

VICTORIA TERMINUS: BOMBAY'S GRAND LADY

BY JACK GOLDFARB

For over a century now, a menacing lion and a snarling tiger have been on ferocious guard outside Bombay's main railway station, Victoria Terminus, or as it was renamed in 1996, Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus. (Also in the mid-1990s, Bombay was renamed Mumbai, but most everyone still refers to it as Bombay.) 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.

A 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 one billion. Bombay itself has swollen into a cosmopolis of 10 million souls.

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

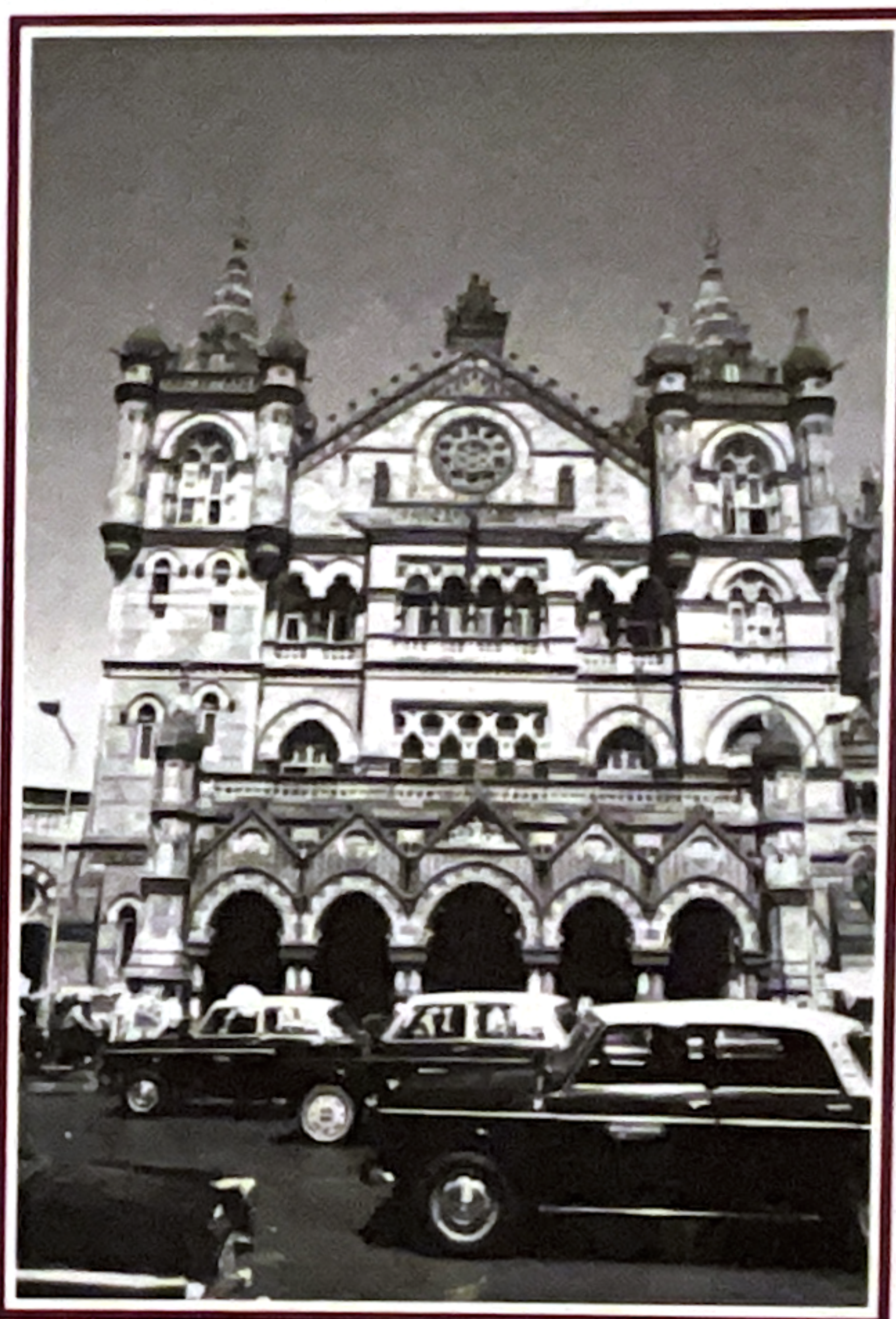
The crush of humanity arriving and departing on a thousand suburban and long distance trains a day threatens to burst the station apart at the seams.

Yet the most impressive feature about Victoria Terminus—despite the name change most locals still call it Victoria Terminus or VT—is not the 2.7 million passengers handled on a normal work day. The extraordinary edifice dazzles viewers as the architectural jewel of India's foremost city. But not everyone agrees. Critics cite the building's crossbred Medieval Italian and Oriental style as florid and passé. 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 Victoria Terminus in 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 Queen Victoria, honoring her 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 here. (Bombay was



Bombay's Grand Old Lady, Victoria Terminus, is a study in whimsy and gingerbread.

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renamed Mumbai in her honor.) Here also once existed a main wharf called Bori Bunder. Bombayites thus affectionately dubbed Stevens' imposing creation, 'The Grand Old Lady of Bori Bunder.'

It is hard to describe this 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 porticos; 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 Indian Peninsula Railway (GIPR), predecessor of the present Central Railways who 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 a noble cathedral and a 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 bad-mouthed the Taj Mahal also.)

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

The crown of the jewel 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 GIPR to the suburbs. Today more than 2.7 million passengers per day ride some 1,000-plus trains. Reservations, ticketing and accounting are all done on state-of-the-art computers. Closed-circuit TV informs the crowds of schedule changes and platform 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 gentleman behind a century-old Burma teak desk chats with this visitor surrounded by original Victorian chairs and tables encased with the GIPR logo. On the wall above the still-used English brass hat stand, an antique European clock ticks away.

The chief engineer 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 in the age of the invasive picture tube.

In the office of VT's recently retired 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."

Nowadays Victoria Terminus serves as the hectic hub of 6,500 kilometers (4,063 miles) 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 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. There's a sense of the whole world rushing by, slaves to the tyranny of Time. Hordes of bush-shirted civil servants; safari-suited Gujarati and Sindhi businessmen; Nariman Point and Fort Area bankers and stockbrokers with attaché 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



Expect to find sellers pitching their wares around every corner at Victoria Terminus. These colorfully-attired women balancing baskets are probably hawking lunch.

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kiosk for a quick snack. Chicken pizza? Kabob? Samosa? Mango? Cola? It's 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—kids of seven to oldsters of seventy—rattles brushes against their wooden boxes, soliciting trade. Disabled youths hobble among the throngs peddling embroidered handkerchiefs. Sturdy *dhaba wallahs* deftly balance on their heads enormous trays stacked with home-prepared *dhaba* lunch pails on their way to offices and shops. 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, lifts 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 on.

All day long local trains and long-distance expresses 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, 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 19 miles from a railway station.

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

A sure sign that such outbursts are about to happen 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 about 7 p.m. By 9 p.m., belated commuters, newspapers in hand, munching *chiki* and roasted *chana* 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. Tired-looking prostitutes and gaunt beggars sit in lonely seclusion toting 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.

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