

Isn't it amazing, dear reader, how perspectives shift when 'progress' comes a-knocking at one's own backyard? A mutant form of the NIMBY malaise hit me recently, as I witnessed, yet again, an exercise in 'improving the quality of life' in my city of Mumbai, that was Bombay.

As those familiar with the city will tell you, every once in a while we are privileged to celebrate the arrival of an intrepid, 'civic-minded' Municipal Commissioner who takes up office with much fanfare, determined to engrave his footprints on the much-mangled, barely visible sidewalks of the city. Freshly returned from an official 'fact-finding' tour of some 'phoren' countries, he is simply bursting with ideas: clean the streets, widen the roads, evict all squatters, tear down illegal constructions, and fine/imprison all those uncouths who spit/urinate/shit in public places; in short, makeover Mumbai into a Singapore-clone, double quick. On second thought, let's change that to Additional Municipal Commissioner. If he was consistently intrepid and civic minded, he would have been derailed long before he managed to grab the Municipal Commissioner's chair! Would anyone care to dispute this?

Suddenly, all the papers are raving about this dynamic go-getter, this AMC, let us call him Shri Naveen Jhadoo, who has taken to heart the oft-repeated slogan, *Amchi Mumbai, Swachha Mumbai* [Marathi for 'Our Mumbai, Clean Mumbai']. Now, whether he really cares about the city or the environment or whether he is playing for larger stakes, I wouldn't know, but he is making waves, that, I can see, for sure. For a populace starved of heroes, here at last is a man worthy of their adulation. The first item on his agenda is Safaai; where better to start than with the

Short Story

The Station Road

○ Gita Hariharan



city's roads? So, the familiar cry is taken up: remove all encroachments, clear the streets of hawkers, and beautify the streets. Hawkers 'are an eyesore,' you see, crowding the streets and making a nuisance of themselves; it's just a matter of perspective. Allow me to digress a bit. My daughter had an assignment recently on the topic, 'Poverty is the cause of pollution.' I tried to make the kid understand that there are other, worse pollutants than shit on the street or smoke from the chulha in a jhopdi. But, as I found out later, the teacher led the class discussion to a unanimous, 'Yes.'

The papers, all of them in chorus (so many papers, so little new news, what to do?) tell us, the janta, about Operation Cleanup at a suburb - let

us call it Ambevili. What a photo-op, not to be missed!

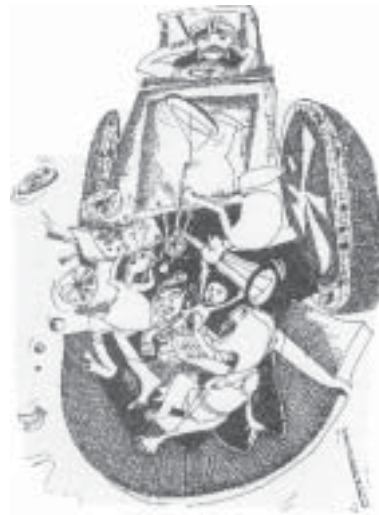
Phase one: The Ambevili Station Road is to be rid of all hawkers/vendors, and the area is to be, yes, beautified. The deed is done, one day, in a surprise swoop, with adequate police bandobast. The road, where once you could hardly find place to drop a mustard seed, is now free, free of all those 'pests' who made life a misery. Misery for whom?, you might ask. Well, now, that is an interesting question. Next please! So now the station road is anointed as 'clean, spacious, and easily accessible,' for the time being. If you happened to pass by, you might have wondered at the sudden eruption of some humungous, flower-vase like terracotta

monstrosities, dotting - no blocking - your way. Some of these might be tilted alarmingly, base already broken; sometimes, you would find three of them bunched together, standing guard like silent, alien sentinels. Fret not; they are part of the 'beauty-paraphernalia,' the half-baked creative output of some aesthetic soul.

