

4 The City in Colonial India

In sharp contrast to Western Europe in the same period, Indian cities did not mushroom in the nineteenth century. The pace of urbanisation in India was slow under colonial rule. In the early twentieth century, no more than 11 per cent of Indians were living in cities. A large proportion of these urban dwellers were residents of the three **Presidency cities**. These were multi-functional cities: they had major ports, warehouses, homes and offices, army camps, as well as educational institutions, museums and libraries. Bombay was the premier city of India. It expanded rapidly from the late nineteenth century, its population going up from 644,405 in 1872 to nearly 1,500,000 in 1941.

Let us look at how Bombay developed.

New words

Presidency cities – The capitals of the Bombay, Bengal and Madras Presidencies in British India

Discuss

Read Source B carefully. What are the common features of city life that the authors note? What are the contradictory experiences they point to?



Fig. 16 – A bustling street in Null Bazaar, Bombay, photograph by Raja Deen Dayal, late nineteenth century.

Source B

Contradictory experiences of cities

Kali Prasanna Singh wrote a satire in Bengali describing an evening scene in the Indian part of Calcutta around 1862:

‘Gradually the darkness thickens. At this time, thanks to English shoes, striped Santipur scarfs [sic] and Simla dhuties, you can't tell high from low. Groups of fast young men, with peals of laughter and plenty of English talk are knocking at this door and that. They left home when they saw the lamps lighted in the evening and will return when the flour mills begin to work ... Some cover their faces with scarfs [sic] and think that no one recognises them. It is the evening of ... a Saturday and the city is unusually crowded.’

Hutam Pyancher Naksha, a collection of short sketches on urban life in Calcutta, 1862. Translated by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay.

In 1899, G.G. Agarkar wrote about Bombay:

‘The enormous expanse of Bombay city; its great and palatial private and governmental mansions; broad streets which accommodate up to six carriages abreast ... the struggle to enter the merchants lanes; the frequent troublesome noise of passenger and goods trains whistles and wheels; the wearisome bargaining in every market, by customers who wander from place to place making enquiries with silver and notes in their pockets to buy a variety of commodities; the throngs of thousands of boats visible in the harbour ... the more or less rushed pace of official and private employees going to work, checking their watches ... The clouds of black smoke emitted by factory chimneys and the noise of large machines in the innards of buildings ... Men and women with and without families belonging to every caste and rank travelling in carriages or horseback or on foot, to take the air and enjoy a drive along the sea shore in the slanting rays of the sun as it descends on the horizon ... ’

G.G. Agarkar, ‘The Obverse Side of British Rule or our Dire Poverty’.

4.1 Bombay: The Prime City of India?

In the seventeenth century, Bombay was a group of seven islands under Portuguese control. In 1661, control of the islands passed into British hands after the marriage of Britain's King Charles II to the Portuguese princess. The East India Company quickly shifted its base from Surat, its principal western port, to Bombay.



Fig. 17 – A view of Bombay, 1852.

You can see the Colaba lighthouse on the right and St Thomas's Church in the distant background. It was still possible in the mid-nineteenth century for artists to search for picturesque spots. The major development projects had not yet started.

At first, Bombay was the major outlet for cotton textiles from Gujarat. Later, in the nineteenth century, the city functioned as a port through which large quantities of raw materials such as cotton and opium would pass. Gradually, it also became an important administrative centre in western India, and then, by the end of the nineteenth century, a major industrial centre.

4.2 Work in the City

Bombay became the capital of the Bombay Presidency in 1819, after the Maratha defeat in the Anglo-Maratha war. The city quickly expanded. With the growth of trade in cotton and opium, large communities of traders and bankers as well as artisans and shopkeepers came to settle in Bombay. The establishment of textile mills led to a fresh surge in migration.

The first cotton textile mill in Bombay was established in 1854. By 1921, there were 85 cotton mills with about 146,000 workers. Only



about one-fourth of Bombay's inhabitants between 1881 and 1931 were born in Bombay: the rest came from outside. Large numbers flowed in from the nearby district of Ratnagiri to work in the Bombay mills.

Women formed as much as 23 per cent of the mill workforce in the period between 1919 and 1926. After that, their numbers dropped steadily to less than 10 per cent of the total workforce. By the late 1930s, women's jobs were increasingly taken over by machines or by men.

