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Maximum Cities: Mumbai, New York

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Summary

We are a planet on the move. There is a tremendous trek underway – an exodus from the villages of Earth to the cities, that is unprecedented in history. In the twenty-first century, for the first time ever, more human beings live in cities than in villages. Homo sapiens has become an urban species.

By 2030, the urban population is expected to reach 5 billion, and 81 percent of them will be found in the developing world. Between 2000 and 2030, migration and natural increase will cause the urban population to double in Africa and Asia. 18 million people are migrating from rural to urban areas each year in China alone. And when they get to the cities, the vast majority of them live not in the skyscrapers but in the slums. One sixth of the world's population lives in slums today. In twenty years, the number of slum-dwellers will double; there will be two billion people living in the world's slums.

This movement is occurring because cities are where the money is. Unlike in previous centuries, where the rich feasted in palaces far removed from the countryside - and whose lifestyles seemed mythic and unattainable to villagers - today, television and the Internet have given every village and hamlet a window into their lives. Noses pressed against the glass, the villagers can see that they, too, might have designer clothes and swanky new cars, if only they migrate. Global warming will only exacerbate this phenomenon, which threatens to make the march out of the flood-and-drought ravaged countryside into a stampede.

This migration will pose tremendous challenges to the political structure in many countries, as it seeks to accommodate and control this shifting population. In China, villagers need carefully rationed permits to live in cities, so there are large numbers of illegal migrants living fearfully under the shadows of the gleaming new buildings in Shanghai and Beijing and Shenzhen. The potential for a social explosion, if the authorities decide to deport them, is huge. And far-right, anti-immigrant parties across Europe are gathering electoral strength from a wave of xenophobia, from Holland to Hungary. Their targets are Arab, African, and Eastern European migrants, most of them from the impoverished countryside of their homelands. For most of our history as a species, we have not been attuned to radical, continuous movement. We have stayed in one place, in our villages. But in the past quarter of a century, the world's migrant population has doubled. They are moving not just from village to city but from the poor countries to the rich. Today, there are 175 million people who are living in a country different from the one they were born in.

We all - wherever we live - have a stake in helping the people of megacities like Bombay or Lagos or Sao Paulo. The desperation of slum-dwellers in cities like Bombay directly affects the economic fortunes of people in New York or Atlanta. It's as important for Atlanta to understand Bombay as it is for Bombay to understand Atlanta, if for no other reason than the next generation of Atlantans is being born in Bombay today. And, given the rise of India as an economic power, it is also possible that the next generations of Bombayites is being born in Atlanta. To survive and thrive, it is absolutely crucial that Americans understand how people live in the vast megalopolises of the developing world – and in our own backyards, when they move here.

WHY DO PEOPLE CHOOSE TO LIVE in the megacities of the developing world? Every day is an assault on the senses. The exhaust is so thick the air boils like a soup. There are too many people. You might live in a seaside city, but the only time most people get anywhere near the sea is for an hour on Sunday evening on a filthy beach. It doesn't stop when you're asleep either, for the night brings mosquitoes out of the malarial swamps and the thugs of the underworld to your door. Why would you want to leave your village, where you own a brick house with two mango trees and a view of the hills, to come here?

So that someday your eldest son can buy a one-room apartment in the edges of the city. And the younger one can move beyond that, to America or Europe. Your discomfort is an investment. As in ant colonies, people in the shantytowns readily sacrifice their temporary pleasures for the greater progress of the family. One brother works and supports all the others, and he gains a deep satisfaction from the fact that his nephew is taking an interest in computers and will probably go to America. Cities function on such invisible networks of assistance. In a slum colony, there is no individual; there is only the organism.

If you look closely at the structure of an urban slum, it often replicates the physical structure of the village from which the slum's predominant community originates. In Bombay, I have seen sewage canals that are named for rivers that flow past the villages of distant Uttar Pradesh or Bihar; small shrines that house the same deities as the temples back home; gardens planted with same varieties of mango and neem trees as the provinces left behind. The slum's winding roads replicate the zigzag topography of the village. The dismal shantytown is thus overlaid with the remembered village, easing homesickness.