Phase two: The press lionises Shri Jhadoo. The other areas in the city envy old Ambevili and clamour, 'Hey, why can't we have a similar cleanup in our areas?', or, so, the press reports. Have you noticed something? When the press high-profiles someone, you may be sure he is going to get his comeuppance soon, and, later, when the press joins the brickbat team, one wonders: Did the press fail to do its homework earlier? Did the hero have feet of clay? Or did he have the carpet jerked out from under his feet by jealous elements? Was he rushing in where angels fear to tread? Did the man project himself as more important than the cause? Well, whatever. And God help him, if he has forgotten to manage the press, for he will find himself demonised, demoralised, and doomed to a dead end.

What happens next is as predictable as a Hindi movie. The Dislocated Ones amass, approach a sympathetic MLA, organise *morchas*, signature campaigns, petitions, the works. Shri Jhadoo calls a press conference to defend his mission. He appeals to the people. The citizenry clucks in indignation. Will this city ever improve?, they ask each other. If a good man like Shri Jhadoo is not allowed to do his job, what hope is there for this city? The big bosses, too, are unhappy. 'Foolish fellow, hogging the limelight. When will he learn?', they tell each other tiredly. Live and let live, is their motto.

Humko bhi phayda, tumko bhi phayda. (We gain and you to gain). Perhaps, elections are round the corner; perhaps the 'permit-dispensers' are finding it difficult to balance their household budgets; or perhaps old debts are being called in. So, with heavy hearts, and pockets to match, they set the transfer machinery in motion. Our man is shunted to some seemingly safe siding: it could be 'Archives,' it could be 'Tribal Welfare' If his spirit has not been broken already, he will stir up a hornet's nest at his new posting, too, but, that, again is



another story, familiar, but sad to say, no longer threatening to 'us.' Does this not add a whole new twist to the old saw? New brooms sweep clean, but old brooms know the corners?

But, back to specifics. My worm's eye view of Operation 'Clean Station Road.' I stay in the vicinity of one such Station Road. 'Road,' perhaps, is a misnomer. At most times, it looks like a huge conveyer belt, sucking up, rolling along, and disgorging a sea of humanity at either end. Within the belt, an aerial view would show two-legged creatures scurrying along, some shoving and elbowing their way purposefully to the other end, and others jostling, dodging sideways,

and trickling past cars bunched up for the signal to change, zigzagging and emerging with arms clutching innumerable bags and parcels.

A few months back, someone decided that our area could do with a facelift. The Station Road, as usual, was target number one. The Municipal Corporation swung into action and set about evicting hawkers, confiscating some of the wares, and maintaining vigil to prevent hawkers from settling back like homing pigeons. Now that the drama was taking place so close by, almost in my backyard, I had a ringside view of the happenings. The first thing that struck me was that, where, earlier, I used to think in terms of hawkers, encroachers, squatters, now I saw people, real people, many of them old, familiar faces for a number of years.

So, who were they, these 'real' people? Picture a road, stretching forth from the station, three furlongs long and two lanes wide, flanked at the other end by a major arterial road. Hundreds of human beings traverse the Station Road each day, by foot, on their way to schools, colleges, workplaces, and back. Unlike the main stations in smaller cities, where people may get down and rush off to their destinations with bag and baggage, this station is a transit point for local trains. So, as people pass along Station Road, they stop and shop. In their very busy lives, they really do not have the time to run to different points in the city to source their daily necessities. Inevitably, the age-old instinct for survival draws a large number of hawkers to the road each morning, offering every imaginable service.

Our Station Road is a micro-city in itself. At the risk of sounding tedious, let me share with you an everyday scene. There are vegetable sellers catering to different needs;

some stock only the staples - potatoes, onions, and garlic. Some specialize in green leafy vegetables. Some have expanded to one-stop-shops, selling a wide variety of vegetables. Some have limited themselves to selling only the masala - chillies, coriander, curry leaves, ginger, and lemon grass. Then there are the fruit sellers. Here, too, there are those who sell only bananas; some sell only chikkooos and some sell a variety of three or four kinds of fruits. There are hawkers who stock only coconuts. There are others who offer tender coconut water to be sipped on the spot with a straw or packed in little plastic pouches as takeaways, a boon to the caregivers of patients in the nearby nursing home.

