

Of Mangroves and Leopards

The Case of Recent Developments in Mumbai's Environmental Movement

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The paper describes three cases in the city of Mumbai, tracing the development of a new environmental consciousness in recent years and locates it in the changing landscapes of the new economy. It aims to foreground one of the most important characteristics of this consciousness, that of appropriation of the city's resources.

Case 1 The New Environmental Consciousness

A unique incident occurred in Mumbai this year. Suddenly during late June and early July for over a period of one and half weeks, more than a dozen leopards from the national park of Mumbai waged an organised attack on the poor tax paying citizens who decided to take their dogs for an early morning walk. Immediately the environmentalists came into the limelight, discussing the rights of leopards on the front pages of national newspapers and television talk shows. It was yet another time in recent years where the environment was considered under severe threat by rapid urbanisation.

Social Workers¹ working with tribal settlements in Mumbai, however confirm that the lives of the tribal population have always been under severe threat from wildlife. However, it is only now that our urban sensitivity seems to respond to such incidences. And it is only now that an Environmental Consciousness seems to have taken such an immense form that it is storming urban areas for the protection and conservation of the green and the brown; this movement being fiercely driven by coalitions of industrialists, professionals and activists

The sudden uprising in this consciousness requires a thorough investigation as the green and the brown have always undergone rapid change throughout the city's histories – either through the land reclamations during the 17th and the 18th century, or the conversion of the paddy fields to industrial lands in the 19th and the 20th century, or even the new reclamations for housing and commercial colonies in the late 20th century². It is only now, however, that such an environmental consciousness has become so powerful that we have started discussing flamingos and mangroves in our daily talks. I propose to locate this consciousness in the changing economic landscape of recent years.

After a high decentralisation in the ownership of the means of production, multinationals no longer seem to compete for making production cheaper. This competition has shifted to lower

levels of sub-contractors and labourers. However, the multinationals now compete in the selling of the goods. Aggressive attempts in reaching the markets have forced innovations in the selling sphere. Schemes employing housewives as agents, have become popular amongst households in the urban area. The competition for selling these commodities on the other hand has caused consumption patterns to change. Severe marketing strategies have forced the importance of “quality” in the commodity. Round the clock service call centres for electronic goods, flexible stalks for toothbrushes, cameras integrated with mobile phones etc. are all representative of this “quality” drive. Innovation seems to have reoriented itself from saving energy to providing of such high-energy consumer goods. This drive for “quality” has created a type of consumerism that demands specialised services. It is easy to find a housekeeping consultant, a computer maintenance agency, an interior consultant etc. in the city. The demand has moreover created a new type of value for commodities generating and manipulating an urban consciousness that searches for environmental sustainability, appropriate aesthetics and a stress free comfortable life. Shops selling organic goods, eco-friendly products, health food consultants, beauty parlours, highly equipped gymnasiums, advertisements for health equipments, furniture and fashion boutiques etc have become a part of the contemporary memory. The first contention of this paper is that the new environmental consciousness is born and nurtured in the landscapes of the new economy. The paper argues that the new consciousness for environment has been a cause for creating highly reductionist positions like fighting for the rights of leopards and saving the mangroves in the city. It is increasingly becoming clear that this kind of consciousness for the green eco-living is leveraged from the concepts of cleanliness, good living, crime free environment, health food etc. that are primarily marketing techniques of the global economy.

This new environmental consciousness is theorised by Amita Bhavisar³ as bourgeois environmentalism – To quote from Bhavisar:

“The concern with an ordered environment, that is safe, hygienic, unpolluted, green and uncongested, is in some ways an extension of the concern about bodily well-being. Personal health, physical and mental, is linked to ‘quality of life’ and the affluent are more able to address their anxieties about crime, disease and other stressful urban characteristics. Parks for morning walkers, temples and *ashrams* where they can seek spiritual succour, the ‘green’ magic bullet of ‘plant more trees’ are ingredients in imagining cities in ways that exclude basic concerns of shelter, sanitation, water and transport as they affect the lives of the working class...

