

The Metamorphosis of Suburban Mumbai: A Case Study of Mulund

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Abstract. Bombay (Mumbai), the commercial capital of India is a notable example of the homogeneity and diversity that characterises India. As a destination that has always attracted migrants, the city has always received people from various parts of the country. Migration has led to phenomenal growth and expansion. The suburban localities of Mumbai grew along the railway lines that connected the commercial spaces of the city with the distant suburbs. Each suburb of Mumbai has a unique blend of various migrant linguistic communities who have enjoyed a close relationship with the host community that largely speaks Marathi. A micro level study of the suburbs throws light on the development of suburban districts and the impact of the various communities on each other. Through this paper we have chosen to focus on the suburb of Mulund, primarily an industrial belt, over the last decade and a half. The findings presented are the outcome of an empirical study. The interdisciplinary approach of this paper attempts to document these changes in terms of three key areas: infrastructure, culture and language.

Keywords: Migration, Growth, Expansion, Linguistic communities, Infrastructure, Culture, Language.

1. Introduction

Bombay or Mumbai, the commercial capital of India is a remarkable example of the homogeneity and diversity that characterises India. The city along with its host communities has always received people from various parts of the country. Many communities and linguistic groups made Mumbai their home and made substantial contribution to the growth of the city. The industrial development of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the economic and spatial growth of the island city that attracted many young people to seek livelihood in this 'city of dreams'. The city had a distinct immigrant working class. A typical residential feature of the working class of Mumbai was the famous 'chawl' which housed a significant section of Mumbai's population.

The island city extended into the neighbouring Salsette island, which eventually merged to form the suburban districts of the city. Salsette island, north of the island city of Bombay (Mumbai) consisted of more than sixty villages or hamlets that find mention in the administrative records of the eighteenth century. Many of these villages were sparsely populated till the beginning of the twentieth century. All these villages together comprised the suburban district of Mumbai. Through the twentieth century, the suburbs recorded a notable increase in population. The expansion and growth of the suburban localities was the result of numerous factors prominent among which were the rapidly growing population in the island city and the demand for space. The suburban localities of Mumbai grew along the railway lines that connected the commercial spaces of the city with the distant suburbs that sprang up. The largely middle class residential localities in the suburbs showed a mosaic pattern of residential areas emulating the residential pattern of the native island city. They also developed commercial activities primarily catering to the immediate needs of the residents of the suburb. The vicinity of the railway station almost always developed into the commercial zone of the suburb. This pattern of development can be observed in practically all suburbs of Greater Mumbai. While most of the suburbs emerged as residential localities, some, especially along the eastern belt of the city were the industrial areas with accompanying residential patches.

The suburb of Mulund which is located at the north eastern end of greater Bombay grew primarily as an industrial belt especially with pharmaceutical industries such as Johnson & Johnson, Hoechst, Burrows Welcome, Rallis etc. Those who were employed in these industries chose to live in the vicinity and turn it

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into their home. The area close to the railway station developed as the commercial heart of the suburb and had small businesses, trades, markets etc.

The story of Mulund is a representation of the rapid transformation of suburban Mumbai post liberalisation. Each suburb of Mumbai has a unique blend of various migrant linguistic communities who have enjoyed a close relationship with the host community that largely speaks Marathi or its dialects. A micro level study of the suburbs will throw light on the development of the suburban district of Mumbai and the impact of the various communities on each other.

Through this paper we have chosen to focus on the growth and development of the suburb of Mulund as over the last decade and a half the suburb has transformed from an industrial area to a vibrant exclusive residential locality. The findings presented are the outcome of a two year long empirical study. The interdisciplinary approach of this paper attempts to document the many changes witnessed in the suburb in the last 15 years, through an analysis of a questionnaire prepared by us which focussed on several parameters as they changed over time, reflecting the change the suburb underwent.

The project covers a randomly selected sample of about 350 male and female respondents from 18 to 70 years of age. They include members of the host community- native Marathi speakers as well as migrants or descendants of migrants who came to this city from various parts of India, initially, for employment. The respondents selected, exhibited a wide range of educational qualifications from school drop outs to post graduates and professionals, thereby ensuring a comprehensive social coverage spread over various income bands. 22% of the respondents are third generation residents, and about 78% are from families living in Mulund for two generations. Thus, they have been witness to the gradual growth and the metamorphosis of the suburb in the last decade of the 20th century.

