

# 60 Years of Heritage

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What an incredible and eclectic mélange of architectural and environmental heritage independent Bombay inherited in 1947! And so much of it has been lost in just six decades due to unawareness and lack of foresight on the part of citizens and the authorities.

Among the treasures the city could boast of at Independence were imposing public buildings in varying styles, from the neo-classical Town Hall and Mint, the neo-Gothic Victoria Terminus, University Library and Convocation Hall and the Royal Alfred Sailors' Home, the Indo-Saracenic General Post Office, Prince of Wales Museum and Municipal Offices to the Renaissance Institute of Science and any number of colonial bungalows. In the 1930s, during the building boom, the city acquired an array of Art Deco architecture – the second largest in the world after Miami. But there were a number of significant structures from a period much earlier than that of British and Portuguese rule ranging from ancient cave temples such as Elephanta, Kanheri, Jogeshwari, Mahakali and Mandapeshwar to innumerable temples, deras, fire temples, durgahs and churches. There were also picturesque gaothans and wadis, saltpans, mangroves and a wonderful coastline.

The post-Independence decade was a challenging one for the city with thousands of refugees arriving from Sindh and West Punjab in Pakistan. It was also a period of reassessment and consolidation for the central and state governments, when planning directions were unclear and objectives were being defined and re-oriented. In Bombay, the move to the suburbs and eventually

into the Greater Bombay region, whose limits extended beyond the island city, was an outcome of the response to the growing pressure on the central city.

The pressure on land came not only from the influx of refugees but also due to the rapidly growing population. Housing became a key priority and every effort was made to tackle the problem. However, in the process more and more heritage structures including innumerable bungalows were lamentably demolished to make way for new multi-storied housing. This was essentially due to a total lack of awareness about the importance of preserving architecturally aesthetic and historically and culturally relevant buildings, artefacts and precincts.

In earlier decades, strict design controls had been mandated for new construction. For example, Horniman (formerly Elphinstone) Circle, developed in the 1860s, identical façades and heights were prescribed for the complex, which was characterised by the provision of a covered arcade at the ground level. Similarly, in 1898, the western side of the Hornby Road (now D Naoroji Road) was developed under public design controls imposed by the Bombay City Improvement Trust). There were no restrictions on the designs of the facades, which were conceived and built by different architects, but each building was required to have an arcade, which acted as the physical and visual element that tied together the varying architectural styles, resulting in a splendid urban design composition. In Ballard Estate, developed by the Port Trust between 1908 and 1914 as a business district, control guidelines were mandated for the first 43 blocks of office buildings,

most of which were designed in a 'European Renaissance' spirit. The Estate featured uniformity of building design, heights and architectural styles. Even as late as the mid-1930s, the Backbay Reclamation scheme, the builder had to comply not only with Municipal bylaws but also a number of special Building Rules stipulated by the Government for the scheme. The situation of buildings, their purpose, their structural design, finish and colour were all governed by these rules. The Backbay Reclamation thus served as a fine example of a judiciously controlled building area.

Unfortunately, in post-Independence construction, Development Control rules only stipulated what was permissible but laid down no guidelines for any design controls. As a result, the city acquired a plethora of unimaginatively designed and monotonous public and private buildings. In the 1960s, with the bifurcation of the former Bombay Presidency into Gujarat and Maharashtra, the city became the capital of Maharashtra. In the renewed fervour of living in free India and a new State, political activists smashed and damaged innumerable marble and bronze statues of Englishmen, without realising their intrinsic worth in terms of international antique prices and their heritage value as priceless works of art.

From the 1970s, in the process of repairing dilapidated buildings, the Mumbai Building Repair and Reconstruction Board insensitively repaired many heritage buildings, thus destroying their inherent character. Alarmed with the rapid depletion of the city's heritage, a group of concerned

# Vasai Fort wall collapses while restoration work is on

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**MUMBAI** A part of Vasai Fort collapsed due to heavy rain and a landslide on Friday despite the conservation work on to restore the fort, thereby raising questions on the quality of work. The collapse has forced the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) office to initiate immediate measures to strengthen the part of the fort and save it from complete collapse. "If the ASI is saying the 18-20-ft high fort wall collapsed due to rains, it is quite amusing because forts and their walls were meant to protect them from natural calamities. It is because of ASI's ignorance that the wall collapsed as several tree roots were weakening the wall," said Seidatta Raut of Kille Vasai Mohin, a fort conservation project in Thane.

"We had been warning the ASI that the work being done here by contractors is not happening as per conservation procedures and this had to happen one day. It is sad that such a thing has happened with a significant historic monument," Raut said. "ASI is only spending money on religious buildings inside the fort and not on the fort itself. ASI has also set up air-conditioned offices inside the fort premises," he pointed out. To save further dilapidation, the ASI said they have drawn an action plan. "The incident happened due to heavy rain. I instructed officials of the Vasai sub-circle to take immediate measures and finish the work by March 2011," said M.S. Chauhan, superintending archaeologist with Mumbai Circle of the ASI. *Hindustan Times* had reported on June 28 as to how historic inscriptions on the Portuguese fort at Vasai were being damaged and had been



■ A part of the historic Vasai Fort that collapsed. While conservationists claim it is because of bad restoration work, the ASI said heavy rain caused the collapse. SHRIDUTA RAUT

buried due to incorrect conservation practices. "The ASI's restoration project has been damaging the fort. First the ancient inscriptions were almost buried under sand and cement, then the fort was being plastered, looking like it was not being restored, but renovated," Raut added.