“... For the bourgeois environmentalist, the ugliness of production must be removed from the city. Smokestack industries, effluent-producing manufacturing units and other aesthetically unpleasant sites that make the city a place of work for millions, should be discreetly tucked away out of sight, polluting some remote rural wasteland. So must workers who labour in these industries be banished out of sight. Even people whose services are indispensable for the affluent to live comfortable lives – domestic workers, vendors and sundry service providers, should live where their homes do not offend the eyes, ears and noses of the well-to-do... For the bourgeois environmentalist, urban spaces should be reserved for white-collar production and commerce, and consumption activities... Commerce and leisure are fused together in the new shopping malls, amusement parks, cineplexes and other developments sprouting across the city, frequently on land vacated through slum demolitions. That this ordered landscape is underwritten by an ugly real estate

mafia with links to politicians and city authorities is another inconvenient fact that is conveniently forgotten...

“... Bourgeois environmentalism forces us to rethink the assumption that ecology and equity are always intertwined in the Indian case. The notion of the ‘environmentalism of the poor’ has been powerful because it does describe the ideology of several social movements, but we need to remind ourselves that all environmental movements do not necessarily lead towards social justice. In fact, bourgeois environmentalism directly threatens the survival and other interests of the urban working class.”

Bhavisar’s allegations foreground an important issue of how this consciousness becomes a powerful instrument to allow processes promoting urban inequity and resource appropriations. Other kinds of activism for “protecting open spaces” against encroachments “in the public interest” also become excellent illustration for this allegation. It is with this allegation of Bhavisar that I launch my second case.

Case 2: An Instrument of Appropriation

The second case is of the three villages - Akloli, Vajreshwari and Ganeshpuri, which are located around 50 km from the municipal boundary of Mumbai⁴, but are included within the metropolitan region. Though the place is very well connected by a road network, the nearest urban agglomerations are around 30 km away where services like a large hospital or a fire brigade etc. could be accessed. The mobile phone network is also feeble with only an availability of the government service. The place however is famous for hot water springs and a series of temples built for local deities and saints. The temples of the Mother Goddess Vajreshwari, Saint Nityananda and a local deity, Bhimeshwara are located in the area. Several myths and legends propagated through word of mouth and through local publications construct the place as a highly powerful mythological site capable of healing difficult diseases. Moreover, geological surprises from the hilly volcanic terrain with all its water reservoirs and forest covers have added to the mythical notions associated with the area. This has rendered the area into a religious pilgrimage site, traditionally attracting the neighbouring tribal populations and more recently, even large numbers of urban inhabitants.

The area is environmentally significant because of the geological activities of the hot springs. Moreover, the adjoining forest area and the perennial Tansa River add to the environmental sensitivity. The State Government recognizes this environmentally sensitive, religious area to be of tourist importance and the Regional Plan of Mumbai demarcates the area as recreational and tourism zone. The present population of the three villages is just above ten thousand people with substantial amount of population (about 50%) classified under scheduled tribes and castes.

More than one third the private property is owned by the large temple trusts in the area⁵. The surprising fact however, is that this component is rising very sharply. In other words, in recent years, the land owned by temple trusts is increasing and land owned by the village community is decreasing. We also find that the newly acquired land is immediately fenced and a Non-Agricultural Certificate is obtained for such lands. Within these lands, several luxurious

leisure based tourism centers like nature parks; meditation centres, hot spring spas, etc. are being developed. A type of “spiritual tourism” is sought with the customers being international tourists. The trusts show an aspiration of developing the precinct into a spirituality centre with the will, capacity and the resources to execute such an aspiration. The trustees of these trusts have become powerful members in the decision making process and are known to leverage their influence at all levels of the government⁶. Hence, when the government decided to spend some money on the development of the area, the most important problem that was articulated was that the spiritual atmosphere and sanctity of the place was under threat due to the haphazard construction activities undertaken by the village folk. One of the chief proposals was to relocate a main road within the village to outside the villages so that traffic would not disturb the pilgrims in the area. However, the village community resisted these plans of the government, arguing that the interests of the villagers were not considered in the planning process. The road was a lifeline to the settlements along it with the state transport passing through it. The relocation of this road would mean a complete cut off of these settlements from the public transport. Moreover, a survey by CRIT (Collective Research Initiatives Trust) indicated that the lands on both sides of this road was bought by one of the trusts and local rumours were that the trust wanted to make this as an internal road for non polluting electrical vehicles for the usage of the spiritual tourists.