This paper will trace these changes in terms of three key areas: infrastructure, culture and language: the barometers of transformation of any society.

2. Observations

2.1. Infrastructure

The extent of the suburb was restricted to the major cross road- Panch Rasta in the west and the highway in the east. Being bound by forest area in the west, it was unsafe for visit after dark. The creek bound it on its eastern side, and the mangroves and marshy land disallowed settlement. There was no easy east west connectivity until the early 1980s so in effect these two areas were like two independent suburbs. Dumping yards near the highway made it a place shunned by the residents especially after sunset. There was no development across the highway until the late 1990s when the government residential colonies came up. Today, the areas near the western hills and up to the salt pans on the east are well populated and effectively connected by public transport. They, thus, command a premium land price.

The civic infrastructure underwent a dramatic change: from roads that were few(only arterial roads existed) , unconnected, un-tarred and often non functional in monsoon, the suburb today has concrete roads with electrical traffic signals, name boards, direction plaques all of which has made the place citizen friendly.

Most respondents recall the rural appearance of the suburb with sea waters rushing in from the creeks, adjoining the salt pans. Houses were largely chawls or small apartment blocks, G+3/4 storied with large open areas. The buildings were constructed in a square formation with an open courtyard in the centre which was reminiscent of rural houses in western Maharashtra. Today, skyscrapers with landscaped gardens and urbane amenities, so typical of multi-cultural Mumbai, dot the Mulund skyline as well.

The railways which, today, are the lifeline of this city were practically non-existent in this suburb as older residents of Mulund recall. There was only an up and a down platform, which would be alternately crowded and deserted as trains were few and far between. Even the approach road was a fair weather one; “people had to walk on stones/ bricks placed strategically on the ‘road’ whenever there was water logging” says, Dattaji Tamhane, a 100 year old resident. The platforms did not have roofs, so commuters were subjected to the vagaries of weather as well. Additionally, there were no benches, no rest rooms and being deserted by early evening, unsafe as well. Today, the railway station is an important and busy transport hub

with all necessary facilities, seeing hundreds of passengers travelling by the famous Mumbai locals daily. Additionally, there are bus terminuses connecting the suburb to various parts of Mumbai as well as the state.

2.2. Shopping Area

Shopping centres were rudimentary proprietary concerns restricted to only along either side of the railway line in clusters of around 10 shops each. These establishments sold multiple fares for example; the local grocer doubled up as a music store, and also stocked perishables. The only bazaar was the Mulund market in the western part and there was only one cooperative store- the Apna Bazaar- both located close to the railway line. The Mulund market retained its identity till the recent past and only recently has transformed into a new avatar. The market also consisted of unorganised hawkers who had fixed clientele and delivered door step services. Fresh vegetables were available only at the station market which was fairly large, unclean and messy. Gawanpada developed as the market of the east and also had a large fish section as well. By and large, western Mulund developed into a vegetarian sector due to the pattern of migratory settlement, while east Mulund home to the host majority had non-vegetarian sections as well. Today, this distinction is blurred due to expansion of residential buildings and alongside the markets of the past, modern Malls have come up in the west. However, the east still retains some of the old world look, though the shops have spruced up their interiors in response to times. People patronize both the old and new shopping formats as each has its own positives.

2.3. Civic Amenities

The respondents gave a mixed response to the quality of Civic amenities: while there was no load shedding then, and water supply was uninterrupted, the quality of the entertainment facilities was not so good. Today, multiplexes, gaming zones with simulated activities have come up, thereby overshadowing the old stand alone cinema halls: the only source of entertainment. The Mulund Gymkhana, Deshmukh and Sambhaji gardens came up in the last two decades or so in the east with civic initiative. The west, which was more industrialized, saw private participation in the development of gardens, cultural centres, public wash rooms, and even an auditorium.

2.4. Education

Education was largely restricted to regional medium municipal schools, and few private ones offering courses preparing students for the local board examinations. Today, a variety of schools offering nationally recognised degrees, public and private institutions of higher education have come up, yet there is demand for more to cater to the needs of the ever growing population of the suburb. In fact, the V.G. Vaze College was set up in 1984 by a local industrialist to address the needs of Mulund –ites. Today, it has become an institution of repute offering a wide choice of courses to the residents not only of Mulund, but also from neighbouring suburbs and districts.

