

TRAVEL

'The Grand Old Lady' of Bombay

By JACK GOLDFARB

Victoria Terminus building dome — elevated dome in octagonal shape built in fine porbunder stone.

photo:
Jack Goldfarb

A menacing lion and a snarling tiger have been on ferocious guard outside Victoria Terminus, Bombay's main railway station, for over a century now. The stone beasts have glared at unnumbered billions of travelers swarming through the white wrought iron gates of what is today the world's busiest railway terminal.

Symbol of the Raj and the British East India Company, in whose heyday Victoria Terminus opened in 1888, the imperial lion ceased to roar on the sub-continent long ago, while the brawny tiger, representing India, has seen the country

emerge from colonial rule into an independent nation with a burgeoning population now nearing a billion. Bombay itself has swollen into a cosmopolis of 10 million souls.

From the safe perch of a balcony overlooking the cavernous Bombay terminal during rush hour, I observe one of the highest population densities in the world.

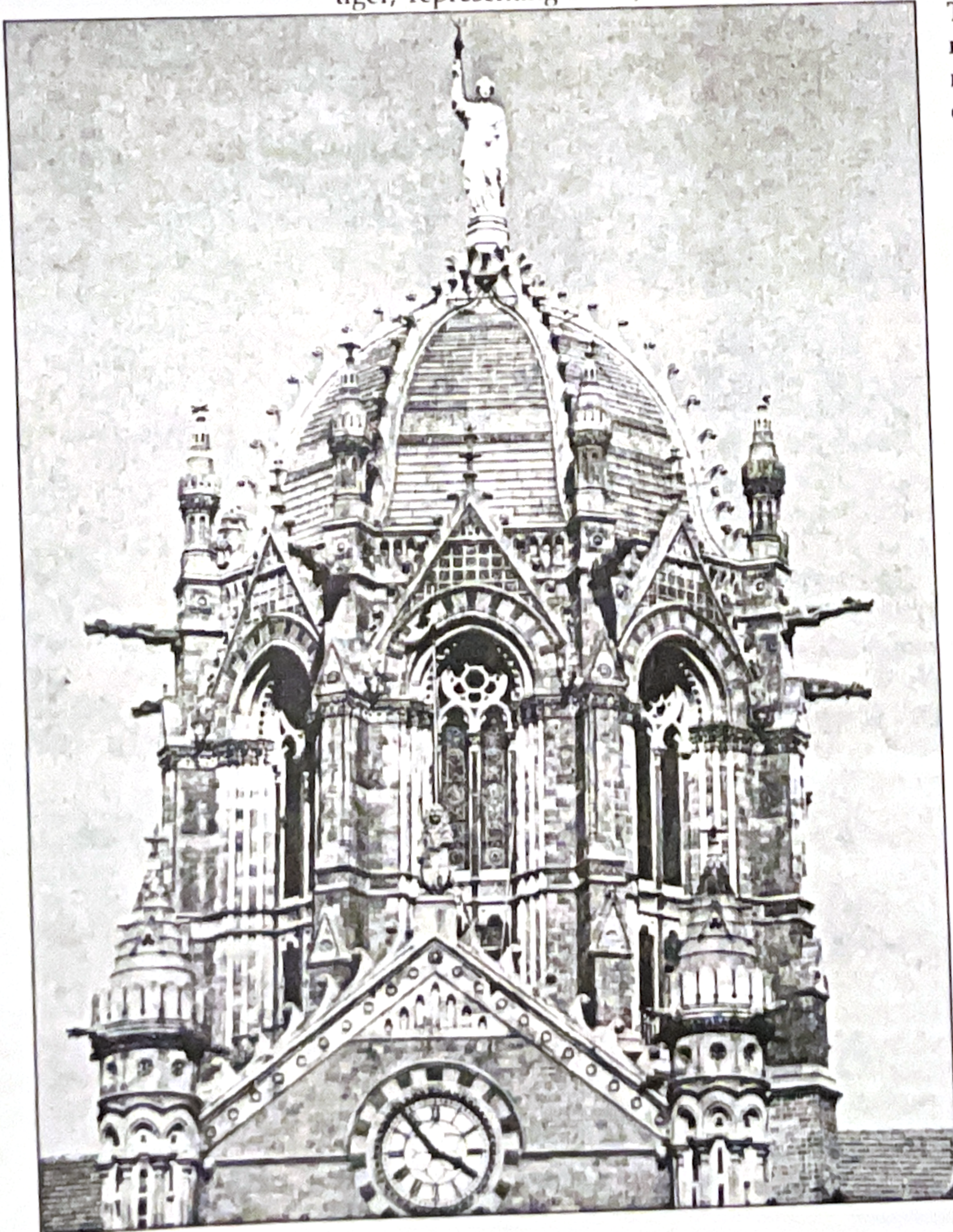
The crush of humanity arriving and departing on a thousand suburban and long distance trains a day threatens to burst the station apart at the seams.

