

## CHAPTER 1

# No Man's Land: A Visual Essay (Mumbai)

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### REFUGEES AND PAPS

As a lowly assistant in documentary films at the absolute margins of Bombay's film industry, *Living On My Own* is not turning out to be what I had imagined. My fantasies of myself as a single woman in a Bombay flat perhaps had a greater resemblance to life in Manhattan, but then, I hadn't really seen any women living alone except in American movies, had I? My idea of living alone in Bombay was Bandra by day and Manhattan by night. I could picture myself at the large window of my flat, in loungy pajamas, a glass of wine in my hand, looking out at the twinkling lights of the city. But soon enough, like in the movies, fantasy collides with reality to the screeching sound of tyres.

Reality is a special Bombay thing called Leave and License. This is not a term that celebrates the liberated life. It is, cruelly, the very opposite. It is a living arrangement under which you are not a tenant with rights under the Rent Act but merely a passer through—someone who has been given leave to live (and license for nothing) in a flat for one day under 11 months. (Living in the premises 11 months would give you tenant's rights and make it very difficult for the landlord to expel you). At the end of 11 months you could revise your agreement—and the landlord usually does, by raising the rent and refusing to fix the leaking ceilings. However nothing can stop the landlord from terminating this arrangement, with a month's notice should you show unruly habits or a little too much cheek and nowadays, perhaps the wrong politics.

I was in fact getting to be a veteran leave and licensee. I had a brief stay in a flat on Yari Road in the up-and-coming parts of Andheri (West),

which did indeed face the sea. If I ignored the intense smell of drying fish from the fishing colony across, the disapproving looks of the neighbours whenever I opened the door and they saw that I owned nothing but a mattress and a cardboard box, or that I had to stand all my vegetables in a plate of water so the ants wouldn't get to them—well, it was almost there, lapping at the hem of my fantasy. Another year and I could afford the glass of wine.

But then I was thrown out so I moved further out to a flat near a sort of hill, which I fancied was a view. The charms of the view were a bit obscured by the fact that the water came for only 10 minutes in the day and the rent was more than half my salary.

I was a refugee from Leave and License. If something did not come along, I feared that I might lose my nerve and go home.

A friend who works for a big Bollywood director tells me film assistants are all talking about this place called PMGP. It has one room with a little kitchenette and an attached bathroom and the rent is only 700 rupees. So we get into an auto rickshaw and venture into the inner reaches of Andheri (East). The further we go, the more I will the rickshaw to stop at every passing block of flats—*let this be it, it looks nice*. But it is a while before we turn into a wide but broken road lined on either side by tiny grey buildings with a valiant trim of red. In one step, I have gone from my fantasy to my father's worst fear—that, rejecting every decent middle class option he has struggled to provide, I will move to Bombay, join the movies and live in a *chawl*.

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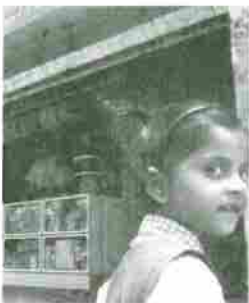


OFF, OFF MAHAKALI CAVES  
ROAD

To find a place in PMGP is not difficult, but you had to go there first.

Technically PMGP is not a *chawl*—that Bombay landmark of one room tenements with common bathrooms and a communitarian balcony corridor. It is blocks of very low cost housing for people who earlier lived in a slum. The slum has been uprooted by the construction of a new road and they have been relocated to this neighbourhood—a working-class enclave in the middle of an upper-middle-class area. My neighbours are people that development experts called Project Affected Persons or PAPs.

When the Congress Party was celebrating the centenary of its founding, Rajiv Gandhi—the party's head and Prime Minister at the time—announced a billion rupee grant to Bombay for slum redevelopment, improvement and urban renewal in Bombay city. Of this bounty was our colony built and so christened PMGP or Prime Minister's Grant Project. Clearly the housing envisaged a middle-class life—yes it was only one room, but it did have an attached bathroom and a marked off privacy from the neighbours and to my middle class heart this made it different from a *chawl*. But to working class people this was no good. They could not afford the monthly charges for water and electricity and maintenance. They didn't like living this way, all separated off and hemmed into a 10" by 12" room. If they sold coconuts or utensils, it was pretty hard to carry their stuff up and down the stairs. Besides, it wasn't close to where they worked. So it was that they found another slum or *chawl* to live in, rented out their rooms and in a strange twist of development, became the more powerful party of a Leave and Licence Agreement, while middle-class folks like me, supplicant and resentful, moved our mattresses and cardboard boxes in, all the better to live the Bohemian Life.





