

A city in a time capsule

Sidharth Bhatia's new book is a record of Mumbai as it stands now – new bridges, and buildings accounted for. But it also finds and tells the stories of the human beings that face the brunt of the breaking down, and building up, of a city

AASTHA ATRAY BANAN

WE MEET author and journalist Sidharth Bhatia at the Royal Yacht Club, a structure and institution as Mumbai as it can be. It seems apt because Bhatia's new book, *Mumbai: A Million Islands*, is about this marvellous city we all live in, or aspire to make a home in. It also talks of the relentless way the city has transformed in the past five years. As the coastal road, the Atal Setu, and other constructions have taken over, Bhatia rues the loss of

space, memory and history. "The book can be seen as a record of where we are now. The city has been changing, and that's axiomatic of Mumbai, because it's already changing. This book may be completely outdated in 15 years — it's a time capsule. But it's changing on steroids. People don't have words to describe what's happening; everywhere there is dust, there is digging, there are cranes — this affects us on a daily basis. One-time quiet areas like Khar and Malabar — people don't know how to react.

I felt the same. I had to record this." Sitting with Bhatia, whom this writer had the pleasure of working under as Editor, and who is the Founding Editor of *The Wire*, is cathartic, because it's like sitting with a die-hard lover of Mumbai. In times where we find more things to complain about this metropolis than appreciate, Mumbaikars like Bhatia are rare. He may be able to point out its flaws in detail, but he also loves the city through thick and thin, and till death does us all apart. In the book, he talks, and has visited, areas many of us have only heard tales of, never daring to tread beyond our comfort zones. Like Lallubhai Compound, a residential colony made up of 72 buildings, which was created under the Slum Rehabilitation Act, with construction work completed in 2003. "This is where project affected people are moved. Who are they? For example, a road is widened, and the people living on the sides of that road are then shifted. For example, someone I spoke to had been living in a make-shift slum at the GPO. There is no transport there, there is nothing. There was a report of high incidents of TB there. There is no ventilation, and no sewerage. But what's worse is that these peo-

"We live here, and we know and absorb nuances about this city. But do we really know much? This book will make you look at the city in a new light."

Sidharth Bhatia

ple who have been moved, used to belong to a community where they first stayed. Care has been taken to separate them, so communities break up," he tells us, his face scrunching up in alarm.

He then asks us, "Do you know what it takes for a place to get BMC water in this city?" before he tells us the painstaking procedure. For

"For everyone in the city, Kala Ghoda is the city," says Sidharth Bhatia, "Though that sculpture takes away its mystery." PIC/GETTY IMAGES

example, Darukhana slums (built on land belonging to the Mumbai Port Trust), which Bhatia writes extensively about, have historically faced a lack of civic amenities. "So when the people from the slums went to the BMC, they say, 'the slums are on dock land, so the BMC has nothing to do with it'. Once you somehow manage to convince the municipality, it has to be signed by a registered plumber — who is that? An architect who is registered as a plumber. It's madness. But I found that there are three things going on, and what can make

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something like this possible," says Bhatia, taking a pause. "Persistent NGOs, feisty locals, and a sympathetic officer. Those also exist, as they are human enough to know that water is a basic right. You and I pay some ₹8-9 for 1000 litres. They pay ₹40 per hundred litres. This city is very warm, but this city is very cold. We always knew about slums, and skyscrapers, but it was growing. So when I started talking to people, I saw an opportunity to write this."

People is also whom make up the bulk of his book. Each neighbourhood he talks of — be it Mumbai, Dongri, Sewri, Behrampada in Bandra East, or Dadar Parsi colony — has a unique character representing it. "Mumbai is full of sto-



One of the neighbourhoods Bhatia speaks of in detail is the Behrampada slums in Bandra East. PIC/NIMESH DAVE

ries; we all have a story, but there are certain stories that are more compelling. I wanted to tell shocking stories about the city they live in — we journalists go to places, but how many of us have gone to the slums? What do you know of the people there, their economy, their homes?"

