

End of the Line

TimeOUT, August 6 – 19 2010

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Living on The edge

Rachel Lopez

When he was growing up in Mumbai in the 1950s and '60s, construction magnate Niranjan Hiranandani lived in a very different kind of city. Most people agreed that the city ended at Dadar and “Bandra was a far-flung suburb”, he said. As Hiranandani grew older, Mumbai grew bigger. By the late 1980s, he had signed an agreement with the Maharashtra government, the Mumbai Metropolitan Regional Development Authority and local landholders to build a township in Powai, much beyond the far-flung Bandra of his boyhood. Mumbai continued to march out even further. In the last decade, Hiranandani has built housing complexes as far away as Thane. He is now constructing a new township in Panvel, a place considered the very edge of Mumbai but which is only one of the four end-points of the city’s local railways system.

The website of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, the body that governs Greater Mumbai, has a large map marking Dahisar and Mulund as the borders of its 468 sq km jurisdiction. On the site of the MMRDA, the organisation responsible for developing the 4,355 sq km metropolitan area, the map is even larger. It also includes Thane district, Uran and Pen – satellite towns and villages whose economy is inextricably linked to Mumbai’s. But for most Mumbaikars, the city doesn’t end where civic authorities tell it to – it stops where the last local train does. On the Western Railway, that means Virar. On the Central Railway, it could be one of three points: Kasara, Khopoli or Panvel.

Hiranandani sees the railways “as important connectors to distant areas”, and they are. But more than a bonding agent, the railway lines have provided the blueprint for Mumbai’s growth, observed architect Charles Correa in his perceptive essay Public Transport as DNA. “The urban structure of Bombay was not ordained by any city planner,” he wrote. It was “really determined by the railway engineers” who laid down the Western and Central Railway local lines. (See Books for an interview with Correa.) Since the end of the nineteenth century, Mumbai has grown in the direction the train tracks led.

Consider these statistics: of the 38 lakh people who moved to the city between 1991 and 2001, roughly half have settled in the suburbs. The 1991 census shows that the population of Kalyan on the Central Railway exploded by 645 per cent in the '80s and the Mira- Bhayander region along the Western Railway expanded to 583 per cent during the same time. The number of first-class pass holders from Dahisar rose from 6.33 lakh in 2007 to 8.44 lakh in 2008, while their second-class counterparts increased from 38.12 lakh to 53.07 lakh. The numbers from Naigaon, Nalasopara, Thane, Dombivali and Kalyan stations showed an average increase of 40 per cent as well.

The railway tracks mark out where the city grew from, and point to where it’s headed next: the areas at the ends of the Central and Western lines. As a city, this puts us in an enviable position. We can plan today so our final destinations are well prepared for the population that is to come.

Mumbai is no stranger to this kind of arrangement. Its first suburb rose higgledy- piggledy beyond the Fort in Kalbadevi and Bhuleshwar in the mid-nineteenth century, but every region that subsequently rose beyond was planned keeping the city’s population growth and needs in mind. In 1866, Mumbai already had east-west connectivity via the Carnac, Masjid and Elphinstone bridges.

Thirty years later, an outbreak of the plague would force the Bombay Improvement Trust to decongest the city by doubling the number of roads, building low-cost housing and extending city boundaries up to Sion. In the suburban colonies of Dadar and Matunga, which emerged in the 1930s, the BIT allowed residents equitable access to sunlight and breeze by ensuring that no building directly faced the other.

Mumbai got its first city development policy as early as 1909, a 20-year plan designed to control landlords and develop homes for the poor. It had a town planning scheme in Bandra and Khar by the 1920s, zoning laws in 1951 that prevented the construction of factories in the island city and a sprawling colony for the middle income group in Bandra east by the 1960s. Mumbai seemed to know how to manage its growth.

So why are we now so grossly incapable of creating suburbs that can adequately support the expansion of our ever-growing city? All development in the Mumbai metropolitan region is supposed to be planned by the MMRDA. But the region also has several other entities that have decision-making powers: the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation

(which manages Greater Mumbai), 12 other municipal councils (for regions like Thane, Khopoli, Virar and Alibaug), the City and Industrial Development Corporation of Maharashtra (which is responsible for the planning of Navi Mumbai) and several gram panchayats, each managing their own villages. Neither of these is answerable to the other.

Perhaps that's part of the problem. The metropolitan region will have an estimated population of 21.9 million by 2015. But it also has perhaps the poorest infrastructure of any city of comparable size.

As the reports on the following pages show, there is sewage on the streets in Virar, four holiday-home complexes in Kasara but no hospital for its 16,000 residents, and no jobs for the residents of Khopoli. Even Panvel, the only planned suburb of all the end-point stations, is starting to strain at the seams.

“There is no overall strategy for urban development today,” observed Shirish Patel, one of the architects who submitted the initial proposal for building Navi Mumbai in the 1964. The plan, created along with Charles Correa, featured a series of stations along the train line around which buildings and a circular bus corridor could be created. Areas closer to the stations were to have dense growth that would diminish as one moved further away so that low income residents could walk to the station. Those who could afford it would have more spacious housing accessible by car. Instead, Cidco, the developing authority that was established in 1971 to manage the making of Navi Mumbai, opted to have a uniform density for the whole area, making for not only a monotonous landscape but creating traffic jams along the main roads in the process. “Funding for the infrastructure was to come from the sale of land by Cidco,” Patel said. “But Cidco turned into a private developer



and sold land at the highest profit. No low-income housing was created.”

Sunil Mantri, the president of the Maharashtra Chamber for Housing Industry, an association of builders and real-estate developers, believes that Mumbai's northward sprawl and rapid pace of construction means that today's last stops will be tomorrow's bustling suburbs. “They will look like Andheri and Goregaon,” he predicted. But unless new development plans are drafted to keep pace with the city's growth, they're likely to have Andheri and Goregaon's nightmarish infrastructure too. Mumbai's first development plan was formulated in 1964; its second came into force between 1990 and '93 and is valid until 2013. “Plans should come every 10 years, not every 30 years,” Mantri said.

