It was April 27, 1959. As the day wore on, the oppressive humidity hung like a pall over the city. Deputy Commissioner John Lobo of the Bombay City Police was in his office, planning to escape the sweltering heat with a family holiday in the cool Nilgiri Hills. But police work intervened. Lobo recalls that he had spent a typical busy day at his Crime Branch, CID (Criminal Investigation Department), office in the hulking police commissioner’s building. The daily routine of discussing business with the commissioner over a cup of tea had ended at around 5:00 p.m., when the phone rang. Commander Samuel of the Indian Navy was on the line.

“Commander Nanavati is coming to see you. He was down at my residence.”
“What's the problem?”
“He has had a quarrel with a person and has shot at him.”

A short time later, he received another call, this one from Deputy Inspector Gautam of Gamdevi Police Station.

“There has been a shooting incident. A Mr. Ahuja has been fatally injured. We are proceeding to the spot and will get back to you.”
A little later, he heard a voice outside his office, asking “Lobo sahib ka kamra kahan hai?” (Where is Mr. Lobo’s office?). A tall, handsome gentleman dressed in white shirt and slacks walked in and introduced himself as Commander Nanavati. He appeared to Lobo like a man in a hurry to unburden himself of something weighing on him.

“I have shot a man.”

“He is dead. I have just received a message from Gamdevi Police Station.”

Commander Nanavati turned pale on hearing this. There was a pause. It was Lobo who broke the silence.

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Just a glass of water.”

Lobo then gathered from Commander Nanavati that the shooting had occurred over an affair between the commander’s wife, Sylvia, and the man who now lay dead. As Lobo puts it, it was a case of “the eternal triangle that sometimes upsets a marriage.” Based on Nanavati’s statements, the police retrieved a revolver and some unspent ammunition from his car. Lobo then placed the commander under arrest.

“Ordinarily, undertrials in police custody are lodged in police lock-ups. We felt Nanavati could be shown some consideration and accommodated him in one of our office-rooms.”

Later, Lobo describes the “feverish activity” at the Jeevan Jyot apartment building of the victim as the Gamdevi police officers investigated the scene of the crime. They noted the shattered glass in the nine-by-six bathroom, the bloodstains on the wall and door handle, and, lying on the floor, “the empty brown envelope bearing the name ‘Lt.-Commander K. M. Nanavati.’” Recalling the murder scene
years later, Lobo could not resist a philosophical observation: “The evil that men do lives after them—it leaves ‘footprints on the sands of time.’”

Thus began the sensational Nanavati case that consumed the city. It had all the ingredients of a thrilling drama—extramarital sex, jealousy, and murder. It also had compelling and cosmopolitan dramatic personae—Kawas Maneckshaw Nanavati, an upright Parsi naval officer; Sylvia, his beautiful English wife; and a rich, swinging Sindhi bachelor, Prem Bhagwandas Ahuja. The locus of the drama was decidedly upscale. The Nanavatis lived in elegant Cuffe Parade, and Ahuja’s posh apartment building on Nepean Sea Road (ironically named Jeevan Jyot, or Flame of Life) was in the exclusive Malabar Hill neighborhood. This upper-class geography cast the case as a story about the cosmopolitan elite in the city. The murder case was fought all the way from the trial in the Bombay Sessions Court to the final appeal in the Supreme Court in Delhi, with renowned lawyers battling on opposite sides. It was also destined to make legal history as the last jury trial in India.

The case received relentless press attention throughout the nearly three years of legal wrangling in the courts. The story even made the pages of *Time* and the *New Yorker*. Facts and opinions surrounding it entered everyday conversation and popular culture in India. So great and lasting was the public impact of the case that even when it disappeared from the front pages of newspapers, the interest in the event never waned. In 1963 a Hindi film loosely based on the incident, *Yeh Raaste Hain Pyaar Ke* (These Are the Pathways to Love), opened in theaters. Ten years later, *Achanak* (Suddenly), another Hindi film based on the Nanavati story, was released. It appears as a vignette in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and forms the central arc of Indra Sinha’s sprawling novel *The Death of Mr. Love*. In 2002 the *Hindustan Times Tabloid* ran a special on the case, reminding its readers of the compelling cast of characters, the captivating legal drama, and its sensational impact on popular culture. It revis-
ited all the lurid details and gossip surrounding the case. Retailed once again was Ahuja’s image as a Don Juan, cooing seductively into the ears of one of the several women he wooed: “The meaning of my name is Love—Prem.”

Half a century after Nanavati pumped three bullets into the body of his wife’s lover, the event continues to retain its sensational appeal. I return to the case to examine the postcolonial city that the legal and mass cultural spectacle brought into sharp focus. At the center of this new culture of sensation produced by the outsize media attention was the portrait of a cosmopolitan society. The case’s multi-ethnic and sophisticated cast of characters evoked Bombay’s mythic image. The fact that an Englishwoman was involved never raised an eyebrow. There was no insinuation (one very likely today) that she lacked the cultural values of India and exhibited the lax morals of Western women. At that time, the fact that Sylvia lived in Bombay and was married to a Parsi seemed totally natural. It was as if nothing had changed in the city, as if the Partition violence had done nothing to tarnish its myth of openness. In fact, a lot had changed. British rule had ended a little over a decade ago, and Bombay was no longer a colonial metropolis. Now, writers, artists, and filmmakers had to imagine the promise of the city in the context of the nation. The picture of the cosmopolitan milieu broadcast by the trial also had to contend with the legal system, ideology, and politics of a free India. In revisiting the case, my goal is to examine this changing city and to draw out the murder trial’s effects on the politics of the city; specifically, I am interested in its contribution to the development of populist politics, that is, the politics of the “people.”

MEET THE PRESS

Almost single-handedly responsible for turning Ahuja’s murder into a gripping and enduring event in popular culture was the spunky
Bombay tabloid *Blitz*. For nearly two and a half years after the trial opened on September 23, 1959, *Blitz* covered the case with outsize and relentless attention. With bold front-page headlines, photographs, scoops, special features, boxed reports, and gossip, *Blitz* dramatized the case as a soap opera of morality and patriotism and played it on the stage of mass culture. The three chief protagonists were—a dashingy handsome naval officer devoted to the nation; his beautiful but impressionable wife; and an ultramodern, wealthy, and wily Lothario, who had wronged not just Nanavati but India itself by seducing a married woman while her husband sailed the seas in defense of the nation. There was also a fourth protagonist—*Blitz* and its dapper and dynamic Clark Gable look-alike, the Parsi editor Russi K. Karanjia, a well-known figure in the city. Under his direction, *Blitz* audaciously framed and broadcast the case of a murder in the city as an event of nationwide importance. Splicing lurid details and courtroom drama into a moral and patriotic story line, it staged the Nanavati case as a riveting media event, the first of its kind in India.

When Ahuja’s murder occurred, *Blitz* was already established as a widely read Bombay tabloid. From its inception in 1941, it quickly became known for sensational stories under its colorful and larger-than-life founder-editor, Karanjia. With an irrepressible drive to unearth and spice up stories, Karanjia fashioned *Blitz* into a popular tabloid known for its irreverence and outsize confidence. A sign hanging outside his office read: “You don’t have to be crazy to work here, but it helps.”

Born in 1912, Karanjia belonged to an upper-class family. His father was an ophthalmic surgeon who had trained in Edinburgh. His mother came from a wealthy family from Quetta and had been educated by an English governess. The family lived opposite the famous Orient Club on Chowpatty Beach in Quetta Terrace, a wedding gift to the couple by Karanjia’s maternal grandfather. As was typical with upper-class Parsis, his upbringing was Western. The hand-wound gramophone played records of Enrico Caruso, Fernando Gusso, and
Lawrence Tibbett. A grand piano, the surgeon’s wedding gift to his wife, occupied nearly one-third of the living room in the sprawling apartment. At the frequent parties hosted by his mother, tea would be offered in the finest china and served to the upper-crust guests by a liveried butler. The evening would invariably include his mother playing Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* and his younger brother singing “The Lost Chord,” Gounod’s “Ave Maria,” or Schubert’s “Serenade.”

Growing up in an elite Parsi family, Karanjia was expected to go on to Cambridge University and pursue a career in the Indian Civil Service after his education in Bombay’s St. Xavier’s High School and Wilson College. But an innocent prank changed his life. While waiting to qualify for admission into Cambridge, Karanjia engaged in a back-and-forth exchange of letters under different pseudonyms in the “Letters to the Editor” column of the *Times of India*. When Ivor Jehu, the deputy editor, discovered his identity, he offered him a job with the newspaper, which Karanjia accepted. Recognizing his potential, the paper sent him to London to apprentice with the *Evening Standard*. But he was soon bored with the staid *Standard*, gravitating instead to the excitement of the tabloid the *Daily Mirror*.