But thanks to Bhatia, and his book, you will meet more of Mumbai, and maybe learn to love it despite the state it is in. When we ask Bhatia, who has grown up in Mumbai, what his favourite part of the city is, he says without missing a beat, "Kala Ghoda." However, he isn't a fan of the actual Kala Ghoda sculpture. "That takes away the mystery. "For everyone in the city,

Bhatia is a die-hard lover of Mumbai. In times where we find more things to complain about this metropolis than appreciate, Mumbaikars like Bhatia are rare

that's the city. It's also very historic — behind you is Colaba. On the East is the naval dockyard, which is the place where this city began, because the East India Company bought it from the Raj immediately. They wanted that natural harbour. On the West, the first layer is the Gothic, then the Art Deco, then the Bay. And when you look ahead, the modern city begins — what they called the native towns — Kalbadevi, Dhobi Talao and the rest. There is Jehangir, the courts, David Sassoon — art, education, restaurants, and Dr Ambedkar wrote the Constitution at Wayside Café. I like Kala Ghoda. I suspect many people will think the same." We do, and those who don't, may see it differently once they read the book. And that's what Bhatia ends with. "We live here, and we know and absorb nuances about this city, not just Instagram nuances. But do we really know much? This book will make you look at the city in a new light."

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Dahyabhai visited him often in Vijapur, Gujarat, and ultimately accepted him as his spiritual guru, seeking his counsel in every aspect of life.

As Jain scholar Dr Renuka Porwal notes, "When Dahyabhai fell critically ill in 1922, he wrote to his Guru expressing fear for his life. Acharya Buddhisagarji, in meditation, assured him of recovery, and Dahyabhai did recover well. Out of gratitude, he resolved to build a Derasar and sanatorium in his Guru's memory."

The vision took form as the Sheth Ghelabhai Karamchand Jain Sanatorium Trust and over time became a sacred refuge for Jain monks, especially during Chaturmas.

Dahyabhai's devotion extended far beyond the temple. The sanatorium kitchen still serves Ayambil meals (boiled food without oil, ghee, or spices) throughout the year, along with boiled water. He also established the Sheth Amthlal Ghelabhai Trust, which continues to provide education and healthcare aid to the underprivileged, in memory of his brother. In 1935, he inspired the founding of the Shrimad Buddhisagarisuri Jain

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The Jain Tirthankars' story inscribed on a silver backdrop in the inner sanctum

his life to spirituality and community service. "Despite being the driving force behind several charitable institutions in Mumbai and Gujarat, he never named any after himself," shares Jai Shah.

A devout Jain, Sheth Dahyabhai undertook the sacred pilgrimage to Palitana in Gujarat 99 times during the course of his life and embraced Bhava Alochan, or constant introspection and repentance for spiritual purification. A steadfast devotee of Ghantakarna Dev (king turned protector deity in

Jainism), he passed away at the age of 86 while peacefully reciting the Navkar Mantra. Dahyabhai first encountered Acharya Buddhisagar Maharajsaheb in Mehsana during the latter's Chaturmas (four months of monsoon) stay, a meeting that would profoundly shape his spiritual journey. Acharya Buddhisagar is renowned for establishing the renowned Mahudi Jain temple. Drawn to the Acharya's wisdom,

Devotees believe the idol radiates divine energy, its tranquil expression and exquisite detailing reflecting an era when faith and art were intertwined

Built on the values community service, Vile Parle's 100-year-old Jain temple continues to draw devotees to its 1001-year-old idol of Shankheshwar Parshvanath

HENNA SHAH

WE TAKE immense pride in this century-old institution founded by my grandfather," says Jai Shah, managing trustee of the Sheth Ghelabhai Karamchand Jain Sanatorium Trust in Vile Parle West, near the railway station. Established on November 25, 1925, the temple is the oldest Jain Derasar between Bandra and Goregaon and remains a spiritual anchor for the Jain community of Mumbai's Western suburbs.