What is a slum, anyway? You and me don't like it so we call it a slum.' The word is loaded, overloaded, toppling. The people in the Mumbai slums have another word for it; 'basti' - community. A basti abounds in community spaces – in the line to the toilet, in the line at the water tap, in the patches of empty ground, in front of the hundreds of little shops servicing every human need. The construction of the basti is crucial to the 'spirit of Mumbai' that saves the city time and again, through floods, riots, and terror attacks.

Each room in the basti is exquisitely custom-built, every detail of it, including the walls and the ceilings. Each room is different, and, over the decades, suited to its owners' needs. They are endlessly flexible, with partitions and extra storeys according to the number of family members that live there. They are colored, outside and in, to their owners' taste. Look at a slum colony anywhere in the world: it is multicolored. Then look at the public housing that replaces it when it's demolished: it is monochromatic.

We marvel at Lisbon's old city; we pay a premium to live in Trastevere or the Marais or the East Village – all 'slums' a hundred years ago. Our young people now want to live where the other half lived. A young Jewish friend of mine in New York was looking for an apartment in New York's Lower East Side. When her grandmother heard about it, she reminded her, "I spent my life trying to get out of that place."

The people of the slum contribute more to the formal city than the formal city gives to them. The slum dwellers provide services – the journalists and accountants and executives of the formal city would find it impossible to do their work if not for their Mexican and African housecleaners, their Jamaican and Tibetan nannies. And the slums produce culture. Cavo dos Mouros, in the heart of Lisbon, is considered a slum by the municipal government and various property developers, who are trying to get rid of it. Its inhabitants come mostly from the African island nation of Cape Verde. The 31 barbershops and beauty salons of Cavo dos Mouros are hotbeds of funana and hip-hop. It is the most vital cultural music in Portugal – the music of immigrants, much more commercially viable than the state-subsidized fado and classical music. People actually pay to listen to this stuff.

Hip-hop, which began in the slums of Harlem and Queens, is now a multibillion dollar industry around the world. I once walked into an illegal Burmese grocery in Queens and saw a large TV screen playing, not Burmese traditional music, but hip-hop videos in Burmese. But Harlem and Queens will not get credit or royalties for contributing such an enormous slice of the American cultural export, because part of it is in the gift economy, and the other part is just outright theft. (Rock music is an example of one of the greatest art thefts in history, the appropriation of black American rhythm and blues by white rockers). If the ghetto were to produce something of similar economic value but tangible, like computers, then we would instantly stop thinking of the barrio as a drain on the economy. It's up to economists to devise creative ways of measuring the value of the slum dweller's labor, and their art. The problem is that this labor is in the 'informal economy.' Most of it is a cash economy, impossible to measure accurately. And how do you put a value on art, and that which it influences?

We may not realize how valuable art is, but art is often what attracts migrants to the city. For someone who has grown up in a village where an evening's entertainment generally consists of folk theater or services at the local church, the big city's glamorous celebrities and bright lights hold the same attraction that New York has for the restless teenager from a farming town in the Midwest. A Bombay taxi driver once told me why he continues to live in the city in spite of its hellish quality of life. "Lata Mangeshkar once sat in my taxi! Right there, where you're sitting!" When he told people in his village that Lata Mangeshkar, the nightingale of Bollywood whose lovely voice pours out of a million transistor radios across the subcontinent, had graced his little Fiat taxi, they thought he was making it up. Such intangible moments of exhilaration keep many a migrant going.

So there's a reason why people still move to cities like Mumbai, with all its problems. A slum dweller whose brother was shot dead by the police in ethnic rioting, and who lives in a shack without running water or a toilet, told me, "Bombay is a bird of gold." A Golden Songbird: Try to catch it if you can. It flies quick and sly, and the chase will be difficult, but once it's in your hand, a fabulous fortune opens up for you. This is why people leave the pleasant trees and open spaces of the village to brave the city's crime and bad air and water. The city is a place where your caste or background doesn't matter as much, where a woman can dine alone at a restaurant without being harassed, and where you can marry the person of your choice. For the young person in an Indian or African or Chinese village, the call of the city isn't just about money. It's about freedom.