When he returned to India, Karanjia was dismayed to find himself relegated to the background while the management groomed Frank Moraes as the first Indian editor of the *Times of India*. He left the *Times* and went on to briefly edit the *Sunday Standard* and the short-lived *Morning Standard*. After leaving the *Morning Standard*, he assembled a group to start a tabloid of his own. The group included Dinkar V. Nadkarni, who had earned a reputation in journalism by penning sensational crime stories in the *Bombay Sentinel*, edited by the veteran Irish journalist and longtime advocate of Indian nationalism Benjamin Guy Horniman; Zahir Babar Kureishi, who wrote a popular column under the pen name of Zabak; and Nadir Boman-Behram, who was to look after the advertising and business side of things. The tabloid, launched from an old Apollo Street building in the Fort, was introduced as “our BLITZ, India’s BLITZ against Hit-
Within four months of the inaugural issue, the circulation had reached twenty thousand; twenty-five years later, the “people’s paper” claimed a readership of one million. 10

Blitz both inhabited and defined Bombay’s dynamic urban milieu. As a newsweekly, it drew on the Island City’s highly developed bourgeois public sphere. A key element of this sphere was the city’s newspapers, where Bombay’s public life appeared as news and photographs. Like all newspapers, Bombay’s press served a crucial function in making the city legible. Typically, newspaper readers confront their public world in reports on politics and economics, descriptions of social engagements, crime stories, announcements of job vacancies and tender notices, advertisements of products and entertainment, film and theater reviews, and accounts of sporting events. In an important sense, newspapers bring the public sphere to life for their readers and function as agents that act upon it. It has been said that in modern city life, the secular ritual of reading the newspaper replaces the Morning Prayer. It is safe to say that Bombay’s illiterate and poor citizens did not practice this secular ritual. The public life rendered real by the newspapers lay beyond them. What is more, the English language dominated the lettered world brought into view by newspapers. In this English-scripted public world, the Times of India was preeminent. Sober and elitist, it carried a whiff of the formality inherited from its colonial past.

In contrast, Blitz adopted a populist and nationalist mantle. What it lost by publishing in English it tried to gain by deploying a radical ideology. It espoused socialism and planning, and identified the cause of the nation with anti-imperialist internationalism. The tabloid lauded Afro-Asian solidarity against the capitalist West, and loudly and regularly unveiled dark CIA plots against India and Third World leaders. Columnists with Communist sympathies—Ramesh Sanghvi, A. Raghavan, and K. A. Abbas—contributed to the leftist flavor. Karanjia reveled in playing the champion of the Third World cause against American interests. A characteristic example of
his posture was the front-page story in the early sixties headlined “Editor Karanjia Crashed US Curtain into Cuba.” The report, date-lined Havana, triumphantly noted his arrival in Cuba at Fidel Castro’s invitation in spite of the denial of a transit visa by the United States to permit him to fly via New York. When the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser visited the city in 1960, Blitz declared: “President Nasser Captivates the Heart of Bombay!” Five years later, Nasser bestowed Karanjia with the Republican Order of Merit, the highest award given to a foreigner. Exultantly, Blitz reported that despite torrential rain, thousands of Bombay’s citizens turned out to felicitate Karanjia.

Blitz’s political viewpoint closely echoed that of its idol, Nehru, who also viewed a robust national identity and anti-imperialist cosmopolitanism as complementary. Indeed, the endorsement of Afro-Asian solidarity, the admiration for the Soviet Union, the distrust of the United States, and the support for socialism and planning formed parts of an ideology that was widely shared in the decolonized world during the fifties and sixties. In this respect, Blitz was not unusual.

But Karanjia’s journalistic creation was no ordinary left-nationalist fare. True, anti-imperialism and socialism were its watchwords, but it espoused populist rather than class politics. In line with Third World radicalism, Blitz frequently denounced capitalists and championed socialism, but it regarded class as an element, not the whole of the political division. The battle lines were clear. The “people,” a homogeneous category constructed out of a socially heterogeneous population, stood on one side. Socialism and anti-imperialism were seen to serve the “people,” and the cause was entrusted with the leader, Jawaharlal Nehru. On the other side were the corrupt, the profiteers, big business, their right-wing political patrons, and communal politicians who divided the “people” along religious lines. Blitz saw its mission as one of carrying the battle of the people into the English-dominated public sphere. With hard-hitting, two-fisted
reports, it saw itself smashing open the arena of public opinion monopolized by the procapitalist and proimperialist elites.

To brashly insert the politics of the collective people, *Blitz* openly and warmly extolled Nehru and skewered those it saw as undermining his leadership with its signature muckraking, over-the-top stories. Among the unlucky politicians to draw its fire was Morarji Desai, the conservative Congress leader who was elected as the chief minister of Bombay in 1952 and was to become India’s prime minister in 1977. *Blitz* assailed him as a power-hungry hypocrite who had become the chief minister through a subterfuge. It scorned his persona of incorruptibility and moral rectitude and taunted his orders on Prohibition by calling illicit liquor “Morarjin” and Morarjuice. Never missing an opportunity to denounce him as an autocratic enemy of the people, it published stories that claimed to expose his abuse of power, patronage of big business and profiteers, and vindictiveness toward his critics, most notably Karanjia and *Blitz*. Desai’s greatest defect, in the tabloid’s eyes, was that he feigned loyalty to Nehru while harboring ambitions to succeed, if not replace, him as prime minister.

*Blitz* thrived on controversy, and Karanjia was frequently embroiled in defamation suits, which the tabloid wore as badges of honor. This is precisely what happened in the so-called Chester Bowles Forgery Case, which once again pitted Karanjia against Desai. The saga began in July 1952 when Karanjia published an interview with Chester Bowles, the U.S. ambassador to India. Apparently, this irked D. F. Karaka, the Oxford-educated Parsi editor of the rival Bombay tabloid, *Current*. On October 1, 1952, *Current* published purported copies of letters exchanged between Karanjia and Bowles. In one letter that Karanjia allegedly wrote to Bowles, he complains of *Blitz*’s financial difficulties, asks for help in getting American advertisements, and requests that the ambassador meet some of his Communist friends. In the purported reply, Bowles expresses his readiness to meet Karanjia’s friends. *Current* charged that
the letters exposed Karanjia’s secret desire to be a “Washington patriot.” Karanjia thundered in reply: “A monstrous lie… Illustrated with Shameless Forgery.” He denied writing such a letter or receiving the one attributed to Bowles. The American ambassador also called the letters forged and denounced Current as irresponsible for publishing a smear.

The Desai government ordered a probe and ended up filing charges against Karanjia. It was alleged that Karanjia had fabricated the forgeries and conspired to get them published in Current in order to embarrass Karaka. Blitz covered the trial with its usual repertoire of bold headlines and blow-by-blow accounts of the proceedings. It expressed outraged innocence and dropped dark hints of a conspiracy hatched by Republicans and McCarthyites against the Democrat Bowles and the progressive Karanjia. After the testimonies and cross-examination of numerous witnesses, the scrutiny of typewriter fonts and letterheads, and legal jousting by the prosecution and the defense, Karanjia was exonerated. The government appealed the decision to the High Court, but its plea was dismissed. The headline in Blitz exclaimed: “KARANJIA DOUBLY ACQUITTED, INNOCENCE DOUBLY PROVED.”

Never one to shy away from self-publicity, Karanjia cut a flamboyant figure. His tabloid frequently carried his pictures, now speaking at a meeting, now exchanging pleasantries with political and cultural celebrities. He brashly promoted himself and his paper. During his long editorship of Blitz, he took many controversial and unpredictable positions. He railed against the powerful but was not averse to cozying up to those at the top. Despite his self-professed radicalism, he was an open admirer of Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi. He professed republican sentiments but lauded the shah of Iran as the ruler over the ancient homeland of his Parsi community. An ardent rationalist, he became a devotee of Satya Sai Baba, the god man whom he had previously denounced for retailing mumbo jumbo. Such a figure naturally cut a divisive figure. There were
hushed rumors in the city that he was on the take from the KGB, that he was a blackmailer and a hypocrite. The rumors only served to make him more interestingly colorful and controversial, and his tabloid the purveyor of a sensational public culture.

