MAKING THE MODERN SLUM: HOUSING, MOBILITY, AND POVERTY IN BOMBAY AND ITS PERIPHERIES

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ABSTRACT

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Sheetal M. Chhabria

This dissertation examines the formation of urban poverty and slums which have long stigmatized South Asian cities. It focuses on the emergence of markets in housing through the 19th and early 20th centuries in Bombay primarily, and Karachi and Aden secondarily. It is the first historical study of slums, or poor and stigmatized housing, in colonial Western India. It critically engages with the terms of global urban modernity and the historiography of colonialism in South Asia, challenging the broader nationalist frames in which scholars have understood South Asia’s poverty. While this is not a comparative project, the dissertation interrogates many of the implicit and explicit comparative claims that have been made about colonial cities and their legibility in the discourse on global slums.

Housing was a visible marker of inequality on the urban landscape and therefore a useful site through which to examine the changing relations between migrants and settlers, laborers and capitalists, and society and the state. The changing political economy of Western India resulted in a laboring and urban poor whose housing issues became productive of regional, colonial, and national difference. By following circular migrants across city and country, this study builds on the subcontinent’s Early Modern history of a pervasive rural-urban continuum of human networks. Everyday workers used their mobility and habitation practices to negotiate a changing world, bringing cities like Bombay, Karachi, and Aden into their routes of mobility to earn a livelihood. Increased opportunities combined with the intensification of production, market crises, growing demographic pressures on the land, and the spread of indebtedness to produce
and reproduce inequality. This dissertation also compares the subsequent management of the urban poverty problem in cities across Western India, which heightened concerns over public health and sanitation. Newly financed poor housing initiatives sought to correct these at the turn of the century, but their limitations made modern slums. By addressing the eventual obfuscation of the once-transitioned status of the modern slum-dweller, this study delineates the bases for the conceptualization of a distinctive third world poverty and urban form.
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Note on Abbreviations and Use of Terms

The name “Bombay” is used instead of “Mumbai” for most of this study, even though the name of the city was officially changed in 1995. I follow the usage of the name prevalent to the period under study. Likewise, I use “Karachi” instead of “Kolachi” which was one of the names of Karachi in pre-colonial times. Only in Chapter One, where contemporary Mumbai is a part of the analysis, do I use the name “Mumbai,” and there the politics of the name change is a part of the narrative.

Non-english terms are italicized and their meaning is explained in the first instantiation. Some quotations are in non-English languages; I provide translations for these in the text.

Abbreviations used for primary sources are below:

BLCP   Bombay Legislative Council Proceedings
COBC   City of Bombay Census
COBIT  City of Bombay Improvement Trust
COBP   Census of Bombay Presidency
GOB    Government of Bombay
IOR    India Office Records
MCRCOB Municipal Commissioner’s Report for the City of Bombay
MSA    Maharashtra State Archives

1 Lakh is 100,000
Introduction: Bombay's Impoverished Histories

Origin stories provide convenient shorthands with which to signal the subsequent texture of a city’s history; as metonymic tropes, they function as efficient producers of an historiographical culture. One of the origin stories for the city of Bombay involves the gifting of the island as dowry when a Portuguese king gave his daughter, Catherine of Braganza, in marriage to the English king, Charles II, in the year 1661.¹ This story is similar to an origin story for Manhattan which claims that, “the Manhattan real estate market was born when the Dutch paid $24 in shells to the Indians...”² Both stories inaugurate the island-cities’ modern histories through a transaction in the seventeenth century, but the similarities end there. The primary transaction in Bombay involved not shells, a kind of money, but a bride, suggestive of an archaic ritual of polity building. The Portuguese gifted a bride along with the island of Bombay to establish an alliance with the English against Spain, having just been abandoned by the French in that very endeavour.³ The giving of Bombay was part of a royal marriage and thus a visible ritual, not a private transaction. It was not meant to extinguish a relationship but to enhance a social bond.⁴ Moreover, this social bonding through a marriage alliance was a European drama playing out on Indian soil.

¹ The other origin story, that Bombay was nothing more than a fishing village, is the subject of the first chapter.


³ Both Bombay and Tangier, a small town in northern Morocco, were given as dowry to Charles II on his marriage with Catherine of Braganza. Once the island was in Charles II possession, he gave it to the East India Company in exchange for a loan. The story of how the Portuguese had gotten the island of Bombay in the first place is that they acquired Thane, northern Bombay, from the Sultan of Gujarat in exchange for mercenary assistance against Humayun, the second Mughal emperor. Humayun had launched an unsuccessful campaign to annex the Gujarat Kingdom in 1535.

These differences between New York’s and Bombay’s histories is produced by a particular genealogy of the urban modern which prevents the writing of Bombay’s history as a modern story. The origin stories suggest that Manhattan is a natural place of commerce while Bombay is a place of obligations and bonds which function until the present day as atavistic forms. Exchanges in Bombay are ostensibly mired in relationships of indebtedness, bondage, and reciprocity; labourers are recruited through jobbers, patrons solicit production through private arrangements rather than anonymous market pressures, credit is obtained based on personal affiliations, and links between real estate developers and the police control housing. Whereas media such as money and contracts create internationally legible markets within which New York is a powerful node, personal bonds presumably present an obstructive layer to the exchangeability of Bombay’s assets.\(^5\)

Challenging these generalizations is difficult due to the existence of arguments which serve to turn contrary evidence into support for the original generalization. If one suggests that Bombay isn’t the site of these traditional forms of exchange and argues instead that Bombay was once a place of industry replete with factories and mills which provided wage labour, from the 1860s until the mills left Bombay in the 1970s, then the defense arises that Bombay was in such a state because it was a junction or interface between a modern West and a traditional Indian interior. All may agree that Bombay was the commercial hub of the British Indian Empire in the long 19th century, but many will qualify this claim by noting that it was an exception in British India. At best, Bombay was where an atavistic society articulated with rational markets

\(^5\) That these “obstructions” are remarkably overcome during periods of global speculative finance and housing booms in contemporary urban India doesn’t prevent the narrative’s prevalence. See Llerena Searle, “Making Space for Capital: The Production of Global Landscapes in Contemporary India” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2010).
elsewhere through local junctions created by empire, but the majority of its own social life remained uniquely Indian.

The city’s infamous slums are routinely submitted as evidence to affirm the persistent conceptual framework which narrates Bombay as a junction between the modern and traditional or between the future and the past. Those characteristics of the city which cannot be reconciled to a preconceived theory of urban capitalist modernity are explained by the inability of modern Bombay to banish its traditional hinterland from its boundaries. The constant flow of migrating workers from hinterlands and the taking up of residences in ill-kept urban slums warrant the claim that tradition or the non-modern is continuously being admitted into the space of the modern, which prevents Bombay from generalizing into a modern urban center. Caste, too, is often enlisted as an explanation for this failure to modernize since caste is presumably a hereditarily determined privilege which locks one into a rank in society; caste cannot be conceived of as a flexible and mediating rubric through which one’s position on the pathways of capital accumulation become operative. Thus, it can seem logical that modern rational markets developed in New York City, but social pressures of debt, bondage, credit, and obligation turned Bombay into a unique and “not quite urban” space.

It would be interesting to know when this story about the city gifted as dowry began to circulate, but a scholar of Manhattan is right to remind us that,

The persistence of this story tells us more about the justifying strategies of our own times than about the past. The Manhattan real estate market, the myth implies, is as natural as its bedrock and harbor, and real estate magnates who today pursue the ‘art of the deal’ are only fulfilling their forefathers’ vision of the profits embedded in Manhattan land.  

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Indeed, origin myths tell us a lot about our own strategies of memory, historiography, and deployment of the past for the present than they do about the days gone by. Their appearance in histories serves to set a stage for the kind of story we are going to be receiving. As efficient producers of a sedimented culture of historiography, these particular stories make it difficult to consider Western India’s urbanization and its related social problems on equivalent terms to urbanization in the North Atlantic or elsewhere in the colonized world.

Demographic data have for long provided a means to quantitatively compare population growth in cities worldwide. Such data has been most inspired by modernization and development agendas in the interwar and post-war periods. Such data can confirm that Bombay was the commercial capital of Western India in the 19th century, oscillating between being the second and third largest city in the British Empire, behind London and comparable to Calcutta, but not quite as large as New York City. However, without critically considering what urbanization means and for whom, we are left with a superficial observation from which many have mistakenly extrapolated Bombay’s progress on a scale of development. (See Figure 0.1)

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7 Information collated from census reports of Bombay Town and Island and Bombay Presidency Census of 1921 which had a summary of population growth in several Western Indian cities. All numbers are best possible approximations based on census records and whichever errors those may produce. *London is 1861, 1881, 1891, 1899, 1911, 1921, 1931; 1899 being the only number for “Greater London”. **New York’s census dates are 1860, 1870, 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910, 1920. “New York” means only Manhattan before 1900 because New York city census reporters started including other boroughs after 1900, which was the first census after consolidation of the five boroughs. Also, Manhattan was the most populous, and at 23 sq. miles, its area was comparable to Bombay during the period under study.
### Fig. 0.1 Population of Western Indian cities compared with London and New York City

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1864</th>
<th>1872</th>
<th>1881</th>
<th>1891</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1911</th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1931</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>816,562</td>
<td>644,405</td>
<td>773,196</td>
<td>821,764</td>
<td>776,006</td>
<td>979,445</td>
<td>1,175,914</td>
<td>1,268,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karachi</td>
<td>56,753</td>
<td>73,560</td>
<td>105,199</td>
<td>116,663</td>
<td>151,903</td>
<td>216,883</td>
<td>301,000</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Surat</td>
<td>107,855</td>
<td>109,844</td>
<td>109,229</td>
<td>119,306</td>
<td>114,868</td>
<td>117,434</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmedabad</td>
<td>128,505</td>
<td>137,041</td>
<td>159,366</td>
<td>199,609</td>
<td>232,777</td>
<td>274,007</td>
<td>314,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London*</td>
<td>2,803,989</td>
<td>3,815,544</td>
<td>4,211,056</td>
<td>6,528,434</td>
<td>7,160,525</td>
<td>7,386,848</td>
<td>8,110,480</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York**</td>
<td>813,669</td>
<td>942,292</td>
<td>1,164,673</td>
<td>1,441,216</td>
<td>1,850,093</td>
<td>2,331,542</td>
<td>2,284,103</td>
<td>1,867,312</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, the assumptions which undergird such data involved a kind of methodological nationalism, where data was collected for national units of analysis. For example, Kingsley Davis assumed national borders as demarcators of regions so that “England’s” urbanization was compared to “India’s” urbanization. Instead, more comparable units of analysis, perhaps coastal regions of Western India compared to the United Kingdom might have yielded more useful results. Additionally, some migrants to London and New York city were likely urban to urban migrants, having first migrated in the old world from country to city, and yet urbanization data lead us to presume that London and New York’s population increases signal a radical transformation of a national peoples from rural to urban ways of life, when the process was likely more protracted and extended beyond national boundaries. Given coastal Western India’s population density, it would also be useful to challenge the definition of what counts as “urban.” Such dense collections of human population are also found in coastal South, Southeast, and East Asia and were results of migration in the latter nineteenth century, and yet some such regions are not formally cities. The *desakotas* of Southeast Asia are literally village-cities, which make up much of the landscape. Migrants to coastal Asia included over twenty-nine million Indians

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8 Davis distinguished urbanization from the growth of cities, where the former indicated the percentage of a population living in cities as opposed to the latter which meant the absolute number of people living in a city. It was possible, according to Davis, to have growth of a city without having urbanization. He acquired such data by computing urban population numbers as a percentage of a nation’s population which was particularly alarming for what he classified “non-Industrial nations” such as India. In his comparisons, places such as India, Brazil, Egypt, Kenya, and mainland China, were experiencing the growth of cities without urbanization due to their population increases in the 1950s and 1960s unaccompanied by economic development, and thus there was widespread urban poverty. See Kingsley Davis, “The Urbanization of the Human Population,” *Scientific American* Vol. 213, No. 3 (Sept. 1965).

before the 1930s. Finally, what is often at stake in demographic comparisons of urbanization is not assumptions about city life but about country or agrarian life. Agrarian migrants are too often conceived of as once rustic folk transformed into sophisticated, cosmopolitan and urban residents through their arrival into cities. In India, such assumptions have driven modernization theory, its use of urbanization as a marker of development, and nationalist agitations both for and against development.

Such impressions from demographic comparisons are efficiently indexed by origin stories which render Bombay only in contrast to New York, and imply that Indian cities lag “behind” their North Atlantic counterparts. However, the experience of inequity in the city of Bombay or any other city was remarkably similar. That the labouring and migrating poor found themselves across world cities dwelling in make-shift and dilapidated housing and operating within unreliable and fluctuating markets of labor and production outside of the purview of state regulation is a commonality across cities which is more difficult to theorize. This dissertation is an attempt to overcome that difficulty.

Markets and Housing

This dissertation is a study of the emergence and development of relations in housing through the 19th and early 20th centuries in Bombay primarily, and Karachi and Aden secondarily. It uses housing as a visible marker of inequality on the urban landscape and as a site through which to examine the changing relations between migrants and settlers, labourers and

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10 Densely populated and coastal Western India, areas such as the Konkan and Karnataka, are discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation. For East and Southeast Asia, see Adam McKeown, “Global Migration, 1846-1940,” *Journal of World History* Vol. 15, No. 2 (June 2004), 157.
capitalists, and society and the state. It focuses on the habitation practices of everyday workers and rural to urban migrants to unravel the dynamics by which inequality is produced and reproduced. This study also focuses on Bombay’s first generation of slumdwellers, i.e., those people who lived in the neighborhoods where the “slum problem” was first raised. The plague of 1896 warranted the stigmatization of dense and vertically built housing structures in First and Second Nagpada, Kamathipura, and Kumbharwada amongst other central wards. (See Figure 0.2) In that first slum-making episode, we see how for migrants, housing existed in a state of tension between providing a path of mobility and proximity to new forms of livelihood in the city and being the medium through which those migrants could be marked as apart from the normal operations of a city. By looking at the formation of the “slum problem” for these residents, this study traces how housing became a site upon which reforms could bring in state officials to reorganize the relations between moneyed interests and itinerant workers.

11 Prior to 1930 at least, Kumbharwada was located in central Bombay amongst these working class neighborhoods and was often spelled “Coombharwada.” Kumbharwada now exists in Dharavi, the most infamous slum of Mumbai which is located far north of these other neighborhoods. I am not sure when Kumbharwada moved to Dharavi.
Fig. 0.2 Map of Bombay, divided into wards
Source: 1867 Municipal Commissioner’s Report of Bombay, 1867
Since the acquisition of housing was deeply embedded in complex webs of negotiation and mediation, the kinds of social webs which form the substance of more popular and stereotypical narratives of life in Bombay, it can be all the more difficult to see how housing functioned within interfacing markets of land, labour, cotton, grain, or money to emerge as a complex commodity of its own. Yet, that is precisely what this study tries to demonstrate. The emergence of a market in housing was a process which involved first discrediting housing entitlements, the kinds of dispensations of shelter that a cultivator or labourer might expect. While these were discredited, they weren’t dismantled, i.e., they continued to provide a way to negotiate the acquisition of housing. The first chapter on the making of Koliwadas, Koli “colonies” or neighborhoods, in the city with “indigenous” housing shows that process. Once everyone except the indigenous was subject to market conditions, the addition of a layer of regulation in poor housing on top of an already developed field in housing brought officials and elites into the process. The second through fifth chapters show how housing was constructed by migrants and how officials and elites inserted themselves into that process most notably after the plague. Attempts at regulation or interference in the production of poor housing furthered distinctions between moneyed men and those without, proving just how pervasive the market in housing was.

Throughout this dissertation, social relations centering on the city of Bombay are analyzed within a broad but single temporal and spatial analytic frame which spans across city and country and included a simultaneity of diverse social forms. This study follows circular migrants through their paths of mobility, tracing the way in which their productive activities were perceived by contemporary officials as opposed to how they functioned in the migrant
labourers’ lives. The production of housing in the city of Bombay was connected to market-based activities which encompassed a rural-urban continuum through the 19th and early 20th centuries. Expanding markets in cotton and grain in Western India led to the kinds of displacements which would be expected from commercialization and also became the conditions under which urban housing was produced. Yet, urban housing was often thought of as an exclusively consumptive activity. The mobility of everyday people was a source of innovation and allowed migrants to negotiate a quickly changing world, but the motive to locate and place the population on the part of officials and employers led mobility to be read as an obstacle to urban settlement. By the 1920s, labour mobility was offered by employers as an explanation for inefficient production and by union organizers as the reason labour could not organize for its own betterment.

While this is not a comparative project, this dissertation challenges many of the implicit and explicit comparative claims that have long been made about the history of the Bombay or the city in South Asia, most notably that its development lags behind other cities. Such comparisons have been driven by the fact that the city is overwhelmed by a labouring and poor population who are ill-housed in shantytowns and make Bombay seem like an underdeveloped landscape. Besides the city of Bombay’s majestic colonial architecture in the Fort neighborhood, the slums serve as the most visible marker of the city’s colonial legacy and suggest that the colonial encounter prevented Bombay from embodying the modern urban form. Even in our present day, it is often the case that when an example of a city with slums is needed, Bombay serves as the city of choice. In an urban studies text called *The City Reader*, the following photograph and caption serves to align present-day Bombay with England’s past through its slums:
Plate 50 The persistence of urban slums: Mumbai, India. As some sectors of cities in the age of globalization reach new heights of innovation and productivity, other sectors are stuck in slum conditions as bad as those described by Friedrich Engels in the early days of the Industrial Revolution. From Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro to Lagos, Nigeria, and Manila, Philippines, as many as 1 billion people worldwide live in conditions such as these with incomes of $1 per day or less, and the struggle against gross social inequality continues as an important part of the urban agenda for reform.

Fig. 0.3 Photograph of slums in contemporary Mumbai
According to the caption above, Bombay is where slums “persist,” or where sectors are “stuck in slum conditions as bad as those described by Friedrich Engels in the early days of the Industrial Revolution.” Bombay’s slums remain as reminders of a past way of life that has not yet been brought into the present.12

To produce this idea that Bombay is like London’s past requires an assumption that different parts of the world occupy different temporalities. How this idea “persists” would be worth documenting in and of itself but it is outside of the scope of this dissertation. However, I can point to a tendency amongst historians to narrate a distinct European transition to capitalism which posits merchants’ activities in an urban environment far from the gaze of feudal overlords as early as the medieval period, a Smithian narrative which persists as much as it has been critiqued.13 The result is that Europe’s cities are seen as uniquely geared towards a transition from centuries prior, a transition from which South Asian cities are either left out or still catching up. The natural separation between urban merchants and agrarian overlords in the European model compels us to see slums and shantytowns in South Asian cities as proof that the cities failed to separate from their countrysides. The persistence of unhygienic, haphazardly organized,


and overcrowded spaces pose a problem for the history of the city, their form fitting stereotypes of non-urban and village life created by some of the earliest urban sociologists. Such historical assumptions also frame the work of anthropologists who for long, didn’t take up the study of complex non-western social forms since they don’t fit expectations created by social theory. Arjun Appadurai has said about this that:

...the anthropology of complex non-Western societies has, till recently, been a second class citizen in anthropological discourse. This...involves a kind of reverse Orientalism, whereby complexity, literacy, historical depth, and structural messiness operate as disqualifications in the struggle of places for a voice in metropolitan theory.

The study of urban slums then, rather than being read as structurally complex spaces, are read as the persistence of simple, rural elements, only intensified in scale. Their presence in Indian urban life serves to prove that Indian cities have followed distinct and incomplete pathways apart from transitions which characterized Europe such that they are stuck in Europe’s past.

To challenge such comparisons, it is worth pursuing Bombay’s own history. Bombay’s population neared one million by the year 1900. Even when it was the second largest city of the British Empire well behind London, it was still “fearfully more dense.” It was the leading commercial and industrial center in all of the Indian subcontinent, full of mills, banks, and ports from which shipping occurred.

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In this study, I trace the development of the city and focus on the causes of its density. I narrate urbanization in Western India beginning with the development of urban life from the ground up by first, following the actions of everyday people who moved to the city in search of work and opportunities. These everyday migrants built and occupied neighborhoods like First and Second Nagpada, Kamathipura, Dongri, and Kumbharwada. These were located north of Fort and South Bombay where merchants could access international markets. Nagpada, Kamathipura, Dongri, Kumbharwada and others were basically working class neighborhoods where people migrated in droves during the cotton boom of the 1860s and the famines of the 1870s. These dense neighborhoods came to be stigmatized upon the onset of plague in 1896. The disease and fear of illness and death put a halt to Bombay’s commercial eminence. The desire to sanitize the city so that commerce could resume led to the formation of the City of Bombay Improvement Trust which offered schemes to remove the city’s slums and rehouse the labouring poor of the city. But the ambitions of the schemes were undermined by the interests of the elite moneyed peoples who were financing and taking advantage of the City Improvement Trust’s access to government lines of credit. Ironically, the labouring and poor rehousing schemes envisioned by the City Improvement Trust only exacerbated the class-based forms of inequality in the city of Bombay.

The kinds of migrations, networks, and markets which formed across city and country were also operative in Karachi and Aden. These latter two cities appear in the sixth chapter of the dissertation as sources of comparisons and connections with Bombay and serve to show that Bombay was seen as a sub-imperial city or as a monopolizer of colonial capital. Rather than seek new kinds of resolutions to the problems of urban inequality, Karachi’s urban leaders and
merchants in the early 20th century complained that they had been made subordinate to Bombay and wanted to catch up. They used Bombay’s attempts at the resolution of the urban poverty problem and Bombay’s access to government lines of credit and well-integrated markets as proof that they had been left behind. Karachi’s merchants and urban leaders thus sought more market-based opportunities for themselves, asking for infrastructure which would connect Karachi to more proximate hinterlands in spite of suggestions that they direct funds towards the city’s poor housing problem. Karachi’s leaders thus managed to ignore the growing problem of urban poverty in their city. Meanwhile, Bombay’s merchants depended on Aden as a fueling station en route to other ports. When an inquiry was conducted to assess the living conditions of the labouring classes in Aden, Bombay’s merchants said they had no responsibility towards housing in Aden. They claimed they were only obliged to offer a wage, not provide housing. Thus it was that in Bombay, Karachi, and Aden, the problem of urban poverty continued and was produced anew through the early 20th century in spite of concerns and plans to resolve the poor housing problem.

The images of closely huddled tin-roofed shacks on potentially unusable land within the city have become a mainstay of any image of present-day Bombay. However, shacks weren’t the first of Bombay’s slums. It isn’t that shacks didn’t exist in historical Bombay— they did, but those weren’t slums, they were just shacks or huts. Officials spoke of them merely to describe their architecture and not to question their legitimacy. Most such shacks existed in the northern parts of the island and along the city’s shores, as well as in a few other locations. The East India Company itself had shacks built to house inhabitants during the 1830s when it became embroiled in the problem of famine in the Madras Presidency. Migrants had come flooding into Madras,
which was seen as a center of authority and a place to get help. The first slums of Bombay were instead small buildings, two to four story flats which populated the dense core of the city in neighborhoods such as 1st and 2nd Nagpada, Kamathipura, and Kumbharwada. These slums were much like slums found across the industrializing world in London, New York, San Francisco, Shanghai, Singapore, Sydney, Nairobi, and anywhere else where human populations were becoming increasingly dense.

Through the 19th century, Bombay’s capacity to sustain inequality and deploy that inequality in its own service as a powerful node of contact with markets beyond itself was like other cities. Capitalists were able to escape forms of regulation and limitation to their activities and seek out new labour markets. Private entrepreneurs of all kinds, including building owners, mill owners, and shipping and commercial entrepreneurs, could have a heyday in Bombay, and they did.

By the early 20th century, their role in housing was a part of their success. Housing created revenues for moneyed men; it was a way to manage the population, a way to discipline labour, and as we see in the formation of the City Improvement Trust, a way to consolidate the interests of moneyed peoples. There was very little to stop or regulate commercial ambitions. Migrants accompanied the ambitions of others and came with their own, building the city’s housing through a complex and changing organization of the production process. Migrants supplied the labour market from rapidly changing sending regions, creating intense competition in the labour market. Their habitation practices caused Bombay to advance rapidly through the phases of urban growth. Extensive urban density in the center of the city came as a result of

17 “Papers regarding the charitable work carried out by the Committee for the Management of the Monegar Choultry,” Madras, Feb 1833-Jun 1834.
intensification of the use of land, and thus people began moving outwards and suburbanizing by the turn of the century. These competitive dynamics also explain why the “hinterland” of Bombay has always changed and why that word is not necessarily useful as a descriptor of a static place. The story about Aden in chapter six demonstrates the necessity of distant labor markets for Bombay’s capitalists. Such tactics of deploying mobility and settlement by British and native capitalists enhanced the social status of private entrepreneurs and sustained the excesses of exploitation and extraction, making Bombay a crucial node in the colonial economy.

Prior to the depression of the 1930s, homelessness in urban centers, whether legal or illegal, was a remarkably comparable condition of existence. Cities were where surplus labour could migrate for jobs and opportunities. Nowhere could the poorest urban dwellers on their quickly declining wages and decreasing incomes from sales afford the kind of housing that any private developer would build. The depression resulted in divergent remedies to the poor housing problem. Public housing projects in cities of the North Atlantic and the concerted effort to make middle classes afford housing saved New York and London from Bombay’s subsequent misfortunes. Bombay’s slums did not “persist” because of a fundamental failure of the market in housing to develop in the same way in India as it had elsewhere. They developed because in Bombay and even outside the boundaries of formal colonialism, “traditional” habitation forms were products of capitalist development writ large. Nonetheless, India played a perhaps special role on the world historical stage; it was made exemplary of that not-yet capitalist state because of its central position as a stage for imperial power.
The depression of the 1930s caused a decline in both the market for goods and in official lines of credit. Widespread poverty resulted in underconsumption and fewer remedies existed than they had prior. Between 1860 and 1930, the British imperial state had invested capital in India’s infrastructure as a way to make its colony profitable. Bombay’s infrastructure was built mainly in that period and it, along with the building of housing, kept people employed, even providing official relief work in times of dearth. Extensive land reclamations, roadways, trains, and ports integrated Bombay with regions beyond the city. Upon the depression, credit and investments were difficult to come by. When the City of Bombay Improvement Trust suspended its housing schemes for labour and the poor in 1933 and was amalgamated with the Bombay Municipal Corporation, it did so with a debt of Rs. 90 lakh on its ledger. Faced with bank crises and the now unreliable funds, the Trust sold off more than half of that debt to private investors and repaid the rest in 1932.

What is a slum?

Slum dwellers are seen as out of time and out of place. According to conventions produced in the scholarly literature, slums are the presence of the past and not yet modern, and slumdwellers are displaced villagers living in the city. By contrast, this study sees inequality in urban housing as productive of and an outcome of transitions to markets which operated on a continuum across town and country and intensified competition for access to shelter in the urban space. Inequality in housing was a product of the very modern transitions with which the history

of the 19th century is filled. Social mobility within society and across space best characterized Indian social life. Mobility across town and country enabled peasants, merchants, landholders, and entrepreneurs of all strata to build Bombay. Therefore, the resultant inequality in Bombay was because of their disparate successes which distinguished communities from each other.

The word “slum” does not occur in the South Asian historical record until late in the 19th century. Native language words for slums may appear in non-English sources. For example, “katchi abadi” or “katchi basti” is a “raw dwelling” as opposed to a “pakka” house which is “cooked,” i.e. with cement walls, electrical outlets, water sources, and a structural roof. Sometimes called “basti” which just means dwelling, this word connotes dense living quarters and often refers to slums, or housing in a colloquial form. In Western India, “jhopadpati,” or “zhopad-pati” is the word used for a row of roofs or huts. However, these words don’t often correlate consistently with the legal status of the housing. Some katchi bastis or jhopad patis acquire legal rights over time through social organization, but some don’t. The varying terminology used to describe slums is significant because it places housing in its local context.

Urban slums of the “developing” or “underdeveloped” world are most often extra-legal, semi-legal, or occasionally legal, makeshift proliferations of informal or organic settlements made from temporary materials such as tin sheets, dried mud, poor quality cement, bamboo, or material waste such as barrels, boxes, cartons, etc. The UN Report of 2001 states, “The urban poor are currently the largest producers of shelter and builders of cities in the world...”\textsuperscript{19} Slums are intensely dense settlements often built on unused or unusable public land. Especially during the beginning phases of a slum settlement, no basic amenities are provided by the state for these

dwellings, but, some locales have been present long enough to garner such privileges from officials. This is what the majority of third-world slums have in common. However, they differ across cities because of the varying local contexts in which customary property relations have been historically transformed into a modern form. Diverse forms of housing tenure include: run-down rentals, non-legal occupancy rights managed by networks and hierarchies of slumlords, temporary housing on seasonal job sites, and outright illegal squatting on vacant land.

The word “slums” as it is used to describe poor quarters in cities of the North Atlantic is quite different from cities elsewhere. In North Atlantic cities, “the slums” often refer to a minority urban population living in dilapidated government or private (often rented) housing which hasn’t been maintained according to housing standards set by the municipality or government. Unemployment, dependence on welfare, or occasional employment can drive urban inhabitants into ill-kept public or private housing. The avenues for petty labour and unregulated production of counterfeit commodities are much restricted in the developed world, thus making the housed urban poor stigmatized as “unproductive” dependents on welfare and the state. In contrast, slums in developing cities often house the majority of the urban population, and accounts of slums in third world cities have moved from condescension in the 1960s and 70s (slums house the poorest of the poor who need to be saved) to since the 1990s, a celebration of the bustling productivity of slum dwellers. This shift in representation of the developing world’s slums has in part to do with the shifting needs for tourism and representation of third world poverty to first world viewers. It also has to do with a valorization of the efficiency of private enterprise which became important after the 1970s.
Historically, slums were found in many parts of every major city throughout the nineteenth century, but they weren’t always called slums. In fact, if one were to stand in the middle of Bombay in 1750 and look out at the human dwellings in the surrounding vicinity, the vast majority of housing would be in the architectural style we would today call a slum and would be embedded within the social relations which today signify the “problem of the slum,” i.e., a small dwelling space made up of makeshift materials without a legal property right over the land it was on. For the next two hundred years after 1750, the modern urban home was introduced which included individual property rights recognized by a bureaucratic and juridical state. This process meant that the earliest “slums” of Bombay were once part of the legitimate housing stock of the city. Making homes with permanent materials facilitated the exchange of property in a housing market which demanded legal jurisdiction over domestic capital. Through housing, urban populations could become legible within urban social hierarchies, and a major organizing feature of social life.20

Theorists of urbanization distinguish modern urbanism from its pre-modern form by capitalist transformations of urban space,21 i.e., the creation of a space neatly divided between class communities who are rational actors within urban economic life, as opposed to the pre-modern walled city which divided the rulers from the ruled according to one’s proximity to the central king or distance from the wall.22 As cities develop, it is argued, neighborhoods should


become socially exclusive zones of cohabitation. Barriers of wealth can in terms of housing and neighborhood costs and can create networks of class-based affiliations.

In contrast, contemporary South Asian urbanism has been characterized as “dirty urbanism” by urban sociologists and city planners.\textsuperscript{23} This is due to the absence of neat boundaries between communities of different socio-economic strata or the miscegenation of urban spaces by rich and poor alike such that even domesticity and the place of work are not neatly divided. Underdeveloped cities, with their overpopulation, absence of demarcated social zones, and a majority population of the disenfranchised within illegal settlements, are seen as sites indicative of the lack of modernization, or incomplete modernization. They are projects yet to be completed. Slums, due especially to their overwhelming presence in the cities of the developing world, became the sign of modernity’s failure to transform the South Asian social and urban landscape.

**Colonialism, Urbanization and Poverty**

While there has been no historical study of housing in urban South Asia, conceptions of the Indian city have been abundant in the debates on poverty, industrialization and urbanism of the 19th and 20th centuries, which are reviewed below. Looking at the study of the city from an interdisciplinary point of view, we can discern some trends. In scholarship in geography, development economics, urban sociology, anthropology, history, and even area studies, the urban form can stand in for the greatest achievements of modernization. Free capital, free labour, and unrestricted human ambition result in forms of social organization structured solely to optimize

\textsuperscript{23} Based on a conversation with A. G. Krishna Menon, Architect and Urban Planner, New Delhi, India.
growth and social mobility in the city. Cities serve as nodes of contact with distant markets and are containers themselves of intensifying capitalist relations. Even current scholastic endeavors which seek to recover the pre-modern urban form offer searching clues to an upcoming modern revolution, teleological hints of the present in the past. Cities are thus cast as places where ethnic ties between kinsmen are abandoned for economic bonds of class, or where class-based bonds can produce the modern economy. They are homes for free associations and organizations which construct coalitions of power apart from the oppressive arms of the state. They serve as instruments to social enhancements and class mobility rather than locations of fixed hierarchies. They are containers of humanity’s progress; markets enable the emergence of individuals who form civil societies who champion progress and freedom.

Such a genealogy of the urban modern prevents the writing of Bombay’s history in modern time and in modern space. Beginning with the assumption that the city is a distinct sociological category from the country has cast the majority slum-dwellers of Bombay as neither townsmen nor country-folk, so they don’t fit the categories which would allow us to write about them as either productive or consumptive, tied to the land or freed, capitalistic or feudal. Yet the use of ontologically distinct entities, townsmen versus country-folk, is pervasive in descriptions of them even in disagreements about whether slumdwellers are rural or urban folk.²⁴ The question of urbanism in South Asia has exemplified a struggle with these issues.

²⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). First published in 1970, Lefebvre predicted the blurring of the distinction between cities and countries for the sustenance of capitalism. He also predicted the total urbanization of society.
Quantity of Urbanism

It is a commonly held view that the degree of urbanization corresponds to the stage of development of a society. In a section entitled “Ascending the Ladder of Economic Development” from the book *End of Poverty*, Jeffrey Sachs, the Economist and Director of Columbia University’s Earth Institute and leading figure of the United Nations Millennium Project which sets development goals writes,

...we sense a progression of development that moves from subsistence agriculture toward light manufacturing and urbanization, and on to high-tech services. In Malawi, 84 percent of the population live in rural areas; in Bangladesh, 76 percent; in India, 72 percent; and in China, 61 percent. In the United States, at the upper end of the development spectrum, it is just 20 percent. Services account for under 25 percent of employment in Malawi, whereas in the United States, they account for 75.

In Sachs’ worldview, it makes perfect sense that the United States is a wealthier country than Malawi given the difference in degree of urbanization in each society. He is basically making a causal claim that development results in a greater percentage of society that is urbanized. He goes on to say,

If economic development is a ladder with higher rungs representing steps up the path to economic well being, there are roughly one billion people around the world, one sixth of humanity, who live as the Malawians do: too ill, hungry, or destitute even to get a foot on the first rung of the development ladder.\(^{25}\)

The world is a simple place from Jeffrey Sachs’ point of view; the ladder serves as a clear metaphor where rungs are stages towards development and cities are a marker on each rung. Cities are spaces of upward social mobility. That some countries don’t have a sufficient urban

population shows that the process of development is still incomplete. Sachs is following an old idea borne out of a long-standing conceit, most well executed by the anthropologist Robert Redfield, that urban people are more advanced than rural folk.\textsuperscript{26}

Historians of 19th century India have often proceeded on the assumption that the degree of urbanization in India declined as a response to British colonialism. This assumption accompanies the ruralization thesis, namely that India was made into a primarily rural and agrarian economy through the colonial encounter. Irfan Habib measured precise rates of urbanization using census data in Eastern India between 1812 and 1872. He concluded that the quantity of urban population in that period alone declined not just in relative terms but in absolute terms. Although he advised that precise regional studies would need to confirm this trend for Western and Southern India, he insisted that “...of the process itself there can be no doubt.”\textsuperscript{27} The problem with his method is that his enumeration stops at the year 1872. The implication is that famine, which was a major factor in urbanization through the 1870s and 1880s, is not a permissible factor in the urbanization process. Additionally, we don’t have a regional study of Western India to show whether the quantitative trend can be generalized.

The ruralization thesis was the complement to the notion that the Indian subcontinent in the 19th century de-urbanized, that the percentage of its urban population actually declined; both were a major part of nationalist agitation and nationalist historiography. Nationalists argued that colonialism had rendered India an exporter of primary agrarian products. Demands for grain and cotton by colonizers led to agrarian policies geared towards greater output. The increase in

\footnote{26 Redfield, “The Folk Society.”}

\footnote{27 Irfan Habib, \textit{Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception} (New Delhi: Tulika, 1995), 322.}
overall population meant that more people found themselves crowding on to the land given that there was insufficient industrial employment to provide opportunities for alienated rural labour. Thus given the rise in overall population, a greater percentage of people were living in the villages at the end of the nineteenth century than at the beginning. A landless peasantry was thus the outcome of British colonial rule. Dharma Kumar’s work tried to mitigate this argument. She was able to argue that a peasantry existed prior to British arrival in the Madras Presidency. She showed that the percentage of agricultural labourers of the rural sector went up from 15-17% to 27% in the 19th century. The first number had a larger margin of error since it was hard to count outcaste landless labourers and so estimates for the year 1800 had to be extrapolations from the numbers from 1900. However, her critics thought she had underplayed the importance of even this ten percent increase in the agrarian labour force.

The quantitative study of urbanization was also bound up with the question of deindustrialization, the most robust condemnation of the development claims of the British Empire in India. According to Habib, by 1880 the de-industrialization of India was complete causing problems of “tribute” for the empire. Craft-based industries had been competitively priced out of the global market through the 19th century and thus unemployed craftsmen had nowhere to go for work. This contributed to the overpopulation on the land. Such expositions were circuitously attempting to explain the cause of poverty through the lack of sufficient


employment. Any evidence against the deindustrialization thesis often used the example of Bombay, to which critics could rejoinder that Bombay was an exception and not the rule.\(^{30}\)

In the postcolonial period and after the 1950s these indictments have been carried further. The few urbanists of South Asia who do take up the study of the city have theorized either incomplete urbanization or “over-urbanization,” which is defined as a larger urban population than warranted by the stage of development of the society.\(^{31}\) The city’s infrastructure, both in legal and physical forms, can not accommodate the demands of the population. Some say that sufficient urbanization exists in cities most influenced by “western culture” but the problems of insufficient infrastructure and a quickly migrating rural population lead to organic urban settlements where the difference between city and country remains vague.\(^{32}\) These assessments are unfortunately complicit in the notion that to be urban is to be economically advanced, although the precise relationship between the presumed advancing and urbanization is never worked out in detail.

**Quality of Urbanism**

While the scholars mentioned above have studied the quantity of urbanization, others have focused on the quality of urban spaces and their development in India. They contend that

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while cities did develop in colonial India, they were insufficiently modernized spaces. Overwhelmingly, slums are the most often cited reason for this interpretation, in spite of the fact that slums existed in all major cities through the turn of the 19th century. Especially for anthropologists and sociologists, slums indicated the presence of the “village” in the city, where recent rural migrants had settled informally without legal rights over the land nor legal claims to basic urban amenities.33 Rural peasants were insufficiently transformed into industrial labourers. Slum dwellers were seen as transitional figures, displaced peasants, who could neither return to a rapidly privatizing agrarian economy nor integrate as urban labourers into the inadequately industrialized city. The implicit history of the formation of urban slums was that they were an aberration of colonial modernity in which colonialism rendered capitalism incapable of producing the pure urban space. The reasons for this were numerous, but some included the notions that colonial powers had monopolized access to industrial machinery or that the development of wage labor was thwarted because of the monetary gains to be made for colonizing adventurers who could benefit from a “traditional” system of production. The nationalization of economies after decolonization justified state-led development programs which sought to industrialize urban peripheries so they could catch up. Urban planners attempted to provide for informal dwellers by constructing uniquely suited third world housing projects.34

The “colonial port city” paradigm has often been used to explain the development of cities throughout the Indian subcontinent like Bombay, Karachi, Madras and Calcutta, which are


seen by scholars in the 1980s, as exogenous and imposed, not a formation indigenous to society.\textsuperscript{35} Those scholars purport that the merchant’s ability to organize urban life after the decline of Mughal rule in the 18th century was indicative of indigenous trajectories towards town-based capitalism, but these were later thwarted by the transfer of commerce from “indigenous cities” to “colonial port cities” like Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras.\textsuperscript{36} Cities served as sites of extraction for the colonial power and places of desperate migration for famished migrants from the interiors in the post-Mughal colonial era. Scholars searched for indigenous concepts of urbanization and looked for native histories of urban growth so as not to impose European models.\textsuperscript{37} For these scholars, India’s difference from universal narratives of capitalist modernity was no longer demonstrated, but rather assumed.

There was resistance to the “colonial city” paradigm as well, but never through the problem of the urban slums. Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, when introducing the emergence of Bombay as an industrial center, wrote:

\begin{quote}
It has, not surprisingly, become a commonplace to regard the city as the principal agent of westernization and the harbinger of the modern world to the sub-continent...Bombay may have owed its origins and early growth to the Company settlement but its commercial and industrial development was shaped increasingly and in important ways by its place within the internal economy and not simply by the ‘modernizing’ forces of the West. Its commodity markets were linked to wider relations of production and exchange in the hinterland. Its mills depended increasingly upon the penetration of the domestic market. Labour for the city’s
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{36} Lakshmi Subramanian, \textit{Indigenous Capital and Imperial Expansion: Bombay, Surat and the West Coast} (Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

commercial enterprises not only migrated from distant regions, but retained close ties with the village and through the remittance of cash earnings contributed to the reproduction of the rural economy. 38

Chandavarkar approached a close picture of the kinds of connections between Bombay and its hinterlands that was necessary to understand its development. He had demonstrated effectively that circular migrations were strategies of survival which indicated autonomy, but his main concern was to show how industrialization had influenced Bombay’s growth.

In studies that took up these questions, the original paradigm had not been challenged, instead South Asia’s development was shown to “not fit” the European model, thus implying that South Asian economic history deviates from a Eurocentric capitalist form. 39 Through ethnographic and archival work, for example, “feudal” relations of bondage were found between industrialists and labourers. 40 It was suggested that the various “modes of production” outlined in Marx’s theory of capitalist growth needed to be abandoned and indigenous modes of production in Indian life found. Frustration with such debates, seen as debates internal to problems with marxian analyses, led scholars to pursue other questions on the issue of the Indian city.

Urban studies followed the trends broadly outlined by the cultural and linguistic turn.

Whereas prior to the 1960s and 70s, work on slums occurred within modernization or Marxist

39 For an important study which suggests a more differentiated, protracted, and discontinuous transition from within Europe, see Robert Duplessis and Martha Howell, “Reconsidering the Early Modern Urban Economy: The Cases of Leiden and Lille,” Past and Present No. 94 (Feb., 1982): 49 - 84.
frameworks, there was an almost total silence on the subject in the 1980’s and 90s. The cultural turn in the early 80s generated new important historical questions but instead of revising the old ones, seemed to abandon them. While new cultural historians have had much to say about the “cultural” nature of the “material,” less has been said about the “material” dimensions of the “cultural.”

By the early 2000’s a fitful and collaborative interrogation of this abrupt change in the directions of inquiry resulted in essays such as “Whatever Happened to the ‘Social’ in Social History” and debates between post-structuralists and self-proclaimed Marxists who were themselves varied and divided. At stake in these debates was the loss of a certain kind of social history which had broken new ground by focusing on the everyday and/or the lowest rungs of society, imbuing these actors with historical agency and rewriting the greatest historical events, such as the Industrial or French revolutions, from the perspectives of the masses. This groundbreaking social history made available analytical tools with which to think about inequality.

After the cultural turn, the status of inequality morphed. Rather than being limited to the notion of disparities in productive relations or consuming capabilities, inequality was expanded to the politics of representations or mediations inherent in sexual, racial, ethnic, or linguistic


identities which had no small role in the disparities of the human condition. As William Sewell put it, there was a “multiplication of historians’ radical identities…” when those affiliated with socialism and feminism now preferred to align themselves with queer movements, post-colonialism, or post-structuralism.\textsuperscript{44} I would add that while modernization was the discourse within which older social historians wrote, cultural historians wrote of modernity’s limits. Historical studies took on questions of culture through meaning, language, and representation, while some of the social sciences (economics, political science, sociology) became ossified within the rubric of empirical, often quantitative, data.\textsuperscript{45}

Work on the Indian city followed such trends. Scholars of urban form contrasted "official" rhetoric about the colonial city and its landscape to the lived experience of native residents for whom there were explicit records, namely, not the poor.\textsuperscript{46} Other scholars juxtaposed the “old city” aside the “new city” in places like Bombay,\textsuperscript{47} Karachi,\textsuperscript{48} Delhi,\textsuperscript{49} Bangalore,\textsuperscript{50} and Lucknow\textsuperscript{51} to underscore the imposition from above of municipal governance, urban planning, or imperial architecture. The latest works of South Asian architectural urban history have either

\textsuperscript{44} Sewell, \textit{Logics of History}, 66.

