

Back of the book

Palpitations

Pali Hill 90210



By Anuvab Pal

Recently, a friend, accompanied by a one-eyed rental broker who preferred to go by the singular name Jackson, went to look at a suburban two-bedroom, lured by the information that he'd have "sea view". On inspection, he noticed, apart from realising he was in a land-locked part of town, that it overlooked a building called Sea View. My friend inquired if Sea View overlooked a building called Sea, hoping to find some logic in Jackson's association of building nomenclature with oceanic splendour. "Sir, are you

mad?" was Jackson's jokey reply, adding, "Sea View overlooks Heaven, sir. Heaven is too much for you," referring to an unaffordable building and not suggesting, I hope, that my friend was too young to die.

Not since 1970s "white flight" (middle class white Americans fleeing urban areas with increasing crime rates thereby creating suburbia) has there been real-estate mayhem of the sort urban India has seen these past few years. Fuelled by a stock market on narcotics, it's mostly driven by real-estate entrepreneurs who speak casually of recreating the topography of downtown Hamburg in Mulund or a sliver of Rio in Bhubaneswar, or a thing they liked in an Ibiza boulevard transplanted to Bhopal. Now, in normal nations, such dreamers would be arrested for talking rubbish and disturbing the peace but here, realty moguls are financed by

New York private equity (read: two Harvard MBAs with other people's money who believe in "The India Story").

With the golden age of anything, comes its own language. One often hears builders talking of "only very high end" flats or "only for the super rich" and most recently I read "flats only reserved for the crème de la crème de la crème".

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Like with all names, there is hierarchy and jingoism. It isn't good enough to just say that this is a housing society. It must have associations with Greek myth (Atlantis, Hellion) or remind one of Florida resorts (Palm Meadows, Silver Springs), or be action-driven (Joy Terrace,

Pleasure Tower, I live close to Ecstasy – all seem to add a disturbing sexual association to Khar residences). Under no circumstances, should posh real estate be vernacular, or it automatically has provincial associations. A Shanti Kutir or a Milan Mela cannot by the very nature of its name, have glass lifts or built-in Jacuzzis.

Some builders are now talking of video conferencing in some buildings, Venetian canals connecting blocks, helipads and penthouses ensconced in waterfalls. Of course, these make a lot of sense in a city where millions are deprived of basic housing. And that's not counting the homeless. So perhaps someday when the basics are taken care of, then the really high-end luxuries will be available – like electricity, water, a roof that doesn't leak, and a simple hole in the wall for an internet cable to go through. But then, that's perhaps only for the handful who can afford it.

Morparia