Central to Blitz’s self-representation as a radical paper of the people was its tabloid form. The tabloid is a classic urban form that claims to make legible the anonymous reality of everyday life in the modern metropolis in its bold and sensational headlines. It professes to reveal the mystery of the goings-on in the backrooms of power and money and expose the real motivations and desires of all and sundry. The city becomes real. Adopting this stance, Blitz dis-
pensed with the convention of dispassionate observation and balanced opinion and assumed a charged tone from the very beginning. The tabloid revelled in its self-proclaimed role as a racket buster, exposing truths concealed by the powerful and fearlessly advocating the interests of the people.

In 1945, for example, D. V. Nadkarni, Blitz’s chief racket buster, wrote a series of sensational stories on the textile shortage. These accounts claimed to uncover the hidden hand of the big wholesale dealers who, with the alleged help of government officials, were hoarding textile stocks to drive up the price while representing the shortage as the result of a natural scarcity. This was not unusual. Week after week, Blitz exposed truths allegedly buried beneath the surface of random and fragmentary events. The embezzlement of public funds, prostitution rackets, sordid stories of seduction and sex in the name of spiritualism, dark political designs behind high-sounding rhetoric, and the fleecing of the poor by rich industrialists and property developers, all were staples in the weekly. Even its sports column, called “Knock Out,” took on the racket-busting posture. It was written by A.F.S. Talyarkhan, whose bearded, pipe-in-mouth photograph on the page appeared to lend gravity to the charges of malfeasance that he leveled against the sports authorities. The poor performance of Indian athletes in international competitions, he alleged, could be explained by the petty squabbles and power grabbing of officials behind the scenes. Of course, no tabloid can be complete without pin-ups. Thus, the last page always carried a pinup that greeted the reader with a witty caption, for example, “Nalini makes a winsome bather, But will someone blow off the lather!” Beside the titillating photograph, there was always the “Last Page,” written by K. A. Abbas, a journalist, screenplay writer, and film director. His column offered a man-about-town view of the world, commenting, venting against, and exposing the machinations of the powerful.

In Blitz’s world, there was nothing mysterious about reality. Once it had wiped the mist off the surface-level mystery and decoded the
outward face of events, the exposed reality always appeared rational, a product of the relentlessly instrumental and banal pursuits of money and power. The scandal lay in the fact that people wrapped their ruthlessly rational motivations and actions in tissues of lies and deceptions. This required a careful scrutiny of the misleading exteriority of events. The journalist had to act as a detective and plunge into the rough-and-tumble of life. He had to examine seemingly disconnected fragments to decipher hidden connections and detect clues to the underlying reality. In this process, the journalist-as detective functioned as an author who produced written and illustrative political and social texts that claimed to depict modernity’s imperceptible reality.

Bombay acquired a textual and photographic face in Blitz’s news accounts and images that sought to represent reality in its surface-level expressions. No grand philosophy or concept defined this depiction of reality. Rather, the tabloid identified the phenomena in the empirical material itself, in the exemplary spaces and activities of modern life. It traced the contours of Bombay’s daily life on its streets and neighborhoods, restaurants and cinema theaters, textile factories and neighborhoods, docks and shipping offices, and municipal institutions and public parks. Warnings of “Death-Trap for Promenaders at Marine Drive Seafront” and exposures of “Super-Market in Sex: Where Vice Is Sold on Department-Store Basis” or “Bombay Municipality Creates Slums” formed the stuff of Blitz’s Bombay.

These stories of the city’s dark side did not signify cultural pessimism or despair. If anything, Blitz always expressed supreme confidence in modern life. Showing no nostalgia for the imagined harmony of the countryside, it openly embraced the gritty, conflict-ridden, and urban milieu of Bombay. While it uncovered tales of greed for money and power, it also provided glamorous accounts of film personalities and celebrated popular struggles for justice. On its pages, the city appeared as an immense and exciting mix of multilayered, contradictory, and restless lives. Everything seemed to be
in motion. Fortunes were being made and lost, swindles were being plotted and exposed, and big dreams were being dreamed and shattered. People jostled for space and heroically struggled for survival and justice. Against the shadow of its dark side, Bombay’s metropolis life glittered on the pages of Blitz.

The Nanavati trial was a godsend for Blitz. It provided an opportunity to project the case as a drama of the politics of the “people” on the sensational surface of the tabloid pages. Blitz seized the opening and framed the trial as a titillating urban drama of national significance. Interestingly, although Nanavati belonged to Karanjia’s Parsi community, Blitz never highlighted the ethnic dimension. It did not extol Nanavati’s Parsi origins or comment negatively on Ahuja’s Sindhi identity. Nor did it read any dark conspiracy in Sylvia’s English origins despite the tabloid’s penchant for discovering neocolonial designs on India. The tabloid presented the story as a moral and political scandal, as a case of the nation’s betrayal by the seductive and corrupt influence of the rich.

THE TRIAL

The trial opened on the afternoon of September 23, 1959, in the packed District and Sessions Court of Judge R. B. Mehta, the first legal venue entrusted to try a murder case. The nine-member jury consisted of two Parsis, one Anglo-Indian, a Christian, and five Hindus. Representing the government, Chief Public Prosecutor C. M. Trivedi charged Nanavati with intentionally causing Ahuja’s death, an offense under section 302 of the Indian Penal Code. Commander Nanavati, resplendent in his naval uniform, pleaded not guilty. Leading the defense team was Karl J. Khandalawala, a famous criminal lawyer, equally well known as an expert on Indian painting and sculpture.

During the month-long trial, which included a dramatic visit by the judge, the jury, and the counsels to the murder scene, the follow-
ing facts were established. Nanavati, a highly regarded naval officer, had married Sylvia in England in 1949. After his return to Bombay, the couple had three children and lived in a Cuffe Parade flat in Colaba. In 1956 another naval officer’s wife introduced Sylvia to Prem Ahuja, a thirty-one-year-old, curly-haired, and handsome businessman. A bachelor, Ahuja lived with his unmarried sister Mamie and three servants in a large apartment on Nepean Sea Road in posh Malabar Hill. Like many Sindhis of the Hindu community, Ahuja's family had fled Karachi after the Partition in 1947. In Bombay he had built a successful car dealership called Universal Motors, which sold Willys Jeeps. Ahuja's acquaintance with Sylvia turned into an affair while Nanavati spent long periods at sea, away from home.

On April 18, 1959, when Nanavati returned home, he found his wife inexplicably cold toward him. On April 27 the couple woke up early, took the dog to a veterinary surgeon, bought tickets for an afternoon cinema show, did some shopping at Crawford Market, and returned home. At breakfast, Nanavati asked Sylvia if there was a reason for her cold behavior, but she did not reply. Nanavati asked again after lunch, but she told him to stay away when he approached her. Finally, when he asked if she loved someone else, Sylvia confessed that she loved Ahuja and had been unfaithful. Stunned, Nanavati asked if she was willing to give up her lover. She did not respond. Meanwhile, the children were waiting to go to the cinema. Nanavati drove Sylvia, the children, and a neighbor’s child to the Metro Theatre for the afternoon show of Tom's Thumb, promising to pick them up after the film at 6 p.m. But things took a different turn.

Nanavati drove straight to his ship at the naval docks and obtained a revolver with six rounds of ammunition, telling the naval authorities that he needed the gun for personal protection. He then drove to Universal Motors on Peddar Road. When he was told that Ahuja had gone home for lunch, the commander drove to Malabar Hill. He parked in the driveway of Jeevan Jyot and went up to Ahuja’s second-floor apartment, carrying the fully loaded revolver in an en-
velopes. He rang the doorbell at around 4:20 in the afternoon. Anjani Rapa, the bearer who answered the door, told him that Ahuja was in the bedroom. Before the bedroom door closed behind Nanavati, Deepak Sampath, the cook, saw Ahuja standing in front of the bathroom mirror, combing his hair.

Less than a minute later, the servants heard the sound of two shots, followed by a third shot accompanied by a loud noise—the clatter of breaking glass. The servants, followed by Mamie Ahuja, who was resting in her bedroom, rushed to Ahuja’s room, where they found Nanavati standing with a revolver in his hand. Ahuja, clad only with a towel around his waist, lay prostrate on the bathroom floor. A bewildered Mamie asked what had happened. The commander did not reply. Instead, pointing the gun at the servants and asking them to stand clear, he walked out. Downstairs, the guard of the building tried to stop him, but Nanavati drove off, saying he was going to the police station. As he did not know the location of the police station, he drove instead to the residence of the provost marshal of the navy, Commander Samuel. “Something terrible has happened. I have shot one man.” With this confession, he handed over the keys to his apartment and asked Commander Samuel to give them to his wife at the Metro Theatre. Commander Samuel then phoned Deputy Commissioner Lobo, and Nanavati surrendered to the police.