\textsuperscript{45} There are, of course, exceptions to this broad trend.

\textsuperscript{46} Spodek in Spodek et al., \textit{Urban Form and Meaning in South Asia}.

\textsuperscript{47} Mariam Dossal, \textit{Imperial Designs and Indian Realities: The Planning of Bombay City, 1845-1875} (Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

\textsuperscript{48} Yasmeen Lari and Mihail S. Lari, \textit{The Dual City: Karachi During the Raj} (Karachi: Heritage Foundation; Oxford University Press, 1996).

\textsuperscript{49} Legg, \textit{Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi’s Urban Governmentalities} (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007).

\textsuperscript{50} Janaki Nair, \textit{The Promise of the Metropolis: Bangalore’s Twentieth Century} (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

posited a unique Indian urban modernity or more carefully analyzed the modernization process as one of locally specific changes and adaptations to new meanings for architecture. In most of these, the question of inequality and poverty are not central. If mentioned at all, slums appear in the beginning of such monographs to introduce the strange entity which is the Indian city.

Current debates over what are called “good” or “bad” globalization invoke the urban slum as proof for either side of the debate: slums provide relatively cheap quarters from which to begin the process of upward mobility for new urban migrants or they exemplify the final step in downward mobility and mass impoverishment. In the most recent scholarship on urban poverty and slums, future utopias are imagined and invoked by re-asserting the urban slum as the frontier of democratization, capitalism, imperialism, or the impending revolution. Moving away from these grand narratives, this study interrogates the formation of slums within the larger field of housing and looks at how poor housing is socially and materially constructed. In doing so, it revisits a question of an older type of social history within insights generated out of cultural history such that the processes of maldistribution and misrecognition work together to produce inequity in urban life.


The last social historian of Bombay to deal with inequality in the city was Rajnarayan Chandavarkar. Since a primary goal of this dissertation is to contextualize, analyze, and discern the life of the migrating urban dweller as a social being, i.e., through an understanding of his/her relations within the social structure at large, it is worth reviewing that intervention.

Chandavarkar’s history of industrial Bombay portrayed Bombay as a vibrant industrial and political center. Its continued links with countrysides were explained by the competitive practices of the labour market, which overcame a rigid interpretation of Marx’s thinking on the formation of a proletariat. He was working against the notion that worker consciousness was constrained by the economic structure in which those workers found themselves. His opponents had claimed that Bombay was industrialized in a particular way, i.e. workers were “part-time urban wage labourers” who maintained ties to their villages and used their pay as remittances to support their rural families, pay back moneylenders, and maintain their conditions of social reproduction in the country. Thus they lacked the requisite discipline and commitment to sustain an effective labour movement. In the 1920s, Bombay’s workers would often abandon a strike too early, give in, or return to their homes in the country. Thus for such determinist Marxists, it was the economic structure of the particular labouring conditions in which Bombay’s mill workers found themselves that resulted in failed labour movements.

Chandavarkar turned this question on its head; he asked why strikes occurred in the first place. He wanted to demonstrate the formation of working-class consciousness first and then delineate its decline as a subsequent development having to do with politics not the economic

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structure. Neighborhoods and union organizations could facilitate class-based solidarities against capitalists, they were not constrained by their position in a structure. When explaining why the labour movement subsequently failed in Bombay, he focused on the decline of communist workers due to inter-party politicking, namely, the rise of the Congress and Shiv Sena parties as more credible voices to represent the mass’ concerns. Also, as good as Bombay’s organizers were at launching actual strikes (unlike Marxists in the rest of India who would rather debate theory), they failed to partner themselves with the growing Dalit movement because of their rigid interpretation of work and labour. Being too narrowly focused on the figure of the mill worker or industrial labourer alone, such histories and movements had failed to question whether the master narrative of capitalist transformation should result only in a factory worker? Why couldn’t casual labourers, day workers, construction workers, temporary mill workers, all count as a varied lot within the general category of labour?

This study builds on Chandavarkar’s social history of the city but moves beyond the constraints of labour history. It focuses on a varied lot of everyday workers, entrepreneurs, and optimizing peasants to provide an image of the broad conditions of working class existence. It follows the insight offered by Eric Wolf’s critique of the limitations of labour history in a chapter entitled “The New Laborers” who Wolf saw as a forming a worldwide phenomenon:

Their emergence upon the stage of history prompted a fear of mass irruption and social disorder, as well as exaggerated hopes of imminent social renewal ... when social scientists began to examine these new men more closely, they treated them mainly as social problems —problems created by a severance from their roots through detribalization or immigration— rather than as social actors in their own right, responding to new conditions. Even labor historians concentrated at first on the history of labor organizations and labor movements; that is, they were more interested in efforts to transcend a condition than in delineating that
Wolf’s concern with the “relational matrix and the content of working class existence” pointed correctly to the problem with labour historians interest in contemporary political change. Being focused on immediate political equity for labourers, while welcomed, also served to obscure close insights on the particular content of working class life, the kind of content which would have perhaps made contemporary labour agitations more effective. This study tends to that problem by offering the contested history of housing and habitation practices of the working classes in the late 19th century in Western India as one unique window on working class existence.

*Inequality and the Rural - Urban Continuum*

A solution to the problem of the relationship between colonialism, poverty, ruralization, and industry, was suggested in a 1994 article by David Washbrook entitled “Commercialization of Agriculture in Colonial India” in which he reviewed a prior debate from the 1980s. The article had within it an acknowledgement of a common mistake to both sides of the debate in considering the applicability of capitalist analysis, or more precisely, “economic theory” to a study of South Asia in the 19th and 20th century. Washbrook said that everyone would agree that commercialization influenced rural societies. However, what scholars had disagreed on was whether that was good or bad. Washbrook called himself a pessimist; having studied dry districts in particular he found that commercialization left many people without land such that fewer and

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fewer people maintained a form of tenancy or propriety over land.\(^6\) Bruce Robert challenged Washbrook when he studied Bellary, the driest district of Madras Province, and found that market penetration did allow some small holders to prosper.\(^6\) Washbrook conceded that he had underestimated the ability of some people to prosper through new commercial opportunities, but he still saw a decline in forms of capital invested into production such as the decline in wells and ploughs. Thus, Washbrook probed further into what might explain this disagreement.

The solution offered by Washbrook was that both he and Robert had missed an important point. They had failed to see the possibility of a crisis in agricultural production and social reproduction.\(^6\) They both instead implicitly agreed that poverty must have meant lack of development, which both failed to properly analyze because:

\[\ldots\text{he from the supposition that commercial growth must have produced economic growth; I from the supposition that the absence of economic growth must have been the result of an incomplete penetration of market forces. Neither of us considered that the expansion of the market economy, itself, might have had negative and deleterious effects on the bases of production and social reproduction. In retrospect, our mutual mistake was to put too much faith in conventional 'economic' theory and in models of 'the market' as an obvious and automatic source of growth.}\] \(^6\)

The insight was that the generalization of markets would produce both chances for prosperity and poverty. This insight served to do away with the question of whether colonialism had held back the promise of capitalist growth even as the transformation was held out as a promise. It wasn’t that market opportunities and commercialization had failed to sufficiently generalize in


\(^6\) Bellary had a negative rate of population growth between 1891 and 1931, a distinguishing characteristic of Bellary in the Madras Presidency.

the subcontinent due to the colonial encounter; rather it was the way in which India articulated with Empire that led to poverty. This study builds on this insight advanced by Washbrook about the dual outcomes of market economies such that inequality is a common feature. Housing is a good way to probe the nature of that inequality, yet, there are very few studies which treat housing or urban slums in Indian cities historically.64

In pre-modern South Asia, while space may have been divided into towns and countries, these entities were both physically and socially amorphous. What some scholars have called a “rurban” landscape was the predominant way of life, where human population density gradually increased and decreased in adjacent local regions, such that a continuum between rural and urban was the norm and not the exception.65 Functions considered typical of an urban type could be found in “country villages” and “small rural towns” within many regions of South Asia and these were historical features of social life across the Eurasian landmass, even in parts of Europe which would eventually industrialize.

To illustrate what “rurban” meant, Perlin pointed to the widespread increase of local mints. Local mints formed nodes of connection within trade routes and networks which were proliferating between the 16th and 18th centuries. This supported the increase in commercial manufactures, a term he suggested as a replacement for “proto-industrialization.” Over time, this increasingly monetized and commercial society was made up of intense relations of production

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64 There is perhaps only one; this very rich and valuable monograph focuses more on the politics and politicization of mass movements which utilize the urban poor rather than housing in particular: Nandini Gooptu, The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

between merchants, money lenders, and labourers. Thus the “rurban” economy was one in which producers were increasingly connected to money lenders and merchants and there was social mobility between these classes. The word “peasant” did not exclusively signify a landless rural labourer and the word “moneylender” did not exclusively mean a town-based finance capitalist. Peasants were sometimes engaged in money-lending and moneylenders were sometimes landholders.

The creation of the analytic category “rurban” in the history of early modern Eurasia allowed scholars to intervene in the Eurocentric historiography of industrialization, it indicated dynamism before the industrial revolution and social change towards more intensive uses of capital and labour which was in place before the explicit attempts at restructuring production which happened under the East India Company.66 Criticizing the concept of proto-industrialism as a teleological stage on the way to an exceptional European industrial capitalism, Perlin argued instead for a methodologically comparative strategy which inter-linked India’s pre-colonial history to other areas of the early modern world.

Perlin was severely critical of the way in which pre-colonial South Asia was treated as a static or cyclical society as opposed to the dynamic, cumulative, and evolving history of Early

Modern European societies. The self-organized, family-based, and impenetrable rural economy was one such stereotype of pre-colonial South Asia. The problem of doing pre-colonial South Asian history was that it had, for decades, remained an “autonomous” history existing “in contrast” to a history of Europe, and the rural village was exemplary of this condition. In place of this model, Perlin asked scholars to consider the interconnections and comparisons possible between Early Modern South Asia and Early Modern Europe. Otherwise, Perlin observed,

> The consequence is that ‘colonialism’ is endowed with the status of a *deus ex machina*, the source of a radical break with this static or reversible past, but essentially the point at which the possibility of irreversible change begins - in short, the start of a history of the European type.  

Perlin was able to show that what Wallerstein called the commercial capitalism of the 16th through 18th century could be observed in local contexts spanning Eurasia and beyond, and most importantly, that this rurban activity increasingly took place in an “international theatre.”

The difference between Perlin and Wallerstein was that whereas Wallerstein saw distinct macro-regions exemplified by the scale of commercial manufactures, Perlin saw similarities across local regions which had to be placed in one spatial unit of analysis:

> Thus I shall suggest that events within India need to be recast as an inseparable part of an international forum of activities, in which rural industrialization in Prussia, Bohemia and Bengal are best treated as aspects of a single set of both comparative and historical problems.

But if commercial manufactures rendered regions of Asia as on par with parts of Europe, then

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69 Perlin, "Proto-Industrialization and Pre-Colonial South Asia," 34.
how could one explain the divergence and eventual dominance of Europe in the realm of production in the 19th and 20th century? Perlin argued that industrialization in England came on the heels of long developments in forms of control over production and labour which took place in vast local contexts competing for the international marketplace. The development of textile industries in Europe, Perlin said,

...is a story of temporary successes, inter-regional competition, decline of old products and crafts and the rise of new ones, and of complex, shifting complementarities between the different trades making up the industry; these compose a continuous history only when put together and synthesized.70

Commercial capitalism did not originate in Europe in the 16th century and then incorporate India,71 but rather had diverse local contexts of origin which articulated with each other.

Perlin’s work on cowries and copper, what he called “humble monetary media” to avoid the anthropological terminology which saw copper and cowries as signifying a residual archaic economic life, traced the development of this “rurban” nexus starting from the 16th century when commercialization of both the agrarian and urban economy increased the involvement of humble groups in global flows.72 Increases in both forms of coinage and mints to achieve the demand for money were evident in this period. The East India Company had the advantage of being politically centralized, militarized, and connected to sister companies of the new world

70 Perlin, “Proto-Industrialization and Pre-Colonial South Asia,” 45-46.

71 Immanuel Wallerstein, “Incorporation of Indian Subcontinent into Capitalist World-Economy,” Economic and Political Weekly Vol. 21, No. 4 (Jan. 25, 1986): 28-39. Wallerstein has modified his views and acknowledged a pre-European exchange network of which India was a part in some of his other writings.

72 Frank Perlin, “Growth of Money Economy and Some Questions of Transitions in Late Pre-Colonial India,” Social Scientist 11, no. 10 (1983).
which allowed it to gain control over the money supply in South Asia. South Asia’s commercial “rurban” social infrastructure was undermined as the East India Company regularized and streamlined local mints and coinage and gained control over the money supply. This changed the “rurban” nexus by bringing producers and merchants into direct relations with new forms of money mostly controlled by the Company.

Perlin’s recommendations was not meant to undermine the anti-imperial voices in the scholarly literature which pointed to the devastating effects of colonial rule on the sub-continent’s economic, political, and social development. Nor was it meant to suggest a simple continuity between the early modern and modern. Instead, Perlin’s suggestions were to bring into focus the more precise and particular ways in which colonialism altered South Asian history, to move that theory of change out of a nationalist framework, which would narrate the history of economic dominance within a local and global framework simultaneously. Addressing particularly the question of de-industrialization under colonial rule in India, Perlin said,

...it is a salutary lesson to discover that the failure to industrialize in India is simply one example among a large number, some cases being located in the industrial heartlands of north-west Europe, even in England.

Thus, the new question offered by Perlin was how “rurbanization” could lead to both industrialization and de-industrialization regardless of the process’ location in Europe or Asia. Perlin had effectively challenged the notion that England’s eventual dominance over India in the domain of manufactures in the 19th century was a result of different trajectories in India and England prior to colonialism.

73 Perlin, "Proto-Industrialization and Pre-Colonial South Asia," 78.
74 Perlin, "Proto-Industrialization and Pre-Colonial South Asia," 45.
Implicit in this intervention by Perlin was also a re-assessment of the status of the city in the transition to modernity. While Perlin criticized the autonomous rural village notion as a residue of ahistorical notions about pre-colonial South Asia, he suggested an implicit critique of European difference as well. He challenged the idea that Europe was set in contrast to India because of its prior formation of dynamic merchant communities based in towns out of which merchant capitalism spread across the ocean and through relations of dominance, imposed capitalism on distant societies. Perlin said that we needed a “...framework of relevance escaping national or continental boundaries, and instead including European traders, Asian commerce and Bengali agriculture as part of a single set of processes, developments and changing structures.”

Instead of heeding these suggestions, the colonial and nationalist history of capitalism in South Asia has remained one of “foreign merchants” and “foreign capital” penetrating and usurping local economies. Carrying these conceptions through formal independence, the decolonization of India in 1947 produced notions of distinctive third world poverty and a unique urban form where “development” had not yet reached. Indian cities became emblematic of underdevelopment, de-industrialization, an unorganized and unregulated labour sector, and poverty on such a scale as to make these spaces both quantitatively and qualitatively distinct from industrial and developed cities. Only a particularly colonial urbanization process could explain an informal economy alongside a formal economy or the persistence of pre-capitalist

75 Perlin, "Proto-Industrialization and Pre-Colonial South Asia," 59-60.
76 A few such examples follow, although there are many more: Janet L. Abu-Lughod and Richard Hay, Third World Urbanization (New York: Methuen, 1979); Kenneth Ballhatchet and John Harrison, The City in South Asia: Pre-Modern and Modern (London, Atlantic Highlands, NJ, USA: Curzon Press; Humanities Press, 1980); Dilip K. Basu, The Rise and Growth of the Colonial Port Cities in Asia; Stephen Legg, Spaces of Colonialism.
forms of labour and housing.\textsuperscript{77}

What’s striking for contemporary observers of Indian cities is that each city’s “agrarian past” has never been made an obsolete and distant past, but instead continues to haunt urban developers as they try to buy land. Producers on what are called “urban peripheries” regularly combine in organized strikes to challenge their dispossession and the dominance of the ever expanding city. Scholars have also begun to realize that the urban poor, who labour informally throughout Bombay and Karachi, as they do in many other cities, are neither disconnected from formal regulation nor are they the transitional figures we once thought.\textsuperscript{78} Marginalized urban dwellers, street vendors, day labourers, scavengers, and domestic servants are no longer \textit{en route} to becoming the proletariat of the factory. Rather than transitional figures between tradition and modernity, the village and the city, or agriculture and industry, the city’s slum dwellers are the functional urban majority. However, their social formation, as indicative of an aberration in colonial capitalism, has prevented the writing of their history.

\textsuperscript{77} The word “informal” came to describe the traditional sector, as opposed to modern/westernized sector, when used by Keith Hart in his work on Ghana in 1973. Keith Hart, “Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana,”\textit{The Journal of Modern African Studies}, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Mar., 1973): 61-89. It also acquired credibility by the International Labour Organization’s work on Kenya in 1972. This is reviewed in several discussions of the applicability of the notion of the informal in South Asian cities such as: Imtiaz Alvi, \textit{The Informal Sector in Urban Economy: Low Income Housing in Lahore} (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997); Emmanuel Romatet, "Calcutta's Informal Sector: Theory and Reality," \textit{Economic and Political Weekly} 18, no. 50 (1983).

Sources, Methods, and Organization of the Dissertation

The making of the urban slum has been thought of as a non-event; it is what one scholar has called, “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary.” This denial of event-status does well to introduce a discussion on how slums, everyday urban dwellers, ordinary city folk, and their everyday housing and habitation practices have been seen as coincidental to history rather than motors of history. This dissertation approaches a history of urbanization in Western India in the long 19th century through questions on the cultures of urban housing and markets, the shifting meanings of shelter, the dynamics of poverty production and its relief, and the acts of human ingenuity which sustained the market in housing - as much as it was a slippery commodity. Throughout the dissertation, I strive to see agency amongst everyday actors.

Some empirical questions which drive the research follow. What were the circumstances of population growth within these settlements? How did early poor communities interface with the rest of the growing city, i.e. through institutions of labour, commerce, servitude, and local politics? When were these communities first recognized as poor? How was land acquired within these cities for either private development or state control? What kinds of forces constrained the activities of dwellers in the first slums and which forces made of these residents active participants in urbanization? What were the variety of dwelling units like in early Bombay? How was legitimate and illegitimate housing determined? What is the pre-history of the “slum clearance”? What differentiated and singled out some poor settlements amongst other poor urban settlements?

Building on well-documented themes of dynamic and mobile early modern societies to explain the growth of Bombay, this study takes the demographic, industrial, and urban transformations of the long 19th century and attempts to see those dynamics and their significances from the perspectives of the denizens of the most densely inhabited quarters. These mobile and everyday people became Bombay’s first stigmatized slum-dwellers in the late 19th century, just as their counterparts did in other major cities of the 19th century. To bring our focus to the divergent remedies to the problem of urban poverty, in addition to analyzing perspectives from inside Bombay, I also look at Bombay’s urban poverty problem from Bombay’s peripheries, from Karachi and Aden which provide comparative cases of the varying resolutions to the urban poverty problem. They also serve to show how Bombay was seen as more integrated into the capitalist world markets by those looking at it from its own peripheries. What follows is a summary of each of the chapters of this dissertation.

_Chapters of the Dissertation_

The first chapter is about the making and dismantling of housing claims; while an indigenous claim to housing is legitimated, other entitlements to housing are discredited. To demonstrate this, I historicize one of the most salient origin stories of the city of Bombay. That story, that the Koli, a fishing people’s caste, are the indigenous inhabitants of Bombay, has functioned as a kind of metonym for the entirety of Bombay’s history. The story functions to demarcate and protect Bombay’s historiography from the kinds of interrogations which would connect it temporally to premodern trajectories and spatially to a dynamic rural process beyond the city’s boundaries. This serves to, inadvertently or otherwise and for better or worse, credit the
British with Bombay’s development. Instead, I argue that the story of the Koli fishing-peoples is itself a product of the history of the city, and its emergence at a particular conjuncture at the turn of the 20th century served important functions for the immediate contests over land, housing, and resources within the city. The construction of Koli settlements, called Koliwadas, in several neighborhoods in the 19th and early 20th century functioned to inscribe the authoritative history of the city into the urban landscape itself.

By following histories of Bombay City from the 16th to 19th centuries along with ethnographies and census reports, I locate the precise date of the creation of the now authoritative tale of Bombay City’s origins at 1901 CE, and then examine its functions. I also analyze some, peculiar on first inspection, records in Bombay’s 18th and early 19th century archive that document the agrarian settlement of Bombay’s Salsette islands which now only make sense if read within a “rurban” framework. Then, I show how the origin myth about the Koli served to exclude a prior agrarian and “rurban” history of Bombay. The granting of Koli housing and building of Koliwadas, or Koli colonies or neighborhoods, authorized both colonial statecraft and the perpetuation of the myth of Koli indigeneity. While the Koli acquired state-built housing called Koliwadas, now known as native shantytowns, the rest of Bombay’s inhabitants were resigned to become players in the emerging field of the housing market, which became their only legitimate means of acquiring housing.

By the 20th century, the market in housing was the determining force in most Bombay residents’ lives, except for the Koli. The indigenous become marked as containing an excess of culture, their survival was a repository of that excess left over from the transition to the modern. Deploying indigeneity served to reframe contemporary social practices as prior to modernity, as
if they were pre-modern practices. The culture of the Koli was framed as one of local significance and a prior artifact to the modern march of value-free economic practices. This was the way in which the economy could overcome native culture in India, and how legitimacy for the market in housing was established.

The second through fifth chapters develop the contours of the market for housing and show how commercialization affected Western India and created the conditions for circular mobility. The second chapter works against the singular history of the Koli origin story. Using census reports, it explores the many communities and forms of social life which together built Bombay in the 19th century. It shows how mobility, both spatial and social, drove the construction of the city of Bombay and preceded the phase of rapid urbanization. The chapter focuses on two particular “shocks” to the region: the American civil war in the 1860s and the famines of the 1870s and 1880s. We see that these created periods of intense urban population growth and increased everyday mobility. During these periods in regions surrounding the city, forms of indebtedness functioned as a wage and the trend of a decline in wages, i.e. greater indebtedness, would lead migrants to seek out greater opportunities. This chapter also shows how pressures in urban life initiated a suburbanization process. Using a “Report on development of salsette” we can see how officials were always lagging behind forms of housing which developed from the ground up. By focusing on a range of habitation practices in the city, the chapter examines the changes in family life, occupational opportunities, and networks of community which contributed to the experience of mobility of Bombay’s inhabitants. Such experiences were misunderstood by what I call the official “urban gaze.” By seeing the city from
the everyday people’s point of view, rather than seeing the growing city as absorbing rural migrants, we see how mobile migrants brought the city into their routes of circulation.

The discussion of mobility contextualizes the “urban housing problem” which is developed in the third chapter, which centers on the legibility of housing. Using annual municipal records as a main source, we see that in spite of officials only seeing housing as an act of consumption, the housing market was already, by the end of the 19th century, a site of advanced organization in which labouring, poor and socially mobile migrants were able to be responsive to changing demand and supply in both units of housing, materials, labour, and industry which drove the need to construct housing. People were able to mobilize resources to negotiate and produce the intensifying social relations in the city. Housing is best understood as a complex commodity. It combined the dynamics of other component markets in materials and labour, and poor housing was not "marked" as such. The attribution of significance to a housing type based on the materials used to construct it, the type of tenurial arrangement of its inhabitants, or access to public goods such as water, sewage lines, electricity, or roadways, was established well after the period under study here, not in the late 19th century. In this period however, we can see officials beginning to document those concerns but they do not determinedly form the set of traits meant to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate housing.

The fourth chapter focuses on Bombay’s part in the global plague at the end of the century, in 1896-1897. The plague was productive of racial tensions across the colonial divide, when reform projects were proposed which focused on solving the problem of poor housing through the eradication or sanitation of urban slums. Newspaper articles and reports by health and sanitation officers form the majority of the sources in this chapter. Conflict between the state
and society over interference in such matters was resolved through the building of a consensus that something had to be done to clear poor housing. The plague brought the urban poor into the hands of the urban rich. Broad measures were considered which were meant to organize urban space in ways that lent itself to surveillance, monitoring, and intervention. Accompanying this was the consolidation of new authorities to the moneyed classes within the city. Knowledge about each city was crucial to enacting these transformations. Bombay’s city census had constructed a kind of knowledge about housing in the city, living conditions, and family life which could, at times like these, serve as a tool for slum demolitions and interventions in the private markets of housing. Although the British Crown, especially after 1857, had resolved to practice non-interference in matters of native religion, the plague warranted interference in everyday matters.

Keen to restore the “sanitary credit” of the city, elites emerged who wanted to clean poor housing and thus they formed the City of Bombay Improvement Trust, the subject of the fifth chapter. The plague was crucial in forming new relations of housing production which distinguished the rich from poor and made space for a politics of benevolence, paternalism, and protection. This chapter uses reports published for each year of the City Improvement Trust’s work which documented the financial condition of the Trust, and the kinds of schemes it was engaging in. Elites interfered in housing to adjudicate how capital was to be managed in the city and how it could be made to circulate again. Ambiguous and changing notions of what constituted a proper house, the kinds of notions which had allowed migrants to create opportunities for themselves and define housing for themselves, gave way to housing reform projects which sought singular definitions.
I suggest that the Trust should be seen as a kind of financial instrument which was ill conceived from its birth because it was designed to fulfil two goals which were at odds with each other. Explicitly at a financial burden to itself, the Trust was motivated by elite interests who depended on the city for world trade, not because there was something endemic to the housing type itself which indicated its rank within housing types in the city. Financial difficulties led it to be amalgamated into the Bombay Municipality in the early 1930s, and it transferred its sources of financing from major banks to the private money market as it was amalgamated.

The sixth and seventh chapters pursue the politics of housing in Karachi and Aden along with Bombay, where merchants could escape regulation and have more control of labor. The sixth chapter sees Bombay from the outside, from the perspective of Karachi and Aden, both cities which came under the administrative rubric of the Bombay Presidency. Reports by the Karachi municipal commissioner and documents for the separation of the province from Bombay help tell the Karachi story. While for Aden, a committee which inquired into the condition of homelessness in the city in the early 1920s left behind a set of interviews with merchants who were operating out of Bombay. Those merchants were asked what they thought their responsibility was towards the growing problem of poor housing in Aden.

While Bombay’s City Improvement Trust was dis-housing and rehousing its labouring and poor dwellers to restore its sanitary credit, in Karachi and Aden, the problem of poor housing did not find similar solutions. There was no Improvement Trust in these cities, and it was hard for local urban leaders to develop the kind of institutional framework which would bring in Imperial lines of credit on the scale that it did in Bombay. Rising classes of merchants were able to use these seaport connections to establish nodes of commerce, but they did so from these
locations as a way to escape any limitations on their commercial enterprises. This chapter demonstrates how the poor in each of these cities could be used as grounds upon which Bombay’s sub-imperial position was challenged and in so doing, effectively delayed the resolution of the poor housing problem. In Aden, the total abandonment of the urban poverty problem was visible, while in Karachi, a desire to “catch up” to Bombay’s stage of commercial advancement meant that leaders advocated infrastructure for more commercial opportunities which would connect Karachi to new hinterlands in its vicinity, not a restraining of commercial ambitions.

The seventh and final chapter of the dissertation follows the problem of representing the poor and how the pressures to represent the poor created a political census on the origins of the modern city in India. It begins with the problem of establishing representatives for the urban poor in the late 19th century during census operations. Then it follows the movements of paupers and indigents across the empire from the turn of the century and the desire to make their “homes” responsible for them. As cities became conduits of intensifying human mobility, from which paupers and indigents travelled, the question of how to understand the city and its relation to poverty came to the fore. The Indian economists in particular cast the city as a secondary effect of changing social conditions in the countryside. The city was demoted in the nationalist economist’s imagination. When discussions of labour and especially Indian labour intersected with or interfered with the nation building exercises of the main nationalists, the question of labour became mired in this very same problem of representation.
Chapter One: Constructing Urban Indigeneity

The second origin myth of the history of Bombay is the tale of the Koli, a fisherfolk caste, who are purportedly the city’s indigenous inhabitants or adivasi (adi meaning “first” and vasi meaning “inhabitant”). If the Koli are indigenous, it is implied that the remainder of Bombay’s social milieu traces its origins to a foreign or outside source. The non-Koli peoples of Bombay are thus not local, not native to, and not from Bombay. In Karachi, another port city on the Western coast of the South Asian subcontinent, a similar origin tale begins a similarly authoritative urban history. Presumably it is the Mohonas, a caste community of local fishing peoples, who inaugurate the history of Karachi’s growth and development. The Mohonas can be counted on to ferry people and goods up and down the Indus river; they serve as local guides and provide urban lore to tourists and travelers.¹ Both the Mohonas and the Koli are known as peoples of the sea by caste. They control the fishing and boating industries because of a supposed natural proclivity for the environs of the oceans and rivers, along which both Bombay and Karachi are nestled.

The historiography of “colonial cities” in South Asia has avoided scrutinizing such authoritative accounts of these cities wherein primitive local communities are constructed as timelessly awaiting modernity’s arrival. In contrast, this chapter will demonstrate how the notion of indigeneity is itself constructed over time, historically, and specifically position the construction of urban indigeneity within a particular kind of story about colonial commercial

¹ Arif Hasan provides a vivid and insightful first hand account of his travels up the Indus river when he was ferried by some Mohonas on a small boat as he journeyed to the interior of Sindh. Between the 1970s and 1990s, the Mohonas became Islamicized, thus their history is continuously being rewritten. See Arif Hasan, The Unplanned Revolution: Observations on the Process of Socio-Economic Changes in Pakistan (Karachi: City Press, 2002).
modernity. That story credits British arrival on India’s shores with the invention of capitalism and modern urbanism and discredits developments in India’s early modern period such that India’s history is seen to be divided into an India before Europe and an India after Europe. Engaging with questions of historiography, narrative production, the politics of indigeneity, and urban housing markets, this chapter shows how the Koli origin myth achieved the status of authoritative urban history in Bombay. It also shows how the story granted legitimacy to the emerging field of the market in housing. The construction of Koli settlements, called Koliwadas, in several neighborhoods throughout the city in the 19th and early 20th century, functioned to inscribe the authoritative history of the city into the urban landscape itself.

Not until the turn of the 20th century did anybody believe that the Koli were Bombay’s adivasi. We can delineate the creation of that “origin myth” of the Koli in Bombay, i.e. we can follow the histories created about Bombay City from the 16th to 19th centuries to locate the precise date of the creation of the now authoritative tale of Bombay City’s origins, which I demonstrate didn’t happen until 1901 CE. Additionally, by highlighting the role of the Koli themselves in the performance of this origin myth, we can see that the Koli served to perform a source of legitimacy which inadvertently served the aims of colonial expansion. The “indigenous” or “adivasi” were discursively constructed by the rubric of colonial expansion itself and once constructed became participants in the re-iteration and re-performance of their indigeneity.

Having established this origin myth, the Koli tale served two important immediate functions while also granting legitimacy to the emerging field of the market in housing. First, it legitimized the transformation of the narrative of Bombay’s history into accordance with the
conceits of modern historiography, which posited a sharp rupture between the modern and pre-modern, between capitalist organization and pre-capitalist organization, and between an India before Europe and an India after Europe. Second, it provided the Koli with a privileged legal status in the domain of housing such that the Koli could acquire land for housing in the city through a form of patronage with the colonial state. This granting of Koli housing and building of *Koliwadas*, or Koli colonies or neighborhoods, in Bombay, authorized both colonial statecraft and the perpetuation of the myth of Koli indigeneity. While the Koli acquired state-built housing called *Koliwadas*, now sometimes referred to as native shantytowns, the rest of Bombay’s inhabitants were resigned to become players in the emerging field of the housing market.

Raising the issue of indigeneity and its opposite is fundamental to both the task of writing urban history and engaging critically with South Asian historiography which has often treated the major modern port cities of South Asia, such as Calcutta, Madras, Karachi and Bombay, as “colonial cities” before they were ever known as such. The notion that modern urbanism, capitalism, and a sphere of activity called economic as such -analyzable and distinguishable in social life because of being free and separate from “cultural” activites- are all foreign impositions has become a convention within the scholarly literature on “colonial cities.” It was for long, a mainstay of anthropological assumptions about Asia at large that capitalism was imposed on Asia from colonizing adventurers. Historians too, are implicated in that assumption. However, those conventions of thought which suggest that modern economic activity was imposed by British rule on the subcontinent make it very difficult to account for the multiplicity of lives, contests, exchanges, and accommodations which together have made urban South Asia.
The most straightforward consequence of the conventional view is offered by Louis Dumont in his infamous *Homo Hierarchicus*, when he says,

> So far as India is concerned, a further fact, many of whose aspects are known and studied but which is often overlooked in itself, in its full generality and fundamental character, is that the British domination emancipated wealth in moveables and chattels by substituting for a political regime of the traditional type, a modern type of regime, one of whose fundamental tasks was to guarantee the security of property, a regime which, compared to the previous one, abdicated part of its power in favour of wealth. The transformation of land into a marketable commodity is only a part of this change. No doubt there is in India today a distinct sphere of activity which may properly be called economic, but it was the British government which made this possible.²

In Dumont’s account the British deserved all the credit for having the ingenuity to create economic activity as such. Indeed, it is a further view, made most explicitly in nationalist literature, which because it seeks to discredit British ingenuity puts in its place British malfeasance, economic decay and depression as the hallmark of the colonial period. Common to both positions is the framing of port cities as the site of inauguration of the modern economy and colonial extraction because of British settlement and fortification on India’s shores.

It is worth challenging the notion that no such realm of activity called “economic” existed prior to the British involvement in Indian history. Doing so requires seeing the emergence of the “economy” as a product of cultural shifts in the way practices of social habitation, organization and competition for resources are read and framed within new rubrics. The construction of the notion of indigeneity at the turn of the 20th century is one such tool in the production of a “modern economy” which is to be understood as devoid of culture. The indigenous become marked as containing an excess of culture and indigenous communities and collectives embody in their practices of livelihood and survival a repository of that excess left over from the

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transition to the modern; they become an installation of a past residue. Deploying indigeneity serves to reframe contemporary social practices as prior to modernity such that the construction of the Koli as the *adivasi* renders the culture of the Koli as one of local significance who are a prior artifact to the modern march of value-free economic practices. Economics as such deploys in its very own discourse the desire to overcome culture. Such a shift, besides making culture and economy separate, most importantly in the case of Bombay’s history serves to obscure the economic dynamism which existed prior to British rule because the indigenous Koli cannot be economic actors, but instead are a cultural reservoir of the past, enshrined in their *pastness* upon the landscape of the present. As installations of a kind, the Koli were of cultural interest to officials. These photographs with captions accompanied the documents of the Colaba Redevelopment Scheme, a neighborhood thought to be their natural home by the 20th century, which is discussed later in this chapter:

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4 A similar argument about vernacular capitalisms as refracted and codified into a concept of the pre-modern economy can be found in Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture, and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
For the British, the Koli story of indigeneity was used to modernize and “economize” housing practices within the city such that previous forms of economic activity could be written out of the historical narrative of Bombay’s origins. The origin myth constructed all non-Koli claims to land as illegitimate and other entitlements to housing could be ignored. For the Koli, their performance of indigeneity secured them rights in coastal land and basic housing amenities while neighborhoods were upgraded to become modern bourgeois urban settlements. Thus, in this chapter we will focus here on the intersections of the emerging British colonial state with Koli leaders as they together forged new practices of housing and managed the limited resource of land on Bombay’s islands.

While both the British and the Koli participated in the sedimentation of the “origin myth,” they were no doubt unequal partners. The emerging market in housing and land was practically invisible to the Koli peoples; they may have understood that they would not participate in the market in housing, however they probably did not anticipate how market dynamics would eventually overtake their entitlements and render their ability to provide for themselves competitively obsolete. The British on the other hand secured for themselves a warrant to statecraft because of their ability to protect a legitimate claim by the Koli and their ability to protect and even enhance actors who sought participation in the market. Such actors increasingly sought out the colonial state to intervene in and secure their claims on housing and land.

By the 20th century, the market in housing was the determining force in most Bombay residents’ lives, except for the Koli. The Koli were legitimate political actors outside of the market with a special relation to the state. Others in the city were subject to the push and pull of
the market with regards to where they found housing on the island-city, however the Koli were allotted space in developing neighborhoods in order to reside by the sea and perform their native, customary, and traditional functions. This right to land by the sea was not always in place however, it took some time after the Koli origin myth was official truth for the Koli to gain coastal hamlets called “Koliwadas.”

The following sections of this chapter begin by discussing who the Koli are and how knowledge about the Koli has been constructed. The diversity of the Koli peoples across the subcontinent is juxtaposed to the singularity of the notion of their coastal indigeneity. Then I ask why it matters, i.e. why does it matter that the Koli are thought of as the indigenous inhabitants of Bombay? What kind of work does that do? To answer these questions I recover an important intervention in the historiography about India’s transition to modernity which revealed capitalist forms of intensifying labour and capital use prior to British arrival. That intervention deals with the problem of urbanization in an oblique way; it uses the notion of a “rurban nexus” across Eurasia to counter prevailing conceptions of India and Europe as wholly distinct prior to colonial rule. The intervention also shows how agrarian forms of accumulation were deeply integrated within urban forms of intensification.

Using such interventions from the historiography, I address and analyze some, peculiar on first inspection, records in Bombay’s 18th and early 19th century archive that document the agrarian settlement of Bombay’s Salsette islands which now only make sense if read within a “rurban” framework. (see Figure 1.2) Names of some of the neighborhoods in the city which survive to the present day betray this agrarian past. Neighborhoods exist which are called: *khetwady* (“khet” = cultivated field), *fanaswady* (“fanas” = jackfruit), and *kakadwady* (“kakad” =
cucumber) with “-wady” being a suffix meaning locality or neighborhood, the same suffix at the end of koliwada; these are some examples. I consider agrarian settlements and dispossession, as well as the normal connections between town-based practices and agrarian practices. I draw out in particular practices in housing, and look at how a claim to housing was a nested entitlement within “rurban” communities where the mobility of producers and extractors was common. Then, I show how the origin myth about the Koli was made into the authoritative tale of Bombay’s history and how it served to exclude that prior agrarian and “rurban” history of Bombay. Finally, once the Koli origin story is established, we see the Koli functioning alone as petitioners and claimants of a thoroughly modern kind, i.e. interacting with the state-run and market-influenced dynamics of housing.
Fig. 1.2 Mixed agrarian and urban land use in early Bombay.
Encountering the *Koli* peoples

As with other *adivasi* communities of South Asia, the Koli people’s precise history of collective identity formation is shrouded in a ritualized telling of the community’s past. Besides oral histories if they have been collected, the Koli appear very rarely in historical records. Thus historians return to the few sources which do reveal something from the premodern and modern periods. Interestingly, after the publication of Edwardes’ History of Bombay City and Island which he published in 1901 in order to accompany the census for that year,5 scholars were deeply influenced by Edwardes’ account and reiterated the Koli indigeneity story when writing about Bombay. The volume of literature which claims the Koli are indigenous in the 20th century forecloses an understanding of the diversity of the Koli peoples as well as the contingent manner in which knowledge about the Koli peoples has been made.

Most notorious are tour books and oral accounts by casual tour guides which repeat the basic tale of the Koli in Bombay: that the Koli was the first inhabitant and the only form of human life on the islands for several centuries. A *Lonely Planet* guidebook for India from 2003 states, “The islands that now form Mumbai were first home to the Koli fisher folk as far back as the 2nd century BC; Koli shanties occupy parts of the city shoreline today.”6 A *DK Eyewitness Travel Guide* for India from 2002 explains the change of the city’s name from Bombay to Mumbai as follows: “The city has now reverted to its local name, Mumbai, from Mumba Devi, the eight armed goddess worshipped by the Koli fishermen who were the islands’ original

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inhabitants." Both of these statements, each occurring on the very first page of each guide book’s section on contemporary Mumbai, collapse the distance between the past and the present. The *Lonely Planet*’s narration is invested in demonstrating that the past has been enshrined in Bombay’s contemporary urban landscape as the past. Shanties are indicative of the primitive lifestyle expected of Koli fishermen and the shanties and are marked in this case not for their informality in housing or illegality but for their occupancy by the Koli community alone. The presence of the Koli shanties also suggests an uninterrupted progression from the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century BC to contemporary Mumbai. The *DK* guidebook makes a similar leap suggesting that the recent name change from Bombay to Mumbai is not a signaling of the rise of exclusionary Hindu ideologues in the city, when in reality it was the ascendance of the *Shiv Sena* in Maharashtra through the 1990s which best explains the change of the name of the city.\(^8\) The guidebook instead discusses the change of name as a reversion to an original condition and thus honorific of local religious sentiment. The Kolis are made unhistorical, local, timeless exemplars of Bombay’s indigenous history, and their enshrinement in the urban landscape serve as a site of continuity between a deep past and the present.

Amongst the few serious studies of the Koli it is acknowledged that the Koli are a diverse peoples engaging in settled agriculture, fishing, boat making, and are sometimes landowners, labourers, artisans, water carriers, watchmen, weavers of baskets, and even bandits. People calling themselves “Koli” can be found as far east as Orissa and as far west as Saurashtra, occupying the breadth of the central South Asian subcontinent. They are regarded for being


highly adapted to their ecological zones and thus take on local names in addition to being called “Koli.” In the post-independence period, they are sometimes given a legal scheduled status which garners them certain rights and resources while yet in other occasions they are placed just above the shudras, or untouchables and local political culture determines their ability to secure a livelihood. The variety of occupations they engage in results in varying names such as: Talpada Koli, Chuania Koli, Malhar Koli, Dhor Koli, Kolghas, Pandhare Koli, Dangar Koli, Bana Koli and several others, all signifying a caste name related to the type of work they do. However, there is much less reason to assume all these Koli are related to each other. There are strict marriage rules within the varying Koli communities indicating if and when a Koli from one group can intermarry with another. Most often they do not intermarry, indicating diversity, segregation and hierarchy within the broadly defined community. Most likely, it was the creation of a legally recognized identity in the late 19th and early 20th century which has led to an all-India social organization amongst the Koli which has garnered them privileges from the state. 

Early ethnographers and historians in the nineteenth century knew the Koli were a diverse people, and they used “scientific” methods to understand the Kolis’ history, culture, and geography. Using early analytic tools such as the delineation of the history of linguistic families, or a simplified periodization of South Asian history into “Hindu,” “Muslim,” “Portuguese,” and “British,” or anthropological classifications of people on a spectrum between primitive and modern based on observations about lifestyle, the Koli peoples have had far more said about them than is warranted by their occasional appearance in historical records.

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9 Shibani Roy, Koli Culture: A Profile of the Culture of Talpad Vistar (New Delhi, India: Cosmo, 1983), 5.
The diversity of the Koli peoples was also known by the British, who suppressed “Koli outrages” in the 1830s and 1840s. In what was read as an attempt to restore the Peshwa in the Sahyadri ranges of the Thana and Ratnagiri districts, hill peoples calling themselves “Koli” raided and plundered villages and attacked forts. The Ratnagiri Gazetteer reports that, “…the warlike Kolis were a terrible menace to British Rule.”\(^{11}\) This was seen as unlike general disturbances by hills-peoples, which the British encountered often, as did Mughal and regional authorities before them. For the British, the Koli uprising was experienced as a form of statecraft on behalf of the Peshwa. The British forcefully put down what were called revolts in 1839 and 1844 by the Kolis. In this period the Koli was identified as the lawless element within society, and a menace to the rule of law. However, reform was seen as possible and the Koli, amongst other tribal communities, were eventually to be settled in an agrarian order on the Konkan coast.

Yet in accounts after 1901, when Edwardes first said that the Koli were the indigenous inhabitants of Bombay, scholars maintained that the Kolis were the “aboriginal” inhabitants of the islands of Bombay.\(^{12}\) Sometimes the full story of their origins was given and in such cases the majority of citations lead back to Edwardes’ Gazetteers and his own history of the development of the city.

In the Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island, first published in 1909, the chapter entitled “Population” begins with an assured statement on the first inhabitants of the city of Bombay. Edwardes, the author, claims that “It can be accepted without demur..” that the Kolis, of the Son-


lineage were the aboriginal peoples of Bombay Islands and of Western India.\textsuperscript{13} Several pages describing the Kolis of Bombay begin with how they lived on the islands since “pre-historic ages,” occupying “rude hamlets” and engaging in agriculture, fishing, and boat-building. The term “Koli” and its potential etymological roots are addressed in the first footnote as follows:

The name Koli has been variously derived from Kola (a hog); Kul (a tribe), in the same way as Kunbi from Kutumb (a family); and from the MundarHoro or Koro (man). But as the word Koli does not seem to occur before the Musalman period, and is disliked by the tribe in Rajputana and Northern Gujarat, it may very likely be a corruption of the Turki word \textit{Kuleh} (a slave). See DaCunha’s Origin of Bombay; Edwardes, Rise of Bombay; and the Imperial Gazetteer (Kolis).\textsuperscript{14}

It is immediately clear that the term has multiple origins and that Edwardes isn’t clear about how the Koli peoples derive their name.