They should ideally come before development takes place, so infrastructure precedes growth and

doesn't have to be retrofitted (like in the case of the metro, monorail and the Jogeshwari-Vikhroli link road projects). Rohit Mujumdar, an architect with a special interest in the peripheral Vasai-Virar region, recalls the press reportage that followed the announcement of the Vasai-Virar development plan in 1988. “The headlines said that 10,000 hectares had been opened up to development,” he said. “But the articles revealed that some 7,000-8000 hectares of that land had already been bought by builders. The plan seemed like an afterthought.”

To make up for the lack of statesupplied infrastructure, large townships like those by Niranjan Hiranandani integrate parking, recreation and even schools and private hospitals into their layouts. “Living is not just staying in a flat,” Hiranandani said. “Eventually you have to get out of the house, go shopping, meet people or go to the doctor.” As more private townships



sprout up in the new suburbs, the disparity between people who depend on state-provided amenities and those with the ability to buy them are becoming more obvious. It's likely that some building complexes will soon have four-lane highways within their perimeters, even as treeless alleys are all that separate one township from the next. Today's Kasara villagers could end up as project-affected persons if a development plan for the area comes after the place is over-run with holiday homes and the roads need to be widened to accommodate SUVs.

But even before it addresses the problems at the city's periphery, the MMRDA is thinking beyond it. Plans are under way for a Mega City project just

outside Panvel that will include an IT commercial centre, an entertainment city and rental housing. In the Igatpuri-Vajreshwari area beyond Kasara, where much of the land is owned by local temple trusts, the MMRDA is working on a Recreation and Tourism Development Zone that could block public access to the river and green areas. In Pen, not far from Khopoli, plans for the Mumbai Special Economic Zone are already the subject of much controversy and in the midst of it all, the MMRDA has recently commissioned a feasibility study to develop the 140km stretch between Virar and Alibaug. Our local trains don't even reach that far yet. But as previous experience has taught us, it's time that we begin to think of taking them there soon.

Industry standard

Megha Mahindru

Some residents of Khopoli haven't have been to a movie theatre in a decade, ever since the area's only cinema hall shut down ten years ago. But the town Khopoli still attracts plenty of youth from around the region. For many of them, the last station on one branch of the Central Railway main line is the first point of contact with the urbanization and the possibility it brings of a better life.

That's obvious from the activity at the year-old Tata Indicom call centre. It is filled with some 250 head-phone-wearing boys and girls from as far away as Ulhasnagar. They travel 12 stations and more than 50 km to work, and their shifts are dictated by train schedules. "It is our rural operations centre," said Sagar Pardesi, who manages the centre. "So most of the staff is fluent in Marathi and a few are given tasks in Hindi and English."

The existence of the call centre isn't really surprising, considering that Khopoli has been an industrial centre of sorts for almost a century. Its potential has been recognised by businessmen since 1914, when the Tatas set up the country's first private hydroelectric plant here. But the big wave of business development came only in the 1960s, when Khopoli and its neighbouring areas became home to factories that manufacture paper, food, pharmaceuticals, chemicals and steel, big names like Mahindra and Mahindra and Cadbury, and several smaller industries for packaging, pipes and bricklaying. The Khopoli Municipal Council, which replaced the Gram Panchayat in the '70s, expects the 2011

census to reveal a population of close to one lakh, a huge jump indeed for a village that had only 515 residents in 1882.

So tied is Khopoli to industry today that a local waterfall, one of the area's big attractions, is named Zenith Falls, after a steel company in the vicinity. Not that anyone minds. "People's lives improved with the coming of industries," said Kishore Yashwardhan Tanna, 60, who runs a grocery shop near Khopoli station and whose family has lived in the town for five generations. "It created plenty of jobs and gave us good connectivity to Mumbai and Pune through the Expressway.

Shankar Dattu Ghatge, who moved to Khopoli from Kolhapur in 1951, agrees. He started out as an employee of Tata, but later found a more lucrative job with Mahindra and Mahindra. Now 77 and retired after 31 years of service, Ghatge says that his life as an industrial worker may have been hard but has been paid off – and paid off well. "When we shifted to Khopoli, it was a jungle," he said. "A few years into my service, our company accommodated their workers at the Musco colony." At Musco, Ghatge and his colleagues live in two-bedroom houses within a building complex that accommodates a fair-price grocery outlet and a recreational club complete with swimming pool. The area now has English medium schools and colleges. Many of its inhabitants own two-wheelers.

While Khopoli seems bright on the outside, it takes only a little surface-scratching for the veneer to chip. The town that supplies power to Mumbai and Pune still lives life ruled by load-shedding timetables. "There has been no major



Khopoli
Population 58,657.*
Distance from CST 115km.
Commuting time to CST by train
2hours 30 minutes.

*According to the 2001 census

Metro flashback

Excerpts from the Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, 1882. Khopivli, formerly known as Campoli, is a small village of 515 people. In 1779, the Bombay expedition, which was to have set Raghoba in power in Poona, had several skirmishes with the Marathas in Khopivli in which two English officers were killed.

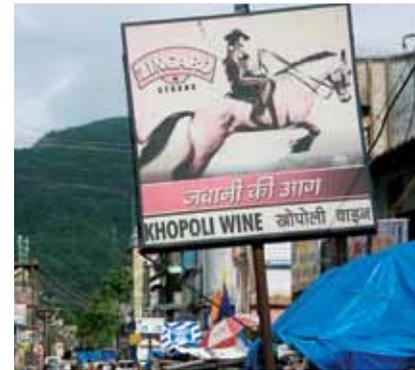
development in recent times here,” said Pravin Jadhav, bureau chief of the Raigad Times, which occupies a one-room office in Khopoli. “It’s mostly road accidents on the Expressway that make news.” The town was abuzz with anticipation in 2003 when steel giant Bhushan Steels set up in Khopoli. The locals had been hopeful about new job opportunities, but the company ended up recruiting most of its employees from outside the state. The cloud of resentment that this created resulted in the murder, in 2008 of Dharamdev Rai, a worker from UP.

