



7 PUBLIC OPEN SPACES AND GROWTH: BOMBAY / MUMBAI

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Bombay (Mumbai) is a mosaic of several kinds of people living next door to one another: a pure-bred local and an immigrant from a neighboring state or even country. Different cultures sharing the same space, the same neighborhood, the same city. Each culture whether local or foreign bringing its own way of life and lifestyle to the neighborhood. A neighborhood becomes a piece in the mosaic of culture, which becomes Bombay.

Its story began several centuries ago with the arrival of the fisherfolk, the Kolis who are believed to be of Dravidian origin. A collection of settlements on the seven islands was called Mumbai after the Goddess Mumbadevi they worshipped. As in any other Indian settlement, the temple of Mumbadevi became the focus for their village as a symbol of their faith at the same time giving identity to their remote settlement. Also, on the islands of Salsatte were the cave temples of the Buddhist monks at Kanheri. The later arrival of King Bimbadev of the Mauryan dynasty at Mahim was significant because he built a temple to Goddess Prabhadevi here. He also created orchards along his palace, gardens for him to enjoy. The building of the temples at the village of Walkeshwar, and at Mahalakshmi came soon after which became the centers for their locales. Fairs and weddings were accommodated in their courtyards or spilt out onto the surrounding streets. Tanks in the courtyard served as cleansing baths to pious pilgrims. Temples also became places for sermons and religious "theater". They were public places without (almost) any restriction, shared places for the community.

The concept of open space in India originated in such settings, from the motif of a shared village space. Temples, tanks, riverbanks, "the village tree" became such a place. Streets became processional paths. The village-square accommodated the weekly market, and bathing banks along the river became secret rendezvous points at night and the temple courtyard became fairgrounds. Their importance stemmed from their adaptability to varied functions, adjusting to varied celebrations, suiting varied purposes.

Latterday arrivals of Moughal rulers and Parsee settlers brought with them mosques and fire temples. Being from different cultures, these places almost barred the "sharing" of this space with other communities, each thus becoming an isolated space within its own setting.

The European influence began with the Portuguese in 1517. Their settlement itself was separated from the "natives" when they fortified their town and created a large swath of open land for clear firing, the Esplanade. Inside their secluded town, a village green was created. The "Green" was a large circular ground that was not only used for military practice, but hosted

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the military bands in the evening. The Esplanade became popular with the arrival of the British in 1673 when promenading came to the fore. Children played here and summer camps were constructed on its grounds, being close to the ocean, bringing comfort from the hot humid air of the island. The military practiced here sometimes, but later it was moved over to the cantonment area of Colaba. The Green was now used as a cotton trading market. Both the Green and the Esplanade were popular amongst the Europeans, and were also dominated by them. Few natives ventured here except during annual fairs.

European residences were also moving out of the confines of the Fort, towards Colaba, and the hills around Malabar Hill and Parel. Estates with romantic gardens became popular. The Governors' house at Parel is an example of one such place. Botanical gardens and cemeteries were combined to create "scenic" resting places. Thus, the European notion of open space—which was a garden, a promenade or an activity place, as recognized by J. C. Loudon in the 19th century—came to the fore here.

By the 17th century, more and more European residences 'moved' with summer houses to cooler places like Malabar hill and Parel, and some in Colaba. They retained some residence in the central Fort area for the rest of the year. This movement literally formed connections and as land exclamation became common by the 19th century, these settlements began to physically connect. Some of these places originally housed only natives, but now there was a blend of native and non-native in these areas.

Nevertheless, as a result of the extension of the physical limits of the city, some of the native public spaces were juxtaposed with non-native public areas. This was clearly evident in the latter half of the 19th century at Walkeshwar on Malabar Hill where European residences sat side by side with the Walkeshwar temple and its Banganga tank, and the Mahalakshmi temple on the northern slope of the hill. This place became more diverse still with the development of the Malabar Hill gardens atop the water reservoir built at the end of the 19th century here and the development and beautification of the Chowpatty beach at the base of the Walkeshwar temple. The Victoria gardens developed as a botanical and zoological garden set on Mount Estate in the European suburb of Byculla, but the area was quickly taken over as a native settlement too.

