

ONE of the city's greatest assets is its extraordinary coastline and its series of unique and picturesque waterfronts. Tragically, these waterfronts are also the city's biggest dumping ground — both literally and metaphorically.

The 34 kilometres of the western coast have never been considered in the planning and development process as an integral part of the city's land mass. On the contrary, the space has been constantly abused by reclamation, sewage disposal and encroachment. On the other hand, the eastern coast has been put to restricted 'defence and docks use'.

Yet, for the millions who live in our crowded city, the waterfronts are the only major open spaces — Marine Drive or Chowpatty, Haji Ali or Worli Seaface, Dadar Beach or Bandra Bandstand, Carter Road or Juhu Beach and Versova. Unfortunately, the ad hoc, unplanned commercialisation, without comprehensive vision, has considerably destroyed the environment. Absence of a master plan for their development has encouraged the rich and the powerful to grab land.

As a solution, we should progressively restore and preserve the beauty of it in a pragmatic manner, working within existing realities and solving problems through modest designs and creating a momentum for positive change. There can be no grandiose ideas here. In fact, no major construction on these waterfronts should be allowed. Instead there must be:

- A halt to their abuse
- A selective re-allocation of spaces and activities
- Very minimal re-structuring

Most important, these waterfronts must remain our collective asset and a vital element in Mumbai's environmental and social fabric.

CONTROLS

Vast stretches of the western coast is reclaimed and is distinctly different from the beaches.

The most important reclamation carried out by the government at a phenomenal cost has been the Backbay scheme in South Mumbai, covering Cuff-Parade and Nariman Point. It has adversely affected the real estate and has led to an entirely new form of structures and spaces, different from the developments in Marine

Let's save OUR waterfronts



Drive, Ballard Pier, Colaba and Fort. Even though the Backbay reclamation was a government scheme, it was jointly conceived by private developers and business houses. The political leadership, however, also wanted to exhibit its might by undertaking developments based on Western models, even though they are irrelevant to our socio-economic condition. This attempt necessitated participation of MNCs. These models of development were therefore consistent with the policy of privatisation and furthered the alignments of the ruling class, while ignoring and alienating public interest.

The South Bombay reclamations have caused damaging effects on ecology. The coastline at Versova is being eroded ever since. Also, land allotted at Nariman Point to the NCPA at an extremely low price, with the objective of promoting art and culture, has now been partly developed for a high cost apartment building — the price being as high as Rs 30,000 per sq-ft. Construction of five-star hotels, resorts and houses are

also being continuously undertaken along the major waterfronts, thereby violating regulations framed by the government. By persuasion and force the developers have been obtaining permissions with dates prior to the framing of the regulation.

Lokhandwala builders have also encroached on an important public space along the Bandra waterfront (Bandstand). They have cut down a hill, destroyed the site of a historic fort and violated the reservation of 'No-Development zone', to construct a five-star hotel. As a result an important public space is once again lost. Attempts made by various citizen forums to halt this land grab by moving court have not succeeded. Similarly, the Raheja's have built two hotels at Madh Island and are in the process of developing more properties there. These activities expose the nexus between officials, police and anti-socials with disregard to public opinion.

There are other encroachments on Bombay's waterfronts, particularly on its beaches, such as in Juhu, Dadar and Walkeshwar. Land mafias

have built stalls and kiosks here. In Juhu, forms of entertainment like animals for joy-rides have not only encroached upon vast areas but are also a danger. Attempts made by the Juhu Citizens' Committee to create a restricted animal zone has not succeeded yet. A litigation filed in Bombay High Court was rejected and is now pending in the Supreme Court.

Land ownership along the waterfronts is held by Collector, Bombay Port Trust, National Airports Authority and the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation. These agencies do not communicate and do not have any definite policy for administration and use of waterfronts. Each authority has at different times entered into lease agreements with private developers, thereby creating lopsided and incoherent growth. The motive has, however, been to promote business interest of private organisations.

Many a times, the public sector has entered the market, competing with the prevailing business interests. As a result, officials of the agency concerned and the businessmen

have developed sympathy towards each other. This nexus has resulted in an illegal system of control of public spaces. Now, of course, the catchword is privatisation. The government is inviting offers and negotiating with private developers to take over the responsibility of development and management of public spaces that includes waterfronts.

While virtually gifting away open spaces, the government has not even been interested in assessing the miserable urban-scape that is emerging. Though some of these developments have been implemented well, there are issues that concern us:

- Should proposed activities replace existing public needs and priorities?
- Should collective spaces be converted to private activities and restricted use?
- Has any assessment been carried out for identifying sites for construction of public utilities?

Even in the case of private investments in public spaces, it is necessary to establish a public control mechanism. But our development policies are governed by upper class interests. In this process, the poor and the working class is further marginalised. The virtual starvation of space for the poor leads to encroachments.

Hence social conflicts.

To generate a more conscious public participation, a different set of requirements has to be evolved. It is necessary to build people's forums that will participate in decision making and monitor the development of open spaces and waterfronts. These committees along with various government agencies must carry out extensive campaigns, disseminating information and gathering public opinion. Establishing an effective public-control mechanism is fundamental to democracy and to the successful implementation of the scheme for restoration of the waterfronts.

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