Though political hoardings proclaim Khopoli’s allegiance to Babasaheb Ambedkar’s beliefs, hints of the Shiv Sena’s agenda ricochet around the town. The townsmen resent outsiders taking jobs they believe should be theirs. “Murder was no way to react, but our

people have to go to far off places to work, because all the jobs here are taken,” said Tanna. Ghatge’s son, Nitin, who works at in a small plant that makes plastic bags and pouches, claims that the workers from UP were willing to work 12-16 hours for the same salary that locals demanded for an eight-hour-day. “This is a no-win situation for us,” he said.

Nitin Ghatge’s colleague, Bhagwaan Sawant, also believes that the real story of Khopoli lies beyond the large industrial plants. “It’s fine to say that Khopoli has big industries and is developing,” said Sawant. “But if you turn to the smaller industries, you’ll find that the city hasn’t changed at all.” A year ago, Sawant, 27, started a project with the research organisation Pukar to investigate the exploitative conditions and problems faced by labourers in the unorganised sector, which includes soap plants and biscuits factories. “We found out that there were no unions in the small-scale industries,” he said. “Many of them are forced to work extra hours without any added compensation. The industries do not even offer basic medical and transportation costs to their employees.”

It took Khopoli many centuries to grow from a little village into an industrial town. Now, the pace of change is much quicker. As costs rise, many industries are considering relocating to nearby villages, with cheaper land and labour. Mumbaikars may see Khopoli as a place to hike, relax and speed along the planned 26-acre private dirt track for bikes and car rallies, but the new generation of Khopoli residents are starting to see something else: a dream deferred and a big city that’s still a very, very long train ride away.



It Happened Here

Some Khopoli residents see UFO, January 2005.

The night of January 11, 2005, continues to baffle residents of Khopoli. Around 8.30pm, a loud explosion was heard in Apta, Chirner, Kharpada and other villages in the area. “The walls of my house began to shake and we immediately rushed out,” recalled Apta resident Sanjay Patil. “That is when we saw a ball of fire in the sky.” Panic spread. Residents didn’t know where the luminous sphere had come from or where it was going. Some wondered if they’d been visited by an alien spaceship.

Police teams were sent out to investigate. “From what I remember, none of the teams was able to recover anything,” said Pravin Jadhav, the Khopoli bureau chief of Raigad Times. Some newspaper reports suggested that the explosion had been caused by an errant fighter aircraft that was flying faster than the speed of sound, triggering off a sonic boom. The ball of fire, these reports claimed, was actually the trail from the plane’s exhaust. Others speculated that the culprit was a misfired round from a naval anti-aircraft gun. Some reports even claimed that the fireball was the result of an asteroid falling to the Earth. Nothing was established conclusively. “I don’t know what happened,” admitted Khopoli tehsildar Ramnath Karad. But for eyewitnesses, the mysterious ball of fire cannot be forgotten. “I have never seen anything like that,” Patil said. Zeenat Nagree



Tracking changes

Zeenat Nagree

On the tracks of Khopoli railway station, even goats have nothing to fear. They linger lazily, grazing on the weeds that sprout between the rails, secure in the knowledge that if a train has just left, there won't be another for a long, long time.

Passengers know this too. Of the 336 trains that depart from Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus on the Central Railway's main line every day, only seven trains chug into Khopoli, 115 km away. They pass by much of eastern Mumbai and weekend stops like Neral (which links to Matheran) and Karjat to get to Khopoli, and once they do, they have nowhere else to go but back the way they came. That train track is more than just a band of steel. By connecting Khopoli to CST, it's made the tiny town part of the idea of Mumbai.

"Before the suburban trains started running, no one had seen Mumbai," recalled local resident Prakash Chawan. "It existed in our imagination as a place that was out of reach." That changed on the afternoon of October 2, 1996, when the first train ran on the newly-electrified track, embracing Khopoli into the suburban train network.

Former resident Sudhir Shetty, who has since moved to Mumbai to work as a newspaper illustrator, remembers the excitement of that day. "The engine was smothered in garlands," Shetty said. "Everyone wanted a picture with the train. But what we all were really excited about was the free ride to CST."

Shetty didn't know then that the train would play an important part in changing his life. The services were even more infrequent than they are today, but the direct trains afforded Shetty a chance to travel to the Sir JJ School of Applied Art from 1998. It meant living a life dictated by the railway time-table and working on his drawing skills in a moving train. But this was the only way out from Khopoli which has only two colleges: the BL Patil Polytechnic, for courses in engineering, or the KMC College, which has BA, BCom and BSc programmes.

Today, more than 2,000 passengers take the Khopoli train to CST. But only a few of them make the entire two-and-a-half-hour journey. The seats usually empty out and fill up at major stations like Karjat, Badlapur, Ulhasnagar or Kalyan, which are centres of employment for Khopoli residents. "There are few opportunities in Khopoli," said Chawan. "Some of us go to Mumbai in search of better wages." The 25-year-old Chawhan wakes up at 5am every day to catch the 06.13 local and commute to Kurla, where he works as a mobile-phone repairer. "No matter how tiring or frustrating it is, I have to keep going," he said. He is certain that the journey will pay off soon. He hopes it will help him save enough money to start his own mobile-repairing shop in Khopoli in the next five years.

Not everyone has been strong enough to sit out the ride. Shetty says that two of his art-school classmates dropped out mid-semester because "they just couldn't handle the journey". Shetty graduated in 2002 and continued travelling to work until 2006, but today,

he has given up too. Newspaper work hours don't coincide with a sevendays-only service, forcing him to look for rental accommodation closer to his office in Parel. "It came to a point where I could do my job or leave it unfinished to catch the last train home," Shetty said. He now lives in Currey Road and goes home only on the weekend.

