

Understanding our  
civic issues

# Open Spaces in Mumbai

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## **Open Spaces in Mumbai**

An expert study group on Mumbai, appointed by the State Government way back in 1957, noted that the poor have very little access to open space, though they live in congested dwellings and desperately need some relief. The group was headed by SG Barve, a former ICS officer and Finance Minister. One can imagine the conditions now. Since then, the lot of the poor has only worsened. While there is a huge increase in population leading to pressures on the limited land available in an island city like Mumbai, its open spaces are dwindling mainly because of land grab by builders.

On the other hand, there is a big increase in spaces for the rich as a number of clubs and gymkhanas and joggers parks and promenades have come up. Contrary to general belief, the shortage of land in Mumbai is not as acute as is made out to be. There is furious construction activity going on, especially for housing for the affluent. From South Mumbai to Borivli and Kalyan, there is an unprecedented boom in high-rise buildings.

There exist large Trusts and families in Mumbai who own vast tracts of land. This is corroborated by reports. A report in the Economic Times of October 10, 2003, stated that Mumbai's 10 largest private landowners hold or own a gargantuan 7000 acres of land in the island city and its suburbs. It is estimated that these top 10 landlords who comprise of some big long established industrial families, old private trusts and builders own land worth Rs.5820 crore. This is contrary to the popular perception of a congested city where small parcels of land are fought over by a bevy of big builders. It must be noted that over time, some of these sprawling properties have been encroached upon or have been affected by zoning regulations.

Even now, there are enough open spaces in Mumbai, if only one looks around closely. However, these are often not accessible to ordinary people. In the very upper class and fashionable areas in Powai, I saw the huge open space used for Go Karting, racing with mini-cars. As I tried to climb a hill nearby, a security guard stopped me saying this was privately owned. I took a long walk from

Wadala (east) to Sion for nearly 5km and saw acres and acres of open spaces, salt pans, mangroves (a very useful vegetation on the seaside, vital for controlling land erosion and nurturing marine life). One can get an idea of this if one looks around on a visit to the fashionable multiplex cinema complex at Wadala. All this land can be converted into space for public utility and must be prevented from falling into the hands of builders.

There is a big increase in open spaces in the last few years in Mumbai but this is mainly in upper class areas like Bandra, Colaba, Cuffe Parade, Juhu and Mulund. The spaces are created mainly by upper class citizen groups and the access is mainly to this class, though technically these are open to all. The entry fee is as high as Rs.5/- per adult in a park run by the Juhu Vile Parle Residents' Association in Juhu.

Bandra (west) alone has acquired four major open spaces in the last few years, the promenades on the seafront at Carter Road, the Band Stand area and Bandra Reclamation and the Joggers' Park. The first two promenades have been developed with citizens' initiative with funds given by the former MP and film actress Shabana Azmi out of the

government funds at her disposal as a Member of Parliament. The upper class Band Stand residents, with support from architect PK Das, have also saved the open space around the historic fort at Land's End from being grabbed by a builder. They have now built an open-air amphitheatre there which was the venue, recently, of music concerts in the Bandra Festival. The promenade at Reclamation has been developed by the Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation (MSRDC) as a sop to citizens following criticism of the perceived environmental degradation brought about by its Bandra-Worli sea-link Project. Joggers' Park, one of the first to be set up in Mumbai, has been developed by three builders.

Shabana Azmi has also used the MP's fund at her disposal to construct a park in memory of her father, the reputed poet Kaifi Azmi, at Juhu near the Kamla Raheja Vidya Nidhi Institute. Entry is free and the park has a more democratic character with access to students and others for study and holding meetings in two enclosures. A spectacular Priyadarshani Park has also been developed with land reclamation at Napean Sea road through the efforts of BA Desai, former minister of state for urban development. It is now proposed to expand the sprawling park with a promenade along the sea at a cost of several crore rupees. A Rs30crore scheme of improving Marine Drive has also been chalked out by the state government.

While all these facilities for leisure walking and recreation are welcome, it is deplorable that funds for constructing footpaths, a vital public space desperately needed by people for their day-to-day activities, are not being allocated.

Legal and illegal construction activity has resulted in the depletion of open public places. As a result, Mumbai, today, has the lowest ratio of open spaces in the world. There is only 0.03 acre per population of 1,000 as against 5.3 acres in New York, 4.84 acres in London and 4.4 acres in New Delhi.