These, in a nutshell, were the facts. The prosecution produced twenty-four witnesses and marshaled forensic evidence to prove that Ahuja’s murder was premeditated. Testifying for the prosecution, Lobo was about to recount the sequence of events leading up to Nanavati’s surrender and confessional statement, when he was stopped. The problem was that the confession was not admissible because it had not been obtained under a judicial magistrate’s supervision. After huddling with the counsels to consider this issue, the judge instructed Lobo to submit his evidence in writing. Lobo wrote his submission in dialogue form, which was entered in the case record, with the confession placed in brackets and ex-
cluded. However, his testimony that Nanavati had appeared in his office dressed in white shirt and slacks, which were without bloodstains or any tears, backed up the prosecution’s contention that the naval officer had shot Ahuja from a distance and killed him intentionally.

The defense offered thirteen witnesses of its own, cross-examined the prosecution testimonies, and furnished its own forensic experts to prove that the death was accidental. Its star witnesses were Sylvia and Commander Nanavati himself. For two days, Nanavati was on the witness stand, reiterating that he had not killed Ahuja intentionally. He claimed that he had gone to Ahuja to ask him if he was prepared to marry Sylvia and take care of the children. But instead of a rational discussion, a heated exchange and physical struggle followed. The gun went off in the course of the struggle. “If I had intended to kill the deceased (Ahuja), I would have riddled him with bullets as he was standing in front of the dressing table.” Asked why he had procured the gun, Nanavati stated that he wanted the weapon so he could shoot himself. Sylvia testified in support of the defense theory of an accidental shooting. Described as often restless in the witness stand, her eyes moist with tears, she acknowledged her affair with Ahuja. It was infatuation, the remorseful wife claimed. He had seduced her with the promise of marriage but had seemed to be backing away. That is why she had kept silent when Nanavati asked if Ahuja was prepared to marry her. She testified that her silence left Nanavati stunned and disoriented. The defense elicited this testimony to establish that the knowledge of the affair left Nanavati dazed and suicidal, that the anxiety about the future of his wife and children gnawed at him, and that he went to Ahuja to ask him about his intentions, not to kill him.

Emily Hahn, the New Yorker correspondent who witnessed part of the trial, describes the drama vividly. The street leading to the courthouse was jam-packed. The spectators were “mostly women, who had, I thought, taken considerable trouble to make themselves look nice.” Women also lined the gallery leading up to the court-
room, carrying garlands for the commander. Viewers crammed the benches—“lots of women, most of them glamorous looking types,” one “dressed up as if she were going to the opera.” Hahn spotted Nanavati in a spotless, starch white uniform bedecked with medals and wearing an expression of “polite indifference.”

The *Times of India*, the premier Bombay daily, covered the trial in detail from the very start. Day after day, it reported the trial proceedings. Naturally, Nanavati’s and Sylvia’s testimonies received prominent attention, as did the defense portrait of Ahuja as a liquor-loving philanderer. But it also paid ample attention to the less dramatic aspects of the proceedings. Its overall approach was sober and balanced. Treating the case as a crime story, albeit a prominent one, the *Times* stuck to factual reporting, eschewing screaming headlines and colorful language.

As a weekly, *Blitz* obviously could not provide a daily account of the trial. Therefore, it was slow to pick up on the story. It filed its first report well into the trial. The editorial staff had reluctantly accepted that the weekly was at a disadvantage in relation to the dailies in covering the trial’s day-by-day developments. But Karanjia would have none of it. “Go ahead, go ahead. Start working right now. Money does not matter, but we want a front-page smasher.” The staff sprang into action. *Blitz* published a boxed item on October 10, 1959, entitled “The Nanavati Trial in a Nutshell.”

In keeping with its format as a weekly, *Blitz* presented the summary of the trial’s daily proceedings as a story. Also, its tabloid format meant that its predilection was to ferret out a scandal beneath the surface, find a drama buried in the cold recitation of facts. Thus, while its synopsis of the prosecution’s case was factual, the report on the defense plea was another matter. In contrast to the *Times’s* straightforward account, *Blitz* spiced up its summary of the defense case with verbatim quotations from Nanavati’s deposition. The commander had deposed that he found his wife tense and unresponsive to his affectionate touch on April 27.
“Do you still love me?” he asked. No reply.

“Are you in love with someone else?” he asked again. No reply.

“Have you been faithful to me?” Sylvia shook her head to indicate “No.” To Nanavati, “this looked like the end of the world.” He decided to shoot himself.

Nanavati, however, wanted to know from Ahuja whether he was “prepared to marry Sylvia and look after the children.” He went to INS “Mysore” and secured a service revolver.

When Nanavati walked into Ahuja’s bedroom and asked him “Are you going to marry Sylvia and look after the kids,” Ahuja nastily replied, “Do I have to marry every woman that I sleep with. . . . Get the hell out of here. . . .”

When Nanavati retorted, “By God, I am going to thrash you for this” and raised his hands to fight, Ahuja made a sudden grab for the envelope containing the revolver, which Nanavati had kept on the cabinet nearby. But Nanavati reached it first. Ahuja suddenly gripped Nanavati’s hand and tried to take the revolver by twisting Nanavati’s hand. During the struggle, two shots went off.

Already, Blitz had found a sensational angle to the trial and a bias for Nanavati.

The following week, the trial was on Blitz’s front page. A bold headline, “Tragedy of the Eternal Triangle,” illustrated with the photographs of Nanavati, Sylvia, and Ahuja, was followed by the story—“Sylvia Nanavati Tells Her Story of Love and Torture.” It reported a scene of hysterical excitement in the packed courtroom among the surging crowds who gathered to hear Sylvia’s testimony and to catch a glimpse of Nanavati, smartly attired in a starched white naval uniform. Given Hahn’s report, Blitz did not have to invent the hoopla. But the tabloid ratcheted up the public frenzy another notch by its reports. It gleefully reported college girls losing their hearts to the handsome commander. Some swooned at his sight. Others reportedly sent him hundred-rupee bills smeared with lipstick. “A few love-
lorn nymphets have even made him offers of marriage, anticipating divorce.” While the crowd in the courtroom listened attentively to the counsels, “there [was] another mute and eyeless ‘spectator’ present—AHUJA’S SKULL, an exhibit in the case, which [stood] on the table near the press benches, grinning sinisterly.”

Sylvia was described as the attractive blue-eyed British wife of the commander, clad in a white sari and blouse—an image of purity—and speaking in a voice choked with emotion. The article then proceeded to selectively reproduce dramatic elements of her four-

5.2. Blitz front page: “The Tragedy of the Eternal Triangle.” Source: Blitz, October 17, 1959
and-a-half hours of testimony as a defense witness, beginning with a scene of domestic bliss.

“On April 27, before lunch,” Sylvia deposed, “we were sitting in the sitting room, my husband and I and the children.”

Bliss was broken by trouble.

“My husband came and touched me. I asked him not to do it. I asked him not to touch me as I did not like him.”

Defence Counsel: “Why did you not like him?”

Sylvia: “At that time I was infatuated with Ahuja.”

Sylvia testified that Nanavati just sat dazed when she confessed that she had been unfaithful. Then:

Suddenly he got up rather excitedly and said that he wanted to go to Ahuja’s flat and square things up. I became very alarmed and begged him not to go. I said: “Please don’t go anywhere there, he may shoot you!” My husband said, “Please do not bother about me. It does not matter. In any way, I will shoot myself.”

When my husband said this, I got hold of his arm and tried to calm him down. I said: “Why do you shoot yourself? You are the innocent one in this!”

After calming down, Nanavati asked if Ahuja was willing to marry her and take care of the children.

I avoided that question as I was too ashamed to admit that I felt that Ahuja was trying to avoid marrying me.

Sylvia deposed that Nanavati offered to forgive her if she promised to never see Ahuja again.

I hesitated to give an answer as I was still infatuated with Ahuja. As this was a question which affected my whole future I could not give an answer at the moment.
Sylvia admitted frequenting Ahuja’s apartment. Ahuja’s sister, Mamie Ahuja, knew of the affair and had allegedly agreed to serve as her alibi if Nanavati came to know of his wife’s visits to their residence. This account of subterfuge was followed by the mention of Sylvia’s revelation that Ahuja drank liquor. This disclosure was meant to draw attention to the discovery of twenty-three bottles of liquor in Ahuja’s apartment, a quantity far larger than that permitted in Prohibition-era Bombay. The defense used this revelation to paint Ahuja as an immoral playboy who habitually threw parties, where he plied women with liquor. Sylvia went along with the defense’s insinuation. More was to come. Sylvia said that Ahuja had promised to marry her several times before 1958—“the year of intimacy between the two.” But this, according to her testimony, changed a month or two after they had sex, when he tried to back out of his promises.