Yet the most impressive feature of Victoria Terminus — familiarly known to all as VT — is not the 2.3 million passengers handled on a normal work day, but rather it is the extraordinary edifice which dazzles viewers as the architectural jewel of India's foremost city. Not everyone agrees. Critics cite the building's crossbred Medieval Italian and Oriental style as florid and passe. But in the exotic panorama of Bombay — sculptured Hindu temples, bulbous Muslim mosques, mannered Victorian administration buildings and sleek futuristic skyscrapers — nothing, in my opinion, surpasses VT for sheer visual excitement.

Designed and supervised by British architect Frederick W. Stevens in 1878, the ornate Gothic-Saracenic-styled structure took ten years to complete. It was dedicated to honor Queen Victoria's Jubilee Year on the throne.

The site has always been a focal point in Bombay. The earliest shrine to the city's patron goddess, Mumba, once stood there (Bombay derives its name from her.). It was also the site of a main wharf called Bori Bunder. Bombayites thus affectionately dubbed Stevens' imposing creation, 'The Grand Old Lady of Bori Bunder.'

It is difficult to describe the massive pile of sandstone, marble and Italian granite. The exterior staggers the eye with its wealth of statuary and decorative detail: minarets, conical turrets and pinnacles spike the sky; gables and rotundas poise above columned porticoes; gargoyles and grotesques lean far out on ledges to spout rainwater and shield against lightning; delicate tracery windows punctuate long rows of ornamental arches. Amid these elaborate embellishments bas-relief figures recall the eminent





directors of the Great India Peninsula Railway, predecessor of the present Central Railways that now operate the terminal. Likewise remembered in stone are the faces of humble construction workers of many ethnic origins who toiled to build the terminus.

A strange blend of noble cathedral and Disneyland fantasy, the building has evoked many a passionate comment, from 'sumptuous' and 'masterpiece' to 'phantasmagoric' and 'ghastly.' (The last uttered by Aldous Huxley, but then he also bad-mouthed the Taj Mahal.)

Despite the extravagance of decorative elements, an overall symmetry envelops the grandiose building.

The jewel of the crown is the soaring central dome ringed by spires and topped by a gigantic female figure called 'Progress.' High in the Bombay sky she points a flaming torch upward while her other hand grips a spoked wheel.

Progress has indeed rolled through Victoria Terminus since a century ago when a scant 50 passengers a day rode the coaches of the Great India Peninsula Railway to the suburbs. Today well over two million make the trip. Reservations, ticketing, accounting are all punched into state-of-the-art computers. Closed circuit TV informs the crowds of schedule changes and plat-

form locations. Electronic guidance systems monitor train traffic.

But all is not high-tech in Asia's oldest railway station. Attachment to the past is amply evident in the environment of this 19th century building. In the Chief Engineer's Office, an urbane Mr. G. L. Koppikar, behind his century-old Burma teak desk, is surrounded by original Victorian chairs and tables enlaced with the G.I.P.R. logo. On the wall above the still-used English brass hat stand, ticks an antique European clock. Mr. Koppikar asks if I have ever browsed in the staff lending library. I haven't, and when I go there I find thousands of well-worn volumes crowding the shelves. Railway employees, scores of them, are in a queue taking out books in Marathi, Hindi, and English. The old-fashioned art of reading is alive and well among these literate railroad workers even in an age of the invasive picture tube.

