

Witnessing Metropolitan Culture in Anish Vyavahare's *Mumbai on the footboard*

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Abstract

Anish Vyavahare's narrative, *Mumbai on the footboard* vocalizes the vibrance of culture of Mumbai, the multicultural metropolitan economic capital of India. Mumbai culture forms using a material of multiple dreams, illusions, poverty, politics, history, multiculturalism and terrorism. The present paper attempts to examine the variant contours of Mumbai culture as projected by Anish Vyavahare in his *Mumbai on the Footboard*. The author articulates history, politics, sufferings, challenges, attitude, dreams of Mumbaikars which accept everything to a part of this fascinating culture. The writer traverses through different classes of Mumbai's heterogeneous demography and narrates adventurous, exciting and refreshing experiences. The novel records the routine travel on the footboard of Mumbaikars who commute everyday on Mumbai's lifeline, the local trains. Further, the author narrates 26/11 terrorist attack and pangs of Mumbaikars who suffered and died in it. He highlights how media and market treated 26/11 attack as a business opportunity. He also brings to light the peripheral community of eunuchs in Mumbai. Also, Vyavahare voices the migration of people from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to Mumbai in search of a livelihood. In short, the author puts forth the all the elements of metropolitan culture which makes Mumbai Mumbai.

Key Words: Mumbai, terrorist, eunuchs, culture

Culture is an umbrella term as define by the Cambridge Dictionary, "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time". Anish Vyavahare's *Mumbai on the footboard* chronicles the multi-culty of Mumbai. As Mumbai is formed from seven islands, the author develops the narrative in seven chapters, developing asymmetry between the construction of the city and the construction of the narrative. The lifeline of Mumbai is its railway network right from western, central, harbor lines which are always overcrowded and people commute by holding the bars and standing on the

footboards is a part of their culture. Footboard is a place that is neither in nor out of the train. It is symbolically an in-between place that signifies instability in the lives of Mumbaikars. Vyavahare through this narrative throws light upon the instability, in-betweenness and uncertainty of the lives of Mumbaikars. Sangeeta Iyer rightly points out the truthful record of Mumbai during the first decade of 21st century. She says, "This book is a refreshingly different expression of truths that everybody knows but has not seen with the same wise-young eyes . . . it is a history of everyman and everywoman of Mumbai." (Back page- *Mumbai on the footboard*)

The first chapter, *'The Money Journey'* highlights the materialistic culture of city. The author underlines the journey of money which traverses from Nashik to Mumbai by catching the train of corruption. Here, he also narrates the journey of green money to black money triggering and nurturing corruption through politics and political leaders who normalize the corrupt practices as a part of culture. Anish Vyavahare compares Mumbai with Nashik which is quaint and green, known for its vast vineyards and smelly sugar factories. The man enters the dream city, Mumbai to fulfill a dreamer's desire through corruption. He criticizes the printed images of Mahatma Gandhi and watermark on the currency note as both are illusionary. This transaction defeats Gandhian values and philosophy as it is being used for ill means. The value of currency note, Gandhi's image and the purity of water symbolized through watermark are molested by corruption. He states that the note is just a Governor's promise, an illusion, and not real. Mumbai, the city of money is known as Maya Nagri wherein one can buy anything right from love, drugs and certificates. The author states that a currency note in modern culture has lost its moral value and it has turned into a promissory note just for negotiation – a negotiable instrument signed the Governor of India.

Further, the author attacks the corruption in The Mantralaya, South Mumbai and its elite culture. South Mumbai, the hippest part of the town has hippest clothes, friends, parties, boozes and even the hippest places for hangout. The author talks about the shattered familial culture where

Sahib and his wife give it to their son for a trip to Goa, another prominent and desired destination for a holiday to enjoy and misuse freedom and liberty. In Goa, by paying an extra amount, the adolescent Mumbaikars consume the drugs just to multiply the feeling of happiness and freedom. Though the government banned drugs in Goa, still Peter, the drug dealer manages to run the drug business with the help of corrupt officials like Mr. Caravlhao and Mr. Raiker. Both the officers plan to compete with each other in corruption and in this competition Mr. Vincent Caravlhao wins. Mr. Caravlhao does not have any type of addiction than money. He is a cultured person who passes on culture to his children by teaching them classical music. This also throws light upon how people live dual life by projecting themselves as culture lovers and protectors of culture on the one hand, whereas they are extremely corrupt and against the culture of Gandhian values of truth and peace.