An architect in Mumbai once explained to me that planning in that city is an exercise in futility. The nicer you make the city - adding roads and train tracks, improving housing stock - the greater the number of people that will be attracted to Mumbai from the destitute villages, swamping the roads, trains and houses. So how do we fix our global cities? I am part of a group of planners and architects called Urban Age. In 2007, I was on the jury of the Urban Age project in Mumbai, to be given out to the best project in the city that had a potential to significantly affect the lives of its inhabitants, and one that could be successfully replicated in other cities around the world. We considered huge projects funded by the World Bank, by the state government, and by private developers: roads, housing estates, architectural wonders. And in the end, the jury members, who included the former mayor of Washington, one of the world's leading architects, the country's biggest Bollywood star, and I decided to give the Urban Age award to: a better toilet.

Out of the hundred-odd entries we had received, only one came handwritten in Marathi, the local language. It was a homegrown project from a group of slum dwellers. Hundreds of them shared a public toilet, which was a pretty disgusting place, as you might imagine. Because it was everybody's property, it was nobody's property; the municipal sweepers often didn't show up, and it was a site of filth and disease. It was worst for the women of the slum, who had no-where else to go. So the slum dwellers came up with a solution: they put up a couple of rooms on top of the building housing the toilet, and made it an educational center. They planted flowers around the toilet. The community center offered simple English and computer classes, and became a social center for the slum. To get to the community center, you had to pass the toilet, and so people started taking responsibility for the cleanliness of the toilet; nobody wants to study computers on top of a filthy place. Now the structure was no longer just a toilet, to be resorted to only when your need was urgent. It became a place the young people of the slum started hanging out, and it started becoming a community center. In short order, the condition of the toilet improved dramatically, as the people who used it made sure to clean up afterwards, because their neighbors and families were all around, and literally on top of them.

So we gave a hundred thousand dollars to this group of slum dwellers who had come up with an ingenious as well as indigeneous solution that needed very little investment, and could be replicated in slum colonies around the world. The best moment, for me, came during the awards ceremony; Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, personally gave out the award on a stage in Bombay. The prizewinners came in a bus from the slums to the grand hall, dressed in ill-fitting suits that they had rented for the occasion. When Frau Merkel gave them the check, they accepted it with grace and shook her hand, but when they encountered the municipal bureaucrat who was in charge of their area, they dove down as one and touched his feet in reverence. They knew who had the power to make day-to-day change in their lives, and it was not the chancellor of Germany. Watching this made me admire the slum dwellers all the more, and made me realize: these people are survivors.

The first and third worlds are distributed over the cities of the world; and in each one, they live side by side. There are people who live in posh Malabar Hill in Bombay as they do on the Upper East Side in New York or in the Eighth Arrondissement in Paris; and in each of these cities, their neighbors are the universal fraternity of the poor. There are sections of Harlem which have a higher infant mortality rate than Bangladesh. The psychic distance between Malabar Hill and the slums of Madanpura, or between the Upper East Side and East New York, is much greater than between Malabar Hill and the Upper East Side.

Two broad groups of cities will emerge in the twenty-first century. The first group is cities like Bombay, Lagos, Mexico City: giant cities of tens of millions of people, their populations swelling through continuous migration from the rural areas of their own and nearby countries. These are cities in which the municipal writ of the administration doesn't reach the majority of the population, who live in vast shantytowns where everything that we expect municipal governments to deliver: water, electricity, transport, security – is effectively privatized.

The second group of cities consists of established cities in the rich countries like New York, Toronto, Paris, London. These are, for the most part, functioning, stable cities, for whom the greatest challenge is dealing with historically unprecedented waves of international immigration. Two of three New Yorkers today are immigrants or their children. The city has learned not only to tolerate diversity but to use it for economic gain.

There's tremendous diversity in American cities, and that's served the country well. This diversity is continuously renewed through immigration of all kinds, including illegal immigrants. American cities have found economic use for illegal immigrants. As Mayor Blomberg noted in testimony before the Senate, "Although they broke the law by illegally crossing our borders ... our city's economy would be a shell of itself had they not, and it would collapse if they were deported." Politicians of the great state of Arizona, are you listening?

The difference between today's immigrants and those of the last century is this: today, many of them are in continuous transit, between their homelands and here. Each new New Yorker brings his own world to the city, and goes back and forth between the two.

