Property is Expensive and Life is Cheap on Elphinstone Road

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Why Elphinstone Road and nearby Mumbai railway stations are congested – and dangerous.

Home-goers catching a late-night local train on the Western Railway in Mumbai in the late 1960s and early 1970s will recall that suddenly, a little after midnight, compartments at Lower Parel and Elphinstone Road would fill to the brim. Mills would run three shifts of eight hours each in those halcyon days and these were weary spinners and weavers making their way home.

Elphinstone Road and Lower Parel stations were in the heart of what the Marathi manoos nicknamed Girangaon, freely translated as the mill district. They were both on the slow lines where trains stop at every station and those who alighted from these in the day or boarded them at night were accustomed to the leisurely pace of life in those days. Most mill workers lived in chawls or four or five storey row houses within Girangaon and walked or cycled their way to work. The few who lived further afield travelled north to Dadar and caught a fast train to the suburbs.

All that changed after the 18-month long textile strike in 1982-83 which was led – reluctantly – by the maverick trade unionist Datta Samant. The strike was never officially called off, but when the mills resumed, one lakh workers lost their jobs. This was not the fault of Samant, as middle-class Mumbaikars believe to this day, but the gradual decline of the mills because the owners bled them to death, diverting the profits to newer heavy industries, chemical and later petro-chemical industries.
Mills weren’t allowed to sell their land because of the enormous labour force they engaged – at the height of their power in the 1960s, some 250,000 workers, the largest number in a single industry in any one city anywhere in the world. The 54 running mills, two decades later occupied 600 acres, valuable real estate even in those days. The venal Sharad Pawar government, at the helm of Maharashtra, amended the Development Control (DC) rules in 1991 to introduce a one-third formula for their sale. One-third of their area was to be surrendered to the BMC for amenities like parks, one-third to the Maharashtra Housing & Area Development Agency (MHADA) for low-cost housing and the remaining third could be sold or redeveloped. However, the mill owners received transfer of development rights (TDR) on the two-thirds they surrendered.

In 1996, the Shiv Sena-BJP state government commissioned a committee headed by Charles Correa to advise what to do with mill land. Among many other humane measures, Correa advocated a large Golden Triangle formed by clubbing land from contiguous mills instead of allowing their redevelopment piecemeal. That would have formed a maidan two and a half times greater than the area of a triangle between Hutatma Chowk (Flora Fountain), Horniman Circle and Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST). He also sketched how Elphinstone Road could be re-envisioned into a genteel people-friendly development with access to the roads and walking to work, instead of the terribly congested roads that plague this part of the city. His report was never made public because it would have eaten into mill owners’ profit, not to mention that of their political allies.

A full decade after the DC Rules were first tweaked, they were surreptitiously amended in 2001 under the late Congress Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh to require owners to part with two-thirds of only vacant land. Since mills occupied a large footprint,
Mumbai lost some 400 acres of parks, amenities and low-income housing by this single stroke of a pen. That opened the doors for rampant development of high-rise office complexes in this area, which the elite prefer to refer to as Worli (East) rather than the plebeian overtones of Parel-Lalbaug.

This development is partly to blame for the accident that took place on September 30 at Elphinstone Road station. The Raj era stations are hopelessly inadequate to deal with current usage. Now, planners estimate, there are nearly ten times the number of workers operating in the same space. Mill workers occupied a 30 sq ft area each in what was an industrial occupation; white-collar workers in finance, IT and other sunrise occupations require much less space with their work-stations.

If, however, as was reported in the Times of India on October 1, 2017, the latest Development Control Rules revert to the original one-third formula, and there are still 13 mills left today of which 11 belong to the National Textile Corporation, there is yet a possibility of using the 100 acres remaining available for open spaces and low-cost housing. Instead of high-rises, this redevelopment can create public access to railways and better public transport.

There are now nearly 150,000 travellers between Dadar and Elphinstone Road between 8:30 and 9:30 am every morning. The floating population in the nearby C Ward is five lakhs against one lakh residents, which gives a clear picture of the crush at these stations, including Currey Road on the Central Railway nearby.

Mill workers, some of whom received a brass handshake when they were let go, now have shifted to cheaper accommodation in the northern suburbs where their children do odd jobs. The clusters of residential high-rises that have sprouted on land formerly occupied by mills or chawls brandish exotic names and are unaffordable except for the rich businessman or highly-paid

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executive. Many are virtually like gated communities, with “open green areas” restricted to those wealthy enough to live there. They form oases of luxury, with slums literally at their doorstep.

The second factor to remember as the cause for the accident is the total negligence on the part of the railways, apart from the creaky infrastructure for passengers boarding and alighting from trains on suburban stations. When Suresh Prabhu, who hails from Mumbai, sanctioned the widening of the overbridge at Elphinstone Road in 2015, after repeated complaints from commuters, he merely passed it on with orders to follow up, which the Railway Mikados slept over in time-honoured fashion.

It is true that the suburban railways are subsidised, but that isn’t a sufficient argument to exonerate them for the inhuman conditions under which travellers commute. There are around 10 deaths every day on both lines due to a variety of reasons including the overcrowding of bogies: that grim statistic should have been enough to prod the comatose Western Railway administration into taking action.

The railways are the lifeline of Mumbai, with 7.5 million passenger-trips a day (not passengers, as is repeated in the media; over half the population couldn’t be catching a train). As it happens, a self-trained young engineer, Ketan Goradia, has been doing the rounds of the offices of the Western and Central Railways, successive chief ministers and even Union rail ministers with a proposal to increase the local railways’ carrying capacity by 750%. To put his idea most simply, it is to link the Western with the Central Railway at their southern end by connecting Churchgate with CST and likewise at their northern extremities, to form a continuous loop.

A group of public transport advocates, who include this writer, identify the main barrier to this overwhelmingly rudimentary solution being that the Western Railway won’t talk to the Central,
while the Union Ministry couldn't care less. It will take INR 40,000 crores—about as much as the single underground Metro line being built in the city. Will this accident, and the deaths of the tracks day after inexorable day, at last prod the Union railway ministry out of its stupor and examine this solution which is staring them in the face? This will solve all the mobility problems of Mumbai problems that are being wrongly sought to be addressed by the Coastal Road on the western seafront and the ever-growing number of flyovers and link roads, all of which only add to the congestion, don't relieve it.

Finally, will the accident prompt our 56-inch chest-thumping prime minister into giving up the horrendously expensive INR 110,000-crore Bullet Train, which only serves the elite between Ahmedabad and Mumbai and may turn out to be a white elephant if it can't compete with airlines? It only emphasizes the distance between the hapless daily commuter, or the long-distance traveller in the accident-prone lines, and the well-to-do. And will it force the Shiv Sena-ruled BMC to give up renaming Elphinstone station to Prabhadevi as if that name-change will atone for the deaths that have occurred or will continue to occur, unless drastic action is taken soon?