The spectrum of activities is mind-boggling. There are cobblers and key makers. There is the lottery agent, always with a crowd of hopeful, wannabe-rich, checking out their luck. There are hawkers selling rubber washers of various sizes, bundles of nylon string - mini-items for which you would not want to enter a shop, some items that the bigger stores may not even bother to stock, some that you remember you need only when you see them spread out in front of your eyes. There is a man selling colourful, ready-to-wear sari blouses, a fairly new entrant. There are those offering other value-added services. One woman cuts and packs pouches of vegetables - cluster beans cut in one-inch bits and cauliflower broken into florets, for her regular clients. In between, attending to customers, the vegetable sellers occupy themselves by shelling peas and other legumes like vaal, tuvar, and butterbeans. In season, there are those selling nose-tickling, mouth-watering corn on the cob, roasted golden, and brushed with half a lime

dipped in a delectable, salt-chilli powder mix. Or those offering shelled tender-corn for soups and sabjies. There is an old lady who sits surrounded by a number of colanders containing sprouts of every kind. The harried, office-going women pick up some gratefully on their way home - a real time-saver, although one *does* wonder about the water they use for the sprouting!

Wait, there's more. We have to put a face on these real people, don't we? There is the *phoolwali*, selling *pooja ke phool*. There is her sister-in-law nearby, selling sweet-smelling jasmine in span long strings. As if to affect a synergy, the *agarbatti* seller has claimed a space on the other side. There is the lemonade seller, who, in the summer, offers cool *panna*, the delicious drink made from raw mangoes. Next to him is the *thelawala* [cartman] who sells ready-to-eat peeled, de-seeded jackfruit covered with yellow transparent film - there are those who buy the seeds separately, for *sabji*. He keeps an incense stick burning to ward off flies. No sticky torture to get at the luscious fruit - who would not be tempted? But, there, the distinctive

smell *does* nauseate some, so they hurry off.

The guava seller has parked himself in the corner. There is a bullock cart, too, bearing that favourite thirst quencher, the *kalingad* (watermelon). Strangely, in recent years, it is always available, in season or out. Down the road, closer to the signal, is another labour saver, the pineapple seller. You do not need to wrestle with the spines, as cut and sliced pineapples are handed over in sachets. The posh juice centre is down the road; perhaps it had some such humble beginning? There are the ubiquitous fast-food tempters. *Dosas*, *idlies*, *vadas*, and sizzling *pakodas* assail your nostrils and play havoc on your will power. There are sandwich-walas, chaat-walas, *jalebi walas*, and there is the handcart with plates of clingfilm-covered fruit salad, on which you can gorge to assuage your conscience.

On festival days, there is a whole new look. Many of the vegetable/fruit sellers switch allegiance and start selling *rakhies*, for *rakshabandhan*; *gulal* [coloured powder] and *pichkaries* [sprinklers] for Holi; thermocol sheets and *pooja*



items for the Ganpati festival; sugarcane, tender turmeric for Makarsankranti; and *diyas*, crackers, and sparklers for Diwali. You name it, they have it. And, on special days, there is a woman at the corner with a Holy Cow tethered to the lamppost. She keeps a cloth bundle full of grass nearby and, as I pass by, I see women buying the grass and offering it to the cow, with pious caresses.

And perhaps, to cater to the hawkers themselves, there is a second-line service brigade: there is a barber wandering with his box, and offering a shave, a moustache trim, or a haircut. There are mobile *chaiwallas*, *pan-beedi walas*, and *vada-pav sellers*. Occasionally, the *dhaarwala*, the fellow who sharpens knives and scissors, works his way down the road toward nearby residential areas. Once, I remember watching fascinated by an ear cleaning ‘specialist’ [what *wala* would he be?] sitting on his haunches, plying his trade, and doing good business, too!