For a majority of the population, access to open spaces like streets is declining rapidly due to various reasons. Most areas lack footpaths due to the apathy of the municipal authorities. Most existing footpaths are unfit for walking or are encroached upon. In fact, footpath space is being depleted with construction of shrines, stalls, hawkers, telephone booths, police chowkies, public toilets and, of course, the pavement dwellers. Besides, sometimes, posh buildings extend their courtyards several feet onto the road.

Mandatory requirements for open spaces and car parking in residential buildings are being increasingly and blatantly flouted in a large number of new luxury apartments. The illegality apart, this has a negative impact on children, as they are denied space to play vital for their mental and physical development. In contrast, the more humble public sector housing colonies built in the 1950s all over Mumbai have large open spaces.

Public spaces are defined as squares, parks, seashores, maidans, railway platforms, bus stops and streets. These are badly neglected in Mumbai, says Ravi Hazra, Professor of industrial design at IIT, Mumbai, and an expert in street furniture. While the ruling class imitates Western models of highways and flyovers, it has completely failed to follow the

Western model of providing adequate footpaths and benches to citizens. These facilities are especially needed in a poor country where a majority of people are pedestrians. Several bus-stops lack shades and those with shades are badly designed. With the BEST deciding to commercially exploit bus-stops with illuminated hoardings, even the safety of commuters may be endangered if norms of electrical wiring are not strictly enforced.

Professor Hazra says, “Many public spaces in Mumbai are negative spaces, like the sides of roads which are left incomplete. No one can use them.” In the last few years, there is increased consciousness among citizens to improve their surroundings. But quite a few of these efforts are directed towards evicting the poor and street vendors, without realising that they fulfil a vital economic function in the city and they have as much right to live in a city with dignity as the rich have. These groups rarely raise their voice against the scandalous destruction of environment, against builders who raze entire hills and tree cover.

Subways, deemed a public amenity for pedestrians, actually penalise them for the benefit of motor cars owners who get overriding access to surface roads, while pedestrians are forced to climb up and down the stairs of the subways. Often, poor ventilation and lighting, along with the fact that municipal authorities have permitted their use by numerous commercial establishments in order to generate revenues, makes walking in the subway a horrendous experience.

However, a group like CitiSpace has done well through legal intervention to save spaces reserved for public parks and schools from falling into the hands of builders. Schemes of providing free housing for slum dwellers are often misused for the benefit of builders at the cost of open spaces.

A nexus between politicians, bureaucrats and builders is being increasingly blamed for misuse of huge spaces which are reserved in the development plan for public amenities like schools and playgrounds for profiteering and luxurious amenities. Politicians clearly need to display greater sensitivity towards the need of amenities for the poor and the disproportionate use of public spaces for the rich.

'Are we to live like prisoners?' asked a prominent politician, in a recent interview. He was replying to a question about the need for politicians to have a posh club on prime land at Cuffe Parade in Mumbai at Government expense. There was a public furore over the allotment of the land for the use of politicians and bureaucrats. If politicians and bureaucrats living in huge houses feel the need for luxury clubs, how much more desperate must be the need of the poor for a few open spaces just for breathing a little fresh air?

Yet, open spaces meant for the common people remain limited and poorly maintained. Sprawling maidans in South Mumbai like the Azad maidan, Cross maidan and the Oval were all created by the British in the late 19th century, as also the Victoria Garden, now called Jijamata Udyan. Since then, the Government has not created any new maidans

even while the population has multiplied; its record in maintaining the existing maidans has also been very poor.

As a journalist in Times of India for over three decades, I have walked through these maidans hundreds of times and found that these are not fit even for walking across, let alone for relaxing. Even more pernicious is the way people are treated. The Azad maidan is virtually barricaded with a locked gate and only a little passage is kept open for pedestrians who are treated like criminals. It is even more hazardous to walk from Azad maidan to SNT Women's University or the American Center near the University. The area is used by thousands of people daily, but it is most unfriendly for them. The pedestrians have to walk through a narrow stretch, fenced on either side. Further down there is the Food Street which is unplanned, dirty and shabby. The Food Street could have been a wonderful public space as the Food Street I saw in Lahore.

The Cross maidan is now like a big garbage dump and is now proposed to be privatised. The Oval maidan has been improved with the initiative of local citizens with sponsorship of nearly Rs.1crore from the corporate sector. Had it not been for citizens' resistance, the maidans would have been turned into car parks.

Political rallies are no longer held at the Oval, following pressure from local citizens. Major rallies are now confined to Azad maidan and Shivaji Park and, even here, these are being opposed. But another view is that people must find some space for holding demonstrations and rallies, which are vital for the functioning of democracy. Even London's famous Hyde Park was the scene of a massive demonstration by nearly a million people last year in protest against globalisation.

