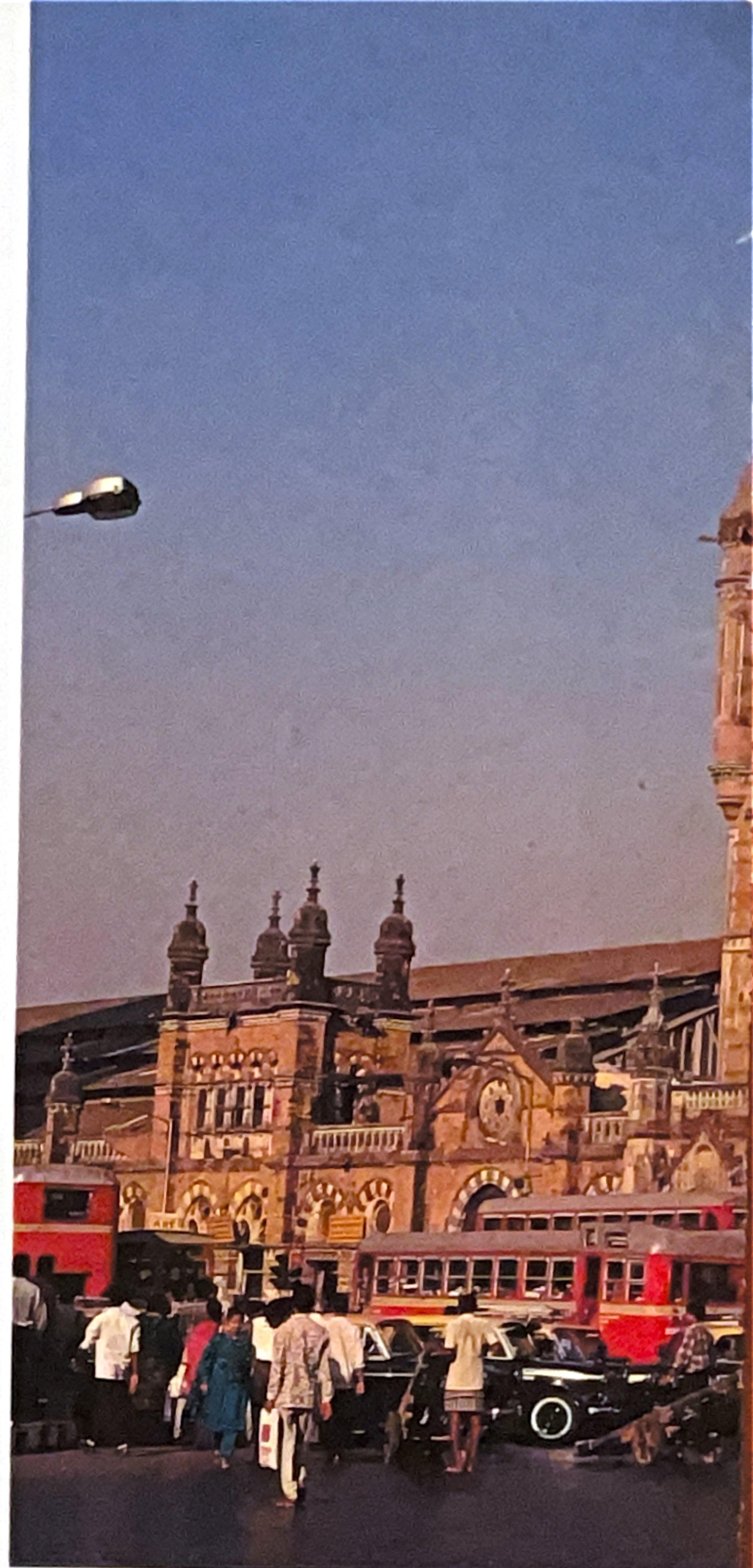


# vt THE HEART OF BOMBAY IS STILL BEATING

*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 the innumerable travellers swarming through the white wrought iron gates of, what is today, the world's busiest railway terminal*



Vendors outside VT station, Bombay

From the safe perch of a balcony overlooking the cavernous Victoria Terminus (VT) during rush hour, I do not doubt that Bombay has one of the highest population densities in the world.

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

Yet the most impressive feature about VT is not the 2.3 million passengers it handles on a normal working day. The extraordinary edifice dazzles viewers as the architectural jewel of India's foremost city. It is hard to describe this massive pile of sandstone, marble and Italian granite that staggers the eye with its wealth of statuary and detail.

A strange blend of a noble cathedral and a Disneyland fantasy, the building has evoked many a passionate



comment, from "sumptuous" and "masterpiece" to "phantasmagoric" and "ghastly". (The latter uttered by Aldous Huxley, but then he bad-mouthed the Taj Mahal also.)

Designed and supervised by British

architect, Frederick W. Stevens, in 1878 to honour Queen Victoria's Jubilee year, the ornate Gothic-Saracenic-styled structure took a decade to complete.

A traveller stepping off the train in VT for the first time can be all but





past still linger 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, chats with this visitor. The original Victorian chairs and tables are enlaced with the G.I.P.R. logo. On the wall above the still-used English brass hat stand, an antique European clock ticks away.

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 craftsmanship for the generations to come".

VT's human deluge begins to taper off each evening about 7 pm. By 9 pm, belated commuters, newspapers in hand, munching *chiki* (crystallised sugar with peanuts) and roasted *chana* (gram) snacks, board the coaches to find window seats are still available.

At midnight, the late-show moviegoers, swing-shift workers, lurching drunks and other strays drift aboard.

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 she will look after them — welcoming them on their way — her restless children, the people of Bombay. ■

overwhelmed. Bombay's "anteroom" presents a realistic foretaste of the city beyond: deafening noise, jostling crowds, aggressive porters and bellowing hawkers. A sense of the whole world rushing by, slaves to the tyranny of time.

The newly-arrived traveller stops at a kiosk for a quick snack. Chicken pizza? *Kabab*? *Samosa*? Mango? Cola? A menu as multi-ethnic as the languages that spice the air around him: Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati, Arabic, English, Pashto, Chinese, Urdu.

He sips his cola and surveys the scene. A long line of shoe-shiners, from seven-year-old kids to their seventy year old grandpas, rattle brushes against their wooden boxes, soliciting trade. Disabled youths hobble among the throng, selling embroidered handkerchiefs. Sturdy *dabba-wallahs* deftly balance on their heads, enormous trays stacked with home prepared *dabba* lunch pails on their way to offices and shops.

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, lifts his suitcase and goes out to meet Bombay. At the street exit, a seven-year-old barefoot child, 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 on.

All day long, local and long distance express trains rumble in and out of the Terminus on one of the world's heaviest rail schedules, hauling passengers to and from the great far-flung cities of India. Reservations, ticketing, accounting, are all taken care of by a state-of-the-art computer network. CCTVs inform the crowds. Electronic guidance systems monitor train traffic.

But all is not high-tech in Asia's oldest railway station. Fragments of the

**JACK GOLDFARB** presents a bird's eye view of the Victoria Terminus.

**PRAKASH ISRANI's** first love is photography. He has been clicking away since the age of 12.