Journeys Beyond the City

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Mumbai Return

Millions of Indians live away from their ancestral regions and villages, while maintaining active links back home. The exodus from rural India does not end in hyper-dense centres but loops back to villages, which are transforming as rapidly as cities. An accessible and affordable railway network helps city dwellers to maintain active links with their ancestral regions and villages. They are sites of holidays, marriage, upbringing, investment and eventual retirement for many. The families become part of extended networks connecting faraway places, and facilitating the movement of a hyper mobile workforce, through the vagaries of economic unpredictability and opportunities.

The ideal urban home is out of financial reach for most Indians, while the village alone doesn't suffice to fulfil the economic and educational demands of a growing middle-class. This is why an immense number of families from Mumbai, New Delhi, Bangalore or Chennai maintain two homes – a small, crowded one in the city besides the one they invest in, back in the village.

The Indian village does not belong to the past as much as to the future – and this future is resolutely urban, networked and circulatory. Official statistics indicating that India is still predominantly rural and will remain so for the next three or four decades feed a narrative of weak urbanisation and a diluted modernity. This misses the point entirely.

For one, the migratory trend of this ancient, historically agrarian and diverse nation does not conform to an expected one way,
“Scholars of migration in India remind us that patterns of movement, whether distress based or otherwise, tends to be part of circulatory routes. These shape India’s unique urban identity far beyond its cities.

Mumbai’s modern identity drew from its industries and mills that loomed large on its landscape from the mid-19th century. It drew in workers from all over the country, but at one point of time, the bulk of its textile industry workforce came from around 300 odd kilometres down the Konkan coast—from the villages and towns of Ratnagiri district. They were as integral to the city’s growth as were the gigantic factories they worked in with their northern light windows and enormous chimneys.

They participated in urban politics, produced theatre, and lead trade union movements. But one thing most of them unfailingly did, was go back to their villages every year, sometimes more frequently than that, to take part in agricultural activities, worship ancestors, celebrate festivals and weddings or to give birth all of which kept village ties alive. They built and rebuilt homes, looked after elders, got younger members to the city for education, among other things.

For decades, this relationship was fuelled by steamships and bad roads. It is only during the last twenty years that the railways expanded into this hilly, heavily forested terrain, making the bonds between the region and the metropolis stronger and more intense.

It is to showcase a part of this story, that urbz presented the ‘Mumbai Return—Journeys Beyond the City’ exhibition, that was held at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum between 1 July, 2017 and 13 August, 2017. The exhibition depicted the circulatory journey of urban families between their neighbourhoods in Mumbai and their villages in the Konkan. It brought together traditional artistic renderings, architectural drawings of vernacular houses and settlements portraits of families and model homes made by
contemporary artisans, along with interactive digital installations and videos. The exhibition was part of a deeper discussion that we are engaged in on the theme of Circulatory urbanism.

**Circulatory urbanism**

Circulation of people and goods are an endemic part of the Indian sub-continental experience. Caste and family ties help maintain deep roots with village ancestry. Social historians have for long pointed out how the need to move to the city for complementary work without giving up connections with agricultural life, were and remain extremely entrenched structures. What made this easier on a pan-Indian level, through most of the 20th century was the presence of the affordable railways.

However, as historian Ravi Ahuja points out: “railways and other forms of infrastructure... (are) materialisations of social relations in space. They should be seen simultaneously as results and preconditions of “circulation”, i.e., of potentially cyclic spatial practices of social groups” (Ahuja 2009).

According to him, the reality of circulation in the South Asian context is a short-hand for repetitive cultural and social practices that generate what was referred to by geographer David Sopher and Medievealist Burton Stein as “behaviour regions” or “circulatory” regions.

In another very important work—scholars Claude Markovitz, Jacques Pouchepadass and Sanjay Subramanyam, point out that circulation is not simple mobility. Circulation implies a dual move—a to and fro—which is repetitive and more importantly, transformative. If there is a form to social change in the Indian context—it follows the principle of circulation bringing about a shift. It is not just that the move to the city, which is significant—but the act of moving itself. And this cannot be overlooked when understanding the template of urban and rural connectivity.

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According to Subramanyam et al – (Markovitz, 2006), the totality of circulatory movements in a region or a social set up can be understood as a circulatory regime. Thus, the Mumbai Konkan region can be understood as one circulatory regime. And Mumbai has connections with many other regions like Tamil Nadu or U.P. These circulatory regimes shape the social and political structures in urban and rural contexts and they can intersect with each other in ways that produce friction or new modes of connectivity.

Indian Railway scholar Mariam Aguiar also underlines that Indian populations were already mobile and constantly circulating even before the establishment of the railways (Aguiar, 2011). Historical studies in India take great pains to explain how circulatory rhythms were part and parcel of economic (via trading) and cultural (via pilgrimages) dimensions of the South Asian region.

The sense of rootedness and slowness, of timelessness and rigidity that one popularly associates with the subcontinent,
went hand-in-hand with feverish movement. Pilgrimages were undertaken and commodities were perennially exchanged, and the overlapping goals of religious and economic travel produced a sense of geographical expansiveness that defied easy categorisations of identity and belonging.

