

# Under The Over: Life Below Mumbai's Longest Flyover

Sameera Khan



Flyover over Mohammed Ali road - photo credit Chirodeep Chaudhuri Time Out Mumbai

Some evenings at maghrib when I drive across the Mohammed Ali Road flyover - officially called the Kutbe-Konkan Maqdoom Ali Mahimi flyover - and hear the azaan resonating from the numerous minarets around me, I think of all the adventures unfolding on the road below.

Mostly I think of food-related escapades - of the rich, flaky malai khajla at N.Lookmanjis, of the tasty naan-bread sandwich at Marghoob Tava, of the spicy nalli-nihari simmering at Noor Mohammadi's, of the seekh kababs at Do Taki, of thick tandoori rotis, sweet sheermals and cooling firnis set in clay pots. I recall wandering the streets with friends in search of perfectly grilled khiri and kaleji for many a Ramzaan iftaar. Sometimes I might catch a whiff of attar - rose, khus or the strong hina - and remember my perfumer friend Quraysh, probably in the midst of closing up the attar shop just off Nagdevi Street that's been in his family for four generations. I think of the elderly Shabaan Bhai at his kite shop in Dongri

being forced to sell umbrellas in the wet months. I recollect the Moharrum when my friend Nikhat and I sat on the edge of a parapet at the Amin school watching the battle of Karbala enacted below us - in full costume and with much blood and sadness. At some point, the drama felt so real, we wept copiously.

Certainly, the city's longest and most curvaceous flyover makes it easier to get to your destination. But the journey is much less interesting because the 2.4 km-long Mohammed Ali



Raudat Tahera - photo credit Chirodeep Chaudhuri Time Out Mumbai

Road flyover skims over the top of some of Mumbai's most historic, economically vibrant and culturally distinct neighbourhoods. These include Pydhonie, Null Bazaar, Mandvi, Chakla, Bhendi Bazaar, Dongri, Umarkhadi, Nagpada and Madanpura. Geographically, these neighbourhoods occupy almost two wards of the city - stretching from Crawford Market at one end to the area beyond Sir J.J Hospital on the other - with Mohammad Ali Road, Ebrahim Rehmatullah Road, Sardar Vallabhai Patel Road, and Shaukat Ali Road providing the main thoroughfares.

Most significantly this is the heart of the old Muslim quarter of the city. It is also a key centre of Mumbai's wholesale market economy. Here, masjids, jamaatkhanas, dargahs and kabristans stand alongside major markets of cloth, spices, timber and glassware. Old-styled apartment blocks and BIT chawls coexist with hakims, bakeries and zari karkhanas. Edged by warehouses and the docks on the east, the Muslim mohallas of South Mumbai are witness to more than 200 years of migration and human settlement.



According to historian Mariam Dossal, when the British first began to build Mumbai, this quarter was where the indigenous bazaar economy was integrated with residential, commercial, social and religious activities into a composite whole. In fact, what seems like unplanned chaos was actually part of a well-thought-out strategy of spatial segregation by colonial administrators who intentionally separated the European quarter (the Fort area) from the Indian quarter (of which this is part, along with Kalbadevi, Bhuleshwar and Girgaum). The chasm was not just geographical but also underscored by differences in architectural design, infrastructure and public amenities.

Though never as eye-catching as the areas in and around the Fort, the salient feature of the Muslim mohallas has been their hodge-podge architectural styles, including the Indian vernacular and what one architect called “watered-down art deco”. Still, one can’t ignore the three architectural gems, all recently refurbished and hidden inside this labyrinth – the Khoja Aga Khani jamaatkhana with its lofty clock tower, the Dawoodi Bohra Raudat Tahera with the entire Holy Koran scripted in gold and studded with precious jewels on its inside walls, and the radiant blue-tiled Moghul Masjid.

Of course, the real charm of the mohalla has always been its vibrant social, cultural and gastronomic life – whether it was in housing the only Indian classical music tradition born in the city (the Bhendi Bazaar gharana), or filling its tea shops with writers, poets, lyricists and leftists, or in training the best basketball players of the state in its backyards, or in the novelty of its barah-handi cuisine.

