The clouds took up their position even before Air India 144 started its 14-hours-long, uninterrupted journey from Newark, New Jersey, to what was first called by wayward Portuguese explorer Gaspar Correira “uma boa baía” and now is simultaneously called Bombay¹, or officially Mumbai. Whether you first saw it from the scurrying eye of enterprising merchants of a not-so-distant colonial past, or heard it on the lips of Hindu nationalists ready to take their patrimony back to the extent of linguistic reconquest, the City of Dreams is impossible to mistake with any other bustling metropolis on Earth—that is, if any rival can compete with the shining aspirations of its twenty million souls.

Again, the clouds can attest: without exaggeration—and nor would I want to—there was not one truly sunny day while I resided in the city. Perhaps the top-secret experiments of IIT Bombay in climate control took a step forward on July 13th when, from the top-floor window of X Billion Lab’s office in the always apocalyptically-chic Bandar neighborhood, I saw a sight equivalent to India what the miracle of an August snowfall on the foundation of Santa Maria Maggiore was to ancient Rome: blue skies during the monsoon season. To this day I ask myself whether it was an illusion, for the next time I looked outside the characteristic shades of gray had once again taken their pride of place perched over the Arabian Sea. Don’t get me wrong, though; the clouds, or as they would rather be christened by the ever-popular #mumbairains, express a singular personality. Trembling, unfurling, and speeding their course with due dynamism, I was never left unimpressed after a regular commute via Uber across the Sea Link, gleaming symbol of an India veering its seemingly endless momentum towards the promises of the third millennium.

How then can it be that Mumbai, a skipping-stone scattering of islands engineering by sheer human will into a fertile field of cultivated skyscrapers more closely packed than shafts of bamboo, be “apocalyptically chic?” It’s a question that carries no critique in its wake, but rather the thick, salty air—the challenge of walking through it and not sweating deemed by CEO participants as a worthy alternative to Columbia’s swim test—of everything that can be and, as has been proven by the endurance of the subcontinent’s spirit from the time of Alexandrian to Mughal, then British conquest and finally independence, will be. Everything blends in that shared air, for better or worse: the blissfully pungent scent of *pav bhaji* dancing its way to the stage of your senses, eyes tearing from smoke and ears picking up on the reassuring call of the vendor that today his stall is a *lassiwala* too, oven-fired clay cups and all filled with yogurt-y goodness for only 30 rupees. It is overwhelming, from first exposure getting off the airplane unto the last, of which there is none, since India finds a way to make itself known in even the smallest nooks flung across the four corners of the globe (*gulab jamun* with vanilla macarons, anyone?) As for the less-welcomed scents, I believe that should be left to the boundless contortions of the imagination…and a glance at recent reports on the city’s failure to implement a comprehensive sewage system. To say the least, it is best to watch your step

¹ Not to be confused with the name of our WhatsApp group, BomBAES.
whether walking on Bandra’s sidewalk, oftentimes obstructed by sprawling, gnarly roots of a mango tree, or on the streets, where cattle and goat threaten the passerby with souvenirs of their routine trek for grass to eat and drivers to stall.

How does an internship of barely two months find its voice in such a space, layers of commotion and causality and chanced prosperity piled higher than the careful disarray of downtown Antilia, the infamous home of business tycoon Mukesh Ambani and the most expensive home in the world? Samyak Chakrabarty, CEO of X Billion Labs and primary test subject of the laboratory that is the Indian social enterprise movement, preferred to let my story run its course outside the office to an extent I could’ve never expected. I was exposed to the truth of X Billion’s mission from the get-go: “we aim to be the first organizer of social change to last a hundred years and to change a billion people’s lives; profit only factors in to sustain our goals a thousand years more.” The passion of Samyak to leave a lasting impression in everything he dives into is undeniable, but this island of genius remained closely guarded by an ocean of enigma.

