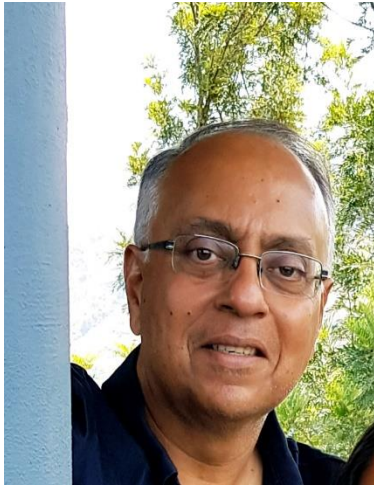


## PAYING GUEST: BOMBAY IN THE EIGHTIES

*Narrated by Mr Sanjay Kumar (PGP 1982)*



He arrived in Bombay in June, an MBA with a large suitcase and no address. He spent the first night with two batchmates in a room on the third floor, no lift, a high ceiling, no bed. He slept on a single mattress, on a tastefully tiled floor. The next day he found a paying guest near Churchgate Oval, he shared a room with another batchmate. It was a large Parsi apartment with polished rosewood furniture, glass crockery, spotless floors, and a landlady who had wrinkles and attitude. She wasn't friendly, ever, but over two years he got to know her a little and found her to be kind.

'I will not give you a key. When you come please ring the bell. Just once. Don't lean on it.'

She wore nighties 24/7, sulked if he came late, and charged a rupee for outgoing calls. 'Double for incoming,' she said. 'Because I have to pick up the phone and call you.'

Her husband was an invalid, placed in a wheelchair when awake. He never spoke nor did he look at anything. Once, when he returned early in the evening, the front door was open. He let himself in quietly. Mrs Mistry was seated near a window. She was talking to her knees.

In The Morning Mrs Mistry brought weak tea in a cup and saucer, no biscuit. He left in a hurry, caught speed while walking, kept pace with those who came from further away. At the bend in the road that led to Nariman Point, he stopped at a stall that sold flavored milk. Banana was green, strawberry was pink, and apple for some reason was dark brown. That was breakfast. He crossed the road towards five towers, the second last was Raheja. On the fifth floor, he found his small cubicle where he sat and waited for sweat to dry. His calculator, a HP 12C, was his companion for the day; that and a blank spreadsheet.

Spreadsheets were cruel, they unravelled numbers, revealed what was under the hood of corporations, told him if they were worth lending to. His calculator told him what he could sell them, and at what price. It was money he was selling in the garb of something called leasing. It was a new creation and while he quickly understood what it wore and what made it so dazzling he found a peculiar pleasure in tweaking it in many ways to make it more profitable. He found a hole in the pricing model. It did not endear him to the three co-directors of the firm, but the Chairman took him to a side, a place that he got used to, the seat on the left in his cabin, where he sat every week and snitched.

In the Bombay of the eighties, living in the city required a survival kit. So the young worked hard and looked out for themselves. Those that could not keep up shifted to Bangalore.

He left his job and with two years of experience he set up a financial services outfit. He took up a six by six room in a business centre in Horniman Circle next to the toilet. Afternoons when it stank he went out for meetings. A typist on the staircase was his secretary by the hour. Lunch was ragda pattice, for dessert there was puran poli.

Evenings in Bombay were spent in Colaba in dive bars, one that served quarters and halves, and played Jethro Tull and Al Stewart, another called Crown and Anchor that had waitresses who brought you the hooch. If you as much as looked at them they sat in your lap and shifted around and garnered a tip.

He got lucky, made some money, he got a car, an Ambassador that could accommodate seven; on weekends he had six friends. They drove to cheap resorts, beaches, waterfalls, and to suburbs where there were other friends staying in apartments cooking communal meals and playing bridge.

One day he emptied his bank account and bought an apartment.