To some extent, its street life is still vigorous and entertaining, especially so during the month of Ramzaan, but most scholars agree that the area is in rapid social and economic decline. Some point as far back as 1896, when the first authenticated plague case in the city was detected in Mandvi and led to many wealthy residents moving out. Others blame the exodus of the poets and educated elite during the Partition. The decline of the textile and powerloom industry in Madanpura – and its eventual shift to Bhiwandi in the 1970s – and lately, the import of cheap Chinese goods in every trade sector has only hastened the decay. But what definitely sealed its fate were the 1992-93 communal riots and the increasing identification of these mohallas as the birth place of underworld dons and potential terrorists.

As Muslims – who form more than 17 per cent of the city’s population – get tagged as “aggressive” and “threatening”, the dynamic neighbourhoods they occupy have come to be labelled as “ghettos”. As a result, few venture below the winding flyover to discover the mohallas that house one of the most heterogeneous Muslim communities in the entire subcontinent. Shia, Sunni, Deobandi, Brelvi, Konkani, Bohras, Memons, Khojas, Irani’s, Sidis, Deccanis, Malyalees and several north Indian Muslim denominations and their sub-sects make up a mosaic of little worlds. Even the lingua franca is varied – ranging from Gujarati and Malyalam to Urdu and Farsi.

When the flyover – whose name was under dispute with Parsis keen to call it the Sir Jamshetjee Jejeebhoy flyover and sections of the Muslim community eager to designate it after Mumbai saint Hazrat Makhdoom Ali Shah Mahimi – first came some called it progress for the area. Four years later, while it is a boon to long-distance commuters, for locals it is the cause for the assault on their privacy, health, daylight and drop in property prices. More critically, it symbolises how a city on the move manages to override entire communities and neighbourhoods, relegating their rich histories and everyday realities to the dark spaces under the over. As says Shama, the first floor-resident of a building facing the flyover, “We want the light to come back.” And she isn’t referring only to the flyover.





**Jama Masjid on Sheikh Memon Street: Konkani Muslims**

The Jama Masjid of Mumbai, located on Sheikh Memon street, was built in 1802 on land donated by a Konkani Muslim trader. The Konkani Muslims, the oldest of Mumbai's Muslim communities – having arrived in Mahim as early as the 14th century – have continued to look after the affairs of the Jama Masjid. This Sunni community is said to trace its ancestry to the 'Nawatts' or 'Naitias' (shipmen) who are believed to be Arab immigrants who inter married with Hindus of the Western coast. Initially a sea-faring community of ship-masters, ship officers and sailors, the community eventually moved towards commerce and the trading business.

**Baba Gor/Gori Pir Dargah, off Sardar Patel Road: Sidis**

Sidis are the descendants of African traders, mercenaries and slaves who have lived in India in significant numbers since at least the 13th century. At one time Sidis actually ruled the city for about 16 months in the mid-17th century. Though few now reside in Dongri's Sidi mohalla, many in the community visit the dargah of Gori Pir, an Abyssinian trader who many Sidis revere as a sort of symbolic family head. Sidis are noted for their love of dance and music and its particular use during the community's sacred rituals.

**Kutchie Memon jamaat khana in Memonwada: Memons**

Memons, from the term 'Maumin' meaning 'believer', are converts to Islam from the Lohana and Kutchi Bania castes. Based on their place of origin in the region of Sindh and Gujarat, Memons are sub-divided in to five divisions, including the Kutchi Memons and the Halai Memons. The severe famines in Kutch and Kathiawar in the 1800s induced many Memons to move to Mumbai and settle in areas around Lohar chawl and Mohammed Ali road. This Sunni community prospered in every class of trade from broking and peddling to furniture and timber dealing.

**Khoja Darkhanna and Clock Tower on Samuel Street: Khojas**  
Khojas are descendants of the Hindu Lohana castes of Sindh and Gujarat. Conversions to Islam took place in the 13th century at the hands of religious missionaries from Persia. Most Khojas are Shia Ismailis owing allegiance to the Aga Khan, who claims descent from the Prophet's family. But there are also Sunni Khojas and Khoja Ashna-Asharies. The community was active in commercial dealings with the Persian Gulf and the east coast of Africa since the 17th century. By the mid-1800s, the Khojas began to challenge Parsi supremacy in the lucrative China trade. They continue to be in business and professional occupations. The Darkhanna, off Samuel street (Pala Galli) in Dongri, which was recently restored along with its magnificent clock tower is the chief jamaatkhana of the Aga Khani Khojas in the city.



