

How Pune went from retirement town to NRI haven

The city's sharpest men tell us what makes the city so unique

310    

Dave Besseling

Oct 24, 2016



Whether it's the princes of Jaipur, the petrolheads of Madras, the bankers of Bombay – many of India's cities are known for the distinct characteristics of their denizens. Not Pune. A manufacturing hub, a rising IT centre, ground zero for Osho devotees, a Mumbai satellite – there is no one way to pigeonhole the place. But to try and absorb at least a few vibes from the second most successful “pensioner's paradise” in the Deccan, we hit up the four men who could get us in the know. Sagar Chordia's construction company, Panchshil, is mostly responsible for the city's rising edifices; Umeed Kothavala heads one of the more notable IT firms this side of Silicon Valley; as MD of Kinetic World, Ajinkya Firodia makes sure Pune's newly minted bikers have access to the most exclusive motorcycles; and Khodu Irani, whether at High Spirits Café or Olive, gives everyone a place to celebrate Pune's coming of age in the New India.

Every time I hear about Pune, I hear something different. How would you describe this city to someone who's come for the first time?

Chordia: It's been changing a lot these past 15 years. Pune's total size is 285sqkm, five times bigger than Mumbai. We have 15 international schools, with 200,000 people graduating every year. And 72 per cent of our population is very young, below 28.

Irani: A far cry from Pune being known as a pensioner's paradise.

Firodia: In terms of industry, there's auto, and now there's IT, which is huge.

That was a surprise for me. When I hear IT, I think Bengaluru, and now Hyderabad.

Kothavala: You get a lot of diversity here. The largest German population in India is in Pune – 4,000 Germans. There are 1,000 Koreans in Pune.

Chordia: In 2011, Pune's exports brought in Rs 30,000 crores. In 2015, it was Rs 63,000 crores. The city's growing at 27 per cent per annum, and in banking, there's Deutsche Bank, HSBC, Barclay's, Citibank – banks with more than 50,000 people working for them.

Irani: And don't forget our Osho ashram. It all started here.

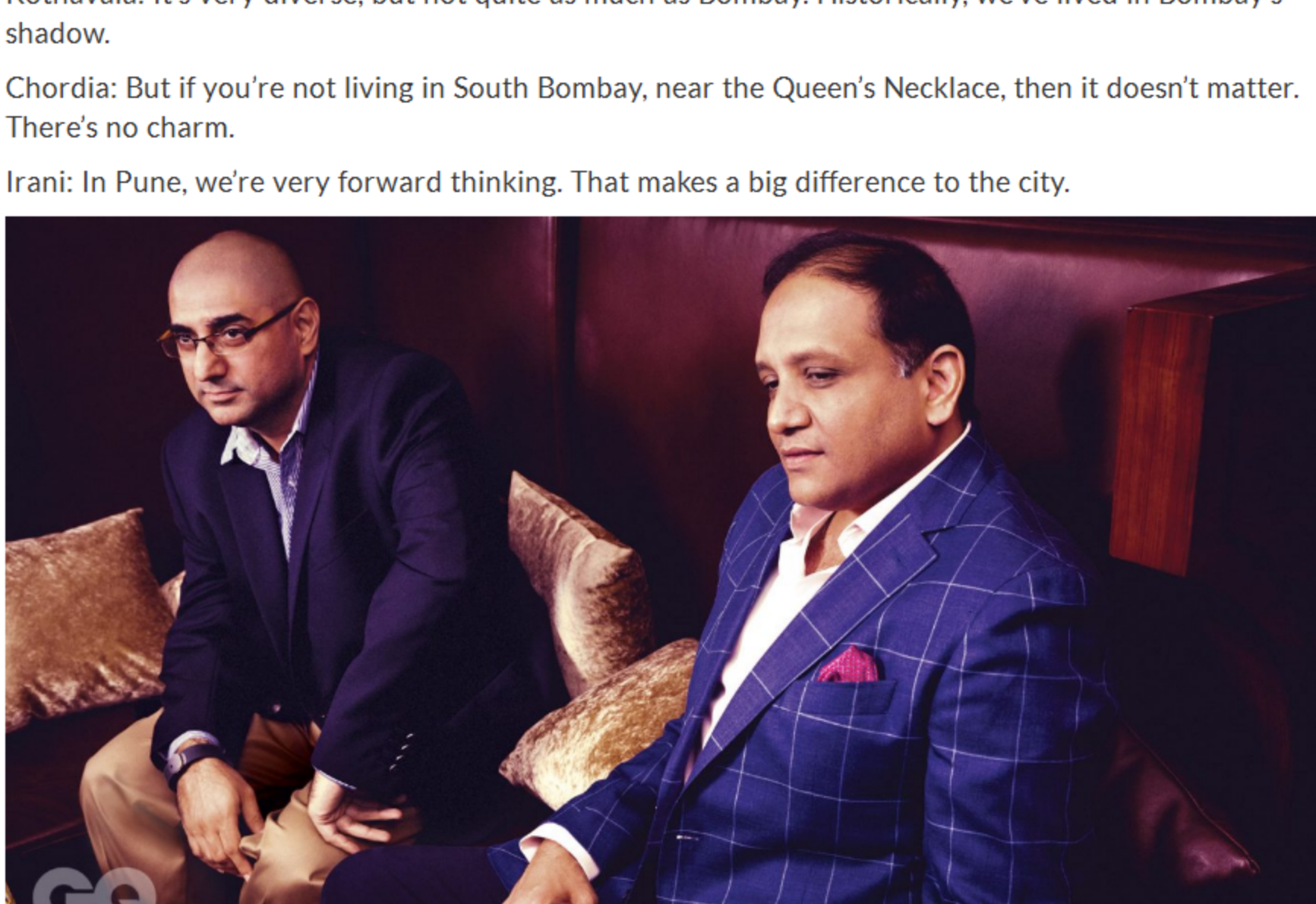
Firodia: When Osho was alive, 20,000 foreigners used to visit him. Lots of Japanese people, because Osho spoke a lot about Buddhism...

