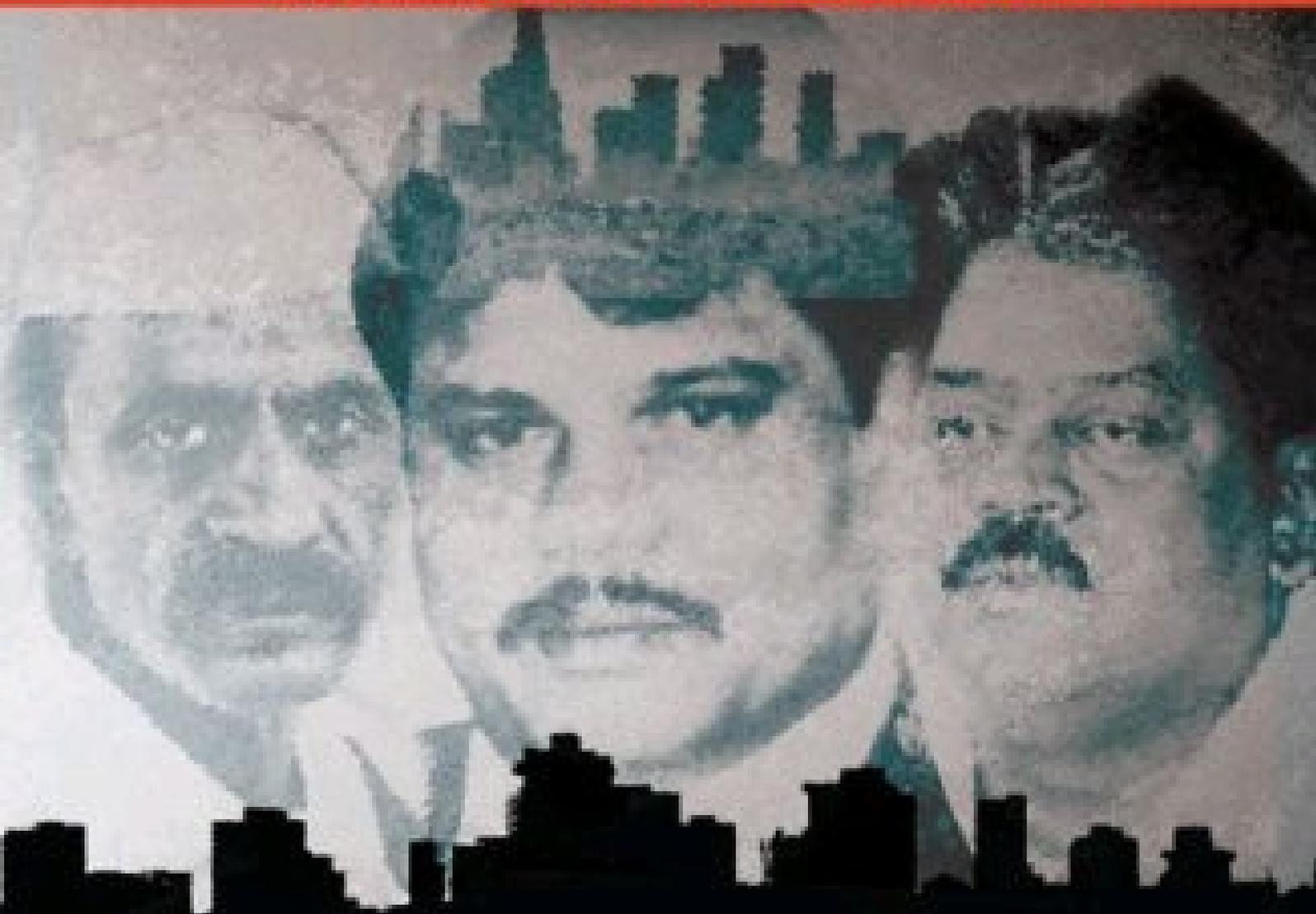


THE STUNNING SEQUEL TO **DONGRI TO DUBAI**



S. HUSSAIN ZAIDI

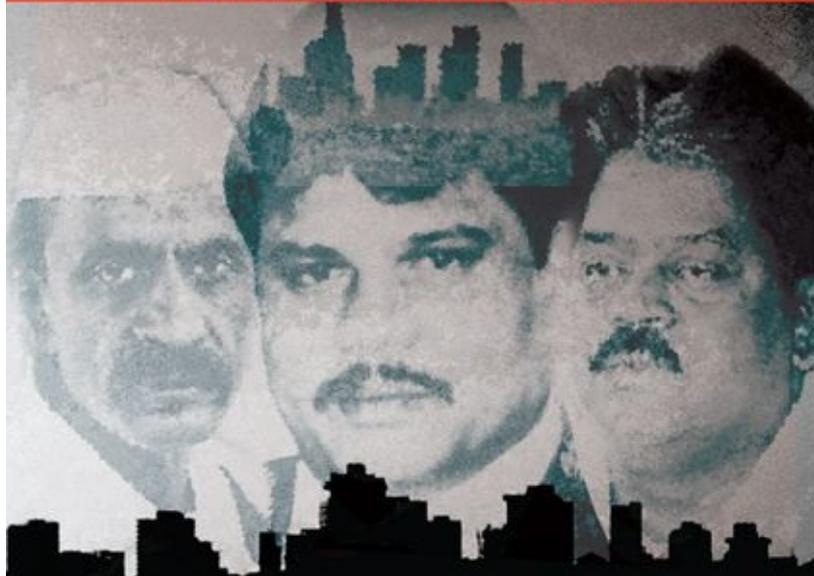
BYCULLA

TO

BANGKOK

MUMBAI'S MAHARASHTRIAN MOBSTERS

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HarperCollins *Publishers* India