**Raudat Tahera in Bhendi Bazaar: Dawoodi Bohras**

Bohras, derived from the Gujarati 'vohorvu' or 'vyavahar' meaning 'to trade', are the descendants of Hindu trading castes who converted to Shiite Islam in the 11th century due to the efforts of missionaries who came from Yemen to the port of Cambay in Gujarat. In Mumbai, the Bohras initially established themselves in the early 1800s as itinerant peddlers of all types of knick-knacks, eventually setting up their own retail businesses in hardware, glassware, shoes, perfume and other businesses. The white marble Raudat Tahera, built in the best traditions of Fatimi art and architecture, in Bhendi Bazaar is the mausoleum of the former Dai or head of the Dawoodi Bohras, Syedna Taher Saifuddin.

**Moghul Masjid in Dongri: Irani Muslims**

When the Irani Muslims first came to Mumbai – in the late 18th century – they were referred to as 'Moghuls' since they spoke Parsi (Persian), the court language of the Moghul kings. Thus, their beautiful blue-tiled mosque on Inamwada road, built more than 100 years ago by a merchant from Shiraz, is called Moghul masjid. At one time most Irani Shias in the city lived in and around Dongri. Now their numbers have dwindled and most live in the suburbs or out of the city. Synonymous with the chai and brun-maskar serving Irani cafes, the special events in their calendar include Navroz, the Iranian new year, and Moharrum, when they enact a passion play on the battle of Karbala in the midst of Dongri.



# IN HISTORY'S AID

Prafulla Marpakwar | TNN

## AUGUST KRANTI MAIDAN

The Quit India movement in 1942 started from this ground, formerly called Gowalia Tank maidan; the Gowalia Tank was initially used to bathe cows (gow in Marathi) and the maidan was built over the tank. Gowalia Tank, still existing underground, used to be a prominent tram terminus; one anna (six paise) was all that took to travel to the Prince Of Wales Museum.

## BANGANGA TANK

The Banganga Tank, attached to the Walkeshwar temple, was constructed during the 12th-century Silhara dynasty's reign and was rebuilt in 1715. The tank is fed by a spring and is cleaned and spruced up every February for the annual Hindustani classical music festival. The tank, despite being only a few dozen metres from the sea, contains fresh water.

## THE SEWRI FORT

The British built the fort on a quarried hill in 1680 and it was originally meant to act as a checkpoint. The fort subsequently had varied uses; it was used to house prisoners and, later still, became a Bombay Port Trust godown. It once held off a Portuguese attack (in 1772). Now, however, it is in a dilapidated state with overgrown weeds around.

Chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh might have offered 244 of the state's best monuments a new lease of life on Friday when he offered them up for adoption by individuals, corporate houses, NGOs and trusts. But few know that the ambitious project is the brainchild of state director of archaeology and museums Ramchandra Hegde.

Soon after taking over the reins of the department two years ago, Hegde started working on this new concept of offering state-protected monuments to NGOs, leading industrial houses and trusts for routine maintenance.

"We felt it was difficult to maintain such a large number of monuments with the existing infrastructure and resources. We then drafted a scheme in consultation with the departmental minister and secretary. It was this scheme that was approved by the cabinet," Hegde told TOI on Saturday.

Hegde knows not it will be difficult to find corporate caretakers for all 244 of the monuments on the government's list.

But he expects a large number particularly in and around big cities like Mumbai, Nagpur, Pune and Aurangabad — will be taken up for conservation and maintenance.

"I am sure a section of NGOs and cooperative-sector organisations, besides corporate houses, will join our movement to maintain the state-protected monuments," Hegde added.

There was an initial proposal to seek financial assistance from the Centre from the National Culture Fund, Hegde said, but it was later felt

## GATEWAY OF INDIA

Completed in 1924, the Gateway of India, King George V and Queen Mary to Bombay, built with yellow Kharod basalt and

that the state government should also explore the possibility of involving NGOs and private companies for mobilising resources for protection and conservation of monuments.

