

Mumbai in the Dock

— Darryl D'monte

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The new minister for road transport, highways and shipping, Nitin Gadkari, is a man with a mission. Only months into his job, he is announcing scheme after scheme with the dedication of a messiah! Among the latest is the redevelopment of port lands in Mumbai, now for a large part derelict, which he estimates is worth Rs. 75,000 crores.

He may indeed have a soft corner for this city because when he was PWD minister in the BJP-Shiv Sena coalition government in the mid-1990s, he was responsible for commissioning the 50 fly-overs which many critics believe has only worsened the commercial capital's congestion, far from relieving it, since it promoted motorized transport.

His vision is nothing if not grand! In the port lands, which occupies 1,860 acres or 753 hectares – three times the size of the beleaguered mill lands in the city - he would like a Mumbai “Eye”, a giant Ferris wheel which soars into the sky. Actually, the proposal was originally mooted by the Shiv Sena politician, Ravindra Waikar, Chairman of the Mumbai Municipal Corporation's Standing Committee, who visited London in 2008 and was so dazzled by its Eye that he vowed to erect one in Mumbai [see: <http://indiatgether.org/eye-government>]. The site chosen was a rocky promontory in the western suburb of Bandra: after spirited protests by residents, the scheme was given a decent burial.

However, the BJP & Sena have a predilection for grandiose schemes and suffer from an “edifice complex”, like the Rs 200-crore statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Earlier, not to be outdone, the Congress-led coalition in Maharashtra envisaged building a Rs. 300 crore Shivaji statue in the Chowpatty Bay. Mumbai's Eye may not surpass London's, which is 135 metres tall and the wheel has a diameter of 120 metres. When erected in 1999, it was the world's tallest. Subsequently, its height was surpassed by the 160 metre Star of Nanchang in China in 2006, the 165 metre Singapore Flyer in 2008, and the 167.6 metre High Roller in Las Vegas this year. Mumbai politicians, who have often spoken about converting Mumbai into Singapore or Shanghai, have in recent years been star-struck by the Singapore wheel, which overlooks a man-made bay where the city-state's sewage is filtered to make it potable.

In addition to this “Eye in the Sky”, the minister has proposed a 500-room “floatel” or floating hotel which will be situated off Raj Bhavan in the Chowpatty bay. This unique form of amusement, which various promoters have been trying to initiate for several years, is also not the kind of amenity which will address the problems that Mumbai in general, and the docklands in particular, face. The city is tremendously short of open space – each Mumbaikar has only a little over 1 sq. metre, which must be the lowest of any mega city with more than 10 million inhabitants in the world, if not of any city per se.

Gadkari has formed a panel presided over by Rani Jadhav, the former chairperson of the Mumbai Port Trust (MbPT), to decide on what use the land belonging to the Port Trust should be put to. Significantly, it has invited public suggestions as well. Years ago, the Urban Design Research Institute commissioned the Kamla Raheja Institute for Architecture to do precisely this and submitted a detailed report to them.

There are certain basic facts which the port authorities cannot disregard. One is that with its low 10-metre draft, only smaller ships can enter the harbour. This is exactly why the Centre set up the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT) in Nhava Sheva on the mainland across the harbour. This modern port can accommodate the container traffic that is the desirable mode of marine transport of goods these days. MbPT also faces competition from Adani's Mundra Port, which is a Special Economic Zone to boot. To counter the criticism that it could not handle bigger ships, MbPT built a longer jetty to handle liquid cargo some years ago, since oil and other petroleum products are a major import. Many city planners believed that in doing so, MbPT was giving itself a fresh lease of life, though it had been on its death-bed for some decades.

Secondly, much of the cargo that comes into Mumbai – like fertiliser and oil products – is not meant for consumption within the city but elsewhere in the State or even distant destinations in the country. From and to MbPT, this cargo is carried by

truck and tanker and causes considerable congestion and pollution in an already congested metropolis. For all these reasons, it is only fitting that the MbPT takes a close look at what it really needs to serve a reduced demand for its services.

What has considerably complicated the problem is that it has leased out – often for very long periods – its godowns and other land within the docks. Companies like Hindustan Lever and Reliance have entered into such leases in a city where real estate is at a huge premium. According to rough estimates, some 45% of the total area occupied is not used for port purposes. Of course, there are legal contortions in terminating long-term leases which in effect puts some of this land out of public use or redevelopment for some years to come.

There is a close parallel on the issue of what to do with the docklands and the controversial sale of mill lands from the 1990s, which coincided with the country's economic liberalisation. The Maharashtra government changed the Development Control rules in 1991 to permit the sales of mill lands. Previously, because mills employed such a huge number – 2,50,000 hands at their height in the 1970s, the biggest number of people employed in one industry in a single city anywhere in the world – owners were not permitted to sell their land.

The government hit upon a three-part formula in 1991. One-third of the land had to be turned over to the Municipal Corporation for open spaces or schools or hospitals, another third for low-cost housing and the last third could be redeveloped or sold. However, it was not as if the owners were surrendering two-thirds of their plots: they obtained the floor-space index or FSI (buildable rights) on what they gave up. Some ten years later, when owners were reluctant to go this route, the State Government surreptitiously altered the formula to two-thirds of vacant land. Since mills occupied a huge footprint, this denied Mumbai some 300 acres of open space and low-cost housing in one fell stroke.

For the port area in particular, there is the precedent of London's Docklands, which occupy 9 sq. miles. These too had become derelict, with the decline of the UK as a major shipping power and the simultaneous rise of London as the global financial capital of the world. The redeveloped Docklands now form the City – with a capital C – denoting the financial centre. One disused dock was named after India, to indicate where trade once originated. As I documented in a chapter in a book titled *Ripping the Fabric: The Decline of Mumbai and its Mills* (OUP, 2002 & 2005), it was Margaret Thatcher's resort to market forces with a vengeance that was played out in the east end of London, generally a downmarket area, with Bangladeshis occupying squalid houses originally peopled by dock workers.

Thatcher virtually did away with any pretence of planning in this area and allowed global builders to call the shots. One, a Canadian firm called Olympia & York, went bankrupt in the process. An iconic multi-storeyed tower till today is Ferry Wharf, which houses the global headquarters of HSBC, among many other reputed firms. However, the entire development has come under severe criticism for neglecting the needs of local residents – either by way of jobs or of housing. The Docklands are largely deserted at night, when commuters leave.

Hence, for Mumbai's port lands, there ought to be a committee which draws eminent persons from different disciplines which will conduct public hearings on what shape the area should take. The hearings should present the views of the port authorities, port workers, industries in the area – including shipbreaking, slum dwellers and so on.

The *piece de resistance* of this area is the 18-km-long sea front which should be largely thrown open to the public as gardens, walkways and other such amenities in the space-starved city. Unlike the much-celebrated stretches of seafront on the western coast – Chowpatty and Juhu – the eastern coast doesn't bear the brunt of the south-west monsoons. In recognition of the role that the port played in the development of Mumbai, it will be fitting if there is a museum devoted to this history. A similar proposal was made to the

National Textile Corporation to set aside one or two mills for such uses, but that has fallen on deaf ears.

Simply put, the redevelopment of a major part of these 1,800 acres is far too important to be left to the MbPT, which is behaving like a penurious landlord and has often said in public that it doesn't have an inch of land to spare! The land has the potential of turning Mumbai into a great city, not just a congested and decrepit place. And, while doing so, Gadkari's fanciful and insensitive high-rise proposals should be firmly avoided.