The deceased had given me to understand that he loved me and wanted to marry me and then he tried to back out of his promises. Having broken my marriage, I thought it was only right that he should marry me.

When challenged by the prosecutor to document Ahuja’s disavowal of his promise, she read out from a letter she had written on May 24, 1958:

Last night when you spoke about your need of marrying, about the various girls you may marry, something inside me snapped and I knew I could not bear the thought of your loving and being close to someone else.

The morality tale was set. On one side was an upright naval officer, and on the other, a liquor-drinking Don Juan. Caught in between was a remorseful wife duped into sexual intimacy by the immoral playboy’s false promise of marriage.
THE VERDICT

On Wednesday, October 14, Karl Khandalawala addressed the jury, asking it to return a verdict of not guilty. For two days, he dissected the evidence to argue that the charge of premeditation was unproven; Ahuja’s death, he stated, was an accident. He ended his spirited address boldly: “Commander Nanavati has committed no offence in the eyes of God nor any offence under the law of this country. I ask for no sympathy and no mercy. I ask for a decision on the facts of the evidence.” Chief Prosecutor Trivedi followed. Summarizing his interpretation of the evidence, he declared that the evidence proved that Commander Nanavati had committed a cold-blooded murder. He discounted the defense theory of a struggle, asserting that there was ample proof of intention. However, he conceded that, given the exceptional circumstances and the “sordid story” underlying the killing, the jury could return a verdict of guilty of culpable homicide not amounting to murder. After the prosecutor completed his rebuttal of the defense, Judge Mehta addressed the jury, patiently analyzing the evidence and instructing it of its responsibility.

After the judge finished his summation on October 21 at 4:30 p.m., the jury immediately retired to consider its verdict. An hour passed, then another, as the tense spectators waited in the courtroom. The crowd swelled outside as office workers stayed to hear the decision. When it got dark, lamps were switched on inside the courtroom. Then, a little after the clock struck seven, the jury returned to announce its verdict: Nanavati was not guilty of murder. By an eight-to-one majority, it also rejected the charge of culpable homicide not amounting to murder.

The courtroom erupted in cheers. But Sessions judge Mehta brought the noisy celebration to an abrupt halt. He declared that the jury verdict was “perverse” in light of the evidence marshaled in the trial and referred the case to the Bombay High Court, the highest court in the province, “in the interests of justice.”
The news of the verdict was the first time that the case made the front page of the *Times*. But it was a different story with *Blitz*. Having already elevated the case as its front-page story for weeks, *Blitz* greeted the verdict with nine pages of what it called a pictorial record of the case and a bold, front-page headline: “THREE SHOTS THAT SHOOK THE NATION.”

Bang ... Bang ... Bang:—Three shots ring out one by one in succession. The shrill crash of window panes is followed by a wild scream. The scene is the ultra-modernly furnished bedroom of

5.3. The accused commander. Source: Blitz, October 24, 1959.
a young Bombay businessman on the second floor of a palatial building called “Jeevan Jyot”—“the flame of Life.”

A brief summary of the case was followed by a sympathetic profile of the naval officer, accompanied by his photograph in uniform. “Commander Kawas Maneckshaw Nanavati, exactly six feet tall, well-built and handsome, has spent eighteen and half years of his thirty-seven year old life in the Navy.” It went on to recount his training at the Royal Naval College in England, his war service, and Lord Mountbatten’s recommendation that he be trained for service in aircraft carriers. In England, Nanavati met and fell in love with the “delicately built, attractive, blue-eyed, brunette Sylvia.” After a month of courting, they were married in London and returned to India, where she bore him three children. He was promoted as the second in command of the Indian Navy’s flagship, Mysore. Aboard the ship during his last time at sea, the “thought of reunion with his pretty wife and three lovely children and meeting his aged parents fill[ed] his mind. His mind was overjoyed at the prospect of a new highly coveted post.”

But Nanavati’s world came apart when Sylvia confessed her affair with Ahuja. He drove to the ship to get medicine for his sick dog. But instead, he ended up securing a revolver from the ship’s stores. “I just wanted to shoot myself and I thought I would do that by driving far, far away from my children.” Then a sudden urge took him to Ahuja. In a rage, he entered Ahuja’s bedroom, shouting, “You filthy swine,” and questioned him about his intentions. Blitz then went on to repeat Nanavati’s claim that a struggle had ensued, during which the gun went off accidently, killing Ahuja. The article ended with the question: “WHAT IS THE TRUTH?”

The answer was supposedly contained in the story entitled “This Is What Happened in the Bedroom of Ahuja.” It was a dramatic retelling of the “Eternal Triangle Murder Trial,” illustrated with the photographs of the main dramatis personae, the witnesses, attorneys, and the swarming crowd. Blitz boasted that the picture of Nanavati
entering the court in his full naval regalia was an exclusive. Homi D. Mistry, the deputy editor, breathlessly recounted how he had scooped the pictures of a smartly uniformed Nanavati exiting the court. The problem was that the famous accused was whisked so briskly in and out of the navy car at the court’s rear entrance that there was no clear view of him. He had meekly offered this as an excuse to Karanjia in explaining the near impossibility of obtaining a picture. But Karanjia would not take no for an answer. “Nothing is impossible for a Blitzman,” he roared. A chastened Mistry and his photographer set about accomplishing the impossible. Help came unexpectedly. A man offered to stall the car long enough for the Blitz cameraman to snap pictures of a waiting Nanavati. In return, this unnamed angel did not want money but only a copy of the photograph. A delighted Mistry agreed. One day, while the police beat back the surging crowd and Nanavati waited at the entrance for the car stalled by Blitz’s photo-seeking trickster, the cameraman snapped pictures at “machine-gun” speed. These photographs became part of Blitz’s pictorial feature. The story depicted the homicide scene with arrow marks on the pictures of Ahuja’s apartment building, bedroom, and bathroom. The mise-en-scène of the trial was set with the “cosmopolitan” crowds milling about, stretching from the courts to Flora Fountain.
With photographs, Blitz presented the visual drama of the courtroom entry of “the handsome, smartly uniformed Commander Nanavati, with an array of seven medals glittering on his breast, but sad-eyed and quiet.” Every time he was spotted going in and out of the court, accompanied by naval officers, the crowd would shout “Nanavati Zindabad” (Long Live Nanavati) and “good luck.” The tabloid recounted the details of the case built by “the learned, soft spoken, thin-lipped, and bushy-browed” chief prosecutor Trivedi and the alternative theory put forward by the defense. It reminded readers of the prosecution’s case for premeditated murder, substantiated by the evidence of the servants, the ballistic expert, and the police surgeon, who stuck to his view that three successive shots could not go off accidentally. The image of Mamie Ahuja was recalled to once again retell the defense’s assertions about Ahuja’s alleged affairs and love letters. The readers were reminded of Commander Samuel’s testimony that Nanavati had looked dazed and disoriented, muttering “fight, fight” when he appeared at the provost-marshal’s residence. This was to bolster the argument that the gun had gone off in a struggle.
Blitz noted the drama of Nanavati’s appearance as defense witness number one. Sylvia was once again portrayed as a pretty, blue-eyed, and remorseful wife, painfully recounting her act of betrayal. Blitz reminded readers that senior naval officials, including the navy chief, Admiral Katari, had appeared as defense witnesses. Citing the jury’s not guilty verdict and its dismissal by the judge, it closed the recapitulation of the trial by quoting Judge Mehta: “I think our whole law is on trial and that our whole Constitution is on trial.” It was now for the Bombay High Court to decide, Blitz declared, whether Commander Nanavati is “GUilty or not Guilty.”

The trial was over, but the next week Blitz’s front page was still asking: “NAvATI: What Next?” People, the article claimed, were eagerly awaiting the answer to this question. Popular excitement ran high. There were rumors among the “gullible” and the “superstitious” that Ahuja’s ghost was stalking the city. Street hawkers were selling replicas of Nanavati’s revolver and Ahuja’s towel. The public sentiment was decidedly pro-Nanavati. Reportedly, the city teenagers put new words to the tune of “Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley”, 33

You're not going to hang, Nanavati,
you don't have to cry;
Hold up your head, Nanavati, 'cause you
ain't going to die.