Khopoli residents want the frequency of trains to be increased. They often end up boarding one of the 15 shuttle daily trains that run 15km to Karjat, where connectivity to CST is more frequent. Kishore Yashwardhan Tanna, 60, who runs a grocery shop near Khopoli station, believes that the residents will do better only if they can travel easily to the city. His father Govardhandas Purshottamdas

Tanna served as the sarpanch of Khopoli and after the Gram Panchayat was replaced by a municipal council in 1970, he served as the president for eight years. In 1964, he witnessed the four-car passenger trains that connected Khopoli to Karjat being phased out by six-coach trains. "When my father inaugurated the first suburban train in 1996, he was happy because Khopoli was finally getting what it needed," Kishore Tanna said. "It was the fruit of the struggle of Khopoli's residents, including my father. But now we need to carry the struggle forward." He wants all the shuttles to and from Karjat to be converted to direct trains to CST.

Even though the tracks to Khopoli were laid down as early as 1856, the station seemed to have been forgotten amidst the expansion of the Grand Indian Peninsula Railway. The village was of

significance to travellers only because it allowed access to the Bhore Ghat, which climbed on to Khandala and Pune. The village gained prominence in 1914 when Tata Power started India's first private hydroelectric project there, creating Patalganga, an artificial waterway, which encouraged other industries to come to Khopoli. The industries attracted workers from across the country and ultimately necessitated a goods train service. "There was significant goods traffic along the line," said Rajendra Aklekar, an amateur railway historian. "But it was discontinued in 1994 after the [Mumbai-Pune] Expressway was built and transport improved in the region."

The abandoned goods train platform standing parallel to the passenger platform at Khopoli station is a symbol of how the rest of the city views the suburb: it's a convenient outpost for industries that cannot be accommodated in the city but it isn't on the radar of the authorities. Its residents only have a tenuous link to Mumbai – a single railway track that cuts across paddy fields. "The train has certainly made my life better," Chawan said. "But some days, when I am leaning out of the train, I don't know how long I can hold on."



Paint It Green

Zeenat Nagree.

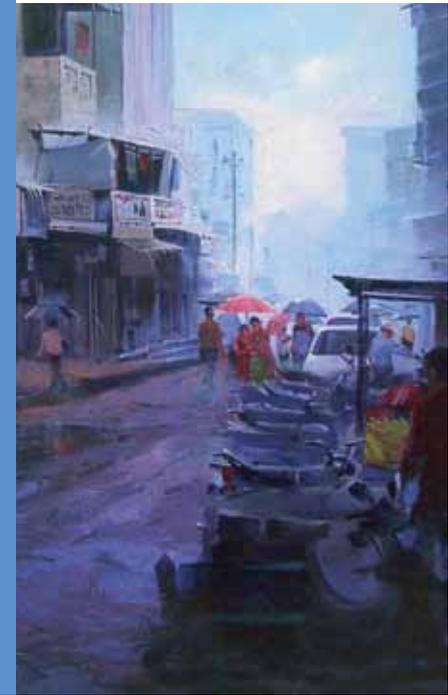
Six years ago, when fine artgraduate Deepak Patil looked at Khopoli's verdant landscape from the window of the State Transport bus in which he was travelling, he knew he had found the inspiration he was looking for. The 21-year-old painter had left his home-town Dhule in search of work but had found a subject for his canvases instead.

Patil's oil on canvas renditions of village life, rural women and the local bazaar will be displayed at the Jehangir Art Gallery and the Nehru Centre in September at an exhibition titled *Pravaas, Marathi for travel*. "The journeys I have undertaken are very important to me," Patil explained. "On my way to Khopoli, I saw many beautiful villages and fields. I tried to memorise the scenes in front of me so that I could transfer them on canvas later." To support his artistic calling, Patil started working as a teacher at the Khopoli Chitrakala Mahavidyalaya.

Today, Patil is the principal of the institute. He still follows his old routine, spending his morning teaching the basics of painting to fineart diploma students who come from Khopoli, Karjat, Alibaug, Dombivali and his evenings touring surrounding villages, stopping to take photographs and make watercolours. "What I like about Khopoli is its proximity of to Mumbai," Patil said.

Suburban train connectivity allows Patil to frequent the Jehangir Art Gallery, the Museum Gallery and the Nehru Centre twice a week. "This journey from Khopoli to Mumbai has been a source of inspiration too," Patil added. Over the last three years, urban landscapes have appeared in Patil's canvases. Mumbai's streets, people, traffic and architecture have become a subject that he enjoys painting.

Patil knows that a chance to exhibit in Mumbai's galleries isn't a common occurrence for a Khopoli artist. So in 2010, he established The Art Group, an exhibition hall on the first floor of the Food Hub, a rest stop on the Mumbai Pune Expressway. Fifteen minutes from the Khopoli exit, this gallery is the only venue in the area to exhibit art. He has convinced the Food Hub's authorities to let artists use the hall for free, and only pay commissions on the works sold. Patil scouts for local talent, mainly his friends and students, to showcase at The Art Group, hoping to entice passengers halting on the Expressway. But, Patil knows that if he wants to give his artistic career a serious chance, he will have to look south. "The local market doesn't even stock canvases or imported paints," he said. "I want to be a full-time artist and that's why I am thinking of moving to Mumbai."



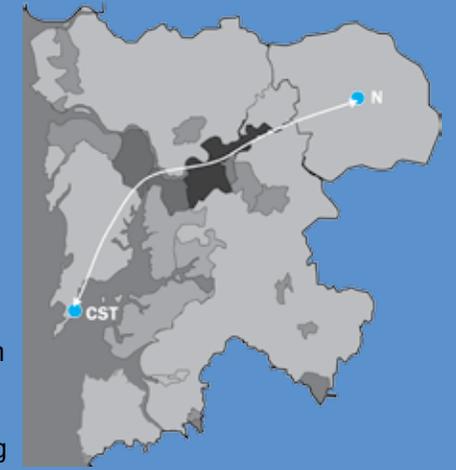
Kasara

Population 15,912.*
Distance from CST 120.56km.
Commuting time to CST by train
2 hours 30 minutes.