Irani: Yeah, I mean, the Japanese were the ones that stitched all of Osho's crazy outfits.

Kothavala: It's very diverse, but not quite as much as Bombay. Historically, we've lived in Bombay's shadow.

Chordia: But if you're not living in South Bombay, near the Queen's Necklace, then it doesn't matter. There's no charm.

Irani: In Pune, we're very forward thinking. That makes a big difference to the city.



I get that impression. Do you guys get combative about status?

Chordia: That's the thing about Pune. If you have to make that effort to compete, then you've already lost.

Kothavala: We are happy where we are.

Firodia: What happens when a Bombay guy comes is this: He meets you for the first time, he gets all competitive, we relax, and by the end of it, they're like us.

So Pune's got the good things of Mumbai without the ostentation and the bullshit? [Laughs] OK OK. What do you like least about Pune? I mean, let's bitch for a bit.

Kothavala: Traffic.

Irani: That's all this city is. But that's not exclusive to **Pune**.

Chordia: The problem is with the government – they don't think about the future. They resolve problems for today.

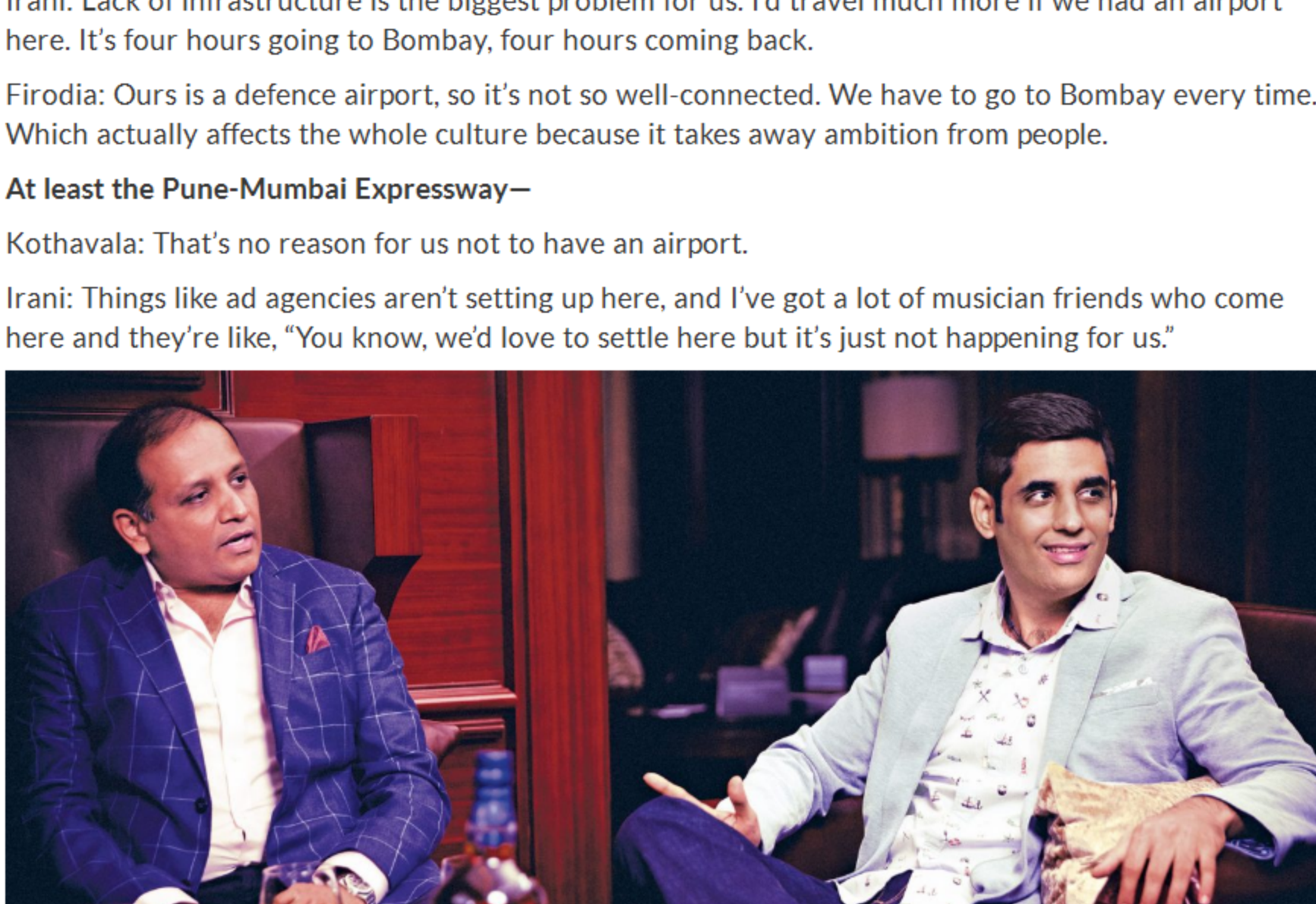
Irani: Lack of infrastructure is the biggest problem for us. I'd travel much more if we had an airport here. It's four hours going to Bombay, four hours coming back.

