

Mark G. Sanchez. *Bombay Journal*. Huntingdon: The Dabuti Collective: 2018. Pages 290. ISBN-10: 1999887611, ISBN-13: 978-1999887612.

*M. G. Sanchez's Bombay Journal:  
Redressing the Past from the Colonial Present*

As the British government promises to deliver its Global Britain policy, seeking to forge international trade links with former colonies, M. G. Sanchez recounts the story of his three-year sojourn in India. From the outset, he is sensitive to the complexities associated with history and the memorialisation of the past. His narrative presents the anomalous perspective of the modern-day colonial, countering the imperial nostalgia of “Take Back Control” sloganeering, and the Brexiteer dream of “Empire 2.0”. Sanchez, a British Gibraltarian, identifies with the history of empire in India, so aptly expressed by Shashi Tharoor, head of the foreign affairs committee of the Indian parliament and former Under-Secretary General of the UN, in his latest publication: “There were good men who rose above the prejudices of their age to treat Indians with compassion, curiosity and respect. All these figures did exist; but they alleviated, rather than justified, the monstrous crime that allowed them to exist, the crime of subjugating a people under the oppressive heel of the ‘stout British boot’” (Tharoor 2018: 216).

Having grown up in the Mediterranean amidst statues of Lord Nelson and General Eliott, Sanchez traces the fate of British colonial sculpture in India. He transports us to the old Victoria Gardens in Bombay, where many pieces of British statuary in the city were removed in the aftermath of Indian independence. He encounters Edward Prince of Wales, alongside distinguished members of the British Raj, “unloved and untended, many of them reduced to headless, armless, legless stumps” (Sanchez 2018: 239). Although saddened by these neglected figures, Sanchez does not get mired in sentimentality, nor bound up in false British pride. Instead, he contemplates the irony of naming a Gibraltarian housing estate after General Sir Thomas Picton, whose bravery at Waterloo and the Peninsular War was offset by such heinous crimes against the black population of Trinidad during his tenure as governor there, that he was arrested and sent to Britain for trial. M. G. Sanchez asks the reader to, “imagine, after all, if your country had been ruled for centuries by an alien people who came from the other side of the world and who arrogantly believed that you and your countrymen were inferior to them” (Sanchez 2018: 239).

Sanchez describes himself from the outset of *Bombay Journal* as, “a PhD-educated, history-obsessed geek” (Sanchez 2018: 31). In fact, he is an established Gibraltarian writer, whose novels and short stories probe Gibraltar’s complex relationship with Spain as well as its British colonial status. Further, his singular works explore the tensions of living in a place where space is restricted and the frontier is tightly controlled. In actuality, despite its 2002 appellation of British Overseas Territory, the people of Gibraltar have never been given the right to self-determination, and Gibraltar is one of the last remaining British colonies. Thus, Sanchez has a unique vantage point in a world where such colonies are anachronistic and the British identity is in a state of flux.

Significantly, however, in *Bombay Journal*, Sanchez, staunch Gibraltarian and critic of Gibraltar’s colonial past and present, finds himself identifying strongly with his “Britishness” in India. He considers this carefully: “[...] is it simply because I feel more British here, where I have many British friends and strongly associate with the British expat community, than in Gibraltar, where, no matter how much I claim to be British, I will always be regarded as a ‘Gibbo’ by the servicemen and functionaries of the MOD establishment?” (Sanchez 2018: 139). Sanchez understands the irony at play. In a defining role-reversal, he moves within the elite circle of the British Deputy High Commission, and belongs to the exclusive Breach Candy Club of British diplomats, Parsi industrialists and Western businessmen. This is not to suggest that Sanchez is wholly taken with this milieu. He is served by waiters that stare inappropriately at women, and nearly drowns while an expat looks on from her sunbed. Nevertheless, Sanchez’s experience of the snooty officers of Gibraltar’s colonial heyday are challenged by life in Bombay as the partner of a member of the BDHC, where he meets people who are, “down-to-earth and amicable” (Sanchez 2018: 32).