The story of Samyak’s rise to fame and fortune is a scrapbook of newspaper clippings to Bollywood celebrities’ endorsement and beyond; listening to him recount it all left me with more questions than answers. All that I know for sure is that Samyak will continue to intrigue and subvert the conventions a globalized, capitalistic society at once conjuring the hope of social ascent to its most marginalized and hefting its mass as a wall of greed in front of them, whether of brick-and-mortar along the borders of nations or the just-as-tangible chokehold on the mind, barring equal opportunity to education and self-determination. I eagerly look forward to learning about the twists and turns of Samyak’s adventures over a cup of black tea, chosen and brewed by him straight from the frond-adorned hilltops of Chinnakanal, Kerala. Of course, another Grand Tour of Bangalore’s restaurants and clubs wouldn’t be a poor choice, either—no wonder it is ranked as the country’s Most Happening City™.

After capping off the explosion of experiences that was CEO Mumbai with a chilled bottle of Kingfisher, what is there left to say about a land that Mark Twain once declared the “mother of history, grandmother of legend?” A lot more, of course, with each day passed under the sooty and rattling arches of Victoria Terminus adding another volume’s worth to my silver-haired memoirs of years to come (leather-bound special edition coming out June 2073!) Let’s then limit ourselves to the name itself: "India" is a toponym entangled in a history not of its own, owing prominence in the ancient Greek historiography of Columbia’s very own Herodotus2. Its epic aetiology is less mythic than the likes of Troy and Rome, but gripping nonetheless: in the word emerges the 4th-century pillaging of Alexander the Great across Persia until reaching the River Sindū, at the time the 3,500 kilometers-and-counting demarcation of the nascent West and an Eden beyond. From the scant whispers of the periphas, navigational accounts of sailors who dared to venture beyond the “nee plus ultra” of their society’s geographical understanding, the Macedonian king learned of the unimaginable riches that rested under the mild light of a rising Eastern sun.

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2 It does appear like it at times, no? I wouldn't be surprised to learn that his direct descendant is studying the dative case of Linear B Mycenean Greek in some seventh-floor Hamilton classroom at this very moment.
To him and the majority of European conquerors of centuries hence, “riches” meant material wealth in the form of gold, gems, spices, and a flurry of textiles in colors so vibrant that no equivalent could be found back home— dear old England ended up being too dreary, after all. What a misfortune it must have been, then, for mankind to pursue India by the whims of feverish wishes that lose their heated pitch as one is destined to lose his life, and not notice the true treasure that lies within, carried humbly in the hearts of those who, with doors wide open and a cup of masala chai, are ready to engage a friendly stranger in a conversation over the remains of the day. The exchange of a smile across the desert barrens of race, language, or class puts to death the case of the “exotic Orient” daily, replacing it with the face of a neighbor similar to me as I am to you. And in my experience, the bonds of time and place, turmoil and redemption are stronger between India and I than one would first think.

While typing up this word vomit (now in Technicolor!) from the comfort of my aunt’s home in Rio de Janeiro, Bharat and Brazil mesh in the mind’s eye to be one in the same, and I am still not convinced that if I were to raft down the tawny waters of the Amazon I wouldn’t eventually find the marble piers of Varanasi after a 80-day feat. (Unlike Christopher Columbus, though, megalomaniacal tendencies are not invited to hitch a ride in my hull.) If the average medieval monk-turned-geographer is to be trusted — and I’m holding no reservations, Friar Odoric — there exists in fact not one, but three Indias, encompassing what is now locales rarely thought to be related as Vietnam and Ethiopia. Throwing the misidentification of the East and West “Indies” in the mix of cartographical blunders, it soon becomes clear that besides the seismic shock of embarrassment felt by historians every time the Northwest Passage is mentioned, this classification of everything “Other” to the glories of Europe as India reflects a deliberate process of exclusion whose repercussions can still be felt today.

Nevertheless, as the contours of a impoverished Global South came into shape in modernity’s dust, India proper found like company not to commiserate with, but to grow in interdependence and wisdom for the sake of a common future. Despite the rapid-fire accusations of corruption and stagnancy faced by BRICS countries today, I still stand firm on the dream of a community of underdogs hustling their paths to success. Whether that be a jugaad-tinged mindset or a gambiarra patching a bridge along the way, I believe that the various Indias of the globe gain strength in banding together to part the mists of a monsoon afternoon just long enough to watch the sun set over the crest of mountains lining Guanabara Bay, Baga Beach, and everywhere in between.