*According to the 2001 census

Metro flashback

Excerpts from the Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, 1882. In 1824, the village was deserted and the Collector had to remit assessment and settle a guard to induce the people to come back. This attempt seems to have failed. Two years later, Captain Clunes notices it as a deserted place with one well. He remarks that the settlement of Kasara, whose people had fled during the two previous years because of the oppressive system of pressing labourers, would be a great gain to troops and travellers.



Villas in the village

Saumya Ancheri

For most of the last two decades, only two kinds of travelers booked tickets to Kasara, the last stop on Central Railways' northeastern line. They were either tourists, heading to picturesque Igatpuri or Nashik beyond, or Kasara residents headed home after travelling to Mumbai for employment, education, medical care or simply a movie and some shopping.

But in the last three years, a new breed of passengers has been getting off at Kasara station. They're owners of the slew of holiday homes that have been sprouting around this sleepy railway outpost, and have left their pokey Mumbai flatsto spend the weekend in spacious second homes that come with swimming pools, golf courses, shopping complexes and other frills that Kasara has never seen before.

Kasara is tiny. It began to grow a little during in the early '80s, when inhabitants from nearby villages started living there during the week so they could commute to Mumbai for work more easily. The 2001 census, which only counts full-time residents, put Kasara's population at a measly 15,912. Most of the town has sprung around the station, in a haphazard cluster of two-storied cement houses, a few grocery stores, even fewer places of worship, a police station, two banks, a school, a primary health care centre and one statue each of Shivaji and Babasaheb Ambedkar. The nearest fire station, hospital, engineering college and cinema are 32km away in the tahsil headquarters of Shahpur.

"All the development in Kasara is only because of the trains," said BS Aher, a railway employee who was posted to Kasara for the first time in 1976 and who now serves as Kasara's station manager. The CST-Kasara line was laid

by the Great Indian Peninsular Railway in 1861. But it was only in 1981 that the station expanded from one platform and three local trains every day to four platforms and 16 daily trains. Last year, the number of people travelling the two-and-a-half hours between Mumbai and Kasara every day stood at 4,820, enough to pack only two local trains.

But the numbers belie the way the town has been growing. The expansion of the Mumbai-Agra NH3 highway, which passes through Kasara, from four lanes to six is nearly complete and so are the themed bungalows that have sprung up along the way. It has put Kasara only an hour's drive away for the car-owning middleclass residents of Kalyan, Thane and Mumbai's eastern suburbs. With that in mind, Ansal Housing has started a project about 15km from Shahpur called Suvarna Vilas, which boasts "Thai-style retreats". Prices start at `29.49 lakhs for a 1BHK villa and

extend up to `82.50 lakhs for a 3BHK villa. In Khardi, the station just before Kasara, a company called Villa Township, which says it has offices in Dubai, Singapore and the US, is building Our Town, a cluster of cottages especially for NRI clients. BlueBell Architect's Landmarc Hills, about 5km from Kasara, has 438 villa-sized plots and is advertised as "resembling the yesteryear magic of Khandala".

Each retreat claims to be built on non-agricultural land, comes equipped with a clubhouse and gym, and offers in-house catering, housekeeping and 24-hour security that guarantees against encroachment. The staff at Our Town also look after clients' vehicles and organise treks and bonfire parties. Suvarna Vilas says its guests can sun on private pool decks, motor across the 225-acre property in all-terrain vehicles, tee off on the mini golf course, fish in the stream that runs through the property, and head to the spa. Landmarc

Hill's residents get free membership to holiday resort chain Sterling Resorts in case they need a change of scene.

At Orange City, the bungalow complex closest to Kasara station, the clubhouse is still under construction, but only a dozen of the plot's 230 villas remain unsold. Each cost around `30 lakhs. Jain Datar, a Mulund resident who has bought one of Orange City's identical villas, has been making the 90km trip to Kasara every fortnight for the past 18 months. "The location is ideal," he said. "It's on the highway and about 4km from the station."

Datar is in the merchant navy, and his wife and child keep up their fortnightly ritual when he's away at sea. He isn't put off by the thought of owning a holiday home in a town with no mall or cinema. His villa is equipped with a DTH television connection and he's waiting for the clubhouse to be completed. He says that Orange City is, after all, "a getaway from the crowd and rush of Mumbai".

Orange City builder Prateek Bhide says that there are plans for another four holiday-home complexes along the NH3, two of which will be launched next year. "Apart from the good connectivity by rail and road, there is decent – I would not say great – atmosphere specifically during the monsoon and winter," he said. He also added that Kasara's property prices make it a cheaper option than buying a plot in Pune.

The prices won't stay low for long. Santosh Naik, the CEO of Disha Direct, a marketing firm selling four properties along the NH3 between



Kasara and Shahpur, said that the price of an acre in Kasara has appreciated sevenfold from `two lakhs per acre in 2008 to `15 lakhs today. Villa Township's website claims that "prices in Our Town appreciated over 250 per cent in the last two years". Villa Montana in its 400-acre township is now selling for `29.70 lakhs, while Casa Rio is going for `23.40 lakhs.

However, the potential for horizontal growth in Kasara doesn't guarantee that it will be paradise for its residents. "You can have a villa or a larger apartment, but what's the use if there is no infrastructure?" asked Naik of Disha Direct. "Rail access allows people to be aware of a town, proximity to highways help sell a location too, but ultimately there has to be road access, electricity and water supply." Bhide of Orange City admitted that Kasara's major stumbling block was the water supply. The region receives



adequate rainfall, but “the reservoirs and distribution is not good”, he said.

For long-time Kasarakars, holiday-time still involves heading to Nasik and Igatpuri. Locals can neither afford homes in the new developments nor benefit from the captive infrastructure that makes easy living possible in the bungalows. Landmarc Hills has borewells, a pump to draw water from the stream on its property and access to the government pipeline.