Such a vibrant place, always thronging, buzzing with activity, and teeming with life. ‘Where would all these people go if they were expelled?’ I wondered. And, let us face it, there are a few questions that need to be mulled over here. One is: Why are they here and not tilling the soil or doing whatever their ancestors were wont to do, in their village? Another is: Anyone can see that most of them are doing pretty well for themselves. But they are not paying any taxes!, you may squawk. Agreed, but is it not a drop in the bucket compared to what the big daddies are siphoning away? So, who are the people *buying* from them? Citizens or aliens? As an aside, I will have you know, that one fruit seller who set my hackles up with some rude comment. Once, I asked him the price of mangoes, and he

said, “So how much? Five hundred per kilo?” And this, when Alphonsos were selling at rupees two-fifty a kilo! He boasted to me that he home-delivers the best fruit to the house of a powerful politician residing nearby. More pertinently, why is it that the squatters are allowed to entrench themselves in the first place? It is all rather ironic: the conveniences and amenities draw the ‘public’ to the place; the place upgrades itself, becomes up-market; and, suddenly, ‘they’ become eyesores.



I kept away from the place for two or three days. How could I patronise what was an ‘illegal’ activity? Then, driven by curiosity and, I admit, by some inventory shortage, as well, I ventured to go and take a look. The train crowd was on auto-propulsion, as usual. The regular shops seemed to be busy enough. It was the festive season, after all. The pavements were hawker free, but, where were the promised great open spaces? It looked like someone had been beautifying the place with a rather heavy hand. Huge concrete planters, at rupees twelve thousand a pair, a

hawker tells me, and with granite moulding and ornamental spiked borders, dotted the pavement at regular intervals, presumably to block off those very spots that were the erstwhile domain of some pavement seller. So, one had to dodge between these monstrosities, and oncoming waves of people to negotiate one’s way though the road. Here and there were groups of hawkers divested of their wares, huddled together, and planning countermoves.

And the road, the ‘new, improved formula’ road, is it a *freeway*, now, you might ask? *Definitely* not. I notice that all of a sudden the Corporation has woken up to the lucrative possibilities in all that ‘empty’ space and managed to kill two birds with one stone by putting up ‘pay and park’ boards; and there are cars parked, wherever, earlier, a vendor sat hawking his wares. The jewellery shops, of which there are many, too many, have special gun-toting, black-uniformed security men, standing guard, giving an ominous look to the whole scene. I am perturbed at this turn of events. If the idea of the cleanup was to give moving space to pedestrians, that certainly was a lost cause. Back home, I scan the newspapers for a clue to the next phase of this drama. Once again, the hawkers seem to have sympathizers. They have mobilized support, and there is talk of some *samjhauta*, a compromise.

The papers report that ‘local residents’ have lodged a complaint with the police about the hawker menace. Funnily enough, I have never heard any of my neighbours complain about them. In fact, most of them seem positively inconvenienced by this new state of affairs. I conduct a spot survey. My neighbour Bharti, a homemaker, tells me that she is fed up with having to

travel all the way to the nearest vegetable mandi to replenish her supply. Mrs. Kamath, old and arthritic, laments that there is no fresh fruit in the house; Mr. Parab, the retired gentleman, walks further to get his puja flowers; Shalini, the supermom, says that her family has been having *dalchawal* for three days and asks, who has the time to go to the main market on weekdays? Earlier, she just used to pick up her needs on the way home from the station. Mr. and Mrs. Bijlani, the old and childless couple, used to be a common sight, walking hand in hand to the road each evening, their meagre purchases being more of an excuse to chat with the *kakas* and *mausis* with whom they have dealt with for many years. Now, they look forlorn and lost, as if something vital and human is missing from their lives. The *bai*, our domestic, is unhappy. She is too embarrassed to enter the bigger shops. She was far happier bargaining with the roadside vendors; her neighbour's husband, she volunteers, is sitting at home jobless, he used to sell sandwiches near the station earlier.