Habitats and dwellings around riverine systems like the Ganges or the Sutlej in the north, the Narmada in the west, the Brahmaputra in the east and the Kaveri in the south did not produce rooted agrarian systems as much as a highly mobile population trading goods and services, which combined hybrid habitats and spatial functions for the people who lived in them. Even remote tribal communities interacted with non-tribal communities in weekly markets on trade routes to exchange forest produce for salt, oil and other goods (Ratnagar, 2004).


These include regular rural-rural migration, rural to small town migration, soldiers and peasants interchanging roles at different points in the year, upper caste and lower caste migration following specialised demands for labour in kingdoms more than 300 km away, even in an era where there was no mechanised transport of any kind. And all of this was accompanied by a return to the ancestral village, at different points of time. It is thus, not surprising that when Mumbai loomed on the horizon in the 19th century as an industrial hub, the villagers of Ratnagiri entered into its working cycle in much the same way as they had done before.

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The city: a new departure rather than an arrival point

Why should we assume that unlike the migration of any other species on earth, human migration is necessarily unidirectional and finite? In biology, migration refers to a circular movement of species that goes back and forth, seasonally or otherwise. Species usually migrate in search of resources and opportunities or to accomplish specific tasks. Then they go back or move forth. It is time for urban planners and policymakers to imagine a city of arrival that is not an end point on a migratory path, but an edge from which the journey takes a new turn.

The circulatory paradigm asserts that humans, like other species, seldom find everything they need in just one place. More often than not, they move within a space that contains several places, each with specific resources and functions.

Newcomers that come from all parts of India to Mumbai in search of safety or economic opportunity do their best to grow roots and feel at home in their new milieu. Many aspire to blend in their new environment. Many also aspire to keep the link to their native heimat alive. The circulatory life is one where these two aspirations converge, to a maximum.

This convergence happens through a variety of strategies. These include: physically moving back and forth; harnessing a broad and diverse social network and sustaining emotional, cultural and economic ties with faraway places. In the process, newcomers often create a spatial field – real, virtual and mental – that contains multiple places.

Policies and plans based on the notion that migratory flows are unidirectional, tend to freeze otherwise mobile populations. Understanding migration as a loop, rather than as a one-way street, may help us design cities and policies that could benefit the native place, the host city and the migrants themselves.

Progressive urban policies would in our mind, lower the barriers to enter the city and provide affordable and accessible accommodation.

**Tool-House:**
This economical “tool-house” has everything a family needs and more: Living room, workspace, rental unit and an open rooftop. This model was made with e-waste recycled in Dharavi.

*Image Credit: Rahul Shrivastava and Matias Enchanove*
located in dense and busy economic centres. The policy would focus on the provision of temporary accommodation rather than permanent housing. These would allow newcomers to kick off their lives in the city with a focus on finding jobs, starting their own business, or educational opportunities. After a few years, these newcomers would either settle in other parts of the city or move back to their villages with more money, experience, network, or education.

It is nearly impossible to capture this phenomenon quantitatively, but, if the statistics for net-migration to urban Maharashtra is any indication (~1,350,679 from 2001 to 2011), we can infer that people don't just come, settle and increase the population figure. They also move back and forth from there on.

Experientially, this movement is evident to anyone who has lived in a large city for a few years and who has met other people who have also come for certain amount of time. How much time one decided to stay in a city, depends on many personal and contextual factors. Some stay for a project, a course or a personal matter for a few months; others come for work, education, or to live with someone and stay a few years. Many stay for a decade or more and then move to a place that corresponds better to their changing means and aspirations.

Rather than regarding the propensity to leave only as a symptom of the city's failure to house its population adequately, we could take a more pragmatic approach and argue that cities need not be end-points for everyone and that we should instead focus on making them accessible to as many people as possible for a short period of time.

Right now in Indian cities, slums are fulfilling this function. Not only do they provide substandard quality of life, they also have the disadvantage of trapping populations in a narrative of poverty and illegality, when these populations actually see themselves as law-abiding middle or lower-middle class citizens.

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New typologies that resemble temporary accommodations more than permanent housing, seem to be emerging in cities that have looser control, such as Dhaka in Bangladesh. A young PhD scholar from Cambridge who is currently interning with us in Mumbai, Shreyashi Dasgupta, has discovered that in the past seven years or so, new forms of accommodation, modelled on college dormitories are emerging spontaneously in the city centre.

These accommodate either single men, single women or families in shared rooms inside mid-rise buildings. They are far from perfect but they are centrally located and provide much-needed access to the city to families that could otherwise not afford it, or who would have to find a place to live in a slum in the periphery. This would mean long commutes, bad living conditions and a degraded status as slum dwellers. This new form of accommodation is only acceptable because it is temporary and serves a key function, providing an access to the city for newcomers.

Homegrown Homes:
Bhandup, Mumbai
Over generations, makeshift shelters have developed into large and dense neighbourhoods, which are the gateway to city life for subsequent generations of migrants. Homegrown neighbourhoods like Bhandup, Chatkopar, Naigaon, Shivaji Nagar and Dharavi see communities of migrants living in close proximity to each other just the way they would, back in their villages.