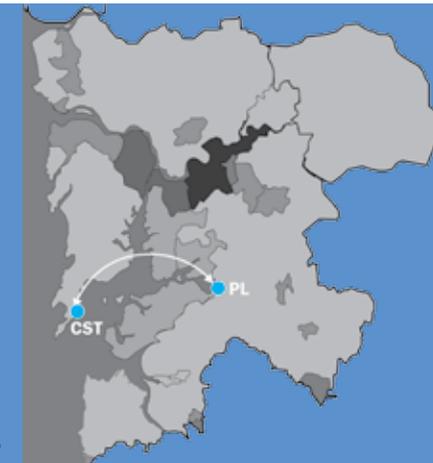
But Kasara residents still rely on the local well because the municipality lines release water for only an hour every five days. Orange City’s Prateek Bhide said that 10 per cent of his project’s infrastructure cost was spent on making an artificial reservoir to harvest rainwater for the villas and the club’s swimming pool. The property is subject to the same six-hour load shedding that Kasara

suffers every day but it has installed transformers for so that the water filtration plant is still kept working.

Kasara’s tahsildar Sanjiv Jadhavar believes that boom in real-estate will help the locals in the long run, since it will allow villagers to find jobs as labourers and construction workers. With shopping complexes and other urban recreations like movie halls expected over the next 10 years, job opportunities may be greater still. But 24-year-old resident Vijaya Gawari who handles in data entry at the tehsildar’s office, believes that progress won’t be as smooth. “People who stay near Orange City have to travel for 15-20 minutes to the well in Kasara Budruk,” she said. “The tank with filtered water is for their residents only.” Better connectivity to the big city hasn’t made locals consider themselves Mumbaikars yet. Station manager Aher said, “I’m a Kasarakar. Mumbai is where people travel to earn.”

Eventually, the boom Kasara may prove to be a disappointment to both locals and moneyed vacationers. Naik said far-flung areas once marketed as second homes are being re-sold as first homes to people who can’t afford to live closer to the city. “People who form a specific economic group, who’ve bought weekend apartments in an area, suddenly find that their green view is replaced with a block of flats and their neighbours aren’t weekend users but budget home buyers,” said Naik. Add this to the fact that the new plots have shut their gates to the everyday struggles of Kasara’s locals, and it could just be that the last stop on the railway line is where trouble may actually soon start.

Panvel
Population 104,031.*
Distance from CST 49km.
Commuting time to CST by train
1 hour 18 min.
*According to the 2001 census



Metro flashback

Excerpts from the Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, 1882. It is an export centre for ganja, the narcotic made from hemp leaves, which is brought in country carts of Ahmadnagar, Poona and Sholapur. The chief local industry is the making of cart wheels, of which every cart that comes from the Deccan carries a pair. The wheels cost about Rs 30 a pair.

A new beginning

Mustansir Dalvi

A patch of road, about three feet wide, crosses my path to the railway station on the New Panvel side. Elsewhere, the road continues, well tarred regularly before each monsoon. This singularity, however, remains untouched and has been since the Harbour Line made its way into town in 1995. Not just unmaintained: it was never even built. Every subsequent overlay of tar turns this dirty old track into an even deeper crater. Each morning, as I drive stationwards, I am compelled to make obeisance here with a loud, teeth-rattling thump. Departmental no man’s land between the Central Railway and Cidco, to me this patch represents Panvel itself.

We found a home in New Panvel in the early ’90s. It was planned by Cidco, circa 1970, as part of the New Bombay Project. Across the highway is “old” Panvel (of the same vintage as the Big City across the pond). New Panvel – or Naveen Panvel, as it’s now known – falls

between several jurisdictional cracks. Part of revenue district Raigad (but not the Raigad Lok Sabha constituency), not under the Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation nor administered by the Panvel Municipal Council, yet, apparently maintained by Cidco, our little hub of urbanity is paternally challenged. It’s at one end of the Harbour Line. Although Panvel is a terminus for the suburban line, through trains connect it pan-India, from Hazrat Nizamuddin to Thiruvananthapuram. Old and Naveen coexist, like Siamese twins, both conjoint and severed by the railway and the NH4.

New Panvel was a one-horse town when we first bought our home, and remained so until the millennium. I can get nostalgic about leisurely drives down its wide, main avenue perpendicular to the highway, through the town and beyond into pristine wilderness, into the spectacular hillscape at the foothills of Matheran. Every monsoon, we chased the elusive 180 degree rainbow. We got lucky, once. Then, we would return to this well-planned place that, for 30 years,





merely existed; a place for investors and absentee landlords, a few service shops and several jewellers' boutiques that fronted for moneylenders. Educational complexes grew and prospered because land and residential accommodation was available. "Then came the churches, then came the schools, then came the lawyers, then came the rules; then came the trains and the trucks with their load," exactly as Dire Straits predicted in their song "Telegraph Road". New Bombay developed, but this node awoke only after the Harbour Line reached Panvel in 1995.

In the '90s and noughties, as we paid up EMIs at 16.5 per cent, Panvel surfed the crests and troughs of real estate vagary and emerged, unlike sisters Vashi and Kharghar, resolutely downmarket. Migration fuelled economy; incoming communities marked their presence with new religious places – a temple to Kali, another to Ayappa, a new mosque, the unusually named Cidco Vinayak mandir.

Forty years on, the wrinkles are visible, what with the administrative ambiguity the city finds itself in. Now, various levels of neglect can mean that load-shedding hits us as if Panvel is a rural backwater; local rickshawallahs scorn metering (for every fuel price hike of one rupee, their base-fare rises by five); garbage collection is sluggish; bins are usually taken apart by stray dogs, who rule the night and run in packs of 20.