Nana Nani Parks have been opened in areas like Shivaji Park and Girgaum Chowpatty in the last few years for senior citizens. But if one considers the growing number of elderly, such parks are very few. The worst affected are children and youngsters. Children have very little space to play, as space in residential buildings is shrinking due to various reasons including car parking and the fact that builders are now providing very little open space. Privatised parks specifically declare that children will not be allowed to play in the premises.

The most glaring example of the destruction of green space is the uprooting of nearly 500 acres of mangroves at Goregaon for development of a golf club. An aerial photograph of the bald patch of land shown by an environmentalist shocked the audience at a meeting of the Bombay Natural History Society recently. It is reported that most of the mangroves on the western sea front of Mumbai have been lost. Fortunately, a huge patch of mangroves has been protected because of the effort of a business house in the Vikhroli-Thane belt. We are also very lucky to have the Borivli National Park so close to the metropolis. It is said to have more bird and plant species than the whole of England-so rich is our bio-diversity. Unfortunately, landscape architects and horticulturists are unaware of the importance of indigenous species and are planting exotic species which attract few birds. So while there is much bio-diversity in the Borivli National Park, Raj Bhavan and Jijamata Udyan (formerly Victoria Garden set up in the 19th century), there

is little in the newly set up gardens and parks. Jijamata Udyan in the heart of Mumbai, set up with the initiative of such makers of modern Mumbai as Jagannath Shankershet and Dr Bhau Daji Lad, has many and rare species of plants and birds and insects. But, such is the insensitivity of the politicians to ecology that some years ago they wanted to convert the Garden into commercial real estate for profit.

We are also lucky to have the Aarey milk colony with its rich forest land. But this, too, is coming under attack from builders. Already scores of acres of this land have been taken away for a golf course and luxury residential buildings. It is a consolation that we still have the Sewree mudflats in sea in the eastern part of the Harbour which attract many migratory birds.

There is also a desperate need to clean up the Mithi river and save the few remaining lakes. One of the few surviving water tanks in Mumbai is in Bandra (West) near the suburban railway station.

Builders are now eyeing the Mumbai Port Trust land, running into hundreds of acres. A campaign to convert it into real estate is already on. There is no shortage of land which can be converted into open public spaces in Mumbai, provided there is political will. The opportunity to convert some of the land of a closed textile mill in prime area for public use has been lost because of the politician-builder nexus. The land is being used for luxury housing or corporate sector offices or bowling alleys and discotheques; flouting the rule that one-third of the space should be left open for public use. The residents are being thrown out of these areas and now it is proposed to dis-house many more by demolishing their houses and acquiring their land for road widening to meet the needs of the new owners.

No one is now immune from the threat to open spaces. With the authorities bending over backwards to amend the development rules which had regulated land use in the island city to please the builder lobby, soon the view from your window would be gone, as the building nearby suddenly rises higher and also expands horizontally. Worse, in the process, that building attracts more cars without providing for parking space. The result there is less open space on the road too as cars are parked there. It is a lose-lose situation for everyone except the builder and the politician and the municipal official.

Given the will, it is possible to create good open spaces even out of garbage, as is seen by the sprawling 15hectare park which is at Dharavi, though it is called the Mahim Nature Park. It has been built by World Wide Fund and other agencies in the last 20 years and has 14,000 trees, herbs and shrubs and much bird life. It is certainly worth a visit. For certain reasons, it is open only during the day, observing normal office timing. But special visits can be arranged in the mornings. It is not artificially landscaped and has a natural charm about it with all its wilderness. It is not very well known to the general public, though it is a regular site for visits of school children for field trips for Nature Studies.

Another good garden created out of garbage dump is the BPT garden at Colaba. While such efforts at creating green spaces are welcome, the real task lies in prevention of further erosion of open spaces from the onslaught of builders. Most nature conservationists, architects, and town planners look at the issue in isolation. The general approach is to beautify Mumbai through some landscaped gardens at traffic junctions. That is a cosmetic approach. The real problem is social and political. The onslaught of builders has to be checked if Mumbai is to have proper open, public spaces. Taking over the lands of closed industries, for example, can salvage any number of spaces. The Urban Land Ceiling Act was an excellent instrument of acquiring surplus urban land at reasonable prices. But it has always been under attack from the builder lobby. The need of the hour is increased citizen initiative and concern for preserving public spaces.

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*The facts presented and opinions expressed in this booklet are those of the author alone.*

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