2.5. Culture

Culture, the hallmark of civilised society is also a measure of homogeneity in cultures. Though major festivals of Hindus are common, the celebrations take on a variety of forms. As migrants mingled with the locals, they enriched each other's cultural expressions. While migrants celebrated local festivals such as Ganesh Chaturthi Sankranti, Padva and even adopted them as an annual religious features in their homes, the hosts also danced with joyous abandon during Navratri, celebrated Janmashtami, Onam and Baisakhi. Bursting Diwali crackers has always been a community affair. Additionally, celebrations during Christmas, New Year and national festivals helped integrate the various linguistic groups into a homogenous group despite their apparent variety.

Another, popular measure of cultural integration is food. Every community in the world has its own cuisine avidly developed with every passing generation. However, it was found that on special occasions, culinary experimentation takes place: with the wada-pav, the pavbhaji, bhel , dosa, idli, daalvada, sambhar, rosogulla, thepla emerging front runners. Today, newly acquired tastes have married Indian varieties to international culinary tastes giving rise to the currently popular Chinese bhel, tandoori pizza, Chinese dosa

etc. This is also seen in the enthusiastic response to eating out in fusion and speciality restaurants which have come up locally and to socializing in cafes.

2.6. Language

The adaptations seen in the development of languages and the manner in which the migrant and host communities have adapted their languages is yet another testimony to the process of acculturation that the suburb has witnessed in the course. While most of the respondents use L1 only with family members, they are very comfortable using the national language and English socially and professionally respectively. As a local language, Marathi has been accepted by migrant speakers who regularly use it, albeit with varying levels of proficiency, especially with service providers. Hindi, of course, comes a close second.

63% respondents acknowledge that their language competence in the four basic skills are better developed in Hindi and English and then in their L1. This is a result of most of the younger members studying in English medium institutions, as English is perceived to be the language of opportunity today.

Within families, respondents feel that subsequent generations are not as comfortable with their respective L1s as their predecessors were or their relatives in native places are. They are comfortable with this fact though and accept it as a consequence of living in a multilingual society. The differences, they note, are in the field of paralinguistic features-especially intonation and in the speed of delivery. They also report that their vocabulary is somewhat restricted and their pronunciation is deviant as compared to their relatives and perhaps even parents and grandparents. Many respondents are of the opinion that their this 'deficiency' is adequately compensated by their competence in Hindi and English and in no way interferes with their status/interaction within their particular community.

Another interesting observation is the twin phenomena of 'Code Mixing' and 'Code Switching' that is seen in younger respondents. In quasi- formal/ official situations and in completely informal situations, both these phenomena are very prominent. Lexical items, popular expressions, syntactic fragments are interspersed with ease while communicating in both L1 and other languages- such as Hindi or English. In fact, it is also seen as a requirement for social acceptability amongst peers: a means to include/exclude people socially; emphasize/de-emphasize ideas; and to a lesser extent to comment on happenings. Often, this phenomenon spills over into homes also and become a norm for younger siblings to imitate.

Code switching is commonly used by a majority of respondents due to the demands of tenor and the domain of use. Here too, the switches are commonly seen between Hindi and English and within families between L1 and Hindi among younger respondents and L1 and English among older respondents.

3. Conclusion

The entire process of socio- cultural metamorphosis can best be summarized by the emergence of Malls and hypermarkets in the belt where once the pharma industry reigned. This has brought in diverse job opportunities, upmarket shopping experiences, enhanced entertainment avenues thereby leading to the creation of a markedly altered cultural matrix: a ethno- global outlook – cosmopolitan, commercial/capitalistic yet conventional.

Together, 'Code Mixing' and 'Code Switching' are two of the common ways in which people adapt language to the demands of society. Such a phenomenon also gives rise to a specialised use of language and leads to the creation of sociolects related to sub-cultures within a society.

Thus until a decade and a half ago, Mulund which was known as an indolent suburb on the outskirts of the municipal limits of Greater Mumbai acquired a new and a cosmopolitan avataar. This study documents the transformation caused by the exit of industries from Mulund and their replacement by Malls and high rise residential complexes, thereby making it a jewel in the crown of suburban Mumbai.

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