Subsequently, the author introduces X Khan, the father figure of underworld mafia who has his protection and shares in all the businesses that are involved with coercion, extortion, smuggling and terrorism. Mr. X Khan is born at the time of India-Pakistan Partition. Hence, he has goodwill in both countries. He is from Rajasthan where he learns the hookah habit and gets involved in the business of opium dealing. He also has the involvement in 26/11 terrorist attack on Mumbai. The author talks about how ten young men entered Mumbai via sea and how some corrupt Indians helped them for the attack. He describes the attack as:

Finally, on a fateful night, they opened fire at the finest hot spots of the city as well as at the busiest railway station. They killed many innocent people. Chased by the police, they split up and entered two different five-star hotels in the city. They shot people who were having their dinner, lounging around or window shopping. (Anish Vyavhare 19)

In this story, the author gives detailed information about the brutal 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attack. He explains how the money caught the train of the corruption and moves through so many corrupt and cruel hands and finally it is used for attacking the innocent people in Mumbai. Anish Vyavhare presents various stories of Mumbaikars who suffered and lost the normal life in 26/11 terrorist attack. He explicates how 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attack is an attack on the vibrating culture as it damages one of the most famous places in Mumbai—Taj Hotel, Victoria Terminals (Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminals), Kama Hospital and Naramn Point. All these places have historical and cultural significant. The attack on Mumbai is attack on the age-old culture of India.

‘An Evening in Mumbai’ narrates Mumbai in its peak hours, the crowded trains and the destined fate of Mumbaikars, especially, Bhargav and his fiancée. In the evening, Bhargav calls his mother and informs that he is leaving office for home. The author vocalizes about the pathetic condition of the local trains and suffocating culture of middle-class working people. He reveals the working class produced by city

like Mumbai gets its identity from city and Mumbai gets its identity as from it. They are so crowded that often many commuters die or become handicapped. Travelling by train in the rush hours is as dangerous as a terrorist attack. Bhargav’s mother’s advice traces the danger of it. Bhargav after the hectic office work takes a short walk to the station. This short walk symbolizes his walk towards his loved ones, towards his family and comfort. On the way, he calls his fiancée, who is also a working woman who waits for his phone as a routine activity. They discuss and talk about loving and serious topics. They also talk about crowded trains, a part of their hectic routine. Bhargav expresses his problem of travelling, an inseparable part of their daily life. The lifeline of Mumbai gives them opportunities to develop their lives but at the same time, it also snatches away their lives and scares them at peak hours. Everyday Bhargav travels for three hours from Thane to Lower Parel, from home to office and vice versa. He says, “Daily, eight to ten people get handicapped for life by falling out of the trains and stuff. So many people die after falling. With an administration like this, we do not even need terrorists to come and kill us!” (Vyavhare 50) Further, the writer draws attention towards the issue of increasing migrants to Mumbai and the limited sources and facilities.

Vyavahare articulates the difficulties of commuting through overcrowded trains through Bhargav who enters the train but it is so packed that he cannot move. He does not breathe. His ribs are crushed. But Bhargav is a real Mumbaikar who enjoys the problems and challenges which have

become the part of their lives. They enjoy the adversities also. Bhargav is so lively and vibrant in the breath blocking *bheed*. In such crucial situations also Mumbaikars are creative who never miss a chance of encashing life. In his Hindi mixed with English – Hinglish. Crowd does not have culture but here, Vyavahare proves that there is culture in the crowd of Mumbai which makes it unique. The writer discusses how Mumbaikars curse when a commuter falls off the train as the train halts and it results into increase in the number of commuters. If the train service stops for little while it causes Mumbai to halt. As Bhargav reaches Dadar station, suddenly his phone gets disconnected. And after six minutes, he informs his fiancée about the news of bomb in the train. He is so panic and scared that he just mumbles on the phone. He narrates his fiancée how at Kanjurmarg, in the ladies' compartment someone hears the ticking and pulled the emergency chain of the train. He becomes very next moment he decides of catching the next train instead of a taxi. Anish presents the true vibrance and never stopping Mumbaikars and their spirit and dashing culture through his decision.