*For Velly
and
my sons Ammar and Zain,
the centre of my universe*

Author's Note

Byculla to Bangkok completes my previous book, *Dongri to Dubai* (D2D), which chronicled the Mumbai mafia and its tryst with the city in the last six decades. D2D concentrated on Dawood Ibrahim's exponential rise from a street thug to a global ganglord and the people around him who contributed to his growth, including Haji Mastan, Karim Lala, Bashu Dada, Varadarajan Mudaliar and other criminals of the era.

While writing *Black Friday*, my first book, I had keenly felt the absence of any literature on the Mumbai mafia. When D2D finally emerged in 2012 after seven years of gruelling and intensive research, I found that much had been left unsaid. While D2D spoke of Dawood and his predecessors, I had left out the sons-of-the-soil (if I may borrow the late Bal Thackeray's favourite buzzword). The Mumbai mafia lore is incomplete without the inclusion of the local lads – those from the mill heartlands who were born in Byculla, Parel, Lalbaug and got sucked into the vortex of the socio-economic quagmire that kept the poor in a circle of poverty for generations. As we remodel south-central Mumbai into a Manhattan, we have to remember that we have failed to redress the issues that once drew promising young men to a life of crime. No city can grow unless there is a concomitant growth of its denizens. The transformation of the mill lands into a swank upper-crust module has left thousands of young men from these areas in the red. The malls are no compensation, as they are filled with restless young men who work twelve hours a day with hardly any job security or personal growth. Thus the stories of the first batch of wayward youth who became gangsters are relevant even today and are also inextricably linked to the social history and map of the city.

Chhota Rajan, Arun Gawli, Amar Naik, Ashwin Naik, Suresh Manchekar, Sunil Sawant, D. K. Rao and so many other boys grew up at a time when money was scarce and opportunities limited. Save for a handful of survivors, all the rest were killed in police encounters. Their story runs parallel with that of the degradation of the Mumbai police force. Until the early nineties, the Mumbai police by and large had some credibility. But with the onset of 'encounters', they became pawns in the hands of politicians. Political parties that had initially patronized the mafia marked them out in a use-and-throw policy.

The only redeeming aspect of these encounters was that fewer local boys dared to step out of line.

In this book, I have not dealt with several events already elaborated upon in D2D, for example the J.J. Hospital shootout or Chhota Rajan's assassination attempt in

Bangkok. Those and other incidents have been comprehensively covered in the earlier book. It is also not possible to chronicle the entire history of Mumbai's Maharashtrian mafia in a few hundred pages. However, I have chosen those stories and narratives that form the crux of their rise and decline to provide a perspective to readers who want to know more about the mafia landscape of Mumbai.

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Prologue

6 MAY 1993

The police cruiser was racing along at breakneck speed. The plainclothes men from crime branch unit VII were anxious, uncertain as they were about this operation.

They were chasing three occupants of a Neptune-blue Maruti-Suzuki 800, the car of choice for most Indians from the moment it hit the roads in 1983. The Mumbai mafia loved the little car; it was easy to manoeuvre when the police were hot on their heels.

In the back was a man called Chandrakant Talwalekar. The two men in the front seat were considered to be Mumbai's most ferocious hitmen: Subhash and Ganesh Kunchikurve. Together, they were known as the Makadwala brothers. Their community is known for broom- and basket-making and training monkeys for roadside shows, hence the moniker Makadwala. The Makadwala compound in Dharavi, in south-central Mumbai, is inhabited by the Kunchikurves, a simple community considered incapable of doing what these renegades were about to do. The notorious Subhash Kunchikurve wielded not a broom but an AK-56. This at a time when Mumbai had not even heard of automatic machine guns; the Mumbai police were still struggling with their outdated self-loading rifles (SLRs) from the 1940s.

The Makadwala brothers were part of the hunter-gatherer Yerukala community, which had been forced out of the caste system after it lost the right to a livelihood; the hunting and gathering of forest produce had been banned in 1878. They were from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, and in the north, they were related to the Bhils and the Kiratas. The British had declared them a criminal tribe in 1935. They were among fifteen communities branded in this manner, with the result that they had to report to the police station every time their settlements moved from one place to another. They spoke two languages – one within the community, which had secret codes, and another with outsiders.