Under pressures from local activists and villagers, the government was forced to appoint a neutral agency to advice it on the priority developments. CRIT was appointed for this project⁷. CRIT was able to articulate that for centuries, the place was being inhabited by locals for whom the hot springs and the volcanic mountains were a way of life. A religious pilgrimage place was developed with busy streets and dirty crowded open spaces. This was characteristic of several places that have been developed like this. Recent upsurges of orthodox Hinduism has brought new kinds of pilgrims from urban areas who have been pouring in money.

CRIT’s survey and the opinions of the stakeholders suggest a definitive shift in the economic base of the area from an agricultural system to a tourism based service industry with a local journalist from Vajreshwari claiming that about 70% of the village population is now involved in this tourism based service sector. Moreover meetings with the villagers also suggest their enthusiasm towards taking advantage of the presence of tourists in the area. The large recent increase in the number of “informal” facilities for tourists organized by the village community not only reinforces this shift, but also shows that there is a capacity to develop this sector further. There is also a trend towards converting agricultural lands into non-agricultural lands (amongst the trust owned properties), while the agricultural lands suffer from inadequate water availability for cultivation. Some of the shifts in the farming activity includes growing of flowers instead of rice.

CRIT’s investigation into the activities of the trusts ended with a discovery of a Masterplan developed by one of the trusts for the whole area. The trust had acquired a satellite photograph, (which is otherwise extremely difficult to acquire in Indian conditions) and developed this Masterplan through some consultants in Auroville (a spiritual place in the south east of India). The whole area was mapped through a geographical information system, with details of each plot regarding ownership, vegetation etc. Further information regarding

land already acquired by the trusts, and all land that would be possible to acquire easily was also indicated. The Masterplan suggested several relocations of existing villages and roads and clearing of not only the whole site, but also a much larger area outside the site for “spiritual development”. Several spas, recreational centres, meditation halls, local transport nodes, swimming pools, sauna etc. were planned elaborately. This Masterplan clearly showed the intentions and ideas of the trust. When CRIT spoke to the villagers, facts on forced eviction of villagers from their property by the trusts were also clear. And the whole plan was sold in the name of maintaining the environmental balance of the area that was otherwise under great threat by the activities of the villagers.

CRIT presented its report to the Collectorate in the presence of all stakeholders and put forth the point of resource appropriation in the name of environmental sustainability. The problem that CRIT focused on was on the unavailability of water to villagers. The access to water was limited to around 10 litres of water per day per person, and even that water was unfit for consumption as it was not treated. At the same time, the trust with spas and meditation centres had water in the showers and flushes. The priority projects that CRIT articulated was augmentation and redevelopment of the water supply system. CRIT further recommended that the development plan is a must for the region to regulate development of all forms so that the place becomes not only environmentally sustainable, but also economically viable and equitable.

The elections happened after the report was presented, and the steam died for any kind of immediate government spending. Meanwhile, CRIT has been able to discover that the trustees have managed to hire some teachers and convince a school of architecture to do a research on the environmental degradation and planning of the area. This research is been supported by the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority. To quote from some correspondence⁸ between a trustee and a school staff some parts of the research proposal developed by the school:

Dear Mr. XXX (*Trustee*),

After our meeting on 12 June 2004, we realized that in such a politically charged area the best option was to work through our Institute Research Cell and approach the MMRDA directly. So we had an appointment on Friday with the MMRDA Environment Improvement Society Secretary /Chairman and with the present MMRDA Chief Planner.

... I spoke to our Director informing him only about the MMRDA Env. Soc agreeing to back the project which my team is wanting to take up through the Research Cell. Now we will have to make a brief report for our Management also before we officially submit the proposal to the MMRDA. We have started putting together the information we have and in a weeks time we'll be ready to discuss this with you all.

We also will have to somehow get the support of the Collector, though ofcourse that is not the criteria for the MMRDA Env. Soc. Anyways I hope he responds positively to your note. May be the fact that the hot springs can die out if development is not ecologically planned might help.

Lets hope for the best.

Regards

XXXX

Teaching Staff, XXX (*Architectural School*)

RESEARCH PROPOSAL⁹

ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY OF THE GEOTHERMAL ZONE OF TANSA RIVER BASIN

...In a country, which reveres the philosophical and the spiritual, healing powers of water cannot be ignored. The importance of water in the life of an ordinary Indian cannot be emphasised enough. ...

