

Ecology Rights and City Development Plans: The Case of Mumbai

PK Das, Mumbai.
12 March 2014



Many voices. Greener cities. Better cities.

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About the Writer:

[PK Das](#)

P.K. Das is popularly known as an Architect-Activist. With an extremely strong emphasis on participatory planning, he hopes to integrate architecture and democracy to bring about desired social changes in the country.

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Mumbai's development plan is revised every twenty years. The revision process of the current plan is underway for preparation of a new plan for 2014-2034, to be launched some time later this year. Amongst many issues that active citizens and environmental groups have flagged is that of ecology and environment. Sadly, ecology and environmental causes are considered by authorities as huge burdens on the "development" agenda, particularly so in "land starved" cities, as is Mumbai. This is true for many city governments around the world. Such a mindset has to be challenged. Sustainable Ecology & Environment has to be the central aspect of city development plans and prepared with peoples' participation. For this to be successful, ecology rights movements have to be popularized worldwide.

Interestingly, participation in the preparation of the new development plan for Mumbai has been bigger than anytime before. Under pressure from people's movements and active citizenry, the Municipal Corporation has launched public consultations before finalizing the new plan. Individuals, organisations and institutions engaged in wide ranging

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subjects are today actively contributing. As for the environmental cause, several groups have come together to jointly submit their views and demands during public hearings to the corporation's officials. This is probably the first time when such collective and concerted effort has been witnessed.

Background

City building efforts have led to unprecedented abuse and destruction of natural assets and ecosystems. Also their relationship with built environment has been severed in most instances. As a matter of fact, development plans and programs have dealt with natural conditions with hostility. Their exclusion from city maps or their inadequate documentation, as in the case of Mumbai, is an example of such apathy and indifference. Instead, our challenge is their integration, towards building a sustainable urban ecology.



City development anarchy in Mumbai.

Today, cities are seen as opportunities to build more, achieving higher and even higher construction turnover for mere financial gains at the cost of social and environmental interests. This build-more syndrome and the development anarchy across cities has led to the decimation of natural environmental conditions and turned these areas into city's backyards: both physically and metaphorically.

In Mumbai's case, the vast and diverse extent of the city's natural assets covering an area of over 180 square kilometers (area for construction & other development works being 260 sq.kms), has been damaged and in many instances totally destroyed by indiscriminate construction. These eco-sensitive areas have been considered as dumping grounds for waste disposal and illegal land filling. Such acts of arrogant violence against natural environment are increasingly witnessed under growing urbanization and city expansion programs.



