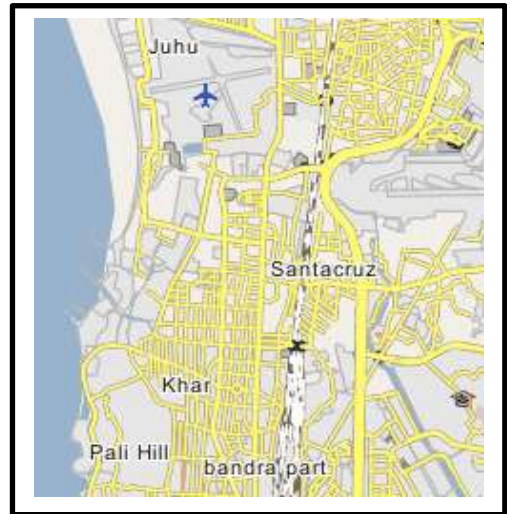




Mumbai Monsoon!

I looked on from a nearby doorway as this man disappeared down an invisible hole in the ground! He was dressed in a suit and carrying a briefcase. If the guy had been wearing a bowler, it was perfect material for Monty Python.

The funniest part was he climbed out with briefcase still to hand, shook himself off, and carried on walking, as if nothing had happened. Passers by didn't blink an eyelash; they had better things to do than watch silly people fall down manholes.



I was shopping in the district of Santa Cruz, west of the main North-South rail lines in Mumbai, buying a 'Tabla' (as one does) to take home to England. My flight left at four o'clock the next morning and I knew there would be a farewell party, thus intended to get a bottle of whisky at a liquor store I knew in Khar, the next suburb.

But I was hesitating to leave the musical instruments shop and step into the street, because all around was totally flooded ... both road and footpath. Monsoon rains had been tumbling from the dark sky

for the past hour or two and a labyrinth of blocked drains meant there was nowhere for the water to go. As well, water disguises any submerged obstacles, including of course, drains without their covers.

Auto-rickshaws were still managing to plough down the street; rainwater lapping around their passenger compartments. Mini tsunamis from larger vehicles were bombarding pedestrians. The falling man convinced me to make a dash for it, towards an unoccupied auto. With no umbrella, it was a case of head down and hope for the best.



I loved the monsoon! For me – an itinerant floating around at middle-class levels – the annual June-July monsoon was an enthralling experience. At my university hostel base, I would sit on the small balcony, watching as sub-tropical surrounds disappeared behind a waterfall; coconut palms swayed to breaking point, thunder clapped like cannon fire and down below the green lawn became a murky lake!

For the poor of course, it could be a story of misery and disaster. Dirt floors and mud walls are poor bedfellows when there's a metre of uninvited water pouring in: walls tumble, and flimsy houses are ransacked by the torrent.



And how it could rain! On one occasion I was at 'Walk-In', an airy South Indian café nearby. It had been pouring most of the day and night before, then after a brief lull suddenly it started to come down again, without warning: from stone-dry to Niagara Falls in seconds! Where did it all come from? It must be stacked up above, kilometres high!

People seemed to love the rain: kids danced in the downpour, taxi drivers wandered dripping wet between cars, soaked sarees and saturated trousers were the norm, those without an umbrella strolling along, oblivious to the water cascading down. Even if you had an umbrella, it was unrealistic to think you could keep dry once the rains became serious. Whether your shoes or your shirt, your hat or your hair; you were going to be drenched anyway, so why bother about it? Throw caution to the wind. Get saturated!



Duncan Gregory

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One day I sat watching from *Walk-In*, a small café, as the rain poured endlessly from above, saturating and almost obliterating everything from view that existed on Earth below. This poem (below) grew out of that experience:

Mumbai Mad!

*I moved to take some refuge,
To escape this teaming deluge,
That just appears to tumble
From a darkly ashen sky.
Then sit and watch them scurry
In a lazy sort of hurry,
Soaked, no saturated
By that waterfall on high.*

*Battered buses honking.
Auto rickshaws squawking:
They wiggle and they waggle,
As they tussle for the road.
The noise, the air pollution!
Who cares? There's no solution.
And bigger makes it better
Is the only Highway Code.*

*No cease to endless motion.
Is peace just a Gandhian Notion
That Mumbaikars adhere to
When they go to sleep at night?
Or is this mad cacophony
The prologue for a symphony
That starts, as people say,
When you've trod the path that's right?*

Duncan Gregory
Walk Inn café, Kalina, Mumbai 1998