I am curious. Who has complained? Who is happy at the new state of affairs? The menfolk I speak to, the ones who are car owners, the working gentry, all claim to be happy. Good, they say, at last there is place to park the cars! But they are taken aback when they see that it is a pay-park zone. Inevitably, in a ripple effect, cars have now started using our street for free parking! Why should a car parked in a space occupied by two hawkers with a dozen mouths to feed be good for the economy? Beats me, but, then, I am only a woman trying to keep the hearth warm and the pantry well stocked. I cannot understand many things; I suppose it is the same

strange logic that says 'inflation is at an 'all-time low' while onions have shot up to 16 bucks a kilo. Do the powers-that-be feel that gold and diamond jewellery is more productive than fresh fruits, vegetables, and sprouts? How can monstrous planters, each the size of a mini tank, be allowed to form a permanent block in the very place where a human sat to vend his wares?

Over the next few days, I watch the goings on in the road with morbid interest. I find that a few hawkers, no doubt responding to the gnaws of hunger, have ventured forth to set up makeshift stalls on gunny bags spread on the pavement. Some have old tea chests on which they have propped some tired looking vegetables. They can hardly attend to a customer, their eyes are constantly in a state of nervous motion, darting left and right, necks craned anxiously like athletes waiting for the starter's gun. Soon enough, there is a warning cry and they roll up the stuff into bundles and run off like thieves into the bylanes. I do not see any municipal van, and, so, I ask, 'Why are you all running?' They tell me that now the job of shoeing them away has been given to a private agency, funded, no doubt, by the richer shopkeepers. Wheels within wheels, as they say!

Some of the hawkers have established symbiotic relationships with smaller shopkeepers, whom they have befriended over the years. They store their wares in the shops, stand around waiting to spot familiar faces, and solicit customers - a customer weaned away may be a customer lost forever. One woman laments that just the other day, she lost a bag of peas in the melee. The banana seller, a very old man, has brought his grandson along to help him shift his wares to safety. Today, he has small, overripe

bananas. I turn away and the grandson offers to run across to a room upstairs in the nearby chawl to get me better ones.

The fruit *bhaiya* says that he does not have the cash needed to redeem his weighing scales, which were confiscated by the municipal staff. He and his brothers take turns manning the stall; their families, back in the gaon, are totally dependent on the money orders that they remit home. One day, I see a whole lot of tree branches on the road, and there is even a huge tree sawed to the stump, right in front of the biggest jewelry store. They appear to have changed the position of the entrance; *feng shui/vaastu*, perhaps? I wonder if this is another devious way to discourage the hawkers, many of whom depend on the shade to conduct their business. Perhaps I am getting overly sensitive?

On the flip side, I can understand that beyond a point the ever-swelling proliferation of vendors on the Station Road is a real nuisance. My friendly chemist tells me that some of the newer bunch of young men take undue liberties with the girls/women who haggle with them for the nighties and salwar suits that hang on the makeshift ropes. The clothes block the entryways to the regular shops which, naturally, leads to bad blood. For every two long-established vendors there are three newcomers, brash, unruly, and, often, unscrupulous. The *phoolwali* tells me that nearer the station there are unsavoury elements who have commandeered most of the road and who spread their wares, leaving hardly any space for the commuters to walk through. She says that women and girls, in a hurry to catch the train, sometimes stumble over the wares and are subjected to a volley

of abuse. Thus, embarrassed and mortified, perhaps they have also complained to the police. It is a vexatious issue, but a mass cleanup seems like an indiscriminate overdose of antibiotics, where the good bacteria are flushed out along with the bad!