The notion of the 'melting pot' is outmoded. People come to the United States today, singly or in groups, and do not melt; they stay resolutely whole. Their flavors might mingle with each other, but they do not lose their general contours. The Italian or Irish immigrant who came by ship to Ellis Island in the late nineteenth century might dream of someday going "back home," maybe once more before they die. Today's immigrants - at least the legal ones - can go "back home" a few weeks after they step off the plane at JFK, thanks to the cheap availability of plane fares. What is exile when a round trip home is \$500?

As a result, there isn't a great need to assimilate. There are whole neighborhoods in New York where you can spend your entire day working, eating, playing, and dealing with the government without knowing a word of English; it is enough to know Spanish, Bengali, or Russian. All you need is access to a network that speaks your language; and for the network to be broad enough to provide the goods and services of a decent life. New York City today has 198 magazines and newspapers in 36 languages, catering to 52 separate ethnic groups. But it's not just New York. There are entire towns in Maine and Minneapolis that have been re-energized by Somalis. There are farming towns in Iowa that could be small towns in Mexico.

Immigrants today see no need to follow an imagined, idealized 'American Way'; because of the strength and regular reinforcement of their ties to the old country, they can live in America much as they did in the land left behind. If, on a frigid January morning, you happen to be crossing the Manhattan Bridge, you may have to make way for several hundred Mexican youths running in sweatshirts adorned with a picture of Padre Jesus, the patron saint of the village of Ticuani, in Puebla. They are recreating the Antorcha, a ritual pilgrimage run in honor of the saint in Mexico. The previous week, many of these same youths would have flown to Mexico for the original pilgrimage, where they carry an idol of the Padre Jesus on their shoulders from Mexico City to Ticuani. Teenaged Ticuanese girls in New York grow their hair to donate as a wig for statues of the saint back in Mexico. "Thus, a 150-year-old Mexican religious icon may be adorned with permed, bleached hair grown in Brooklyn."

In this way, their cultural identity is preserved in the new world, and a continuity preserved between the rituals of the land left behind and the land now inhabited. Those who can afford to fly to Ticuani participate in the Antorcha; those who cannot, or lack the papers to fly back, can prostrate themselves before a life-sized replica of the Padre Jesus in a Brooklyn church and feel part of the extended international family of their village. The Ticuanese are living neither in Mexico nor the United States, but in a continuum of the two.

I've noticed that immigrants also network with people in the new world that they wouldn't give a second glance to in the old country. Over brunch recently, a young, rich Nigerian couple, an investment banker and a lawyer at top firms in New York, told me about how they discovered their fellow Africans. They come from tribal nobility in Nigeria. They live much as others of their education (boarding school in England, business and law school in Boston) do: summer shares in the Hamptons, expensive meals on expense accounts. Then they got pregnant, and they bought a large apartment in a section of Harlem where they come into daily contact with African street vendors, people who they would only have interacted with as servants in Nigeria. The top banking and legal firms are supposed to be a meritocracy; anybody who can make money for the firm is supposed to be welcome. But as they tried to make partner, they saw more and more evidence of the caste system of haute New York, and found more in common with the street vendors than they'd ever have imagined. As they struggled to find a place in New York city, they ended up rediscovering Nigeria. The Nigerian couple, and their child, have a choice: in their personal lives, they don't have to assume the culture and manner of the elites in the same way their Jewish and black predecessors had to when they first entered the WASP banking and law firms, in the last century. On the way home from the subway, the banker and the lawyer stop and chat with the African vendors selling umbrellas and trinkets, and discover a fellowship they never had at home in Africa.

We need to look at what this restless mass migration has done to our concept of 'home'. I am one of the tribe sometimes described as "rootless cosmopolites." Home, for people like me and for many people in this room, is not a geographically intact entity. It is a global apartment with many rooms. I was born in Bombay and came to live in New York when I was 14, and since then I have lived in Paris and London. If I had to live in Rome or Tokyo tomorrow I would find my feet within a matter of weeks, and live pretty much as I do in New York now. Most of my friends travel in this orbit. I meet people in New York this week that I saw in Bombay last week, and will see in London next week; but I am unlikely to ever run into them in Omaha, Lucknow, or Liverpool. I do not live in America but I do live in New York. I am of the twenty-first century: a city-dweller, a megapolis-dweller. People like me have always been the target of genocidal hostility by nationalists, since the old tribal antagonisms don't apply to us. But we are growing in number, every day, every year. I refuse to live in one room. My home has many rooms. My home is a palace; it is the Earth.

