

BOMBAY DUCKS

The June monsoon, which the rest of India awaits with impatience, is regarded in Bombay merely as a hindrance to making money. These pictures were taken in and around the city during the downpour of 1987

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARL DE KEYZER



The first rains of this year's monsoon are about to fall in Bombay. Between now and September, nearly 70 inches of rain will engulf the city. Throughout India everyone is hoping for a proper drenching without the disastrous flooding that often accompanies it. It was a "good monsoon" in India last year, not so good in neighbouring Bangladesh which spent weeks almost totally submerged. In one parched village in Gujarat, north-west India, children under the age of three sat amazed as 15 inches of rain fell around them in 30 hours. It was the first rainfall they had seen in their short lives and a good crop

resulted, greatly increasing their chances of reaching their third birthdays.

Nobody in the city of Bombay, however, has the time to sit around admiring the rain. Here in India's leading commercial metropolis, which has been on a business footing since 1688, when Charles II granted the East India Company a £10 annual lease, the monsoon is merely a nuisance – an annual three-month obstruction to money-making. And nothing gets in the way of that in Bombay.

During the Indian Mutiny of 1857 – or the First War of Independence, as Indian children know it – so keen was Bombay's

native mercantile community to avoid any disruption to business that the Parsees sent a message of support to the British government. (There are three Parsee families by the name of Readymoney in the current Bombay telephone book, and five called Sodawaterwallah.) The fabulously wealthy Sassoon family went further and offered to assemble a Jewish battalion to fight the mutineers over in Bengal.

A major irritant to today's business life is the infamous Bombay rush-hour, in which three million commuters fight to get back to their homes in the mainland suburbs through the bottleneck causeways at the







northern tip of the island. During a monsoon rainfall, when it is hard to believe that the city can have a chronic shortage of drinking water, this process descends to the level of near primal chaos. Red double-decker buses heave through the gloom like ships in a storm at sea as they negotiate pot-holes; battered black and yellow taxis, sometimes carrying 10 people, make quick spurts for any visible gap ahead, reason and lane-discipline a lost memory; motorised rickshaws – Vespa scooters on to which are welded leaky sedan chairs – weave in between with mosquito whines; dogs run for cover with the first drops of water, goats are relatively unconcerned; cows, however, sit down in the road and as sacred beasts to Hindus are navigated with the greatest care.

Many vehicles have “horn OK please” painted on their rear. The request is gladly acted upon. Nevertheless, over the din, one can still enjoy a chat with a couple of young civil servants from the Indian Department of Atomic Energy, in an adjacent car, about the pros and cons of fast-breeder reactors.

And then there are the beggars who approach at traffic lights. They know that being wet and bedraggled, like being crippled or maimed, will increase pity and thus payments. That is simple Bombay business logic. The city’s population is now estimated at nine and a half million, of whom nearly a third lack a proper home. If you are fortunate, you might get a place in one of the licensed shanty towns such as those that lead from the airport, described by James Cameron as “the real Gateway to India...a public shithouse many miles long”. Known as Dharavi, this is the largest slum in Asia with a population of 300,000 in 432 acres; but it is a relatively privileged poverty, and many inhabitants have full-time jobs and support families.

For the less fortunate, it’s the street. Whatever can be scavenged from rubbish dumps – plastic sheeting, rags – provides shelter. (Nothing ever goes to waste in India.) Such pavement squatting is so well-established that the Bombay Mob has moved in, unimpeded by the municipal authorities, and charges dwellers 50 rupees (£2) per month for a six-foot-square patch. A further half rupee is often extorted for the use of a public toilet, although the monsoon does provide free showers for all from broken guttering and drainpipes. And unlike Nellie the Elephant, who did a runner from the circus in Bombay, most people are heading in the opposite direction, swelling the population still further.

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