In the 1930s, the community migrated to Mumbai and several of them settled in Dharavi, in what is now called the Makadwala compound. The women of the community were said to be good at fortune-telling. But fortune-telling in Mumbai did not take off as they had expected, and they took their place at the margins again, making brooms, weaving baskets and training monkeys. The Yerukalas were such precise, expert hunters that they could easily nail a running animal or a flying bird; the Makadwala brothers' skill as sharpshooters was taken for granted.

Subhash Makadwala was part of the group led by Anil Parab, who was Dawood Ibrahim's trusted aide. Subhash had a record of more than twenty-five murders, most of them executed with a ruthless spray of AK-56 bullets. Mumbai was used to high-profile killings, daylight murders, executions by the mafia. But the use of the Russian-made Kalashnikov assault gun in a civilian killing chilled the blood of even the most hardened police officers.

Subhash walked around with his AK-56 just as people walk around with their umbrellas during the monsoon. He carried it with him everywhere. When he went to a beer bar, he kept the gun on the table. His close aides were terrified of both the gun and its owner: Subhash was known to open fire indiscriminately, at the slightest provocation.

The terror the Makadwala brothers evoked had spread amongst Mumbai's business community. Builders, hoteliers, share brokers, film producers, distributors and even actors were threatened, tortured and exploited by them. Subhash was especially notorious. A buxom Pakistani actress who sang with a nasal twang was the hapless recipient of his attentions – and the victim of his baser instincts. The gangster sexually exploited the Bollywood diva for a considerable period, and it is said that he made her sing each time before raping her. She was so terrified that she could not even muster up the courage to lodge a formal police complaint against him.

The Mumbai police were reduced to mere spectators in the face of Makadwala's terror spree. The impotence of the police and their adherence to the basic police credo of 'qayeda mein fayeda' (the benefits of following the law) had so emboldened Subhash Makadwala that he boasted that no one but the Special Operations Squad (SOS) could touch him, let alone arrest or kill him.

And this was one such attempt. The Bandra unit of the crime branch had received information that Subhash and his men were about to exit a flat at Amrut Nagar in Ghatkopar, in the north-eastern suburbs of Mumbai – and had sprung into action.

Within seconds, Inspector Shankar Kamble was on the phone with Additional Commissioner of Police (ACP) Hasan Ghafoor, who was with the crime branch, for consent to raid the flat. Ghafoor's response, full of grit and purpose, was: 'Get Makadwala, dead or alive'. It was 6 May 1993, the city was still reeling from the serial blasts of 12 March and Ghafoor had sworn to uproot the mafia menace from the city. The directive was to cost him dearly.

But the order was a shot in the arm for the disparate group of seasoned plainclothes officers who immediately left for Amrut Nagar. Kamble had shown great presence of mind by assembling a rag-tag team of officers who were willing to take risks. Eventually, this team went on to become Mumbai's top encounter specialists.

Sub-inspectors Vijay Salaskar and Pradeep Sharma were part of the team. Salaskar took the wheel and Sharma cradled a .9 mm carbine on his lap as he took the seat next to Salaskar.

Bravado aside, they were unsure whether they would come back on their feet or on a stretcher. Before leaving their offices, they all called home nervously and spoke to their wives and children, without letting on anything about their destination or explaining the sudden burst of aff ection.

As the police cruiser arrived at the building, they saw the blue Maruti leaving the building premises. Caught at last!

Salaskar recognized Subhash immediately and tried to block his exit, though wary of Subhash's infamous AK-56. The driver of the Maruti 800 gave the police the dipper. Salaskar ignored it.

The driver immediately reversed the car, turned and straightened it with amazing dexterity, wheels screeching loudly in protest, and began to climb the steep slope of Amrut Nagar, in the opposite direction.

It was Salaskar's turn to display his skill as a driver. He revved the engine, almost standing on the accelerator, and jumped ahead of the other car. Both vehicles were now racing, sides bumping against each other in the dark night. Amrut Nagar was yet to be developed at the time, and the infrastructure was still in a shambles. The roads did not even have streetlights, so both vehicles kept grinding up against each other.

Salaskar shouted to Pradeep Sharma to shoot through the windscreen, instructing him not to lean out of the window as he did so. Sometimes a delay of nanoseconds at a time like this could drastically influence the outcome of an operation.

Suddenly, the wheels of the Maruti 800 screeched loudly and the vehicle crashed into a tree. Subhash grabbed his AK-56 and his bullets shattered the windscreen of the police jeep. This was the decisive moment.

The night was rent with the sound of incessant gunfire as Sharma acted swiftly and fired his carbine. It was a do-or-die moment for the police team.

Salaskar and Kamble drew their .38 weapons and fired round upon round on the sharpshooters, praying that they would find their mark before the gangsters did. Soon, silence reigned in the other camp. At long last, victory! The crime branch cops had managed to eliminate Mumbai's most wanted gangsters.

Though the skirmish was over in a matter of seconds, it seemed like an eternity for the police party. Two AK-56 guns and an abundance of magazines, pistols and grenades were found in the boot of the car.

The police department heaved a collective sigh of relief. The worst was over. Or, was it?