Mumbai's seafronts as dumping grounds. Photos: PK Das

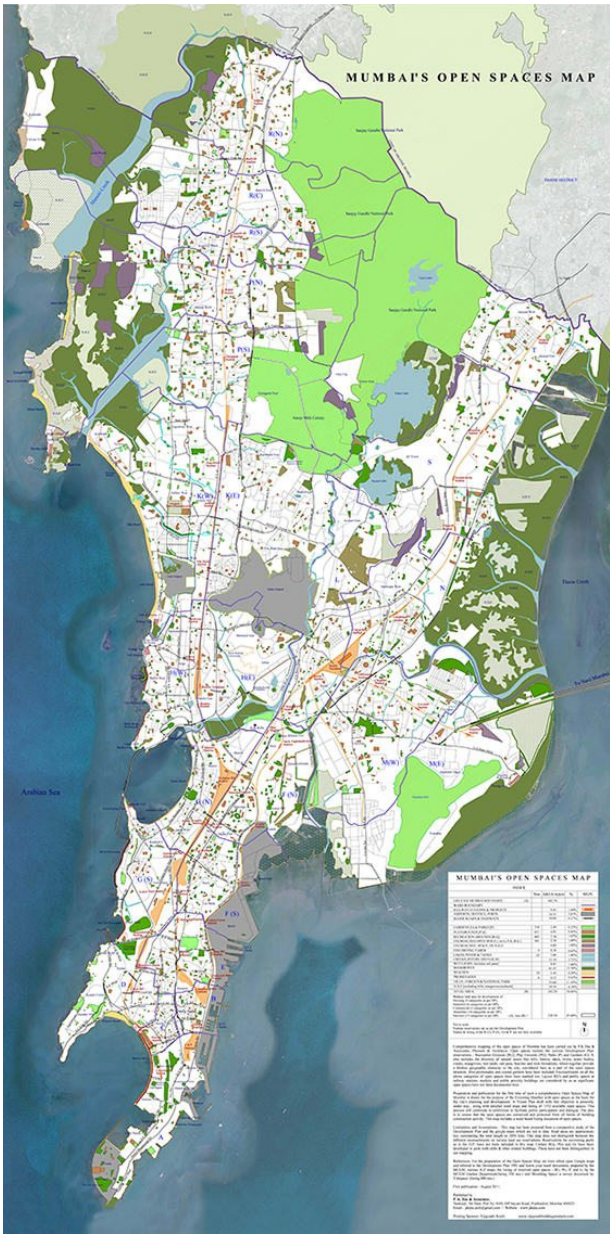
Open Mapping

Due to rapid expansion plans and programs in cities, it has become necessary to define boundaries and areas of various natural aspects. This proposal is not meant for a permanent division or separation of the natural areas from the city building process, but to ensure their protection in the intermediate phases towards the achievement of an informed integrated urban ecology. Also determining and demarcating buffer areas for every natural element has become an absolute necessity during this period. Such buffer areas will help in the establishment of open space between various built developments and core ecological areas.

While undertaking both these exercises we will experience critical differences with our governments and bitter conflicts with private builders and developers who forever want to extend their property boundaries onto these areas for further construction and real estate benefit. In

Mumbai, based on ‘Open Mumbai’ plans, we have jointly proposed to the authorities to designate the buffer areas as reserved public open spaces for walking and cycling without any form of construction and for regeneration of natural ecosystems. Further, we have proposed to develop a contiguous network of these buffer areas connected with other open spaces of the city parks, gardens, playground etc., and various public places: market areas, community buildings, transportation hubs, etc. We believe that free public access to spaces in this network will facilitate effective vigilance by community groups against abuse and misuse of the natural assets. Such collective engagement in open spaces will facilitate social networking and the democratization of public spaces and vital ecological resources.

Mapping is not merely a physical exercise but has to be understood as a socio-political action engaging people across neighborhoods and the city. Through the mapping process individuals would not only be able to contribute but will learn to work together with others in building public knowledge about ecology and the importance of conservation of fragile environmental conditions. People’s survey data, generated through collective engagements will challenge government’s skewed and insufficient information manufactured to suit certain vested interests that are contrary to larger sustainable environmental cause.



MUMBAI'S OPEN SPACES MAP				
INDEX				
	Nos.	AREA-SQKM	%	SIGN
GREATER MUMBAI BOUNDARY (A)		482.74		
WARD BOUNDARY				
RAILWAY STATIONS & PROPERTY		9.41	1.94%	
AIRPORTS, DEFENCE, PORTS		14.55	3.01%	
MAJOR ROADS & HIGHWAYS		30.00	6.21%	
GARDENS [G] & PARKS [P]	318	2.49	0.52%	
PLAYGROUNDS [P.G.]	631	4.01	0.83%	
RECREATION GROUNDS [R.G.]	603	7.18	1.62%	
ENCROACHED OPEN SPACE [on G, P.G., R.G.]	501	5.30	1.09%	
ENCROACHED SPACE ON N.D.Z.		4.80	1.00%	
FISH DRYING YARDS	5	0.16	0.03%	
LAKES, PONDS & TANKS	23	7.06	1.46%	
CREEKS, RIVERS AND NALAS		13.14	2.72%	
WET LANDS [includes salt pans]		8.01	1.66%	
MANGROVES		61.42	12.70%	
BEACHES	10	1.44	0.29%	
PROMENADES	6	0.12	0.02%	
HILLS, FORESTS & NATIONAL PARK		53.60	11.10%	
N.D.Z [excluding hills, mangroves, wetlands]		39.50	8.18%	
TOTAL AREA (B)		262.20	54.40%	
Balance land area for development of Housing (5 categories as per DP), Industrial (6 categories as per DP), Commercial (2 categories as per DP), Amenities (34 categories as per DP), Services (15 categories as per DP)				
- (A) less (B) =		220.54	45.60%	
Not to scale Various reservations are as per the Development Plan. Names & listing of the R.G's, P.G's, G's & P are not fully available.				

Comprehensive mapping of the open spaces of Mumbai has been carried out by P.K.Das & Associates, Planners & Architects. Open spaces include the various Development Plan reservations - Recreation Grounds (RG), Play Grounds (PG), Parks (P) and Gardens (G). It also includes the diversity of natural assets like hills, forests, lakes, rivers, water bodies, creeks, mangroves, wet-lands, salt pans, beaches and rock formations, which together provide a distinct geographic character to the city, considered here as a part of the open spaces structure. Also promenades and coastal gardens have been included. Encroachments on all the above categories of open spaces have been marked too. Layout RG's and public spaces at railway stations, markets and public amenity buildings are considered by us as significant open spaces have not been documented here.