Bombay dominated the maritime trade of India till well into the twentieth century. It was also at the junction head of two major railways. The railways encouraged an even higher scale of migration into the city. For instance, famine in the dry regions of Kutch drove large numbers of people into Bombay in 1888-89. The flood of migrants in some years created panic and alarm in official circles. Worried by the influx of population during the plague epidemic of 1898, district authorities sent about 30,000 people back to their places of origin by 1901.

4.3 Housing and Neighbourhoods

Bombay was a crowded city. While every Londoner in the 1840s enjoyed an average space of 155 square yards, Bombay had a mere 9.5 square yards. By 1872, when London had an average of 8 persons per house, the density in Bombay was as high as 20. From its earliest days, Bombay did not grow according to any plan, and houses, especially in the Fort area, were interspersed with gardens. The Bombay Fort area which formed the heart of the city in the early 1800s was divided between a 'native' town, where most of the Indians lived, and a European or 'white' section. A European suburb and an industrial zone began to develop to the north of the Fort settlement area, with a similar suburb and cantonment in the south. This racial pattern was true of all three Presidency cities.

With the rapid and unplanned expansion of the city, the crisis of housing and water supply became acute by the mid-1850s. The arrival of the textile mills only increased the pressure on Bombay's housing.

Like the European elite, the richer Parsi, Muslim and upper-caste traders and industrialists of Bombay lived in sprawling,

Activity

Have a debate in class with speakers for and against the motion, on the following topic:
'City development cannot take place without destroying communities and lifestyles. This is a necessary part of development.'



Fig. 19 – Interior of Esplanade House built for J.N. Tata in 1887.



Fig. 20 – Scene by Robert Grindlay of Bombay, 1826.
A number of palanquins are being carried across the square.

spacious bungalows. In contrast, more than 70 per cent of the working people lived in the thickly populated *chawls* of Bombay. Since workers walked to their place of work, 90 per cent of millworkers were housed in Girangaon, a 'mill village' not more than 15 minutes' walk from the mills.

Chawls were multi-storeyed structures which had been built from at least the 1860s in the 'native' parts of the town. Like the tenements in London, these houses were largely owned by private landlords, such as merchants, bankers, and building contractors, looking for quick ways of earning money from anxious migrants. Each *chawl* was divided into smaller one-room tenements which had no private toilets.

Many families could reside at a time in a tenement. The Census of 1901 reported that 'the mass of the island's population or 80 per cent of the total, resides in tenements of one room; the average number of occupants lies between 4 and 5 ...' High rents forced workers to share homes, either with relatives or caste fellows who were streaming into the city. People had to keep the windows of their rooms closed even in humid weather due to the 'close proximity of filthy gutters, privies, buffalo stables etc.' Yet, though water was scarce, and people often quarrelled every morning for a turn at the tap, observers found that houses were kept quite clean.

The homes being small, streets and neighbourhoods were used for a variety of activities such as cooking, washing and sleeping. Liquor

Activity

Look at Fig. 20 What kinds of people do you think used this mode of transport? Compare it with the pictures of the horse-drawn tram (Fig. 22) and the electric tram. Notice the inversion of the numbers involved: the horse-drawn tram or electric tram needed only one operator while a single traveller required several people.

Source C

Why spaces cannot be cleared

Bombay's first Municipal Commissioner, Arthur Crawford, was appointed in 1865. He tried to keep several 'dangerous trades' out of south Bombay. He described how builders and entrepreneurs bribed inspectors to continue with their haphazard use of space, even when their activities increased pollution:

'... Kessowjee Naik brought his dyers back to their old quarters. I prosecuted them, but was defeated. Kessowjee Naik spent money like water, eminent physicians swore solemnly that dye pits were beneficial to health! ... This infamous success emboldened a powerful German firm to open a large steam Dyeing Factory close to Parbadevi Temple whose refuse waters polluted the fair sands of Mahim Bay ... Last but not least Bhoys and Dasses, Shenvis Brahmins and all the Jees, set up cotton and spinning mills anywhere their sweet will prompted them: for example close to the Byculla Club itself, around the Race Course and Kamathiporra Foras Road, in Khetwady, on Girgaum Raod and at Chowpatty.'

