

Bachpan Ke Din Bhula Na Dena



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Editor's note: The title "Bachpan Ke Din Bhula Na Dena" means "Don't forget your childhood days".

1950

Dadar station ... from which exodus-ed travel weary wayfarers, at all hours of the day and night, to seek their fortunes in Bombay – the city of their dreams.

Migrant labourers, all skin and bones, homeless families with stars in their eyes and dreams in their hearts; boys with wanderlust in their veins who had run far away from their homes, women with babes in their arms looking for salvation; jobless youth with nothing in their pockets, but driven by the passion to be someone in this tinsel town – Bombay.

They come spilling out, their few belongings bundled in a cotton sheet; dishevelled, dirty, disoriented, bleary eyed, as they stand undecided under the sulphurous glare of overheard lamps, overpowered by the din, sweat and clang of passengers and coolies in a surging procession.

What do they do next? A wash? A cup of hot tea? Who will be the first to help them? They get to know slowly.

Outside Dadar station there is a Hanuman temple. Here they offer their prayers to the Lord for having brought them safely so far, and to protect them on the journey ahead. Next, they step out to face a three-way road lined with houses and trees.

These people have come from Baroda, Bareilly, Badrinath, Almora, Renigunta, Barabanka, Pathankot, Jhansi, Guntakal, Mewar, Jhumri Talaiya, Siliguri, Mughal Serai, Meerut, Nagerkoil, and even from Kabul.

They have left behind them with a deep ache – their cows, livestock and pastures which they could not tend to anymore; the heavenly smell from dung fires billowing from *choolbas* and *sigdis* (traditional cook stoves); the enchanting crush of wild lantana bushes which released jungle smells only after sundown; the lowing of animals and the tinkle of cow bells at purpling dusk.

Instead, this city's warm evening air fills with the fragrance of jasmine from the *venis* twined into the *joodas* (chignons) of Maharashtrian women; the smoke curling out from incense sticks as pujas

get underway in all the Hindu homes; pungent aromas of pakoras and samosas being fried in wide *kadais* at street stalls; the comforting smell of roasted peanuts and horse gram.

They also get the occasional spike of a spicy mutton curry from an Anglo Indian home, and the unfamiliar sound of saxophones producing dance music. They see zooming Bentleys with parrot nosed Parsi men, looking majestic in their *phetas*, those hats that resembled the hooves of cows.

These village folk now join the confluence of many cultures, who have already left their imprint on this port city – the Parsis from Persia who began life in Bombay by setting up tea shops in the late nineteenth century, and which eventually triumphed as Irani cafes; Sephardic Jews from Iraq who under David Sassoon established themselves as a very powerful community in Bombay, dabbling in textiles, spices, silver and gold and finally opium. This melting pot also drew Chinese and Arab traders in large numbers.

To this city now have come those, whose fate hangs in the balance.

Vacantly, it sinks in, that for the present they can at least sit under the trees.

Over the weeks, they begin to learn the curious ways of the city.

You cannot sit under a tree for very long, for the police will think you are a crook. The locals take you to be a mad man. Stray dogs ask you whether they can move in with you. Passers-by sometimes drop a coin. Soothsayers keep a sharp eye on the alms just received, and try to brainwash the *musafir* (traveller) to pay heed to what the parrot, which pulls out a leaflet from a pile of fortune forecasting booklets, has to say.

Even the city crows are sharp. If you dream away too long, the *chappati* in your hand will soon be in its beak. Aesop's fables never came more alive than in this little street corner, pulsing with life, throbbing with drama.

From my window, around 9 o'clock in the morning, I used to watch the *Dubbawallahs*, adjusting their Gandhi topis, and then sorting and marking their long wooden trays of tiffin carriers destined for various city offices. Then, they would heft these trays and balance them on their heads, and move on in one continuous, winding flow towards the station to join the crowds going up the flight of stairs of the overbridge at Dadar station.

Under the trees would be grouped young street urchins, their bleary eyes gummed with sleep. The hard pavement was where they would be forced to sleep every night. In the morning, they would creep out of their sheets, rubbing the grit out of their eyes, stretch their limbs and wash their faces with water from an ancient pitcher.

Two of them would be off to clean cars. The others would trot off to the nearest Irani restaurant to catch a bite, and then run off with six glasses of tea in a wire tray to the neighbouring tailoring shops.

The rest sidled up to the push cart vendor, and watched him arrange newspapers, soda bottles with glass marble stoppers, boxes of matches and cigarettes, solid jars of boiled sweets. After that, they would just watch the world go by.

Soon, they knew that they would be one of them ... the balloon seller whose thumb tweaked taut music on balloons to draw wonder eyed children flocking to his side, the shoe shine boy whose

work produced such a mirror like finish, that the city was reflected in convex detail on each shoe; the black market cinema ticket seller hanging round at Broadway cinema theatre before each show.

Or, they could be apprenticed as mill workers in the Mafatlal, Kohinoor, Finlay or Khatau Mills in the Dadar/Lower Parel textile belt – from which were sourced all my mother’s crisp cotton saris, bed-sheets, tablecloths, napkins, curtains, towels, petticoats, dusters. Their registration stamp on the cloth made my mother so happy in the knowledge that she was buying the best, even better than British long cloth!