A more recent ethnography of the Koli peoples, from the year 1983, provides the following list of characteristics and historical facts gathered from a village study in Chotila, Gujarat:

the term “Koli” is derived from the English word “coolie; Aryans may have applied the term relating to the Sanskrit “Kola” or hog as a form of contempt; “Kola” also means boat in Sanskrit and so the principally sea-faring peoples were called this; Kolis are descendents of either the fifth king of the lunar race (Yayati), or they are descendents of King Vena; the first historical occurrence of the Kolis is from the Koli Kingdom in the North Konkan which was recognized by the Bachaniani Kingdom in 1346 CE; the second historical reference is from 1559 CE when the Portuguese attacked them but suffered losses to them later in 1583 CE; the British raised an army of Kolis in order to combat the Bhils, another hill tribe thought to be hereditary rivals; finally, in Nasik district the Kolis were classified under the “Criminal Tribes Act.\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Roy, \textit{Koli Culture}, 28-29.
The Kolis who were themselves interviewed in this study also claim kinship to some of the most famous anti-Brahmanical movements in the subcontinent’s history. They claim that the Lord Buddha was himself a Koli, that Valmiki, author of the Ramayana, was a Koli, that Samrat Chandragupta of the Maurya Kingdom was a Koli, that the chief senapati, or warrior of Shivaji named Taraji Malusare was a Koli, and that Kabir was a Koli. When asked how they achieved their now relatively low status, the Kolis claimed that an internal clash led to their present deterioration. The author of this study refers to this section as “legends and beliefs.” These Koli see themselves as descendants of great men, fallen now in the modern era. This is a common trope in oral caste genealogies.

While scholars have considered how indigeneity is performed and enacted by adivasi communities within politically charged contests over local resources and legal recognition, that the adivasi community was the original and first inhabitant of an area is difficult to circumvent or sustain. Furthermore, the motivation to either prove or disprove original status has immediate consequences in contemporary political struggles for land and resources in present day Mumbai. This is the case now as it was when the British first landed on the islands. Having been schooled in this ritualized retelling of Bombay’s history, it becomes difficult to pose the questions: Of what significance is it that a certain community inhabited the islands before any other? For whom does it matter? And most importantly here, what are the historical pasts of Bombay which are obscured through the ritualized tale? A primary concern here is that the multiple origins of the city’s peoples are disciplined into a unified linear tale through the making

16 Ibid. 25-26.

of the Koli origin myth of Bombay. There are however, surely other purposes served in repeating
the Koli’s status as “aboriginal” or “indigenous” again and again, even if the repetition of that
origin myth trope has nothing to do with the topic of the subsequent history being provided.

In the next section, I consider an intervention in the historiography of the subcontinent
which had oblique implications for the study of modern urbanization. Using the insights of that
intervention, I show that the origin myth of Bombay served to support a merchant theory of
Bombay’s capitalists origins. It precluded the necessity of telling any other kind of story about
how Bombay grew in size and population, how Bombay came to be urban and the pre-eminent
commercial city in colonial India. Other questions about the Koli have to remain unresolved,
especially those about when precisely the fishing communities began identifying themselves and
organizing under the title “Koli” and how this collective identity formed in Bombay. Was it in
response to British legalization of the identity or did it exist prior to or even in tandem with
British efforts? Put in another way, did the British or the Koli of Bombay invent their collective
identity? Not being able to answer the question about whether Koli performances of their own
indigeneity are a result of modern knowledge or whether the Koli created that modern
knowledge in response to changing pressures for resources and land, we can still consider how
the Koli origin myth functions within Bombay’s history.

Agrarian Bombay and Ordinary Dispossession

A strict division between the urban and rural in social life did not exist in early modern
South Asia. Frank Perlin’s observations about the “rurban” economy in the transition are borne

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out by the East India Company’s settlement in Bombay, where Company officials sought an increase in revenues through both agrarian and urban “improvements.” Bombay was not seen as a city until the latter 19th century, when it began to be called *Urbs Prims in Indis.*\(^{19}\) The sprawling metropolis did not take its more dense form until the 20th century. The making of the space of Bombay as an urban space with a type of urban logic to its social organization was a process of subordinating agrarian interests and organizations within the city’s boundaries, and this process continues to the present day. Yet the presence of this previous agrarian social life in Bombay’s own urban history has been entirely suppressed from the city’s history.

Recovering Bombay’s agrarian past allows us to explore the multiple origins of Bombay’s development and recover the battles over land use which continued to influence Bombay’s growth and expansion. An account of Bombay’s growth must begin by placing the Koli peoples on par with others who were settlers on the islands and locate exactly when the Koli became relatively privileged inhabitants who were given housing and land while others were continuously dispossessed or became socially mobile and able to distinguish themselves within the islands through elite forms of housing.

This section shows that the eventual privileging of the Kolis permitted a merchant and town-based story about capitalism’s foreign origins in the history of Bombay. This story of the foreign origin of capitalism in the subcontinent was especially championed by later nationalists and anti-colonial actors who resided in cities like Bombay. Furthermore, the Koli story, by ignoring Bombay’s immediate history and privileging Bombay’s ancient history substituted a deep past for an immediate past. The origin myth of Bombay posited the Koli story as the only

\(^{19}\) Albuquerque, *Urbs Prima in Indis.*
history of Bombay which mattered, and thus de-legitimized any other claims over land use in Bombay which may have been established in the preceding few decades or even prior century.

This rendered dispossession of most early inhabitants “ordinary” or uneventful. Moreover, it endowed such dispossession with a teleological end such that the making of a capitalist city out of Bombay became a never-ending project, one that could be invoked again and again in order to intensify capitalist relations and accumulation by dispossession. The Kolis became the distributors of legitimacy to the successive governments over Bombay, not intentionally, but as subordinate participants in the making of an authoritative account of Bombay’s past.

The key structural change in the making of exclusively urban space out of a mixed agrarian space was a drop in the price of agrarian commodities. When food and the “raw materials” for clothing dropped in relation to housing and rental prices, the majority of petty and bourgeois capitalists sought out those investments which allowed them to profit from housing. In the historical documents, this is indicated by housing issues and the density of population becoming dominant tropes in the records. When it became more profitable for land owners to develop their land vertically and sell it to the growing population than to cultivate it for produce, the urban logic to spatial organization had dominated agrarian interests. The state’s participation in securing urban interests over agrarian ones, either through local forms of state in the Municipal Government or imperial forms of state based in Calcutta or London, was crucial in the triumph of the urban order. This change also resulted in changes in how the history of the city was told such that agrarian activities were excluded or presented as vestiges of the past. Before the triumph of the urban order however, in the early nineteenth century, the “improvements”
spoken of in records relating to Bombay Town and Island referred explicitly to agricultural improvements.

A pronounced historical contrast is provided by an exploration of the *agrarian* forms of settlement and revenue collection on Bombay Islands. It allows us to understand how land led to mixed forms of capital and production, both agrarian and commercial, and that the division between agrarian peoples and urban peoples was not yet in place. (See Figure 1.2) When working with records for 18th and 19th century Bombay it isn’t clear what the boundary of the “city” is or how certain social practices transform into modern urban practices. One way to distinguish urban from rural could be based on the source from which wealth is derived. Landed forms of wealth are predecessors to future rural livelihoods while credit or commerce are predecessors to urban livelihoods, although amongst the elites in Bombay’s later development, people do participate in both. Agrarian means of production include tools for cultivation and harvest. Non-agrarian means include looms for weaving, building materials for housing, and instruments of money including credit and debt. In early nineteenth century Bombay, we see a constantly changing set of competing claims over how the land we now call Bombay should be used. Moreover, an exploration into agrarian Bombay recovers the histories of those obscured by the origin myth of Bombay City, namely that it was nothing more than a collection of fishing villages on top of which a bustling city emerged.

It can be seen through official letters and dispatches that the East India Company was one element in an already dynamic and evolving “rurban” nexus on the west coast of South Asia. In a series of letters exchanged between officials residing in Bombay to Government in Calcutta and London regarding the acquisition of Salsette, one of the islands on which Greater Bombay rests
(See Figure 1.2), we see a discussion on how the islands had the potential to make up the revenues the Company would have lost in maintaining the defense of Company officials residing there. The Company’s officials located in Calcutta discouraged the acquisition of Salsette Island by force, preferring instead a treaty with the Peshwa Ragobah. However, they were forced to leave the means of acquisition up to those in Company officers in Salsette because only local officials had the immediate benefit of knowing the current conditions. The island was eventually taken by force and then a treaty was signed.\(^{20}\) This shows how Company policy was fragmented across regions since local Company officials each had their own commercial ambitions.

Fig. 1.3 Map of port and island of Bombay with adjacent Islands, 1724
Upon arrival on Salsette Island, officials immediately noted the potential for agrarian revenue:

The Island of Salsette, upon a mean computation, is capable of producing, as we are assured, twenty seven thousand Morahs of Batty provided there is no want of labourers to till and cultivate the extent of land, which it has been, in late years, liable to, from the oppression and exactions of the Portuguese Government, the gross proceeds of which, at the rate of 14 Rs. per Morah, (being the common price,) will amount to 378,000 Rs., or 47,250 £ Stg, exclusive of several sorts of fruits and grain produced in great abundance from the fertility of its soil, the profits whereon we may reasonably suppose would be sufficient to defray the expense of tillage and manuring the Batty-Grounds; and the Forts already built upon it, with a very small addition and proper repairs, would be sufficient to maintain a quiet possession against any attempts of any Enemies we might have occasion to dread.21

We can see here that Company officials distinguished themselves from previous governments, the Portuguese in this case, because of their own perceived ability to actualize the full capability of the island’s soil. The only obstacle Company officials perceived was the potential that there would be a shortage of labourers to cultivate the land, otherwise their goal was to gain the full capability of agrarian revenue on the island.

Policies and prospects for increased revenue were suggested from Bombay to the Calcutta Government, i.e. policy was created from the bottom up and conditions in Bombay had the capability of influencing overall Company policy in the subcontinent. Officials discussed the potential revenue of the islands if waste lands were appropriated and cultivated through the encouragement of settlers such as Cunbees (cultivators), merchants, and landholders.

The rich Merchants and other Inhabitants of the neighbouring Governments, finding their objections cease, to a removal to narrow barren Island, like ours, would be invited to make Settlements under our Government, when we should once be in possession of the Island of Salsette, the Merchants of Surat, in particular, having often expressed such a disposition; and

21 “Correspondence about Salsette Island,” 22-23.
such a situation would put us in a condition to be feared and respected by all our Neighbors, and greatly increase the credit of our Nation in these parts.²²

Once the island was acquired, it was reported to Government in Calcutta on Dec. 30th, 1774. The Parsees of Surat were encouraged and sought for their capital, and several public notices were issued about encouragements for advantageous settlement conditions with regards to rent and lease structures in Salsette. Additionally, all duties on the trade in fish were abolished to remove the source of oppression on those people engaged in fishing.²³

Population growth was encouraged and waste lands were claimed through incentives. The product of the lands was made of great interest both to its leading inhabitants and Company officials. Revenues were collected in both cash and kind. White batty, coconut groves, other forms of rice cultivation, and occasionally and briefly sugar, tobacco, and indigo, were cultivated on the northern islands, including in “Dharavee,” the area that resulted in the second highest cash revenues in the year 1777, second to Mallar.²⁴ This by no means suggests that the acquisition of Salsette was of greatest importance to the overall agrarian revenues of the Company, i.e. other parts of Western India were much more productive than Salsette. Indeed, being a coastal island, cultivators struggled with flooding, rising tides, and swampy conditions in various areas. Nonetheless, what is revealed here is that agrarian occupations were encouraged on the island, and the earliest settlers were in fact engaged in landed forms of wealth in their pursuit for livelihood and social status.

²² “Correspondence about Salsette Island,” 26.
²³ “Correspondence about Salsette Island,” 49.
²⁴ “Correspondence about Salsette Island,” 77.
Improvements on the land required the disassembling of older forms of securities and entitlements.\textsuperscript{25} The Company claimed that Portuguese forms of land tenure had left property residing in the hands of Jesuits, and these were dismantled by the Marathas, and thus through acquisition of the island they could be appropriated.\textsuperscript{26} These varied forms of dispossession, either by force or by changing the terms of settlement so as to encourage and discourage particular groups of people were justified rhetorically and ideologically by an \textit{economic end}. Namely, it was because the Company was going to achieve the full productive and monetary potential of what they saw as a fertile island that they were benevolent rulers. This is what allowed them to distinguish themselves from older forms of dispossession, which must have happened when Akbar moved his capital from Agra to Lahore in the 16th century, or when Shah Jahan founded Shahjahanabad in the 17th century, or even earlier when Vijayanagar was founded in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century. The East India Company succeeded rhetorically where other rulers had failed, or so they claimed, because of their attention to the economic potential of the lands.

Other changes initiated by the Company on Salsette included the following right in 1779: “to reserve in our hands all lands or villages whose leases might fall either by insolvency of the Farmers or other casualties in order to allot them upon easy terms to new settlers.”\textsuperscript{27} This decision came from local Bombay Company officials to the Government in Calcutta, and was followed by a brief period of relief of debt. Insolvency had become so widespread that when searching for the causes of debt, officials acknowledged that numerous villages had been over

\textsuperscript{25} The discrediting of prior forms of tenure and their recasting as obstacles to improvements has been most astutely discussed in the chapter on \textit{Inam} lands in the Madras Presidency in Nicholas Dirks, “The colonization of the political order: land settlements, political intervention, and structural change,” in his, \textit{The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom} (University of Michigan Press, 1993), 324-358.

\textsuperscript{26} “Correspondence about Salsette Island,” 24.

\textsuperscript{27} “Correspondence about Salsette Island,” 79.
assessed by themselves. Even the terms of assessment had been left to officials located in Salsette:

The local knowledge you possess enables you to be better judges than we can possibly be, in what manner these lands should be let, whether annually, or for five or more years. Our opinion inclines rather to the latter mode; but we leave it to you to act herein in such manner as may best promote the interest of the Company, recommending it to you, in the strongest terms, to give such encouragement to the farmers as that their number may be increased, (for we understand that a great part of the Island is still uncultivated) and you are also to be very cautious how you distress them for outstanding balances incurred since the Island has been ceded to the Company, unless it appears to you very clearly that their circumstances are such that they can comply, without being distressed, with your demands.²⁸

Land policy was constantly adjusted in the local setting in order to encourage population growth which was meant to increase the agrarian revenues of the island. The policy of letting out land in perpetuity was discouraged so as to avoid lands becoming “an incitement to needy adventures” which would “thereby place the tenants on the footing of Zamindars.”²⁹

The Company even paid for several families transport from the hinterland to the islands. One account cites a request from a neighborhood where people requested financial assistance to transfer 50 families and their cattle, 208 persons in total to the islands as future cultivators. The request was heeded and this incident was praised because the families had fulfilled the expectations of them by becoming profitable cultivators. Many others cases like this would have been encouraged and carried out, however the Maratha Government at Poona took objection to this and the Company had to stop offering assistance to transfer cultivators.³⁰

Officials met with both successes and failures in their attempts to increase revenue, and when they failed the persistent poverty of the cultivating classes was blamed. The cultivating

²⁸ “Correspondence about Salsette Island,” 71.
²⁹ “Correspondence about Salsette Island,” 95.
³⁰ “Correspondence about Salsette Island,” 92-7.
classes, it was argued, could never make capital investments in the land and were thus resigned to toil for minimal returns. As a solution, the capital of Parsees and landholders was sought to encourage land improvements. In a letter to Bombay in 1807, officials were told:

...we direct that you hold out such encouragements as may induce persons from Bombay and the adjacent County to settle at Salsette, by which means and under the Government of mild and equal laws, the settlers enjoying the benefit of protection of person and property, both the agriculture and commerce of the Island may be promoted, and we further direct you to revise the present Settlement for the Land Rents, and if it shall appear that the Land is over assessed; a new Settlement be concluded with the Proprietors or Renters on more moderate terms.31 [Italics mine]

The point here is that revenue was revenue, regardless of its agrarian or commercial origins. Improvements were meant to liberate the full potential of natural resources and thus Company officials saw themselves as liberators of an as of yet un-harnessed natural bounty. Everything from their revenue system to the settlement of the space was meant to liberate inhabitants from the previous and vicious social systems of exploitation exerted by native rulers which had, according to Company officials, only perpetuated poverty in the past.

In such acts, no clear distinction was utilized between the city and country, agriculture and commerce, or indigenous or not. Both the inhabitants of Bombay and East India Company traders became enmeshed in the entire potential of the land to produce revenues. All revenues could and would ultimately be traced to their roots in the soil and how the land was utilized. If commerce was possible at all it was because of the intensification of agriculture, a project enhanced by the eventual acquisition of the island of Bombay’s immediate hinterland by 1818. (See Figure 1.3)

31 “Correspondence about Salsette Island,” 194.
Most importantly, not once in any of these records does one hear of the Kolis as the indigenous inhabitants of the islands, and in fact, they were only rarely mentioned. Bhandaris,
the caste of toddy dealers and cultivators, *Cunbees*, the caste of cultivators, and various merchant farmers made homes for themselves along with Kolis on the islands. No community distinguished itself as relatively privileged nor were officials concerned with the ancient history of the islands or its deep origins.

In the next section, I focus on the issue of housing through encounters over housing and land settlement in Bombay prior to 1900, when the Koli were not singled out as having any special claims over the land of Bombay. The Koli peoples were one amongst many inhabitants of Bombay who encountered the growing powers of the East India Company in conflicts over the regularizing of land use in Bombay. The Kolis’ contests with Company officials were like many others contests over land use at that time, and thus the following section provides historical contrast. It recovers a time unlike the present when the Kolis were not yet marked as indigenous. Through the Kolis’ encounters with forms of state power over housing, we can pursue how the Koli came to speak as Koli when the community was required to articulate with legal and economic institutions controlling the changing built environment.

**Housing as a Nested Entitlement**

One can’t be sure exactly how older forms of rights to housing worked due to the paucity of sources on the subject. However, we can reconstruct trends based on the few sources available. In a history of land revenue in the Bombay Presidency written in 1892, in a chapter on Surat regarding the instructions issued by the Company in 1826 about leases and revenues in villages, one rule said about *ryots*, i.e., cultivators, that: “Ryots were to be at liberty to leave any
village, subject to the ordinary custom as to ownership of houses and lands being relinquished.”32

Given this statement it seems that the right to be housed had to do with the ability to produce something by one’s work on the land. Once the latter failed, i.e. once the land could not be made productive, the cultivator had to give up the home along with the plot of land. Most importantly, housing was not a separate right. One wouldn’t expect to be permitted to stay in the house if one no longer cultivated the land.

Thus housing must have been a nested entitlement, a part and parcel of being a productive member of the landlord’s domain.33 Housing was part of a collection of entitlements and one’s productivity entitled one to housing. The landlord was connected to the cultivator both within the social relations of housing and the social relations of labour. Eventually the question arose for the Company on whether the Government owned the property in houses or whether it was the tenants who owned the property in houses. According to the historian of the 1892 text, the “custom of the country” was that the Government in many villages which were not under direct state management upheld their rights in property. Thus it logically followed that the Company should hold the rights in the property of housing. However, the Company decided to depart from the custom of the country and instead relinquished its own proprietary claim. Upon learning of this, however, the Collector at Surat protested:


33 “Nested” is a term used by Stewart Gordon to describe clusters of rights for families which are interpenetrated with other family rights. See Stewart Gordon, *The Marathas 1600-1818* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 35.
on the grounds that it would be useless to surrender the houses to the tenants for their creditors immediately to seize, and that it was well to have houses which could be given to immigrants from foreign territory. On this the issue of the proclamation was suspended. Thus it was that Government maintained the ultimate right to the property in houses, and housing remained a nested right in lands under direct state control. The custom of the country was upheld with the Company acting as the Government.

The Kolis were neither exceptional nor marked as having any special housing rights in this period. The Company began issuing rules for how land was to be used as early as the acquisition of Bombay. But in the late 18th century, a fear of an attack by the Marathas led them to secure Dongri Hill and thus exclude many of the native residents who lived there. Dongri Hill was seen as advantageous to Company interests because it was the highest point on the island. From there one could see enemies approaching, such as the Portuguese, Marathas, Sidis or any others who often exercised their coastal ambitions. When occupying Dongri Hill in Bombay, several petitions came forth contesting the terms of displacement and dispossession the Company officials enacted. In response to these petitions, all conflicts were resolved equally, i.e. with the same logic for each petitioner.

The first encounter between the Koli peoples and the East India Company was documented in the form of a petition from them from the year 1763. The East India Company officials were enforcing regulations over the use of land in Bombay in order to secure space for themselves on Dongri Hill for the sake of their own defense. Numerous residents entered negotiations with the Company over compensation for their land and housing. Various terms of compensation were offered in this period when land was cleared and resettled. For example,

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34 Rogers, *Land Revenue of Bombay*, 183.
when vast oarts (an oart is often a coconut grove) were cleared, petitioners came forth requesting that they be compensated with oarts in return rather than their full value in cash.\textsuperscript{35} The price of coconuts was rising, and thus the cash value Company officials were expecting to pay for clearing them were of a previous date and thus of a lesser value. Another type of compensation was to give land when land was taken. In a letter dated 29\textsuperscript{th} January, 1770 an official wrote:

Enclosed your Honour will receive account valuation of sundry houses within the town wall represented by Colonels Campbell and Keating as necessary to be removed. All such as are to the westward of the Bazar Gate, the principal engineer requests may accordingly at once be removed; the removal of those to the eastward may, he apprehends, be deferred till next season. Agreed that Rs. 9132-1-26, the value of the westward houses be made good to the proprietors and ground be allowed them on which to rebuild their houses.\textsuperscript{36}

On the 13\textsuperscript{th} April 1774 the issue of the petition from the Kolis was dealt with after the land paymaster had presented an estimate of the full value of the houses of the Kolis on Dongri Hill in comparison with the value of the area where they had been allotted to rebuild. The report noted:

the former of these amounts to Rs. 11,241-0-4 and the other to Rs. 5616-3-67. As our treasury is so very low it is ordered that the houses be permitted to remain till we may be better enabled to discharge the amount of their valuation.\textsuperscript{37}

The connecting link between these and many other such cases was the question of monetary value of the land. All demands were translated into a monetary value and equivalents were

\textsuperscript{35} Public Diary 44 of 1765, Maharashtra State Archives, 93; and “Houses & Fortifications” from Bombay Town and Island History, 471.

\textsuperscript{36} Public Diary 55 of 1770, Maharashtra State Archives, 91, 109-110 and “Houses & Fortifications” from Bombay Town and Island History, 475.

\textsuperscript{37} “Houses & Fortifications” from Bombay Town and Island History, 481.
sought between what residents wanted and what the Company could offer, with money as the medium.

Given that the Company could not monetarily compensate the Kolis, they were allowed to stay, but Koli peoples in other parts of the city were displaced for cash, just as other inhabitants were. In fact, even in 1831, when a local Delhi resident, Dilsookh Roy asked for rights to a plot in Delhi in order to provide a dharamshala for indigent travelers, the land value was checked before he received the rights to build the dharamshala. Once deemed low enough, i.e. the opportunity cost of using the land for something else, the dharamshala was permitted to be built. Such petitions revealed the parity of Koli negotiations with government officials over issues of land use and housing and most importantly, also show that their rights to housing were no different than anyone else’s as far as the government was concerned.

These forms of ordinary dispossession affected the Koli as well as others settled on the islands. The Koli likeness to other inhabitants of the islands reveals that it is only after 1901 C.E. that the Koli would acquire a separate legal standing in the city and become enshrined in historical memory. Before 1900 there was no notion of “indigeneity” as a legal category which could garner privileges. Through the nineteenth century the use of land was increasingly regulated by Company officials who needed to protect their investment in an area and ensure a hospitable environment for their trading operations.

In the next section we look at the construction of the Koli origin myth and most importantly the effect the origin myth had on claims to housing in Bombay after 1901 C.E., when the myth was created. Prior to the construction of this tale, as we have seen in the

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38 “Grant of a piece of ground in Delhi to Delsukh Roy for the erection of a dharmshala,” Aug 1831-Apr 1832, India Office Records, London, United Kingdom.
preceding sections, the Koli were like other petitioners who contested and accepted the terms of their rehousing by Company officials. Once their status was elevated by the performance of their indigeneity, both by officials in Government and members of the Koli community, the Koli garnered privileges in housing and became sources of legitimacy for market-based development projects in the neighborhoods of Bombay.

Constructing the Koli Tale

The burden of constructing the Koli tale of indigeneity did not acquire importance until the 1880s when migration to Bombay Town and Island was exponential and uncontrollable. Several social factors contributed to the myth’s construction. By the late 19th century the British were retreating from most deferrals to “customary” entitlements of any kind; they saw themselves as serving the sovereignty of the market. The relatively new colonial state, which had only become formally in charge of all land, revenue, taxation, and distribution of resources in 1858 found itself searching for sources of legitimacy. The diversity of Koli society had to be streamlined into a simple legible rubric without any of the confusion an acknowledgement of pluralism and diversity would entail. It was decided that in Bombay Town and Island, the Kolis were of the Son lineage and solely fisher folk. Fisher folk used the sea, thus Bombay’s Kolis were entitled to land by the sea. They were relegated to small coastal hamlets which the government provided even when municipal officials were clearing out entire neighborhoods for development and upgrading. Now, I’d like to review the construction of the Koli tale and then, in the next section, show how Kolis were provided housing amidst development schemes to build some of Bombay’s most famously bourgeois neighborhoods.
It is remarkable that even Hindi and Marathi writers in the 19th century, those who had a lot at stake in constructing a story about Bombay’s origins and history, did not believe the Koli to be the sole inhabitants of Bombay Town and Island prior to British arrival. The telling of Bombay’s history was no neutral or objective scholarly endeavor. With the intense rise in population starting in the 1860’s, claims to diminishing resources depended on just such histories to prove which community had the right to land, access to water, the right to cultivate, or the right to commercial avenues for trade.

In 1863 a Maharashtrian by the name of Govind Narayan wrote *Mumbaichee Varnan*, its recent translated edition calling this the first biography of Bombay in the Marathi language. Govind Narayan relied on theories about the history of language to determine who the “antecedents of the original settlers of Mumbai” were. He made several leaps of logic which are entirely untenable now, however, his account serves the purpose of demonstrating that in 1863, the Kolis who lived in Bombay were seen as a diverse and un-unified group, who were never thought of as “indigenous” or “adivasi.”

However, it is important to consider the conditions of this text’s production. *Mumbaichee Varnan* is important in present-day Bombay because of its ability to lend credibility to the Shiv Sena’s allegation that Marathi speaking people are the true and original residents of Mumbai. The changing of the city’s name from Bombay to Mumbai in 1995 reflects the rise of the Shiv Sena as both a political and cultural vehicle for increased representation of Marathi speakers in the city. These facts have everything to do with the popularity of the current translation by Murali Ranganathan, and its billing in the publication as the “first Marathi biography of the city.”

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39 Hansen, *Wages of Violence*. 
Having met Ranganathan in London and conducted an informal interview over coffee in August of 2009, it was evident that Ranganathan chose to translate this text and make it newly available to the public because of the text’s ability to prove claims made by Maharashtrian exclusivists in contemporary Mumbai who are eager to “re-claim” Mumbai’s true Maharashtrian past.

The text *Mumbaichee Varnan* uses ingenious tools of analysis to prove that Bombay’s earliest inhabitant were Hindu and Marathi speaking, the Koli are one of those people, but not the only ones. In short, Narayan claims the Kolis are Hindus. The Christians of Bombay are rendered originally Kolis and by implication originally Hindu as well. Narayan also establishes the necessity of Brahmans in order to defend Hinduism, so that Bombay becomes a place first consolidated by Maharashtrians who are the original inhabitants of Bombay. It is important to remember too that despite the privileging of the Marathi-speaking ethno-linguistic community of Bombay, the Koli do not function in Narayan’s account as the sole aboriginal or indigenous residents of Bombay. What is important for Narayan is that Marathi speaking peoples are the original inhabitants of Bombay.

Narayan develops a claim that Marathi speakers are descendants of the original communities of Bombay. Narayan writes that of the several types of Marathi spoken in Bombay, that of the Christians is unique and he suggests that those Christians must have spoken that type of Marathi even before they were converted to Christianity especially since there is not a single Portuguese word in their language. This also must mean that this language, spoken by the Christians of Mumbai, must have been the Lingua Franca on the island prior to the Portuguese arrival. Most importantly, any caste which speaks a language similar to that one today must be descendants of the original inhabitants. Narayan thus concludes that:
Based on a study conducted on this premise, five castes emerge whose language can be linked to that of the Christians of Mumbai. An examination of the language of the ancient texts and fables of these castes also leads one to a similar conclusion, this being that they have been resident in the region of Mumbai since times immemorial, without any changes in their religious practices. The five castes are as follows: Koli, Bhongle Bhandari, Palshe Joshi, Pathare Prabhu, and Paanchkalashe – Vaadval – Sutar.40

From these statements we see that Narayan believed the Koli were one amongst several caste groups who had resided in Mumbai since “times immemorial.” While the Koli are cited as one ancient community, they are only one amongst several ancient caste communities. What’s most important for Narayan is that Marathi speakers of his contemporary Bombay, in 1863, are descendants of the original communities of Bombay.

Another section which attempts to explain the arrival of later settlers in Mumbai is embedded in the notion that India’s history can be divided into “Hindu,” “Muslim,” and “Christian” periods. This religious periodization is faulty and has been criticized by numerous scholars who criticize the periodization as being complicit in a Hindutva model of the Indian nation state.41 Under such a periodization, the differences between religious communities are ignored, the contests for resources – often violent contests – are reduced to inter-religious warfare rather than political competitions which took place both between religious traditions and even between sects of the same religion. The Hindutva model of Indian history claims that


41 Romila Thapar, “Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity,” *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 23, No. 2 (1989): 209-231; Romila Thapar, “Ideology and the Interpretation of Early Indian History,” *Review* (Fernand Braudel Center) Vol. 5, No. 3 (Winter, 1982): 389-411. While Romila Thapar is critiquing national uses of ancient history, her point is applicable to the conditions of the production of the *Mumbaichee Varnan* as well. Namely, that it’s translation was undertaken during the rise of the Shiv Sena party in Maharashtra, who through their political power, were able to make certain kinds of histories of Bombay legitimate while excluding others.
Hindus were the original inhabitants on the subcontinent, that Muslims and Christians are later converts, and thus advocates a “return” to the original ancient nation of Hindu India. Criticism of this model includes the history of the name “Hindu,” where it has been suggested that no sect referred to themselves as “Hindu” until called such by non-Hindu early modern conquerors, and the naming of Hinduism is itself mired in political history. Narayan’s early history of Mumbai casts later “Hindu” settlers on the islands as being necessary to save the Koli peoples from the threat of other religions. In Narayan’s account, the primitive religion of the Koli peoples is absorbed through the need for protection into a local form of Hinduism itself. Narayan cites a Sanskrit text to explain this:

The *Walkeshwar Mahatmaya*, a Sanskrit Purana describing the temple of Walkeshwar says that prior to the building of the Walkeshwar Temple, the Hindus were very much terrorized by the religious intolerance of Mubarak Badshah. This led to the arrival of Hindus of a very high caste in Mumbai. If the population had consisted only of Kolis, they would neither have striven to build the Temple nor would they have been able to recognize the threat to their religion.

The building of the temple at Walkeshwar, a still existing neighborhood of Bombay, is interpreted here as a necessary act meant to preserve the place of the now “low caste” Hindus, the Koli, from the terror of the intolerant Muslim, Mubarak Badshah. As Narayan says, the arrival of high caste Hindus was necessary to preserve the Koli peoples and make them “recognize the threat to their religion.”

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The problem of the presence of Christian Kolis is dispensed with by proclaiming the Christian Koli to be originally Hindu. Furthermore, by claiming other Christians as originally Koli because they speak a language similar to the Koli dialect, Christians in general are proclaimed as originally Hindu. All their spoken languages and dialects are analyzed as aspects of what is together the “Marathi language,” a language that is treated as an inert entity receiving change from the outside.

Many of the Christians of Sashtee and Mumbai were originally Kolis and Bhandaris, and many of them retain their original surnames and languages. The key to establishing a connection between these five castes lies in their common language. While they speak the Marathi language, the Hindu and Christian Kolis have a distinctive enunciation, and use certain words, by which this dialect came to be known as the Koli language. Thus we understand that, since the earliest times, there were many Kolis in this island…. Amongst the four castes, there is very little difference in dialect and, in recent years, hardly any noticeable difference exists between the languages of the Palshe Joshis, Prabhus and Paanchkalashes. The possible reasons for this include the migration to Mumbai of Brahmins from the South and the Konkan, as well as the introduction of a pure form of the Marathi language through the publication of books by Elphinstone College. Many of the educated people abandoned the language of their castes to speak in this pure Marathi diction, with a view to increasing the prestige of their respective castes. These are the three main reasons for the sweeping changes in spoken Marathi.44

Narayan’s claims here about the Marathi language and the priority of the Hindu religion over other religions establishes an early ethno-linguistic history of a community. The publication of the translated edition of this history is indicative of the current politics of Hindu nationalism which is tactically adopted to varying regions and linguistic communities.

If we contrast Narayan’s Mumbaichee Varnan with the first official history of Bombay which spoke of the Koli as indigenous, we can see not only two different accounts of Bombay’s early history, but the similarities across histories of Bombay in that they have contemporary political functions which are served by the kind of history told. In 1901, S. M. Edwardes wrote the first history of Bombay which claimed the Koli to be the original inhabitant. Edwardes was

asked to write a history accounting for the growth of the population of Bombay and include it with the 1901 census of Bombay city. No census of the islands had been taken in 1891 and so this history was thought to compensate for the lack of information in the intervening decades. Edwardes’ history was published both in the preface to the Census of 1901 and as a separate publication on its own. It was the first which explicitly claimed a pure Koli caste of fishermen as the aboriginals of Bombay.

Edwardes justified the Koli origin theory as a part and parcel of his justification of British presence and involvement in Bombay. With allusions to the foreign and merchant theory of capitalism, Edwardes claimed that merchants were emancipators who harnessed idle and natural wealth in the time of British rule alone to emancipate not only labour and production on Bombay island, but also to emancipate the Kolis from the tyranny of oppressors. The British saved the Koli and recognized the community’s elevated status just as they saved Bombay from becoming a series of islands that would have been nothing more than wastelands.

In his account, the Kolis were the first settlers of Bombay and linguistically traced their name “Koli” to a Dravidian root meaning agriculture. Edwardes thought this Dravidian root was the Koli people’s original language. Through the further authority of anthropometric techniques he “confirmed” that the Kolis were of a Dravidian type. The Kolis’ “natural sturdiness” had allowed him to survive “successive waves of invaders, who have almost threatened to engulf him,” and a bond between the Kolis and early Greek traders to the island was even speculated upon. Edwardes romanticized the Kolis’ natural abilities. The Kolis were pre-Brahmanical,

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Brahmanism having “hid the truth of his lowly origin in a specious tale of descent from a Lunar Monarch.”

Koli hamlets or hut settlements were identified all over the island, with special notice being given to the neighborhood “Kolaba” as being an early Koli village. The trade of the island and its population was narrated as minuscule all through the Portuguese period of Bombay’s history. One brief moment of doubt was revealed by Edwardes when he wrote that the population of Bombay had grown to 50,000 in the 17th century, which Edwardes believed deserved further inquiry. This vast population could have derailed Edwardes confidence in the notion that only under the British had the city grown so much, but he nonetheless insisted that the islands were never utilized to their full potential. Only the English had the great foresight to see all the productive potential on Bombay island, and in fulfilling their duty to emancipate commerce the British also emancipated the Kolis. Edwardes wrote:

> Of minor arrangements for the benefit of the people, one may remark in particular the emancipation of the Kolis, and the refusal to grant a five years’ monopoly to the sellers of betel-leaf. “As we understand,” wrote the Directors in 1791, “that an old arbitrary power, which was established when the island belonged to the Portuguese, has been exercised in later times, and perhaps in some degree still exercised, against that most useful set of people, the fishermen, a certain number of them being obliged to sell fish in the Breach water, and to act as palanquin-bearers to some of the gentlemen in office, for the first of which duties they either receive no pay or scarce any and for the latter not near the wages customary, and that they experience other grievances which must not only subject their industry to imposition, but their persons to insult and oppression from the sepoys or others authorized to compel them to execute such duties, we direct that in case such grievances do still in any degree exist, they be on receipt of this letter entirely abolished and the fishermen released from all such servitude and left as free as the other inhabitants of the island.”

Freeing the Kolis from servitude was central to the construction of British legitimacy as was restoring them to their original status. According to Edwardes, the Kolis survived through various aggressors and immigrants to the island in unchanged form, but only now under the

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English could they be emancipated. It was both the natural state of the Kolis which had to be preserved and freed from Brahmanical, Maratha, and Portuguese tyranny, and the natural productivity of the island which had to be recognized and unleashed.

There were numerous demographic changes through the 1880s and 1890s on Bombay Island which would have necessitated the construction of such a myth of Koli indigeneity. Famines swept through most of South Asia in the 1870s, migrants to Bombay were sometimes stopped upon entry to the city because the city was being so overwhelmed with the population. The plague of 1896-97 also brought to the fore the problem of disease borne of overcrowding and density of population. The plague resulted in a massive shift of the population through voluntary relocation northwards on the island. The growth of Bombay overwhelmed not just rural migrants who found themselves lost within the dense entrails of neighborhoods such as Nagpada, Kamathipura, and the original Kumbharwada (before it was located in what is now Dharavi) but it overwhelmed city officials and the imperial state.

Accounting for Bombay’s growth would have required a story of multiple origins, of intercourse between country and city, and of agrarian and commercial capitalism developing together. The Koli story avoided this messiness. Identifying origins in a deep past rather than an immediate past supported the Orientalist conception about India that it was an “ancient civilization,” and not a dynamic, evolving and historical subcontinent full of competing communities many of whom were participants in the transition to modernity.

Furthermore, the Koli story identified a local noble savage. The Koli women took care of the business of the community, selling the fish and managing household finances. Therefore the women had an “advanced” social role unexpected of women in native communities. According
to official perception, there was an ease of work in relation to nature and a purity of ethos amongst the Koli which was not corrupted or rendered unproductive by a domineering Brahmanism, Mughal decadence, Maratha plunder, or Portuguese frivolity. Kolis were primitive, sure, but also superior in their authenticity. They had a special relation to the earth and its water; theirs was an unmediated relation to the natural productivity of the environment. In a subsequent history meant to account for the rise in population of Bombay, read before the “Indian Section of the Royal Anthropological Institute” on Oct. 25, 1925, Stephen Meredyth Edwardes provided the most fully developed of the above views. About the Koli, he said that:

Reverting now to the several periods into which this survey is divided, we may infer that the seven islands were inhabited in the Stone Age, from the fact that along the shore of Back Bay, the false harbour which divides Malabar Hill from Colaba, and in the Kolaba District on the opposite side of Bombay harbour, flint implements have been found, similar to those associated with the cavemen of Europe. The people, who fashioned and used these stone weapons, supported themselves perhaps by fishing in the land-locked harbour and by hunting in the jungles of khair (acacia catechu) which once covered the face of the islands. The existence of a forest of these trees in prehistoric ages has been rendered credible by the discovery, during the excavation of the foundations of the modern Prince’s Dock, of a petrified khair forest, lying 32 feet below high-water mark, imbedded in a decayed traprock soil, and overlaid by the thick clay stratum, which forms the bottom of Bombay harbour. We know nothing of the origin and characteristics of these hunting and fishing clans of the Stone Age; but it is surmised by some authorities that they came from the south, migrating slowly along the coast and forming settlements here and there in the river bottoms. It is certain, however, that at some remote date they were ousted or absorbed by a tribe of aboriginal fisher-folk, the Kolis, who form today by far the oldest element of the Bombay Population...

While the precise origin of the Bombay Kolis must remain conjectural, two facts concerning their contribution to the history of Bombay may be accepted as practically certain. The first is that in each of the seven islands, they formed rude settlements which still exist today. Those settlements are often mentioned in the letters and documents of the early period of British rule under the name of ‘Koliwadas’ or ‘Koli quarters,’ and were located close to the seashore, as it existed before the reclamations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Such a situation was obviously necessary for people whose primary occupation was, as it still is, sea-fishing. The principal Koliwadas are located in Colaba, Mandvi, Mazagon, Worli, Mahim and Sion; and although the general progress of the city and the acquisition of (3) wealth by the Kolis themselves have combined to rob these settlements of their former primitive appearance and characteristic, there can be little doubt that they represent the original location of the Koli hamlets in the seven islands. Mandvi Koliwada, for example, which I first visited twenty-three years ago, was composed of old houses, set down haphazard in a maze of narrow lanes, which once debouched directly on the foreshore of the harbour.

Between the houses of the Kolis and the sea which has been their sustenance from time immemorial there now intervene the wide area of the Frere Reclamation and a section of the modern docks, constructed during the nineteenth century. Moreover, since the opening of the
The Koli were characters in Bombay’s “pre-history,” having ousted or absorbed another tribe of fisherfolk who had settled on the river bottoms. Edwardes divided the history of the “City and Island of Bombay” into five periods and he said it was called the “city and island...so as to include both the business quarters and the once rural areas in the north of the Island.” He noted that during the first four periods there were seven islands and only in the last, “Their eventual union to form the modern Island of Bombay was effected during the final or British period...”

Prior to this unifying of the seven islands, the population was restricted from crossing only at low tide. This unification and British efforts at reclamations were “potent factors in the growth of the occupied area and in the change from rural to urban.”

According to the official British narrative, previous imperial forms had obscured the full productive potential of the earth’s bounty and the Kolis’ access to it. Company statecraft facilitated the realization of Bombay’s and the Koli’s full potential. Lands were classified as waste or fallow, i.e. brought into cultivation when not cultivated or in proper use. Company officials surveyed the land, made note of how it was used, produced records full of settlement patterns, productivity, irrigation, and patterns of cultivation which indicated the deviation from the achievement of this full potential. It is not the case that the Company officials were the first to do these things, but it was in their time that this narrative about themselves as the liberators of the Koli as indigenous became the authoritative account of Bombay’s history well into the 20th century.

What happened once the Koli were seen as the indigenous inhabitants of Bombay? How did Edwardes’ account of Bombay’s origins and growth influence the way the city developed? In the next section I return to the issue of housing and look at the Kolis as privileged petitioners during the period of major urban renewal between 1900 and 1920. Through the period of the work of the City Improvement Trust (whose activities are pursued in much greater detail in chapter five) the Koli managed to become the only community in Bombay who could rightfully contest their dispossession in housing. While there were others who contested the terms of their compensation when city officials exercised eminent domain on their lands, the Koli were unique because of their ability to appeal to their primitive and *adivasi* status.

**Enshrined Koliwadas, Koli Housing**

The granting of indigenous status to the Koli had many consequences in the development of Bombay. Most importantly, it warranted the Koli as petitioners against official acquisitions of their land and property. Just as they had done in the 18th century when the East India Company was acquiring land for their own use, the Kolis continued to organize and appeal to officials whenever they faced the risk of being displaced. Only now, they could appeal to their indigenous status and appeal to the particular occupation which they were bound to by caste such that they could claim a special need to live by the sea. Two occasions in particular demonstrate the emergence of the Kolis as modern petitioners: first in 1904 when the City Improvement Trust had designs on their neighborhood as part of the “Mandvi-Koliwada Scheme” and second, in 1919 when Colaba was being redeveloped as an upper class neighborhood.
In 1904, just five years into the Trust’s creation, a plan was proposed to redevelop Mandvi-Koliwada in central Bombay. Doing so required that the Trust acquire land that the Kolis were resident on. The Kolis organized and submitted a petition to the Trust. The petition said that they had to live, “...within easy reach of the sea as our people have for generations past lived and worked in Koliwada.” If they weren’t allowed to do so, they claimed that they would have to disperse away from the community and live elsewhere which would be difficult because, “our industry already languishing, must collapse, and a population numbering over a thousand souls, go to ruin.” They argued that they weren’t opposed to moving provided they could be allotted new land, “...by which we may be kept together in New Koliwada, after the improvements are completed and space re-allotted for building purposes...[or]..be still kept together in a fresh colony along the seaside and more or less near the scene of our present labours.”