While reading such statements we must remember that colonial officials liked to represent Englishmen as honest and Indians as corrupt, the Englishmen as concerned with pollution of the environment and Indians as being uncaring about such issues.

Source

shops and *akharas* came up in any empty spot. Streets were also used for different types of leisure activities. Parvathibai Bhor recalled her childhood years in the early twentieth century this way: 'There was an open space in the middle of our four *chawls*. There the magicians, monkey players or acrobats used to regularly perform their acts. The Nandi bull used to come. I used to be especially afraid of the Kadaklakshmi. To see that they had to beat themselves on their naked bodies in order to fill their stomachs frightened me.' Finally, *chawls* were also the place for the exchange of news about jobs, strikes, riots or demonstrations.

Caste and family groups in the mill neighbourhoods were headed by someone who was similar to a village headman. Sometimes, the jobber in the mills could be the local neighbourhood leader. He settled disputes, organised food supplies, or arranged informal credit. He also brought important information on political developments.

People who belonged to the '**depressed classes**' found it even more difficult to find housing. Lower castes were kept out of many *chawls* and often had to live in shelters made of corrugated sheets, leaves, or bamboo poles.

If town planning in London emerged from fears of social revolution, planning in Bombay came about as a result of fears about the plague epidemic. The City of Bombay Improvement Trust was established in 1898; it focused on clearing poorer homes out of the city centre. By 1918, Trust schemes had deprived 64,000 people of their homes, but only 14,000 were rehoused. In 1918, a Rent Act was passed to keep rents reasonable, but it had the opposite effect of producing a severe housing crisis, since landlords withdrew houses from the market.

Expansion of the city has always posed a problem in Bombay because of a scarcity of land. One of the ways the city of Bombay has developed is through massive **reclamation** projects.

4.4 Land Reclamation in Bombay

Did you know that the seven islands of Bombay were joined into one landmass only over a period of time? The earliest project began in 1784. The Bombay governor William Hornby approved the building of the great sea wall which prevented the flooding of the low-lying areas of Bombay.



Fig. 21 – Chawl on Kalbadevi Road built in the early twentieth century.

What do you notice about the organisation of space in this building?

Activity

Imagine that you are a young person living in a *chawl*. Describe one day in your life.

New words

Akharas – Traditional wrestling schools, generally located in every neighbourhood, where young people were trained to ensure both physical and moral fitness

Depressed classes – A term often used to denote those who were seen within the caste order as 'lower castes' and 'untouchables'

Reclamation – The reclaiming of marshy or submerged areas or other wasteland for settlements, cultivation or other use

Since then, there have been several reclamation projects. The need for additional commercial space in the mid-nineteenth century led to the formulation of several plans, both by government and private companies, for the reclamation of more land from the sea. Private companies became more interested in taking financial risks. In 1864, the Back Bay Reclamation Company won the right to reclaim the western foreshore from the tip of Malabar Hill to the end of Colaba. Reclamation often meant the levelling of the hills around Bombay. By the 1870s, although most of the private companies closed down due to the mounting cost, the city had expanded to about 22 square miles. As the population continued to increase rapidly in the early twentieth century, every bit of the available area was built over and new areas were reclaimed from the sea.

A successful reclamation project was undertaken by the Bombay Port Trust, which built a dry dock between 1914 and 1918 and used the excavated earth to create the 22-acre Ballard Estate. Subsequently, the famous Marine Drive of Bombay was developed.

4.5 Bombay as the City of Dreams: The World of Cinema and Culture

Who does not associate Bombay with its film industry? Despite its massive overcrowding and difficult living conditions, Bombay appears to many as a '*maya puri*' – a city of dreams.

Many Bombay films deal with the arrival in the city of new migrants, and their encounters with the real pressures of daily life. Some popular songs from the Bombay film industry speak of the contradictory aspects of the city. In the film *CID* (1956) the hero's buddy sings, '*Ai dil hai mushkil jeena yahan; zara batke zara bachke, ye hai Bambai meri jaan*' (My heart, it is difficult to live here! move over a little, take care of yourself! this is Bombay! my love). A slightly more disillusioned voice sings in *Guest House* (1959): '*Jiska juta usika sar, dil hai chhote bada shabar, are vah re vah teri Bambai*' (Bombay, you city what a place! Here one gets beaten with one's own shoes! The city is big but people's hearts are small!).