The killing of the Makadwalas had drawn the curtains on another chapter in the history of the mafia in Mumbai. Members of the business community burst crackers and organized a feast. The newspapers were full of panegyric reports the next day and the media hailed Sharma and Salaskar as heroes.

Hasan Ghafoor was elated at the success of his men and wanted to felicitate the bravehearts who had risked their lives in such a fashion. The next day, he summoned them to the police headquarters so that he could present them to the police commissioner for due praise.

For the officers of sub-inspector rank, appreciation and encouraging words from the police commissioner are no less than a gold medal in the Olympics. So, when Ghafoor called to say he wanted them to meet Police Commissioner Amarjeet Singh Samra, the police party was charged with anticipation.

Samra was an upright cop and his tenure in the IPS had witnessed zero controversy. During the communal riots of 1992-93, when the whole country burnt and blood was spilt on the streets, Thane had remained peaceful and registered no incidents of communal discontent. It was this sterling track record that had earned him the job of Mumbai police chief. Within days of taking charge, however, he had come up against the enemy force in an unprecedented manner: the city suffered one of

the most horrific attacks on it, on 12 March.

Muslim police officers in the force, regardless of their rank, were demoralized by the blasts. They were embarrassed and ashamed of the handiwork of the terrorists who masqueraded as good Muslims. Ghafoor, a Muslim himself, had gone through personal hell and was at a loss to explain the heinous acts that stigmatized a whole community.

Ghafoor hoped the Makadwala encounter would bolster the sagging confidence of the police force. But he did not know what lay in store for him when he led the police team to the commissioner's office on the first floor of the main building.

He knocked and entered the cabin, followed by his team of police officers, who formed a row and gave Samra a stiff salute. The turbaned Sikh cop looked up at Ghafoor curiously, asking who the men were and what had brought them there. Ghafoor said, with a mixture of pride and diffidence, 'Sir, these officers were successful in getting Makadwala. I thought you would want to see them and commend them on their good work.'

What happened next had Ghafoor reeling. The usually cool-headed Samra sprang to his feet and shouted, 'What the hell! Why have you brought them here? I don't want to meet these killers. Ask them to get out of here. Out!'

Kamble, Salaskar, Sharma and the others looked at each other and rushed to the door. They stopped only at the reception, where they waited for Ghafoor to join them. None of them uttered a word until they saw a flustered Ghafoor emerging from the office of the police commissioner, beads of sweat and worry lines on his face.

'The commissioner said one of the three men killed in the encounter had no criminal record. He is upset about his death,' Ghafoor tried to explain his boss's fury.

Kamble, considered to be one of the most blunt and outspoken officers of the Mumbai police force, showed remarkable patience when he told Ghafoor, 'Sir, when someone opens fire at us and we are in danger of being killed, we cannot wait to check the person's criminal record. We retaliate to save our lives. And these men were with Makadwala. For us, each of them was as dangerous as Makadwala was.'

Ghafoor nodded. But as he turned to leave, he said, 'He does not want any more encounters.'

He walked away. The much anticipated success party had ended in an anticlimax, throwing another pall of gloom over the crime branch.

Soon, Hasan Ghafoor was shunted out of the crime branch, apparently for administrative reasons, and posted at the nondescript Anti-Corruption Bureau.

Two police officers, though, were unperturbed by these developments: Vijay Salaskar and Pradeep Sharma. They continued to work in the crime branch and nursed other plans – known only to the two of them.

ONE

The Emperor of Aurangabad Jail

Mumbai's most ferocious ganglord-turned-MLA, Arun Gawli, was convicted by a special MCOCA (Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act) court on 12 August 2013 and sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of former Shiv Sena corporator Kamlakar Jamsandekar. Jamsandekar had been shot dead in March 2008, at his residence in suburban Ghatkopar.

Gawli was accused of having paid Rs 30 lakh to his men to kill Jamsandekar over a dispute regarding a piece of land. He and eleven others were found guilty by the court.

The court sent Gawli to jail for twenty years: ten for being a member of a murderous, organized crime syndicate and ten for extortion. While delivering the judgment, judge Prithviraj Chavan said, 'Instead of death, I am giving you life imprisonment.'

Arun Gawli's conviction set me thinking about his power and considerable clout back in the nineties, something I had personally witnessed during my first meeting with the gangster. This was in the confines of Harsul Jail in Aurangabad, in 1996.

Harsul is one of the largest jails in Maharashtra, and Gawli and his gang had found themselves cooling their heels there and eating spicy Aurangabad curry; it was the only place they could rest without crossing swords with other mobsters owing allegiance to other bosses.

At the time, I was barely two years into the profession and was accompanied by my wife Velly Thevar, by then an established crime reporter. We took the overnight train from Mumbai to Aurangabad for the meeting, which had been set up by Gawli's aide-de-camp, Santosh.

