

CITY OF VERSE

ON ARTISTIC TRANSGRESSION AND URBAN CHAOS

ANISH GAWANDE



Can poetry still help us make sense of a city that's constantly remaking itself?

The Penguin Book of Poems on the Indian City, edited by Bilal Moin, has been lying on my bookshelf for the past week. A 1,000-page tome with 375 poems tucked between its covers, it's just as effective as a doorstop as it is a poetry anthology. I've grown used to slimmer volumes: Ranjit Hoskote's *Hunchprose*, Agha Shahid Ali's *Country without a Post Office*, the sort of poetry books you can slip into a bag or pull out on a local train. This one, in contrast, demands attention — and possibly some upper body strength.

It deserves both. For this is not just any collection. It is the first of its kind: a sweeping anthology that brings together poems across time, tongue, and territory, all responding to the enigma that is the Indian city.

Gandhi loathed the city; Ambedkar saw it as a site of possibility. For decades, Indian cities have stood as contradictory symbols of opportunity and despair, aspiration and inequality. Where manicured lawns abut open gutters. Where gated communities co-exist with sprawling slums. Where dreams are manufactured and discarded, often in the same street.

As climate change eats into farmlands and industries of the future cluster in urban centres, the Indian city will become even more central to our national imagination. What sets these cities apart? What makes a Mumbai or a Delhi or a Kolkata uniquely itself?

This was what I hoped to uncover as I dipped into Bilal's collection. What I found, instead, was a vivid portrait not of the Indian city in general, but of a very particular species of writer: the city-poet. More specifically, the Mumbai/Bombay poet.

Who is a Mumbai/Bombay poet?

It's a question I found myself asking even while reading Jerry Pinto's *The Education of Yuri* a few years ago — another book soaked in the fading glamour and sharp contradictions of Bombay in the 1980s. Yuri, Pinto's protagonist, haunts Elphinstone College, finds love between Mahalaxmi and Churchgate station, and pores over volumes by Nissim Ezekiel and Eunice de Souza from Mr Shanbhag's Strand Book Stall. He is, in many ways, part of a lineage, one brought to life again in Bilal's anthology.

While the collections span a wide range of Indian cities, naturally, the Mumbai/Bombay section is the largest. After all Bilal is from Mumbai. Through the poems in this section, a cultural world swiftly vanishing re-emerges. There's Dom Moraes and Gieve Patel, there's Eunice and Nissim, there's Ranjit Hoskote and Arundhati Subramaniam. There are also lovers of Mumbai, like Hoshang Merchant, whose 'An Old Bombay Film Story' reads like an elegy to a more hopeful era. Or Akhil Katyal, a proud Dilliwalah until recently, whose 'Bombay' prophesies the move to our city



The Penguin Book of Poems on the Indian City doesn't just romanticise Mumbai, but also confronts it in all its messiness. For example, Imitiaz Dharker's 'Bombay, Bombil, Bummalo' smells of fish and memory

he made just a few months ago.

The anthology doesn't just romanticise the city, though. It confronts it in all its messiness. Namdeo Dhasal's 'Kamathipura' is not the stylised red-light district of Bollywood, but a site of fierce resistance. Dhasal, after all, once led a morcha from Kamathipura to Sharad Pawar's door, demanding dignity for sex workers when few dared speak their name. Elsewhere, a poem by Sushilkumar Shinde (not the politician) translated by Dileep Chavan, mourns the city's loss of care. "Don Bosco's hands are short of length," he writes. "The city wants to commit suicide."

There are cheeky poems too. R Raj Rao's 'Shivaling Swayamwar' is both queer and comic, a portrait of desire on the Western Railway. Imitiaz Dharker's 'Bombay, Bombil, Bummalo' smells of fish and memory. Tenzin Tsundue's *The Tibetan in Mumbai* cuts through the "cosmopolitan" myth, reminding us that even here, some will always be seen as outsiders.

Of course, no anthology is perfect.

There are poems I would have liked to see between these covers. Like Prakash Jadhav's 'Under Dadar Bridge', a fierce critique of caste in the city translated by Shanta Gokhale and Nissim Ezekiel. Or Arun Kolatkar's 'Breakfast Time at Kala Ghoda', which reminds us of the many worlds we've already lost. Of the Olympias and Baghdadis and Military Cafés, which will soon give way to Pret à Mangers and Starbucks and the next bougie cafe.

Still, what Bilal Moin offers is remarkable: a window into multiple cities (sometimes in conflict, sometimes in chorus) that coexist within the sprawl we call Mumbai. In reading these verses, you realise that cities are not made by metros or malls. They are made by memory. By the ones who refuse to forget.

And so this anthology, heavy as it is, offers light. In reminding us that there once were bookstores and libraries, cafes and causes, comrades and strangers—and that all of them wrote poems.

Perhaps the city-poets of Mumbai/Bombay are calling on us to write our own.



Model Y cars at the Tesla Gigafactory in Gruenheide, Germany. The Austin-headquartered company has already shipped in the first set of cars, apparently Model Y rear-wheel drive SUVs, from its China plant to India

Tesla's big-bang India debut with showroom at BKC next week

#New Delhi, Jul 11

Global EV giant Tesla is finally setting up shop in India — and its first experience centre will open next week at the Bandra Kurla Complex.

The Elon Musk-led firm has sent out select invites, presenting the inaugural event on July 15 as the "launch of Tesla in India".

While Tesla could not be reached for comment, according to industry experts, the Austin-headquartered company has already shipped in the first set of cars, apparently Model Y rear-wheel drive SUVs, from its China plant.

Last month, Tesla India took on lease 24,565 sq ft warehousing space in Lodha Logistics Park in Mumbai for a period of five years.

In June, Union Heavy Industries Minister H D Kumaraswamy stated that the electric carmaker is not interested in manufacturing cars in India but keen on establishing showrooms in the country.

US President Donald Trump has said that if Tesla were to build a factory in India to circumvent that country's tariffs, it would be "unfair" to the US.

Musk had said in April last year that his visit to India had been delayed due to the company's heavy obligations.

The electric car maker was seeking an initial tariff concession that would allow it to offset 70% of customs duty for cars priced less than \$40,000, and 100% for cars of higher value.

However, earlier this year, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal stated that India will not tailor its policies to suit Tesla, and its laws and tariff rules will be formulated to attract all-electric vehicle manufacturers from across the globe to set up a base in the world's fastest-growing economy.

Tesla is entering India at a time when it is facing reduced sales in Europe and China. — PTI



Elon Musk