The Koli used the notion of their essential identity as workers of the sea in order to make a case for land acquisition. They were assured that their request would be honored initially, however Trust officials later rescinded their views deciding that in this particular case, the Koli had no right to claim land in Mandvi-Koliwada since it was no longer near the sea.

In 1919 an ambitious plan to redevelop Colaba (previously spelled “Kolaba”) into an upper and upper-middle class neighborhood was suggested. When writing the plans to redevelop the neighborhood the displacement of numerous inhabitants was described as “automatic.” By “automatic” it was meant that people naturally followed their jobs towards neighborhoods where they sought affordable residences within the confines of the housing market. In contrast to the


50 Kidambi, Making of an Indian Metropolis, 81.
automatic displacement of many of Colaba’s residents, the Koli were singled out as peoples warranting specially allocated lands as the site of their fishing village.

Colaba was in the southern part of Bombay near the Fort area where booming businesses associated with overseas commerce brought local and foreign merchants into neighborhood associations. Colaba had first been divided into an Upper, Middle, and Lower Colaba in 1872 by the relatively new Municipal Commissioner’s office. Prior to this it was two islands between the waters of the harbor and Back Bay which were narrow and long. The channel of water between them was reclaimed to unite the two islands into Colaba. In 1872, all of Colaba contained 16,601 people who experienced the highest death rate from cholera in the entire city, it had no system of drainage or sewage and was entirely dependent on the manual labour of the halalkhors\(^{51}\) to clean the area. There had been an upgrading of materials used by scavengers, better carts and depots, which meant that fewer halalkhors (1118 in 1868 down to 875 in 1872) could be used to increase the daily average of nightsoil removed from the city by 55%.\(^{52}\) Upper Colaba was occupied by military and naval personnel, Middle Colaba was mostly private dwellings, and Lower Colaba, which itself was made up of the reclamations on the eastern and western edges of the island, contained “the thickly crowded and very insanitary village of Hamalwady...”\(^{53}\) Hamalwady\(^{54}\) was called a “dirty village” and officials had wanted those inhabitants moved for the railway and also to protect the health of the European troops, but they

\(^{51}\) The meaning of the term “halalkhor” is one who eats what is halal or permissible, although the meaning was possibly different in Early Modern times. For modern urban scavengers, everything is “halal” and thus consumable. Halalkhors have thus acquired the role of sanitation workers, scavengers and recyclers in cities like Bombay, but the history of their changing status in society is unknown.

\(^{52}\) MCRCOB, 1872, 17.

\(^{53}\) MCRCOB, 1872, 54.

\(^{54}\) Hamal means porter, thus hamalwady is a porter’s colony.
hadn’t succeeded. Steady growth along those same lines through the turn of the century led to a very crowded southern portion of Bombay. The vast majority of these people had to leave when Colaba was being redeveloped in 1919. The “slum” of Colaba had to be cleaned up by the Bombay Improvement Trust and the only people allotted land and exempted from the forces of the market were the Kolis.55

City officials decided to move the Cotton Green area to Sewri. In anticipation of that scheme, the following was the proposal for what to do with the cleared area along with approximately 1200 acres of land being acquired through reclamation in Colaba on Back Bay. Housing for all classes was an immediate necessity; the working, middle and upper classes were struggling to find adequate housing in the city that was in the vicinity of their work. Officials in charge of Colaba’s redevelopment advanced the argument that since the working classes would prefer to stay near their industries, which were being moved northwards, Colaba should be a middle and upper class neighborhood and not a working class neighborhood. Removal of the Cotton Green would automatically remove much that was unwanted about Colaba. Mirams, the Consulting Surveyor to the Government of Bombay, wrote the following in a report about the redevelopment of Colaba:

In the same way the absence of the cotton green, will render the cotton go-downs as such no longer necessary. The boat basins will not be required and a great deal of the insanitary Colaba village will be automatically evacuated by the people who now find employment in industry in Colaba.56


Mirams noted that much of Colaba had been a “festering sore” and on several previous occasions the Municipality had wanted the Bombay City Improvement Trust to address its problems.

In a section entitled “Census,” the following demographic information was provided about Colaba: 8,736 people would be directly affected by the development scheme and of those, 6,570 would automatically have no interest in remaining in Colaba. The need to provide accommodation to the labourers who would be “automatically” moved to Sewri, the site of the new Cotton Green, was deferred to the Port Trust of Bombay. (The question of who was responsible to house labourers was an important one during the operations of the Trust and this will be explored in later chapters.) Labourers were moved both physically and politically; the responsibility for their housing was transferred amongst commercial cooperative societies in Bombay.

This was not the case with the Kolis of Bombay. With regards to the fishermen of Colaba, the report stated:

The only people for whom housing accommodation must be provided within the area of the scheme is the fishermen, and a suitable area of land has been set aside towards the south for a Fishing Village of approved design with an area sufficient for 100 tenements. There are only 89 families of fishermen, numbering 400 persons. Ample provision has been made for the drying of nets, open spaces, etc. The intention is to make it a miniature model village and there need be no fear of its becoming a nuisance.57

Two detailed maps were provided with the report which showed the model village to be constructed. The most striking thing about the map was the juxtaposition of middle and upper class housing adjacent to the much more condensed Koli village. In total, 294.6 acres were going

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to be developed with 360 building plots varying from roughly 1000 to 3000 sq. yards each.

Mirams said that he intended to use the land to its most efficient end, through an “economic
development” of the space. Wide roads, a water front garden, tennis courts, a concert hall with a
café, a swimming bath, market, chauffeur’s quarters, motor garages, stables, and servants
quarters indicated that Colaba was to become a place of leisure and recreation, with activities
designed to cultivate the mind and body through the theatre and baths, for example. The design
of the servants quarters made Mirams especially proud of his own innovation in planning, as they
were located next to the stables and not next to the new residences. He wrote:

To the west of the stables and immediately adjoining them, a site is provided for servants’
quarters. This is a new departure in Indian development, but it is hoped that owners of houses
would be pleased to be free from the nuisance inevitably created by servants being located in
close proximity to the main residences.58

Colaba was being redeveloped to be an exclusive neighborhood: a certain type of person would
live there in contrast to the other neighborhoods of Bombay. It was also exclusive from within,
i.e. the classes of employers were to be kept distinct from the “nuisance” of having their
domestic labourers in close proximity to themselves.

In the final section of the report, the financial cost and estimated profits was provided.
Mirams estimated that the scheme would cost Rs. 4,07,37,000, and by selling the building sites it
would recover, at an average of Rs. 50-75/sq. yard, a total of approximately Rs. 5,30,30,400. The
net profit of 1 Crore and 23 Lakhs (Rs. 1,22,93,400) was anticipated without the use of any
credit to purchase the materials.59 Thus, it was not only developers who would benefit from

building Colaba into an exclusive neighborhood, but the Municipality and Improvement Trust would monetarily benefit as well.

Providing the Kolis with housing in Colaba exemplified their unusual relation to the Municipal Corporation and City Improvement Trust, both of which were run by some of the most prominent landlords and industrialists in the city. Honoring the Kolis’ right to land had ironically provided the growing cadre of city officials the legitimacy to grant land developers access to resources. The Koli story established a link between contemporary officials and Bombay’s “past” and served as proof that officials were honoring a tradition. The story thus relegated any other types of claims to housing and land in the city to the domain of the market. The rise of the origin myth, the Koli indigeneity history of Bombay signified the total breakdown of any other claims to rights over the land, which now had to operate only in the realm of the market.

The Kolis of Bombay were singularly thought of as fisher folk. The previous ambiguity of the varying occupations which the Koli could engage in, such as settled agriculture, no longer applied. Since they did not work on the land and only worked on the sea, their presence was not a threat to liberal conceptions of private property. In Colaba and in Mandvi, the Koli emerged as indigenous petitioners whose rights to land and housing in the city had to be honored.

**Conclusion: Contesting Bombay’s Origins**

Upon establishment of the Koli origin myth in 1901 C.E., the Koli tale could serve the local purpose of managing dispossession, the regional purpose of politicizing an ethno-linguistic identity as the sole arbiter of Bombay’s history, the national purpose of “re”-constructing the Hindu nation, and the global purpose of lending credibility to a merchant theory of capitalism’s
origins on the city-islands. The Kolis’ sole right to the housing in Bombay rendered all other forms of dispossession ordinary, an everyday occurrence enacted by the apolitical, amoral, non-cultural, and rational operation of the market. The Kolis, in contrast to the neutral market, were the site of culture, the only site of an excessive culture which neither could they shake free from nor did anyone want them to. Their habitations served to maintain the “cultural past” of Bombay’s history which warranted the rational and culture-free march of the economy in the distribution of housing, land, and property in the rest of the city and for everyone else. If technology, industry, and the rule of property was going to cast itself as the future, it would need to enshrine all other forms of life as residues of the past. As a recent scholar has said of the reclamations which led to the fantastic seascape of Marine Drive in Bombay: “Only the ramshackle huts of the Koli fishing community break up the solid continuity of the industrial mastery of the sea.”

Consulting extant sources and histories of Bombay from the Portuguese and early Company period which cite deeds and grants, one cannot find corroboration for the story of Bombay as a small and inconsequential fishing village. This chapter has demonstrated that the story of the Kolis of Bombay did not achieve the status of the “origin tale of Bombay” until 1901, when the story was derived from more ambiguous versions of it which circulated a few decades earlier. Upon consulting the records prior to 1901, one finds that the Kolis or fisher folk were not treated as if they were the only native inhabitants of the city-islands. Only long after many others had settled on the collection of islands called in total “Bombay,” did the Kolis achieve the status of the indigenous inhabitants of the islands. Those early settlers were as varied

as any socially diverse collection of peoples which could be found throughout South Asia historically. The inhabitants of the island were influenced by and themselves influenced the ebb and flow of waves of migrations, settlements, ascensions to power, and conflicts of interest which marked the subcontinent’s history. Bombay was neither detached from the subcontinent’s immediate and preceding historical developments nor was it an isolated enclave in which the Kolis alone could lay claim.

Furthermore, the story of the rise of Bombay as a modern port city is a story of a particular type of transformation of agrarian and market space. It made the city seem as if it was produced *ex nihilo*, from scratch, and even this served a purpose. In addition to tracing how claiming indigenous rights produced a collective Koli identity and people and how indigeneity was performed once it was established as a legal right, this chapter also traced what honoring those rights did for modern imperial statecraft where merchant capitalism came to be privileged over early modern commercial relations and set the context in which future battles over land would take place in the urban context.

The Koli story, once invented, supported a merchant based theory of capitalism’s origins rather than an industrious, agrarian, or commercial revolution. This theory credited mostly foreign merchant’s activities with the major changes which led to Bombay’s growth. It argued that merchants who resided in towns which were networked with each other across seas were the liberating force of the inherent capitalist potential within South Asian society, and indeed within human nature. The narratives of the “colonial port cities” of South Asia as being nothing more than mere fishing villages were thus severed from the subcontinent’s larger history. Capitalists arrived by sea and provided the liberating force so that the subcontinent’s capitalist potential
could be set in motion. Bombay was henceforth cast as a desolate enclave where it was found that a social life consisting of a near primitive relationship between man and nature existed in a location both physically and developmentally distant from South Asian imperial heartlands who had no control over the coasts. Thus early modern forms of sovereignty, social organization, commercial dynamism, and capitalist progress were denied in South Asia’s urban past.

The British saw themselves as the agents of the subcontinent’s modern history and thus pursued the question of Bombay’s origins. The colonial story of Bombay would begin with isolated and centuries-old fishing communities living on the island until merchant communities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were able to achieve the potential of the islands due to Company fiat. The Company merchants along with initially Parsis in this case, but eventually Khojas, Memon, Katchis, Bohras, Banias, settled in the town due to British initiatives. These merchant communities financed mills, facilitated commerce, extracted surplus from the hinterland, shipped it across seas, and effectively increased demand for goods, services, and labour, which were only now organized into more productive relations through the arrival of machines and industry.

By the twentieth century nationalists saw Bombay as a “colonial city.” Bombay’s history was thought to mirror and reflect the narrative of colonialism itself. A colonial modernity was first, the narration of capitalist success which served to congratulate merchant’s activities because of whom an entire cadre of supporting actors migrated to the city in search of work, each one along with the merchants freeing themselves from the shackles of agrarian bondage which characterized their predecessor’s lives in the hinterland; and second, through a brutal form of high imperialism, capitalist potential was thwarted, and un-development, the wide scale
persistence of poverty, un-built urban environments, and un-harnessed productive potential remained in colonialism’s wake. National independence would embrace development to set the city back on its proper modernizing path. Throughout the political shift in power and governance, to be urban was to be free, to be in the country was to be un-free. In the city free labour, free capital, free migrants collectively dwelled, inhabiting the space of capitalist modernity’s victory: the city. The city like modernity itself, was the sign of the new and novel, marking a distinct break with the past. No element of the city’s immediate past was seen to contribute to the city’s future.

What this chapter has done instead is to locate the growing power of the East India Company on the islands as a part and parcel of an already existing “rurban” nexus in which urban functions could be found in country villages and rural towns, and agrarian functions too were encouraged by the Company in the developing of Bombay. The East India Company officials, along with native merchants, cultivators, Koli peoples, and petty tradesmen settled on the island through encouragements in both agrarian and commercial ventures. No distinction was made between city and country in this period. Through this early settlement, this chapter focused on early contests over rights to housing where customary claims to shelter existed alongside modern economic claims, neither of which distinguished the Koli peoples as having any extraordinary right to housing. Dispossession was made ordinary and a “natural” or unavoidable step on the way to settlements on the islands.

This chapter has also traced the way in which the Koli myth obscured the multiple origins of Bombay’s history. The Koli origin myth supported a merchant based theory of capitalism’s origins as foreign since the Company officials can be cast as arriving on a tabula rasa, on
uninhabited islands. Bolstered by the nationalist imagination, it lent credence to the notion that capitalism arrived on the subcontinent from the outside, as a foreign imposition which either needed to be removed or set back on track through local and national development. In Koli-inhabited Bombay, no grand fish farms or farms of any kind were ever formed; i.e. no one organized the activities of others or farmed out revenues from the sale of products, no great overlord emerged from the fishing community’s ranks or any other community’s ranks to exemplify the social stratification indicative of advanced societies. Instead a community of people who made use of the bounty of the sea were narrated in the authoritative account of Bombay’s history as singularly fixed across time.

In contrast to these prevailing stereotypes, we’ve seen the ambiguity and imprecision prevalent in the 19th century about who the Koli are and what they do, and how they are one community amongst early settlers in Bombay and treated equal to them. The practice of modern indigeneity is a type of knowledge making which substitutes the knowledge of a deep and distant history in place of an immediate history. The origin myth of Bombay depended on a notion of the Koli peoples as unhistorical, primitive, and as dependents on the state for distribution of resources such as land for housing, and protected spaces of commerce for their goods. Only after the turn of the century were the Koli given special rights to housing on the islands, and it was after this moment that a ritualized retelling of the origin story served the purpose of constructing the merchant based history of Bombay such that no other groups could make claims to housing and land other than the Koli peoples.

There are several areas of Bombay famous for their Koliwada, or Koli settlements within the city. These serve both as tourist cites for visitors to the city as well as a way to write the
authoritative history of the city into the landscape itself. Traveling throughout the city, one can encounter a Koliwada, or “Koli settlement” in Dharavi, Sion, and Mahim amongst other places. One can procure “native” crafts, fabrics, and buying fish from the Koli peoples. In the most recent attempt to upgrade and relocate Dharavi’s residents between 2005-9, it is the Koli community of Dharavi who have taken the lead in organizing resistance and negotiation of the terms of this attempted dispossession. They have argued that they have lived there for at least 450 years, and supposedly possess British documents to prove it. While that may be true, writing against this singular history is the task of the next chapter, where we will explore the many communities and forms of social life which together built Bombay in the 19th century.

61 See Ravindra Keny’s role in the battle over Dharavi’s redevelopment in the late 2000’s where he hopes “the re-development of Koliwada ... manages to respect the community’s traditional needs as well as their dependence on rent from tenants,” at “Dharavi.organic,” http://www.dharavi.org/index.php?title=C.Communities_%26_Nagars_of_Dharavi/Koliwada
Chapter Two:  
Mobility and Urbanization

This chapter follows illustrations of mobility from contiguous regions surrounding the city of Bombay, changes in relations of production and exchange, and urban settlement practices to paint a picture of the diversity of migratory trajectories, social connections, and commercial circumstances which made Bombay. It shows that experiences of mobility preceded the phase of rapid urbanization in the city of Bombay so that rather than seeing the growing city as absorbing rural migrants, we need to understand that already mobile migrants brought the city into their routes of circulation. In addition to spatial mobility, social mobility also produced the city of Bombay as an effect of dynamism in Western India. This was the case in Early Modern Asian history just as it was in India’s 19th century development. Chaudhuri and Frank have discussed the history of this mobility, and Chaudhuri is most direct when he says,

An expanding and flexible labour force able to switch occupations between agriculture and industry was to be found both in China and India...Asian history is full of examples revealing the constant movements and migrations of craftsmen from one locality to another in search of better opportunities...Migration and movements provided common remedy against natural disasters, political oppression, and shrinking economic opportunities...at a time of commercial depressions, the unemployed industrial worker turned to agricultural work such as helping with the harvest in order to earn a wage.¹

Official discourse was unable to render the migrating and flexible labor pool legible or legitimate because urban officials saw the city as an isolated social zone burdened by its own urban social problems, most notably, the problems of overcrowding and disease.

The emergence of the urban housing problem is the subject of the next chapter, but here I contextualize the “urban housing problem” within a longer temporality of mobility, and the experiences of the circular migrants. Reading city-country connections together functions here as a methodological strategy to limit the influence of official city documents on our understanding of Bombay’s everyday inhabitants. There isn’t a single argument, i.e., it isn’t the case that I can make a linear narrative about the dynamics of rural to urban migration or the forms of housing which migrants built and resided in. Instead, I try to approach as nearly as possible the diversity of lived experiences of acts of mobility and inequality. Accounting for Bombay’s growth through the 19th century requires just such a story of multiple origins, of interlinkages between country and city, and of agrarian and commercial capitalism developing together. We can think of an urban peasantry and a rural proletariat together and developing in tandem as people move across physical spaces and change social positions. The Koli origin myth avoided this messiness of multiple origins, as we saw in the first chapter. Instead, in this chapter we explore the diversity of practices which made up urban life through the decades.

There are major trends which will frame the following discussion. First, a variety of “shocks” to the region, such as the American civil war in the 1860s, the famines of the 1870s and 1880s, or the creation of new buyers in urban housing in the early 1900s, all created periods of intense urban population growth and increased urban mobility. Second, as the first decades of the 20th century progressed, most especially in the first three decades of the early 20th century, migrants and residents of Bombay became less legible as legitimate urban subjects. This was due not just to market forces, but increasing desires on the part of officials to homogenize the

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2 The first two are the subject of this chapter. The latter is not discussed in this chapter, but the creation of new buyers in housing is the subject of the fifth chapter of this dissertation.
practices of the everyday, surveil and monitor the lives of the urban inhabitants, and control the use of the city’s resources. Accordingly, a range of habitation practices emerged in the city which both reflected and produced changes in family life, occupational opportunities, and new networks of community. By looking at the long 19th century, we will see the growth of the city of Bombay as produced by and as an effect of the expanding domains of mobility of rural inhabitants and their practices of accommodation to such official changes rather than a result of urban encroachment on rural life. Particular areas within the Konkan, Karnatak, Thane, and Kolaba will be highlighted to show how the city was brought into those domains of mobility and spheres of activity of everyday migrants and workers.

We will focus on two periods of rapid change in the productive and commercial economy in this chapter alone: the cotton boom due to the civil war in America in the 1860s and the famines across Western and Southern India in the 1870s and 1880s. On first inspection, these two events should have had opposite effects on the lives of peasant migrants. The cotton boom stimulated the economy by increasing the demand for cotton production while the famine was a depressed period in the economy when the supply of grains was limited. However, both caused increases in prices by working on opposite ends of the exchange relation: the cotton boom increased demand while the famine reduced supply. The cotton boom could have followed liberalist predictions of political economy which said that everybody’s standard of living should rise with such a stimulus, but the results were predictably uneven. The increase in demand resulted in a “weak expansion” in the agrarian Deccan with more optimal growth in more responsive cotton districts, such as the Khandesh. The famine resulted in a shortage in supply and coming on the heels of the cotton boom and subsequent crash, only further depressed the
cultivator’s access to a regular livelihood. Both events worked to exacerbate inequality but in different ways.

The question of how to categorize the activities of accommodation and assimilation which everyday people – peasants, migrants, workers – undertook in response to the changes of the 18th and 19th centuries has driven some of the most contentious debates in South Asian historiography. Describing pre-colonial modes of production and the changes wrought by the transition to capitalism and empire have divided scholars in fierce debates.¹ Such debates can be thought of as divided between those who see the changes of the 18th and 19th century as only effecting the relations of exchange and those who see it as having an effect on the structure and thus mode of production. Did increased commodification and new market opportunities for products and labor have a structural effect on the social relations which produced new commodities, or did production proceed as it had done before, but now at a higher rate and with new carriers who worked longer distances? The question can be put in another way: how are we to understand the articulation of the “petty” workers’ and migrants’ lives into the relations of capital, did they merely participate in a greater quantity of exchange or was their social position embedded in a new form of articulation between producers, capitalists, and commercial men?

Urban officials who documented and managed Bombay through the 19th century could easily see and document the exchange relations which made Bombay a great commercial capital of Empire. But they were unable to see the changes in the relations of production which were spanning across the city and into the country interiors. Officials regularly deplored housing conditions in the city, complaining that rooms were crammed with people sleeping on makeshift

cots in verandahs or wherever else they could find a place to sleep. Officials documented migrants who found temporary work in the city on railways or elsewhere because of “shocks” to the system such as the cotton boom, famine, and other such events. They saw such workers as responding to changes in the exchanges of commodities, not as responding to changes in the production of commodities themselves.

For many urban labourers well into the mid-twentieth century, attachment to rural land increased as a result of increasing labour opportunities in the city, not decreased. Competitive pressures were a product of urban jobs, but the low returns on a family’s labour, the descending wage as a result of more competition in the labour market, increased the need for land in the country as a secure insurance for a family’s social reproduction and even served as an investment for those who were able to earn spare money from their labour. Thus, competition in city and country increased simultaneously as the demand for jobs and land grew in tandem. The demographic growth of Western India too played no small part in this matter. Nonetheless, city officials constructed these mobile lives as dependent on exchange networks alone and underplayed or often didn’t notice the changes in the relations of production which were causing the mobility.

This limited view or bias in understanding migrants lives is what I refer to as an “urban gaze” which was particularly strong in cities such as Bombay but also extended to a kind of commercial gaze when officials observed colonial India’s interiors. Urban observers including city officials, native elites, industrialists, and capitalists who spent the majority of their time in the city, either within the entrails of industrial neighborhoods or on the docks and ports,

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depended on labour to accomplish their commercial goals. It was primarily the commercial goals of the imperial project that undergirded the guiding principles of colonial rule and law. They were often frustrated by the limited reliability of the labour pool and yet stood to gain by increasing competition in the labour markets. Debates amongst officials hinged on whether peasants and migrants were responsive to markets. Market responsiveness indicated interconnectedness and that Indian social life could be transformed, that forms of bondage between laborers and landlords could be broken. However, practices of housing seemed to confirm that bondage still existed, that migrants were continuously dependent on the social capital of their employers to acquire residences in the city. This was not a severe problem until plague broke out at the end of century, but even before then it raised concerns.

This limited urban gaze made inequity in housing seem like a series of personal choices or a product of migrants not being true urban dwellers, i.e. not being free laborers but rather bonded to the same social networks that brought them into the city. Housing wasn’t read as a part of a market itself and thus a result endemic to the very changes some officials were themselves advocating for across the city and country. The legibility of housing is the subject of the next chapter, but here it is important to remember that housing appeared to officials like a series of choices based on village of origin, connections to landlords and employers, and sentiments informed by customs and preferences. The rest of this chapter contextualizes and situates the problem of overcrowding within the changes of the 19th century which drove the patterns of circular mobility within Western India, thus correcting for the limited urban gaze of officials and urban capitalists. Had the urban gaze been overcome, then increased competitive pressures across city and country, firmly embedded in markets of labour and commodities, would have
been seen as the cause of the slum problem during the plague. Housing would be seen as an operative market of its own, obviously connected to the competitive pressures of other commercial markets.

Routes of mobility influenced Bombay’s interiors prior to the cotton boom. While officials and native elites had been developing a limited urban gaze to consider the population’s dense settlement patterns in the southern parts of the city, processes which escaped them were occurring in the northern parts and beyond Bombay’s city limits, into the Konkan, Karnataka, Thane, Kolaba, and even further into Gujarat and Rajputana. These processes included the making of masses of people who utilized their labour wherever it would take them and who were losing land due to both policies which sought greater output from cultivation and forms of indebtedness which they depended on to earn their way and meet those expectations of cultivation.

The density within Bombay was due to that mobility. Of the entire population in the city in 1881, only 27.76% of the population was born in Bombay, less than the 31.13% born in Bombay in 1872. Migration accounted for the majority of the population: 16.32% were from Ratnagiri, 8.92% from Poona, 5.87% from Satara, and 5.86% from Cutch. Just from these four regions, which were the highest of all sending regions, came more than one-third of Bombay’s inhabitants. In 1881, when an outbreak of cholera added to the city’s troubles, it was thought to have been brought about by this mobility, especially by those from Ratnagiri. Fifty percent of those affected by cholera were from Ratnagiri, which officials thought was attributable to the “indigent condition of those attacked - the majority being poor, mostly a poor class of labourer-

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5 COCB, 1881, 61.
and defective sanitary conditions under which they live..." Of those 50% Ratnagiri-born residents who became affected by Cholera, more than three-fourths died. In 1872, there were 56,879 people in Bombay born in Ratnagiri, while in 1881 there were 126,190 people in Bombay who were born in Ratnagiri.6

The people who migrated to Bombay were embedded in a “chain of operations”7 extending from the peasantry in Bombay’s hinterlands, into the city, outwards to ports across the Ocean, to the City of London, and beyond into Africa, Middle East, and Americas. At each step of the way, changes in one location affected everyone from the smallest producer to the largest landholder, and all the merchants and transactors in between, but it didn’t affect them equally.

The monetary loans which village moneylenders gave to cultivators, ryots, were for the cultivators, a temporary source of livelihood. Such loans may have worked to keep cultivators tied to moneylenders and landlords, but seen from the point of view of the cultivator and debtor, the advances on their production in anticipation of the upcoming harvest functioned as a wage. Officials only saw in such relations increased forms of bondage and tenancy between usurers/moneylenders and farmers. Distress sales of land were cast as results of too much debt or exorbitant rates of interest which had no checks in the official government. There is no doubt that interest rates were too high. Private moneylenders could get away with exorbitant rates when there was no oversight, regulation or limits to the desperation felt by cultivators. Thus for the last few years of the 19th century, the British Crown was trying to stabilize the lending rate and monopolize and centralize banking. This not only proved difficult but it also resulted in a

6 MCRCOB, 1881, 353.
fundamental misreading of the status of seasonal migrants within the social systems engendered by enhanced penetration of capitalist relations into society.

Seasonal migrants were not awaiting urban industry to rescue them from forms of bondage. While there may have been periods of higher wages for mill work as opposed to casual labouring throughout the city, we have no evidence of how much construction workers⁸ made or how much petty tradesmen profited from their minor trades. At least up until the 1910s, mill work did not necessarily mean greater job security nor did it mean freedom from relations of patronage or bondage. Working at a machine or with one’s own hands amounted to similar choices between opportunities and constraints. There couldn't have been any industrial manufacturing machine, no matter how massive or magical in its ability to transform a simple product into something more complex, that would have impressed the circular migrant enough to make him or her (most migrants were actually male) exclusively subservient to it, or make him or her abandon his options of mobility between cities and countries. Nor could the migrant ever have faith that a machine alone would increase the standard of living. Market forces had capacities well beyond mechanization’s promises, such that mechanization in Bombay did not privilege industrial workers over their nonindustrial counterparts at the turn of the century. As far as the most dependent migrant was concerned, his livelihood was already in the form of a wage, and he paid it all almost in entirety to his employer, often the same person in the countryside as in the city. He didn't need the wage form to experience his freedom; he was exercising his freedom in a competitive labour market in his very migration to the city. Harvest season called

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⁸ Ian Kerr, “On the Move: Circulating Labour in Pre-Colonial, Colonial, and Post-Colonial India,” *International Review of Social History* 51 (2006): 85-109. Kerr discusses both the difficulty in assessing the working conditions of construction workers and the regional groups such as banjaras who were known to provide labour whenever infrastructure projects were undertaken.
him to his village while manufacturing or the commercial season called him to his home in the
city. In the village, he shared his dwelling space with his extended family, a large network of kin
relations including his wife, children, parents, etc.; in the city, he shared his dwelling with fellow
urban labourers who used their status as sojourners to enhance their income as much as they
could.

Throughout, there was differentiation amongst the peasantry, merchants, and
moneylenders which created mobile communities not only across town and country but across
the social ladder such that switching occupations was common amongst the stratifying classes.
Merchants were often usurers as well and cultivators could themselves become moneylenders.9
As one scholar of the 19th century in Western India says, “...there was scarcely a ‘merchant’ who
could not be classified as a ‘moneylender’, and vice versa.”10 Peasants were internally
differentiating into a big and small peasantry who were either dependent on loans for production
or were semi-wage labourers who hired out their labour power and may or may not have incurred
debt or bondage to work the land.11

Usury and indebtedness were common features of the production process; small peasants
often took advances in order to buy the materials necessary for cultivation. Banaji has argued
that indebtedness “functioned as a wage,” and moreover, that the advances were not simply the
buying of a commodity in advance of its production but should instead be seen as input of capital
in money form into the production process.12 Thus through forms of a wage in debt, producers

9 Guha, Agrarian Economy, 147.
10 Banaji, “Capitalist Domination and the Small Peasantry,” 1383.
were dependent on outputs of capital from merchants and moneylenders.

We find optimizing peasants\textsuperscript{13} in Western India who were mobile and were internally differentiating and stratifying through opportunities and losses. The phrase “optimizing peasant” doesn’t have to indicate success in climbing the social ladder however, many took the most optimal choices between a series of bad options while others chose poorly. Precisely these divergent outcomes led to the differentiation of the large and small peasantry throughout the 19th century. Some found opportunities where they arrived and yet others found themselves stigmatized as they took up new occupations. For example, when officials noted that increases in the lowest castes accounted for much of the increase in population between 1872 and 1881, this could not be accounted for by social reproduction and migration of low caste communities alone. Dheds and Mhars were twice as numerous in 1881 as in 1872, and Chamars, leather workers, increased three-fold.\textsuperscript{14} It is hard to imagine that such an increase in low caste population did not index the creation of new identities amongst occasionally downwardly mobile migrant communities. Those who took up the occupation of working leather in the city could come to be called Chamars for example.\textsuperscript{15} It also isn’t clear what the status of different caste groups was.

The census writer for the 1911 census of the city of Bombay, when accounting for the growth of the certain outcaste communities, said:

The Mahars, Holiyas or Dheds, who represent the untouchables under names which vary according to the locality from which they come, are third on the list with 58,000. They fall

\textsuperscript{13} This phrase is from Anand Yang, “Peasants on the Move: A Study of Internal Migration in India,” \textit{Journal of Interdisciplinary History} Vol. 10, No. 1 (Summer, 1979): 37-58.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{COCB}, 1881, 41.

\textsuperscript{15} Ramnarayan S. Rawat, \textit{Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).
into two classes, the Surati Dheds who earn a living as butlers and hamals to the European community and those from the Deccan who work as mill-hands. Both of these classes are rising superior to the position to which they have been relegated by the Code of Manu. They have increased 11,000 or 23% and are in addition materially prosperous.16

Spatial and social mobility, downwards and upwards, seemed to be the rule at least prior to the first world war. Such mobility drove the construction of the city of Bombay.

**Rural Mobility and Commercialization**

The city of Bombay sits nestled amidst a lush, fertile area on the Western coast of the Indian subcontinent known as the Konkan coast. The Konkan, along with the Karnataka, Ghats, Gujarat, and other dynamic regions on the Western Indian subcontinent are a part of the history of the city of Bombay as the city is a part of those regional histories. Suspending the claims of the authoritative history of Bombay City as an exogenous port is necessary in recovering the empirical dynamic that led to urbanization and the eventual housing of everyday people in what were called “slums” in the long run. The history of the settlement of the city must focus on the history of the peoples and follow their lives wherever it takes them. Everyday mobility, opportunism, strategies, successes, and failures all contribute to the stratified human settlements within the city’s boundaries.

Across the Bombay Presidency and throughout the long 19th century a vast diversity of rural conditions provided contexts for periods of intense agrarian dynamism. Local conditions varied so no generalization can be made about all of Western India. Except for that the rise in cash cropping and the increased access to distant markets created competitive pressures for

16 *COBC*, 1911, 33.
everyone, whether directly involved in the commercialization process or not. Numerous scholars have studied this period and the commercialization of agriculture, changes in social relations of production and commerce, and the articulation of local economies with global forces. However, connecting the city to the country through mobile migrants has been difficult.

Relying on urban records of Bombay means that we don’t pick up the story until the 1860s at the earliest, when rural cultivators begin a period of circular migration between their villages and the city, and when the first exclusively urban records of Bombay are kept. The Municipal Commissioner’s office in Bombay kept annual records beginning in 1868 and all-India census taking began with the 1864 census which included the first census of “Bombay Town and Island.” If as scholars we use only the urban records, we develop a biased view of the temporality of circular migrants lives. We are led to assume that mobility driven by landlessness and leading to urbanization must have begun in the 1860s. However, this is not true, mobility was a feature of peasant life as was landlessness before the 1860s. Nonetheless, things changed in the latter half of the 19th century in seemingly irreversible ways. It is important to situate emergence of the city within its larger spatial and temporal contexts.

In the 19th century and earlier, the “Konkan” referred to relatively flat area between the Sahyadri mountain range, also known as the Western Ghats, and the Arabian sea. Thus it was the coastal plain which received the first rainfall of the summer monsoon. Between June and October, as the southeasterly winds hit the mountains first, heavy rains drenched the fertile soil providing annual fertility. In the 19th century, irrigation techniques included man-made, small and temporary dams thrown across streams on hills by industrious cultivators during the monsoon to source the flow of water. Rice was commonly grown on moist ground while on
higher ground local coarse millets such as *ragi*, *nachni*, or *nagli* occupied cultivators as they secured themselves sustenance and livelihood. Besides during the monsoons, the climate was dry and so the soil was rarely cultivated again for a second winter harvest as was the case in other parts of India, except in Kanara which was occasionally able to export groundnut and vegetables from the winter harvest. Along the coast of the sea itself, palm trees, mango groves, and plantain orchards made some landholders particularly wealthy while commercial fishing too thrived to provide another source of livelihood.
Fig. 2.1 The Bombay Presidency with divisions in 1909.
Source: *Imperial Gazetteer* of 1909.
Even when the “town and island of Bombay” was excluded from demographic accounts of the Konkan, the Konkan region still maintained the highest density of population in the entire Bombay Presidency through the turn of the 20th century. This dense population clustered itself into numerous small towns containing ten to twenty thousand inhabitants each, and smaller communities spaced themselves out over cultivatable areas. The coasts were the most dense areas, having 1200 to 1350 people per square mile; three times the number of people could live on the coast as opposed to the inland towns and villages, which supported about 400 to 450 people per square mile. The landscape of the Konkan region exemplified a contiguous territory of urban and rural regions as well as a social continuum between townsmen and countryfolk tightly knit into social relations of production and exchange. Konkani cultivators were dependent on the rains for summer work and even when the rains came, they were prone to seek second forms of livelihood in non-harvest seasons, most especially in the second half of the 19th century. This proclivity towards supplementary work drove them into Bombay and Bombay’s industries depended on its many and expanding “hinterlands” as sources of capital and labour. The city’s emergence as a modern and populous node of human activity cannot be understood without understanding the changes within such contiguous regions.

The Karnatak was situated southwards beyond the Konkan, bordered on its north by the Krishna river and, like the Konkan, surrounded by the Arabian sea to its West traversing the Western Ghats. The Karnatak can be thought of as three distinct eco-zones which run parallel to the north-south running Sahyadri mountain range: the “Mallad,” the “Transition,” and the “Desh.” The Mallad was the eastern most part abutting the sea. It was always plagued by

\[17\] COBP, 1911, 7.
malaria, sitting deep in water logged areas from heavy monsoons which provided both abundant rice along with illness. The plague which hit Bombay in 1896 was particularly pronounced here. The Transition area between the coast and the plains grew rice along with pulses and millets and was able to support a slightly higher population density than the Mallad, concentrated to three large towns, Hubli, Belgaum, and Dharwar. If those towns were removed from the enumeration, then the Transition and Mallad were roughly the same in population density, about 320 persons to the square mile or slightly less on the coast. Then came the healthy plains of the Desh famous for its black soil. The railway ran through the Transition region because of its higher population and the railways themselves resulted in the intensifying the population density even higher.

Two other regions were directly contiguous to Bombay city. Thana to the north and Kolaba to the south. Thana had several towns with a density of 860 people per square mile while a plateau just below the Western Ghats had 461 people per square mile. The plateau and hills were well drained so people didn’t succumb to malaria. Later Kolaba and Thana remained only as names of the southern most and northern most parts of Bombay city itself, however in the 19th century, they were larger agricultural areas which included portions of the growing city.

The phenomenal growth of cities like Bombay in the 19th century was dependent on the dynamics of these adjacent regions. People on the move made the city of Bombay the most dense city across the British Empire; it was because of the connections that people made with regions beyond the formal city that life in the city was possible. In the city’s vicinities, products of all kinds were produced into more complex commodities by a hierarchy of labourers who required tools, capital, information, and ideas to sell end products to merchants and creditors. Over time Bombay became the main port city in Western India for shipping items across the oceans into
South East Asia, the South China Sea ports, the Middle East, Western Europe, and beyond into the new world. Those who sought immediate access to the waterways, waterways which earned merchants’ profits and coolies’ livelihoods, would relocate to Bombay so as to maintain control over their commercial ventures and meet new people who provided the social capital necessary to engage and create new opportunities. As the markets in things like fruit, grain, and cotton generalized, many found themselves in disadvantaged situations where their prior efforts could no longer earn them enough to buy the basic necessities of social reproduction. Thus they were compelled to enter the vast chains of operations developing between London, Aden, Bombay, and Ratnagiri for example, amongst other places. Some entered such chains of operations with hopes of rising up the social ladder while others were merely maintaining their social positions. Yet many, instead, experienced downward mobility and bare sustenance as their reward.

In the Konkan, the district called Ratnagiri lay exactly on the coast, today in the Southwestern part of Maharashtra. Ratnagiri and Kolaba were the main sending regions to Bombay city. Ratnagiri migrants were also well represented in Karachi. Many from Ratnagiri were lascars or sailors who sent remittances home. Officials thought of the Konkan post offices as bustling money centers because of these remittances. Others were wage earners who joined mills and offices and either settled in Bombay or migrated circularly and seasonally.\textsuperscript{18}

Prior to the 1850s producers in the Deccan experienced a period of constant crisis and a prolonged depression. Even in the years of good harvest, since there were no railways or assured pathways to reach distant markets, a good harvest season would mean that local markets were glutted with the product. Thus prices would fall and cultivators would be stuck with the problem

\textsuperscript{18} This discussion from COBP, 1911.
of plenty. They neither went hungry nor did they experience windfall profits in such circumstances. In Ahmednagar between the years 1821-1847, every two years there was a poor harvest while other years were unusually good. Regardless of the outcome, the monetary value of the assessment of the land been worked out by East India Company collectors prior to the new prices. Therefore, even in years of good harvest, prices would fall and the ryots had much more grain taken from their stores. From 1822 onwards, there was a longterm trend of downward prices in general which furthered the prolonged crisis amongst the ryots.\textsuperscript{19} Upon each annual harvest, ryots had to sell their goods in the local market, recover the cash value, and pay some fixed portion of it to local revenue collectors. Thus if prices fluctuated upwards then the ryt needed a smaller harvest to maintain his right to land, but if prices fluctuated downwards then more cash crops would have be sold off in order to meet the terms of the assessment.

Officials wanted evidence of market responsiveness. They wanted to see that cultivators were moving beyond subsistence and beyond acts of basic social reproduction. Officials wanted to see that they were achieving the full value of their land and that cultivators were themselves fully productive as market actors. After the 1850s more land was brought into cultivation and transport systems were created such that Ahmednagar came out of this period of prolonged depression and crisis.\textsuperscript{20} The years 1852-53 were called the “turning of the tide” by a British

\textsuperscript{19} There are numerous explanations for this downward trend between 1820-1850. Gluts produced by crude transport mechanisms is the argument provided by Banaji, “Capitalist Domination and the Small Peasantry,” 1377. Seeing transportation as an insufficient explanation, Guha adds burdensome taxation in Guha, Agrarian Economy, 17-30. The East India Company’s standardization of the silver rupee in the 1820s is offered as an explanation for the drop in prices over the next 30 years in David Ludden, An Agrarian History of South Asia (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1999), 167.

\textsuperscript{20} Sumit Guha sees the expansion after the 1860s not as due to better transport mechanisms but because of a reduction in the land tax which combined with the growing population led to more acreage of cultivation. The quality of the new lands under cultivation was not always good which is why overall agrarian production could not grow at the same high rate throughout the late 19th century. The most plausible explanation seems to me that both the railways and lower taxes combined to expand cultivation after the 1850s. See Guha, Agrarian Economy, 60-83.
official, G. Wingate.\textsuperscript{21} Market responsiveness was a sign that Company policy was working, but the results were expectedly uneven. Some cultivators responded to the rise in price of cotton through the 19th century by shifting cultivation from local grains to cotton while others continued producing local grains to feed the growing population in the city of Bombay.

Khandesh district was a cotton producer and so as cotton demand steadily increased throughout the 19th century, Khandesh became a wealthy district, although even there the results were uneven. G. Wingate said of Khandesh that, “The peasantry are becoming comparatively wealthy, independent, and enterprising.”\textsuperscript{22}

It is important not to focus exclusively on international trade but also see how regional markets changed cultivators’ lives. Prior to the American civil war of 1864 and the resultant cotton boom in Bombay’s economy, there were connections across the oceans due to the market in cotton:

Well before the cotton boom, every poor cotton harvest in America, e.g. in 1836, 1838, 1845, 1846, 1849, had revived and stimulated the interest of British capitalists in an Indian cotton supply. After 1848, the Manchester Chamber of Commerce began a systematic and concerted campaign to secure Government interest in supply from India. ... By 1861 the programme [sic] of the Cotton Supply Association included as its major objectives the conversion of land into a commodity, the establishment of effctual courts of law with the power to enforce contracts, and massive State expenditure in public works that would link the cotton districts to the port of Bombay.\textsuperscript{23}

Whereas cotton connected areas across oceans, regional dynamics in various grains connected the port of Bombay city to inland cultivators. Thus, even the districts which weren’t producing cotton were responsive to market demands. These included Poona, Sholapur, Satara and parts of Ahmednagar which continued to produce grain which fed the growing populations in small and

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 1400.
large urban centers including Bombay and Poona.\textsuperscript{24} Regional overland flows were just as important as flows across oceans in the commercialization of Western India.

Money formed the connecting link between these flows; it connected burgeoning small and large towns with the countryside and with distant ports and those distant countrysides. Before the cotton boom of the 1860s, markets was having an effect on the average cultivator’s life throughout Western India. By the end of the 19th century, approximately one-half of Khandesh’s acreage was devoted to commercial crops but Khandesh was on the high end of commercialization. Nasik had one-third of its region devoted to commercial cultivation. In the Deccan as a whole, about one-quarter to one-third of the cultivated soil was used for distant markets, either regional or global.\textsuperscript{25}

The railway expansion and improvement of roads in the latter half of the 19th century, mainly from Bombay outwards, led to price convergences across regions even if they started out unevenly. Especially through the cotton boom of the 1860s to the famine of the 1870s, prices converged across local markets much more intensely. As a result, small villages grew to bigger towns throughout the Deccan because they became commercial \textit{entrepôts} of their own connecting Bombay city’s major ports to the agrarian heartlands of Western India. As a scholar of this region writes,

\begin{quote}
The population of such towns and villages - Kharda, Vambhori, Karad, Tasgaon, Sowda, Faizpur, Lasalgaon, etc. - would tend to vary between 5,000 and 10,000 persons, and their ‘mercantile’ sector to account generally for anywhere between four and ten percent of these populations. It is these smaller centres that mediated the local, inter-district and external trade of the Deccan. The monied capitals, whose intervention in this trade was absolutely decisive
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 1377.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 1379.
resided mainly in such centres, connecting links between the larger capitals of the major local wholesale market and the taluka peasantry.26

These “monied capitals” formed nodes linking producers and consumers across regions. The rising population density of the city of Bombay was only one part of a widening trend as cultivators became small merchants of their own. The differentiation of the peasantry led to such monied capitals across the whole region.