The author highlights how terrorist diverts the attention, so they can execute their plans. Simultaneously, Vyavahare provides information about the vibrant spirit of Mumbaikars who behave courageously in challenging situations. Through their culture, they get these lessons. Gradually, the author traces how the ancestors pass on their courageous and undying culture to Mumbaikars. He also highlights the misfortune of Bhargav's fiancée who is

travelling in the cab and listening to the scary incident took place with Bhargav. Unfortunately, the taxi in which she travels is bomb-blasted by the terrorist and she and the taxi driver die in the attack.

The author puts forth the harsh realities of media. Media which informs and alert masses about the society they dwell in, it has ethical and professional responsibilities to promote the truth, but in reality, it serves selfish purposes. *The Midas Law* presents the story of corrupt media culture which encashes 26/11 terrorist attack on Mumbai. Arya who wants to do something meaningful in life, joins journalism as she thinks journalism as 'a world-changing catalyst' (Vyavahare 62), 'Journalism As A Tool Of Social Change' (Vyavahare 65) She gets the opportunity to work as a trainee journalist into a popular TV News Channel. Soon, she impresses her boss, Mr. Swami with her dedication and talent. In absence of Gaurav Thakur, the prime news reporter of Mr. Swami's news channel, Swami assigns Arya a responsibility to take care of the Gaurav's section of bytes. He tells her to interview the fisherfolk who claim that they have observed some suspicious people entered the city by boats. The author informs that the media people already had crucial information about the attack but they used it for their benefit instead. Pradeep Koli, a fisherman shares detail information about the suspicious people who entered Mumbai. By being responsible Mumbaikar, Pradip analyses the danger and alerts the police as well as media without disclosing his identity for the safety of his family. Police did not take him seriously and the media used the

serious information for themselves. The author ironically underlines Swami's happy reaction on the news as he gives lakhs rupees to each, Arya and Randhir who give the news of terrorists' entry in Mumbai. Arya fails to understand the reason behind the bonus from Swami but afterwards, it is Randhir who clarifies her that the people must be the real terrorists and Swami knew it but he will not telecast this news as he might have got his share of interest from the people who have planned the entry of these terrorists. The writer traces the unfortunate fact about corrupt practices of Indian politics, politicians, police and press which allowed to destruct Metropolitan culture of Mumbai. The conversation between Arya and Randhir highlights it. He says:

“Listen kid, Swami has used his sources to verify our story. Now he knows much more about it than what we learned yesterday. If this is a terrorist operation, he has probably gotten in touch with the people who are behind this whole thing. . . . If the coast guard didn't stop them at sea, we can't rule out the involvement of government and security agencies in this. Swami maybe knows maybe doesn't about what's going to happen. I know one thing, whenever such plans leak into the media's hands, more often than not, someone ends up paying money to us to not get the news out. That is what this money for!” Arya had never seen Randhir this worked up. (Vyavahare 79-80)

Though media knows about such incidents from the beginning, it lets the incident

happen because others misfortune and tragedy give them a chance to earn money and fame. But these people forget that who these others are, they are their countrymen, innocent people who trust them blindly. For Swami, blowing up a taxi at a signal junction near the airport is merely an interesting happening which gives his channel popularity. But his greedy eyes fail to see how that incident destroys the happy and hopeful life of Bhargav and his fiancée. The author tells how the tragic attack would have been avoided but it just because of greedy media and the corrupt government, innocent people were killed and that makes 26/11 terrorist attack on Mumbai more severe and serious as insiders were involved in planning and execution of it. He questions the Indian culture which promotes humanity, selflessness, loyalty and work ethics.

The writer in his next story, “Ek Cup More, Please!” captures the reaction of Mumbaikars after the 26/11 terrorists attack which reveals the café culture exists in Mumbai. The young Mumbaikars – Kanishka, Zoeb and Harry meet at the coffee shop. The author makes their conversation realistic by using the dialectical non-English words and expressions which Mumbaikars generally use in their conversations. These youngsters work in the marketing business. Vyavahare reveals how the business industries consider the attack as a golden opportunity to gain the profit. Such industries cannot think beyond profit and loss. Like media, it also gains from the people's pain. Kanishka informs how his company has come up with the cool marketing concept which is based on the victims of the 26/11 attack. He says:

“For starters, we are launching a credit card that is being marketed as a tribute to the people who died during the attacks on our city in November. Damn cool marketing concept no! . . . That’s what we are trying to crack, how to get the people to feel patriotic and buy this credit card.” (Vyavhare 88)

These youngsters discuss the attack and their marketing concept based on it very casually. The author presents the inhuman attitude of humans. They have become so senseless that they always try to encash others’ sorrow, tragedy and misfortune for their greedy objectives. In both stories - *Ek Cup More, Please!* and *The Midas Law* Anish Vyavhare highlights the death of the professional ethics and values. He criticizes this tendency. For instance, Zoeb comments on Kanishka’s marketing tendency. He says:

“You did what you did, you vulture!
So many people died in the attack on the city. So many people were disabled and so many families suddenly left incomplete. And you come up with the idea for exploiting the situation? For exploiting the emotional undercurrents, the grief, the fear that has gripped the city?
(Vyavhare 92)

Harry too scolds Kanishka for his stone heartedness and calls his new marketing concept as “vulturish idea” (Vyavhare 92) But Kanishka by being on the side of the greedy industries and media clarifies, “What! Everyone does that! Didn’t you see the media coverage of it all? The attacks were a pot of gold for the news channels.”

(Vyavhare 92) Vyavhare pinpoints the materialistic tendency of the media and business worlds.

The author throws light upon the fake and self-centred attitude of people after any tragic happening. He tells how after the 26/11 terrorist attack on Mumbai, booksellers at Dadar station use people’s stress and fear and sale numerous copies of religious books. He also mentions the business of Psychiatrists after the attack. He presents the wicked psyche of a business-minded person who considers, “. . .the world is nothing more than a weak woman to be raped and every rape gets me a promotion.” (Vyavhare 93)

Further, the writer criticizes how in democratic culture of India especially, where youngsters vote if they will get good job opportunity. For them, nation is not so important than themselves. He brings to the notice how the lawyer decides to stand up in the court for the terrorist who has been caught during the attack, is attacked. The people who planned and executed the attack do not want it because it would be proven as threatening to them. Vyavhare clarifies how the death punishment was not sufficient to the terrorist because when he attacked, he knows that after doing this bloodshed, he will get a place in heaven. But Indians surprise him by making him work for the country to which he wants to destroy. The author showcases the patience and courage of Mumbaikar who thinks rationally in such moment of emotional trauma. He also tells that how the business-minded young Mumbaikars at the end of the story decide to boost the confidence and spirit of

Mumbaikars as well as to give a strong message to the terrorists by organizing a signature campaign, writing a book about how terrorist is made to work for their country. This group of friends – Harry, Zoeb and Kanishka wants to bring these ideas in reality. The present book is also one of the examples which conveys a strong message to the world about the strength, courage, patience and undying spirit of Mumbai culture.

Anish Vyavahare brings to light the most secluded and inseparable part of any culture, which is clap to draw the attention towards it. ‘*A Clapper’s Slap*’ deals with the life of those people who are outcast by society, who are punished for their gender. Such a person is called, eunuch, in Mumbai dialect, *Chhakka*. Vyavahare presents a story which is unique in itself because it is about neglected, deprived, humiliated and exploited human beings who are not even considered as a part of the society. The story revolves around Ramaa, Kamla, Mangla, Munni and Ginni - a eunuch community which is a social victim but at the same time bold and courageous to accept the social stigma. The writer highlights bold and righteous nature of eunuchs. He writes how they ask money from the so-called “decent” people. He writes, “Ramaa and her likes never beg for alms, they always ask for money, with a sort of right, an obligation of society towards them.” (Vyavahare 25)

The author criticizes the hypocritical culture of society who is not ready to accept the eunuchs but the same society wants to seek blessings from them. He tells how society, even the educated parents, feels

ashamed if they give birth to a child, Kamla who is a eunuch. Her parents throw her to die. But the eunuch community accepts and educates her. She too makes them proud. Vyavahare highlights how these *chhakkas* are deprived of the common human rights. They do not get proper treatment, respect and education. He tells how they dream to get a normal life.