IMAGE CREDIT: MARIUS HELTEN
In Mumbai, another typology, which we call the tool-house, has served as a similar access point. Tool-houses are either small homes or workshops where residential and working activities overlap. In the first case, they are often where family members from the village land up when they come to the city.

It provides them with the bare minimum space they need: a floor to sleep on and a job to earn something – hopefully enough to bring back to those who have stayed in the village. Workshops employ workers coming from villages who work and sleep there. Rather than family ties, it is the clan or community, which provide access. We have observed that in Dharavi (where our office is located) the time these workers stay in the city can vary widely. It can be a few years, with at the very least one trip to the village per year, or a few months. A worker who goes back to the village is replaced by another who comes from there. The workshop manager, who is usually from the same community, is the only one who needs to remain in place for the production to happen.

This last example is of particular interest to us as it seems to indicate that the live-work strategies of mobile villagers sometimes defies the industrial organisation of time that has always structured the city spatially and socially. To us, it expresses perfectly what the circulatory paradigm is about, and hint at its potential, if it was taken seriously at policy and planning levels.

Many urban jobs do not require a constant presence in the city. In the example above, a worker can be willingly replaced by another. In the case, the job is a resource shared between members of the same community. This specific cannot be reduced to the exploitation of a victimized labour force. It also shows the capacity of a mobile labour force to self-organise and exercise agency.

This helps understand something that always intrigues Europeans when they visit Dharavi for the first time: by European standards, the working conditions in many of the workshops in
Dharavi are abysmal. People perform repetitive tasks such as cutting leather in specific shapes or sew a motif on a piece of cloth all day long, they sit on the floor in cramped, moist and dark rooms with little or no ventilation. Yet, in many of these workshops the workers seem jovial and far from depressed. They do not seem as oppressed by their working conditions as they should be.

Why things appear to be this way is a complex story of course. But what is certain is that most of them do not feel trapped in their reality. They have a broad horizon in mind, which includes the village and possibly other places that their community network could give them access to. The ability of being mobile is an important aspect of their lives. This is provided by their family and community networks as well an affordable transportation and communication infrastructure besides policies that do not discourage movement between the city and the village (as opposed to the policies in China). Another factor that is important is that they work in small-decentralised units rather than at top down industrial scale.

Obviously, people are limited by their own conditions, their lack of education, their caste and economic status. As it is, the situation of migrant workers is far from representing an ideal. It rather expresses the inherent inequality that characterises countries like India, which has a socio-economic spectrum that ranges from sub-saharan Africa levels of poverty to European levels of wealth in parts of Mumbai.

However, as we have seen in our ethnographic study, even communities, which have been historically oppressed, can to a certain extent overcome their condition through access to education and earning opportunities in the city. The passage to the city is potentially transformative. It is precisely this possibility that progressive policies should promote.

“The ability of being mobile is an important aspect of their lives.”
There is no question that the city has helped millions to improve their conditions. The worry, however, is that as cities develop and consolidate, they may become even less accessible to migrants from remote rural areas. This is why a policy of keeping it open to temporary workers, traders or students by actively promoting affordable and centrally located accommodation is essential. Because settling for the long-run may become increasingly difficult, it is all the more important that newcomers maintain their link to the places they come from.

Rural populations have forever used cities as places of work in between two harvesting seasons. However, the only way in which the city has absorbed them is as informal, low skills, low-wage workers. Perhaps there could be another way in which the urban economy could deal with mobile populations. After all, why should cities be stuck in the industrial rhythm, when their economy has for long shifted to post-industrial time? This is
important, in particular for labour activists and policymakers, who are interested in improving the conditions of work in what is called the 'non-organised' sector in India. We should not improve working conditions in the workplace (in all these small insalubrious workshops) at the cost of fixing a population that could otherwise be mobile, and which through its movements, helps the urban economy as well as rural development. The right to the city should not come at the cost of having to renounce to the village.

We agree with David Harvey that “The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources” (2012). It is a right that is collective rather than individual, which according to Lefebvre must be claimed by the working class. It is a right to participate in urban life, says Lefebvre. It is the right to transform, shape and reinvent urban space and time. It is without doubt because this right was denied to them for so long, that many working class migrants living in slums have invested so much in their ancestral village.

Homegrown Homes: 
Ukshi, Ratnagiri
Villages across the Konkan have turned into the most dynamic laboratory for a new urban aesthetic with its varied typologies. Houses built by circular migrants reflect contemporary cultural choices and aspirations. New city-style homes are built next to traditional, old ones, ready to accommodate the extended family that returns annually for festivals and holidays.

IMAGE CREDIT: MARIUS HELTEN
But, to reduce the movement from the city back to the village only to an expression of class oppression would amount to denying these mobile populations any agency. By putting faces and words on an unidentified mass of urban workers with ties to the villages we realise that

1) the urban realm cannot be reduced to the city;
2) the right to urban life is being exercised in the villages as well;
3) the city should not be seen as the necessary end point of all journeys and aspirations;
4) the right to be mobile goes hand in hand with the right to urban life.

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IMAGE CREDIT: MARIUS HELTEN
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