Was the Road always so crowded? When were the unwritten limits of expansion transgressed? Who is to draw the Laxman Rekha? Actually, the ambience has been changing over the years. Of late, there has been an influx of sellers who hawk stuff that is available in regular shops. This eats into margins and creates hostility between *pucca* shops and street vendors. There are those who set up big rows of iron clothes-horses, draping them with saris, salwar suits, nighties, children's garments, and even lingerie - rows of bras, which, in my younger days, would have made me cringe and look away in embarrassment. I am told that many of the young men are employed by the same Seth, and that they earn on a commission basis. One can see that pavement sellers with minimal overheads are leaching away the clientele of the *pucca* shops. Unable to withstand the competition, some of the old timers have sold their shops to other richer shop owners, catering to the high-bracket segment.

So, a Chinese-food joint has replaced the old *chana-kurmura bhandar*. The neighbourhood *vaani* [grocer] has given way to the supermarket owner, who will not deliver your provisions to your home unless you order at least a thousand rupees' worth of products. The general practitioner has sold out to a new pathology laboratory. The hosiery shop and the tailoring shop have been replaced by an air-conditioned 'mall.' It is the old case of, 'the big fish eats the smaller fish,'

and so ad infinitum. What intrigues me most is that there seems to be a spurt of jewellery shops on the road. In the past year, I have seen at least three large jewellery showrooms coming up, and the existing ones are forever renovating, one after the other, in a never-ending game of one-upmanship, with bigger, larger frontages and awnings.

I contemplate the scenario, grumble, and wonder selfishly about my own little problems: Now where will I get roasted corn on the cob? Where can I get my slippers repaired? How long will I have to do without a handy bunch of coriander to redeem a below-par rasam or an indifferent curry? I have already missed my quota of Totapuri mangoes this year. Chores pile up for the weekend. I know I will 'adjust,' will get used to travelling further, and will discover new sources, but, yet, somehow, there is a sense of loss, of having been cheated out of some luxury.

And one day, I meet Bharti at the gate carrying two bags full of veggies. I look at her questioningly, and she tells me, "*Woh log sab wapis aagaaye* [those people are all back]." I walk across and take stock. The familiar faces are there. The handicapped man is back, sitting with his wife and selling vaaties [small mounds] of tender cucumber and chillies. The smiling bird-like woman, who always added a bit more *masala*, has set up her stuff a few feet away. Most of them are there: the young boy with his own tray of *limboos*, helping his mother; the grumpy old lady with her colanders of sprouts; the wrinkled old man with knobby, arthritic fingers - I hate to bargain with him - a fixture at the same spot, rain or shine, muffler round his head; the couple selling newspapers and magazines, with their second child,

barely a month old, asleep on the cart, and the elder boy sitting nearby doing his homework... The fancy planters have been put to good use, too; some have spare bags of vegetables stowed inside. The spikes have proven useful as handy hooks to hang a shirt here or some bags there. Some, sorry to say, are on the way to becoming a refuse dump, the wilting plants in them almost beckoning the additional offering of rubbish.

I stop near the *phoolwali* to exchange a few words. No, she says, *samjhauta* has not yet happened, but they 'are working on it.' She introduces a new dimension to the dilemma: 'We Marathi-*maanus*, who live close by, should be given permission to operate here,' she says, and adds, 'It's not fair, nearer the station are those *bhaiyas* from the North, who operate in groups; they have one of them serving as a 'lookout' all the time; I am a lone woman, what can I do?' I commiserate with her. Her natural spirit asserts itself, she looks around and consoles herself: 'At least I am spared too much harassment, because I sell *Bhagwan ke phool*. Those people there have to give some of their *sabji* to the *policewale* daily.' As I move away, she adds, with ill-concealed satisfaction, that the *pucca* shops also witnessed a good drop in income when the public stopped coming for the wares hawked on the pavements. I am not surprised.

As I make my way home I admit to myself: I am glad they are back! Is it my conscience? Is it the convenience? Perhaps a little of both! But I know now that at other times, as I traverse other such roads, I shall grumble less and jostle my way with good-humoured tolerance. □