Preparation and publication for the first time of such a comprehensive Open Spaces Map of Mumbai is drawn for the purpose of Re-Visioning Mumbai with open spaces as the basis for the city's planning and development. A Vision Plan draft with this objective is presently under way, along with detailed ward maps and listing of 1552 available open spaces. This process will culminate in exhibitions to facilitate public participation and dialogue. The idea is to ensure that the open spaces are conserved and protected from all forms of building construction activity. This map includes a ward based listing document of open spaces.

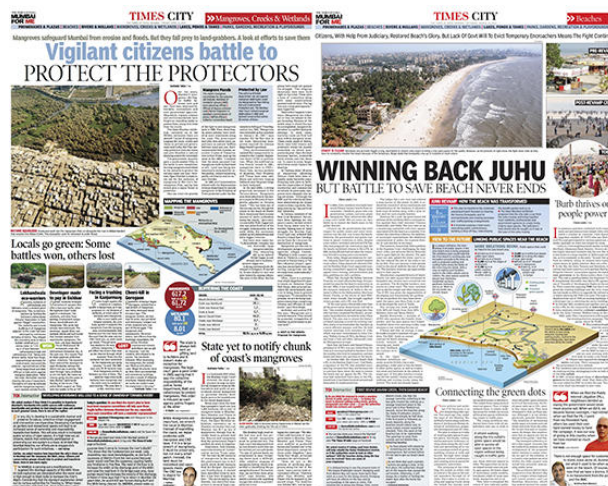
Limitations and Assumptions : This map has been prepared from a comparative study of the Development Plan and the google maps which are not to date. Road areas are approximate too, considering the total length as 2050 kms. This map does not distinguish between the different encroachments on various land use reservations. Reservations for swimming pools as in the D.P. have not been included in this map. Certain RGs, PGs and Gs have been developed in parts with clubs & other related buildings. These have not been distinguished in our mapping.

References: For the preparation of the Open Spaces Map, we have relied upon Google maps and referred to the Development Plan 1991 and 'know your ward' documents, prepared by the MCGM, various A-Z maps, the listing of reserved open spaces - RG, PG, P, and G, by the MCGM Garden Department (listing 700 nos.) and 'Breathing Space' a survey document by 'Citispace' (listing 600 nos.)

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Popularizing ecology & the environmental cause

Collective engagement along with wide public dialogue is a necessary democratic process for the achievement of such an objective. Organizing public meetings and campaigns for awareness towards building public opinion can achieve this process. Significantly, public engagement would be possible only when they realize the necessity of the importance of environmental issues in their daily life experience.

Citizen's action will inevitably include legal interventions and public interest litigations (PIL) in the courts. Many significant orders in favor of environmental cause have been achieved through this effort. In Mumbai's case, due to PILs, the Courts have ordered that mangrove areas be reserved as protected forests. Similar orders have prohibited land filling in wetlands. Strangely, the State Government of Maharashtra that includes the city of Mumbai has been pursuing an idea of building low-cost housing on saltpan lands and other wetlands for short-term political gains. These court orders are big victories in the battle towards conservation and protection of natural assets. But, filing PILs are neither simple nor easy for citizen's movements. They involve massive expenditure, time and sustained effort to cope with slow legal procedures. Moreover the opponents are powerful people with enormous resources at their disposal to fight these legal challenges.

20/01/14

Article - HC order will boost wetlands: Activists

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HC order will boost wetlands: Activists

Chinmayi Shetye/Press

Mumbai: The Bombay high court order directing the state government to ban construction on wetlands could lead a lease of life to acres around the city's coast where either construction or dumping of debris has destroyed mangroves, say activists.

On Monday the HC directed the state government to issue an order to all civic bodies stating that no construction would be permitted on wetlands.

Despite a rule to protect sites that fall under the Wetland Rules 2010, blatant reclamation of wetlands has been taking place at Oshiwara, Versova, Vashi, Ghodhunder Road, Mumbai and Navi Mumbai. The HC also

GREEN INITIATIVE

Following activities are prohibited under Wetland Rules 2010

- Manufacturing, handling or storage of hazardous substances
- Dumping of solid waste
- Discharge of untreated effluents from industries
- Any construction of permanent nature within 50 metres from the mean high flood level
- Reclamation of wetlands
- Setting up new industries or expanding existing industries

directed the state to identify the wetlands and take measures to protect them. Activists said the order comes as a boon for many areas where reclamation has

been in progress in broad daylight, in blatant violation of the law. They pointed out a Vashi area, for instance, where a 500-metre-long and 8-foot-high wall has been

constructed to block the tide gates. This has destroyed all mangroves in the area.

Similarly, around 50 hectares of coastal wetlands have been reclaimed by dumping of debris over the past five years. In Oshiwara and Versova, salt marshes and Mithanand have stretches of land where debris had been dumped and mangroves destroyed. "This is the first stage for construction. If buildings in these areas have come up, we will press for demolition," he added.