The trigger for the interview was my amazing boss, Sai Suresh Sivaswamy, at the time the editor of the newly launched Express Newslines. The idea of a city pull-out edition along with the mother brand was just catching up. Bombay Times, unlike its tame avatar now, was posing a challenge to readers of its main newspaper, the *Times of India*, and in response, both the *Asian Age* and the *Indian Express* had launched their own city editions: The Mumbai Age and Newslines respectively.

Sai and I hit it off instantly. Unlike other editors, he did not bark out instructions but threw out challenges instead. 'Dum hai toh jaa Gawli ka interview jail me karke dikha (If you have the courage, go and get an interview with Gawli in jail)', he said to me. And so I set off brazenly for Aurangabad, unsure whether I would bag the interview in the first place and wondering how the hell I was to circumvent jail regulations.

I first landed at Dagdi Chawl to get a contact from the gang, and finally got introduced to Santosh. I was so naïve that when he asked, 'Daddy ko milna hai,' I

actually thought he was asking whether I wanted to meet his father instead of Gawli. Santosh laughed and clarified: 'Mere daddy ka interview lene upar jaana padega!'

The meeting was set up. At the Harsul compound, we did not flaunt our press cards. Velly was essentially a reporter and I must say I have not seen a journalist quite like her. While I was waiting for my contact to appear and take me inside the jail for the interview, she was already walking around and listening to the stories of the people sitting on their haunches inside the compound.

She later told me, with much regret, that she had witnessed an amazing sight and, for the first time in her life, felt she had failed as a journalist. She had met an old man waiting with impatient eyes and an obvious eagerness for somebody. When she checked with the cops, they told her that the man had just come out of jail after spending almost a lifetime there. Velly tried to talk to him, but he was too preoccupied. Finally, after what seemed like hours, a frail old lady in a nauvari (nine-yard) sari wrapped in the traditional Maharashtrian style stepped out from the women's section of the prison. The man ran to her and they hugged and cried like young lovers.

Velly was moved but did not feel like disturbing their reunion. Also, she was too worried about what I was up to inside the jail to chase the couple for a story.

Velly's concern was not misplaced. Unlike her, I was a rookie. I was only twenty-seven years old and had never seen the inside of a jail except in Hindi movies. Harsul was an awe-inspiring fortress, swarming with security personnel, and I was very anxious about the interview.

While everybody else was frisked, my contact and I seemed to have escaped the guards' attention. After passing unchecked through several big halls and labyrinthine corridors, we were finally led into a large room. It was sparsely furnished, with only two chairs and a bench. The police officer who had led me and my contact into the room said, 'Please wait here. Daddy will come in a while.' I was flabbergasted. Why was a khaki-clad officer referring to Arun Gawli as Daddy?

We waited for Gawli to appear. After a few minutes, we heard the clanging of a big iron gate and light footsteps like those of a woman or a child. We looked up and saw a thin, puny man, less than 5 feet tall, frail but neatly dressed in a starched white kurta and pyjamas, a Nehruvian cap completing his attire. The man could pass for one of Mumbai's iconic dabbawallahs, except for his slight frame. He was clean-shaven, with a neatly trimmed Kamal Haasan-style moustache and well-oiled hair, and flanked by two cops who seemed to be melting in awe of him. He did not look like a prisoner. Gawli appeared well-dressed, comfortable and perfectly at home.

The mediator announced in a reverential tone, 'Daddy aa gaye.' Daddy has arrived.

I had to conceal my shock. I had seen photographs of the man, but nothing had prepared me for this. After having been fed a diet of Hindi film villains with their larger-than-life personas – booming voice and broad shoulders – this was an anticlimax. But his eyes were interesting. There was guile and many secrets in them: eyes that had lived life and thirsted for more.

'Namaskar,' I said, folding my hands.

Arun Gawli folded his hands in the same gesture.

'Haan bol, kya chahiye.' (Tell me what you want.) The way he spat out the words, it was like he was an emperor doling out largesse and I, a humble servant begging for

an audience. I had to pinch myself to believe that I was standing before a TADA accused in a high-security prison.

‘I want an interview with you, maybe 15–20 minutes of your time,’ I replied.

The don seated himself in a chair and offered me tea and snacks. I refused, adding for good measure, ‘I don’t want anything from your money.’ I felt brave after saying this but many summers later, I realized I could not show my antipathy to gangsters so blatantly. Now, when I am offered something, I tell them I have just had lunch or do not consume tea/soft drinks, etc., or I tell them I am unwell. I remember, as recently as three years ago, when my wife and I had gone to interview the sister of one of the most wanted men in India at her residence – my wife had come along because the journalist in her could not resist an interview with a female don – I refused to get up to greet her, and was chastised by my wife.

Any other man would have walked out of the interview after my self-righteous outburst, but not Gawli. His eyebrows arched, but he did not say anything.

The interview began and I found myself in my element, refusing to play ball and asking him all kinds of uncomfortable questions. We spoke about his rivals: Dawood Ibrahim and those who were buying for his blood, including Bal Thackeray, the Mumbai police, etc.

Twice, during the course of the interview, we were interrupted by a cop asking him to return to his barracks as the IG of prisons was about to go on his rounds. Both times Gawli screamed at him, shooing him away.