## NEIGHBOURS

Slowly PMGP is changing. More of us enter, more of the original inhabitants leave. Slowly my hostile neighbours are becoming a little, could it be, obsequious? Like Mr Kante, the property agent, they are getting in the brokering game asking me on the stairs—'Madam, *aapka koi dost hai, room ke liye?*' (Madam, do you have any friend's looking to rent a place?). 'Tell me, I will arrange it, two months rent as fees. But for you, a discount.'

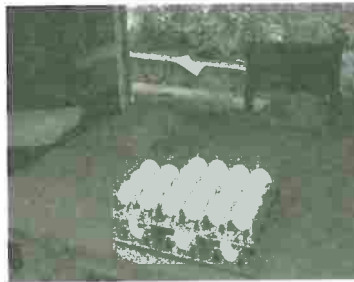
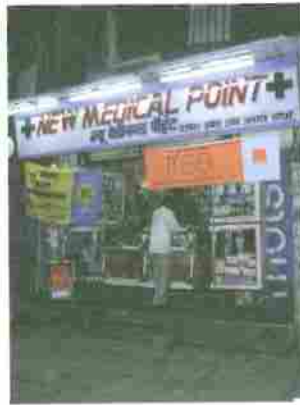
The PMGP locals regard us with a mixture of curiosity and hostility.



We regard them gingerly, with a class uncertainty—not knowing how to live next door to the people whose houses we had never previously been inside.



Sometimes at Andheri station I get in an auto rickshaw and the driver says, 'PMGP, right? I've seen you around, I live in number 8.' My friend's household help lives on the ground floor of her building. On the surface, like a socialist ideal, we all live in the same type of house, but the interiors belie our different worlds. They have aluminium utensil racks, Godrej cupboards, laminated shelves, maybe a box bed. We have handloom cushion covers, *chatais* (straw mats), a van Gogh print taped to the wall or a kitsch Hindi movie poster, handmade pottery coffee cups and books and tapes. One man looks long and assessingly at my rack full of music cassettes and finally asks—Do you have a music shop?





Finally a phone line comes to PMGP. It brings with it Prakash bhai. Prakash bhai gets not one, but three phones. For a small fee, one of them could ring for you and Prakash bhai, chewing pan and speaking mostly in grunts, will take down a message. You may collect this message at any time but he will not come up to give it to you—unless it is a matter of death—it says so in a big notice on the wall.



The shop is big and empty except for calendars. It is not long before the long-haired actors and the unemployed strugglers are ensconced in the steel chairs, waiting for the phone to ring. This is not something Prakash bhai has bargained for. After a few abuses and loud complaints, he puts up pieces of paper that say:

NO LOITERING, SITTING IN THE SHOP  
WITHOUT WORK IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED  
AND WILL BE PROSECUTED

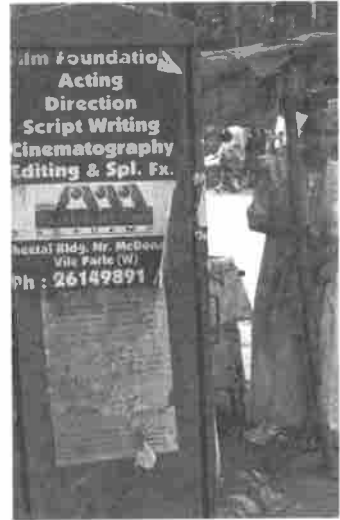


Prakash bhai knows exactly what's going on in our lives now. You may be discreet and studiously casual when you pass by for the eighth time asking, 'Any calls for me?' He looks at you intently and says, 'No, He didn't call'. And you scurry off blushing. Or if you happened to be walking past on the main road he calls out loudly, 'You got a call, about a job; they want someone from tomorrow.' You run anxiously to the shop and he allows you to break the line of people waiting to make STD calls—'Let her call, it's about a job.'





But it's not enough for Prakash *bhai* to be privy to every detail of your life. He also feels he must tell others about it—'Did you hear, M was called for an audition for some role by B.R. Chopra? *Arré*, but his luck is bad, and actually he hasn't got that special something, you know? I have been in Bombay for many years, I can take one look and I can tell you he is not going to be a star.'



So of course when M does not get the role, we all look away guiltily.

Prakash *bhai* also offers a facility called conference call—he will connect you through his phone line to a long-distance call. But he will also put you on speaker phone so that everyone can overhear you tell your true love you've been seeing someone else, or your mum tell you that Jatin uncle is bringing a jar of jackfruit pickle for you from Delhi, or you telling your share broker to buy 500 of Nestle and drop the 2000 of ISP.

The only person really amused by this is in fact, Prakash *bhai*. Everyone else is somewhat embarrassed but no one dare tell him to stop because he's dictatorial and will throw you out of the shop abusing loudly and what's more, you may never get a single message again.