In the office of VT's current Chief Architect, Mr. Ram Dandavate, I find further appreciation of the past. With reverent care Mr. Dandavate unrolls treasured tracings of the original blueprints used in the terminal's construction. Explaining them to me, he waxes eloquent in admiration for those builders who with their 'life involvement produced such a gift of master

VT is an enduring symbol of the British Raj.

photo Jack Goldfarb

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craftsmanship for the generations to come.'

Nowadays Victoria Terminus serves as the hectic hub of 4,030 miles (6,500 kilometers) of Central Railways' lines linking northern, southern, and eastern routes out of Bombay. The great bulk of the passenger traffic, however, shuttles to and from the expanding suburbs of Greater Bombay. The Suburban Explosion has created an ever-rising tide of riders putting rail officials under constant pressure to increase the number of trains, reduce intervals between departures,

and devise two-way boarding and debarking platforms.

To add to the congestion, the historic old workhorse station also houses Central Railways' administrative headquarters with thousands of personnel lodged in a maze of offices under the vast red tile roof.

A traveler stepping off the train in VT for the first time can be all but overwhelmed. Bombay's 'anteroom' presents a realistic foretaste of the city beyond: deafening noise, jostling crowds, aggressive porters, bellowing hawkers, demanding beggars. A sense of the whole world rushing by. Hordes of bush-shirted Gujarati and Sindhi businessmen; Nariman Point and Fort Area bankers and stockbrokers with attache cases; bearded filmmakers from the studios of Bandra and Dadar; sandaled women in colorfully-patterned saris who have arrived in the special 'ladies' coaches; herds of shoppers bound for the markets, bazaars and stalls that make Bombay the commercial capital of India; and ubiquitous bright-eyed children dutifully clinging to parents' hands.

Less visible in the darker recesses of the station are the drug pushers, prostitutes, pickpockets, and derelicts.

The newly-arrived traveler stops at a kiosk for a quick snack. Chicken Pizza? Kabob? Samosa? Mango? Cola? A menu as multi-ethnic as the languages spicing the air around him: Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati, Arabic, English, Pashto, Chinese, Urdu.

He sips his cola and surveys the scene. A long line of shoeshiners, seven-year-olds to oldsters of seventy, rattle brushes against their wooden boxes, soliciting trade. Disabled youths hobble among the throngs, peddling embroidered handkerchiefs. Sturdy *dhaba wallahs* on their way to offices and shops deftly balance enormous trays stacked with home-prepared *dhaba* lunch pails on their heads. Two scrawny young urchins sift through a trash can and find a paper cup containing left-over ice cream. They share it.

A fellow snack-eater, seeing the visitor's wide-eyed wonder at the scene around him, remarks with a grin, "Bombay teaches you to live by your wits!"

The new-arrival finishes his drink, collects his suitcase and goes out to meet Bombay. At the street exit a barefoot child, scarcely seven years old, selling garlands of marigolds, smartly flags down a taxi for him, opens the door and smiles sweetly for her tip. Bombay's lessons are learned very early.

All day long local trains and long distance expresses rumble in and out of the Terminus on

The VT building dome's interior: classic stained glass, exquisite masonry.
photo: Jack Goldfarb



INDIA

one of the world's heaviest rail schedules, hauling passengers to and from the great far-flung cities of India, from Amritsar to Cochin in the West, Varanasi to Madras in the East, and the thousands of little towns in between. Even the remotest village in India is said to be no more than 30 kilometers from a railway station.

In the late afternoon the mass flow of suburban traffic resumes; the weary, languid multitudes pour back through the terminal. Generally even-tempered, the compliant commuters have, however, on occasions when one train too many has been canceled, exploded in anger. They have smashed stalls, shop windows, and other items of railway property.

A sure sign that such outbursts are about to erupt is the sudden disappearance of the shoeshine lads, scattered like nervous sparrows at the sight of a cat.

VT's human deluge begins to taper off each evening at about 7 PM. By 9 PM belated commuters, newspapers in hand, munching *chiki* and roasted *chana* snacks, board the coaches to find window seats still available.