The city soon emerged and a "City Improvement Trust" was set up. Roads were laid out and streets lit, buildings built with strict regulations and the city grew in all dimensions. The Port was becoming an important part of the city economy and land was developed for its use. The Esplanade was divided due to the addition of 4 roads through it, making thus 4 maidans, the Oval, the Azad, the Cross and the Cooperage grounds. With the new economy, the Green was shrunken to accommodate a smaller Elphinstone Circle, surrounded by a strong business core.

The first few decades of the 20th century brought more

development to Bombay. New suburbs, being Mahim and Dadar, were envisioned. Some wooded marshes were reclaimed for development. Shivaji park, a large "maidan" (quad-like open ground) similar to the Oval and Azad maidan at Fort was developed. Five Gardens at Dadar was added to the suburban development scheme which set guidelines for roads, buildings, neighborhood parks etc. Beachsides like Chowpatty, Marine Drive, and Apollo Bunder were developed to create promenades.

By the mid-20th century, until India's Independence in 1947, all the public places that were truly public came from European motifs. Some European places however like golf courses, yacht clubs, and such were restrictive for a considerable period of time, until the natives forced their way in using their financial status.

With Independence, there remained no "natives v/s non-natives". There were only Indians. Independence, however, found no expression in its public places. With more and more people adjusting to the previously considered "elite" European way of life, golf courses and clubs became popular. The "new elite" as they rose above the "common", focused on the "elitist" ways within "refined" spaces. This created a distinction between the common and the ex-common citizens who created more spaces for their kind. Areas that were sparsely populated became dense and crowded and recreational spaces were concentrated collectively into those like stadia, swimming pools and golf course or a cricket club and its grounds. Single level residences were replaced by tiny and cramped cubicles to house the many that poured in everyday. Streets became narrower, courtyards were lost, tanks and wells filled in, land cleared and land made for new settlements.

However democratic one might declare the country, few of these public open spaces are truly democratic. Annual dues and memberships keep these places from being truly public in nature. A demand for a new public and private, space and life arose and the common did not remain the common anymore.

What remains today in the old island are three types of public places remnants from European times—the beaches and promenades, the gardens and the maidans. Despite the several centuries of foreign influence, these places have been adapted to the Indian way of life. The beaches and promenades go back to being the riverbanks and the fair grounds in the evening hours. They become jogging tracts for health conscious citizens in the morning hours. They become places to interact with the society actively and passively. The maidans also become fairgrounds, theatrical stages, wedding grounds, gathering arenas for political parties and social activists or even stadia for one day inter-school cricket or soccer matches, or the padav or camp ground of the Indian village. The temples have however given up their courtyards to accommodate new house and have passed on some of its functions to other places. The gardens for most part yet remain the "formal" space—sometimes Mughal, sometimes European in nature, still struggling to be accommodated into the Indian life and are

often seen to be declining in their aesthetic appeal.

Traditionally, only about 20% of an Indian village or settlement was built up and thus 80% left open. Today Bombay has inverted this ratio by having about 69% area as built-up space and only 5% open space, the rest taken over by transportation networks. So the question is, what do we really need in Bombay? Less development, yes, of course! But, are the existing open spaces truly sufficient to accommodate the city and its needs? How appropriate is it that place like jogging parks, stadia, race courses, golf courses or even the National park that allows only limited access, be included in the overall category of public places, are they truly public in nature? Or are they included to add the numbers? The development of new parks in new spaces is close to impossible, so is it not time that existing places are opened up to accommodate all needs? It is true that some visions aim optimistically towards a "modern" lifestyle. But their shortsightedness comes forth with ill-designed parks, underestimated uses and insufficient capacity. With an advancing economy and lifestyle, are we able to come up with ideas to reflect our own sensitivity to our needs or do new designs reflect a disjointed overlay of Westernized concepts on Indian needs?

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