We also get a bank. It's quite plush and we are the first ones to open accounts there. My account number only has 3 digits. Almost every time I go there the bank manager is yelling at someone, 'How did you sign for your father? Should I call the police? Huh? Should I? Trying to cheat us?' while the culprit, from Building no. 15 or 12 hangs his head down and mumbles, 'Sorry, I didn't know, please forgive me this time.'



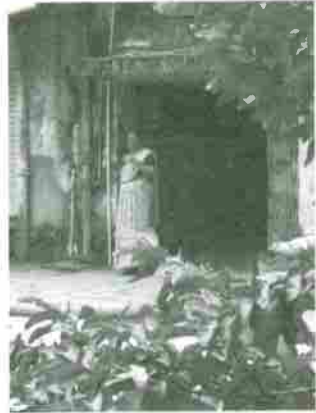
Behind PMGP a whole new MHADA colony is coming up and the central road winds upwards between its pink and mauve buildings, as yet unoccupied. Some nights, my friend and I walk up this empty road.

The neon lights shining off the perfect unused road and the full moon make us feel like we are on a film set. Any moment now the rain will come down and we will sing a song of love under a black umbrella.



### SO, MORE LONELY NIGHTS

Eventually it came to be that there were seven of us on the floor, all women—me, Ramona, Shirley, Bitti, Priya, Naina and Rukhsar. Which did not mean we had that much in common although we often shared our different dinners.





For reasons of ignorance or obtuseness, I am often oblivious to the meaning of people's days. For instance Priya and Naina, in the room across wake late, and spend each day scurrying after their babies or standing and gossiping in nighties and petticoats. They seem like quiet, North Indian girls who watch the soap *Kkusum* and wear *mangalsutras*. In the evenings they bathe, and I hear the tinkling of *pooja* bells. Later I see them go off, dressed in *shalwar kameezes* with little knapsacks on their backs. They kept to themselves and I never really wondered about when they came back home and where their husbands were.

A family with seven children of all ages move into the room next door. Their mother, whom everyone calls Bhaiyin, is a gigantic woman with a sweet face. A Bhaiyin with seven children; what's so fearsome about that? Well, if they don't live in the von Trapp mansion then it means their one room is lined wall to wall with mattresses, their balcony stacked with utensils and clothes and about thirteen pairs of shoes straggle down the corridor up to my door. Her two older daughters follow the same routine as Priya and Naina. The evenings become a religious contest. Bhaiyin's daughters believe in electronic prayer and play *bhajans* on their stereo at evening prayers. Priya begins to do the same. The volume of each stereo ratchets up each day as they compete for piety. Then they all come out in their *shalwar kameez* and knapsack and go off to work chatting down the stairs.

All the girls work in bars in and around Andheri, as dancers. If you are that young and pretty you get to be a dancer, when you get older you would have to be a waitress. Rukhsar, in the corner room, a former bar dancer herself, is relieved she no longer has to do it. So what if she's had to have five abortions. She is happy to have folks like her to hang out with, unlike us who help her in many ways, but will persist in speaking English over her head and try to make her send her son, Shoyu to school.



Feeling bolder for having community around, Priya and Naina have been transformed. They now keep their door open, the radio running loudly. They send their babies to play loudly in the corridor and if I complain they take them in for a minute and let them out as soon as my door is closed. They throw old *chapattis* outside their doors, so the rat population once again begins to climb. Ramona, my old neighbour, doesn't like this takeover of the floor or losing the supremacy she has so far enjoyed. I want to keep out of it. But she won't let me and her daily tirades get stronger. 'Really these building people, they don't think who they rent to, they take anybody. Must our children play with these sorts of people now.' I try to ask, 'Come on, what do you mean "these sorts of people"'. You were friendly with the girls too earlier.' 'Not me!' she says vehemently. As I gape at her rather convenient memory she says, 'Never, you can ask anyone, I only keep respectable friends. Really something should be done.'

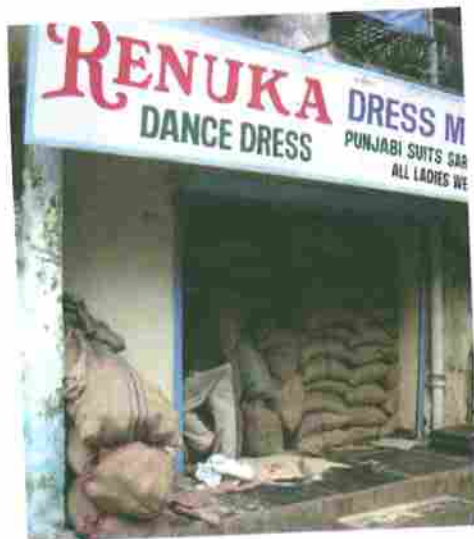




Rukhsar is crying. Her boyfriend, Shoyu's father, is getting married. He has told Rukhsar he won't be supporting her anymore. She asks him how she is to manage with Shoyu and he says: 'You can work, can't you?' So she has to go back to work in the bar but now she's been downgraded from dancer to waitress. She is always tired and rarely smiles. No one wants to look after Shoyu because he is naughty and abuses and looks at people in a mean way.

