The Elphinstone Stampede: why the story of Elphinstone is the story of Mumbai

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On 29th September, 2017 there was a stampede on the foot overbridge connecting Elphinstone Road Station and Parel Suburban Station, leading to 23 deaths and several injuries.

It is easy to dismissively attribute the story behind 29th September’s crushing stampede in Mumbai’s Elphinstone Road station to a narrow pedestrian bridge. It is also convenient. Policy-makers and the ruling political class, locally and nationally, offered a wider bridge as its panacea almost immediately.

But, the story of Elphinstone is the story of Mumbai. The seeds of the stampede lie not in an unwidened bridge. It lies in the years of neglect the city has witnessed, a deliberate neglect made necessary by the collusion of the private and the public to the exclusive interests of the private. The stampede is its ugliest manifestation. Ironically, the neglect is symbolic on the streets of Elphinstone Road better than anywhere else in the city.

Elphinstone Road is witness to events that have transformed Mumbai’s character, spatial and social. The area has witnessed the emergence of the city’s textile mills, the slow creation of Girangaon, a combined milieu of the homes and workplaces of these mill workers and their families. The area has also witnessed its death, celebrated by the gleaming towers, five-starred hotels, tony pubs and bars that now stand in their place.

The transition from the new to the old, from the chawl to the tower, is the story of Mumbai.

It’s the story of an opportunity lost, squandered away recklessly by those who were supposed to be the city’s guardians—its politicians and bureaucrats—both, driven by cringe-worthy myopia, at best, and sheer moral depravation and unfettered greed at the worst.
In 1991, the Maharashtra government, in order to try and revive loss-making and financially unviable industries, allowed mill owners to sell mill lands, something that was not permissible until then. This sale, however, was conditional – the owners had to surrender 1/3rd of the total land for the government to create cheap homes and another 1/3rd for authorities to create green, open spaces.

The potential was immense. For a city gasping for breath, this offered a chance to live again. The government even set up an elite panel, consisting of urban planners and architects like Charles Correa and Rahul Mehrotra to suggest a holistic way of making the best of the opportunity.

The report the Committee submitted was a blueprint for a Mumbai that, today, is unimaginable. At Elphinstone, instead of the exclusivist massive glass-façade towers that stand today, the report envisaged using land from the Elphinstone mills and, on the Parel side, from the Tata Mills, to expand both the railway stations. The plan also proposed to create a train terminal at Parel, allocating adequate land. The two stations would have been directly connected to the two major North-South arterial roads on the East and the West, i.e. the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Marg and the Senapati Bapat Marg respectively.

The report also proposed a ‘Golden Triangle’ in Central Mumbai, an oases of green, open spaces, pedestrian walkways, road connections and water bodies preserved within the eight textile mills.

It was an audacious dream. The dream that people's priorities, their lives will take precedence over commerce and the self-serving, narrow interests of all those who were hovering over these mill lands like vultures, waiting to encash them.

The plan was submitted to the state government. Soon after, the government developed cold in their feet and greed in their hearts. The report was never made public.
Instead, the government, under then Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, went the extra hog to crush the dream, almost as a rebuke to the audacity it displayed. Deshmukh’s government tweaked the rule which offered all these mill lands for the city. Instead, it said that only the land on which there were no structures had to be surrendered. The owners could sell the rest of the land.

The decision had drastic consequences. From the nearly 400 acres that the city was supposed to get from the sale of these mill lands, the number crashed to less than 60 acres. The city did not get the land, neither green, open spaces nor the cheap homes. Instead, builders got real estate which was expensive and unaffordable to most. The towers, standing there today, are guarded oases of exclusivity, in stark contrast to its surroundings.

Mumbai, however, swallowed this and moved on. It celebrated the cafes, malls and pubs that came up. It worked in the offices of the plush towers that stood where the mills once did, realising little of the betrayal that the towers symbolised.

Since then, it has done that repeatedly, with an air of resignation and nonchalance.

This year itself, close to 60 people have died in multiple building collapses across the city. There is a near-nonchalance about such collapses in bureaucratic, political classes, dismissing them as annual events. These collapses evoke little other than routine assurances of an inquiry, a stray First Information Report (FIR) or an arrest.

In contrast, in London, the horrific fire at Grenfell Tower in June this year which claimed 80 lives, caused a massive stirring of outrage among citizenry and political class. Spurred by the fire, there were nationwide inspections of fire safety in buildings; why, there were even calls for Prime Minister Theresa May to resign.

Mumbai’s tragedy is not just in the past, it is perpetuated in the current moment, especially by a political class which has

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Mumbai sees an average of 7 deaths every day on its suburban railway systems, but this is seldom discussed, leave alone be the subject of angry outbursts and calls for action by our leaders. Instead, elected legislators across party lines were huddled together in approving a proposal to rename the Elphinstone station as ‘Prabhadevi’, after a Hindu goddess, or the act of adding ‘Maharaj’ to the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus.

The reactiveness of the political class can be gauged from the fact that they also renamed the Oshiwara station as ‘Ram Mandir Road’. The shame that this railway station took over 10 years to complete was left aside. What mattered was that it had a new name, even before it could be inaugurated.

The tragedy, though, continues. The Shiv Sena and the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) lashed out against the proposed Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train, as an almost spontaneous response to the stampede. Neither of them have shown the inclination or the capability to take their politics, in this moment of crisis, beyond the protest. The Sena, one to take on violent means as an involuntary response to most situations, is now hiding behind letters that its legislators and MPs wrote about the bridge. The MNS has blamed the city’s migrants for the stampede and has threatened to evict hawkers from railway bridges. The Congress, in a spectacular display of amnesia, has expressed outrage that the bridge wasn’t widened, mentioning little the role of its own governments in selling mill lands and neglecting the city’s urgent needs for infrastructure. The BJP MP Kirit Somaiya was captured dancing to the tunes of traditional Garba just hours after the stampede, while other leaders of his party are busy taking pot-shots at the Sena.
While a lot may be lost, not everything is. The Mumbai Port Trust (MbPT) is now looking at opening up a substantial part of the 1800 acres that the port currently occupies on the city’s eastern coastline. As a committee of experts suggested, this project has the potential of a major urban renewal and transformation in Mumbai.

Sadly, this also bears striking resemblances to the mill land sale. Just like the mill land dream, this project also carries all the dangers of being devoured by greedy land-sharks, myopic politicians and conniving bureaucrats. In fact, they have started eyeing the land, with noises being made about monetising it.

Will the city continue to look away?