## THE HISTORY

- In 1534, Bahadur Shah, the Sultan of Gujarat, ceded the fort at Vasai to the Portuguese. Vasai was then called Bassein.
- The fort, as seen today, was constructed by the Portuguese in 1590.
- In the 18th century, the fort was attacked by the Marathas before the British conquered them.

## SION FORT



Sion Fort is a hill in the heart of a bustling city, a structure draped in green throughout the year. Once a military citadel, the fort was renovated by the ASI and converted into an escape for nature lovers. When Mumbai was seven islands, this fort was created by the Portuguese as a strategic location between Mumbai and Salsette Islands. It was eventually conquered by the Marathas and later handed over to the British. There is a path running up to the fort, along the forested belly of the hill. This is the road to take because it brims with the gilded blossoms of laburnum trees, the crimson anger of Gulmohars, and the *musambi-narang* zing of Ashoka trees. There are squirrels scurrying about the walls, and a host of birds perched on the trees: parakeets, magpie robins, cuckoos to name just a few,

After illegal breweries, the protected monument is now home to a health club run by a local with the tacit support of the Archaeology Department



## Gym rats take over historic Worli fort

From the outside, the Worli Fort looks like just another neglected historical site, and inside it gets worse

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For years now the historic Worli Fort, a protected monument, has been rendered inaccessible because of various barriers leading right up to the entrance, making it a safe haven for anti-social elements and illegal liquor brewers. And from the middle, which was constructed by the British in 1673 to keep an eye on pirates, is born a thriving gymnasium, even as the State Archaeology Department chooses to look the other way.

Ran by a certain Danny, the gym includes a temple and a concrete structure and offers its 150-member members - mostly local fishermen from the vicinity - the unbeatable opportunity to enjoy a bit of history, while enjoying a panoramic view of the island city and the Sea Link.

The official reaction to this, of course, came along expected channels. Sanjay Patil, director of State Archives, said, "If there are any illegal structures within the Worli fort and if they are creating a nuisance in the vicinity, we will seek the intervention and take the appropriate action." He also revealed that the fort is a state-protected monument and of crucial importance as per the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1906.

Important structures within city limits are protected by Mumbai



Inside view of the gymnasium

■ Since I am also taking care of the fort while running my gym, no one has raised any objections so far

**DANNY: WHO IS RUNNING THE ILLEGAL HEALTH CLUB IN THE FORT?**

has raised objections so far." Danny's confidence may stem from the fact that he has the tacit support of the State Archaeology Department, which was nothing wrong with his activities. An officer from the department said on the condition of anonymity, "It is better to have a gymnasium inside the fort than be surrounded by drug peddlers as it has happened with the Marathi fort. We have allowed Danny to remain here as he has assured us he will demolish the structure whenever asked."

Like in many other historical sites in the city, the Worli fort has been the victim of sporadic and uncoordinated planning. The archaeology department's strategy at restoring the fort is a tussle of the law.

However, history is being taught to school by the unconserved structure illegally and justified by a story, saying, "Since I am also taking care of the fort while running my gym, no one

citizens, architects, historians and NGOs came together and prepared a preliminary list of buildings and precincts that needed to be preserved after considering their architectural, historical, aesthetic and cultural and social importance. A committee of experts reviewed their report and presented it to the Minister for Urban Development in February 1992.

In the milestone year 1995, Bombay became the first city in the country to amend the Development Control Rules by introducing Regulation 67 and legislating the Heritage Regulations for Greater Bombay. Thus, 615 structures and precincts were classified as heritage and graded into four categories - I, IIA, IIB and III, taking into account their historic, architectural or social significance. This enactment and the appointment of an advisory body known as the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee (MHCC) has afforded much needed legal protection to heritage. Further impetus was provided with the formation of, the MMR Heritage Conservation Committee to promote research and further listings of heritage structures and precincts in Mumbai and the Metropolitan Region. The State Archeology Department and the Archaeological Survey of India have also been actively involved in protecting, restoring and maintaining heritage.

Ironically, however, beginning from the late 1990s, under the guise of 'development' and pressure from the builders' lobby, the land mafia and textile mill owners, the very authorities such as the Urban Development Department, MCGM or MMRDA that had legislated and promoted heritage regulations, began to look with an attitude bordering on contempt at heritage and the environment. New policies such as the amendments to DCR Section 58 or Section 33(7) have resulted in the loss of several Grade III structures and precincts and the loss of valuable textile mill structures, chimney stacks and water bodies. Meanwhile, an additional list commissioned by the MM Heritage Society awaits urgently required legislation.

Further, there has been considerable loss in terms of destruction of mangroves and the loss of many open spaces with the Government now eyeing salt pans for further development. So far, the only recourse that citizens have had to the wanton destruction of heritage has been through Public Interest Litigation. Solutions for conservation and restoration of the city's heritage perhaps lie in giving more powers to the MHCC and in creating a Heritage Fund, especially for privately owned structures, to aid the process of conservation.

