



India

GEOGRAPHY

Bombay: City of Hope

Bombay, on the west coast of the Deccan, is not India's largest city. That status belongs to Calcutta, on India's east coast. However, Bombay is by far India's most prosperous city. Its average production per person is three times that of Delhi, India's second most prosperous city. Bombay alone pays one third of all the taxes collected in India. Here, a non-Indian resident of the subcontinent describes this amazing city.

For the 13 million residents of India's commercial capital. . . . making money is Bombay's karma [destiny]. . . . When the English received what is now Bombay from the Portuguese in 1661 . . . no one in England gave the place much thought. . . . The king was happy enough to lease Bombay to the East India Company—a group of London-based merchants. . . .

In 1669 Gerald Aungier became an East India Company president, and Bombay, then populated mostly by local fishermen, fell under his control. Visiting his new dominion, Aungier saw that this string of seven small islands . . . was situated [located] next to the largest deepwater harbor on India's west coast. Aungier promptly set about developing the harbor. . . . By the time of his death eight years later, Bombay's native population had increased sixfold to 60,000. . . .

Now Bombay has no more room to grow. Though the seven islands Aungier visited have long since been joined by land reclamation, the result is not quite two-thirds the size of New York City. This has not stopped people from moving in, however. Their greatest motive: jobs. Of an estimated 300 newcomers arriving each day, only a small percentage fail to find work. . . . While employment may not be a major problem in Bombay, housing is. Roughly half of all Bombayites live in city slums. . . .

Nothing ever goes to waste in Bombay. I was reminded of this the day I went to Dharavi, generally regarded as Asia's largest slum, where an estimated 600,000 people live wedged within less than one square mile. I soon discovered that it is very easy to get lost in Dharavi, with its maze of alleys often passable only by turning yourself sideways. Squeezing past clusters of . . . children and stray dogs, I peered into improbably small houses where families of 12 or more lodged. Most of these structures were divided into two stories by rough platforms, with no more than five feet of head-room either on the ground floor or in the loft, and with no furniture to speak of, lest it preempt [take] the floor needed for sleeping.

Although most people in Dharavi do not have indoor plumbing, they do have jobs, and sometimes three or four. . . . I saw all sorts of shops and businesses aggressively competing for the . . . cash of the area's residents. Beyond the shops, . . . tanneries churned out leather to be made into fashionable garments for export to Europe, the United States, and Asia.

At the end of the road I came upon a glittering tower of neatly stacked aluminum cans. . . . Beyond them I saw lofty stacks of collapsed cardboard boxes, mountains of plastic bags, pyramids of steel barrels. I had arrived at the site of one of Dharavi’s principal industries—recycling.

A young man appeared suddenly beside the tower of cans and eyed me suspiciously. “What do you want?” he asked. I said I wondered how he happened to have so many cans. “I found them,” he said. “And now I’m going to sell them.” . . . The man went on to tell me that selling other people’s old cans was a great business. “I used to be a truck driver in [the rural state of] Gujarat,” he said, “but I gave that up nine years ago to try my luck in the Bombay garbage trade.” Now 30, he is confident that he made a wise career move. “After all,” he explained, “trash is this city’s only inexhaustible resource.”

I asked how much he made selling cans. “Twice as much as I made as a truck driver—15,000 rupees a month, and sometimes even more.” Fifteen thousand rupees is about \$480 U.S. A pretty good salary—especially since a college professor’s average pay is only 8,000 rupees a month. I raised a skeptical [unbelieving] eyebrow. He shrugged. “That’s nothing. There are people out here making 60,000 a month doing the same thing.”

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. Why do hundreds of people move to Bombay every day?

2. Why does Bombay have such a serious shortage of adequate housing? How has this shortage affected the lives of Bombay’s citizens?

3. Why would the recycling business be a good occupation in Bombay?

Activity

Imagine that you have come to Bombay from a rural village to look for work. Write a letter to a family member or friend back home reporting on your experiences in the city.