"The entire scheme has been accepted by the government and we will take the help of leading architects and conservation and heritage activists for our plan," Hegde said. He added that a state-level advisory committee would be set up soon to oversee the plan and scrutinise the proposals received by the state government.

But the ownership of the monu-

## CORPORATE SUPPORT

Most corporates think the idea can be made to work

It is yet another example of a public-private partnership. This alliance has already been managing infrastructure facilities like airports and museums. The Taj Mahal in Agra, for instance, is managed by the Tata group and the Bandstand stretch in Bandra is managed by US Vitamins (USV). It is a great opportunity. The monuments will be kept in good shape and such sites will definitely boost tourism. We (Pfizer) are also looking at the best option for entering into such a public-private partnership.

Kewal Handa | PFIZER MD

It is a good idea. There should be a regulatory body that will ensure that the aesthetics of the heritage property are taken care of. It should not lead to exploitation, add value to the city and not just be used to get mileage. We will also look at this opportunity but we need to go through the draft guidelines.

Harsh Mariwala | MARICO CHAIRMAN & MANAGING DIRECTOR

This government move, to allow private parties to manage monuments of historical importance, is good as they will be able to maintain them in a better way. The government can also earn additional revenue from this initiative. The concern is that the private players should not commercialise the whole place in terms of banners and other signages.

Vivek Jain | DCW LTD SENIOR PRESIDENT

## MAHIM FORT

Built by Bombay's first governor, Gerald Aungier (1669-1677), Mahim Fort overlooks the Mahim Bay and Bandra. It was a defence point against Portuguese attacks and, later, used against the Marathas. Illegal huts have mushroomed, the walls have developed cracks and it is now a haven for drug addicts; squatters often deny even ASI staff entry.

## BANDRA FORT

It was earlier called Castella de Aguada as passing Portuguese ships would collect drinking water from the fountain (aguada) since 1640. The fort was demolished by the English as they saw it as a threat. Some of the fort's walls, however, still stand and a plaque outside calls it "one of the few standing reminders of the days of Portuguese glory". But Bandra residents complain it is vandalised by rough-and-ready film units.

## SINHAHAD FORT

Pune's Sinhadgad, meaning the "lion fort", brings back memories of history lessons describing its recapture by Shivaji's general, Tanaji Malusare, in March 1670. But the victory came at the cost of Tanaji's life and Shivaji said: "The fort is captured but the lion is dead." The fort's strategic location helped Shivaji in many battles. But Pune's NDA cadets differ, saying the steep climb to the fort (800 m) is too punishing.

## THE HERITAGE LIST

The state government has decided to hand over 244 of our finest monuments to private agencies, which will be responsible for their maintenance for five years. TOI gives a list of the more important heritage structures and explains the logic behind the move

## THE FORTS

Here's a complete list of the forts in the 244-monument list

**MUMBAI & THANE**  
Dharavi, St George, Mahim, Bandra, Sewri, Shirogaon

**PUNE**  
Torna, Rajgad, Singhagad, Koirigad

**NAGPUR**  
Umred, Nagardhan

## OTHER DISTRICTS

Khanda, Gadhi (Ahmednagar), Baitulwadi, Taltam, Antur, Naldurg, Paranda, Vishalgad, Rangana, Bhudargad, Gadhi (Jalgaon), Parola, Laling, Nandgiri, Kandhar, Mahur, Malegaon, Ankai, Tankai, Pathari, Vadgaon, Dharur, Rasalgad, Bharatgad, Ausa, Udgir, Amargad, Padlela

## THE CAVES

There are 14 caves in the heritage list

**AURANGABAD**  
Ghatotkach, Rudreshwar, Jogeshwari Devi

**OSMANABAD**  
Dharashiv

**KOLHAPER**  
Pandavdara

**JALNA**  
Bhokardan

**THANE**  
Khandeshwari

**NANDURBAR**  
Mohida

**NANDED**  
Pandav, Brahmani

**NASIK**  
Jain Caves (Kalika, Mandir)

**BEED**  
Yogi Sabhamandap

**RATNAGIRI**

Buddhist Caves

**LAYUR**  
Kharosa

## THE TEMPLES

There are 101 temples on the list of monuments to be protected with private help

**OTHER STRUCTURES**  
90 other heritage structures make up the list