What makes this centenary celebration truly special is the 1,001-year-old idol of Shankheshwar Parshvanath, the 23rd Jain Tirthankar, enshrined at the temple's heart. Acharya Padmasagar Surishwarji Maharajsaheb describes it as "a rare creation, dating back to Vikram Samvat 1080 (1024 CE) predating the Solanki dynasty in Western India". Unlike the or-



The 1001-year-old main idol of Shankheshwar Parshvanath

Paheli promos get Reel feels

This indie film took the unusual step of splashing out on its social media push — an investment that paid off, with Reels getting tens of thousands of views

AKSHITA MAHESHWARI

MEMES about middle-aged detectives, tongue-in-cheek "casting calls", and short clips that feel like inside jokes between filmmaker and viewer — this is the content on *Kaisi Yeh Paheli's* Instagram feed.

An indie film usually makes its presence felt on the festival circuit, or through word of mouth. *Kaisi Yeh Paheli's* writer and director Ananyabrata Chakravorty says, "If a film is primarily made for the festival circuit, it often struggles to connect with wider audiences. Only the festival crowd ends up watching it."

Its *Catch-22*, as indie films often lack the budget of big productions to market the film the traditional way. But *Kaisi Yeh Paheli* has made people laugh, click, and care before it even hits theatres, thanks to its social media push.

Chakravorty says, "If we make independent films that are also entertaining and want to connect with audiences, then a social media campaign makes a lot of sense. It aligns with that goal of reaching people."

The dark comedy opens with a bizarre premise: a lonely mother forced to solve a crime just so she can talk to her estranged son. Chakravorty says, "The idea came to me around 2016. I was thinking about old-age loneliness and my own inability to connect with my mother."

While the film made its rounds on the festival circuit, having its world premiere at the NYIFF 2025, and was an Opening Film of Yellowstone Film Festival. It also found an unlikely second home: Instagram.

Behind the digital disruption is social media consultant and creator Pulkit Kochar, whose work has helped the film's Instagram Reels gain up to ten lakh views. Kochar's strategy was simple: treat the film's Instagram like a character in the movie. The result is a page that feels more like a personality than a marketing tool, each post crafted

to reflect the film's sardonic, self-aware tone. "People don't want another film poster in their feed," Kochar says. "They want something they can share with a friend."

Of course marketing is a given, but what's different here is that a consultant was hired especially for social media, and was even named in the film's credits. Kochar, who first watched the film at a private screening through a friend, recalls, "I saw the film and immediately loved it. It was smart, engaging. It had heart. When Nishu [Dikshit, the film's producer] asked if I wanted to come on board, it just made sense."

The sensibility has caught attention not just from audiences, but also from filmmakers and marketers wondering if this might signal a shift. Chakravorty points to recent examples like *Dilli Dark* and *Stolen*, festival darlings that found wider audiences thanks to clever digital buzz. "Those are the kinds of films we need more of," he adds, "Movies that are independent in spirit, but not alienating. The kind you can show your parents or your college friends."

Still, for all the digital success, Chakravorty knows that the real test lies ahead. *Kaisi Yeh Paheli* opens in Indian theatres on November 28, and while the early reviews have been glowing, he admits to a mix of excitement and anxiety.

"I'm confident about the film," he says. "But you never really know how many people will show up at the theatre."

He pauses, then laughs softly. "If the first three days go well, if Friday to Sunday fills up even a little, I know word of mouth will take over. That's what I'm hoping for. The film just needs to find its people." If the internet is anything to go by, it already has.

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Kaisi Yeh Paheli follows a broken mother-son relationship where the mom solves a murder mystery to get closer to her son



PULKIT KOCHAR



ANANYABRATA CHAKRAVORTY



Sheth Dahyabhai Shah, founder of the 100-year-old Jain Derasar



The original plaque from 1925 at the temple entrance

Band Mandal, a group that upholds the community's rich tradition of devotional music to this day.

A century later, Jai Shah continues to uphold his grandfather's values as he leads the 10-day Shataabdi Anandotsav Parv. "In our society, a son is often seen as the one who carries his father's family name forward. My grandfather Sheth Dahyabhai only had three daughters, and as his eldest daughter's son, I want to prove that even a daughter's children can pre-

serve their maternal grandfather's legacy. We have restored the temple and the property, giving it a new lease of life for the younger generation to reconnect with their faith," he says.

The 10-day centenary celebration from November 21 to 30 will culminate in grand events on November 29 and 30, featuring a rathayatra, mahapuja, cultural programmes, and community meals.

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