It was in this moneyed nexus and commercial context which extended well beyond the city’s boundaries that urban officials developed and utilized an urban gaze to describe the conditions within the city of Bombay, as limited as that gaze was. They were unable to see that a commercial revolution in agrarian commodities was the cause of Bombay’s growth and that the penetration of markets meant that the already mobile peasantry would eventually bring the city into its orbits and routes of mobility and migration. The cotton boom of the 1860s and the famine of the 1870s caused major changes to Bombay’s urban life; in both periods the city experienced large influxes of population.

**Cotton Boom of 1860s**

What was perceived as overcrowding and too much density in the city of Bombay from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century was in fact experienced by the cohabiting dwellers as the actualization of new opportunities, a strategy for survival, or a voluntary and even ingenious practice of thrift geared towards social mobility. For some people this ingenuity worked to raise their status in society, garnering them new opportunities for the future. While yet for others practices of thrift turned into perpetual states of abjection such that they were

26 Ibid., 1379-80.
continuously excluded from the widening spheres of commercial life centered on Bombay. Even though over time their worlds became smaller and smaller, the period beginning in the 1860s began a period of intense circular migration throughout the Bombay Presidency and beyond between cities, small towns, and diverse agrarian landscapes. “Optimizing peasants,” the apt phrase coined by Anand Yang in his study of Northeast India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, negotiated their ambitions for climbing the social ladder.27

How can we distinguish between these two dissonant experiences? On the one hand, officials who wrote the documents about the city, everyone from health officers to census takers to workers for the Municipality, upon entering buildings and rooms found numerous people huddled together into tight spaces sharing kitchens or outhouses and claiming any spot of ground to sleep on overnight. Dr. Leith, the sanitation officer who reported on the state of overcrowding in the city in the census of 1864 said,

“In a lane 9ft. wide ‘the houses on each side were of two or of three floors, and the various rooms were densely peopled, and the floors of the verandahs were fully occupied, while to eke out the accommodation in some of the verandahs there were charpaee or cots slung up and screened with old matting to form a second tier of sleeping places for labourers that were employed in the day time at the Railway terminus or elsewhere.”28

Dr. Leith did not refer to these places as homes but rather “sleeping places.” That name was apt as people, often working age men, just used the location to sleep at night. There were no domestic activities associated with the places. It wasn’t a place to retreat from the external world, it wasn’t a place where one raised children or kept a family, nor was it a place of privacy, removed from the public sphere. But the name “sleeping places” also belied official attitudes

27 Yang, “Peasants on the Move.”

28 COBC, 1872, 1
towards the native migrants’ lack of settled lifestyles. Officials had an anxiety about where to place people, how to classify them, how to account for and manage the intense mobility of the labouring classes, and this was expressed as a worry over the overcrowding in houses. It wasn’t that there were too many people in the city, rather there weren’t enough houses to create an acceptable person-to-house ratio. The use of the verb “eke” expressed that anxiety.

The rise in price of cotton upon the onset of the American civil war precipitated dramatic changes in the city and country. The commercialization of crops in Bombay’s interiors meant that more and more people entered markets of exchange in labour and goods, it also meant that the number of moneylenders operative in speculation tactics across the region increased. Expansion of cultivation in the agrarian economy was what Sumit Guha has called a “weak expansion,” largely due to stagnant wages and the increased role of moneylenders, themselves a growing group:

Another feature of the boom years was the large increase in the number of moneylenders....The civil war boom ‘poured money into the country to seek investment ... [and] raised to an extravagant pitch the value of agricultural securities’. In the Hubli taluka of Dharwar ‘Rs. 100 per acre was given for planted cotton fields by dealers backed by speculators from Bombay.’¹²⁹

Even in the Khandesh district, the otherwise prosperous cotton district, officials noted that cultivators had not gained from the rise in cotton prices, only native merchants and moneylenders had.³⁰

It was a boom time urban economy too, but the total drama of the cotton boom has to be placed in longer contexts. The British demand for cotton steadily increased between 1820 and

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²⁹ Bombay Government Series 148, page 104 as cited in Guha, Agrarian Economy, 76.

³⁰ Guha, Agrarian Economy, 71.
1850 and until the civil war, the American south provided most of that supply. By the 1850s India had carved out its share, providing 20% of the British demand in cotton. Upon the civil war’s onset, India provided 46%, but once the civil war ended America returned to supplying 54% and India’s share reduced to 25% for English industry. This boom and bust of India’s cotton fortunes created particular social conditions within the city of Bombay. Only some portion of these people were able to benefit from the gains made.

The creation of a “second tier of sleeping places” which alarmed Dr. Leith was in fact a result of a very pertinent and apt calculation on the part of the inhabitants. Mobile cultivators were in the city to work for a season. Some had done this every year while others were newcomers to the routes of mobility, taking advantage of a period of intense growth in Bombay’s cotton industries. This work was going to supplement their livelihood for the year. They had left their families in the villages from which they came and they spent the vast majority of their waking days working in either the numerous small offices throughout the city, as porters or coolies, as domestic help, as railway workers or millhands, or as petty vendors of foodstuffs and other everyday articles. They would be taking their earnings back to their village homes in order to add to their family’s income for the season. Thus, the more they could save the better off they would be. There was no need to spend more on housing than absolutely necessary and since they were out of the house all day, all they needed was a place to sleep at night.

Social benefits too, could be gained from the decision to sling up many charpaees, four-legged cots, in single rooms. Cohabiting created networks of information and community, information which could be used to find the best-compensating opportunities for work and a

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community which could be deployed to send and receive messages from families in rural communities. People from the same village tended to cohabit in the same urban dwelling spaces, making urban neighborhoods with communities from common places of origin. There would have been no reason to live in isolated or even less dense rooms as doing so would have excluded the inhabitant from the necessary information to stake out a livelihood. In fact, less dense housing would have been a disadvantage for workers.

Census writers on the city had limited access to the circular migrants’ lives seeing them exclusively in their capacity in the city. In the city, they were documented as petty movers of goods and their labour became the necessary condition to intensifying the circulation of commodities such as cottons and grains. Their subjectivity or agency was relegated to the capacity to respond and react to bursts of economic activity stimulated by events elsewhere. The Indian cotton boom of the 1860s in response to the American civil war was one such stimulus which propelled cultivators and coolies into reactive action. That “second tier of sleeping places” which Dr. Leith spoke of was at best a crude technological apparatus by which everyday people appropriated the momentary gains of the cotton business’ boom into their lives.

Anxiety over mobility and the desire to have a sedentary population on the part of officials colored the way these urban resident’s lives were read. The migrants were thought of as undomesticated in every sense of the word. The migrant community was mostly masculine, didn’t make homes in Bombay, didn’t raise and support families, nor did they shed rural forms of kinship in their associations and become anonymous and thus “urbane” in their dispositions.

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32 A similar process in Shanghai was also the result of economic growth in the 19th century, not a vestige of traditional forms of organization. Native-place associations, huiguan, were an important part of urban communities and were central to the urban modernization of China, contrary to Weberian typologies of modern city formation. See, Bryna Goodman, Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).
These issues led to officials thinking of Bombay as a city without homes, as a place of temporary sojourn which had not yet been settled.

The enumeration of this unsettled urban population was so important that the Municipal Commissioner ordered a trial census in 1868.\(^{33}\) The native population, from whom the stock of enumerators would be drawn, needed to be trained and accustomed to the process of census taking and had to learn the boundaries within their neighborhoods. The Commissioner also renumbered all the houses in Bombay city, dividing the area into “beats” to which both the Police and Municipal officials were assigned. However, he soon learned that the income for the Municipal office was too low to adopt his ambitious scheme. The town was divided into beats, however the renumbering of houses had to be removed from the plan.\(^{34}\) The superintendent from the previous census was placed in charge of the census and compensated at the rate of Rs. 12,000 for the entire census for the city.

Census operations in the city contributed to the making of an urban gaze in which objective and even quantitative measures could stand in for a holistic understanding of social life within the space. Having printed an English, Marathi, and Gujarati set of directions for the census forms was an acknowledgement of the diversity present in the city,\(^{35}\) but this didn’t indicate an awareness of the various ways in which migrants made their lives. This census was more detailed than the last, but from the changes made to this one, it was clear officials were most interested in what we might now call the urban landscape, or the use of the land than in actually achieving some intimate knowledge of the nature of the inhabitants.

\(^{33}\) \textit{COBC}, 1872, 2.

\(^{34}\) \textit{COBC}, 1872, 3.

\(^{35}\) \textit{COBC}, 1872, 4.
The newer census collected information for sanitary purposes. It included the number of streets in the city, the population quantity in them, the number of houses in each street, and the number of gardens themselves divided into decorative or agricultural kinds. They also distinguished housing types by the type of roof on each house; these were divided into tiles, thatch, metal or terrace. They also provided the number of floors per house and from where each got its water.

Everyone involved were being taught the urban gaze. Enumerating life in the city was a project undertaken by officials and natives who were trained to take their own census reports. One police sepoy was assigned to each of the 689 “beats” which were marked in the city by marking the nearest house to a boundary. Each sepoy was carefully trained and developed a great knowledge of their own beat and its boundaries. A permanent enumerator familiarized himself with his beat, distributed the forms, and was duly employed for 10 days prior to the day of the census. These men were paid Rs. 1 per day and if possible, employed in the beat in which they resided. Detailed instructions were also provided for the operation of the census which specified what enumerators were to do on the day of the census and what kind of information they were going to collect.\textsuperscript{36} Each beat would be divided into two districts on the day of the census and an assistant enumerator assigned to one of the districts. The head of each house was to be the one to answer the questions pertaining to the decrease or increase of the size of each family and household so that only proper families, those with one male head of the household, could adequately participate in the census.

The homeless population required other measures for its enumeration; specific

\textsuperscript{36} COBC, 1872, 6.
instructions were provided for the population who were “houseless.”"\textsuperscript{37} Enumerators were to wait until after 8pm and count those houseless persons found wandering the streets or residing in \textit{dharamshalas}, resting houses, within the beat in which they are found. Enumerators were given blank census forms in anticipation of such findings. The idea was to get a snapshot on the night of the census of the make up of the local population. Only if someone was traveling out of their house for the one night of the census were they to be included in the forms, otherwise those family members departed to other locations at the time of the census would not be included in the city population, they would be counted where they were visiting. This was the point of having the census be on one day throughout the British Indian Empire.

A \textit{battakee} was beat around town with to announce the census to the population. Also, public papers announced it, native language notices were also distributed, and native gentlemen of all classes were recruited to dispel fears about the census, ships were also called back in to dock on the day of the census. The \textit{Government Gazette} of Feb 17th instructed that all offices were to be closed from the 20th to the 22nd, and 109 Municipal employees were put into census duties. A total of 1,479 people were engaged in conducting the census on the last 3 days. census writers noted “the great order everywhere” as “remarkable,” noting that people

\begin{quote}
“seemed anxious to assist the Sirkar, and came forward voluntarily to deliver up their Householders’ Schedules. Not the slightest opposition was offered to any person engaged in taking the census by any one, and the work was completed for the night in some districts by 9pm, in all by 10pm, when the houses were closed.”\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

This may have been the only census in which opposition wasn’t felt in the city. Later censuses

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{COBC}, 1872, 7.

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{COBC}, 1872, 8.
would be more fraught with resistance.

The quantitative assessment of the city’s population was useful in comparing it with London or Calcutta. On average, each beat had 43.09 houses, including inhabited outhouses, in which 170.47 families consisting of 901.96 persons resided. In a section called “the Population” the actual numbers of people and classifications of the population were offered. The total population was 644,405 people, which was a reduction of 172,157 people. There had been a 21% decrease in the city’s population from 1864 to 1872. This was reflective of the boom and bust of the cotton economy. Greater than average decreases in population were attributable to Bhatias, non-Brahman Hindus and “Negro-Africans” fleeing the city the most. Less than average decreases in population were attributable to Chinese, Europeans/Americans/Australians, Jews, Parsis, Muslims, Hindu Outcastes by which was meant Hindu Low Castes, and Brahmans remaining in the city. Basically, some combination of labourers and merchants left the city most noticeably.

Even after the decline upon the completion of the Civil War in America however, Bombay was still one and a half times as populous as Calcutta, which had 447,600 people, and even more populous than Madras which had 397,552 people. Bombay was the second largest city in the British Empire, behind only London which had between 2 and 3 million people. Census writers had nothing but praise for the fast growing city, writing:

...from the intelligence, loyalty, and enterprise of its inhabitants, from the manifest advantages of its magnificent harbor, from its proximity to Europe, from its noble public

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39 COBC, 1872, 9.

40 COBC, 1872, 10.

41 London’s Historical Population: http://www.londononline.co.uk/factfile/historical/
buildings, which we owe to the forethought and determination of our late Governor, Sir Bartle Frere, and from its salubrity of climate, this great City is fast becoming fitted to assume its proper place as the Capital of India.\textsuperscript{42}

There were particular qualities to the city with regards to its demographic patterns that made it remarkable for officials. The overwhelmingly inhabitants and particular forms of land use set it apart from London as early as the latter half of the 19th century.

\textit{Gender}

Bombay was a masculine city and would remain this way for a long time. More than 62\% of the population were males and less than 38\% female. The male to female ratio had narrowed since 1864 but still favored male migrants. One explanation was that the Harbour population consisting of dockworkers, coolies, fueling servicemen, assistants to merchants of all kinds, and shipmen, were overwhelmingly male. Bombay always had a separate section of the “Harbour” population, i.e. those people on vessels either working for the Royal Navy, Bombay Marine and commercial operations called “merchant steamers” or what were called “native craft, such as khotias, patimars, bugloes, and puraos.” There were 1,254 vessels in this latter category in which there were 11,827 male and 31 females. Half of the harbour population was in this “native craft” category which was almost entirely male; in 1871, there were 22,860 males and 93 females present. Not even half a percent of the total harbour population were female.

But if one removed the Harbour population from the total city census the ratio of male to female narrowed to 154 males for every 100 females, instead of the 163 males to every 100 females. The absence of women indicated that men had left their families behind in search of

\textsuperscript{42} COBC, 1872, 10.
work and that women did not experience the city as a place to live. Census officials doubted
whether certain communities had concealed the number of women in their families, but it wasn’t
clear why they would have done this.\textsuperscript{43} Using mortuary tables and ratio of male deaths to female
deaths, census writers calculated that there should have been 48,000 more females but that
census takers were being lied to about the number of women in a household. This is difficult to
verify but it probably says more about official paranoia. All of this created anxiety amongst
officials because they could neither explain the lopsided gendered demographic of Bombay’s
dwellers nor were they being “let in” on the actual dynamics of family life.

It was especially difficult after the famines of the 1870s to ascertain the status of women
as the families were very timid about giving out such information. People had the option of
leaving out the names of the females but just providing the number of how many there were in
each household. Women of upper castes were especially hesitant to state their occupations even
if it was a legitimate occupation. Working at all indicated impoverished conditions and out of the
fear of the stigma of necessity, perhaps entire households were embarrassed to admit when
“their” women worked. Being reduced to being a labourer was likely to have been a source of
shame for some families.\textsuperscript{44}

The migrating population between city and country was thus called the “fluctuating
element of which our community is composed” and it warranted the need for another census
during the monsoon as well as during the winter.\textsuperscript{45} To guess the true population of the city
officials felt they should derive the average of the two rates and get the mean population for the

\textsuperscript{43} COBC, 1872, 11.

\textsuperscript{44} COBC, 1881, 22.

\textsuperscript{45} COBC, 1872, 11.
year. This was to reduce the errors in guessing the true population of the city and provide a more objective measure. The fluctuating population couldn’t be understood without a holistic picture of the way in which Bombay was integrated into rural life but that perspective of the migrants was unavailable to city and census officials. Instead a mere average would have to suffice to satisfy the urban gaze which was mainly concerned to know the number of people using the urban land per year.

Deploying gendered views of a home in opposition to a place of work allowed officials to read the males in the city as proof that the city was not becoming a home. The ratio of male to female in each community became an indication of the level of permanence of each community in the city. Women’s migration would have been indicative of the creation of homes of permanent residence, family life within the city, and forms of social reproduction spanning a lifetime beyond the working age. But neither was that Bombay’s reality nor did such a gendered view of the “home” convey the reality of circular migrants lives.

The highest ratio of men to women were amongst the Chinese at 883.87 men to every 100 women and Buddhists and Jains, at 413.27 men to every 100 women, while the lowest was amongst Parsis, Jews, and Eurasians, spanning between 106-110 men for every 100 women. Parsis, Jews, and Eurasians made up the major merchant communities and the Parsis in particular had been living in Bombay since the 18th century in large palatial mansions, so it was not surprising that their gender statistics indicated their permanence in the city. Everyone else was somewhere in between the average, which in Bombay was 163.35 men to every 100 women. The male to female ratio was much smaller among those born in the city. 31% of Bombay’s inhabitants were born in the city and it was expected that as this number grew the city was
becoming more permanent, and a fixed feature of the social landscape of Western India.\textsuperscript{46} Census writers noted this male-female ratio as being the exact opposite of what was in England, mostly attributed to men being “on the Continent, in the Colonies, or in foreign lands.” Thus, in England in the census of 1871, women outnumbered men, there being 94,900 men for every 100K women. This was an important difference in the way the urban gaze developed.

The types of jobs in the city were also counted revealing differences across gender and age groups. Men outnumbered women in attaining work in the city. Occupations were divided into seven classes: professional, domestic, commercial, agricultural & pastoral, industrial, indefinite, and miscellaneous. The most striking thing about this classification is that 80\% of women were occupied as “miscellaneous” and this was the category surpassing all others.\textsuperscript{47} The most likely explanation for this is not that women started working in the 1870s or 80s, but that they had been working all along, only now men were pulled out of “miscellaneous” jobs into other jobs as the city came to offer such opportunities. 51.04\% of the total population belonged to the “miscellaneous” category, of which 62.75\% were females, and 51.97\% were children. Further analysis revealed that almost half (40.82\%) of the females classified as miscellaneous were children. Children made up more than half (70.77) of the men classified as miscellaneous. Descriptions of what types of jobs count in each class were provided. Selling fish was done mostly by women, corroborating the notion that the Koli peoples had women doing the majority of the commercial work in the fishing industry. Finally, due to the increase in building activity in the decade, the numbers of wood and timber merchants increased.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{46} COBC, 1872, 12.
\textsuperscript{47} COBC, 1872, 66.
\textsuperscript{48} COBC, 1872, 70-71.
The age distribution of Bombay’s residents also said a lot about the dynamics of the city and the kind of urban gaze which was developing. Approximately 9.4% of Bombay’s inhabitants were children whom officials had a particular interest in since children were seen as most vulnerable to insanitary conditions of the city. 26.23% of Bombay was made up of people between ages 20 & 30 and in this category men were twice as populous as women. This was the peak working age. This gap between men and women at this age grew with the next census, men outnumbering women by 133.6%. Once this peak working age has passed however, the ratio of men to women narrowed such that after age 70, women actually outnumbered men in the city by 8 more women than men out of every 100 of the population.

A very interesting table was provided which compared the age distribution of the population in England versus Bombay, and it also singled out the Parsis and Jews of Bombay to show that they were more like the population of England. In general, the table confirmed what was known, that in Bombay, those of working age exceeded the rest of the population to a greater degree than in England, indicating once again that Bombay was less of a home. It would have been more useful, however, to compare those numbers with that of London rather than England as a whole to see whether urbanization was in fact “temporary” by these standards in all major cities.49

Thus, as Louis Wirth’s was developing the notion asserted in his famous “Urbanism as a Way of Life” which spoke of cities as permanent spaces,50 the dominance of men in colonial cities such as Bombay made them seem like transitory entities, born of bouts of economic growth in certain periods which were temporary and fleeting and not indicative of structural

49 COBC, 1872, 16.

transformations of social life in Western India. This is exactly what the census writer said:

Bombay must therefore be considered as a place of only temporary sojourn to a majority of its inhabitants, who are attracted to it from its position as a great emporium of trade and as the gate of India from the West, but who in a very large proportion do not bring their wives and families with them.\textsuperscript{51}

The census writers themselves thought of the absence of women as a sign that the city was impermanent. Episodes of intense growth, such as that of the civil war in America cast Bombay as a place responding to changes elsewhere and its migrants as being pushed and pulled by conditions in the United States or Europe. There is no doubt this was true, migrants did respond to changes elsewhere, but their responses should have been indicative of their integration into world markets, these weren’t signs that Bombay was left out or behind.

In hindsight we know that the city was not temporary and the city would long outlive economic growth periods. Migrants too, however, must have experienced their time in the city as temporary given that they didn’t move their whole families into the city, and maintained families in their villages. But it is possible too that villages were no more homes than urban dwellings. Migrants had to have maintained the vast social networks that would have been needed to conduct their lives seasonally both in the city and in the country. They would have had to maintain ties to landed people in the country, continue forms of servitude, relations of indebtedness and bondage which would keep them employed and taken care of. They would have to have bonds of trust such that they could leave families behind. Furthermore, it is likely that women were kept in charge of households and household based economies, so that women actually had more familial power in the rural spaces and likely made collective decisions to send

\textsuperscript{51} COBC, 1872, 13.
the working age men of their families into the city to supplement incomes and secure adequate livelihoods for their families.

The polarity between temporary and permanent settlements is very important to understanding the development of the discourse of urban modernity, which eventually comes to distinguish central cities from peripheral cities. Louis Wirth was not alone in his conception of cities as permanent spaces. The mobility between the city and surrounding villages always perplexed census writers. People couldn’t decide whether seasonal migrants should be counted in the city census or in the village censuses, and how to account for their mobility. This also made it hard to classify people as urban inhabitants or sojourners. This mobility also assisted in forming the view in the official’s minds that India was a place of villages and not of cities. People seemed to be fundamentally or essentially from such and such village, and only temporarily residing in the city. An extreme expression of this view was accomplished by citing a Horace poem in the 1872 census which expressed the writer’s notion that agricultural work on ancestral land was primitive, pristine, and pure, and thus villagers were happier than their urban counterparts. Such romantic views of rural life were a part of the urban gaze.

In the winters an influx of people from villages in the Deccan, Kutch, Kathiawar, Colaba, Ratnagiri, Malwan, Goa and the Coast come to the city in search of work. Both warehouses and the wharves of the city had plenty of work to offer during the winter season. Just before the monsoon the seasonal migrants returned to their villages to cultivate the land. This mobility and migration was the reality of social life all across Western India.
Land Use

Land use was the main concern of officials and this concern drove their data collection efforts both in urban and rural contexts. Even the language of estimation, the kinds of tenures used to distribute lands, and the tools for and concerns over population density showed how the same indicators were being used to assess the population across city and country. Especially to calculate the density of the population of Bombay, officials required estimating the area which was always in flux due to ongoing reclamations of the sea. In the 1864 census the area had been 18.62 square miles, but now the area was said to be above 22 sq. miles due to reclamations. This was the way in which more space was being carved out even though it wasn’t necessary in the 1860s. There was plenty of land just north of Bombay, in the “rural and suburban” districts, which could have been used but the need to live near the ports created incentives to reclaim land in the southern parts of the island. Interestingly, the land was also divided up into what kind of land tenure existed throughout Bombay & Colaba Islands. “Old Salt and New Salt Battty Ground” made up most of the land, second was Government grounds, and third was land under “Pension and Tax.” Following this was “Sundry items such as roads, tanks, waste lands, and reclamations.” Government Tocca and Foras Land was then next, followed by Quit and Ground Rent, then Inam tenures, and then Government resumed land. A separate table showed that 43,48,918 square yards was under reclamation, equalling 898.5 acres or more than 43 lakh square yards. Various companies were involved in the reclamation projects, whose names were also provided.\(^52\) The companies who reclaimed land made money in the process, receiving exclusive contracts to make inhabitable land on coastal zones. They no doubt employed

\(^52\) *COBC, 1872, 16-17.*
numerous labourers and steady hands in the process, only further increasing the demand for labour in the city.

Overcrowding within Bombay was a constant concern of officials who provided numerical data comparing both person to an acre and persons to a housing unit. These were then compared to equivalent numbers for London and England. For our purposes, the important comparison is between London and Bombay. London had 41.69 persons to an acre while Bombay had 52.14 persons to an acre. So even though London’s population was greater than Bombay’s, Bombay was already more densely inhabited. While this difference was not overwhelming, what concerned officials was not this average of persons to an acre, but the particular localities which had grown to such an extent that those particular densities were ten times the average. For example, in the “B Division” of Bombay island there were 522.55 persons to an acre, while in the “C Division” there were 357.21 persons to an acre. This was further broken down into sections where for example, in Chuckla there were 763.19 persons to an acre, and in Kumbarwada there were 634.19 persons to an acre. To provide an image of the stark contrast in density in Bombay itself, consider that in Chuckla, the densest part of Bombay just ahead of Kumbarwada, there was 6.34 sq yds for each person while in the Southern part of the Fort, the main commercial and government district, there were 219.73 sq yds for each person. The merchant communities were more likely to settle in the Fort area, including wealthy capitalists and industrialists who lived close to British operations. In Kumbharwada and Chuckla in contrast, were where the large populations of the city’s labourers resided.

Both in London and in Bombay the numbers would have been different if the census was taken during the day time. Both cities also had an unequal distribution of population, with people
collecting in certain locales of the cities while leaving others sparsely populated. In the 1870s, Parell and Mahalaxmi were considered suburban districts, and they had only 9.74 and 7.75 persons to an acre respectively.

This revealed that urban settlement, just like human settlement in general, had a social component and was not driven by natural abundance of land alone. So open land was not necessarily best for human habitation, it meant that people would not reduce their densely crowded conditions without other reasons for doing so. This was an aspect of human settlement that officials didn’t understand, it was a notion totally excluded from the urban gaze. People chose to live where they were close to work, close to people they knew, or in places that seemed familiar because of stories they had heard about the location, not because they wanted the most land for themselves. Access to work was more important than the maximizing of land.

Labourers and workers crowded themselves together in the neighborhood “Dongree” to save on rent and then once they had enough they moved out throughout the city. Census writers were reminded of Scotland by these conditions and quoted the Scotland report of 1861:

what has been said of Scotland may with equal truth be applied to Bombay, that families instead of living on earth in pure air with the sky over their dwellings, in many instances prefer lying stratum over stratum in flats opening into a common staircase, ‘a continuation of the street’ as it has been called, which receives the organic emanations of the families on each floor.

That housing was often a continuation of the street indicated the failure of “the street” to come into focus as a public space distinct from the private residences or shops. The line between living

53 COBC, 1872, 18.
54 COBC, 1872, 19.
in and interacting with the city was not easily distinguishable from each other. It is interesting that this was said of both Scotland and of Bombay, both suppliers of labour within the vast chain of operations which made up the British Empire. This was importantly not said of England. England’s census of 1871 provided a history of persons to a house as follows: in 1811 there were 5.45 p/h, and density in housing actually reduced steadily and slowly down to 4.98 persons per house in 1871. In London there were 7.8 persons to a house while in 1871 there were 7.78 persons to a house.

In London and throughout England, the density of people occupying houses actually remained at approximately the same density throughout this period, while in Bombay it was steadily increasing. Furthermore, officials were concerned more with this type of “overcrowding,” i.e. many people residing in one dwelling space. Thus officials construed the problem as one of there being too few houses in Bombay. Either building activity was much less in Bombay than in London or people preferred to live in joint families and joint networks, whereas in London they didn’t. Officials confused their anxieties about overcrowding on land and overcrowding in housing with their general cultural anxieties about the native population. There was the question of the burden on limited natural resources and fear of disease, but there were also cultural anxieties about difference which were mapped on to their descriptions of Bombay’s housing conditions. They once even said that from “a sanitary point of view the City requires a new Town to be built to prevent this excessive over-crowding.”

In the concluding remarks of the census report it was said that any error was probably an underestimation of the population, not an overestimation. For future census reports, it was

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55 COBC, 1872, 19.
56 COBC, 1872, 74.
suggested that the police be involved and leaders from the varying native communities be brought into the workings of the census so as to ease the feelings and prejudices of the native population about the census. Such efforts would extend the urban gaze to new sections of the urban population, generalizing the assumptions of such quantitative methods of understanding city life.

The social *mileu* in which the natural disaster of the droughts of the 1870s occurred exacerbated and left unmitigated any scarcity which resulted from the failed rains. Already expanding cultivation prior to the famines had meant low quality lands were brought into cultivation by declining quality of cattle, “so that output would not have increased as much as cultivated area, which increased only somewhat faster than the population.”57 Moneylenders increased their hold over producers who were often short term borrowers, taking advances to buy the supplies to cultivate the land as they waited for the monsoons to arrive. Owing their landholding patrons varying sums, producers would borrow in advance of harvest expecting to recover these advances when the rains came. When the rains failed, neither patrons nor moneylenders could be kept from increasing their hold over the producers lives.58 This increased hold ranged from more burdensome bonds of tenancy or entire dispossession. Both those dispossessed and tied through intense bondage to patrons and moneylenders migrated to the city in search of work and relief from starvation.

Once in the city, migrants were subject to the intense competition for work, housing, and new forms of urban patronage and work. Unfortunately, the timing of this mass urban migration


in the 1870s coincided with the post Civil War slump in the industrial economy in Bombay City. Thus, competition was not only stiff, but global demand for cotton was being met by the reinvigorated American producers. The 1860s witnessed the quick boom and bust in the cotton industry out of Bombay city but the correction to the market was worse than the stimulus. Widespread speculation in response to the boom raised private profits temporarily but as in any crisis, also caused such inflated and speculative values and so much overproduction that ultimately the excess supply led to a glut and monetary crash; the Bank of Bombay in 1866 collapsed. \(^{59}\) It was in this context that the famines occurred.

### Hunger and Famine

The census of 1881 came on the heels of what may have been the worst famine in Western India’s history. The famines of the 1870s, most pronounced between 1877 - 1879, depopulated much of the rural landscape. There were both natural and social causes to the famines and the early development aims of the colonial state put peasants in particularly vulnerable positions. \(^{60}\) The rains did fail in many key producing regions resulting in a lower supply of grains causing hoarding and the raising of prices amongst all consuming communities. An Indian Famine Commission was set up to investigate the causes and results of the famine and to provide insight as to how such a famine could be prevented in the future. In 1880 they found that:

\[\text{at the root of much of the poverty of the people of India and of the risks to which they are...}\]

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\(^{60}\) David Hall-Matthews, *Peasants, Famine and the State in Colonial Western India* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
exposed in seasons of scarcity lies the unfortunate circumstance that agriculture forms almost the sole occupation of the mass of population, and that no remedy for present evils can be complete which does not include the introduction of a diversity of occupations, through which the surplus population may be drawn from agricultural pursuits and led to find the means of subsistence in manufactures or some such employment.\textsuperscript{61}

In short, de-ruralization would be the prevention of future famines. The notion of the “surplus population” was in line with prevailing drives towards enhancing productivity and efficiency in the agrarian economy which rendered many people redundant.

It also revealed the way in which hunger itself could not become the subject of analysis in the official mind influenced by Smith, Locke, Malthus and Mill.\textsuperscript{62} Instead, hungry people were the excess part of a mass of population which had to be managed and their surplus status had to be absorbed into productive labour. The evaluation of the famine commission was at odds with prevailing policy in Imperial India which saw the country as essentially agrarian, rural, and a collection of village republics.\textsuperscript{63}

The evaluation was also revelatory of the new kinds of continuities which would intensify between city and country over the next 50 years, at least until the depression of 1928-33. Between August 15th and Sept. 30th alone, in a mere 6 weeks alone, 36,000 people had entered the city.\textsuperscript{64} The prior decade was a boom time economy, this decade revealed the frail nature of that growth. In either case the expectation amongst the cultivating and producing classes across city and country was that they belonged or could make due equally in both even as

\textsuperscript{61} Tomlinson, Peasants, Famine and the State, 104.


\textsuperscript{64} MCRCOB, 1877, 25
their social status declined across the way.

Rural producers became circular labourers migrating back and forth between town and country to keep up with the pace of growth and the dynamics of change through these decades. The famine which precipitated the Famine Commission’s creation was both a result of such changes of the 19th century and it also worked to exacerbate those changes. Under the rubric of free trade, both city and country were bound more tightly than ever before, even as ideologies of essential distinction arose to separate the two. Links between producers, moneylenders, and merchants, were tightened as usury and forms of debt bondage thrived. The bonds between social classes across the rurban spectrum were enhanced.

Between the 1864 and 1872 census the population of the city declined and this was a correction to a temporary cotton boom. Between 1872 and 1881, in contrast, the population of the city grew immensely due to famine and masses of people entering the city. This caused not only fear amongst the migrants, but alarm amongst officials who saw swarms of people coming into the city with very few lodging places available. When asked why they were coming, migrants replied, “pote bhurnya sate,” basically, “to fill my stomach.”

Many migrants came in through the northern most part of the islands in Sion across the Sion causeway, where an official witnessed the inflow of people and reported on it. His vivid description is below:

I went to Sion yesterday to inspect some of the immigrants into this city from the famine districts. On my way out opposite the North entrance to Government House, Parell, I met a party of 15 people, 8 of whom were children. They had come from Phulton, Sattara zilla; they had originally left their village 18 in number, but 3 had fallen ill on the way and had been left in Tannah; they said they had been 15 days on the road. They knew no one in Bombay nor one portion of the City from another, and beyond that they were going to Bombay -- ‘pot burnea sate,’ as they said - they had no more definite idea of their destitution or what they would do when they got to Bombay. One of the children appeared about 2 months old, the other a little older was trying to suck, but neither its mother nor the mother of the other child had any milk; they said their milk had stopped owing to want of food. Two of the other

65 “Twelfth annual report of the health officer” in MCRCOB, 1877, 17.
children were nothing but skin and bone. The only property they had was a small basket, in which they carried their smallest child. They had supported themselves on charity by the way. They appeared to have been respectable people of the cultivator class.

I came to the Sion Causeway and found 178 people - 73 men, 64 women and 41 children - who had come over the Causeway during the night and in the morning. I inspected them all carefully, and one by one. None of them were so ill as to be unable to walk, but they were all weak and worn and very fatigued. Some were very emaciated, and of the whole number not one was fit for any work. The children were as a rule much emaciated, and the strongest of them had large pot bellies and painfully pinched features. By half past two 257 more immigrants had passed over the Causeway and were collected for my inspection. From half past two till 4:30 - 111 more had come, and more were still coming along the Causeway when I left at 5 o’clock. Out of the 546 people I saw during the day only twelve were strong and healthy and fit for work; all the others were weak, and if not absolutely so ill as to be unable to walk, were merging into illness and disease. Some of the children and a few of the men had fever.

I saw some women who had come by themselves bringing their children with them, their husbands having deserted them. In one case a girl and two children had come from Weidis near Mahableshwar. Some of the immigrants had been as many as 17 days travelling before they came to Bombay. They were very frightened at being stopped at Sion, as the only hope they had was of getting to Bombay, where they believed they were sure of food. There were only two professional beggars amongst them all. They seemed with a few exceptions to be of the cultivator class; they received the utmost gratefulness any little assistance given them, but the neither begged nor asked for it. Looking to their miserable, hungry condition I was somewhat astonished at the amount of self-respect they displayed. From the heat and fatigue of their journey they were intensely thirsty, the only water they could get to drink was from the foul tank by the roadside, but they lapped it up most eagerly. A Vehar stand-pipe near the Causeway is a public want.

The tide of immigration towards this City unless stopped will very soon place in the greatest jeopardy the health of the whole community. Since the 15th instant, 7,302 paupers have passed into the city: the admission of these famished people exposes the public health to the greatest peril. The health and safety of the whole community is endangered by their presence, and it is impossible not to view the prospect with the greatest alarm. They are now weak and feeble, and if their constitutions have not been undermined by the fatigue and suffering of a long journey on foot through an unknown country; that their condition in this city will soon become worse and worse is perfectly certain, that many of them will soon succumb to fever or cholera is almost equally certain, and if in this crowded city they will not taint the health of the whole community and produce a pestilence all our experience will be at fault. There is only one way by which the crisis may be averted - by forcibly preventing any more paupers entering the city, and if necessary, sending all the destitute that have already found their way into the city out of it.66

This official made it very clear these people were cultivators and not beggars. They were self-respecting members of communities who had been driven by hunger to look for relief and who, as a rule, took pride in their work. In coming to the city, the cultivators were expecting perhaps official mercy: grain stores opened up to them, social institutions of poor relief like temples and

mosques, or charitable organizations to provide simple meals. What they found was not nearly adequate.

There were some relief works set up across Western India. In Poona in 1876 just amidst the famine, it was found that half of the 50,000 working on relief sites were “holders or underholders of land.” In Khandesh and Berar, land cultivation areas were still expanding so migrating cultivators could find opportunities there. Thus, only 22 percent of those living through relief works set up by the state were cultivators.67 Cultivators and those left in want during the period of famine pushed to survive wherever opportunities might take them, either to other sites of cultivation or to the city for other kinds of work. Compensation for agriculture was on the decline though and this incentivized the urban rush, causing mostly cultivators to abandon their fields for other forms of occupation in the city.

Upon arriving in the city, some were able to find temporary camps which were put up by city officials for housing the migrants. In this effort city and village district officials worked together recognizing the continuities across regions. The Municipal Corporation allotted Rs. 10,000 of its money towards temporary housing camps at the Flats, called the Refugees’ camp. It was in operation from March 30th, 1877 to May 29th, 1877 and admitted 1,566 people of whom 105 died. In addition to the Municipal Corporation’s contribution, the Deccan and Khandesh Famine Relief Committees added Rs. 3,000. Private initiatives were also incorporated. Mr. Toolajee Fukirjee, a Bombay city resident, donated grain and clothing of his own. Mr. Dadabhoy Nusserwanjee and Mr. Nagoo Syajee loaned the wood for the construction of temporary sheds and served as contractors for the Municipal Corporation. They charged the corporation only the

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cost of putting the sheds up and taking them down. The construction of temporary sheds and not
the allocation of resources for permanent housing indicated to the famished peasants that they
were to return home and were not welcome in the city on a permanent basis. Through such
efforts the Municipal Corporation was able to spend less than one-quarter of its Rs. 10,000
towards these relief efforts.68 The major sentiment amongst the officials was alarm about public
health and this motivated the temporary relief efforts.

The grain market existed beyond specific locales. Thus, even as enough food was
available to feed the famished population, the prices were so high that locals were priced out of
the very food they had produced and it needed to be shipped across the seas where it would
garner a higher income for grain dealers higher up on the social ladder than the producers. All
this revealed that the logic of the market trumped any previous logic of reciprocity and mutual
exchange and benefits.69

The famine intensified connections between city and country through human mobility
and money relations. It produced grave affects on the rural and urban population and intensified
old paths of mobility between urban and rural locations as well as created new ones. Because of
the famine not only did land producers come into the city for work, but in a rare instance of
female migration, they also brought entire families including wives and children. Moneylenders
of big and small loans benefitted too from the bouts of crises. In attempts to produce capitalist
farmers out of the cultivating classes and landlords, smallholders were often blamed for being
“thriftless.” During times of necessity, either the land had to be sold off or the cattle.

69 Mike Davis, Late Victorian Holocauists: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World (London;
Smallholders were prone most to indebtedness or total loss. An official remarked,

> It is obvious that where there is peasant-proprietary, though the stimulus to individual exertion is considerable...the individual capital cannot be great and misfortunes comparatively small will throw even a thrifty and industrious person into the hands of the moneylenders for temporary loans.\(^70\)

Even the thriftiest could do nothing in such circumstances. Having become landholders through the system of *ryotwari*, alienation of those possessions became the only way to survive.

Nonetheless, Bombay was seen to be “progressing” even after the famine. The city was growing both in its internal organization and capacity to house people and provide livelihoods and it was growing in stature from the perspective of “world commerce.” Imperial agendas needed Bombay to become a reliable hub and node of commerce from the subcontinent westwards. Upon a visit to the city, her Majesty the Queen said, “I have watched with pleasure the progress of the great city of Bombay and its advance, not only in material prosperity, but also in education and in matters tending to the improved health and comfort of the people.”\(^71\)

The famine caused also methodological changes in the census. Officials’ alarm over increased overcrowding led them to become unabashedly ambitious in what they wanted to know about this new urban population. But they were met with difficulty because the new migrants were deeply suspicious of officials, clearly having heard stories of hunger and disease befalling fellow migrants. While previous census takers before 1881 had remarked on the cooperation of the native population, these census takers remarked on the trepidation, hesitation, and fear looming within the communities. Not only were people skeptical of the census, but they doubted

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\(^70\) Quote by T.C. Hope recorded in Bombay Government Records No. CLVII, Papers and Proceedings of the DARA, XVII of 1879 Bombay 1883, p. 143 ff, as quoted in Banaji, “Capitalist Domination and Small Peasantry,” 1401.

\(^71\) *MCRCOB*, 1887-1888.
the good will of the officials as well. Some went out of their way to avoid being counted, leaving town on the night of the census, not reporting how many women were in the household, and with regards to the homeless there were reports of people wandering around from neighborhood to neighborhood for the entire night just to avoid being counted. Policing of the few roads into the city was common. There were so many entering the city in 1877 that the need was felt to at least count the numbers. People were stationed along the road to enter the city and between Aug 15 - Sept 30, in those 45 days alone, 36,258 destitute entered the city.\(^{72}\)

For the first time too, the population was asked to identify a “mother tongue,” an official and collective acknowledgement that Bombay’s inhabitants were diverse, a truly heterogenous population.\(^{73}\) Although the schedules were in English, Gujarati, and Marathi, there wasn’t one in Urdu with the Nastaliq script and this created a problem in gaining the cooperation amongst Muslims.\(^{74}\) Census writers wrote, “In a city, where to the largest section of the population family life is the sacred unit of organization, the grouping of the population in families is of great importance to be known.” They also provided a column for the name of the head householder and wanted to understand the organization of family life within the city.

The suspicion and fear amongst the local population made it much more difficult to conduct this census. Representatives of each community were brought into the Municipal office and meetings were held to generate good feelings and a sense of collective effort amongst disparate groups. Officials also tried to ask locals why they were reticent of the census taking

\(^{72}\) COBC, 1881, 1.

\(^{73}\) Louis Wirth cites this as one of the three features on his theory of urbanism. Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” 10.

\(^{74}\) COBC, 1881, 3.
efforts. Some people said that they thought a census indicated the coming of some great natural
disaster. Others suspected it was a means to recruit labour and a means “to recruit forces beyond
the Indian frontier.” Fears were rampant that even the women would be forced into work.\textsuperscript{75}

A few days before the census some 20,000 Muslims were going to leave Bombay to make
the pilgrimage of Bhawa Mulung Saheb, and so Muslims were undercounted in this census. A
meeting of Ulama and prominent Muslims was used to help the situation and encourage
Anjumans (assemblies) to inform their community about how the census functioned and garner
their cooperation. There was an “Ishtihar” published by the Municipal Commissioner which was
to be read after Friday prayers. Census officials even attended important meetings of some
Anjumans and acquired assurance that they would get full cooperation. All these efforts were
successful, the attitude amongst the Muslim community was reportedly changed. The official
said, “I have no hesitation in stating that this change of attitude and the successful enumeration
of Muslimin [sic] was due to the influence and help of the prominent Muslimin who attended the
meeting in the Municipal Office.” Muslim leaders came forth offering their help in insuring
community cooperation.\textsuperscript{76} The counting of the population, describing of housing conditions, and
evaluation of domestic lifestyles was slowly being trained into wider and wider spheres of the
population, extending the urban gaze even further.