Blitz boasted that its print order had soared to 152,000 to meet the huge demand, which had reportedly led the newspaper hawkers to scalp the tabloid at as much as eight times the price. The date on the newspaper’s masthead was Saturday, but impatient readers rushed to the newstands, which received the tabloid on Friday. Old city residents remember that copies circulated among friends. It was as if Blitz had traversed the whole of Bombay, creating a print city through its circulation. A film journalist, who was then a schoolboy in the city, remembers cutting school and traveling ticketless on the suburban train from Kandivli to Churchgate to catch a glimpse
of Nanavati and Sylvia. Nanavati appeared to him as a hero—a portrayal, he now understands, shaped by the tabloid. As far away as the railway bookstall in Madras, the arrival of the *Blitz* from Bombay was eagerly awaited.

*Blitz* roused and shaped the popular imagination with its aggressive coverage of the case. Front-page headlines, sensational stories, and exclusive photographs became regular features of its reporting of the case. In the lull before the case was taken up by the High Court, *Blitz* tried to keep the interest alive and its circulation up by somehow bringing up the issue. It even commissioned a palmist-astrologer to interpret Nanavati’s horoscope to foretell his legal fate. While predicting auspicious developments in the domestic sphere, the fortune-teller announced that since the case was sub judice, he had placed his legal prediction in a sealed envelope in custody of *Blitz*, to be opened after the court’s verdict. The movie correspondent published an article, “L’Affaire Nanavati—Hollywood Version,” discovering the resonance of the case in the 1959 film *Anatomy of a Murder*, starring Jimmy Stewart, Lee Remick, and Ben Gazzara. Illustrated with movie stills, the article highlighted the film’s fascinating depiction of the trial of an army lieutenant charged with murdering his wife’s rapist.

A week before the case opened before the High Court, *Blitz* published another summary of the case, illustrated with photographs and graphic representations of the prosecution and including defense theories of the murder. In an era before television, this was the closest the public could get to the case as a compelling visual drama.

**THE DENOUEMENT**

*Blitz*’s coverage of the case went into high gear as the High Court took up the lower court’s referral on February 8, 1960. Over the year and half that the case was deliberated in the High Court, before it moved on to the Supreme Court, there were numerous legal
twists. Through it all, Karanjia relentlessly publicized its factual, legal, and moral dimensions. By the end, he had turned Nanavati into a cause célèbre.

Unlike the drama of witnesses and cross-examinations in the trial, the issues before the High Court concerned the interpretation of law and rules of evidence. Still, the public interest remained undimmed. The courtroom was overcrowded, and police forces lined the High Court corridors on each floor to regulate entry. Once again, legal luminaries were ranged on opposite sides. Y. V. Chandrachud, the government pleader and later the chief justice of India, led the prosecution. A.S.R. Chari, a leading Bombay lawyer, appeared for the defense. *Blitz* announced the importance it attributed to the High Court proceedings by publishing the photographs of the main cast of characters. There were the by-now familiar pictures of the famous accused and the victim—Commander Nanavati in his naval uniform and Ahuja in a suit. But also illustrating the story were portraits of the two counsels and the High Court justices, Naik and Shelat, in their legal robes.

The accompanying articles drew the readers’ attention to the main points in Sessions judge Mehta’s reference. First, the Sessions judge had ruled that the jury verdict was “perverse” because it had no reasonable basis in the evidence presented. He highlighted several facts that undermined the theory of an accidental shooting. He pointed out that had there been a struggle, the towel would not have remained in place on Ahuja’s body. The defense had also failed to explain, according to him, how Ahuja knew that Nanavati’s envelope contained a revolver when he allegedly lunged for it. Second, his opinion was that Nanavati was guilty of culpable homicide not amounting to murder. In view of Nanavati’s excellent record of service, however, Judge Mehta recommended a nominal sentence.

The defense’s first move was to challenge the dismissal of the jury’s verdict. It contended that the High Court should rule only on the Sessions judge’s reference, not on Nanavati’s guilt or innocence. It
was overruled. The government pleader claimed that the Sessions judge’s instructions to the jury contained severe “misdirections” and “non-directions” that had tainted the verdict. Therefore, he argued, the court should rule on Nanavati’s guilt. The High Court agreed and asked the government to argue the case on the merits of the evidence. For the next three weeks, the prosecution and defense counsels battled over the interpretation of evidence.

*Blitz* fully covered the courtroom tussle between the prosecution and the defense, but it also published juicy tidbits. Chief among these were Sylvia’s letters to Ahuja, full of love and longing. “I want to love you in every way—with love and quietness and with passion. I want to cook for you, sew for you (poor you!). I want to look after you when you’re ill, bear your children and be with you always. Please say you’ll have me, please say you want me.” With his wife deeply in love with another man and planning to leave him, Nanavati appeared as a grossly wronged husband. Ahuja, by contrast, was portrayed as an immoral playboy, callously playing with the emotions of an impressionable and lonely wife.

On March 9 the High Court resumed the delivery of the judgment that it had begun the previous day. “There is nothing surprising or abhorrent in the step Nanavati took in avenging his injuries,” observed Justice Shelat, but, he continued, “the law of the country did not permit the avenging of a wrong by taking law into one’s own hands.” The verdict? “The accused is convicted under Section 302 I.P.C. (Murder) and is sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for life.” The judge had rejected the theory of sudden provocation and ignored the trial judge’s recommendation that Nanavati be charged with culpable homicide not amounting to murder. Tension broke in the hushed courtroom. Many rushed out to flash the news of the bombshell judgment to the thronging crowd outside.

The front-page headline in *Blitz* read: “NANAVATI … What Next?”

A dispirited report speculated on Nanavati’s options—appeal to the nation’s highest court, the Supreme Court in New Delhi, undergo
the sentence, and a pardon by the state governor or the president of India. A prominent boxed item on the front page read: “Love Letters of Mrs. ? to Ahuja,” with the question mark covering a woman’s face. The letters were frank and intimate, with sentiments such as “I shan’t see you for a very long time—ten days at least. I shall probably die in that time. What is there to live for, if I can’t see you, hear you, touch you?” Defense Counsel Chari had brought these letters to the court’s attention to assert that they proved that Ahuja lived dangerously and was aware of the consequences of such a life. It is for this reason, the counsel argued, that the court should accept Sylvia’s evidence that she had seen Ahuja with a revolver and had warned Nanavati that her lover might shoot him. Supposedly, this was why Nanavati had gone armed with a gun to Ahuja’s residence.

The defense’s arguments for Nanavati’s innocence had failed to move the High Court, but all was not lost. On March 11 Sri Prakasa, the governor of Bombay, invoked the constitution of India to direct that Nanavati be held in naval custody pending disposal of his appeal to the Supreme Court. The order was issued even before the Sessions judge could issue a warrant for Nanavati’s arrest following the conviction by the High Court, ensuring that the commander did not go to jail at all. Prime Minister Nehru acknowledged that, in response to the appeal by the navy chief and with the clearance of the law minister, he had advised the governor to suspend the sentence and remand Nanavati to naval custody. Both the governor’s decision and Nehru’s intervention in a provincial matter were unprecedented and were construed as unwarranted executive interference in the judiciary. The controversy raged in the Parliament, the provincial legislature, newspapers, and among lawyers. Even the Communist Party, with which Blitz was friendly, condemned the governor’s action. The High Court picked up the gauntlet as well. After rejecting Nanavati’s petition seeking leave to appeal his conviction before the Supreme Court, it appointed a full bench of seven judges to consider the constitutionality of the governor’s action.
A sensational case of adultery and murder was now a high-stakes legal spectacle. The trial, the jury verdict, Nanavati’s conviction by the High Court, and the governor’s suspension of his sentence had escalated the case into a constitutional tangle. Brought into view was a crisis in the liberal constitutional order’s management of society. The very idea of equality before the law as the means of governing social conflicts was being tested. On trial was the ability of the principle of separation of powers between the executive and the judiciary to check the abuse of power.

Blitz jumped into the legal fray with a column by Ramesh Sanghvi, a barrister. He wrote that the case was no longer just a matter of the death of a rich businessman and the life of a naval officer. Hitting high rhetorical notes in the law, he declared that the battle concerned issues much bigger than the fate of one man; it was about the fate of countless Indians who have no medals to bedeck their chests but depend on the supremacy of the jury system. He pointed out that no judge could discard the decision of the jury in Britain. In importing this system into colonial India, however, the British had introduced the provision for an appeal against the jury verdict to the High Court. This anachronism in the law permitted Englishmen, who were invariably the High Court judges, to maintain control over Indians. In using this anachronistic provision in the Indian criminal law to reexamine the evidence and convict Nanavati in the High Court, the prosecution had perpetuated the colonial violation of justice. It was a clear case of double jeopardy.