Firodia: Ours is a defence airport, so it's not so well-connected. We have to go to Bombay every time. Which actually affects the whole culture because it takes away ambition from people.

At least the Pune-Mumbai Expressway—

Kothavala: That's no reason for us not to have an airport.

Irani: Things like ad agencies aren't setting up here, and I've got a lot of musician friends who come here and they're like, “You know, we'd love to settle here but it's just not happening for us.”



Is it a case of having a brain drain to Mumbai?

Kothavala: There's actually a huge influx, in fact, into Pune. A lot of people end up coming here to get jobs. This is the first time we're seeing a generation of Indians who are relatively mobile about getting out of their home cities or states.

Firodia: Most of the NRIs, when they come back they end up first in Bengaluru, and second, Pune – and Pune is connected to Bombay. That makes a big difference.

Irani: Plus we're very inclusive. You tend to make new friends easily here. And talking about international students, we've got Middle Eastern students, and half of Palestine was here at one point. I'm not exaggerating.

Kothavala: Yeah, and during the Iran-Iraq war, every Iranian student was here.

Firodia: We had a huge Jewish community at one point of time, an African community.

Chordia: Wadia, Symbiosis and Spicer were the first three, I think. Pune University was called “the Oxford of the East”.

Firodia: And now, 50 per cent of the population is below 25.