Hot springs and geysers are often sources of the healing powers of water

... The hot springs in this region occur due to the existence of the geothermal zone, generally between folds of mountains and owe their origin to a geological fault... The hot springs also support a diversity of life from the microscopic bacteria, which are found in water to the plants growing in the wetlands and the forest in the surrounding region.

... The Tansa River Basin, which is unique in its ecosystem and close to the city, is soon finding itself under immense pressure of urbanisation due to the ever-expanding growth of Mumbai having reached almost its fringe areas.

... In most countries abroad however hot spring reservoirs have been classified as areas of recreation having scientific, educational and research value... Generally these areas have certain common legislations that emphasise the preservation and conservation of the ecology and the surrounding environment where direct contact of the users with the spring is discouraged... Instead separate areas in the form of spas; resorts have been introduced to prevent the degradation of these springs and of the lakes and rivers, which run through them. The surrounding regions of these springs are nature reserves where guided trips are undertaken. These areas are consciously kept away from the thrust of urbanisation but are not cordoned off so the local populace are as much a part of this area.

.... Thus its not just the hot springs which need to be demarcated as places of interest but the entire influence zone of the hot springs in the Tansa river basin needs to be identified. On the basis of the influence zone the intensity of activities, the density of built forms, infrastructure development etc. should be decided such that the ecology and environment is conserved.

The research proposal plays on the environmental consciousness, rearticulating it for the purpose of defining what kind of development should be allowed in the environmentally sensitive zones. They clearly establish how the academy aims at using the consciousness of the environment for a project of grave appropriations. I end this case with my second argument that the environment consciousness is an effective instrument to misappropriate resources. Here it is absolutely anti-people.

CASE 3

A Tactic To Protect Property

The third case is of the Vasai Virar sub region, which is located to the immediate north of Mumbai city and admeasures around 370 sq. km. The place is connected by a mass rapid transport corridor, thus making the place accessible to the city of Mumbai. Over the recent years, this place has seen a rise of housing colonies and townships that are affordable to the new middle class that is developing rapidly in the city. These housing townships have come up at various sites in the region: mostly along the railway corridor, but also deeper inside over marshy lands and agricultural lands, depending upon the availability and accessibility of the lands for the builder.

But the recent migrants are not the only people staying in the region. The place has been an important port for the larger region during ancient times. Traders' settlements that came up during such period have remained inhabited in the region even today. Moreover, the region is dotted with specialised work-based settlements like agricultural villages, fishing villages,

villages of toddy farmers and villages of saltpan workers. The region also has a large forest cover with numerous tribal villages who still engage in the hunting and gathering modes of production.

The proximity of the region to the city of Mumbai and the available accessibility has definitely pressurised the place towards an array of urbanisation that is highly dependent on the core city. The region is treated as a dormitory of the main city. Since legislations have been weak along with very high demands of land, a land mafia has developed in the region. It has been extremely powerful in manipulating all decision-making processes.

Since 1988, the government agencies have been attempting to make a development plan for the region. And since the same time, there has been severe criticism of the plan by an organised local community. The process of making the development plan oscillated between the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) and City and Industries Development Corporation (CIDCO) for around a decade until recently when a three-member committee was appointed by the state government to finalise the development plan for the region. This committee finally prepared a plan in 2001.

The plan made several proposals for the area that were highly objectionable to the local community as they thought that such proposals would not only encourage rampant development of the region by outsiders, but also strip the region of its local economy. The proposal included several large landuse changes, like demarcation of lands for urbanisation over mudflats, saltpan lands or marshlands, which are very important for several work environments in the agricultural sector. The plan further allowed development for tourist resorts in the forestlands and increased the amount of development allowed in other agricultural zones. The local community accused that these proposals very clearly indicated a bias towards providing opportunities for the builders and developer groups.

On the other hand, the plan revised the basic standards for amenities and utilities suggesting that private enterprises would undertake such activities. Moreover, the proposals for water supply and drainage were weak and without clear strategy for resource mobilisation. But more importantly, the development plan aimed at developing this place as a service backyard of the city. It proposed to shift all the slum dwellers of Mumbai and rehabilitate them in this region; it proposed creation of new dumping grounds in the region and shifting of the city's cattle sheds. There was no indication or remark on the status of the economy in the development plan.