Till such time, they would watch the slow roll of trams; big hoardings of Bharat Bhushan and Meena Kumari romantically paired in Baiju Bawra (a popular film), done up in garish pink and green, hear hauntingly beautiful melodies from Aah, Taxi Driver, Paying Guest, Chori Chori, Awaara, Barsaat, Boot Polish, and Jagte Raho (popular films).

And I would watch from my window ledge, the bhaandi wallah, the radhi wallah, the subzee wali, or the dumroo man with his monkeys Radha Bai and Dilip Kumar enacting the eternal courtship scenes, ending up in marriage, and Radha bai walking off in huff to her parents’ home, after her first domestic tiff; or open the front door to watch the *mochi* (cobbler) handcrafting the sturdiest pair of *chappals* for me.

As the day lengthened, along would come the knife sharpener. Neighbours would rush out with their kitchen knives. Soon he would be operating the treadle wheel grinder, until the fire sparks flew far and fast, when the knives were put to the grinding stone. Within seconds, the knives would be as good as new, and could easily draw blood if not properly handled.

Once a fortnight would come the tin smith from a distant land, to give a new shine to the insides of old brass and copper vessels. He would bring along with him, a bag of coal, handheld bellows and a strip of tin. Once the fire got going, the tin would be melted and evenly applied on the inside of the vessel.

Applying the tin is an art: the molten tin is poured into the copper vessel, then swirled and brushed around for only two or three seconds before it cools, to form a thin but complete coat

After two coatings, the vessels would be dipped into a bowl of cold water, causing them to hiss in protest. The vessels would dazzle with a silvery finish, after which they were finally handed over to the lady of the house. (Editor’s note: See [Growing up in Princely Mysore](#) for another description of tinning, called ‘*kalai*’ in that story.)

Around the same time, the stone chisellers too would come – usually dusky women, with unkempt hair gathered in an Andhra knot. Before they started their work, they would un-sling their babies strapped to their backs and place them on the uneven pavement. Then, with a sharp chisel and hammer, they would chisel away on flat stone spice grinders and giant *idli* grinders hewn out of a single rock.

Tuk-tuk went their rhythmic music, as they chiselled away the worn out surface. Soon, little crescent shaped dents would cover the entire surface. Rock salt or husk would then be dry ground on it to remove all the residual dust particles, before they were used for grinding masalas or chutneys.

I would wait for days for the flute seller, or the one string violin seller. They would produce magical music and fill me with a burning desire to own at least one of them.

My mother with equal firmness, would divert my attention, by promising to take me to BB Dadar, where later in the evening by the rainbow halo of the hissing Petromax, I would see Sindhi pavement sellers with wares to delight any child.

There were plastic mouthorgans that produced symphonic music; plastic dolls with arms and legs that could be moved every which way, spinning horses inside a globe, tiny silver balls inside a sealed plastic case, which had to be rotated carefully in a maze, be tilted this way and that, till they finally rolled into the central circle; yellow plastic hens which laid white plastic eggs with each downward squeeze: marbles big and small, with that little twist of colour magically trapped in them; kaleidoscopes that produced mesmerizing geometric patterns in jewelled colours, *surma* in silver containers, the tops of which were exquisitely patterned like a delicate chinar tree.

My mother would walk purposefully towards bolts of satin, silk and velvet in dazzling hues, which would become, under her gifted hands, pretty dresses for my sister and me. She used to drag me towards little shops selling lace, ribbons buttons, needles and thimbles and of course Anchor's embroidery pattern books. Further down there would be tall jars of dried apricots, walnuts, almonds sultanas and juicy raisins, along with rock candy.

As evening descended and I returned home, I would see Bahadur, the dada, emerging from the shadows and flexing his muscles. The street urchins cowered when his shadow fell on them. After he moved away, they would count their pickings and stow them carefully away in the hidden niche in the wall where the bricks had become dislodged. Around this time, the gas-lamp lighting man used to come with his long taper and a ladder. He would first wipe the inside of the soot covered glass shade thoroughly, and then light the gas lamp atop each ornate cast iron lamp post.

At first, each one flickered, hissed and then slowly bloomed into an incandescent jet. The lamp lighter would then move on, until all the lamps on our street spread pools of light.

The boys had by then knocked off for the day. They would crouch on the ground and settle for a spot of gambling. Cards would be shuffled and dealt out quickly. In between, they would take deep puffs from discarded beedis, which they passed around. Sometimes a sharp argument would erupt. Most often they died quick deaths. But sometimes they would build up into ugly scenes, and more than once, I had seen a sharp knife being whipped out from under the shirts of these, cocky, little warlords.

Before the police arrived, the dada, sensing trouble brewing, would swoop down on them and cuff them lightly on their ears. Cards would be hastily put away. A few sullen moments would follow.

Then in the best traditions of friendship, glowering rivals would drape their arms across each other's shoulders. Life was too short for protracted bitterness.

As I continued to stare at them, I would see the little boys looking at me covertly. Next, they would nudge the dada, who in turn would twirl his moustache into handle bar perfection, and then wink at me.

That was no ordinary wink. I would quickly jump off the window sill and scamper off, and cling to my mother's sides in fear. For, I had often overheard hushed whispers carry ... beware girl, of the *movali* (vagabond) who winks at you!