That was the first time I experienced the impotence of khaki. First impressions rarely die; to date, few policemen – a handful, really – have managed to make an impression and rise above my general prejudice about them.

After the interview, Gawli warned me, ‘Sambhaal ke likhna, be careful you don’t write about the jail meeting.’ It was more than a warning – a veiled threat, actually. But I was a reporter and reckless.

I returned and wrote the whole story in detail. Newslines ran the interview as an eight-column flyer across the page. “I will join politics to save myself from a fake police encounter,” says Gawli from jail’, was the headline of my story. It created a big hue and cry. (Incidentally, Gawli went on to keep his promise and became a politician. The first time, he got a few thousand votes, but my cop friend, the late Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) chief Hemant Karkare warned me that it would take only a couple of elections more for Gawli to become an MLA. Karkare, one of the best policemen the force has seen, was so right.)

Ranjit Singh Sharma, then joint commissioner of police, crime, summoned me to the crime branch office and asked me to disclose how I had managed to get inside the prison and do the story. I refused to spill the beans. Sharma politely mentioned that he could issue summons against me under Section 60 of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872. I said, ‘Sir, you can arrest me if you want. I can sit behind bars for a few months, but I cannot disclose how I got the interview.’

Mr Sharma was one of the finest crime branch officers the city had. When he realized that I was adamant and that a clash between the media and the police could get out of hand, he became concerned about me and warned me to be careful of the Gawli gang as they could make my life hell.

Later, when Gawli got bail and I met him with some foreign journalists at his

fortress at Dagdi Chawl, he looked at me accusingly. ‘Tumne mera boochch laga diya (you fucked me royally)’, he said. Soon after my story was published, several jail officials got transferred and that had made his life miserable, he said.

I was lucky to be spared. Two journalists, one from the *Times of India* – my friend, Mateen Hafeez – and Anandita Ramaswamy of the *Asian Age*, had got roughed up by Arun Gawli and gang. Anandita had written a story about how Gawli’s political party was going broke and not paying salaries to party workers. And then she did something reporters should avoid doing – after the story was published, she landed up at the infamous Dagdi Chawl for first-hand verification. The party workers roughed her up. They assaulted her physically, causing injuries and bruises.

Once upon a time, Dagdi Chawl was impregnable. It still is, to some extent. Gawli’s top-floor terrace house in a six-storey building is so big that you could play badminton there. His drawing room is lined with various pictures and idols of a pantheon of Hindu deities and looks like the sanctum sanctorum of a temple.

Gawli’s gang has a larger base than other gangs, with a lot of members in and around Mumbai and Pune. In Wadgaon Pir, where his in-laws live, he is revered like a saint. His other Maharashtrian peers have not been so lucky. Amar Naik is dead, Suresh Manchekar is dead, Sunil Sawant is dead, Chhota Rajan is absconding, Ashwin Naik is in a wheelchair, Anil Parab is in prison.

This is the story of the Maharashtrian mobsters who, in the words of Sena supremo Bal Thackeray were ‘amchi muley’ (our boys): sons of the soil, who greatly influenced Maharashtra’s politics and drove the economy of the city of Mumbai.

TWO

Ghatis versus Bhaiyyas

A few decades before the Shiv Sena raised the bogey of 'Bhaiyya bhagao Mumbai bachao' (drive out the north Indians and save Mumbai), Arun Gawli had embarked on a similar mission, its forerunner.

Except for the Pathans, who never allowed a non-Muslim into their crime syndicates, the Mumbai mafia was a melting pot of cultures: a miniature Mumbai. When Gawli began establishing his supremacy in the Byculla region, he was first challenged by a local gang made up of a majority of north Indians – referred to by some as bhaiyyas – and so he became the first gangster to target the north Indian 'bhaiyya' gangsters. Bhaiyya means elder brother, but in Mumbai the Maharashtrians throw the word around as a pejorative to denote anybody who hails from the north of the Godavari.

In fact, the Mumbai mafia has never been racist or communal like the exclusivist American syndicates: in the US, you have the black mafia, Chinese mafia, Russian mafia, Pakistani mafia, Korean mafia, Italian mafia and so on.

Bombay has always been an amalgamation, a confluence of cultures, a cosmopolitan city that was under the control of some foreign ruler or the other since the fourteenth century, all of whom left their imprint on the seven islands. First, it was the Muslim rulers who annexed the islands way back in 1348 and refused to give them to the Mughal emperor Humayun. Sultan Bahadur Shah of the Gujarat Sultanate thought they were better off with the Portuguese, who ruled from 1534 to 1661. They married local women and established churches led by Portuguese Fransiscans and Jesuits. They called the place 'Bombaim'.

The British, who had always had their eye on Bombaim, got it as part of the dowry in 1661 when King Charles II of England married Catherine of Braganza, the daughter of King John IV of Portugal. The king gave Bombaim to the East India Company, who brought in artisans and traders to settle the new town. As early as 1661, the Parsis also migrated to Mumbai; in 1673, the British handed over a piece of land at Malabar Hill to them for the Tower of Silence.