The other Panvel, to my right as I get off the train, is, not unlike Mumbai, an old town in a new world. Historically both a port and a trading town, Panvel was once the rice bowl of the north Konkan, with its famous Bazaar Peth, Mirchi and Kapad Gallis. Panvel Gaon dates back to 1725, when the Bapat Wada was built. It was elevated in the 1800s, when migrants from the Konkan were populating Bombay, and Panvel Shahar was an alternate place to make a home. When you talk to old-timers, they tell you that a newcomer could always find home in Bapat Wada and a job in Dhootpapeshwar, the ayurvedic factory. While the factory is gone, the wada still shelters several hundred residents.

Then as now, festivals at the many temples, mosques, dargahs, even a synagogue bring the faithful thronging to Panvel. The oldest temple, the Ballaleshwar, is from the eighteenth century; the Beth-El Synagogue was consecrated in 1849. When I visit these places today, I am struck by their similarity. On the outside, every place of worship looks like every other. It only reveals the trappings of faith when I enter. This town was once a paragon of middle-class cosmopolitanism. Its

people – Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Jains – shared a Konkani culture, food, clothing and Marathi as lingua franca.

In the past 20 years or so, I have seen attitudes stiffen: today, gentrification pervades, the old bonhomie is breaking down. More and more overt displays of religion and community foreground civic life – flags and flex-banners pervade. I am uneasy when I encounter makeshift notice-boards, not-so-subtly exhorting good religious behaviour. Money also fuels change. Many (thankfully, not all) of these places of worship are now "renovated", with RCC shikharas and minarets sprouting incongruously. Many wadas too have given way to MHHses, or Middle Class Housing Societies. Now, tall buildings crowd narrow alleyways bottlenecked with newly acquired cars. No country for old men.

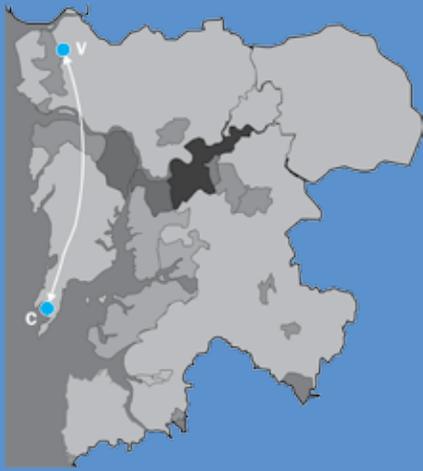
But I wallow in my good fortune, for, out of my window I can see, beyond the whooshing SUVs on the Expressway,



Panvel's glorious peaks – Malang, Vishal, Prabal, Matheran and Karnala. Each with signature crowns, they transport me to the geological beginnings of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. This entire geography was the result of great and sustained volcanic eruptions 65 million years ago that cooled to form the Deccan, the Konkan and the isles that were Bombay (eliminating all the dinosaurs in the process). This craggy beauty bookends Navi Mumbai to the east and signals the end of the Harbour Line.

Meanwhile, Panvel waits; patient, like the stone sentinels that shadow it, patient like Mother Konkan, who waited decades for the railways to link her to the ghats. Panvel now waits (as I do) for a new airport, a new SEZ, a fast train to Mumbai or even a three-foot patch of road to energise its fortunes – and mine. Until that happens, I have to be content with "Asia's largest railway station" (all steel decking and faux Egyptian columns), still in the making.





Virar

Population 118,945.*

Dist. from Churchgate station 60 km.
Comm. time to Churchgate by train
1 hour 20 minutes.

*According to the 2001 census

Metro flashback

Excerpts from the Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, 1882.
It has a railway station with refreshment and waiting rooms.
The station traffic returns show an increase in passengers from 48,294 in 1873 to 83,176 in 1880. Virar is the nearest station for visitors to the old town of Sopara.

A very wild west

Aditya Kundalkar and Suhani Singh

In 2007, Zareef Ahmed, chief technology officer with an IT firm in Noida, came to Mumbai on a week-long vacation and instantly fell in love with Virar. He visited the famous Ram Mandir, relaxed on Arnala beach with his family and ended up buying a flat near his brother-in-law's apartment in MB Estate in Virar (W). He also set up virarlive.com, a blog to provide information about the neighbourhood. "Thankfully, cellphone connectivity was poor in Virar," said Ahmed. "I was completely away from the world for two whole days. It was a reason to visit the place again and again."

Virar, 60 kilometres from Churchgate, is the last stop on the local Western Railway. It is home to the seventeenth-century Jeevdani temple, which attracts thousands of women pilgrims who hope a visit will help them conceive, and it was once home to the Bollywood actor Govinda. Virar has the lush green Sahyadris in the east and the sandy beaches of Arnala and Kalamb

to the west. Fishing villages and paddy farmers' cottages co-exist with multi-storey townships that have become home to families that find Mumbai city too costly and claustrophobic.

But the picturesque town that charmed Ahmed is rapidly changing. New complexes are starting to encroach on the government-mandated green zone, which is supposed to cover 78 per cent of the 526-sq-km Vasai-Virar region. All construction is technically banned here so that the trees can help Mumbai breathe easier.

"The Vasai-Virar belt was always meant to be a buffer zone for Mumbai," said Chandrashekhhar Prabhu, an urban planner, architect and former president of the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority. The lowlying areas of the Vasai-Virar region and the Vasai and Thane creeks should act as a drainage area for excess monsoon water, ensuring that Mumbai doesn't flood, Prabhu added.

But in practice, the situation is quite different. In January 2007, 70-year-

old Marcus Dabre, a cofounder of the Harit Vasai Sanrakshan Samiti environmental group, filed a writ petition in the High Court against illegal constructions on government land. The court went on to identify 4.8 lakh illegal buildings.

The illegal buildings and absence of planning have brought with them a host of problems in many parts of this beautiful region. Today, when it rains in Virar, sewage spills into the streets of many neighbourhoods. Residents of Virar have to contend with frequent power cuts and water shortages.

In Agashi village, for instance, many residents have a time-table pinned to their calendars to remind them during which six hours of the day they will lose power. Others, like Samson D'Silva, have simply given up the battle. To make sure that the adventure sports club that he runs isn't affected by power cuts, he has installed an inverter. "Some people are shifting to generators too," said D'Silva. "It's going to become like some parts of Delhi, where in the evening all the generators start up and then it's business as usual."