The constitutional card was not the only one that Blitz played. Its trumps were morality and patriotism. Karanjia bylined a lead story headlined “Let the People Rally to the DEFENCE OF NANAVIDI!” He began by asking a series of rhetorical questions. Why did the governor intervene? Why did Nehru offer advice? Why did the jury return a verdict of not guilty? “Finally, what magnet or magic brought some 20,000 citizens to crowd around the Bombay High Court to ‘jai’ [felicitate] the man charged with killing, four times everyday of the
long trial?” The answers, Karanjia claimed, lay in the “greatly derided and heavily ridiculed middle-class morality.” According to him, everyone, barring the members of the upper strata and an “amoral minority of the intelligentsia, hails Nanavati as the man who fired those shots on his behalf—that is, on behalf of the sanctity of his home and honour of his family—against the plague of corruption, be it of the financial or moral variety, that is eating into the body, mind and soul of the nation.” Ahuja, he suggested, had come to stand for the wealthy, corrupt, immoral, and “unsocialist” forces ranged against the country, whereas Nanavati had become a symbol of the “avenging conscience of humanity.” It was a popular revolt against the corruption of public life, not an expression of communal solidarity, for those who regularly gathered at the trial were not only Parsis but included Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and even Sindhis. The people had risen against the enemies of the nation.

Ratcheting up the sensational twist to the morality angle, Blitz published a copy of a letter allegedly sent to Nanavati by “Mrs X,” a “beautiful 30-year old Anglo-Indian married woman.” Mrs. X wrote that she and her husband met Ahuja at lunch at a friend’s house. During the absence of her husband, who spent days away from home on work, she often went to Ahuja’s apartment for parties. At one of those parties, he plied her with drink and broke down her resistance. He stripped her naked and “proceeded to satisfy his lust.” When she woke up, filled with guilt and a hangover, Ahuja offered her a packet of yellow powder to cure the hangover. This cleared her mind, and she went home. Despite the guilt and a resolve never to repeat the experience, she succumbed the moment he called a few days later. She fell under his spell, like a “woman possessed.” She went to his house, where, “once more, he satisfied his lust and I meekly submitted.” This occurred several times. Mrs. X could not understand why she could not resist him, until a South Indian gentleman told her about a mysterious love potion commonly used in his part of the country. Apparently, this potion’s magical effect lasted only when the
object of love was present; it became dormant when the person was away. This explained to Mrs. X her mood swings. Armed with this precious knowledge, she broke up with Ahuja. “Something tells me,” she told Nanavati, “that what happened to me happened to your wife too.” She implored him to inquire if such a thing happened to Sylvia before judging her. After all, the culprit was not a charming seducer but a love potion–dispensing villain who preyed deviously on unsuspecting married women to satisfy his lust.

Not content with playing the morality card, Blitz also tugged at the heartstrings. It published a story about “the agony of the family.” Nanavati’s eldest son, Feroze, had become the butt of cruel jokes in school. His six-year-old daughter, Tannaj, and three-year-old Jimmy had to be withdrawn from school. Nanavati was forced to sell his car, refrigerator, camera, and Sylvia’s sewing machine and jewelry to pay for his legal costs.

By this time, Blitz had dropped all pretense of only reporting the story. The tabloid had openly become a protagonist in the legal, political, and moral theater it had helped to stage. It appealed to readers to sign and mail its draft letter of support to the governor. It exhorted them to attend a public meeting in Nanavati’s support. The weekly triumphantly reported that people responded enthusiastically. The hall was packed with thirty-five hundred people, and five thousand waited outside, jostling to get in. But plans for rousing speeches had to be put off. Karanjia explained to the expectant crowd that the government had advised him to adjourn the meeting because the matter was sub judice. Then he pointed to Commander Nanavati’s portrait and thundered, “The struggle will continue.” Accompanying the jubilant report on the meeting was a dark front-page story by Karanjia, alleging that certain political forces had manufactured the controversy over the governor’s action in their plot against Prime Minister Nehru and Defense Minister Krishna Menon. Nanavati was a mere pawn in their game. Doing their bidding was “an insignificant Bombay weekly edited by a Parsi stooge.” The poison pen was aimed at his
archrival D. F. Karaka, against whom Karanjia had fought and won a defamation suit in 1952. Karaka’s endorsement of Nanavati’s conviction provided Karanjia with an irresistible opportunity to strike once again at his Parsi foe.

Meanwhile, the High Court upheld the governor’s order as constitutional but regretted his use of extraordinary powers. It worried that the suspension of Nanavati’s sentence would convey the impression of special treatment for a particular person. Clearly, the court was unhappy. But not *Blitz*. It celebrated the decision with the headline “vox populi… vox dei! Full Bench Upholds Governor’s Order.” Accompanying the story was a photograph of Karanjia and Sanghvi, both smartly dressed in suits, presenting two petitions: one with a “wide and cosmopolitan range” of fifty thousand signatures, and the second signed by a group of Sindhis in Bombay. It also published a spoof piece on the deliberations of a fictitious club determined to combat the menace of Nanavatism. The members of the club were moneybags and “Chupo Rustoms” (Judas-like men) who had gathered to denounce the violations of their fundamental right to prey on army and navy wives.

The celebration proved short-lived. The Supreme Court used Nanavati’s special leave to appeal his conviction petition to deliberate on the constitutionality of the governor’s order. The legal drama took a twist when Attorney General M. C. Setalvad and Solicitor General C. K. Daphtary excused themselves from defending the governor’s order. The explanation was that they were members of the Supreme Court Bar Association, which had criticized the governor’s order. In their absence, H. M. Seervai, the advocate general of Maharashtra, rose to defend the governor’s order. For several weeks, the court heard opposing arguments on the order in relation to the principle of the separation of powers between the executive and the judiciary. Finally, the Supreme Court ruled on September 5: While the constitution gave the governor the power to suspend sentence, it also empowered the court to enforce its rules. In this situation,
a “harmonious” construction of the respective constitutional powers of the executive and the judiciary required that Nanavati surrender before his petition of special appeal against his conviction by the High Court could be heard. The court had averted a clash with the executive while protecting its domain.

On September 8 a deflated Blitz published a photo story capturing Nanavati’s journey to jail. The newspaper’s spirit was down, but not its instinct for theater. Nanavati, dressed in a suit, was shown leaving naval custody in a car, a large crowd lining the motorcade. According to the story, a “cool, calm, but sad-faced” Nanavati bade farewell to Commander Samuel, kissed a sobbing Sylvia good-bye, and took a seat in the car that drove him in the afternoon to Arthur Road Prison. There, a huge crowd stood waiting for him. Amid cries of “Nanavati Zindabad!” (Long live Nanavati) and flashing camera bulbs, the “tall, handsome, cool” Commander Nanavati came out of the car, “determined to face his destiny.” After a fleeting look at the formidable jail, he bent gracefully to enter the tiny wooden door and disappeared from view. A momentary silence hung in the air. Then, mayhem, as the crowd dashed toward the door, shouting “Nanavati Zindabad! Nanavati Zindabad!”

The Supreme Court commenced its consideration of Nanavati’s appeal on October 9. The murder case had now escalated into a national legal spectacle. Back onstage were star jurists. Once again, long lines formed outside the courtroom. G. S. Pathak, an eminent lawyer who later served as India’s vice president, led the defense team. M. C. Setalvad, the attorney general, represented the government. Reiterating the theory of an accidental shooting, Pathak asserted the matter concerned not law but fact, which only the jury could decide. The High Court, he argued, was wrong to overrule the jury and to try the case de novo. Setalvad defended the High Court’s decision to overrule the jury and its finding of Nanavati’s guilt. While the legal battle went on for several weeks in the Supreme Court, Blitz ran a tireless campaign. Week after week, it splashed “the Case of the Eternal
Triangle” on its front page, illustrated with photographs of the three protagonists.

On Friday, November 24, the Supreme Court delivered its judgment: Nanavati was guilty. In a unanimous judgment, the four-member Supreme Court bench upheld the right of the High Court to overrule the jury decision and consider the evidence afresh. The murder was deliberate and calculated.50 *Blitz* responded to the decision with a front page emblazoned with an eye-catching headline, “MERCY FOR NANAVATI! An Appeal to the President for Pardon.”51 In the lead article, Karanjia was careful not to challenge the Supreme Court’s confirmation of Nanavati’s conviction. But he cited mitigating circumstances to plead for a pardon. Nanavati was a brilliant and patriotic naval officer; his only crime was that he had avenged his honor. Articles by its legal experts echoed the editor’s argument. It was a Grecian tragedy, involving the destruction of the life of an honest officer by a notoriously “gay Lothario.”52 Ahuja’s conduct represented an invasion of “unprotected homes” by the rich. The defense had bungled the case, it argued, by offering the accidental-shooting theory. This plea, according to the tabloid, denied the psychological shock underlying Nanavati’s action and had lowered the brave officer in public esteem.

