



Mumbai, an urban agglomeration of around twenty million people residing in an area of around six hundred square kilometers is one of the densest cities of the world. An important port city, since its history — eastern marine gateway (symbolically represented by Gateway of India), it is country’s wealthiest city, and is rated amongst the world’s top ten centres of commerce.

Being a city of migrants, it possesses a rich cosmopolitan character where multiple cultures and faiths exist together. The architectural vocabulary of the city is a blend of many styles — Gothic, Victorian, Art Deco, Indo-Saracenic and the modern building forms including some of the world’s tallest skyscrapers. In the post-independence years, it is one of the few cities of the country that became the fountainhead of many cultural movements — Progressive Arts Movement, theatre and drama, popular Hindi cinema, now the world’s largest film producing industry. It has remained a strong protagonist in many literary works of writers, poets and dramatists in modern history and in present times.

A vibrant informal sector, high densities of population and its vast economic disparity are some of the distinct characters of the city. The informal sector gives work to around 65% of the city’s population while Dharavi, Asia’s largest slum colony contributes substantially to the financial graph of the city. Around 90% of the population travels by public transport of trains, buses, and taxis or walk and cycle to work. The city is an excellent example to study the importance of informal sector and people driven mixed land use development as crucial parameter in retro fitting of existing cities and planning new ones, especially in context of Indian subcontinent. Shilpa Gaurish Chandawarkar, Guest Editor of the issue, notes that the people of Mumbai would perhaps constitute the most interesting case study in the subject of human geography. The contrasting development of gated housing societies, expansive neighbourhoods with tree lined avenues, sea facing bungalows, wide roads and avenues flanked by hotels, upscale markets and high rise buildings dotting the urbanscape make it an aspirational model.

Contrasted to all these facts is its ecological fragility. Since late seventeenth century when the port centre was shifted from Surat to Mumbai by British, over the years, the islands and land in the sea are being reclaimed and consolidated to build and expand the city. With many natural areas of the region — estuary, mangroves, natural drains, streams — being reclaimed for construction purposes, the rivers and lakes have become ecologically defunct entities. For the few years now, the city is facing serious flooding issues during rains. Encroachments, aquaculture ponds and infrastructure development are taking a toll on the stretches of mangroves, toxic air quality due to high vehicular emissions and poor solid waste management systems.

The issue celebrates Mumbai with all its varieties and contradictions. Our sincere-most thanks to Shilpa for working tirelessly for putting together this very special one.

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