The corner room has a high turnover of tenants who seem to operate on a leave and licenses of about two months. A family with two grown sons who don't seem to work or study, and one Pomeranian that always lies with its head disconsolate across the threshold move in. It's not long before Rukhsar is smiling at the younger son as he walks around bare-chested, and plays with Shoyu. 'My God,' Ramona says. 'She has no shame, she won't even leave that young boy.'

When they leave, they are replaced by a Bengali woman who someone insists is a prostitute. 'Er, you aren't supposed to say that, you should say sex-worker,' I demur. Everyone laughs. 'Yeah, yeah,' they say, 'This is just like when something happens you say we should call the police and turn to the law instead of giving that person one tight. What world are you living in Paro?'





## HOME ALONE

A music studio opens on the ground floor of my building. Greta from downstairs who makes *dabbas* and delivers them on her two-wheeler also passes my friend a card which says Driving Lessons for Ladies only.



Times aren't what they used to be, Prakash bhai says. Prakash bhai is thinking of shutting shop because everyone has phones and also STD rates are going down. 'What about a cybercafé?' I suggest. I don't really want him to move since he is one of few remaining people from the old days.

A crazy man lives on the ground floor. His eyes are crossed and angry. He abuses anyone who walks past and the children either make fun of him or are scared of him. I wonder how he is always so neatly dressed. One day I come down the stairs and see he has a roommate, a man who is tenderly combing his hair. As I turn the corner he gently touches his friend's cheek.



Another day I go down and see the door of the house has been pulled out. The door lies diagonally across the doorframe, the edges jagged as if it had been torn out. The crazy man sits on his bed glowering and muttering. Greta tells me he tore it out himself the previous night in a fit of rage. Why is this man so angry?





*Gentrification: the process by which higher-income households displace lower-income residents of a neighbourhood, changing the essential character and flavour of that neighbourhood.*

Analyses of the changes in a neighbourhood like PMGP would use that word when the film assistants replace the coconut sellers. What's the word when the film assistants leave to be replaced by another category of people who come from a no-man's land of shifting class?



I am a bit adrift. My playmates are gone to their true homes—the 2 BHK (2 Bedroom Hall Kitchen) kind of homes. They are in Vijay Sales buying red refrigerators and new TVs.

In pursuit of their dreams, they do not mind moving to Kandivili because Bombay for them lies where the film and TV offices and studios are and the commute takes them maybe as far as Bandra. They are at large in a different city from mine.

When I moved here, just the thought that saving so much money on the rent meant I could have a life I enjoyed and which only this city offered me—going into 'town'—downtown Bombay—sitting at Marine Drive, eating a Frankie, while I lovingly surveyed my purchases from New and Secondhand Bookstore or the scratchy 45RPM wrapped in protective plastic bought from Furtado and Sons.



Now, after three years, there is a big question in my mind. To commit or not to commit? I buy the room right next to mine, because even though the neighbours are unfamiliar, the fourth floor of building 17 A seems like home. At least moving will be pretty easy.



Our building still hasn't registered itself as a co-operative. But it doesn't mean we can't act like one. A big board downstairs lists some rules. 'Resell or matters relating to renovations without prior permission is strictly prohibited.' Eventually the landlords are given a talking to. Bhaiyin's family have bought a place in Number 16 but are not being allowed to shift into it because the building people don't want dirty families with dubious professions. Why must our building not have high moral standards? We may be poor, but we have our respect.

When I suggest to Ramona that this isn't fair, what if people ask us to leave because we are single? She says, 'Don't be silly, those people used to make such a mess and a nuisance no? That's why their lease was not renewed, not for any reason. After all this is a building not a slum, no.'

Over the years I too have lost my middle-class ways. Sometimes, when it gets stiflingly hot in the summer, Bombay's intense humidity mixes with my genteel self-imposed poverty to stir up a big sweat and I have to open the door. I've even lost my middle-class decencies and sit in a tank top and shorts, revealing my shoulders for the world to see as I work at my computer. My friends are uncomfortable and always shut the door when they come in.





The building has its own soundtrack—the theme tune of *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, the pressure cookers, the clanging vessels, the kids crying, the unemployed grown ups yelling at them. After a while it all gets too much for me and I shut the door and turn up my jazz CD. Somewhere in a corner of my progressive heart, there is perhaps, a place that is forever 2BHK. I am uncomfortable that I do this. I shut the door on that as well.



# COMPARING CITIES

The Middle East and South Asia

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