At midnight, the late-show moviegoers, swing-shift workers, lurching drunks and other

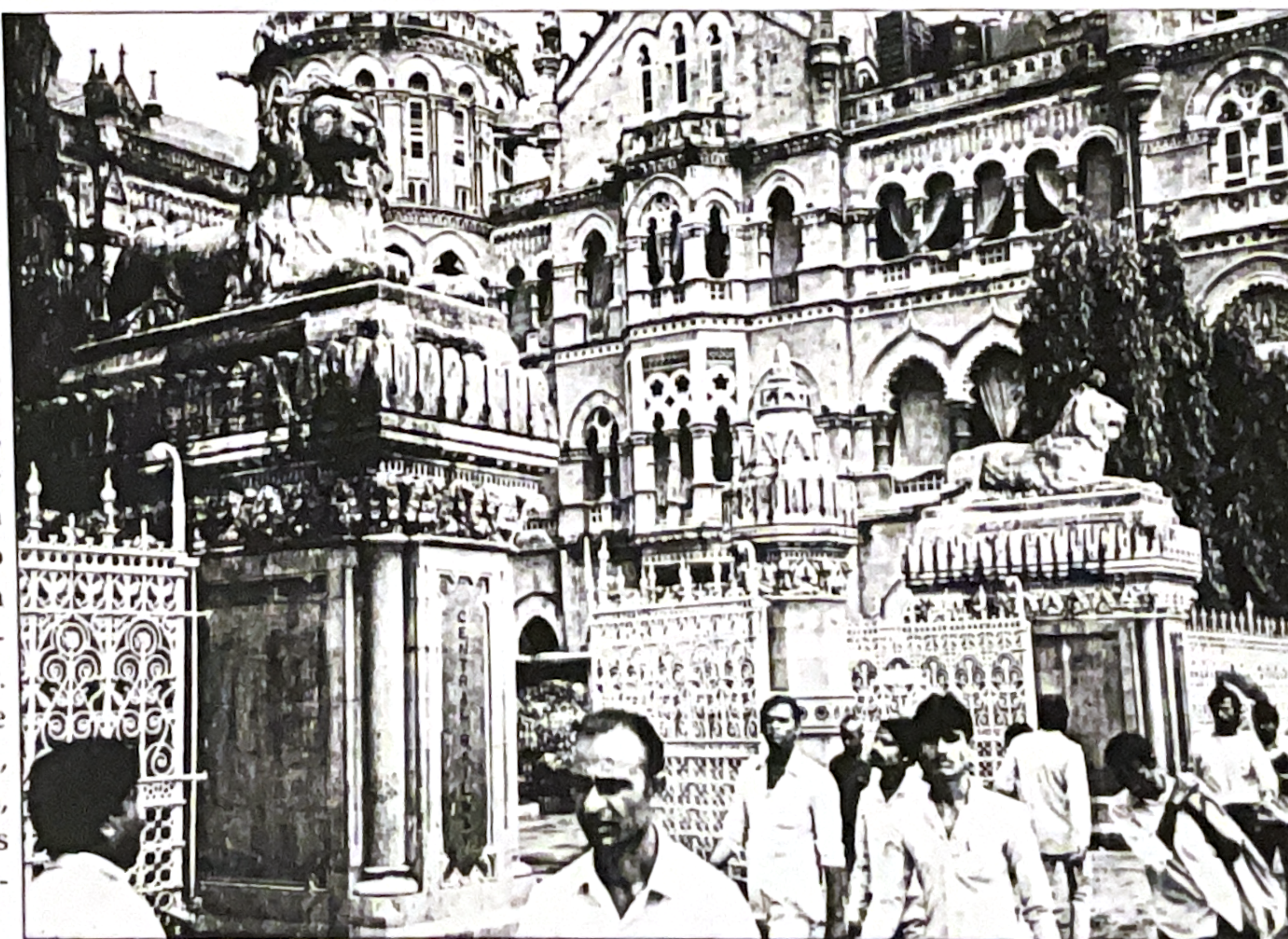
strays drift aboard. Tired-looking prostitutes and gaunt beggars sit in lonely seclusion tallying up their day's takes.

The last trains trundle down the tracks into the humid night. VT grows strangely quiet, as if dozing off for a few hours. But by dawn the teeming throngs will be back, and the Grand Old Lady will be looking after them — welcoming them and speeding them on their way — her restless children, the people of Bombay.

Top: Classic Archage, a combination of Columnnade, parapets and arches.

Below: An outside view of the Victoria Terminus.

Photo: Jack Goldfarb



(Jack Goldfarb is a New York-based journalist and writer.)