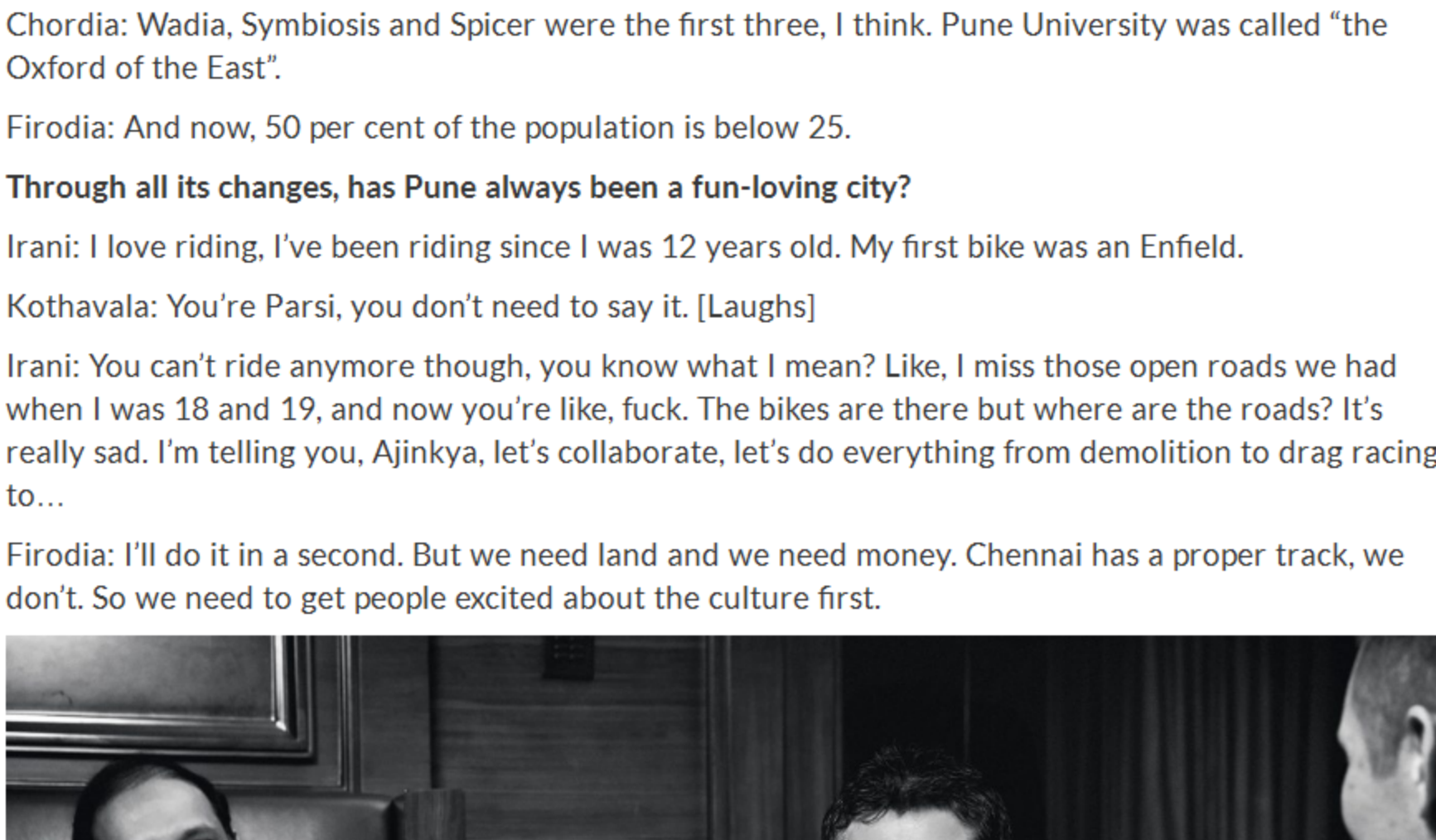
Through all its changes, has Pune always been a fun-loving city?

Irani: I love riding, I've been riding since I was 12 years old. My first bike was an Enfield.

Kothavala: You're Parsi, you don't need to say it. [Laughs]

Irani: You can't ride anymore though, you know what I mean? Like, I miss those open roads we had when I was 18 and 19, and now you're like, fuck. The bikes are there but where are the roads? It's really sad. I'm telling you, Ajinkya, let's collaborate, let's do everything from demolition to drag racing to...

Firodia: I'll do it in a second. But we need land and we need money. Chennai has a proper track, we don't. So we need to get people excited about the culture first.



But there's a bit of a music scene happening right now with the music scene here.

Irani: You know, the first proper psy party ever happened at Pyramids, a two-day party...

I would have thought the first psy party would have been in Goa.

Irani: It all started in '89 and shut down here in '94. But I still remember when Osho died, something like 500 bottles of champagne were sold that night.

He may have been a guru, but he wasn't exactly an abstemious mendicant.

Kothavala: As Osho always said, you're supposed to enjoy death.

Irani: So every year on his death anniversary for the first three years we did this carnival, Rio de Janeiro-style, and when I mean Rio de Janeiro style, I mean people were wearing those kinds of costumes...

With Osho sunglasses?

Irani: Trust me, it was crazy. I was 14 or so at that point, and to see these women dress in that manner and parade down the road... Osho's the one name that comes to mind when people who haven't been here think of Pune.

Is that frustrating for you guys?

Chordia: No. He's actually made the culture nice, because Koregaon Park is beautiful, and they have the best places to eat.

Location: Bar 101/JW Marriott, Pune