More people should travel around the rooms of this palace. Though the potential deforestation and pollution that may accompany the urbanization of the planet may pose dangers to the environment, it is not without its benefits. When people move to cities, per capita income rises in consequence. Migrants are people with zeal to survive and succeed; they are more motivated because they have more to gain or lose than the native-born. And the evidence shows that international migration is one of the best methods of tackling world poverty.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development and the Inter-American Development Bank report that in 2006, 150 million migrants working in rich countries sent back \$300 billion in remittances to developing countries _ a total greater than all the foreign aid and direct investment from rich countries to the developing world that year combined. So migration is the most efficient and targeted way of getting money to poor people, since the migrants ensure that their money, usually sent in small increments of a hundred or a couple of hundred dollars, is spent efficiently by their families, without any bureaucratic overhead other than the cost of the bank transfer. In some countries, up to two-thirds of these remittances go to rural areas. It is the most striking example of the poor helping themselves. The money that is not immediately spent by the families may be a significant source of development funding, through microcredit schemes and the like – the seeds of small rural businesses; hope for the villages.

Just as we need genetic diversity in our agricultural crops to deal with unforeseen pests and plagues, we need cultural diversity among our peoples. For an example of diversity that's working, just look at India. It's the world's largest democracy, and is 82% Hindu. But today, 60 years after the country's

independence, its Prime Minister belongs to the Sikh religion; its President is a woman (the last president was Muslim), its chief justice a member of the caste formerly known as untouchables, and the leader of the governing coalition an Italian Catholic widow. Now there's diversity! Compare that to the US, which took two and a quarter centuries after independence to elect anybody who wasn't Christian, white, *and* male, even as vice-president.

To do business in these global cities, you should study anthropology, or the fiction of those countries. Even to me, born in India, it was a struggle to understand the ways of the country when I returned to Bombay to live in the late 1990's, after twenty-one years abroad. I had to understand, first of all, that the official rules are not the rules that apply. For example, when I went out to get a cooking gas connection in Bombay. The government has a monopoly over the supply of cooking gas, which is delivered in heavy red cylinders. When I first went to the designated office and ask for a cylinder, the clerk said, waving me away, "No quota." The Five-Year Plans of the country have not provided for enough cooking gas for everybody.

"When will there be quota?" I asked him.

"Maybe August."

This was May. We would have to eat sandwiches till then.

Various people advised me to try the black market. So I went driving around with my aunt to try to kidnap a gas delivery man; and we saw one bicycling along the sea. My aunt jumped out and asks him how much he will take to give me a cylinder. He explained that the cylinder was not a problem, but the connector would be; he promised to call after he finds a black-market connector.

Then a friend, also an expat from New York, advised me to take her mother to another gas office. She knew the ways of Bombay. So we went to the second office, and I told the clerk, "I need a gas cylinder, please." I explained the problem with the other office, their lack of quota.

"Do you know a member of the upper house of parliament?" the clerk asked.

"No. Why should I?"

"Because if you did, it would be easy. All the MP's of the upper house have a discretionary quota of gas cylinders they can award."

At this point Manjeet's mother stepped in. "He has two children!" she appealed to the female bureaucrats. "Two small children! They don't even have gas to boil milk! They are crying for milk! What is he supposed to do without gas to boil milk for his two small children?"

By the next morning we had a gas cylinder in our kitchen. My friend's mother knew what had to be done to move the bureaucracy: she did not bother with the official rules and procedures and forms. She appealed to the hearts of the workers in the office; they must have children, too. And then they volunteered the information that there was a loophole: if I ordered a commercial tank of gas, which is bigger and more expensive than the household one, I could get one immediately. No one had told me this before. An emotional connection had to be made, and then the rest was easy. The workers in the gas office were willing to pretend that my household was a business, and they delivered the cylinders every couple of months efficiently, spurred on by the vision of my two little children crying for milk.