Amongst the Hindus, the labouring classes in particular were singled out as being most
uncooperative. Just as with the Muslims, a meeting of influential Hindus was held in the
Municipal Office on the 31st of January. A Mr. Javerilal Umashankar Yajnik suggested
convening this meeting to explain the purposes of the census to the public. An public meeting

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{COBC, 1881,} 4.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{COBC, 1881,} 4-5.
was held in Madhav Bagh where Mr. Varjivandas Madhavdas presided as chairman over the meeting; four to five thousand people attended the meeting. Some of the false notions about the purpose of the census which had to be dispelled were that it was for additional taxation. Inhabitants were also suspicious over being asked how many males and females there were in each household, and who were married, unmarried, or widows. People seemed suspicious about being asked about their family life. Officials explained that the census was for public good; it was designed to understand the social and economic condition of the people and the changes therein. The information from it would be used for schools, hospitals, sanitation, “and in a period of famine for increased supplies of food-grain...” Throughout India, the census was taken on the same day, on Feb. 17th, and each person would be marked for where they are on that night. They were also informed that domestic servants were counted on the form of their employer, called a “master” in the report, regardless of whether the servant slept in the house or outside of it. The upper castes often had horoscopes with them so they knew their age whereas the lower classes did not know their age precisely.77 Other prominent Hindus included Rao Bahadur Gopalrav Hari Deshmukh, Mr. Raghunath Narayen Khote, Mr. Goculdas Jugmohandas, and Mr. Gangadas Kishordas. Mr. Rao Vishvanath offered suggestions to the British officials about how to speak of the advantages of the census, and overall the meeting was a success in assuaging the fears of the community.78

The Parsi community was not uncooperative in the first place but a similar procedure was used with this community because they were so influential throughout Bombay. High ranking members of the community were made to explain the causes, procedures, and need for

77 COBC, 1881, 21-22.
78 COBC, 1881, 4.
cooperation for the upcoming census within the community. A Mr. Nowrozjee Furdonjee suggested that the Parsi priests be employed to explain to the lower classes what the purposes of the census were. Some Parsi leaders included Mr. Nanabhai Byramjee and Mr. Kaikhushroo N. Kabrajee, who suggested that the Gujarati instructions for the census be reprinted with some alterations. Lectures were given by honorable “Dustoors” of the community including one by Dustoor Jamaspjee Minocheherjee which the British official census taker attended.⁷⁹

Even enumerators of low caste were recruited in order to properly count the low castes. Counting the homeless or “houseless” as they were called was more careful this time.⁸⁰ The census writer reported of his experience on the night of the 17th and morning of the 18th of February:

I spent the greater part of the night in watching the enumeration of the houseless. It was a sad night – bands of timid, fear-stricken vagrants – crouching and shivering – caught and brought together to be counted, the officers of Police seated at tables questioning each homeless one by faint candlelight, and the questioning had to be patient and gentle, to soothe frightened minds to speak.⁸¹

The number of homeless on the streets of Bombay surely must have increased through the 1870s and no doubt the suspicion amongst the homeless greatest towards officials in office. There were expected places where a homeless person could find shelter and perhaps even food, usually religious resting houses for the wandering, called musafirkhana, or sarai which were inns. Census officials had warned authorities of mosques, temples, and resting houses where the homeless had to be counted and included in the census. Thus authorities in these places were told

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⁷⁹ COBC, 1881, 4-5.

⁸⁰ COBC, 1881, 7.

⁸¹ COBC, 1881, 7.
to keep the homeless within their institutions on the night of the census and after 10pm that night the homeless were very carefully counted.

What does all this enlisting of high ranking and representative members of various communities tell us about the city and urban life? It says that assessments on the quality of urban life which were becoming quantitative and streamlining towards notions of what is a “good house” or an appropriately sized household were being deployed by and trained into elite members across communities. Together, the representative members were taking it upon themselves to manage their space, their environs and their neighborhoods. Leaders of various collective communities were developing lateral connections with each other to evaluate, enumerate, assess, manage, and discuss the varieties of lifestyles amongst their communities. They were developing a collective sense of themselves as a single community each with vertical linkages to communities under them.

Besides the homeless, there were other challenges to this census. Kamateepoora was already known as an area inhabited by “dangerous classes.”\textsuperscript{82} The northern portion of the city, from Tardeo to Parell, was thought to have “elements of difficult enumeration.” Those wanting to avoid being counted resorted to all sorts of tactics generally to evade the census officer:

Some timid strangers devised a scheme for evading the census-officers; they imagined that by walking round the streets all night they could escape enumeration, but they were caught by watchful enumerators and confessed their plot. We had been prepared for plots, and special care was taken to examine all met in the streets, although some had to be given chase to.\textsuperscript{83} Such evaders of the official’s efforts were especially concerning for this census as the population

\textsuperscript{82} COBC, 1881, 8.
\textsuperscript{83} COBC, 1881, 8.
had grown so intensely through the famine.

In total, 773,196 people were counted in all in the 1881 census. This was an almost 20% (19.98%) increase since Feb of 1872, and was largely attributable to immigration, 17.8% of the increase being due to immigrants.\(^84\) Although as usual, male immigration outnumbered female immigration, males made up 60% of the city population, most immigrating to the city after the age of 9 to work. When comparing the proportion of males to every hundred females, the highest male ratio of immigrants were from the farthest places. So those coming from Rajputana and Marwar immigrated at roughly 800 men for every 100 women. Next was from Gujarat, Daman, Diu, and Goa, from where approximately 225 to 235 men immigrated to Bombay for every 100 women. Next was Kathiawar and Surat which was in the 170s for every 100 women. In the near vicinity, Ratnagiri, Satara, Thana, and Kolaba were the highest of the near vicinity at about 150-170 for every 100 women.\(^85\) Thus those who lived closest had women relocate to Bombay for work too.

The females proportion was increasing in significant ways. Especially those of working age found themselves moving for work just like everybody else. An official, comparing Bombay’s female population after the famine to London’s and Calcutta’s, noted: “I find, for instance, that the proportion of females under 20 years of age to the total population of females is greater than even in London by 8.3% and 16% greater than in Calcutta.”\(^86\) Younger women, prior to marriage, made up more of the working classes in Bombay than in the other cities. The population of elderly in the city was always low, “The falling off in the population at advanced

\(^{84}\) COBC, 1881, 23.

\(^{85}\) COBC, 1881, 25.

\(^{86}\) COBC, 1881, 25.
periods of life is an indication of the migratory elements and nature of the population.” Parsees were most equal across genders, there being 108 men for every 100 women. There were only 2 communities in which women outnumbered men: Kanara and Telinga Brahmins.87

The neighborhood known as 2nd Nagpada was the densest, having 15.8 families to a house or 67.8 people per house. Sion in the north was the least dense, having 2.6 families to a house. The average across the city was 5.1 families per house.88 Parsees and Eurasians were the most likely to have infants in their household in Bombay, indicating they had few rural connections and had made Bombay a home. The number of families per house was calculated by removing the number of homeless and dividing the number of occupied buildings by total housed population. Bombay was exceptionally dense, more dense than London even though its population was smaller, census writers noting that, “The minimum of house population by districts of sections as called in Bombay is apparently higher than the maximum in London.”89

In the 1881 census of the city, density was once again compared with London. The area of the island of Bombay was 22 sq. miles, 4 sq. miles more than in 1872 which were attributed to reclamations. The population density amounted to roughly 10 more people per acre than in 1872. Compared to London, Bombay’s density was described as “fearfully more intense” such that even the most dense section of London was less populated than the 12 most densely populated sections of Bombay. London’s population density average was 49 persons per acre, while the same measurement was 52 persons per acre in Bombay. The real difference between London and Bombay was in the most dense areas, which in London was 222 per acre while in Bombay it was

87 COBC, 1881, 25.
88 COBC, 1881, 33.
89 COBC, 1881, 33.
759 per acre.\textsuperscript{90} We can conclude from these numbers that inequality was already vastly exaggerated in Bombay compared to London. The averages between London and Bombay were much closer (49 vs. 52 persons per acre) because of the yet sparsely populated rural parts on the northern parts of the island. These suburban districts were referred to as “rural” and included Parell, Seoree, Sion, and Worli, but they had all grown in density since 1872.\textsuperscript{91} Removing these sections, the “urban” sections had 99 persons to an acre, which was greater than London and Calcutta, Calcutta having 208 persons per acre as a maximum and an average of 33 persons per acre. Thus, density was greatest in Bombay throughout the British Empire even though London was by far the largest city.

\textbf{Urban Mobility: Function of the wage}

Bombay had become more dense than any other city across the Empire. London’s absolute population far exceeded Bombay’s by World War I. London had 7 million people in Greater London of which 4.5 million people lived in Inner London. Bombay had just under 1 million. Yet, Bombay’s inhabitants lived crowded into a small island, and those crowded inhabitants were only able to gain the attention of the official and urban gaze if they resided in the southernmost part of the islands. There were a regular stream of paupers and migrants who wandered the southern neighborhoods and were stigmatized. In 1889, the chair of a standing committee for the Municipality, Dosabhai Framji, reported that,

\begin{quote}
For a great part of the year, the city was infested by a crowd of paupers, mostly sturdy vagrants from Kathiawar and Guzerat, who refused honest work that was offered to them,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{90} \textit{COBC}, 1881, 37.

\textsuperscript{91} \textit{COBC}, 1881, 38.
and, as beggars, were a source of nuisance and danger to the health of the city. They were ultimately induced to depart, and it is hoped that measures will be devised to protect Bombay from a recurrence of this infliction.\(^\text{92}\)

Meanwhile, other settlements were forming further north which escaped official view. Only when people started thinking about expanding the city northwards were other communities noticed.

To relieve the overcrowding, attempts were made at suburbanization by developing northern Salsette. A report submitted in 1909 about this development revealed those northern human settlements already had thus far been occupied organically.

Briefly stated we may say that the immigrant population of Salsette has clung to the main roads within a mile of the various railway stations on the two lines of rail. Homogenous colonies of various castes and creeds have sprung up at the different points linked up by rail with Bombay.\(^\text{93}\)

While all prior census reports and annual Municipal commissioner reports had focused on the southern portions of the island, varying communities made use of swampy and forested lands northwards, enduring bouts of malaria and lack of infrastructure to stake out a place to live near the opportunities of the city. Most lived within a mile or two of the rail line being able to come into the city for work. Yet others who lived up north were agriculturalists who created rice flats, using northern Bombay’s land for cultivation. The report went on to say that:

Ghatkopar itself has been colonized by Kacchi Bhatias and the area selected by them has already been very closely developed. New Kurla has unfortunately sprung up under the influence of the railway on a narrow strip of land surrounded by mud flats and creeks, and its

\(^{92}\) “Review by the Standing Committee for City of Bombay for the year 1888-89” included in \textit{MCRCOB}, 1889, iv.

\(^{93}\) “Report on the possibilities of development of Salsette as residential area,” 1909, 2.
two factories provide all the population this ill-built little township can hold. If funds can be made available some redistribution of population may be possible, but any increase near the present station should be strongly discouraged. In both these places the chief function of any planning which may be possible will be to open up congested areas and facilitate sanitation.94 Other areas too had already been occupied as little “colonies” including Malad, Ville Parla, and Santa Cruz. These latter places were set to be sites for the expansion of the railways which would have required relocating some of the settlers.95

Development of these places would require public expenditure. To install water and sewage pipes needed the ability to pump water, such that it could traversed hilly terrain. Creating pathways for transportation would require rail lines or other forms of communication between these new locations and central Bombay. Those areas which were too difficult to develop or financially untenable were recommended to be given up by Government, who had rights to all the land, to private enterprise:

Besides forest land and khajan or mud flats, there is no Government unoccupied land here or indeed practically anywhere in Salsette. The function of Government, I submit, should be restricted to encouragement and control of any building enterprise that may be projected in this area. Subject to such restrictions as may be necessary to secure light and air for future bungalows, Government would, I suggest, be well advised to lease their land cheap to any capitalist or body of capitalists who produced a well considered scheme for private development of these spurs as a residential area.96

By 1909 the City Improvement Trust was already formed,97 and its experience in using government monies to develop neighborhoods was already being criticized. Thus, the demand here to have private initiative in northern Bombay/Salsette was part of a wider trend.

There were obstacles for private developers, though, a major obstacle being the

97 See Chapter 5.
acquisition of large enough plots of land for development. As was the case whenever a buyer of land would emerge, those who held the even the smallest plots would hold on to their land the longest, trying their best to wait out the market for the higher prices which would come at the end of the acquisitions. The shape and size of the land acquired was a problem, i.e. trying to stake out a big enough parcel for suburbanization projects required forethought and the kinds of town planning ventures which had not yet been implemented. The writer for the Salsette report complained that:

Control over building has at length been secured in some of the khoti villages such as Ville Parla and Malad, but these notified areas have been formed too late and much land has been occupied by bungalows placed haphazard on any curiously shaped piece of agricultural land that could be bought...It is of course impossible at present for a prospective builder to buy a reasonably shaped block in all cases. Practically he can only do so from a large landowner or from a speculator in land who has acquired a large area cheap and makes what profit he can on its resale.  

The problem was that Bombay was being settled by those of limited means on small plots of land which could not easily be converted to a larger scale. Most people continued to live in what were by official accounts, cramped quarters, in the southern parts of the city. What explained these practices?

While officials and native elites had been developing a limited urban gaze to consider the populations dense settlement patterns in the southern parts of the city, processes which escaped them were occurring in the northern parts and beyond Bombay’s city limits. People utilized their labour wherever it would take them. They were losing land due to policies which sought greater output in exchange for indebtedness. The people who migrated to Bombay were embedded in a “chain of operations” extending from the peasantry in Bombay’s hinterlands and outwards to

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ports across the oceans. Each step of the way, changes in one location affected everyone from the smallest producer to the largest landholder, and all the merchants in between, but it didn’t affect them equally. Seasonal migrants were not awaiting urban industry to rescue them from forms of bondage. Market forces had capacities well beyond mechanization's promises, such that mechanization in Bombay did not privilege industrial workers over their nonindustrial counterparts at the turn of the century. As far as the migrant was concerned, his livelihood was already in the form of a wage, and he paid it all almost in entirety to his employer, often the same person in the countryside as in the city. He didn't need the wage form to earn his freedom, he was exercising his freedom, in a competitive labour market, in his very migration to the city. Harvest season called him to his village while manufacturing or commercial season called him to his home in the city. In the village, he shared his dwelling space with his extended family, a large network of kin relations including his wife, children, parents, etc. in the city, he shared his dwelling with fellow free labourers who used their status as sojourners to enhance their income as much as they could. Optimizing peasants were upwardly and downwardly mobile and were internally differentiating and stratifying through opportunities and losses.

Conclusion

Suspending the claims of the authoritative history of Bombay City as an exogenous port is crucial to recovering the empirical dynamic that led to urbanization and the eventual housing of everyday people in what are called “slums” in the long run. This chapter has traced the historical trajectory of the rural-urban continuum rather than treating each realm as already empirically distinct. We’ve explored the mobility of enterprising peasants, the dynamics of
commercialization, changes in relations of exchange and production, and the way in which indebtedness could function as a limiting factor and a kind of wage, leading to downward and upward mobility for rural-urban migrants. Opportunities and forms of accommodation drove the settlement of the city in the 19th and early 20th century. Hunger too played no small part in the motivation to move. All these things in total resulted in Bombay having the highest density of all cities across the British Empire.

These conditions created new forms of dependency across social hierarchies which also influenced the way the city was settled. Landlords and peasants both utilized rural-urban paths of mobility and built and occupied various forms of housing in the city. Social bonds between landlords and peasants facilitated each other’s mobility and social status both in the country and the city. In the next chapter, we will look at the variety of tenancy relations which created bonds between capitalists and labourers in the housing of Bombay. Communities continued to move together between city and country seasonally, and a pervasive social continuum between cities and their hinterlands resulted in vertically built and densely occupied housing in the city’s core.
Chapter Three:  
Building Bombay’s Housing

Travelers to India and successive statesmen through the centuries have marveled on the diversity of housing conditions within the subcontinent. Comments on the housing conditions of locals, which are in official records and early ethnographers’ accounts, attest to the perceived difference between “civilized” statesmen and an unruly society, or “cosmopolitan” travelers and “indigenous” natives. That is to say, the domestic practices and habitations of people have often been a marker of rank and status within society.¹ Housing connotes a set of material practices which create mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion amongst dynamic and stratifying communities.

The terms upon which that rank is established changes according to the ethos of the time. For example, in India’s early modern courtly cultures of the Mughal period, housing reflected and produced circles of proximity to the Mughal king and his retinue. The capital city was an “imperial mansion” in which the sovereign and his retinue lived. Often, surrounding mansions or elite mohallas, i.e. elite residential quarters, there existed small, straw-thatched, mud huts where members of a “household” resided including small traders, craftsmen, soldiers and others. Stephen Blake, a scholar of imperial Shahjahanabad says,

As the population increased these small dwellings gobbled up much of the open space in the city and encroached on lanes and thoroughfares....The inhabitants of these huts suffered periodic disaster. In the hot season fires regularly swept through the city, jumping from one

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¹ Even the Ratnagiri District Gazetteer from 1962 begins its section on “The People” with a subsection called “Houses” where the opening line is, “The types of houses built in the district vary with the locality and the stage of development and culture of the community to which the inhabitant belongs.” See Government of Maharashtra, Maharashtra State Gazetteers,  
tinder dry roof to the next - in 1662, 60 thousand people were killed in three separate fires.

During the monsoon rains the mud walls tended to weaken and collapse.\(^2\)

When the Mughal kingdom declined through the 18th century, aristocrats and statesmen tried to continue their hold on their rank and status in society by maintaining their homes and the rules of who could live near them. Housing continued to be a “nested entitlement,” an entitlement connected to the rights to other goods and services like the right to cultivate the soil or be part of a royal retinue, but that entitlement’s terms were changing, as we saw in the first chapter.

We can infer that the problems of human crowding and the instability of temporary and unstable dwellings preceded the 19th century as we see from the description of Shahjahanabad above. However, urban crowding and housing took on new and more intensified meanings because of the great demographic transition of the 19th century when both the rate and the growth of the population increased exponentially. This demographic change combined with changing foundations of legitimacy for governments such that the way or mode in which housing became legible changed. The field of housing, and all that entailed including cultural and social articulations, was transformed by the numerous opportunities engendered by expanding markets. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the capital city of Delhi declined in population and commercial cities on the coasts became new centers of power. By the 19th century, officials were concerned with accounting for and maximizing the use of land because of the prevailing commercial logic which focused on optimal productivity, improvements, and greatest use of natural resources. Housing’s legibility became embedded in new discursive registers by the late 19th century.

One way to assess the human impact on the land was through the enumeration of housing density and type. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Bombay’s population density was the highest across the British Empire, thus land use was most intense in Bombay and it consistently alarmed observers. Officials referred to Bombay as “fearfully more intense” such that even the densest section of London was less populated than the 12 most densely populated sections of Bombay as early as 1881. This made housing a central concern of urban officials’ observations. However, if thought about at all, housing was seen from the consumption point of view, especially prior to the plague. Housing appeared to officials like a series of choices based on village of origin, connections to landlords and employers, and things like customs and preferences. These were surely important factors in the construction of the field of housing in Bombay, but all of these factors were also embedded in and articulated with market dynamics which had local, regional, and global dimensions.

This chapter is a cultural history of the housing market or, put in another way, an account of the culture of the housing market in Bombay city, between 1864-1900. The central and overarching question is how to understand the culture of housing production and exchange in Bombay in the late 19th century. The main point to be illustrated here is that Bombay’s first generation of slums, those tenement units in the center of the city in areas like First and Second Nagpada, Agripada, and Kumbharwada, which housed those who settled in the city between 1860-1900 and were the first targets of the Improvement Trust’s schemes, were not the shantytowns which later exemplified Bombay’s housing problem. Rather, these were vertically

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3 COBC, 1881, 37.

built structures comparable to other classes of housing units throughout Bombay. I want to illustrate and argue that the housing market was already, by the end of the 19th century, a site of advanced organization in which labouring poor and socially mobile migrants were able to be responsive to changing demand and supply in units of housing, materials, labour, and industry which drove the demand to construct housing. Poor housing and its meanings were a product of social relations embedded in market dynamics. Prior to the plague, there were specific meanings tied to the social location of actors, their rank and status within society, and how their rank provided them access to forms of capital within the markets of goods, labour, capital, and housing. People were able to use these resources to negotiate and produce the intensifying social relations which characterized the city.

By the turn of the century and in the period before the formation of the Improvement Trust, housing is best understood as a complex commodity. Housing combined the dynamics of other component markets in materials and labour. It was also both a sign of social stratification and itself productive of that stratification. Housing could serve as a form of social and cultural distinction. Settlers in neighborhoods were able to solidify and enhance bonds of reciprocation and were also capable of forming new terms of reciprocity through cohabitation in the city. The attribution of significance to a housing type based on the materials used to construct it, the type of tenurial arrangement of its inhabitants, or access to public goods such as water, sewage lines, electricity, or roadways was established later, well after the period under study here. In this

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5 Polanyi's language is purposefully being used throughout this chapter without adhering to the temporal argument he makes about modernity dislodging markets from their embeddedness in social relations. Instead, I see markets and social life as continuously inter-embedded. That they come to appear disembodied is an accomplishment of its own kind. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1944, 1957, 2001).

period however, we can see officials beginning to document those concerns but they do not
determinedly form the set of of traits meant to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate housing,
or rich housing from poor. The only distinguishing feature is the number of people per unit of
housing, or crowding and density. Thus, this period is worth recovering as a lost historical
moment in which the habitation practices of the urban labouring poor was formed from the stock
substances of the city, literally in terms of building materials such as bricks, pipes, wood, roofing
stock, etc., and this period is analytically useful in showing us how habitation practices went
from being unmarked to marked in new ways. The Improvement Trust’s housing reform projects,
begun in 1898, focused on the most densely inhabited tenements throughout the city and served
to mark them as “slums.” Those units were targeted for demolitions and their inhabitants were
forced into resettlements or removed from the market. That project, which is discussed in the
next chapter, occurred because of elite interests who were dependent on the city as a venue for
world trade, not because there was something endemic to the housing type itself which indicated
its rank amongst housing types in the city.

Officials’ observations of housing density in Bombay, as accurate as it was in assessing
land use, was nonetheless incomplete. Officials misunderstood at worse and underestimated at
best the extent to which numerous transactions determined the ability to acquire housing in the
city and also served to limit and constrain one’s choices. Officials also underestimated the urban
migrant’s cultural and capital resources.

Building housing on diminishing and scarce parcels of land in urban contexts required
highly organized and coordinated acts of human effort. The success of that effort depended on an
individual’s access to information which provided insight into general patterns and trends such as
the neighborhood’s or building’s monetary values, its proximity to places of work or its proximity to human networks who could find work. There was a tendency to want to live as close to sources of income as possible which was an obvious desire for migrants but alarming for officials. The health officer, T.S. Weir, wrote to the then acting municipal commissioner of the city of Bombay in 1886, “The reality to be understood is, that 37 percent of the population live on 3 1/2 percent of the surface of the Island...”

For people like T.S. Weir who were focused on sanitation, the proclivity to density was a sign that urban residents didn’t know what was best for them. Building housing also required access to resources and information about the various inputs necessary to build a house such as materials and labour. By the end of the 19th century, in the contexts of demographic changes which had led to the first phase of urbanization of the world’s population, Bombay was the home to a densely built environment in which the migrating and labouring classes of the city played a major role in the construction of that density, not out of ignorance but because they were creators of that world transformation and aware of the limitations and opportunities it presented to them.

For several decades prior to the concerns of sanitation, the house tax was the only reason officials cared at all about housing. The field of housing had developed from the ground up and the government’s role in mediating the development of housing was deeply influenced by the collection of the house tax by the Municipality and their dependence on that stream of income. Once the British Government made the house tax their main source of revenue in Bombay City, there was a need for a census of the City which was not as much a census of people but a census of housing conditions and the built environment. The value of the collectible house tax was

7 MCRCOB, 1886-1887, 269.
adjusted based on the materiality of housing forms. The materials used and the size of the
dwelling were both variables in the calculation of the assessment. So there was a push from city
officials for the improvement of housing to higher quality standards. Importantly, however,
officials had little power to influence the production of housing. Nonetheless, the rhetorical
pressure to produce better housing was justified on economic terms; it was calculated that in the
long run it saved money for the government to provide incentives and means for the inhabitants
to build high quality housing from the outset rather than have to continuously remedy and
rebuild deteriorating housing. Other than this there was no official investment in housing.

This chapter follows the development of housing from the ground up and foregrounds the
industriousness of Bombay’s migrants and labourers in building the city. The first section,
“Markets from Below,” shows the average migrants’ integration within larger markets in land,
labour, housing, commodities, and consumption practices which were centered on Bombay. It
shows how government officials and imperial concerns and interests had a limited influence in
the first few decades of Bombay’s growth. The second section, “Quantifying Housing” uses
numerical data from city census reports to situate housing patterns in the neighborhoods of
Bombay within broader trends and patterns; it also illustrates officials’ attempts at keeping up
with people-made housing. The chapter ends with the outbreak of plague, which is when an
already occurring process, the making of housing’s meanings and integration into interconnected
markets, was heightened and came to demand official intervention. The plague’s subsequent
influence on urban life, urban housing and the formation of political consensus in the city is the
subject of the next chapter.
Markets from Below

It must be remembered that urban housing and all its problems by the end of the 19th century was an effect of a slow but steady transformation of the islands of Bombay from agrarian land-use patterns to urban ones. The urbanization trend can be seen in the earliest annual surveys of the island-city in the late 1860s. Upon the establishment of the Municipal Commissioner’s office in Bombay, one of the first tasks were annual surveys of the entire island by Major Laughton. Nine surveyors were employed in what was called the “Old Town” in areas like the Market, Mandvie, and twelve surveyors worked to survey “the country around Wudalla, part of Naigaum, Parell, Chinchpoogly, Sewree, and the Flats near Worlee.” They found that more than a half of the surveyed acreage was what we would today refer to as agrarian. Of a total of 2,855 acres, 847 acres of rice land were found (as opposed to 1,038 acres from the year before), 872 acres of garden land (as opposed to 898 from the year before) which “consists of estates, surrounded by high walls, containing within them pucka-built houses, fruit and flower gardens, dense plantations of mango and cocoanut trees…” (italics mine).

The steady replacement of agricultural lands with multi-unit housing structures was the consequence of new demands by a growing population and the likely calculation on the part of landholders that tenants were more profitable than the sale of rice, mangos, or coconuts. Major Laughton’s use of the word “pucka” (literally meaning “cooked” or made of permanent materials) to refer to the houses on garden lands was also important. The word “pucka” occurred

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8 MCRCOB, 1868, 13.

9 In current discussions of housing in Indian cities, pukka housing is opposed to kaccha, the former meaning cooked while the latter means raw. Pukka housing indicates the presence of concrete or the use of permanent building materials. Contemporary Bombay and other Indian cities are full of kacchii bastis, literally neighborhoods of “raw dwellings” which indicate impermanent shantytowns and slum settlements.
very rarely in the urban records from the 19th century but when it did occur it suggested that the
words, “pucka” and “kaccha” may have been used by locals to distinguish forms of housing even
before officials started evaluating the legitimacy of a built structure based on the kinds of
materials used. In this case, it also suggested that the owner of a garden was prone to build a
permanent house. By 1911, only 20,000 persons counted in the city census of a population
nearing one million people were agriculturalists, of which almost four thousand were dairy
farmers.\textsuperscript{10} Northern “suburban and rural” areas of the city of Bombay showed some of the
highest percentages of population growth since 1872. For example, Warlee increased by 792%,
Sewree by 327.5%, Parel by 230.17%. For a point of reference, consider that southern Bombay,
the area including Lower Colaba, only increased its population by 48.49% between 1872 and
1911.\textsuperscript{11} Southern Bombay’s growth was more exemplary of the city in total whose population
increased by 52% in those four decades. The northern sections had corresponding increases in
quantities of housing.

The definition of what constituted a “house” changed with every census. Census writers
asked, “And here we are met at the outset with the same question that has perplexed statists in
Europe - What is a House?” Census reports from other cities were circulated across the empire
and so Bombay’s officials frequently consulted the London reports. They observed that the
Digest of London’s Census of 1871 said a house should be considered: “all the space contained
within the external and party walls of a building, and not treat a room or story of a building as a
separate house, although one or other might be separately owned or occupied.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus houses

\textsuperscript{10} COBC, 1911, 37.
\textsuperscript{11} COBC, 1911, 12.
\textsuperscript{12} COBC, 1872, 18.
divided from within and amongst occupants did not qualify as multiple houses in the 1872 census. However, this changed later.

The discursive use of London throughout the assessment of Bombay in these decades served to justify different solutions to the problems of density, poverty, and spatial disorder, but the comparison also depended on a kind of parity. Both Bombay and London were commercial capitals of their respective regions and the functioning of the pathways within and between the two cities were central to sustaining business. At the most basic level, London was the city which officials in the city of Bombay must have been most familiar with. Population statistics and the demographic growth of London must have circulated amongst census officials more readily than other kinds of information about other cities so that the comparison with other cities could not be readily made. However, the ease of access to information is not the most satisfying answer as to why officials compared Bombay to London. On several occasions, a comparison could justify differential tactics of urban management. If London and Bombay were different, then solutions to urban problems or the encouragement and management of growth in Bombay could be different. But when there were different solutions proposed, it wasn’t always clear what the precise difference was which justified different solutions. On just one occasion when an official said that the English Poor Laws could not be applied in India, no reason was given. Perhaps it was that Bombay was “fearfully more dense” which meant that the Poor Laws would be ineffective. Across cities, officials were beginning to fear the growth of the “masses,” and unique solutions were sought for each city’s unique problems.

Numerous types of housing styles were included as legitimate forms of housing in the city reports. Huts with barely completed floors or roofs were also included in the census reports:
“A house will therefore represent in Bombay...the Jowlie hut, under the eaves of which one can with difficulty stoop down to find the entrance into the one miserable mud floor cabin…”

There were also the *chawls* or native tenements located in the northern parts of the city. These were distant from the Fort area and the southern portions of the island where British officials and elite natives tended to dwell and conduct business. One particularly overcrowded example was “No. 1” on Parell Road, in which 122 families lived, totaling 466 persons to “one house.”

Even visitors from Calcutta marveled on Bombay’s prominence as a commercial city and housing was no small sign of the city’s vibrancy. Rajendralala Mitra, remembered as one of the few “native” orientalists of Bengali origin, gave a lecture called “The Parsis of Bombay” at a meeting of the Bethune Society in Calcutta on February 26th, 1880. In the very first few sentences of the lecture he said of Bombay that, “Its houses are the most magnificent; there is no other part of India where so many rich and lofty mansions can be seen together; but they are all roofed with tiles of the kind called in Bengal *khaprael*, which the officer in charge of the last Census of Calcutta took as the most prominent characteristic of huts.” Clearly, there was a difference of opinion as to how to classify houses based on the material used for roofing. While the census officer thought Bombay’s mansion’s roofs characteristic of a style of huts in Calcutta, Mitra himself thought the mansions very grandiose and didn’t seem to agree with the Census writer’s classification. What was a magnificent mansion for one observer was demoted to a kind

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13 *COBC*, 1872, 18.
14 *COBC*, 1872, 18.
of hut for another. The common use of the same material in making the roof made them less
easily discernible from each other.

The type of roof of each dwelling space served as one of the earliest methods of
classification of houses. Houses could have several types of roofs: tiles, thatch, metal or terraced.
Each city census from 1864 onwards divided and counted houses according to which kind of
roof they had, but officials couldn’t necessarily attach a consistent meaning to these distinctions.
Certain types of roofs could be condemned or well regarded but most descriptions were just
descriptions. The kinds of roofs indicated instead differential access to materials on the part of
the people constructing those houses and also the degree of permanence of its inhabitants. There
was a steady decline in thatched roofs from 1864 to 1881, dropping from 6,676 buildings to
3,735, and then to 2,169.\textsuperscript{16} In spite of the large migration into the city during the famine,
temporary housing was not built. Instead, people overcrowded with relatives into rooms and
some building activity was able to keep pace with the growing demand for housing.

“Camateepura” had the highest number of tenements. This indicated that human effort and
organization from within society was happening in spite of the state’s lack of attention to housing
patterns or types, i.e. even though there were no building bye-laws, people were building
upwards and crowding in from within tenements. Koombarwada was the most crowded section
of the city, having the highest number of people per tenement.

No style of housing was condemned or rendered illegitimate as a rule, even when the
definition of a house changed with each census. Through the changing definitions of a house, i.e.
from that space enclosed between four outer walls in 1871 to individual tenements in 1881, and

\textsuperscript{16} COBC, 1881, 35.
the whole building under one divided roof with any kind of roof and made up of any kind of material all throughout in 1891-1911, what was legitimate housing was very broad. In fact, there is nowhere in these reports an account of illegitimate forms of housing. Up until 1911, huts were perfectly legitimate forms of housing and even well regarded because they didn’t tend to indicate overcrowding. The report said, “The largest number of houses are to be found in the northern sections. Warli, Mahim and Sion, but many of these are huts and do not indicate overcrowding.” The northern section was becoming more populated starting in the 20th century with many huts, and this is the section that produced the infamous shacks of Dharavi by the 21st century.

Housing was an important source of revenue for the Municipal Commissioner’s office through the institution of a “House Tax” which was decided based on an assessment of the value of the house. This information was not readily available and census takers, even if they wanted to group the houses according to value in order to see who bears the House Tax burden more heavily, couldn’t get such information. Record keeping was not very thorough or reliable with regard to housing values.

The legal type of property ownership or tenure had little to do with the enumeration of housing or the collection of the house tax. The form of tenure, either ownership, tenancy, or under-tenancy, did not count as a significant distinguishing feature of types of housing nor did it allow officials to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate housing. This must have indicated that the method used to enumerate the housing brought individual people forward who said “I own this house,” but that person not only sub-divided and parceled out their property through some

17 COBC, 1911, 3.
form of tenure, but that dividing and parceling out the property was capable of extending
infinitely through chains of people. Ownership of property did not always indicate control over
its parts. It became very common for the owner of the property to have no awareness of who
occupied his building since he had given the right to find occupants out to someone who would
find inhabitants. That person too could successively find more inhabitants and under-tenants.
 Basically, from the point of view of “under-tenants,” their “house” was a right to occupy a unit
on terms of exchange with the person whom they had negotiated with, without a necessary claim
on the structure’s legal status. The highest city official would have a very hard time sorting these
chains of occupancies out from each other and finding individual owners to hold responsible for
the taxes and for sanitation. People could generate legitimate housing status’ amongst themselves
by assigning units or rooms to other people in exchange for money or work. The official
bureaucracy was not needed to recognize these appointments, except when it came into dispute.

With regards to infrastructure required to upkeep a house, such as plumbing, lighting,
roadways into the building, and sanitation such as removal of night-soil and other waste,
negotiations between people determined the availability of these. Officials sought to manage,
upgrade, and amend what private persons accomplished on their own, but they were regularly
torn between the desire to manage the sanitation of private areas and the need to ignore it due to
budgetary constraints. For example, when it came to scavenging of refuse, newspapers were
reporting on the insufficient scavenging in 1872. The health officer complained to the Municipal
office that not enough people were employed for scavenging and it was estimated that 10,000
less tons of garbage had been picked up in 1872 than in 1868. But the Municipal officer
responded by distinguishing the degree of cleanliness of public versus private streets. He said,
Remarks have recently been made in the newspapers on the imperfect manner in which scavenging has been carried out of late. I go a god deal more about these parts of the city which are not commonly visited by Europeans, than most people, and I must say that, as regards the scavenging of public streets, there is very little indeed to complain of. It is impossible to find any accumulation of garbage. Of course we cannot keep up men enough to enable all the streets and lanes to be cleaned by 8 am; and people who go about in the morning, and see that a street has not yet been cleaned, are apt to fancy that it will not be cleaned at all. The real point in which our scavengering falls short is, as the Health Officer points out (p. 22), in the cleaning of the numerous lanes, gullies, courts, and by-ways which are private, i.e., which are not vested in the Corporation, and which the Municipality is not legally bound to clean.\textsuperscript{18}

He strongly suggested that the Municipal office be given the funds to clean the private streets and was aware that there would be too much cost. One suggestion he made was to increase the “halalkhor tax,” discussed below, to make up this cost. Thus, whenever it was financially feasible, new streets would be incorporated into the Municipal office’s areas of responsibility.

Night-soil was removed by a caste of “recyclers” named \textit{halalkhors}, meaning those for whom everything is \textit{halal} and thus consumable.\textsuperscript{19} They had hereditary rights to their occupation within certain neighborhoods, locales, and streets. The city provided night-soil depositories in response to complaints or other kinds of demands to organize night-soil collection. An “halalkhor tax” also functioned in complex and changing ways. Often occupants paid the tax to the city to have night-soil removed; that money was used to reimburse the \textit{halalkhors} themselves by city officials. Yet in other circumstances where the city officials had less influence, private homeowners made their own arrangements with the \textit{halalkhors} in the vicinity to have their buildings cleaned. The question of the \textit{halalkhor} tax was always a topic of discussion for Municipal officials who often regretted their dependence on this caste community for the sanitation of the city. Several \textit{halalkhor} strikes, especially during the time of the plague, made

\textsuperscript{18} “Health Officer’s Report,” in \textit{MCRCOB}, 1872, 16.

\textsuperscript{19} This definition of the title, “halalkhor” is a modern definition. In early modern usage, it may have meant just the opposite.
that dependence most visible. These strikes were also a response to attempts at achieving greater labour efficiencies by the city officials, who sought with each passing year to have a greater volume of night-soil collected through the employment of fewer and fewer halalkhors. The hereditary right to their occupation was interpolating with the concerns of the markets in labour and this created moments of conflict.\textsuperscript{20}

Official involvement in the issue amounted to a management tactic after private arrangements had been made. Officials could merely augment or slightly amend the terms of private sanitation efforts. For example, the carts used for the removal of night-soil were originally made of wood and themselves became highly insanitary, nuisances which would process through the streets through the night. As early as 1867, the Municipal office became involved in providing upgraded night-soil carts for the halalkhors to use. They sanctioned 75 new iron carts with approval through a budget meeting at the finance committee. Iron carts were provided which cost the officials money, but the expenditure was justified on the grounds that the iron carts could hold double the volume of refuse and make multiple trips since they did not retain the stench. After some time, a lid was designed and provided to the night-soil carriers. The Municipal Commissioner said about the new carts,

\begin{quote}
It is not too much to say that while these carts have doubled the working power of the Halalcore Brigade, and abolished those hideous nocturnal processions, and the necessity for the collected soil to stand fermenting all day at the depots, they will repay their cost in a single year by actual saving in the item of bullocks and drivers.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{20} For a similar process involving the various castes of sanitation workers in Delhi see Vijay Prashad,\textit{ Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community} (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Prashad shows how some castes lost control over their occupations and livelihood and became employees of the Delhi Municipal Corporation, while others didn’t.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{MCRCOB}, 1868, 16.
Through such small measures, the city officials attempted to constrain, manage, and mitigate the mostly private initiatives which made up the substance of urban social life.

Lighting, plumbing, and roadways functioned in similar ways, with private enterprise first and then public management later. Throughout the late 19th century, private peoples extended roads into new building sites as they became necessary. They provided lighting and plumbing of their own accord as well. Official involvement was minimal and often focused only on the densest, southern parts of the city where officials resided and where the shipping industries were dependent on such infrastructure. Whenever overcrowding was noticed as a problem in the southern parts, a health officer or city official may have commented on the need for “communications” and roadways which would encourage people to settle farther from the commercial center of the city. In some such circumstances, major roadways were built such as north-south or east-west thoroughfares. Additionally, a slow and steady process of widening already existing roads in order to enhance ventilation and mobility across the city meant that some property owners were regularly displaced or moved back. However, these were few compared to the numerous and imperfect private initiatives, often roadways which were unkempt and hard to traverse or didn’t drain properly. Most roadways, too, were never experienced as “government” property but rather for use by the people. In 1884, officials involved in the paving of footpaths complained that,

One of the chief difficulties that the Municipality has to deal with is the never-ending encroachment which beginning with a plank, a box, or a stool advances to a semi-attached bench, which again is insidiously converted into an ‘otla,’ first temporary, then permanent, and this becomes (unless detected in time) the boundary line of the future wall of the house.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{22} MCRCOB, 1883-1884, 44.
This was the way many residential areas got started: through steady colonizations of land by everyday, mobile people in some form or the other. Petty shopkeepers used a similar procedure for settlement into the city. In 1886, the Municipal Commissioner noticed, “the very serious encroachments on the sides of road and foot-paths which is everywhere going on from shopkeepers and house occupiers being allowed to project stalls, &c., over the road way...” He used this complaint to ask for consideration that executive powers be instated which would allow the city to remove such users of the streets.

Municipal budget meetings were the site for all Haussman-like ambitions to be extinguished. Official expenditure could only be justified on “large works of permanent benefit to the city” rather than small scale projects because each had to be justified to the current generation of rate-payers. In 1872 there was a complaint that there was no system of sewerage or drainage at all in the neighborhood of Colaba, and due to its housing of European troops it was attended to early:

I believe Engineers are of opinion that this district must be provided with its own system of sewerage and drainage, independently of the general scheme for the remainder of the City. As the interests of Government are so largely concerned in the maintenance of health among the European troops station ed in Upper Colaba.

To have access to water, communities and neighborhoods could receive public “house connections” into buildings once officials decided it was important enough and financially feasible. In 1886, such house connections were provided for Kamathipura, the red-light district, for “sullage.” There was regrettable delay in completing this project due to “an abnormally large

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23 *MCRCOB*, 1886-1887, ix.
24 *MCRCOB*, 1886-1887, v.
25 *MCRCOB*, 1872, 55.
percentage of breakage” of the pipes while being transported from England, for which contractors were held liable.²⁶ Lighting too was extended on a case by case basis. Amenities such as these were provided occasionally for a portion of a neighborhood or for a subdivided multi-unit housing structure on a seemingly *ad hoc* basis, depending on who could garner the attentions of official concerns.

There was at least one overt episode, prior to the plague, in which officials tried to exert an influence in the process of the production of housing. Housing was embedded in market relations beyond mere consumption. The production process provided jobs to migrant workers, who were needed to make the materials such as wood and bricks, and construct the dwellings themselves. Whenever there was a boom in the city’s economy, people flooded the city and the demand for housing grew. Supply responded to the demand and was able to provide work to some of the migrants. This market in the production of dwellings followed the logic of all markets, i.e. it behaved just like any other market would. Namely, over the decades the generalization of the market resulted in a decline in the cost of inputs such as labour and materials. This change alone allowed officials to make a minor intervention. The actors who produced housing were beyond official control and officials were keen to keep things this way. Officials did not want government to become a permanent player in the market but rather to make a simple interference which they thought would have long lasting effects and enhance the market’s ability to function optimally; they did not want government to challenge it or become the competitor of private interests.

²⁶ *MCRCOB*, 1885-1886, 33. I am not sure why pipes were brought in from England and whether there was ever a discussion on the inefficiency of such a practice. I also don’t know whether other kinds of pipes were made locally and whether these were imported for a special reason. It would also be interesting to know how long this importing of pipes lasted for or when sullage pipes began to be manufactured in Bombay itself.
The official complaint was that the native style of building construction didn’t produce structures which would last long. The average life of a native building was 40 years while many didn’t even make it past 20 years of age. Officials suspected that the bricks used by natives in their construction projects were of an inferior quality. They described the native buildings, both shops and homes, as being made of jungle-teak which was used for the main structure of the building. Spaces between the wood were filled with whichever bricks were sold in the open market. Better quality bricks would not require the jungle-teak structure, because they could withstand the air, moisture, and the weight of the structure. Instead, due to using poor quality bricks, the native buildings succumbed to “wet-rot” because the teak gave in to environmental pressures. In contrast, the quality of brick made by the Municipality itself, rather than that made by private brick makers, was of higher quality, and could now, because of the decline of the cost of labour and coal required to make those bricks, be offered into the larger market. They were able to justify their interference based on their desire to make local buildings last longer, but they were keen not to interfere in the market on a permanent basis. Their hope was that native brick makers would be enterprising enough to learn how to make the higher quality bricks once introduced to them and eventually the Municipality’s brick production process could stop. The ultimate goal was for the Municipality to itself buy higher quality bricks on the open market. IN 1877, the Municipal Commissioner of Bombay said, “The style of building known as the native principle would then be entirely abandoned, and that known as the European principle adopted in its place.”27 The market was thus being used here to effect a permanent shift in the building quality of construction projects throughout the city. Furthermore, poor quality buildings were

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27 MCRCOB, 1877, 6.
being indexed as being of a “native” type while higher quality buildings were being indexed as of a “European” type.

A monetary calculation justified this simple intervention. Supposedly 450 buildings were built annually until the late 1870s at a cost of Rs. 4000 to Rs. 5000 each. Officials guessed that constructing a building in the “European style” with the higher quality bricks would cost the same or just slightly more, perhaps Rs. 100 more each, and that such a building would last twice as long, about 80 years in total. Thus, “The adoption of the former method would therefore reduce house rents without lessening the value of house property.”

This must have meant that house rents were calculated based on the value of the building over the length of time it was expected to be functional. In the long run and according to the hypothetical computation, the use of European style bricks would be a cost saving measure.

The municipality owned a machine in the neighborhood of Panwell which made the European quality bricks. The author of this report believed native brick-makers could make similar, or just slightly inferior, quality bricks without the initial outlay of expenditure on the same machine at other sites of brick production. He said,

There is no necessity to use machinery such as we have at Panwell. Bricks little inferior in quality could be made by hand, if the same precautions are adopted as by the Municipality to properly mould, press, and burn them, in accordance with the practice followed in Europe.