Invoking all these moral and patriotic reasons, *Blitz* launched a mass petition campaign for mercy. To buttress the grounds for mercy, it consolidated the story line that its coverage had developed over two and half years. This was presented in a series that it published over several weeks, comprehensively recapitulating the chain of events leading up to the murder and conviction.53 With photographs and illustrations—now ever more creative—this series once again presented the case as a story of the tragic unraveling of a patriotic naval officer’s life. It described Nanavati’s illustrious career; the romance with the “beautiful, blue-eyed, brunette” Sylvia in England; the happy family life with three children; the Garden of Eden disturbed by the snake Ahuja; the news of the shocking betrayal and
The murder; and the two and half years’ legal ordeal ending in a fourteen-year sentence. This series and the pardon campaign capped the tabloid’s successful effort to transform a quotidian urban episode into a national legal and moral spectacle.

SEX, LAW, TABLOID, AND THE CITY

The Nanavati case’s life as a media event is a quintessentially modern story of the entanglement of the city, mass culture, and law in a single circuit. But it is a story located at a particular juncture in the cultural modernity of Bombay. There was something very specific
about the city that the case brought into view. So too were the modes of the case’s circulation in mass culture and the issues of the law, society, and politics it raised.

The sensational media coverage brought to the surface the elite milieu of the late-colonial and early-postcolonial city, a milieu rooted in the colonial experience. Here, English was the mode of communication. An anglicized and colonial lifestyle was utterly normal. It is the Bombay evoked in Salman Rushdie’s fictionalized story of his childhood in the city. It is also the city of the golden fifties, which are nostalgically remembered today. Daily life in this world included visits to the trusty department stores on Hornby Road and Mahatma Gandhi Road—Evans and Fraser, Whiteway Laidlaw, and the Army and Navy Store. The hair salon Fucile and cafés and confectionaries—Cornaglia, Mongini, Comba, Bertorellis, and Bombellis—were familiar spots.54 Clubs and dinner parties, bearers and servants, were fixtures of elite life. Going to an afternoon show of Tom’s Thumb at the Art Deco Metro Theatre was not out of the ordinary. The exclusive enclaves of Cuffe Parade and Malabar Hill, the locus of the drama of adultery and murder, were well known in the elite geography of the city. Ahuja and Sylvia’s affair, the love letters, and the details of the daily lives of the main protagonists did not appear exceptional in this setting.

It is this elite city that Blitz presented on its pages. Its relentless attention to the story was remarkable, given that this was a period of very important political developments. The Bombay State was divided into the linguistic provinces of Gujarat and Maharashtra in 1960. The border dispute between India and China was heating up at this time, and Blitz covered these developments as well, with front-page headlines and special features. Blitz also published the usual stories on political and financial malfeasance. But the Nanavati case was Blitz’s mission. It turned what could have been a tawdry revenge killing in Bombay’s upper-class social circuit into something more. It enlisted patriarchal and nationalist senti-
ments to forge populist support for Nanavati. In its framing of the story, the rich did not just oppress the poor but threatened the very moral fiber of the nation, which *Blitz* identified with the armed services. Thus, a routine upper-class drama of sex and murder became a spectacle of patriarchal honor and law in the modern, cosmopolitan city. If Nanavati was guilty of anything, it was of honor killing. Ahuja got what he deserved.

*Blitz* was not alone in prominently covering the case, but it alone was loud and partisan, in contrast to the sober and impartial dailies such as the *Times of India*. The bourgeois public sphere may well be an arena for speaking truth to power, but the speech had to be colorful, vivid, and visual. It confronted the elite discourse of cold reason with a populist politics expressed in the culture of sensations and emotions. Thus, it played the Nanavati case with classic tabloid techniques—screaming headlines, exciting stories, rumors, photographic scoops, and graphic illustrations. Reporting the case as a big-city scandal, it claimed to unearth the moral and political versions that lurked under the surface of the city’s elite life. Glossing over the fact that Nanavati was a member of this elite and had received special treatment since the time he walked into Lobo’s office, Karanjia cast him as a hero of the “people,” someone who stood for patriarchal and patriotic values. Drawing on its self-representation as a radical paper, *Blitz* pointed fingers at the right-wing forces allegedly determined to use the case to embarrass Nehru. Accounts of cheering crowds and petition campaigns for Nanavati were used to construct a “people” ranged on the naval officer’s side.

Everyone appeared to have played along in a public drama that was largely stage-managed by *Blitz*. Nanavati was superb in his role as a patriotic naval officer and a devoted husband and father. Sylvia came across as a duly repentant wife who had strayed temporarily. Ahuja’s image as a villainous playboy hung over the case, with the replica of his skull in the courtroom—according to *Blitz*—“grinning
sinisterly” at the proceedings. Star attorneys dressed in their court uniform uttered high-sounding dialogues on law, evidence, and the constitution. The pronouncements of the judges from their bench cast an aura of order. The Gothic Revival buildings of the Sessions and High Courts in Bombay, and the imperial Indo-Saracenic architecture of the Supreme Court in Delhi, provided weighty authority to the spectacle in which the law strained to assert its supremacy over society. The teeming crowds shouting “Nanavati Zindabad” and college girls swooning at the sight of the commander also played their part in this riveting public theater.

Karanjia mobilized mass culture to influence the legal theater. Against the “people” whom the state claimed to embody in bringing the case against Nanavati, *Blitz* assembled an alternative collective body. On one side was the abstract citizen of the law; on the other side were flesh-and-blood “people.” In the confrontation of these rival conceptions of the “people,” patriarchal and patriotic values asserted their superiority over the interests of law and order. This assertion appeared momentarily successful when the jury gave a not guilty verdict. Although subsequent court decisions went against Nanavati, *Blitz* raised the stakes by its persistent orchestration of the public opinion. Under the glare of the media, the case became a spectacle of the law’s capacity to resolve social conflicts. The law offered the premise of “sudden provocation” to justify the unlawful act of murder as a crime of passion.55 Popular sentiment, summoned by *Blitz*, also goaded the courts in this direction by portraying the murder as an honor killing. Ironically, Karanjia’s public campaign to influence the legal process helped the judicial system to assert itself emphatically in the theater of mass culture.

But it was a Pyrrhic victory. Commander Nanavati enjoyed powerful support. The entire naval hierarchy, including the navy chief, was in his corner. Governor Sri Prakasa and Prime Minister Nehru had already intervened on his behalf. The government had provided
funds for his legal defense. After his conviction, Sylvia petitioned the governor, imploring him to pardon her husband, who was paying the price for her “stupid infatuation and selfishness.” Nanavati's parents and his son Feroze also submitted mercy petitions. Spearheaded by Karanjia, Blitz launched its mass petition for pardon.

The liberal order buckled under the populist pressure mounted in favor of the powerful. But the government feared antagonizing the Sindhi community. A behind-the-scenes intrigue developed. Sylvia and Rajni Patel, Nanavati's lawyer, who was an influential power broker, visited Ram Jethmalani, a prominent Sindhi lawyer who had represented Mamie Ahuja. Patel offered a deal. The government was prepared to pardon Bhai Partap, a well-known Sindhi businessman convicted for financial fraud. The condition was that Jethmalani secure the concurrence of the Sindhi community for Nanavati's pardon. This also meant obtaining Mamie's consent. The deal was struck. Ahuja's sister gave it in writing that she had no objection to Nanavati's release from prison. With the communal calculus settled, Viyalakshmi Pandit, Nehru's sister and Maharashtra's governor, pardoned both simultaneously.

On March 17, 1964, Nanavati was released from Sundown, the small bungalow in Lonavla where he had lived for six months on a month-to-month parole. He had spent less than three years in prison. A few years later, he left for Canada with Sylvia and the children, never to return or be heard from again. He passed away in 2003.

As for Karanjia, he delighted in Nanavati's release and continued to edit Blitz with his characteristic aplomb for the next several decades. But long before the tabloid ceased publication in 1998 and his death in 2008, Blitz's Bombay had changed. The elitist late-colonial and early-postcolonial urban milieu and the legal theater that it had brought into prominence never again achieved such spectacular cultural influence. It was the mythic Bombay's last
hurrah, facilitated by Karanjia, also a member of the classic cosmopolitan set.

Ironically, it was also Karanjia and his Blitz that inaugurated the politics of the “people” that was to hammer the nail in the coffin of the city’s mythic openness and sophistication. The stage was set for Bal Thackeray and his Shiv Sena.