The local community represented by the all-party coalition *Vasai Vikas Arakhada Nagari Kriti Samiti* approached CRIT to formulate a critique of the development plan and submit it as objections and suggestions to the state government. CRIT made an elaborate study of the field and the development plan and made the case that the plan opens up opportunities for the builders and developers and snatches away opportunities from the local population. When this case was presented, the representative of the state planning committee Mr. Hardikar remarked:

“The development plan creates new opportunities, since you people (CRIT) are NGOs, it is your responsibility to train people to take advantage of these opportunities. Why can't the tribal people organise themselves and build a tourist resort?”

The government was very clearly adamant and it was very clear when the state government finally passed the same development plan earlier this year with no major modifications. The elections fervour put a halt to the activities of the *Vasai Vikas Arakhada Nagari Kriti Samiti*, which is the representative of the local community. The movement is sure to receive a further setback with a film star as its MP and a land mafia don as its MLA.

CRIT decided to engage in the region with a completely new series of agendas: that of heritage, environment and sustainable settlements. Taking clues from the earlier environmental movements that articulated around the agenda of saving the city from land sharks and builder lobbies CRIT decided to use the same concepts that it vehemently opposed in the Akloli-Vajreshwari and Ganeshpuri project to protect the area. CRIT undertook some rapid surveys to make a case for the protection of heritage and environment and has been able to acquire support from the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority towards identifying such heritage and environmentally sensitive sites and further developing guidelines to protect them. CRIT hopes that this tactic would be able to protect some parts of the region for local benefit.

My third contention is that the environmental consciousness, is the only instrument that can be used for protection of resources from getting appropriated. This is because there is a market for such a consciousness. We have witnessed in Mumbai, how the heritage protection and conservation arguments have been able to succeed in mobilising people and secure political blessings for protecting several localities from rampant misappropriations. Similarly, the environment consciousness seems to be very special for this time, and hopefully could be used again to ensure against misappropriations.

NOTES

¹ This reference is specific to my discussions with Vivek Pandit who has been working with tribal populations of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region for more than past twenty years. Moreover, one often finds instances of leopard attacks on tribal members or slum dwellers in the second or third page of any newspaper.

² Mumbai City has been a city of seven islands with paddy fields and fishing villages and extensive forests. . Since the 17th century, there has been systematic changes in the topography of the city with successive reclamations by the local and the colonial administrations. These were not only for acquiring more lands, but also for reasons like clearing up of mosquitoes from marsh lands etc.

³ Bhavisar, Amita (2004), The Politics of the City, web based article accessed on 21st October 2004 and available at <http://www.india-seminar.com/2002/516/516%20amita%20baviskar.htm>

⁴ The three villages of Akloli, Vajreshwari and Ganeshpuri are located about 16 km from the Mumbai-Ahmedabad Highway (towards the East) in the Bhiwandi Taluka of Thane District. Its location is equidistant (about 30 km) from the three urban agglomerations of Wada, Vasai and Bhiwandi. The area is well connected by road networks from all three agglomerations with a public transport system. The Shirsad-Ambadi Road is the main connector that runs through the three villages and connects the two nodes of Shirsad Fata (on the Mumbai-

Ahmedabad Highway) and Ambadi Naka (on the Bhiwandi-Wada Road) on the west and the east respectively. The area is skirted by the Tansa River on the North (that separates the Bhiwandi Taluka from the Wada Taluka) and the Tungareshwar Forests on the South.

⁵ The whole area including three villages account for around 947 hectares with about 416 hectares under forest cover. Around 163 hectares of land is held by various trusts in Vajreshwari and Ganeshpuri. While the Siddhapeeth Trust has fenced land exclusively for its own activities, the lands owned by other two trusts have indigenous tenants inhabiting them.

⁶ This was very clear during the study undertaken by CRIT, where meetings with the Thane Collectorate was held at the convenience of the trustees, all high officials of the government were invited to spend time in the ashrams of these trusts.

⁷ CRIT was appointed in the middle of June 2004 and the government asked for a preliminary report that could help them to prioritise the projects and programmes. Also CRIT was asked to understand and present the opinions and aspirations of the villagers on the development process. The complete report is available in a pdf format at www.crit.org.in

⁸ CRIT has been able to gather several such correspondences which clearly establishes such a link between the school staff and the temple trustees. The names in these correspondences are avoided to hide identity.

⁹ These excerpts are from the research proposal developed by one of the schools of architecture in Mumbai. The proposal was developed and written in July 2004 and the confirmation of sponsorship for the project by the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) was finally acquired in October 2004