Furthermore, the monetary cost of the manual labour of the brick-makers wouldn’t be obstructive since the labour market had already brought labour costs down. Thus, doing without machinery

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28 MCRCOB, 1877, 7.
29 MCRCOB, 1877, 7.
could be monetarily justified because the market involved in the production of housing prior to this report being written had already brought down the input costs:

    The price of the bricks originally made at Panwell by the Municipality was Rs. 35 per 1,000. The reason why I am enabled to make such a large reduction in their cost is on account of the price now paid for coal and labour, and the reduction I have made in the working establishment. The price of coal was formerly Rs. 48 per ton; it is now Rs. 18. The rates paid for labourers was formerly 6 to 8 annas per day; it is now from 3 to 4 annas. The engine and machinery are in thorough working order, and no outlay is required for repairs before utilizing them. There is a quantity of clay on our ground sufficient to last for several years.30

Already by 1877, the price of coal had decreased by a third and the cost of labour halved. No doubt, the influx of people both from the cotton boom of the 1860s and the famines of the 1870s had created competition in the labour supply such that labourers could now command less for their work. The same story was true for the coal market, although it was more prone to adjust to global flows than regional ones.

Housing occupied a strange role in the mind of officials. Moments like these showed they had all they needed to understand that there was a market to the production of housing, and yet, housing was consistently thought of from the consumption point of view, if thought about at all, especially prior the plague. Housing appeared to officials like a series of choices based on village of origin, connections to landlords and employers, and things like customs and preferences. These were surely important factors in the construction of the field of housing in Bombay, but all of these factors were also embedded in market dynamics which had local, regional, and global dimensions. The government didn’t interfere in such markets at all until the plague, after which the status of housing, especially poor housing, changed.

    Officially, and “on the books,” were a body of Municipal Acts which were meant to function as a set of regulatory by-laws for the city. They provided the Municipal office formal

30_MRCOCOB, 1877, 9.
jurisdiction over the organization of space. Municipal officers could limit the boundaries of buildings sites, authorize details of building structures, set guidelines for infrastructure like lighting and sewage, and apportion space amongst private actors. Trying to find evidence of a Municipal Act being put into practice though is difficult for the scholar dependent on municipal records. Most often, officials complained about either the inadequacy of the Municipal Acts, warranting their augmentation with some updated measures, or they complained about their enforcement. In 1885, the Surgeon, D.C. Davidson of the Indian Medical Service for the Bombay Municipality, wrote to the Municipal Commissioner of the city that:

The Municipal Act, as it at present exists, is so defective as to afford little or no protection to the public against the erection of most insanitary dwelling-houses, which are directly injurious and dangerous to the health and lives of people, who are compelled by circumstances to occupy them, and are potent factors in bringing about and augmenting epidemics which give rise to much misery and expense, and by causing the imposition of quarantine seriously interfere with trade.\(^{31}\)

Outbreaks of cholera and other diseases resulted in regular occurrences of epidemics in the city and these were blamed on the uncleanliness of the city and its inhabitants. The health officer felt himself particularly burdened by his job. Later and in the same report, he said, “The Health Officer is in the position of the London Policeman, who has orders to make the street Arabs “move on,” but has received no instructions from the Municipal authorities as to where they are to go.”\(^{32}\) Regulating building structures was also ineffective through the use of by-laws in the Municipal Acts. The same officer recounted with considerable frustration the following incidences:

\(^{31}\) MCRCOB, 1884-1885, 223.

\(^{32}\) MCRCOB, 1884-1885, 227.
Plans for almost every description of insanitary buildings are submitted....A man intends to rebuild his house, in the rear of which ten or twelve feet of open space had been left for ventilation. On submitting plans he is perhaps called upon by the Municipality to set back his house ten feet. What is the consequence? He does not diminish the size of the house and still leave an open space in the rear of ten feet; he literally sets his house back ten feet, and then builds on the open space which had originally been left for ventilation, thus shutting out light and air from the rear portion of his dwelling, and rendering the back rooms dark, unwholesome dens, into which light and pure air never enter....The most perfect drainage...etc. will not effect public health if house sanitation is so woefully neglected as it is in Bombay in present time. A privy is occasionally built inside a house and overhanging a well; on another occasion a similar structure is built within three feet of a well of drinking water, and a drain is constructed to carry sewage within a foot and a half of the same well; a privy is built or rebuilt underneath inhabited rooms; and yet, notwithstanding the self-evident danger to the public health arising from this and that, such arrangements are opposed to the most rudimentary principles of sanitation, so accustomed have people in Bombay become to them that I have been gravely informed by otherwise fairly intelligent men that such contrivances are ‘unobjectionable.’ In such cases it is hopeless to argue and useless to make comments...any intelligent man ought to be able to comprehend and understand how his own health and life and the health of his fellow-citizen may be sacrificed to a disregard of the first principles of house sanitation.\(^{33}\)

The health officer was bemoaning the limitations of official power and the influence of other motivations besides “the health of a fellow citizen” in the construction of dwelling units and their necessary sanitation. While money was being spent by the Municipal office on “sanitary improvements” such as the widening of roads, street drainage, etc., the fact remained that housing was being constructed by private citizens without any regard to the sanitation of the city at all. Thus, the municipality’s work on utilities and spatial widening was being undermined by market practices in housing just as it was proceeding. Inadequate by-laws and the lack of their enforcement were blamed. The problem was the cost of each; both the costs of municipal sanitation in public spaces were too high and there was no financial motivation for private persons to follow sanitary principles. A prior report from 1870 was cited; Dr. Hewlett, when speaking of respiratory and other illnesses borne of unsanitary urban conditions, said,

How can it be otherwise in a city where, in that portion where the masses live, every square yard is of fabulous value, and where there exist no laws to regulate the height of houses and

\(^{33}\) **MCRCOB**, 1884-1885, 224-225.
width of streets, or space between the adjacent buildings, and where the internal arrangements are not under any control; where, for the sake of greed, owners of property run up ranges of buildings, divided into as many compartments as possible...

He gave as an example a building on “Dewjee Dongria Street” which was 11 feet wide, with a depth of 70 feet, separated from a house opposite it by a “sweepers’ gully” 3 feet broad. Buildings were constructed as large as possible and subdivided into as many “compartments” as possible, in order to accommodate the most number of people at minimum cost. “Greed” is what this health officer used to describe that proclivity. The homeowner in question was unable to value the health of his fellow-citizens more than the money he could make by letting out as many units in his building as possible.

Although the health officer thought the lack of concern for fellow citizens was a problem of the average Bombay homeowner in particular, the fact was that based on financial motivation alone, nowhere, in no city, had house sanitation and thus a disease-free city been made without public intervention. It took public funds, financial incentives for private builders, or severe penalties that would be enforced, for the collective life of market activity to evince a concern for public sanitation and community well being. The health officer in Bombay who was complaining about housing sanitation along with other issues was asking for such interventions. Concerned about the supply of milk in the city, he said that all cattle stables within the city of Bombay should be controlled by the Municipality. The city should thus clean each stable but somehow transfer that expense to the owners of the stables. Furthermore, he observed that all

34 MCRCOB, 1884-1885, 225.

large towns in England had some form of medical care which was delivered into the homes of the residents, including the poor, called the Union Medical system. This didn’t exist in Bombay and so people either made their way to a dispensary or died at home. He said, “...I think, right, both in the interests of the public health as well as from motives of humanity, that the Corporation should organize some system by which the benefit of medical science may be made available in the homes of the poor.” His advice was ineffectual.

This fact, that government intervention was necessary to create a truly public citizenry, in the literal sense of that term, functioned as a limit to colonial rule. The British government was waiting for native leaders to organize such systems amongst themselves. The government would sit back and assess and judge whether the natives were financially and morally ready to start such programs, and then provide minimal resources in terms of legislative or financial support for such ventures. Native leaders would hear complaints like the health officers’ and wait for the British government to start such programs as they had heard existed in England. While everyone waited for everyone else to take the initiatives, the production and consumption of housing continued from the ground up. Besides the relatively minimal interventions in supplies of water, roadways, lighting or other amenities, urban officials were enlisted in the more scientific process of counting, assessing, and understanding the degree of land use in the city, in order to gain an accurate portrait of housing conditions in the city. This quantitative knowledge was presumably necessary before more widespread interventions could be designed. There was as of yet, much to be learned about native urban life.

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36 *MCRCOB, 1884-1885, 227.*
Quantifying Housing

The first city census was in 1864 and thus it is those figures which must serve as a baseline for understanding Bombay’s growth. Following the city census reports and just using the numbers provided without any corrections due to the changing definitions of housing, the following chart is a summary of the major measurements in the five decades prior to the first world war:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Housing Units</th>
<th>Housing Density</th>
<th>Persons per acre</th>
<th>Area of City included</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1864</td>
<td>816,562</td>
<td>25,664</td>
<td>30.587</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1872</td>
<td>644,405 (62% male) (31.13% Bombay - born)</td>
<td>29,691 (23,882 tenements)</td>
<td>20.93</td>
<td>52.14</td>
<td>18 sq. mi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>773,196 (60.11% male) (27.76% Bombay - born)</td>
<td>73,033 tenements, 29823 buildings</td>
<td>*See Table 4 below</td>
<td>52.52 (12 to 67 from Sion to 2nd Nagpada)</td>
<td>22 sq. mi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>56,959</td>
<td></td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>776,006 (23% Bombay - born)</td>
<td>30,125</td>
<td>51.47</td>
<td></td>
<td>22.4 sq. mi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>979,445 (19.56% Bombay - born)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22.8 sq. mi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig. 3.1** Distribution of Bombay’s population by housing and acreage in the city.
Source: Numerical information collected from five census reports. The blank spaces indicate a lack of information in the reports themselves. Between reports, criterion for measurement changed quite a bit and sometimes not even the same data were provided across reports.

Although in 1864 the average density per housing unit was 30.5 people per house, this average was far from some of the densest areas, such as in Dongree, where it was 83.57 people per house. The range of housing density across Bombay’s neighborhoods shows how concentrated urban
life was in parts of Bombay. The number of housing units, even with changing definitions, always increased.

It is still worth emphasizing that each census was conducted with a new set of concerns and a new set of criterion for measurement. While these changes in criterion attest to the way in which housing was culturally constructed and always changing, it is hard then to make broad generalizations or discern patterns. For example, in the 1872 Census, a distinction was made between the 23,882 tenements and 5,809 inhabited outhouses. It wasn’t clear what an outhouse was and census writers themselves disagreed on these definitions. The census official said,

Opinions as to the distinction between a house and an outhouse would differ; enumerators in different portions of the city might hold different opinions as to what constituted a house, and what an outhouse, and even in regard to the definition of a “house” there was room for a perverse difference of opinion and interpretation; there could, however, be little room for misunderstanding as to the number of stories or floors in a building, and as to whether a building was inhabited or uninhabited: therefore it is possible that the number of houses by floors at each enumeration afford the most accurate data for ascertaining and contrasting the dwelling accommodation of the population at each period.37

Given the differences in opinion in classifying buildings overall, but floors could easily be counted and thus they could agree to that. One thing was clear though, people could be found sleeping in outhouses.

As another example, the multi-family building or the tenement, prior to 1881, counted as one house. If it seems that the number of houses increased drastically from 1864 to 1881, one must correct for the fact that what counted as a house also changed. In 1881, each individual unit within a tenement building counted as a house. Due to the overcrowding created by the rural influx into the city from the famine, the “tenement” was introduced into the vocabulary of the city census which meant an individuated unit within a building. This was justified as a “census

37 COBC, 1881, 33-34.
conception” of a house whereas the house of the previous census was pertinent to the assessment register, that is the taxing body.\textsuperscript{38} The counting of houses and people had to accommodate the habitations and practices of those being counted in order to get a more accurate and useful view of city life. After using the previous definition of a house, that space enclosed between four external walls, officials stated that:

\begin{quote}
...at a later stage a further definition was considered necessary with a view to ascertain more fully the collocation of the population; this definition was necessarily arbitrary, but still it was capable of practical application and easily understood; a house – or, as I shall speak of it hereafter, with a view to distinguish the house of the first definition, - “a tenement” – was defined to be “a building used for any purpose, or a dwelling-place of one or more families, with tenants, occupants or servants having a separate entrance from a public road or thoroughfare or yard or open space.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

Separate entrances were separately numbered so that individual tenements could be counted as separate homes. This was different both from what was occurring in England and the definition used in Bombay in 1872 where one building was one house. Thus the sheer quantity of houses being increased in this Census may reflect that more units are being counted not just that more units were built.

Regardless of how houses were counted through the entire second half of the 19th century, it is likely the case that crowding was more of a problem than the quantitative analyses of the census reports tell us. People were likely to under-report how many people slept in a single unit and officials were likely to over-count units which probably shouldn’t have counted as an individuated unit. Officials likely missed units entirely in their surveys. The alarm expressed by census officials in their reports when they walked into houses and encountered overcrowding first hand tells us more about the extent and state of poor housing in Bombay in this period than

\begin{footnotes}
\item[38] COBC, 1881, 34.
\item[39] COBC, 1881, 33.
\end{footnotes}
the quantitative figures, even if that is what we have to work with. Additionally, one house, i.e. one unit, could have been and often was a multi-family unit. Bombay was full of multi-story homes, a unique feature of the city. An official noted the verticality of Bombay’s building structures when he said: “Of 23,751 buildings in Calcutta, only 6% have more than 2 stories against 33.5% in Bombay (and the buildings in Bombay having more than 2 stories are 3% greater than in 1872)” \(^{40}\) Many such houses were completely unvisited and unseen by the official gaze. When officials expressed alarm over the state of crowding in Bombay upon the outbreak of disease, they were often shocked that Bombay’s population had grown, piled on top of each other, without anyone noticing until a disease broke out. In fact, it just happened to be the first time officials noticed and meant to do something about it.

Inequality in housing is one of the best measures we have for social inequality within the urban society. The most obvious measure of social inequality when it comes to housing would have been the relative cost of living, which is the percentage of income spent on housing for different classes. What would be most useful is the cost of living over the five decades, but in determining that we encounter the problem of inconsistent and incomplete information. Some census reports provide that kind of information while others don’t. Also the costs used depend on housing assessments conducted by Municipal officers for the purposes of collecting taxes, and the problems encountered in that process were numerous and thus the data was unreliable. Even when the cost of housing is provided, they are the products of guesses and observations by census workers who can’t access all the information. These houses ranged from a value of Rs. 80 annually or slightly under that up to Rs. 1000 annually and upwards.\(^ {41}\)

\(^ {40}\) COBC, 1881, 38.

\(^ {41}\) COBC, 1872, 19.
Thus, we must rely on inequality in space and housing density which are provided below.

In the 1872 Census, the following table was provided which divided the population density by neighborhoods. The average was 52.14 persons per acre and the numbers below show the deviation from the mean. Some similar numbers were provided in 1881 for the areas of greatest population increase called the “rural and suburban” districts, Parell, Sewree, and Sion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area/Neighborhood</th>
<th>Persons to an acre in 1872</th>
<th>Persons to an acre in 1881</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chuckla</td>
<td>763.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumbarwada</td>
<td>634.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oomberkharee</td>
<td>582.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khara Talao</td>
<td>575.83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market</td>
<td>512.31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhuleshwar</td>
<td>501.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandwee</td>
<td>447.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhobi Talao</td>
<td>442.57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dongree</td>
<td>376.59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort, Northern</td>
<td>320.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parell</td>
<td>9.74</td>
<td>16.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewree</td>
<td>7.95</td>
<td>12.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahaluxmee</td>
<td>7.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sion</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombay Average</td>
<td>52.14</td>
<td>52.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig. 3.2** Neighborhood population density.
Source: *Census of City and Island of Bombay, 1872, 1881*. Blank spaces indicate unavailable data.

While the above table (Table 2) showed population density per acre of land, population density per housing unit also showed similar inequities across neighborhoods, and changes over time.

For example, in Dongree, one of the densest neighborhoods in the 1860s and 1870s, the housing

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42 *COBC, 1872, 16-19.*

43 *COBC, 1881, 37.*
density was double, if not more, that of the average in the city. Yet, as the cotton boom and bust progressed, the housing density more than halfed in Dongree, whereas in the city as a whole it became two-thirds the original amount.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Year</th>
<th>Housing Density in Dongree</th>
<th>Average Housing Density in Bombay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1864</td>
<td>83.57</td>
<td>30.587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1872</td>
<td>40.69</td>
<td>20.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 3.3 Dongree’s housing density.  
Source: Compiled by author.

The data about Dongree suggests that while those residing in Dongree were probably some of the least well-off residents of Bombay through the cotton boom and bust, their housing conditions were also the most elastic, i.e. responsive to the changing dynamics of the markets in cotton, land, housing, and labour. For many imperial observers, urban officials, and later development economists, elasticity is an excellent measure of degree of integration into markets, and yet this measure has not been used to assess the lower and mobile classes’ integration into market conditions.

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44 A British official, G. Wingate, commenting on the responsiveness of the peasantry in Khandesh to the increased demand for cotton for export through Bombay in the 1850s prior to the cotton boom, agreed with other officials that the peasantry was becoming integrated into the larger economy. However, he disagreed with officials who saw peasants in districts further south who continued to cultivate coarse grains such as jowar, bajra, and nachni as unintegrated. He said, “The observation, however, is most unjust to them, for, with the great populations of Bombay and Poona to feed within easy distance, it so happens that grain crops in the arid climates of those collectorates pay better than cotton or other exportable products, and this is the reason why they are so extensively grown.” As quoted in Jairus Banaji, “Capitalist Domination and the Small Peasantry,” 1377.
By 1881, the city’s neighborhoods had continued to grow and transform in uneven ways. The following table shows the neighborhoods of Bombay with the six highest housing densities in the city:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sections</th>
<th>Persons to a House</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd Nagpada</td>
<td>67.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esplanade</td>
<td>55.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarwaree</td>
<td>46.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koombarwara</td>
<td>36.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandvee</td>
<td>35.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chukla</td>
<td>33.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig. 3.4** Neighborhoods of Bombay with the highest housing density in 1881. Source: Compiled by author from *Census of Bombay City, 1881*, 35.

Although the average housing density was not provided for that year, we can remember that in 1872, the housing density averaged around 21 people per house. Dongree was no longer one of the densest neighborhoods in 1881. 2nd Nagpada was the densest and it would remain so for decades to come and also later become the first large scale project of the Improvement Trust in its first “scheme.”

The number of floors per building also increased by about 25% and census takers voiced concern that there was no regulation over this or requirements for open spaces around buildings. Most six story buildings were found in Fort North, while the majority of one-story buildings were in Sion, which was called the “section of groups of villages.” As discussed earlier,

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45 *COBC, 1881*, 34-35.
Bombay’s multi-story buildings distinguished it from Calcutta as well, where two-story buildings were more common.

Such changes in density per housing unit were indicative of the viability of the production and consumption of housing to be responsive to other market changes. It also indicated the intense mobility of the majority of Bombay’s population. The decrease in housing density between 1864 and 1872, for example, indicated that people were able to move outwards, space themselves out more, and thus must have had the money to afford more space for themselves. It also indicated that the housing construction sector, of which we have very little information, responded quickly to demand.\footnote{Ian Kerr, “On the Move: Circulating Labor in Pre-Colonial, Colonial, and Post-Colonial India,” \textit{International Review of Social History} 51 (2006): pp. 85-109.}

When there wasn’t a disease, a market crash, or some extraordinary factor, the production of tenement buildings kept up with the need for housing quite well. Migrants were industrious, joining construction operations and keeping up with the demand for housing. The native tenement buildings increased in number and therefore accommodated the migrating and reproducing population. This was not always fast enough to accommodate people at the same rate per house, so crowding within “houses” fluctuated. For example, between 1864 and 1872, the population decreased by 172,157 persons but the number of tenements went up from 23,882 to 25,664.\footnote{COBC, 1872, 18} This temporarily decreased the overcrowding, but that was quickly compensated for through the 1870s and 1880s when famine and other factors contributed to the urbanization trend.

Tenements, individuated units within buildings, were built from the inside out. It was inhabitants and landlords who constructed more and more walls within units to divide and sub-
divide housing as the need for accommodation grew. Any building could much more easily have
its number of units multiplied from the inside rather than add space on the outside. Thus units
became smaller and smaller. Kamatheepura, the section infamous for its questionable
commercial character, the red-light districts, had the highest number of tenements, 5099 in that
neighborhood alone out of a total of 73,033 tenements in all of Bombay.⁴⁸ Thus Kamateepoora
(the spelling changed often, sometimes being spelled, “Camateepura”) was very well developed
by this time. The residents must have been an enterprising sort who were able to both produce
and consume housing according to their needs. The buildings divided into tenements in such a
great number indicated intense human effort and organization from within the mobile population.
There must have been a hierarchy of occupants within the neighborhood of Kamatheepura, with
profit seeking landlords and indebted tenants combining to form the density which officials
observed and maligned.

The “chall” (chawl) too was included too for the first time in 1881, although it was not
specifically defined. It was clearly the local word for a multi-unit building which could be used
as a dwelling place or a workplace but it isn’t clear in the reports what distinguishes a chall from
another type of tenement. Out of a total of 28,315 houses or “tenements,” 4,139 were “challs,”
i.e. they were that class of tenements called “challs.”⁴⁹

In counting houses in 1901 during the years of containing the plague, the definition of a
house changed again. This time, not the space within the four external walls, nor the multifamily
tenement determined quantity of housing, rather a “separate house was held to mean a building
under one undivided roof.” Subsidiary roofs, which connected servants’ quarters to the main

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⁴⁸ COBC, 1881, 35.
⁴⁹ COBC, 1881, 34.
roof, rendered the whole roof one roof. This change in definition made comparison of number of houses with previous years impossible. While individual units within one large building counted as a house prior to 1901, now the shared roof rendered the whole building one housing unit. A sketch of a “one-floor chal,” a prevalent structure throughout Bombay, was also provided to show how a previous 7 unit structure was now considered only one house. (See Figure 1)

![One story chawl diagram]

**Fig. 3.5 One story chawl.**
Source: This drawing was provided in the Census of Bombay City report of 1901 as an example of one-story chawl.

In the prior census, “A” through “G” would have been seven different houses, in this they were considered one house. This made temporal comparisons once again futile. Whereas in 1891, officials found 56,959 occupied houses, in 1901 they found 30,125.⁵⁰

The definition of house as meaning a building under one roof was at odds with the way people experienced their dwelling space, often referring to a single unit within the building as their house:

⁵⁰*COBC*, 1901, 14.
The illiterate tenant or owner of room A or D or G, calls that room his ‘house’ or ‘ghar’; and we believe that this view of the “house” was adopted by the census authorities of 1891, and that a separate census number was affixed to each of those separate rooms. But, according to the arrangements in 1901, the whole building containing those seven rooms was looked upon as one separate house, and was marked with one house number: while the seven rooms were regarded merely as tenements in that one building.\textsuperscript{51}

Thus, the number of houses between 1891 and 1901 couldn’t have shown the accurate increase brought about by human efforts at building and subdividing buildings, especially as must have been needed to accommodate their growing numbers.

Northern sections of the city, especially Mahim, Worli and Sion, had the largest number of houses. However, there was no overcrowding problem because a good portion of them were “scattered huts.”\textsuperscript{52} This showed that the style of housing didn’t matter, officials were merely concerned with density of housing on an acre of land. Scattered huts were not considered illegitimate forms of housing. The City Improvement Trust’s targets were overcrowded areas from which disease was thought to spread. There was no demand to have housing made of permanent materials. The huts were not marked as illegitimate in anyway because they were well spaced out, and this was true throughout the Trust’s operations.\textsuperscript{53} The tendency amongst the population was to relocate northwards where more open space could be had, and they could potentially escape the plague.

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{COBC}, 1881, 13.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{COBC}, 1901, 14.

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{COBC}, 1911, 3-4.
This was suburbanization by the people, not through city policy.\textsuperscript{54} Officials said, “If plague leads to suburbanization it will have had one good result. So long as a city refuses inoculation its only safety lies in evacuation.”\textsuperscript{55} As in London, suburbanization was not encouraged or enforced by the Municipality. Officials weren’t developing land on the outskirts of the city, people were fleeing there because of the gravity of the plague and they were doing so of their own accord. The government had little influence over the patterns of urban settlement until the Trust was formed.

The most built up areas were Chakla, Kumbharwada, Kamathipura, the Market, Khara Talao, Bhuleshwar, and 2nd Nagpada. Growth of housing corresponded with the growth of population.\textsuperscript{56} Incoming populations had increased the structural accommodation for themselves, not needing official support. By the 1911 Census, the City Improvement Trust’s work was well underway. Thus the fewest number of houses were found in 1st Nagpada, the site of the Trust’s first “scheme.” The Trust had pulled down many buildings. Officials didn’t regret the change in housing availability in Nagpada because they knew it would be temporary, and they referred to the buildings which were pulled down as “insanitary rookies.”\textsuperscript{57}

The link between poverty and housing was known, however, but not much was made of it. In the year 1901, 80% of the total tenement population lived in one-room tenements, and the average number of people in the one-room tenements was between 4 and 5 people. It was noted,

\textsuperscript{54} COBC, 1911, 9.
\textsuperscript{55} COBC, 1911, 9.
\textsuperscript{56} COBC, 1901, 15.
\textsuperscript{57} COBC, 1911, 9.
“These facts point very clearly to the high cost of living in the city and the poverty of the majority of Bombay residents.”

The overcrowding in Bombay became worse between the famines of the 1870s and the plague of 1896-7. After the plague, however, many escaped sickness and death by leaving the city, most likely temporarily. The plague resulted in total density of cities like Bombay, Calcutta, and London becoming more comparable, as depicted in Table 5 below. The total density for the island decreased from 57.7 in 1891 to 51.47, more like London, which had 56 people per acre and Calcutta, which had 54 per acre.

The plague caused many houses to be uninhabited. In some areas up to one-third of all houses were empty. The greatest exodus from the plague happened in Wards C and D. While this did create temporary relief in the demand for housing, housing was no less of a concern for officials after the plague. The inability to contain and manage the plague made housing reform a key priority for officials, who believed more radical measures had to be taken to stop the spread of disease, and to prevent such an outbreak from ever taking over the city again.

Temporary housing camps sprung up by those wishing to leave the dangers of illness but not having homes in the “interior” to return to. Temporary camps also emerged in the Northern parts of the city at Mahim, Dadar, Sion as well as more sparsely throughout the city. Watching neighbors die or become infirm created a general state of panic throughout which led people to alter their housing conditions very quickly. Those who could leave did, and those who couldn’t

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58 COBC, 1901, 68.
59 COBC, 1901, 11.
60 COBC, 1901, 14.
61 COBC, 1901, 5.
stayed or fled to the temporary camps. In the Market, Fanaswadi, Girgaum, Chowpatty, Walkeshwar and Mahalaxmi, anywhere from one-fifth to one-third of houses was found uninhabited due to the plague exodus. The main areas from which people fled the plague were Fort North, Market, Dhobi Talao, Bhuleshwar, Girgaum and Chowpatty.⁶²

Three main groups of people did not flee the plague. One were the Muslims who did not leave the city during the plague. Officials referred to places like Kharatalao, Chakla, Umarkhadi, and 2nd Nagpada as “Mahommedan areas” and estimated that the six sections of greatest density in 1901, the Muslim population of four of them averages between 62-67% of the total, and in the other two, Kumbharwada and Kamathipura, they are a close second after the Hindus.

The most likely explanation for why the Muslims of Bombay didn’t flee the plague in the way Hindus did is because the Muslims didn’t have homes in the interior to return to. The earliest butchers in the city were Muslims, and in the 1860s there was a “Beef Butchers and Mutton Butchers strike” because the officials were attempting to move their market into a new location which the butchers were objecting to due to anticipated loss of business.⁶³ This was also true for some of the labouring and working classes, some of whom fled to the northern parts of town while other stayed put. The only other community to have homes solely in Bombay and nowhere else were the Parsis, who left Gujarat’s cities through the 18th and 19th centuries and settled in Bombay. Even the middle and poorer classes of Parsis, who lived in Fort North and Dhobi Talao, didn’t flee the plague, having lived there for two centuries and also representing the community with the highest percentage of its population born in Bombay.⁶⁴

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⁶² COBC, 1901, 10.
⁶³ MCRCOB, 1868, 6-7.
⁶⁴ COBC, 1901, 44.
Therefore we can assume that if the measurement of when Bombay becomes a “home” is when people stop migrating circularly and using the city as a place of temporary sojourn, but rather see it as a place of permanent residence, then Bombay becomes a home first for Muslims, the labouring and working classes, and the Parsis. The remainder of the urban population seems to maintain connections to locations elsewhere throughout the 19th and early 20th century.

Another indicator of “home making” in Bombay was when migrant communities also included women. In 1901, officials noted that the proportion of females is highest in Dongri, then Kamathipura, and then 2nd Nagpada, all working class neighborhoods with Kamathipura particularly infamous for its sex workers. The lowest proportions of females were in Upper Colaba, the Esplanade, and South Fort, namely the sites of merchant communities’ settlement, and they had nearly half the proportion of females as those areas with the highest.\footnote{COBC, 1901, 25.} Thus, labourers were more likely to have complete families in the city than the capitalists.
Compared to London, the number of buildings per square acre was very high throughout the five decades. London’s densest section had 22 buildings per acre, while the densest area in Bombay in 1881, Kharatalao, had 35 houses to an acre. Even though there were fewer buildings in Bombay than in London, the buildings were more closely built together. In terms of population density too, the most dense section of London had 222 persons per acre, which was
still less dense than the 12 most densely populated sections of Bombay. The most densely populated area of Bombay had 759 persons per acre. These numbers are depicted in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Highest Buildings /acre</th>
<th>Highest Persons/acre</th>
<th>Persons/acre in 1901</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>759</td>
<td>51.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td></td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig. 3.7** Greatest Density of Bombay and London compared.
Source: Compiled by author.

Bombay’s average of buildings per acre was 2 buildings to every acre which was thought to be a low figure since the city had recently grown and there was a “rural character still of its suburban districts.” In the six most crowded sections there were 24 houses to an acre, but in five suburban districts there were .59 houses to an acre. Bombay’s land use patterns, density of people, and general overcrowding was worse than London’s even though London had a much larger population overall.

Comparisons like the one to Calcutta’s two story homes or the density of English towns were made on occasion within Bombay’s census reports. Housing density in Bombay easily surpassed housing density in English towns, where between 1811 and 1871 the number of people to a house increased from 5.45 to 7.78 persons to a house. English towns and Bombay appeared worlds apart from those numbers alone, but there wasn’t a clear explanation as to why. Neither was this a case of Europe opposed to Asia, nor North Atlantic political economy versus Indian Ocean political economy. Officials observed astutely:
Indeed, what has been said of Scotland may with equal truth be applied to Bombay, that “families instead of living on earth in pure air with the sky over their dwellings, in many instances prefer lying stratum over stratum in flats opening into a common staircase, ‘a continuation of the street’ as it has been called, which receives the organic emanations of the families on each floor.” (Vide Census Report, 1861.)

The “preference” of families was marshaled here as the explanation for difference, a preference that made Bombay seem more like Scotland. They chose to live in continuity with the street and in proximity to other families, not choosing to separate themselves off from street life or the “organic emanations” of other people.

Conclusion

This chapter has followed the development of housing from the ground up and foregrounded the industriousness of Bombay’s migrants and labourers in building the city. As late as the 1860s, this process included the steady replacement of agrarian lands with housing and buildings. This chapter has explored the culture of housing and the unstable meanings of housing in the city of Bombay between 1864-1900. Although officials saw housing mainly from a consumption point of view based on simple proclivities to live in certain ways, we have seen above that housing is best understood as a complex commodity. Housing combined the dynamics of other component markets in materials and labour, and it was an elastic form, responding well to changes in other component markets. It was also both a sign of social stratification and itself productive of that stratification. Settlers in neighborhoods were able to solidify and enhance

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66 COBC, 1872, 19.
bonds of reciprocation and were also capable of forming new terms of engagement through cohabitation in the city. Such social relations were a part of the culture of the housing market.

The process began from below with migrants settling in the city, occupying lands, and building varying housing styles. Officials did not create clear correspondences between housing types and their legitimacy. They struggled to define what a “house” or “home” meant and the definition changed with every census. As units became subdivided from within to accommodate more people and divide families from each other, it became more difficult to keep track of what counted as a single house. The housing style didn’t matter. The only noteworthy feature for officials was the density which was only occasionally true during periods of illness. Bombay’s socially and spatially mobile population, the working classes and the poor, tended to reside in vertically built structures comparable to other classes of housing units throughout Bombay. The housing market was a site of advanced organization in which labouring, poor, and socially mobile migrants were able to be responsive to changing demand and supply in units of housing, materials, labour, and industry which drove the need to construct housing.

By the end of the 19th century, in the contexts of demographic changes which had led to the first phase of urbanization of the world’s population, Bombay was the home to a densely built environment in which the migrating and labouring classes of the city played a major role in the construction of that density. They moved into and out of the city as a way to make opportunities for themselves and as a way to negotiate their changing worlds. They moved not out of ignorance of the changes around them but because they read those changes and responded to them as best they could and built housing in the city with an eye to maintaining their own social reproduction and mobility. They were creators of that world transformation and negotiated
the limitations and opportunities it presented them. In the next chapter, we turn to the role of the plague in changing the meaning of housing in the city.
Chapter Four: 
Unsanitary Dwellings

The outbreak of the global plague at the end of the nineteenth century, beginning in 1896, centered on port cities and inland nodes of human mobility and commerce. In response to the plague, there emerged reform projects focused on solving the problem of poor housing through the eradication or sanitation of urban slums. Broad measures were considered which sought to reorganize urban space in ways that lent itself to surveillance, monitoring, and intervention. Accompanying this was the consolidation of new authorities to the moneyed classes within the city. Knowledge about each city was crucial to enacting these transformations. Bombay’s city census had constructed a kind of knowledge about housing in the city, living conditions, and family life which could, at times like these, serve as a tool for slum demolitions and more intimate interventions in the making of housing.

The moneyed classes were the most vocal dependents on the health of city, without which their fortunes would dwindle. Thus, they sought to sanitize their urban environments. They started to see housing as a cause of the poor health of the city rather than see housing as an effect of inequalities endemic to urban life, free markets, or industrialization. In addition to those who sought more state intervention to protect the population from plague, e.g., local leaders, businessmen, and even rising nationalists, numerous others fled authorities in droves. Two hundred thousand people fled Bombay during the plague, and clashes between residents and authorities made these few years increasingly violent.

The overt conflict between residents and officials has influenced the historiography on the plague in Bombay. Scholars cite moments such as the condemning and destruction of the slums of Bombay during the plague as evidence of an insurmountable gap between the
colonizers and the colonized. Such scholars see these moments as exemplary of colonial imposition and intervention in native society and its social forms. Such interpretations require repeating the very justifications given by local leaders and officials who managed the spread of illness in these heightened times, and who, not coincidentally, wrote the records we have to rely on. What this chapter shows instead, is that the urban housing issue, which motivated displacement and rehousing of the urban poor in every major city of the world, was not just a product of racial divisions in society, but was itself productive of race and class itself. Furthermore, such a production had a very local context in which a cadre of urban reformers were made elite caretakers of the health of the city. Conflict over the anti-plague measures resulted in new consensuses across communities that intervention was needed in the arena of poor housing.

This consensus was formed in numerous ways. First, there was the question of who would represent the interests of the poor. Employers and elites of particular religious or ethnic communities were elevated to the status of representers of the poor. Second, housing itself was a commodity with its own production process requiring inputs of materials and labour. Officials and elites sought to intervene in that process. Third, poor housing was recognized as creating social relations amongst the labouring and working classes such that controlling the forms of habitation could become one tool for the disciplining of labour. By inciting or encouraging competition, complacency, or loyalty and allegiance to landlords and employers, many of whom were often one and the same person, social bonds across classes could be used to engineer social and labour controls.
Thus, city elites and government officials gained support for intervening in poor housing where they previously had no support before. A consensus formed around the demand to cleanse the city of the poor and the poor’s habitation practices were the main target. Since the entire city was suffering commercially, they were able to justify imposing their own meanings of housing onto an otherwise dynamic field. They distinguished between good and bad housing, whereas prior to the plague multiple voices defined housing in multiple ways. A “slum” came to indicate homes in which many people dwelled together or in which there was relatively little ventilation, lighting, or means to dispose of waste. It was also the name given to less profitable housing from the point of view of municipal taxation. “Slums” had the ability to reduce the commercial viability of the city; they were the overcrowded or dirty quarters, which were especially troubling if they were located in the center of the city, or near the elite quarters in South Bombay. Because the “sanitary credit” of the city had declined, merchants too found themselves aligned with official interests. The outbreak of plague was the catalyst for government officials, for the first time, to successfully interfere in the housing market in Bombay and they could do so because they were able to create a consensus around the problem of poor housing.

The creation of a consensus amongst Bombay’s various societies served to make a new urban elite who justified the notions that poor housing had to be interfered in and that a Trust had to be formed. What started as a conflict between the people who were avoiding, fleeing, and sabotaging sanitation officers efforts and those invested in urban sanitation ended with concessions across conflicting interests among the elites of commercial communities. The notion was agreed on that the projects of slum clearances, poor housing sanitation reforms, and
displacements and re-housings of unsanitary dwellers were the only way to restore the city’s status as a world port.

Nonetheless, some tension remained as a conflict between merchants and government or city officials, which will be explored in later chapters. For local merchants and commercial elites, slums were profitable because they kept the costs of social reproduction low for the labouring classes. Decades later in Bombay and in Bombay’s peripheries, merchants and officials would disagree on the need for intervention in housing and the plague. The Trust’s activities proved to be a temporary moment of agreement between the two groups. Where commercial elites and merchants could get away with not supporting interventions in poor housing, they did so, keeping their labour costs low. This was especially possible in other major cities of the Bombay Presidency like Karachi and Aden which served as Bombay’s peripheries, and even within some unofficial parts of Bombay itself. The financial schemes set forth by the Government to finance the City Improvement Trust of Bombay were able to keep moneyed interests invested in poor housing in Bombay city, but the financial schemes weren’t broadly applicable.

**Immobility of Capital and Mobility of Disease**

Plague broke out in port cities across the world in the last decade of the 19th century. The disease spread across East Asia in Hong Kong and Canton as early as 1894, and Bombay in 1896 and 1897, continuing onwards to infect port cities across the Middle East, sub-Saharan and North Africa, old world and new. The scale of the disease was so immense, in port cities alone, that it brought to the fore the problems created by increased mobility through the 19th century and
became the condition within which pressures to permanently settle populations was heightened. The mobility of people was causing the immobility of capital. The global dynamics of the plague mapped on to the paths of world commerce and created what was called a decline in the “sanitary credit” of the city of Bombay. Business stagnated, investors retreated, transactions decreased, and foreign firms exited Bombay. The effect of this could be felt by everyone, on every rung of the social ladder. Merchants experienced a decline in the mere quantity of transactions their businesses were involved in. Migrant and settled labourers found themselves losing jobs and thus leaving the city; those who chose to stay found themselves bargaining their wages even lower in the more competitive labour market. In addition, the entire social climate in Bombay was changed by the plague. The state, by which I mean anyone acting in official interests, sought more control and penetration into society while society became more suspicious of those acting on behalf of the state. Conflicts over housing were central to those changes, but it is also important to understand the plague’s dynamics on the city as a whole.

The quantity of human devastation due to illness and death were enormously different across each city and the devastation was importantly never confined to cities. By the beginning of the 20th century, rural deaths surpassed urban ones in India and India had the highest mortality of all countries. In a span of 25 years starting in 1896, India’s mortality due to plague outnumbered the rest of the world combined four times over clearly indicating, amongst other things, that India’s population was highly mobile. India’s mortality was approximately 12 million people, whereas in the rest of the world combined the mortality was 3 million people.¹

Port cities and urban centers provided nodes from where the spread of contagion could be halted by reducing human mobility, and the plague alarmed officials into doing just that throughout the world. Besides commercial mobility, the pilgrimage to Mecca was singled out and stigmatized Muslims as spreaders of the plague, and as a threat to Europe. Yet, even the religious pilgrimage turned into an opportunity to blame local commercial actors. In the Bombay Gazette of Feb. 21, 1898, it was reported that the British Medical Journal wrote:

> The importance of Mecca as a ... disseminator of cholera, by means of Mohammedan pilgrims, by whom it is visited annually, is thoroughly understood, and it is not surprising that all European Governments, including Turkey, should hold strong views regarding the possible danger of plague being spread to Europe by pilgrims proceeding to Mecca from infected areas in India.... Jeddah, was last year an infected port... This is a subject of importance for those concerned not only with the pilgrimage from India, but from every part of the Mohammedan world. It is reported that Russia has decided to maintain the prohibition of Mohammedan pilgrimages from Russian territory for the current year; and it would seem that this is an example which other Governments - European, African, and Asiatic - would do well to follow.

The British Crown, especially after 1857, had resolved to practice non-interference in matters of native religion, at least in theory. The plague, however, and the suspicion it aroused about mobility changed that:

> In January and February, 1897, plague in Bombay was increasing by leaps and bounds....It needed no little moral courage to depart from the traditions of non-interference with religious customs by which the Indian Government has been guided so long.

This religious interference could now be justified since there was a commercial venture tied to the pilgrimage. The report continued, “It is believed that the plague was introduced by Hadramaut and Yemen merchants who trade with the pilgrims at Mecca.” Thus, the British Government of India constructed the radical position of halting all pilgrimages to Mecca from Bombay:

> Government of India has treated the Bombay Presidency as infected country isolating it from other parts of India. No person resident permanently or temporarily in the Bombay Presidency is to be permitted to embark from any port in India with the object of making a
pilgrimage to Mecca....The ports which are open to pilgrims are limited to Karachi in Scinde and Chittagong in the lower provinces of Bengal. Opinions are likely to differ as to the advisability of using Karachi, so recently the scene of an epidemic, as a port of embarkation. We should have thought it wiser to have given it a wide berth.  

Drastic measures were taken to stop the people’s mobility but yet many escaped surveillance which frustrated officials.

Local conditions of urban habitation also had to be changed. Indeed, the plague was one of the major motivating factors in propelling urban renewal movements from calm and calculated projects of minimal government interference into states of heightened frenzy in cities as far as San Francisco, London, and Bombay.

In Bombay in particular, it can be argued that the urban poor became subjects of state and official concern first as ill-housed in overcrowded and diseased quarters, and unkempt in customary forms of habitation, not as economically disadvantaged residents or even citizens. Even aspiring national leaders had concerns for the health of their people. Whereas in London the Cross Act, Dwelling Acts, and Poor Houses were institutional recognitions of market failures in housing prior to the outbreak of plague, in Bombay it was only once the contagion was released, and when disease became an impediment to imperial trade, that state officials decided they had to intervene in the lifestyles of the urban poor. Kamathipura, the neighborhood of high density, vertically built, with a large proportion of women, provided an example for how unclean Bombay had become. The Municipal Commissioner wrote:

2 “Plague and the Pilgrimage to Mecca,” Bombay Gazette, Monday, Feb. 21, 1898.


4 A “market failure” is a pseudo-technical term used by some economists and social commentators to refer the condition in which a demand for some good is unable to be fulfilled by the market supply due to obtrusive barriers to entry into the market or inability to recuperate initial investments such as in the case of poor housing.
I take one district in Kamathipura. Seventy percent of the buildings in this district are more or less unfit for human occupation from imperfect ventilation, and until Dec 1896 the effects of the imperfect ventilation and darkness were intensified by dampness caused through the position of the water pipes generally at the back of the last of the rooms. Most of the buildings consist of double rooms separated by a narrow passage. Some passages were so narrow that it was difficult to walk down them. On both sides of the passages are rooms. At the back of the rooms is a little open space wide enough to allow one to easily turn. On one side of this space was a water-pipe - on the other side a privy. All the clothes of the house are washed in this little space. The pavement is cemented and sometimes paved roughly, and is always wet from the dripping of water or from the washing of clothes. The walls of the outer rooms are splashed and wet. Except the front rooms, which often have no openings other than the door ways and the back rooms which open on to this little space, with the privy at one side and the water pipe on the other, the rooms have no means of ventilation. The entire rooms are in darkness and sometimes have a water pipe inside them. Dwellings of this kind depress the vital powers.⁵

This kind of description was driven by prevailing notions of public health, namely, that light and ventilation served as antidotes to disease. Narrow passages didn’t let air through which meant damp conditions couldn’t be dried out. Light too, if it couldn’t enter a home, couldn’t dry out and sanitize a space. Kamathipura’s residents had lived like this for years if not for decades prior to the plague, dividing and subdividing units, constructing connecting passageways, using the space as a home from which to find work in the city, and even turning their homes into places of work. The district’s infamy as the “red-light” district and the numerous women in the area attested to that. But it was not alone in being marked as “unfit for human habitation,” although it had 70% of dwellings in that single district alone marked in such a way. That number was rather high, but there were other areas as well which were stigmatized.