When did the Bombay film industry make its first appearance? Harishchandra Sakharam Bhatwadekar shot a scene of a wrestling



Fig. 22 – Colaba Causeway, late nineteenth century.
Notice that the trams are being drawn by horses. You can see stables for horses on the left and the Tram Company's offices in the background.



Fig. 23 – Marine Drive.
A familiar landmark of Bombay, it was built on land reclaimed from the sea in the twentieth century.

match in Bombay's Hanging Gardens and it became India's first movie in 1896. Soon after, Dadasaheb Phalke made *Raja Harishchandra* (1913). After that, there was no turning back. By 1925, Bombay had become India's film capital, producing films for a national audience. The amount of money invested in about 50 Indian films in 1947 was Rs 756 million. By 1987, the film industry employed 520,000 people.

Most of the people in the film industry were themselves migrants who came from cities like Lahore, Calcutta, Madras and contributed to the national character of the industry. Those who came from Lahore, then in Punjab, were especially important for the development of the Hindi film industry. Many famous writers, like Ismat Chughtai and Saadat Hasan Manto, were associated with Hindi cinema.

Bombay films have contributed in a big way to produce an image of the city as a blend of dream and reality, of slums and star bungalows.

Discuss

Read Source D. What does the poem communicate about the opportunities and experience for each new generation?

Source D

The Many Sides of Bombay

My father came down the Sahyadris
A quilt over his shoulder
He stood at your doorstep
With nothing but his labour
...
I carried a tiffin box
To the mill since childhood
I was cast the way
A smith forges a hammer
I learned my ropes
Working on a loom
Learned on occasion
To go on strike

My father withered away toiling
So will I, and will my little ones
Perhaps they too face such sad nights
Wrapped in coils of darkness

Excerpted from the poem *Maze Vidyapeeth* (1975) by Narayan Surve.

Source

The verses of this poem are a stark contrast to the glittering world of films, pointing to the endless toil which new migrants encounter in the city.

Box 2

Not all cities in Asian countries developed in an unplanned manner. There were many cities that were carefully planned and organised. Consider the case of modern Singapore.

Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore

Today, most of us know Singapore as a successful, rich, and well-planned city, a model for city planning worldwide. Yet the city's rise to this status is quite recent. Until 1965, Singapore, though an important port, shared all the problems of other Asian cities. Planning was known in Singapore since 1822, but benefited only the small community of white people who ruled Singapore. For the majority of its inhabitants, there was overcrowding, lack of sanitation, poor housing, and poverty.

All this changed after the city became an independent nation in 1965 under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew, President of the People's Action Party. A massive housing and development programme was undertaken and it completely altered the face of the island nation. Through a programme of total planning which left nothing to chance, every inch of the island's territory was controlled in its use. The government itself won popular support by providing nearly 85 per cent of the population with ownership housing of good quality. The tall housing blocks, which were well ventilated and serviced, were examples of good physical planning. But the buildings also redesigned social life: crime was reduced through external corridors, the aged were housed alongside their families, 'void decks' or empty floors were provided in all buildings for community activities.

Migration into the city was strictly controlled. Social relations between the three major groups of people (the Chinese, the Malays and the Indians) were also monitored to prevent racial conflict. Newspapers and journals and all forms of communication and association were also strictly controlled.

In 1986, in the National Day Rally speech, Lee Kuan Yew's recalled his early experiments with planning: '... we would not have made economic progress, if we had not intervened on very personal matters: who your neighbour is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit or what language you use. We decide what is right. Never mind what the people think – that is another problem.'

Reported in *The Straits Times*.

Although the citizens of Singapore enjoy a very high degree of material comfort and wealth, there are many who point out that the city lacks a lively and challenging political culture.



Fig. 24 – Singapore Marina, which is built on land reclaimed from the sea.

Activity

Compare the examples of the work done by Baron Haussmann in Paris and Lee Kuan Yew, almost a hundred years later, in Singapore. Discuss if physical comfort and beauty in the city can be introduced only by controlling social and private life. In your opinion, is this a good enough reason for the government to make rules about the way in which people should live their personal lives?