After the swamps were filled by the 1800s and all the seven islands were linked to become one large island in 1845, more people came to the city and made it their own, thus contributing to its growth.

The local trains, the first of their kind, brought even more migrants into the city. Initially, it was the mills that attracted the hordes, but post independence, pharmaceutical and engineering companies brought more workers into its fold. Technically the Kolis, who were fisherfolk, were the original inhabitants, but most Marathi-speaking people, even if they come from different parts of Maharashtra,

consider non-Maharashtrian Mumbaikars to be the outsiders. This view also stems from the consistently right-wing policies of the Shiv Sena, which believes that the sons of the soil (Maharashtrians from all over Maharashtra who speak Marathi) deserve more.

Incidentally, all Muslim gangs in the early years had north Indian bhaiyyas in their ranks. Different communities jostled for space in all spheres of life in cosmopolitan Bombay and this applied to the mafia too. North Indian bhaiyyas, predominantly from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, were part of the Kanpuri, Jaunpuri, Rampuri and Illahabadi gangs. These gangs called the shots at Sankli Street and Madanpura in Byculla, which were essentially Muslim pockets. But they also had their fair share of Hindus, and conflicts were few and far between, except when women or wealth were involved.

The conflict between Arun Gawli, the Marathi-speaking gangster of the BRA gang (its name was taken from the initials of its three leading members, Babu Reshim, Rama Naik and Arun Gawli) and the north Indian bhaiyyas was not based on regional prejudices. It all began with territorial one-upmanship. The BRA gang was first challenged by Mohan Sarmalkar's gang in Byculla, known as the S-bridge gang – after the serpentine S-shaped bridge that connects Byculla East to Byculla West – and later rechristened as the Bhaiyya gang. Sarmalkar had considerable clout in Byculla West. He dismissed the BRA gang as inconsequential and refused to accept their supremacy. If the BRA gang had its headquarters at Dagdi Chawl and supporters in Peon Chawl, Laxmi Chawl and Cement Chawl, Sarmalkar had his headquarters at S-bridge.

Sarmalkar did not like the title 'S-bridge gang' because it limited his clout and jurisdiction to one location. He wanted a larger canvas and sought to call his bunch of thugs the Byculla gang. But Gawli was opposed to this.

Though Sarmalkar was a Maharashtrian and the leader of the Byculla gang, many of his top commanders were north Indians. Parasnath Pandey (the matka don of Byculla), Kundan Dubey and Raj Dubey were all north Indians. Sarmalkar also owed allegiance to Virar's Jayendra Singh Thakur, known as Bhai Thakur, who was a north Indian.

Gawli's master stroke was to quietly plant the seeds of mistrust among the Maharashtrian populace. He dubbed the Byculla gang the Bhaiyya gang and quickly usurped their title, rechristening his own gang the 'Byculla company'. Once he had prejudiced the local boys against the S-bridge gang, new recruits decided to join the BRA gang and scrupulously avoided the S-bridge gang.

Sarmalkar was aghast. He started proclaiming that Gawli was an Ahir and that he was from Madhya Pradesh, a neighbouring state, and as such, was not a local. The Gawlis are cattle-grazers and milkmen (gwalas) and are spread across Maharashtra's border with Madhya Pradesh and throughout the state. Sarmalkar, who was a hardcore criminal and boasted gang members like the Pandeys and the Dubeyes, tried to claim that Gawli was a mill worker and did not know the ABC of crime.

Arun Gawli was the son of Gulab Puran Gawli and Laxmibai. Gulab came from Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, while Laxmibai hailed from Khandwa, Madhya Pradesh. They had six children, of whom four were boys. Gulab Gawli had worked at Simplex Mill and had high hopes for his children. He was eager that his children acquire a good education. Arun managed to complete matriculation, which was a big deal in the late sixties and early seventies, but his father left his mill job around this time. The

reasons are not known. His mother, too, had worked for over ten years at the cotton mills. In fact, most of the Gawli clan was employed as mill workers or government servants. Arun's sister Ashalata Gawli was married to Mohan Gangaram Bania alias Ahir, who was employed as a loader with Air India. Another sister, Rekha, was married to Digambar Ahir, who worked in the accounts department of the Central Railway. Vijay Ahir, a relative, worked at Khatau Mills before he became a corporator. One of Arun Gawli's brothers, Pradeep, who lived with his family at Dagdi Chawl, also worked at Khatau Mills, as did Sachin Ahir, son of Gawli's sister Ashalata. Gawli's connection with Khatau Mills ran deep and this later became the cause of a long and violent gangland feud.

After his father left his job, Arun took up a series of jobs with various companies. He joined Shakti Mills in Mahalaxmi after matriculation and later Godrej Boyce in Vikhroli. In 1977, he joined Crompton Greaves in Kanjurmarg.

It was at Crompton Greaves that Gawli first shook hands with the burly, well-built Sadashiv Pawle, later known as Sada Pawle or Sada Mama. In the company of Sada, Arun took to anti-social activities.