Unfortunately, there is no quick fix for the water shortage. Residents of Virar's Jayant Paranjpe Nagar, like Ramesh Gupte, have to walk five minutes to Bolinj to collect drinking water from public taps. "When people from Mumbai visit us, they don't even want to rinse their mouths with this water", let alone drink it because it's so salty, said Gupte, a BJP activist. "But we use it for everything." Suresh Kamat, editor of a local newspaper Vasai Samata, said that despite 20 years of strong press coverage, "there

is still no good hospital in the area. For advanced treatment, people have to go as far as Mira Road", 20 km away.

Virar's problems are rooted in its controversial history over the last decade. The region, which is home to 10 lakh people, is now governed by the Vasai-Virar Municipal Corporation, which was formed last year. In the 1970s, Virar was home to barely two lakh people and its rural infrastructure protected it from the meddlings of construction companies. But in 1988, the state government decided to open 85 sq km of the region's 410-sq-km green zone to builders. Although allegations of corruption flew thick and fast, two years later, the state government announced a plan to open an additional 20 sq km for development.

That second plan was halted in the face of street-level agitations and a legal challenge by the Harit Vasai Sanrakshan Samiti group, formed in 1989 by activists Francis D'Britto, the parish priest of St Thomas Cathedral in Vasai's Sandor area, and Marcus Dabre, a trade union leader.

But in August 1990, the Harit Vasai activists realised that they'd won a pyrrhic victory when Sharad Pawar, the chief minister of Maharashtra, put the City Industrial & Development Corporation in charge of developing the green belt. Following Cidco's arrival, more buildings sprung up. By 2001, the number of people living in the Vasai Virar belt had touched 6.8 lakh.

Today, Virar offers some of the cheapest homes along the Western Railway line. Five years ago, property

rates here were approximately Rs 1,100 per sq ft. Today, they have risen to Rs 2,500 per sq ft but are still lower than Mira Road's Rs 3,700 a sq ft.

But the houses in Virar come with a different sort of price tag attached, some people claim. "These houses have been built on land that was taken from the locals via muscle-power," alleged Vivek Pandit, an MLA from Vasai who has been working to protect the land rights of the state's tribal communities. Pandit alleges that the Thakur family have had an undue influence on the development of the region. Their mammoth construction company, the Viva Group, has established townships, a college and a supermarket.

The Thakurs also wield positions of authority in the Vasai-Virar Municipal Corporation. Rajeev Patil, the mayor of the Vasai-Virar Municipal Corporation,

is the cousin of Hitendra Thakur, the leader of the Bahujan Vikas Aghadi political party that has been ruling the region for over two decades. Hitendra Thakur's elder brother Jayendra alias Bhai Thakur spent nearly nine years in jail after being convicted in 1994 for murdering Suresh Dube, a Vasai-based builder who refused to join hands with Thakur. Dube was shot dead in October 1989. But Hitendra Thakur doesn't see a problem with his family's control of power. "It's not we who decide these things," he told Time Out. "It's the people who have voted for us all these years."

Those voters, it's clear, have not included the supporters either of Pandit or Harit Vasai. But even people who oppose the Thakurs aren't agreed about their vision for the region. While Pandit resists the idea of all development, Dabre of Harit Vasai believes that they need to take a more realistic view of the situation. In their agitation during the 1980s, they explained their position with the slogan, "No structure without infrastructure."

Dabre said that they want the development to come in a manner that's more planned, in the way that Cidco developed Navi Mumbai. "The municipality has to be developed; it's necessary," said Dabre. "We cannot stay a village forever. But progress will not happen under the [village-level] Gram Panchayats" that are being supported by Vivek Pandit.

For its part, the newly formed Vasai-Virar Municipal Corporation seems to be making the right sounds. Rajeev Patil, mayor of the Vasai-Virar Municipal Corporation and cousin of Viva group owner Hitendra Thakur, told Time Out

that plans to improve the region's water supply are underway. As part of these development plans, Patil recently met with representatives of GTZ India, a German company based in New Delhi whose objective, according to their website, is "to improve people's lives on a sustainable basis". GTZ India will help the municipal corporation to set up sewage treatment plants, rainwater harvesting initiatives and solar energy solutions.

In addition to Viva, other developers including HDIL, Evershine and Mayfair have built townships here. The Rustomjee Group, for instance, is setting up a Virar Global City over 217 acres. "Like New York city has its boroughs, I think Virar will become one of Mumbai's boroughs," said Boman Irani, managing director of the Rustomjee Group and president of the Mira-Virar chapter of the Maharashtra Chamber of Housing Industry, an association of developers that takes up issues of infrastructure with local municipalities.

Irani contends that everything developers have learnt while building Mumbai over the last 30 years will be applied to the Mira-Virar region. Virar Global City will have an in-house sewage treatment system and an underground drainage system. The streets within the township will be 24 metres wide, with three metres of footpath space, and streetlights will be solar-powered. Irani is confident that in ten years, the area will be a commercial hub that is as bustling as the Bandra-Kurla Complex. "Eventually, when the Western Railway line gets extended to reach Dahanu, similar development will start there as well," said Irani. "That entire

belt is going to become a mini-city. It's going to have a life of its own."

The Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation has proposed that a new 5.59-sq-km industrial area be created in Vasai-Virar to establish electronic and plastic industries. It's precisely this sort of development that leaves old-timers like Dabre deeply disappointed. He feels this is just the beginning of the end for Mumbai's lungs.

"What's left now?" asked Dabre. "The banana plantations are gone. The coast is destroyed, it's full of filth. Our own people are destroying the region's ecology." People who have bought homes in this region, like Zareef Ahmed, are also unhappy. "Development doesn't only mean buildings," said Ahmed. "It also means proper facilities for everyone and it shouldn't come at the cost of destroying the existing settlements."