M. G. Sanchez is struck by the way in which in India, “*extreme wealth and extreme degradation are locked together in a permanent embrace*” (Sanchez 2018: 75, emphasis in original). In spite of his entry into the upper echelons of the colonial hierarchy, he is not at ease with the status quo. He acknowledges that, “that’s the way it works around here, see. Shopping for groceries in Mumbai is so stressful – and domestic help so cheap and plentiful – that you simply get somebody else to do the dirty work for you!” (Sanchez 2018: 22). And yet, although most women offering home help live in, Sanchez and his partner are grateful that Agatha, who cleans their flat, “only works from 9 to 5” (Sanchez 2018: 23). Sanchez is clearly saddened by the scenes of hardship he witnesses in India, and the narrative voice captures them with clarity but also compassion. Particularly evocative is the description of a ten-year-old girl sprinting desperately alongside his car, arms outstretched for the sake of one of the chocolate wafers Sanchez buys for child beggars, to avoid giving them money for

their gang-masters. There is also the poignant image of a man pushing a cart, thin limbs shuddering with effort, flip-flopped toes grinding against asphalt, for the sake of a pound or a pound-fifty a day.

On the whole, Sanchez maintains an authorial distance within this personal journey, observing himself with the humorous gaze of the omniscient narrator. When driven around the chaotic streets by his chauffeur Manoj, who carries an official Mumbai police bag to threaten shop-keepers into fair prices, and repeatedly slaps a taxi driver on the head, Sanchez conjures up laughable Benny Hill analogies. When dining with visiting friends at an acclaimed restaurant in Mumbai, a middle-aged man carrying a gun in a holster under his jacket is, “unashamedly and lasciviously eyeballing” Sanchez’s partner (Sanchez 2018: 134). Sanchez details this explosive scenario with comic skill, as the men enter into a kind of “Indo-Gibraltarian” staring stand-off, fortunately broken by the light relief of a phallic Indian dessert (Sanchez 2018: 136).

Sanchez does not rely purely on subjective notions of Indian culture in his rendition. Perhaps it is the “geek” in him that pushes him to read broadly about the culture and politics of the place he visits, and he is well versed in relevant travel literature. In Sanchez’s portrayal of India, we are greeted by opulent Art Deco mansions and grandiose colonial buildings. Although he socialises with the expat community, he immerses himself in Indian life, visiting local sites and travelling around the country at large. He struggles with the unsanitary plight of Mumbai, where people defecate in the streets and air pollution chokes the inhabitants, but still finds much to admire in its people without recourse to flimsy sentimentality. His approach is honest and personal. Taxi drivers, shopkeepers, and officials treat him like a simpleton, trying to squeeze extra rupees out of him simply because he is Western. Notwithstanding, M. G. Sanchez asserts that, “you will be stared at, you will probably be followed, you might even get pawed at, but you will also come face to face with a remarkable collection of human beings” (Sanchez 2018: 75). At no moment is this clearer to Sanchez than when he becomes desperately ill with Dengue Fever. He is hospitalised, his platelet count dangerously low, unable to eat and in need of a blood transfusion. It is a debilitating and harrowing experience, and yet Sanchez declares: “the nurses, by the way, are extraordinarily kind and caring (far kinder than nurses back in Gibraltar or the UK)” (Sanchez 2018: 128).

Throughout *Bombay Journal*, Sanchez provides thoughtful awareness of his colonial heritage, which makes his account of India a compelling and novel read. In India, over 5,000 miles from Gibraltar, he meets people who have lived in Gibraltar before, and have enjoyed a “*cafelito con leche*” at Casemates Square. He is offended by a British Asian at a BDHC do advising that, “sometimes it can be a bit difficult adapting to life here – unless, of course, you come from somewhere like Gibraltar, like our friend here, in which case it won’t be so difficult adapting to all the dirt and chaos” (Sanchez

2018: 32-33). On this occasion, Sanchez, like so many others throughout the history of empire, is sharply reminded of his colonial place. Moreover, as a citizen of one of the last remaining colonies, the paradox of Sanchez's colonial predicament surfaces strongly in his narrative. He exhibits allegiance to the Crown, praising its implementation of health care and education in far-flung territories. Yet the conflicting experience of mingling within the privileged expat circle leads him to reflect on his own past, and the injustices of colonial subjugation. He recalls with palpable nostalgia the streets of his childhood in Chicardo's Passage, and the British military-controlled football pitches where he used to play football with his friends. However, in the final analysis, he was a young native playing on borrowed ground — a "Gibbo". Perhaps Edward Said puts it best: "In the system of education designed for India, students were taught not only English literature but also the inherent superiority of the English race" (Said 1994: 121). M. G. Sanchez's memoir strives to redress this.

### References

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