Hydraulic City
Anand, Nikhil

Published by Duke University Press

Anand, Nikhil.
Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructures of Citizenship in Mumbai.

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Relative to the towns of Surat in the north and Goa in the south, the swampy amphibious mixture that was Bombay was not of much interest to either the Marathas or Bahadur Shah, the ruler of the Sultanate in Gujarat in the sixteenth century. In 1534 Bahadur Shah, weakened by a series of wars, yielded the temporary mixtures of earth and sea that was the city to the Portuguese (Tindall 1982). More than a century later, in 1661, the Portuguese crown, in a customary gesture of imperial arrogance, gifted Bombay to the British to commemorate the wedding of Catherine of Braganza to Charles II.

While there can be little dispute that Bombay was gifted, the Portuguese and English got into a bitter dispute about what Bombay was. The islands, appearing contiguous at certain times of day (during low tide) and scattered islets at others, confused surveyors of both the East India Company and the Portuguese Crown, who were in disagreement about where the gifted city ended and the remaining Portuguese islands began. Each made their own maps, to verify their own truths. Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha describe the confusion in their book Soak: “The many configurations of Mumbai in the seventeenth and eighteenth century have been attributed to poor mapping techniques, deliberate misrepresentation for the sake of gaining territory, or the temporality of a terrain where landforms are subject to tidal variations. Few challenge the inadequacies of the notion of island in a place which was so fluid and dynamic that it could at times be largely under the sea, and at other time become part of the mainland” (2009, 14).

After years of bitter dispute, the English came to control the seven or so islands in the southern reaches of the city, and the Portuguese controlled the larger island of Salsette to the North. Eager to solidify (their claims to) the city, the British connected their islands with causeways and breakwaters to make the ring of several islands that circled a large area of mud flats into single island city (see map 1). As such, the ground of the city has been made whole and one through infrastructure works that have drained the
MAP 1. The making of Bombay. The British made the many islands of Bombay (in the south) into an “Island City” through large engineering works conducted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Note the creation of Vihar, Tulsi, and Powai “lakes” in the late nineteenth century on Salsette Island. Jogeshwari, a former village on Salsette Island, lies just southwest of the lakes. Images redrawn by Jake Coolidge, reproduced with permission from Soak: Mumbai in an Estuary, an exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Art and book by Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha (New Delhi: Rupa, 2009).
wetlands of the sea that had, until recently, occupied them for at least part of every day. As Gyan Prakash (2010) poignantly reminds us, Mumbai has been made through a “double colonization”. The British ruled Bombay by capturing territory from both native residents and the sea. While this is so, the making of Bombay was also contingent on the colonization of lands and oceans that exceeded the city’s geography.

From its earliest days as a colonial city, the city in the sea has been made a critical center in world systems of commerce, colonialism, and empire. Until the late eighteenth century, most trade in the Arabian Sea was controlled by non-Europeans: Parsi and Muslim merchants based in Surat, a trading city to the north of the marshland that later became Bombay. In an effort to make Bombay a center of commerce in the region, colonial officials offered attractive financial terms to ship builders to move their operations from Surat to Bombay (Furber 1965). At the same time that they sought to make the city the primary port in Western India, the British began exercising control over the Arabian Sea. Amid the decline of the Ottoman and Safavid empires in the eighteenth century, the British began to exert their influence on the Arabian Sea, demanding protection money from maritime merchants to “save” their ships from British pirates (Farooqui 2006). Over time, as the company consolidated control of the seas, they instituted a system of compulsory licensing and taxation for ship operators, the proceeds of which came to fund the construction of the city’s road and rail infrastructure.

The city, having long struggled to be fiscally sound, became a profitable node of empire through the opium trade (and the Opium Wars) with China in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The opium trade enriched the city’s Parsi merchants and the city’s colonial municipal government alike (Furber 1965). The city was also fed by commodity circuits that fueled the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century. Cotton textiles made in the hinterlands of Mumbai were traded by colonial officials for slaves in West Africa to endow sugar plantations in the Caribbean (Kobayashi 2013; Mintz 1985).

Enriched by the profits they made in maritime commerce, Indian capitalists set up the city’s first large cloth mills, drawing hundreds of thousands of workers from the southern coast of the province. Staffed with cheap migrant labor, the mills were lucrative. They enriched the city with windfall profits in the late nineteenth century when cotton exports from the United States to Europe were interrupted on account of the U.S. civil war (Hazareesingh 2001). The opening of the Suez Canal during this period stimulated a great demand for Mumbai’s industrial goods in Europe. By fulfilling this demand, the city’s merchants and laborers made the city one
of the most significant industrial centers in South Asia, a status that persists to this day.

This is a brief history of Mumbai in the world. It is a wheeling-dealing city, built in and on its relations with the sea and, through it, the world. Mumbai has always been a world city, a city that has been built on and with relations made through water.