It was also here that Rama Naik and Arun Gawli met; they had earlier studied at the same municipal school in Byculla. Though Arun was Rama's senior, he looked up to him. Rama Naik lived in Lalvitachi Chawl at Cross Gully in Byculla. His penchant for getting into trouble meant he had to leave school before completing matriculation. He dropped out after Class 6 and took with him other troubled and trouble-making youths like Ashok Chaudhary alias Chhota Babu, Bablya Sawant and Vilas Choughule. His exit did not affect his friendship with Arun Gawli. Along with the other boys, they played kabaddi at the local Om Club.

At the time, Byculla was just making its mark as the Palermo of independent India. The Jaunpuri, Kanpuri and Illahabadi gangs were all big names in the area. Later, gangs headed by Nanhe Khan and Waheb Pehelwan along with the Johnny Brothers, who became active in the Clare Road area (which was essentially a Christian locality and ruled by the Johnny brothers), became prominent in Byculla.

With its history of gangs for more than fifty years, Byculla was the hunting ground of the Mumbai mafiosi. It was in Byculla that Arun Gawli and Rama Naik entered the lanes of the underworld. Once in, no one ever got out.

The internecine warfare between the S-bridge gang and the BRA gang escalated. Kundan Dubey was a known acolyte of Parasnath Pandey, and they had both served in the ranks of Sarmalkar's gang. Ironically, Kundan's sister Pushpa had fallen in love with Arvind, the elder brother of gangster Rama Naik, who was with the rival BRA gang. As Bollywood has shown us, such romances cannot survive without bloodshed. In 1976, Kundan got into a quarrel with Arvind on the streets and slapped him. Rama Naik's younger brother, Umakant, could not stand by and watch his brother's humiliation. He stepped in and soon a fist fight broke out between Kundan and Umakant. Kundan stabbed Umakant, who later succumbed to his injuries. Kundan was arrested by the Agripada police and jailed for a while before eventually being released on bail.

This incident marked the beginning of a violent battle between the BRA gang and the Bhaiyya gang. Until then, they had restricted themselves to street skirmishes and fist fights.

Kundan was now on the BRA gang's hit list. Soon after his release from jail, he barged into a gambling den at Parsi Wadi in Tardeo and killed two people; his reign of terror was beginning in the Grant Road area, earlier managed by his friend Shashi Rasam, the leader of the Cobra gang, whom he had met in jail.

The selective crackdown by the police on their matka (gambling) dens only exacerbated hostilities; it frustrated the BRA gang as the dens of their rivals were never raided. It was obvious that the others paid more hafta to the police. Arun and Rama never intended to join a gang – they would have happily run their matkas and liquor joints – but the raids made them furious. It was their sense of frustration over the injustice that forced Rama Naik, Babu Reshim and Arun Gawli to join hands.

Babu Reshim was the seniormost among the three and the other two looked up to him, discussing all plans with him and asking for advice. It was at his suggestion that they named their gang BRA. They soon started terrorizing the traders of the Byculla region by extorting money from gambling dens, liquor shops and those selling smuggled goods. Later, with the induction of foot soldiers into the gang, muscle power was provided to landlords and contractors to evict tenants for the construction of new buildings. This became their entry into the real estate business – Arun Gawli was the first don to dabble in land deals.

Many other dons in Mumbai tried their hand at the real estate and construction businesses. Haji Mastan tried very hard to get his fingers into the construction pie, with the help of the Dawood and Pathan gangs, but was unable to sustain it as the business required constant engagement. Dawood came into the field much later, initially content with rigging horse races at the Mahalaxmi Derby and financing films. However, Arun Gawli had foreseen that real estate would be the next big thing and concentrated his energies in the Worli, Byculla, Chinchpokli, Parel, Lalbaug and Dadar areas of south-central Mumbai or Girangaon.

Gawli understood the requirement for – and power of – muscle in this business. He started settling financial disputes and providing protection to his contractor friends. He demanded a flat 50 per cent fee for settling financial disputes or a certain number of flats in the newly constructed buildings. He was also the first don to demand 50 per cent of the money recovered in financial disputes. As the police could not intervene in such civil matters and did not get involved in settling financial disputes because of legal constraints, Gawli and other gangsters made a killing. These practices created a link between building contractors and gangsters, and the BRA gang became a force to reckon with.

Meanwhile, when Kundan Dubey was in jail, his sister fell in love with Shashi Rasam, leader of the Cobra gang. Shashi Rasam at this point thought he should patch up the relationship between the BRA gang and the S-bridge gang.

As it happened, Rama ended up in jail after a fight with another gang and met Shashi Rasam. Both were released in 1977. While in jail, Shashi tried to convince Rama to let bygones be bygones and bring closure to the Kundan episode by not testifying against Kundan in the Umakant Naik murder case.

But Rama was in no mood for any such reconciliation. He told Shashi in no uncertain terms that blood was thicker than water and that Kundan would have to undergo punishment as dictated by the courts. As expected, after the court trials, Kundan was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment. Shashi was enraged, and