The author criticizes the government, politicians and their goondas who become violent to save the “*bhartiya sanskruti*” (Vyavhare 27). They feel Valentine Day celebration as a threat to Indian culture. They accept the oppression of women, liquor as part of Indian culture. These people attack female to save culture but they do not attack or criticize the government for their poor governance. Anish Vyavahare compares these people with terrorists. He says, “With people like theses within the country itself, who needs terrorists to come from outside?” (Vyavhare 28) He slaps such protectors of the culture. He asks them:

“. . . why they only consider sex and sexual things as definitions of culture. And why things like corruption and bribery are not considered as *bhartiya sanskruti* getting *bhrasht*. And I want to ask them why they don’t fight against poor infrastructure and unequal development because that is also against *bhartiya sanskruti*.” (Vyavhare 30)

The author traces the problems of migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar who are called, *Bhaiyya* in Mumbai. ‘*A Chapter In History*’ shares the news about the atrocities against migrants, their family

problems especially, the women whose fathers, brothers and sons migrate to Mumbai by leaving them to live a lonely life. He also tells how these women from UP and Bihar protest and demand the lazy politicians to create the employment opportunities in their regions which can stop the migration. Migration mars Mumbai. It burdens the city with the blast of population. The author reveals the fact that the lazy and corrupt politicians do not create employment in these regions which have generated the problem of migration. The migratory subjects consider Mumbai as a land of opportunities and they endure the insult from the natives but still continue to become part of Mumbai.

Vyavahare in his story, *'The Suicide Letter'* he as a Mumbaikar wants to destroy the problematic, dangerous part of Mumbai. He takes the responsibility of May 2009 blast. He gives historical and cultural references of Bombay. He says he travels in the city by trams, buses, trains, cabs, bikes or by walking. And he feels to explode the city for every Mumbaikar and give chance to reform Mumbai as a beautiful city. He mentions November 2008 attack after which Mumbaikars protest but after sometime, they move on. He traces Mumbaikars' helplessness to change the situation and hunger which gives them the spirit to move in the dangerous situations. He chronicles colonial culture in Mumbai. He narrates how the British gave birth to her. He traces that Britisher's Bombay city was well developed but Mumbai has lost that charm and dignity. He tells how Mumbaikars destroy and deform the natural treasure of the city. He articulates the indifferent attitude towards

the city is more dangerous than the terrorist attacks. He highlights the problematic situation where for the blast, RDX is available within the country. He points out the damaged but still, overused Currey Road station-bridge which is neglected. The traffic jams are neglected where Mumbaikar spends three to four hours every day in the traffic which also generates the fuel crisis and pollution but still, the greedy politicians and businessmen ignore these problems. Mumbai's lifeline, trains are managed from Delhi which fails to increase the frequency of trains or put rail tracks which again trouble Mumbaikars to suffocate daily in travelling. In short, the author puts light upon the pathetic conditions of Mumbai and Mumbaikars. He tells, "Standing on the footboard is not only dangerous to life but also illegal under the railways act of 1986". (Vyavahare 143) but he highlights the present condition when Mumbai, Mumbai's culture and Mumbaikars are on the footboard. He draws the attention toward one of the alarming situations.

The author sarcastically accepts that 26/11 attacks inspire and teach the writer how to draw attention of government and Mumbaikars towards Mumbai's problems, pathetic conditions of road and infrastructure. He writes:

I was also inspired by the 26/11 attacks, because of the attention they got. Pain is a good thing for the body, doctors tell us. If there were no pain, we wouldn't know that something was wrong somewhere. (Vyavahare 145)

According to him, the attack gave unbearable pain but it also drew attention

towards the security issue and corruption. Anish Vyavhare as a true Mumbaikar through his book, *Mumbai on the footboard* gives insider's views on Mumbai, her culture and her problems. To sum up the argument, it is apt to quote the back page of the text that upholds the argument of Anish and the spirit of Mumbaikars in corrupt and uncertain scenario of overcrowded Mumbai: *A tribute of seven fiction stories to the city of seven tempting islands*

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Go on an insightful journey across the city and amongst her people. Don't be surprised if you find yourself in a story or two while you read the book in the train, on bus, at story or two while you read the book in the train, on bus, at home or during your *cutting chai* break! This debut by twenty-two-year-old blurs the line between reality and fiction to create an image of the city that every Mumbaikar holds close to his or her heart. (Back page, Mumbai on the footboard)