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La Pinta tips the lane to the path towards St Paul's Church. Across lie Surya Mahal and Chandra Mahal, with arresting Art Deco-meets-Indo Saracenic facades crowned with sultry-sulky sun and calmer moon motifs.

In Ganpati Bhuvan, Naigaon, 90-year-old Vishnu Shete confirms that his father Sakham was associated with the construction of both. "Bhide, the architect, stayed near Sena Bhavan. The east-open land offered unobstructed views of the rising sun, so the first building was Surya Mahal. They may have thought of Chandra Mahal to balance solar and lunar energies. Like La Nina-La Santa Maria-La Pinta, these are built to last, with solid steel girders."

Pednekar Marg is packed with signboards announcing services of advocates and notaries. In Ramesh Vedak's rooms in Surya Mahal, he points to a portrait of Vithal Narayan Vedak: "My grandfather rented this office when the building rose in 1937. Practising at this very spot since 1974, I'm the third advocate generation. My father Chandrashekhar was one as well."

An Irani cafe which shared Surya Mahal's ground level with the Vedaks is currently the popular Nee-sha Bar and Restaurant. Two lanes further east, on Govindji Keni Road, pops up a still standing remnant of Persia, Aspi Irani's Spenta Bakery—an unusual vegetarian Irani outlet catering to the swell of Gujaratis and Jains in the area. "It was a beer bar I converted in 2006. The maidan was open then, the road clear of vendors," Irani says. "Making many friends with police people, I have fond memories of them."

Guiding me through the twisty innards of essentially police turf is police historian Deepak Rao. Walking past the Bhoiwada courts, armed police headquarters and Ganpat Pabalkar's corner stall hawking police shoes and holster belts. A couple of freshly inducted women cadets check their uniform accessories. Next, we sip elaichi chai in the canteen of the English Police Recreation Hall.

Rao explains the strategic sway this jurisdiction held in central Bombay from the 1920s. "Bhoiwada importantly controlled Bombay's five battalion camps in Parel, Worli, Tardeo, Marol and Ka-



Carved newel post on a staircase of La Santa Maria. **PIC/SACHIN BAWISKAR**



Tile detail of the Columbus ship at the La Pinta entrance. **PIC/ATUL KAMBLE**



Vishnu Sakham Shete, whose father is associated with Surya Mahal and Chandra Mahal. **PIC/ATUL KAMBLE**

lina. It has undertaken vital roles in sensitive interrogation, guarding government premises and escorting undertrials to various courts. With thousands of police tenements in these parts, every second person has some cop family connection."

The cab driver taking me home bristles with opinion. I must be Parsi, he observes in an instant. Am I here because the Dadar colony of my community members isn't far? When I mention what brings me to Bhoiwada, he exclaims, "Hamara interview lena tha. Pitaji ne ACP ke ghar kai saal kaam kiya."



Bombay-to-London biker cops flagging off at Shivaji Park in September 1977; at centre is Chandrakant Bawiskar with his wife. **PIC/SACHIN BAWISKAR**

# Man, the migratory species

Journalist-author Sam Miller's book on migration looks at its centrality in human history and aims to reposition modern discussions around it

**SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY**

ONE damp October morning in 2018, I spent 25 minutes in my father's old study spitting into a small plastic tube," begins a chapter in Sam Miller's *Migrants: The Story of Us All* (Abacus, R899), in which Miller, a London-born former BBC journalist and author who has lived and worked in several countries across Africa and Asia, including India, reflects on his lifelong penchant for a nomadic way of life. "[I]t feels elemental, as if a desire to be on the move, to travel to new places, to be with people who are not like me is part of my being," he contemplates. Curious about his own desire to keep moving and intrigued by the workings of a "curiosity" gene, an ancient genetic mutation known as *DRD4-7R* present in all human populations, and among some genetic markers scientifically correlated to how far particular groups travelled from Africa in prehistoric migration, he writes about his decision to test his DNA. This rumination forms a part of one of the book's several 'intermissions'—sections where Miller weaves more personal travel stories about expats and the Passport Index with the book's larger historical narratives of migration. "It's something I use in all my books, and they enable me to break with the normal constraints of narrative non-fiction. It's liberating," he tells mid-day over an email interview. "Here, it enables me to reflect on my own migration experiences, as well as incorporate the stories of others into the narrative."

The book's main focus however, is the importance of migration to the human story, a matter that Miller contends has become a modern proxy for other issues affecting our lives and thought such as identity, religion, home, multiculturalism, integration, racism and terrorism. Hence the book, he proclaims, is his attempt "to restore migration to the heart of the human story", to challenge the way it has been overlooked or misunderstood in history and reposition both the dominant view about migrants and the modern discussions around migration. "It's a subject that I've been interested in for a long time," he says, his work alongside migrants in different countries over the years having proved influential. "I felt there was very little honest discussion about it in most countries—and very little recognition of how fundamentally migratory we humans are as a species. In the Indian context, it's a subject that came up in my first book, *Delhi: Adventures in a Megacity*, and my encounters with Bangladeshi migrants who felt



Migrants queue up at a railway station in Mumbai to leave the city ahead of a lockdown to slow the spread of COVID-19 in April, 2021. **PIC/GETTY IMAGES**

they had to disguise their place of origins, even though they were living alongside—and sometimes married to—migrants who came from West Bengal."

Miller's book charts an ambitious course, starting with the long-extinct 'lobsterpedes', creatures that because of their symbolic passage from the ocean to the land about 530 million years ago, could be effectively considered the first migrants. It's a move so significant that Miller calls it "the lobster equivalent of humans landing on the moon". From the early travels of the Yaghan who journeyed to the southernmost tip of South America, the Bible which "can be read as a migration hand-

book" and Alexander the

Great who spent most of his adult life on the move, to the origins of the Aryans, the Viking migration, Columbus "whose Atlantic wanderings would ultimately lead to possibly the greatest of all

modern human migrations", the North American slave trade and migration around the South China Sea which was at the heart of what became known as the 'Maritime Silk Road', several migratory narratives are examined. The book however stops short of engaging with narratives, patterns and issues around modern migration. "It was a deliberate decision—taken after much thought," Miller explains. "Modern migration has become such an explosively toxic issue... In most countries people calm down, and talk less emotively, when the discussion is about migration in the past."

Among several topical discussions in the book is one about the complex relationship between human mobility and contagious disease and how migrants suffer disproportionately during pandemics, calling to mind the

much-politicised plight of Indian migrant workers back in 2021. Miller points out that rather than economic migrants or refugees, history shows that it is those trying to avoid getting infected by fleeing who end up spreading contagion. Moreover, "encouraging people to return—in an unplanned manner—to their home villages at the time of a pandemic is a certain way of spreading the virus".

Miller also writes about how in India where he spent over a decade, migration plays an important role in the struggle over the identity of modern India and the disagreements that are there about that identity. "I used to joke that in India you could make a reasonably reliable prediction of someone's political views by asking them about migration and the Indus Valley Civilisation. Only in India could you make such a prediction based on such ancient history," he says. At the same time, he admits that migration is enormously complex in the context of the country. "I would argue that India is, in many but not all circumstances, better considered a continent, rather than just a country. This is particularly relevant to internal migration because India is comparable in scale and population and variety and languages and 'regional' identities to Europe, rather than, say, Britain or France. And this applies strongly to the subject of India's migration history which should be seen through a continental lens." While India has recently been aping western concepts of what a country should be, other countries, he says, could learn from how it, at least until recently, has been a place where diversity could thrive, "always imperfectly, but still in a more impressive manner than in any other parts of the world."

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**SAM MILLER**