To do business in places like India, understanding the human heart is sometimes more important than studying the human mind. I'm going to propose something that may sound radical: if you want to understand diversity in human beings, read fiction. Read novels, short stories. For it is the novelist that best understands human diversity. An anthropologist or a sociologist also studies heterogeneity, but it is the novelist that can not only understand it but make a story out of it, a story that reaches many more people than the stories of the social scientists. Fiction contains an enduring truth that lasts beyond mere journalism. So when we want to read about nineteenth-century Russia now, we don't read the newspapers of that time; we read Tolstoy and Chekhov. If, as V. S. Naipaul recently proclaimed, the novel is dead, I'm a necrophiliac.

So it was the novels of the great Bombay writers such as Rohinton Mistry and Salman Rushdie that I turned to when I wanted to understand the heart of Bombay. Greater Bombay has 21 million people, and

parts of the inner city have a population density of over one million people per square mile. How the hell do all these people live together? New York City is panicked because it's projected that it will add a million people over the next 20 years; it will go from eight million people to nine million. Bombay adds a million people every single year. I realized, when I was doing my book, that the way Bombay survives is by a series of solidarity networks among the poor.

On July 27, 2005, Bombay experienced the highest recorded rainfall in its history – 37 inches of rain in one day. The torrent showed the best and the worst about the city. Hundreds of people drowned. But unlike New Orleans, after Katrina hit, there was no widespread breakdown of civic order; though police were absent, the crime rate did not go up.

That was because Bombayites were busy helping one another. Slum dwellers went to the highway and took stranded motorists into their homes and made room for one more person in shacks where the average occupancy is seven adults to a room. Volunteers waded through waist-deep water to bring food to the 150,000 people stranded in train stations. Human chains formed to get people out of the floodwaters. Most of the government machinery was absent, but nobody expected otherwise. Bombayites helped one another, because they had lost faith in the government helping them. On a planet of city dwellers, this is how most human beings are going to live and cope in the 21st century.

In the years I spent researching my book in Bombay, I saw many things that made me despondent, fearful about the future of the human race. I met gangsters who could be hired to kill someone for a hundred dollars; I met people who had killed others for belonging to the wrong religion; I sat in the back of police stations and watched as the police tortured human beings with leather straps and electric shocks to the genitals. I despaired for the future of my city; I did not think I could find hope. And then I did, in the strangest place: the incredibly crowded commuter trains of Bombay.

The manager of Bombay's suburban railway system was recently asked when the system would improve to a point where it could carry its five million daily passengers in comfort. "Not in my lifetime," he answered. Certainly, if you commute into Bombay, you are made aware of the precise temperature of the human body as it curls around you on all sides, adjusting itself to every curve of your own. A lover's embrace was never so close.

Asad bin Saif works in an institute for secularism, moving tirelessly among the slums, cataloguing numberless communal flare-ups and riots, seeing first-hand the slow destruction of the social fabric of the city. Asad is from Bhagalpur, in Bihar, site not only of some of the worst communal rioting in the nation but also of a gory incident where the police blinded a group of petty criminals with knitting needles and acid. Asad, of all people, has seen humanity at its worst. I asked him if he feels pessimistic about the human race.

"Not at all," he responded. "Look at the hands from the trains."

If you are late for work in the morning in Bombay, and you reach the station just as the train is leaving the platform, you can run up to the packed compartments and you will find many hands stretching out to grab you on board, unfolding outwards from bodies like petals from a flower. As you run alongside the train, you will be picked up and some tiny space will be made for your feet on the edge of the compartment. The rest is up to you; you will probably have to hang on with your fingertips on the door frame, being careful not to lean out too far lest you get decapitated by a pole placed too close to the tracks. But consider what has happened: your fellow-passengers, already packed tighter than cattle are legally allowed to be, their shirts already drenched in sweat in the badly ventilated compartment, standing like this for an hour, retain an empathy for you, know that your boss might yell at you or cut your pay if you miss this train, and will manufacture space where none exists to take one more person with them. And at the moment of contact, they do not know if the hand that is reaching for theirs belongs to a Hindu or Muslim or Christian or Brahmin or untouchable or whether you were born in this city or arrived only this morning or whether you live in Malabar Hill or New York or Jogeshwari. You're trying to get to work in the city of gold, and that's enough. Come on board, they say. We'll adjust.