If you are inquiring about Vishram Society, you will be told right away that it is "pucca" – absolutely, unimpeachably pucca. This is important to note, because something is not quite pucca about the neighbourhood – the toenail of Santa Cruz called Vakola. On a map of Mumbai, Vakola is a cluster of ambiguous dots that cling polyp-like to the underside of the domestic airport; on the ground, the polyps turn out to be slums, and spread out on every side of Vishram Society.

At each election, when Mumbai takes stock of itself, it is reported that one-fourth of the city’s slums are here, in the vicinity of the airport – and many older Bombaywallahs are sure anything in or around Vakola must be slummy. (They are not sure how you even pronounce it: Va-KHO-la, or VAA-k’-la?) In such a questionable neighbourhood, Vishram Society is anchored like a dreadnought of middle-class respectability, ready to fire on anyone who might impugn the pucca quality of its inhabitants. For years it was the only good building – which is to say, the only registered co-operative society – in the neighbourhood; it was erected as an experiment in gentrification back in the late 1950s, when Vakola was semi-swamp, a few bright mansions amidst mangroves and malarial clouds. Wild boar and bands of dacoits were rumoured to prowl the banyan trees, and richshaw and taxis refused to come here after sunset. In gratitude to Vishram Society’s pioneers, who defied bandits and anopheles mosquitoes, wildflowers and Hibiscus, and White Rose grow and grow in the stairwell resembles the screen of the women’s zenana in an old haveli, and hints at secretive, even sinister, goings-on inside. The polyps turn out to be slums, and spread out on every side of Vishram Society.

The more enterprising of the residents have paid for improvements to this shabby exterior – hands have scrubbed around some of the windows, creating aureoles on the façade, further complicating the patchwork of pink, mildew-grey, black, cement-grey, rust-brown, fern-green, and floral red, to which, by midday, are added the patterns of bedsheets and saris put out to dry on the grilles and balconies. Luxuriant ferns, green and reddish green, blur the corners of some windows, making them look like entrances to small caves.

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The face of this tower, once pink, is now a rainwater-stained, fungus-licked grey, although veins of primordial pink show wherever the roofing has protected the walls from the monsoon rains. Every flat has iron grilles on the windows: geraniums, jasmine, and the spikes of cacti push through the rusty metal squares. Luxuriant ferns, green and reddish green, blur the corners of some windows, making them look like entrances to small caves.

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For the Desk of:
His Excellency Wen Jiabao,
The Premier’s Office,
Beijing,
Capital of the Freedom-Loving Nation of China

From the Desk of:
‘The White Tiger’
A Thinking Man
And an entrepreneur
Living in the world’s centre of technology and
outsourcing Electronics City Phase 1 (just off Hosur
Main Road),
Bangalore, India.

Mr Premier,
Sir.

Neither you nor I can speak English, but
there are some things that can be said
only in English.

My ex-employer the late Mr Ashok’s
ex-wife, Pinky Madam, taught me one of these things; and
at 11:32 p.m. today, which was about ten minutes
ago, when the lady on All India Radio announced,
‘Premier Jiabao is coming to Bangalore next week’, I
said that thing at once.

In fact, each time when great men like you visit
our country I say it. Not that I have anything against
great men. In my way, sir, I consider myself one of
your kind. But whenever I see our prime minister
and his distinguished sidekicks drive to the airport
in black cars and get out and do
namastes before you
in front of a TV camera and tell you about how moral
and saintly India is, I have to say that thing in English.

Now, you are visiting us this week, Your Excellency,
aren’t you? All India Radio is usually reliable in these
matters.

That was a joke, sir.

Ha!

That’s why I want to ask you directly if you really
are coming to Bangalore. Because if you are, I have
something important to tell you. See, the lady on the
radio said, ‘Mr Jiabao is on a mission: he wants to
know the truth about Bangalore.’

My blood froze. If anyone knows the truth about
Bangalore, it’s me.

Next, the lady announcer said, ‘Mr Jiabao wants to
meet some Indian entrepreneurs and hear the story of
their success from their own lips.’

She explained a little. Apparently, sir, you Chinese
are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you
don’t have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it
has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system,
public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline,
courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs.
Thousands and thousands of them. Especially in the
field of technology. And these entrepreneurs – we
entrepreneurs – have set up all these outsourcing
companies that virtually run America now.

You hope to learn how to make a few Chinese
entrepreneurs, that’s why you’re visiting. That made
me feel good. But then it hit me that in keeping
with international protocol, the prime minister and
foreign minister of my country will meet you at the
airport with garlands, small take-home sandalwood
statues of Gandhi, and a booklet full of information
about India’s past, present, and future.

That’s when I had to say that thing in English, sir.
Out loud.

That was at 11:37 p.m. Five minutes ago.

I don’t just swear and curse. I’m a man of action
and change. I decided right there and then to start
dictating a letter to you.

To begin with, let me tell you of my great
admiration for the ancient nation of China.

I read about your history in a book, Exciting
Tales of the Exotic East, that I found on the pavement,
back in the days when I was trying to get some
enlightenment by going through the Sunday
secondhand book market in Old Delhi. This book
was mostly about pirates and gold in Hong Kong,
but it did have some useful background
information too: it said that you Chinese are great
lovers of freedom and individual liberty. The British
tried to make you their servants, but you never let
them do it. I admire that, Mr Premier.

I was a servant once, you see.

Only three nations have never let themselves
be ruled by foreigners: China, Afghanistan, and
Abyssinia. These are the only three nations I admire.

Out of respect for the love of liberty shown by
the Chinese people, and also in the belief that the
future of the world lies with the yellow man and
the brown man now that our erstwhile master,
the white-skinned man, has wasted himself
through buggery, mobile phone usage, and drug
abuse, I offer to tell you, free of charge, the truth
about Bangalore.

By telling you my life’s story,