All these cases were referred to the court with photographic evidence by Vashibhakti, the environment NGO that filed the PIL on non-implementation of the Wetland Rules.

"The rules have been in place but there wasn't any implementation on the part of state or civic authorities. BSRO has already mapped

the wetlands and the state has to make the information public and ensure protection. The court order would help get the government to act," said Stalin D from Vashibhakti.

Stalin further said areas like Mumbra and Mira-Bhayander have stretches of land where debris had been dumped and mangroves destroyed. "This is the first stage for construction. If buildings in these areas have come up, we will press for demolition," he added.

Another activist working for mangroves protection said the ruling would mean the wetlands can be restored. "It will take time but if the state cracks down on dumping, the sites can be restored and the coastline protected," said the activist.

For long-term gain, it is important to achieve necessary legislative changes for

the protection, conservation and enrichment of various natural conditions. Governments deciding unilaterally or taking decisions in collaboration with highly influential private developers, land sharks and business houses, as is the practice today, leads to the downsizing of natural areas and depletion of these vital public assets. In spite of protracted struggles for environmental cause, governments have undermined such critical decisions and thereby allowed the continuing destruction of natural areas. In Mumbai for example, we witness large-scale illegal land filling, dumping of garbage and rubble generated from building repairs and construction sites onto areas of mangroves, wetlands, rivers and creeks. Even the city government, has over the years, used wetlands and mangrove areas as solid waste dumping sites. Hence, concerted democratic movements and protracted struggles will have to continue in order to influence decisions in favour of environmental protection and their conservation.

Integrated City Development Plans

Amongst many steps that have to be undertaken and battles waged, the formalization of boundaries and areas of the natural and eco-sensitive areas in the development plans of cities is of utmost importance. Only then we would achieve legal teeth for pursuing our ecology rights battles for the achievement of sustainable ecology and environmental justice.

Preparation of development plans of cities with such ideas and objectives creates new challenges. Integration of the natural areas with other social infrastructure and human development demands are complex, when basic human rights related to housing, amenities, access to healthcare and education are pressing demands. In

spite of public suggestions backed by surveys and elaborate data — as also carried out by Mumbai waterfronts Center and this author — the authorities in Mumbai have not committed as yet to define the boundaries and areas in the forthcoming development plan of the rich and varied natural elements that this city uniquely possesses.

With continuing pressure from movements and sustained public action, hopefully the authorities will ultimately concede to the demand for surveying all the natural areas and carry-out their integration in the forthcoming development plan for Mumbai.

Continuing participation and active citizen's movements have been able to influence government decisions in many other planning issues and related areas of concern. As demanded, the idea of participatory neighbourhood planning forming the basis of city planning, is one such example which the authorities have adopted. In the new draft plan, the city has been divided into 151 planning units.

Local area or neighbourhood plans facilitates maximum participation as people relate best to their neighbourhood. In any case, Mumbai has evolved by itself and every area has typical challenges. Each neighbourhood has its own unique set of strengths, weaknesses and opportunities, best understood by the people who live and have an interest in it. Also every neighbourhood has distinct geographic and environmental conditions. Allowing citizens to utilize this awareness of their neighbourhood will result in a vision best suited to them and to the city.

'Neighbourhood Planning' keeping larger, city issues in mind is the way ahead. It will empower local residents and make them responsible for their area development. This will truly be our Vision, our desired

future for our surroundings, our city and the environment.

In India, as in many other countries, destruction of natural areas continues to exceed efforts towards arresting them. Simultaneously, pretentious and counter-productive plans are mooted on many fronts. For example, to reduce erosion of the coastline including beaches, governments are dumping concrete tetra pods and building sea walls. Similarly, enormous concrete walls are being built on both sides of rivers and other watercourses to contain their spread. These big contract turnover projects permanently sever the water courses from the natural ecosystems.

Integration of the natural assets with other urban development goals is not easy; particularly when the city is being systematically fragmented into disparate and conflicting parts, best reflected in the physical form of cities. Land and resources, including natural areas are divided and barricaded and considered individually and separately for various construction and development works. How then can the integration of natural and built environments happen for the achievement of a sustainable urban ecology under the present nature of city development?

This integration is indeed one of our biggest challenges in our thrust towards urbanization and city building. For this purpose people's movements for environmental cause would necessarily have to join forces with other democratic rights movements for the achievement of integrated and inclusive cities world over. This has to be a simultaneous effort in all cities of the world.

P.K. Das
Mumbai

On The Nature of Cities



'Open Mumbai' Plan suggests networking the various natural assets, enabling over 500 kms. of contiguous public open spaces for walking and cycling.