Internal housing conditions were a new focus of official concern. Prior to the plague, the case could be made that broad drainage schemes, waterways, and connecting roadways were important for the city’s health. Now, there was a doubt as to how effective that was. Officials

⁵ MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 593-594.
who visited the insides of these homes questioned the effectivity of a broad drainage scheme outside a building if the insides could not be cleaned.

...let us enter a building in Khara Talao inspected by His Excellency the Governor. There is a ground floor and a room over it. The length of the ground floor room is 111 feet and the width 18 1/2 feet. There is no means of ventilation on either side. In fact the room is a passage with a door in front between closed walls. We counted in this room 19 men, 21 women, and 17 children. What a life? What can anything done outside this room do for the people in their misery inside.  

These descriptions served to justify a more intimate intervention; it was the insides of the houses that would have to be changed. Such descriptions served to further justify visits like this from officials who could enter homes at will to inspect, manage, judge, and regulate. Such descriptions paved the way to justify removing the right to build housing from the ground up at all, regulations and standards would have to be met. A growing demand was emerging to regulate housing itself rather than just resolving to merely amend external communications outside of houses. Housing conditions were being cast as a primary cause for problems within the city. 

Urban centers and their status as nodes of human mobility meant that much of official attention was turned towards the state of human habitation within the bustling entrails of the city. In Bombay, the residents huddled together in dense and squalid ways, several families to a unit, within dense buildings and neighborhoods built over the several decades prior to the plague. Then, the plague prompted a mass exodus of both Indians and Europeans alike. Officials left when they heard of those amongst them succumbing to the illness. They began to fear for their own lives and thus asked leave from the imperial bureaucracy for permission to return to

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6 *MCRCOB*, 1896-1897, 594.
England. Those Indians who could returned to their villages hoping to seek refuge from the
disease and far from the city, while those who couldn’t migrated a few kilometers northwards to
sparsely populated neighborhoods like Sion where marshlands became sites of temporary
accommodation. Those left in the city became embroiled in the give and take of suspicion and
fear, inhabitants fearing the sanitation officials and sanitation officials suspected inhabitants of
harboring contagion.

The fear was about sick bodies and diseased bodies on the move. It wasn’t that the sickest
of all were the poor, but that the labouring and urban poor’s mobility served as the greatest threat
against the containment of disease, from whomever and wherever it came. Thus, the labouring
poor were thoroughly stigmatized by the onset of plague. By seeking mobility away from the
plague they were criticized as being ignorant, presumably not realizing that by moving they were
spreading disease. Mobility was causing the plague itself it was argued. Forms of temporary
settlement had meant people didn’t invest in building clean and suitable accommodations for
themselves, instead people crowded together exposing themselves to public health risks. The
increasing mobility of labouring bodies and capital, a welcome sign of advancing liberal
imperialism, would be the cause of its own undoing if Bombay’s housing wasn’t remedied. Both
British officials and Indian leaders observed this fact. They both sought to return the mobility
now halted by plague and criticized the mobility itself.

No one could be blamed for believing in or being attached to the commercial stature of
Bombay. Capital, labour, investments, and every form of business suffered during these years.
Some two hundred thousand people fled the city during the plague.7 Ward C and D had the

7 COBC, 1901, 8.
highest number of totally abandoned houses.\textsuperscript{8} Whereas just prior to the outbreak, Bombay had been the center of India’s cotton production. Over 70,000 workers worked in the industry, and cotton industry workers made up 10% of the total population.\textsuperscript{9} The goods which travelled on ships out of Bombay onwards led exchanges with other world cities and the ships themselves were becoming threatening to the people. As one scholar has noted: “It was frightening that not only cholera but also the dreaded Black Death could make its way on British ships from India, through the British-controlled Suez Canal, and into Europe’s Mediterranean or Atlantic Ports.” Supposedly an American doctor, a physician on the staff at Johns Hopkins University who visited Pune during the plague, reported that his experience “left him, ‘with an indelible impression of dreadful nightmare’ similar to what he imagined physicians felt in the fourteenth century.”\textsuperscript{10} The British were faced with the threat of embargoes against Indian goods and thus quarantined ships at Indian port cities, isolated potentially sick people, and took greater control over people’s mobility. In 1897, they passed the Epidemic Diseases Act, which satisfied many international trading partners.\textsuperscript{11} The ultimate driving force for the overtly beneficent gesture of a willingness to endure debt was the belief that restoring Bombay’s role in the networks of trade at the turn of the 20th century was so great that they could justify expenditures.

Thus, many vested interests, both British and Indian, had to restore the sanitary state of Bombay in order to restore commerce. The mobility of people had caused the immobility of capital. The global context of plague mapped onto the routes of capital and labour flows. What

\textsuperscript{8} COBC, 1901, 14.

\textsuperscript{9} Echenberg, \textit{Plague Ports}, 48.

\textsuperscript{10} Echenberg, \textit{Plague Ports}, 56.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
was called a decline in the “sanitary credit” of Bombay meant that business declined, investors retreated, transactions stagnated, and foreign firms exited Bombay. The effect of this was a decline in business, job losses, and the reduction of the population of Bombay. Restoring these required drastic measures which many inhabitants were unwilling to endure.

**Affect of State - Society relations**

The plague heightened both latent tensions between state officials and certain members of society in India and created new anxieties amongst the city’s inhabitants. The entire affect in Bombay was changed by the plague. The state sought more control and penetration into society while vocal members of Bombay’s various societies became more suspicious of those acting on behalf of the state. It made sense then, in such a context, that people would seek their own housing rather than live in state run shelters. So people were on the run, literally running away from checkpoints at shipping ports, railway stations, hospitals, and throughout the city. They sought refuge not in good housing but from sanitation officials, medical workers, the police, and even other sick people, many of whom could not unfortunately be identified until it was too late. At the same time, city officials, both old ones who had worked in the Municipal Commissioner’s office, and new ones who would be placed in the City Improvement Trust, were scheming and plotting ways to take full control of the city’s housing problem.

Stories were offered of native residents becoming aimless wanderers or purposeful fugitives. One account made a resident’s mobility seem almost like insanity, as if mental illness were a result of the disease:

The following is a case that escaped from Bombay on the 11th of October, an account of which will be interesting. A labourer by name P. T., caste Wani Waswul, was living on the north side of Musjid Bridge near the Police chowkey and working in a godown at Colaba. In
the afternoon of the 11th October, he felt feverish and afterwards noticed a swelling on the right foot, and became anxious to leave Bombay, and sent a telegram to a brother in Dhulia that he was coming to him. He left Bombay on the night of the 11th. On the morning of the 12th he arrived at Chalisgaon station. There he hired a tonga and on the way became very ill, but he now noticed that a bubo had appeared in the right groin, and, according to the account given by himself to the doctor at Dhulia, before his death, he was so terrified at the sight of the bubo that he fainted away. He reached Dhulia that evening, and died in hospital on the 14th of Bubonic Plague. This case illustrates the extraordinary desire to go somewhere or wander anywhere, that came over people suffering from Bubonic Plague. 

Also suggested by the account given above, presumably a first hand account from the ill man to a doctor, is that the sight of potential illness in himself, seeing the “bubo” on his right groin, was so terrifying that he fainted. People had become not only afraid of illness, but everything illness meant. Bearing witness to one’s own body succumbing to illness signified not just personal disease, but intense interference from city officials and all the loss of autonomy that would necessarily entail. The official said,

The desire to wander - the delirium of the disease - is very strange and pathetic. A patient, with a temperature of over 100 degrees, suddenly becomes influenced by his desire to wander. He leaves house, and if he is wealthy, he drives to a Railway station and tries to proceed to some place, and he cannot tell you why. I noticed this desire to wander in all classes, and it often precedes high fever and delirium. 

The wandering was noticed for wealthy and poor, Europeans and natives, and even people who once transported by ambulances, were found to have jumped out on the journey, just to avoid quarantines and treatments.

People had a motive to keep their illness and disease from the officials. One official reported that they were told no one was in a room in Kamathipura when they visited. They stood

12 MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 637-638.
13 MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 644.
14 Ibid.
outside the home and heard a moan, upon which they opened the door. They found a woman inside with a fever.\textsuperscript{15} In another house in the same neighborhood, they found a very ill man locked up in a room. Apparently he had been locked in there by a relative or friend who had gone away the night before, presumably to protect him from officials while he was away.\textsuperscript{16} Yet another instance involved the case of a “mad woman” from a chawl in Mandvi, who had no one to take care of her. When removed to the hospital by plague officials, she purportedly recovered.\textsuperscript{17} The majority of official narrations of such encounters included their noticing that the room of the ill inhabitant was completely dark.

People were so petrified of officials interference in their health that they sometimes threatened to kill themselves rather than see a loved one removed to a hospital. The following account is worth reproducing here:

On one occasion in Kamathipura an incident, at once hilarious and pitiful, occurred. A boy, a Hindoo, had been living in a Parsi family; he contracted the disease. He was in a house near the entrance and on the way to one of our stables. We made the usual arrangements for the removal of the boy. The family in which he lived were much attached to him. As soon as the Health Department Inspector told the family that the boy would be removed to the hospital, the Parsi ladies objected and exclaimed they would not permit the boy to be removed; and before the lad could be removed, 13 Parsi ladies surrounded the bed, and with knives in their hands shouted that they would kill themselves if the boy was removed. The affair was telephoned to me in office. The Assistant Health Officer and I directed the Police to be sent for, and the Officers of Police came. By this time a large crowd had collected, the street was full of people, and the streets converging were thronged with great crowds. The crowds were kept back from the house, but the Police and the Health Department had formidable opponents in 13 Parsi ladies, who threatened to take their lives if the boy was removed. It was now past dark and we decided to wait till next morning, and next morning when I came to see the boy he was dying. He died while I was in the room. This is an instance of opposition met with, yet the boy was a Hindoo and the family were Parsis.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{MCRCOB}, 1896-1897, 643.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{MCRCOB}, 1896-1897, 644.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{MCRCOB}, 1896-1897: 644. I say “purportedly recovered” because it is hard to know whether officials had an investment in narrating stories like these in order to prove that their efforts, sanitation depots and legal measures, were effective in resolving disease, and therefore how much the results may be embellishments to support their own interventions.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{MCRCOB}, 1896-1897, 644.
As formidable a force as thirteen Parsi ladies threatening to kill themselves undoubtedly was, this was not even the most extreme case. Such episodes would not serve any official well in making the case for keeping his job. Officials struggled with such outbursts most especially from elderly women. Elderly women seemed, for whatever reason, to be totally against official efforts at halting the spread of disease, they appeared in the records as insurmountable obstacles: “On another occasion we were followed through the streets by an old woman with her hands up who called down curses on our infamous duties.”\(^{19}\)

Mistakes were also liable to occur, sometimes ill people being mistaken for healthy while at other times perfectly healthy people being mistaken for ill. Closing the gap on such mistakes was important to the legitimacy of public health:

Here is what I saw one morning in the street behind the Municipal stables and running past the end of the chawl occupied by Municipal sweepers. The Municipal ambulance carriage was standing in the street. In a verandah lay a boy, unconscious, and apparently dying. As I came up he was being lifted into the ambulance. By the door of the ambulance stood one man, and two men lifted the boy into the ambulance. Before he was placed inside and before the hands that were joined underneath in lifting him had parted, he suddenly sat up, jumped on to the ground and ran away up a narrow gully. We followed him and caught him in a passage, and to our surprise found he was not ill from plague. Apparently he was liable to fits of unconsciousness in one of which he had fallen on the verandah and been caught by us.\(^{20}\)

These kinds of mistakes created tensions between those trying to stop the disease from spreading and those trying to avoid falling in to official hands. It undermined the notion that plague officials were acting with discretion and for a public good. It also cast officials as unable to know the population, that they couldn’t even make out when people were healthy or ill and distinguish between those who needed help and those who didn’t.

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\(^{19}\) *MCRCOB*, 1896-1897, 644.

\(^{20}\) *MCRCOB*, 1896-1897, 644.
There was also the first case of a European becoming ill on the 12th of November in the Fort area. The European was referred to as a “Mr. S” who had gone to Poona for a short period and had also “moved about the slums of this city...and may have contracted the disease.” The Fort area was thought to be the most alarming site of plague given the large European and merchant population there. An entire large chawl in Fort where 800 people resided was said to be infected. The official said that, “The desire of the people, when ill, to go somewhere, and especially to their country home, even when their homes were far away, was very remarkable. The same disposition I noticed in Europeans, when ill.”

No area of the city seemed spared from the illness. Accounts were offered as exemplary of conditions in neighborhoods such as Nagpada, Khetwadi, Kamathipura, Khara Talao, Umakhadi, Dhobi talao, Bhuleshwar, Middle Colaba, Chuckla, Marine Lines, Dongri Road, Mody Bay Bunder, Byculla, Andheri, Bandora, Mahalakshmi Fort, Worli, in huts in Narelwady, Upper Colaba, near the huts occupied by scavengers in Upper Mahim, Mazagaon, amongst the Kolis in Upper Mahim, and at the Lunatic Asylum in the far south of the city. Dead rats were also signs that rodents were the cause of the spread, and some residents, knowing this, took it upon themselves to acquire permissions to settle lands farther north owned by the Municipality in order to live in sheds. A request from such a resident said, “As some dead rats are found in the house I am living in, and as I am afraid that it is infected with the plague, I want to vacate it

21 MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 638.
22 MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 640.
23 MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 639.
24 MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 638-640.
temporarily and live in some sheds.” This request from a resident also showed that temporary sheds were less likely to be infected and allowed people to get away from diseased buildings without too much financial investment in their housing. Municipal lands required permission to occupy, and permission to live in sheds could be granted.

Officials concluded that natives were not willingly sacrificing enough for the sake of the city. There was too much resistance, they felt, to interferences in their lives which were meant for their own good. A plague official remarked:

The people here had no conception of the sacrifices willingly made in European cities for the prevention and suppression of infectious diseases. Even in a free country like America, and in the city of Boston, I find the following regulations in respect of the isolation of children suffering from infectious diseases adopted: - 2. Every parent or guardian of any child or ward infected with small pox, scarlet fever, diptheria, or membranous croup shall immediately cause such child or ward to be conveyed to some isolated place or room approved by the Board of Health

There should have been a willful giving up of one’s personal desires for the greater good as was the case in Europe, and even in “a free country like America.” Instead, riots and revolts against official agendas of quarantines, solitary confinement, demobilization, and forms of medical and bodily violation added to the frenzy brewing as illness spread recklessly across the subcontinent. Hospitals were seen as suspicious, they were where one went to die and what was worse, the sick were made to die in isolation. That women’s bodies were exposed to the official gaze was particularly unnerving. Pandita Ramabai commented:

The poor Purdah women who would never think of uncovering even their faces before strangers, had to submit to the most repulsive and humiliating treatment by male doctors, and

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26 _MCRCOB_, 1896-1897, 655.
had at that time to be exposed to public gaze...They did not even so much as put a screen between the women patients and male visitors.\textsuperscript{27}

The suggestion was that Indians didn’t have a sense of public or common good and that unlike in Europe or America, Indians could not see how their unwillingness to cooperate could endanger those around them. Or even if they could see, they didn’t care. The primary concern was to avoid falling into a plague official’s hands.

A confrontational incident allows us to see how housing played a role in the management of labour. One particular incident involved a Bombay mill being overtaken by workers when approximately one thousand workers demanded that the patients inside be released.\textsuperscript{28} Another case of mill workers involved an attack on a hospital:

On the 20th of October, 500 mill-hands assembled on the road outside the Arthur Road Hospital and threatened to wreck the building and carry off the patients. On the 29th, some 900 or 1,000 mill hands collected and rushed into the compound of the Hospital and threw stones at the building chasing the staff into the offices and inside the hospital. Even some of the patients were struck by the missiles and all were greatly terrified. The news of the disturbance was at once telephoned to the Police who promptly appeared on the scene. In this disturbance one of the ambulance vans was smashed, and the roof of the hospital damaged.\textsuperscript{29}

Regarding this incident, the official distinguished mill hands from scavengers. The mill workers were a class of labourers more easily managed due to their living in worker housing and so could be isolated:

The mill hands were a source of much anxiety. Yet they had been very considerably dealt with. Whenever a case had occurred in mill buildings occupied by mill-hands, or in other buildings, so long as it was fairly isolated, it was left alone. We had also agreed that if the mill hands gave information of cases and isolated them, they would not be removed to hospital. The mill hands could more easily than even the halalkhores and scavengers be segregated in their own buildings, and besides the Managers of the mills had erected huts on open ground for their workmen.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Mahratta}, September 5, 1897, as quoted in Echenberg, \textit{Plague Ports}, 56.

\textsuperscript{28} Echenberg, \textit{Plague Ports}, 65.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{MCRCOB}, 1896-1897, 660-661.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{MCRCOB}, 1896-1897, 661.
The managers of the mills had erected “huts on open ground for their workmen” which meant that the mill-hands could be kept separate from other workers and could be monitored since they lived basically at their place of work. Worker housing for these mill hands meant huts on open ground, proving once again that building housing with impermanent structures was not just a migrant worker tactic, but also a tactic of capitalists, imperial managers, and official bureaucrats.

The *halalkhors* and other scavengers, were another story. The officials, in fact the entire city, were gravely dependent on the class of scavengers for cleaning the city, without whom, the health of the city was doomed. But the scavengers threatened to leave the city and were stopped by officials blocking their means of transport:

> They spoke of leaving the city, saying that if the “setts and sahebs” left, they would also require a change of air. A little later they tried to leave the city, and we had in despair to appeal to the Agents of the Railway Companies and the Agents of the Railway Companies and the Agents of Shepherd’s Line of Steamers to refuse tickets to all scavengers and halalkhores. It is not necessary, even if it were wise, to dwell long over all the difficulties that beset us, but great peril had been avoided by prudence. I will only add that the men were watched without flagging by the Sirdar Abdul Ali under the instructions of the Commissioner of Police, Mr. Vincent, and that they did not baffle the skill nor evade the vigilance of the Police.\(^{31}\)

This forceful blocking of the scavengers movement aroused the sympathy of many people. The Commissioner of Police warned the Municipality that riots were about to break out if something was not done. People were not going to put up with being forcibly removed to hospitals and other measures. The Municipal Commissioner pleaded that without those measures and the maintaining of the *halalkhors* in the city, the city would be ruined. An official notice was issued on the 30th of October, 1896.

That announcement saved the city. Had it not been issued and had a riot occurred, all business would have ceased; the people, including all the scavengers, halalkhores and drivers of the Health Department would have surged out of the city in a panic-stricken mass, uncontrollable in their frenzy and flight, carrying pestilence to the towns and villages around Bombay.

\(^{31}\) *MCRCOB*, 1896-1897, 661.
Bombay would have been ruined, and every town and village close to Bombay overtaken by the calamity. The stricken crowds of people flying from the city would have been so vast that no force could have controlled them; at the same time portions of the town might have been fired and plundered, and total ruin might have come on the city.\footnote{MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 662.}

The Halalkhors held, particularly up until the 1890s, a near monopoly on the sanitation of the city. The city was dependent on them and they had thus engaged in strikes and bargaining tactics to secure and enhance their positions.

Officials also issued a notice saying that no one would be removed to Arthur Road Hospital without a certificate from a qualified medical officer. Such decisions were public relations measures meant to calm anti-sanitation sentiments down. Officials were not being trusted with the care of the sick and officials had to regain the trust of the inhabitants if they were going to stop the disease from spreading. Another incident involved a group of Muslims who reacted with hostility when they were asked to isolate an infected 12 year old girl. Fearing that she could not be protected from medical observation, riots broke out in Bombay in March of 1898. Hospitals were attacked as well as other buildings.\footnote{Echenberg, \\textit{Plague Ports}, 65.} On Falkland Road, a crowd stoned an ambulance. Soldiers were brought in to quell the anger:

One of my first duties in March was to go down to Falkland Road, as it had been telephoned to us that a large crowd had collected and stoned the ambulance van. On the way I sent Assistant Surgeon Pettigrew to bring up a detachment of soldiers from the Northbrook Garden. I found a very large crowd in the street, every land being filled, and the soldiers had to drive the crowd back.\footnote{MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 656-657.}

Many such ambulance vans were reported damaged. While in the country during the famines, price rises, and starvation episodes, rioters destroyed account ledgers, in the city, ambulance...
vans, hospitals, and plague officials suffered the anger of the people. Complaining of police having to be constantly called in, disturbances having to be settled at every occasion, and the need to rescue those employed for the sake of sanitation the official said:

Fortunately, the hostility was not directed against the men on conservancy duty; it was directed against the men removing the sick and those engaged in treating buildings. But a more dangerous feeling arose through the sympathy between the scavengers and halalkhores and the mass of the population: aversion to hospital, that is aversion to medical treatment and not to the building, aroused a common sympathy and intense feeling in the masses.

The sympathy by the natives against the officials was most worrisome for officials as it threatened to undermine their efforts even in places where they still had people’s trust. The most infamous protest against British authority in particular was in Pune, where the British head of plague controls in the Bombay Presidency, Walter Rand, was killed by two brothers belonging to the Chitpavan Brahmin caste. This was an important moment in the beginnings of Indian Nationalism and had a particularly Maharastrian undertone to it in Pune. It also showed the way in which the conflict over official interference in public health was widening a gap between the state and society, and new voices could emerge who would give new meaning to state interference. Officials were cast as the enemy of the people’s health and dignity.

Divisions between landlords and tenants too, punctuated sanitation efforts. When asked why they didn’t have their houses and buildings cleaned, residents claimed that the landlord should be responsible:

36 *MCRCOB*, 1896-1897, 657-658.
In the large buildings in Mandvi the tenants would not employ people to clean down the passages and spaces outside the rooms, as they said it was the duty of the landlords. They maintained that the landlords should do it, and we could not find the landlords.\(^{38}\)

It only added to the frustration that no one could find the landlords. The development of tenancy relations had been from the ground up, as we saw in the third chapter, such that divisions within buildings and units were made amongst inhabitants and sub-lesors and sub-lessees. Owners and landlords were far from the scene. There wasn’t even an effective law to hold landlords accountable for the housing conditions they were providing. Temporary measures were established allowing officials to forcibly remove the ill to hospitals, break into houses for inspection, and forcibly quarantine people or buildings to prevent the spread of contagion.\(^{39}\)

Evaluations of housing styles, their condemnation, removal, and reconstruction may have been indicative of the progress of a “civilization” from an official point of view. This could have correlated with measures of material prosperity and relative advancement of a society towards progress which was expected to be the natural outcome of embracing the conditions of the new global commerce set by capitalists all across empire. For local residents however, absentee landlordism, and a desire to not take on more expenditures than necessary were simpler, immediate, and more viable explanations geared towards managing a personal budget. Some officials insisted on their world view and often spoke of customs and traditions which they believed prevented the making of more clean housing:

To show what strange customs prevail, I need only refer to the defence put forward in the Police Court in a case where cows were kept on the ground-floor of a dwelling. The plea urged was that the cows were kept for religious purposes, the ladies of the household having to worship them in the morning. I believe the plea was true....In September, a large number of Bunniahs living in Mandvi went in procession to the sea and thus showed themselves willing

\(^{38}\) *MCRCOB*, 1896-1897, 656.

\(^{39}\) *MCRCOB*, 1896-1897, 659.
to do everything to appease the gods; but at the same time they did little to cleanse the overcrowded houses or chawls.\textsuperscript{40}

While that was the official view of local housing conditions, locals had their equally extreme explanations for official places of sanitation. In response to the temporary measures and extent of force used throughout the city, residents petitioned the Municipal office against such measures. While we don’t have the petitions themselves, municipal officials reported that in the petitions:

- It was stated that the hospitals were places of torture and places intended to provide material for experiments. The Officers of the Health Department were charged with a brutal pleasure in dragging the sick from their homes and in killing them, and it was stated that our Sovereign Lady the Queen had demanded 500 livers of the people of Bombay to appease the wrath aroused at the insult offered to her statue. Men have said to me, ‘You think we are like mad dogs, and you want to kill us, as if we were.’\textsuperscript{41}

Appeasing wraths because of insults to statues was not simply a false understanding of the gravity of the plague, it was in response to a very real fear. The people knew just how bad disease was. Many lost loved ones and struggled to maintain their own sense of normalcy during this period. One criterion of normalcy was the desire to remain with friends and loved ones while receiving treatment. Another petition from a group of influential citizens stated,

...that hospital life being unknown amongst the people, the patient himself was most averse to being removed and deprived of the care and comforts he could count on in his family, and his removal was looked on, both by himself and his attendants, as certain death. In this petition it is stated that, if the regulations continued to be enforced a much larger number of inhabitants would fly from Bombay. The petitioners demanded that the regulations should be carried out by all municipal subordinates with care, judgment, and tact; that friends and relatives did not like to part with their sick nor see them taken to hospital “recklessly”; that “house measures” should not be entrusted to young and raw European and Eurasian lads; otherwise there would be more discontent and panic, and so on.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{40} MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 657.

\textsuperscript{41} MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 658-659.

\textsuperscript{42} MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 659.
People were threatening to leave the city and many were doing so. They were aware of how dependent on them the city was and they wanted to be have a voice in the course of treatment and sanitation, to have a say in it.

Nonetheless, the general logic could prevail at least for officials that if a city’s housing was unsightly then the society could not progress and benefit from the new state of world trade. The poor of every city hit by plague in the late 19th century, and there were very few cities spared, were recast as unclean, insanitary, and dirty objects of governance. Race had everything to do with it, but what race meant was constructed anew through the management of the plague through local housing projects which together achieved global proportions.

“Natives” often turned on each other, trying to save themselves from illness by demanding intervention in other’s lives. Aged men, from whom officials expected “sage counsel,” became afraid, and the fear itself spread like a contagion:

Many fled from their own fears, and in flying frightened others. Some who might have been expected to be calm, if they did not remain silent, kept calling to others to fly and save themselves. They wantonly called on the Health Officer to burn down districts as if I had not chemicals to do, with not less certainty, what fire does.\(^\text{43}\)

In each place, the habitations of the the infirm, the poor, or the stigmatized, could be cast in opposition to superior qualities, occasionally associated with the natural condition of an advanced society.

\(^{43}\) *MCRCOB*, 1896-1897, 659.
From Conflict to Consensus

The slums had to be eradicated in Bombay and in every city where plague hit. This seemed to be the one and only idea about what could be done for the urban poor and the housing conditions. If there was any resistance to this notion, it had to contained and be brought into agreement with the official view. To solve the problem of resistance to this measure, local leaders were sought. A committee of representatives of different communities was created on the 11th of December, 1896. It included, “Balchandra Krishna Bhatvadekar, K N Kabraji, Ismael Jan Mahomed, OV Muller, A D Mody, NN Katrak, and about 90 more people consisting of Parsees, Mahomedans, Hindoos, and Europeans,” all of whom sought the sanitation of the city. They issued a notice called “How to Avoid the Plague” which suggested cleaning the crowded parts of the city.44

The work that the City Improvement Trust would take up more systematically was begun before its official formation. The Commissioner reported:

From the beginning the greatest attention was paid to the disinfection of houses and to the segregation of the poor. I believed from the first that the room where the patient lay was the place from which the disease might spread. There were, therefore, two principles kept in view to the treatment or disinfection of the rooms of the building and isolation of the patient. We never had to adopt the system carried out in Hongkong of walling round an infected area.45

Thus, the task of forming a consensus had been accomplished. A consensus was created that the city, and the housing of the poor in particular, required major intervention. Even Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the otherwise extremist voice of the emerging anti-colonial movement who as a matter of course, radically opposed the entire edifice of colonial government, in this case advocated the

44 MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 672.
45 MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 675.
closing of slums rather than their cleansing.⁴⁶ An attempt to rid the city of disease was made by using large quantities of carbolic acid to flush drains, sewers, pipes, warehouses, and shops.⁴⁷ Prior to the establishment of the City Improvement Trust in 1897, several hundred slum-dwellings were destroyed, as a part of what the scholar David Arnold has called a period of “comically thorough campaign of urban cleansing.”⁴⁸ This only added to the fear amongst the population, and shows how the issue of housing was central to it.

Given that everyone agreed slums could not remain as the form of housing for the urban poor, the only question that remained was where the poor were to go? How should they acquire compensatory housing once the slums were cleared? Who would assume responsibility for the urban poor? The state? The market? Landlords? Employers? Whose job was it to house the urban poor in sanitary conditions? These were the main questions which drove the urban renewal project in Bombay.

The City Improvement Trust was formed mainly to remove unclean housing. The founding document stated,

> In the early part of 1897, consequent on the outbreak of plague, the Government of Bombay took into their serious consideration the question of a comprehensive scheme for the improvement of the City of Bombay, more especially in respect to the better ventilation of the densely inhabited parts, the removal of insanitary dwellings, and the prevention of overcrowding.⁴⁹

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⁴⁶ *Mahratta*, Nov. 21, 1897, as quoted in Echenberg, *Plague Ports*, 63.


⁴⁸ Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, 204.

⁴⁹ *COBIT*, 1898, 1.
Plague was the impetus for the ambitious measures the Trust would undertake. Their goal was not only to improve the current conditions but also lay the groundwork to prevent overcrowding from happening in the future.

Thus the plague created the conditions for the pursuit of widespread consensus across the colonial divide in colonial India’s greatest commercial city. The formation of the Bombay City Improvement Trust was introduced by the Government of Bombay in 1897. City leaders had to restore what they called the “sanitary credit” of Bombay to lure the capital which had fled the city. This would be done by: “making new streets, opening out crowded localities, reclaiming lands from the sea to provide room for the expansion of the City, and the construction of sanitary dwellings for the poor.”\(^{50}\) With 14 people on the Board of Trustees, a combination of elite Indian and colonial officials together made up the core group of men who embarked on the project to reform the way in which Bombay’s inhabitants lived, and they didn’t hide the fact that an explicit goal was the restoring of the movement of capital within their city.

To be clear, Bombay’s building of poor housing and sanitary improvements within the city did not occur solely out of a concern with how the poor were living. Poor housing was built for various reasons cited by different people, but two particular motivations stand out. One, it was thought that cleaning up the city by re-dwelling the poor would restore the sanitary credit of the city which would return the capital that had fled with business’ mass exodus from the city. Second, some voiced a genuine concern for the lives of the poor and justified building housing on those grounds alone. These two different motivations, very often located in different people,

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\(^{50}\) COBIT, 1898, 1.
combined to create the momentum necessary to embark on the wide-scale housing project the City Improvement Trust wanted to initiate.

The plague brought the urban poor into the hands of the urban rich. Rather than see the plague and its attempted remedies as a “clash of medical cultures”\(^{51}\) or the reason to adopt “draconian measures,”\(^{52}\) the plague was crucial in forming new relations of housing production which distinguished the rich from poor and made space for a politics of benevolence, paternalism, and protection and subsequent use of the labouring poor within the domain of the free market in housing. That is to say, the changes in affect due to the plague were not only in terms of colonizer versus colonized, British versus Indian, modern medicine versus native medical knowledge systems, or a simple racial binary between colonizer and colonized, the changes had everything to do with how capital was to be managed in the city. The plague had served as a hinge point, dividing the fluidity of housing’s meanings and production before the plague from a period after the plague in which official and elite notions of housing became dominant. Ambiguous and changing notions of what constituted a proper house, the kinds of notions which had allowed migrants to create opportunities for themselves and define housing for themselves, gave way to housing reform projects which sought singular definitions.

The Municipal Commissioner admitted of the importance of trade when he was defending his measures against the petitions by people threatening to leave the city:

Had at any time matters been pushed to extremities, there infallibly have been a general exodus of the halalkhores, scavengers, labourers and cartmen, and in the general panic the dock and mill-hands would also have fled the city, putting an end to the last remnant of trade,


\(^{52}\) Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, 205; also cited in Echenberg, *Plague Ports*, 55.
and completing the ruin of Bombay. The Plague would have been carried throughout the Presidency where there was no organization capable of controlling the movements of the fugitives.\footnote{MCRCOB, 1896-1897, 662.}

The relations of capital cut across racial boundaries, across systems of medical knowledge, and needed all social classes present to make Bombay a commercial center. That dependence on all social classes was crucial in forming the kind of political consensus necessary across racial lines to enact the interventions in poor housing. Then, housing became a primary cause of urban illness and the site of public and collective concern which justified official interference and a new legal and financial mechanism designed to reconstruct poor housing and become the poor’s permanent landlord.

Within the purview of the Trust, the official division between good housing and bad housing became dominant and elites monopolized power over the meaning of housing. Housing became reflective of elite concerns and the elite became the sole determiners of how poor and working class housing in particular was read and made legible. In 1898, thoughts like the following were ignored by those in power:

\begin{quote}
The fact is, the poor classes in Bombay will not tolerate interference beyond a certain amount. The economic conditions that oppress them are so rigorous that they will defy interference when it proceeds beyond a certain stage. The weight of opposition is so great that it resists and repels the pressure of authority. The authorities are few, the people are many. The real matter is this: if overcrowding is to be diminished, not only dwellings but relief for the poor must be given, and much higher wages. The construction or improvement of buildings is but the first step in relief. All relief is now voluntary, and generous as the relief in each community is, it is only to help the healthy who can seek it....There are over 100,000 people in Bombay who sleep on the floor and on the outside of buildings! Imagine the effect of this state.\footnote{MCRCOB, 1898-99, 710.}
\end{quote}

Even though there was an attempt here to make the wage a concomitant concern with housing, such utterances were rare. Those who had power in the city were not interested in insuring a
wage but merely cleaning the city up so that trade could continue. The drive to reform housing and improve the sanitary condition of dwellings was the main activity, even if there remained disagreement and naysayers who doubted the effectivity of such measures:

When a locality has been improved, what is to be done about the improvement of the state of the people? This in time will be asked. I wrote last year on this subject: “The city may give water and keep the ways of the city clean, and do all else that is sanitary, but it cannot give clothes nor food to all the destitute, nor a bed to each one of the 100,000 or more who sleep on the damp ground.” Take the most sanitary buildings in Bombay and allow the poor classes to enter it, and in a few weeks they will make it as insanitary as the most insanitary area. So that, therefore, the improvement of dwellings and localities is but the first step and easiest step.55

The health officer who spoke these words seemed to be suggesting that the people themselves had to be reformed, not the housing. The poor classes themselves had to be changed. Such a view was one option; some believed that the people made the housing while others though that housing conditions made the people. That debate was not yet decided. Another thing this health officer suggested was the opening up of communication to “Dharavee” in the northern suburbs to relieve the pressure on the population in the south:

Other areas in the suburbs should be prepared for population by communications being opened to them and through them. In some of these portions the only buildings are huts, nestling amongst mango trees, or hidden in garden foliage. More than one-fourth of the island is sparsely populated and large portions unoccupied; to this area roads must be constructed. I attach great importance to a railway proposed to be run by the Port Trustees from the harbour, N.-E. and N.-W., across the island. The tramway ought to be extended to the north, and a roadway ought to be constructed on either side of the Tulsi pipe line from Dadar right north. All the roads in the suburbs should be widened before buildings are erected on the sides of them. This would open a large area right up the centre of the valley to the sea estuary at Dharavee.56

These were the combined measures which would drive plans for major restructuring of the city. Refashioning urban space though was the main object of the Trust and the elite city figures who

55 *MCRCOB*, 1898-1899, 711.

56 *MCRCOB*, 1898-1899, 711.
made up its board. Along with the Municipal Commissioner’s new members, people such as Mr. Bhalchandra K. Bhatawadekar and Mr. Ibrahim Rahimtoo, ran the efforts of the Trust.

The formation of the City Improvement Trust served to remove poor housing from the market, the Trust offered to become the poor’s permanent landlord, a paternalistic position they welcomed due to all the gains to be had from it. The removal of poor housing from the market was an implicit recognition that a market in housing had already developed and that the market had failed to provide suitable, adequate, and sanitary housing for the poor and labouring classes. Poor housing was a technical market failure, thus it would require government intervention to meet basic sanitation and housing standards. The removal of housing from the market didn’t mean that officials wouldn’t collect a housing tax. The housing tax was still collected through landlords or Trust officials, which meant that the Government stood to benefit from the removal of poor housing from the market. In fact, the removal had the potential to regularize an income stream for tax collectors.

While these interventions began just before the formation of the City Improvement Trust, as we saw above, they were grandiosely carried out under the auspices of the Trust. Most especially by bringing instruments of finance into the renewal project of the city, the Trust accomplished something new. It legitimated the moneyed interests gains and holds over the city’s development. Perhaps ironically, this was done so most especially through the creation of poor housing in Bombay which was fully funded by the state. It is to those moneyed relations and their management of the market failure in poor housing in the city that we turn next.
Conclusion

This chapter has explored the way in which the outbreak of plague at the end of the 19th century transformed the question of poor housing into a public concern. Reform projects focused on solving the problem of poor housing through the eradication or sanitation of urban slums appealed to moneyed interests in the city who were the most vocal dependents on the health of the city. Descriptions of housing served to justify more intimate interferences in people’s domestic lives. It wasn’t that the poor caused the plague; it was that mobility caused plague. The solution was that people should stop moving so that capital could continue its circulation. All classes throughout the city tried to escape quarantines, isolations, and remedies proposed to stop the spread of disease. However, broad measures were instituted which sought to construct the organization of urban space in ways that lent itself to surveillance, monitoring, and intervention. The pilgrimage to Mecca was temporarily halted out of concern for the spread of disease. Housing came to be seen as a cause of the poor health of the city rather than being an effect of inequalities endemic to urban life, free markets, or industrialization. Concerns over the state of poor housing was itself productive of distinctions within the urban populace itself, such that a new cadre of urban reformers were made elite caretakers of the health of the city.

Differentiation within society took on racial and class-based overtones, and labour housing was a strategy of mitigating opposition to the status quo. Worker housing for mill hands included huts on open ground constructed by mill owners, proving once again that building housing with impermanent structures was not just a migrant worker tactic but also a tactic of capitalists. These huts served to isolate mill workers from other workers so that any agitations would not be generalized and thus remain ultimately ineffective. Scavengers were particularly
important during the plague, having much control over the public health of the city. Their management was not as easy as the mill hands, though, since they did not live in an isolated location, but were spread out throughout the city connected to their own “setts and sahebs.” Divisions between landlords and tenants, too, punctuated sanitation efforts. Absentee landlords could not be held accountable for cleaning up buildings and providing basic sanitation in dwelling spaces, and residents were keen to defer responsibility to these invisible men. Occasionally, officials blamed the residents’ customs for unsanitary housing conditions by citing a few instances in which they couldn’t get residents to comply with sanitation suggestions.

The conflict over official interference in public health was widening a gap between the state and society, and new voices could emerge who would give new meaning to the episodes of state interference. The gap created between state and society allowed the formation of an empty political space such that competition over what was to be a debate over the “care for the poor” would later form the substance of politics. The plague measures had served to undermine the legitimacy of public health and the legitimacy of officials. But the crisis of legitimacy was managed by the creation of a consensus amongst a new urban elite that poor housing had to be remedied.

The plague moved state and society relations from conflict to consensus. The relations of capital cut across racial boundaries, and systems of medical knowledge, and needed all social classes present to make Bombay a commercial center. That dependence on all social classes was crucial in forming the kind of political consensus across racial lines that was necessary to enact the interventions in poor housing. Housing became understood as a primary cause of urban illness and the site of public and collective concern which justified both official interference and
a new legal and financial mechanism designed to reconstruct poor housing and make itself the poor’s permanent landlord. Through the creation of a legal and financial mechanism in the City Improvement Trust, the plague brought the urban poor into the hands of the urban rich. The consensus formed during the plague was an important condition for the City Improvement Trust’s activities, into which we shall inquire in the next chapter.
Chapter Five:
Managing a Market Failure, Financing the Public Chawl

This chapter is about the building of poor housing by the City Improvement Trust and Bombay Municipality, their explicit attempts at removing poor housing from the domain of the market—an acknowledgement of poor housing as a market failure—and the eventual abandonment of that removal. As moneyed interests came to have greater influence in the city of Bombay, the aims of housing the poor were divided between two concerns: first, that of maintaining and enhancing the structural conditions which perpetuated market-based growth in housing, and second, that of removing housing from the market to remedy the problems of sanitation in the city. The tension between these two positions drove the Trust’s institutional history, and its embedded location in market forces beyond its control eventually made the Trust financially unfeasible. This chapter explores what drove the sustenance of a project to house the poor even though it came at a financial loss to the Trust by scrutinizing the motivations of those who built the housing and financed it, as well as the motivations of all those who supported and opposed the project. The chapter follows the imbrications of the moneyed nexus and argues that moneyed men elevated their positions and tightened and extended their bonds by the scheme to finance the Trust’s operations.

Most importantly, I offer a new way of reading the institutional location of the Trust and suggest that the Trust is best understood when it is seen as a particular kind of financial instrument, whose capacities to finance the purchase of land and housing in the city were used by the imperial government, employers, and moneyed elites who ran the Trust. Paternalism towards the labouring poor combined with concerns over the mobility of capital through the city to form the Trust. While Bombay had the most international banks in all of India, the largest gold market
in Asia, and the largest silver market in India,¹ it has been argued that the colonial location of the city meant that access to financing and resources for business growth were limited, which is why, for example, employers didn’t invest as heavily in building worker housing.² While this is true, we will see below that there were attempts to solve the problem of low resources for housing investment through the financial capacities of the Trust.

Elite moneyed interests sought to gain from the management of the market failure in poor housing in the city, and those gains were able to justify what were losses for the Trust itself. In the very first pages of the meeting notes of the City Improvement Trust from 1898 it was written that properties were to “develop to the fullest extent and as rapidly as possible their revenue producing powers.” It further stated that, “Surveys, etc., for providing better housing for the working classes, that being a matter of great urgency, [are] second only in importance to the measures to be taken to develop the revenue resources.”³ Thus one of the justifications for making the Trust, according to the Board of the City Improvement Trust on its founding, was that property was a source of revenue and thus it should be able to fulfill its revenue producing potential. The secondary reason was to provide better housing conditions such that dwellings would not become crowded locales of contagion.


² Chandavarkar says employers such as mill owners had to rely upon, “the money market and short-term credit for a proportion of their fixed capital and the whole of their working costs rendered the financial structure of most mills extremely precarious.” Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-1940 (Cambridge England; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 292; also cited in Kidambi, Making and Indian Metropolis, 107.

³ COBIT, 1898, 3.
The emergence of the City Improvement Trust’s poor housing project in Bombay was one instantiation of a worldwide trend at the turn of the twentieth century. In Bombay, the problem of housing the urban poor with a housing project included governmental backed financing. Between 1880 and 1920, numerous experiments in urban renewal and housing reform projects socially elevated a whole new cadre of urban reformers and observers who with their new power created new kinds of knowledge about what cities had been and what they should become. Housing was a central issue for these thinkers, but most treated housing as an effect of markets in land, labour, capital, or commodities, not as a site which was productive of new relations.

A scholar of New York City’s housing market in the early nineteenth century has been right to point to the housing market’s capability to produce power through control over greater revenues and tightening links in a growing cash nexus. About housing in the first half of the nineteenth century, she says,

For not the least problem with conventional interpretations of the ‘industrialization’ of nineteenth-century cities is the tendency to treat housing as a derivative cultural ‘sphere’ or arena of ‘consumption’ that merely reflected rather than helped construct the new material social relations of capitalist society.4

This tendency was particularly true amongst Bombay’s urban observers, officials and native elites alike, who never thought of the field of housing as embedded in the logic of market dynamics. Thus, when they sought to remedy the problem of poor housing by financing the Trust endlessly, they sorely underestimated the impact the Trust itself would have as a market player.5

4 Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent*, 112.

5 This can be compared to the management of housing markets and the reticence to participate in housing markets which took place in other cities at the same time. See, for example, J. A. Yelling, *Slums and Redevelopment: Policy and Practice in England, 1918-45, with Particular Reference to London* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).
Bombay was a “world city,” which meant that it depended on particular flows beyond its purview for its functioning as a viable space for capital and capitalists to collect and enhance their portfolios. The retreat of capital due to the plague was detrimental to its local functioning. Leaders both in favor of and opposed to the formation of the Trust were aware of the consequences of not solving the sanitary issues in their city. The stated goals and ambitions of the City Improvement Trust were so great that at the Legislative Council Proceeding of 1898, Mr. W. C. Hughes said,

I was recently asked if this was only a paper scheme, or does it really mean business. Being as it is no mere paper but one of very real intentions, it has been impressed upon me that no time should be lost in making a start with the improvements, as I am told such a step would go a long way to increase confidence on the part at least of foreign traders.⁶

Likewise, Mr. Balachandra Krishna, a proponent of city improvement, echoed,

If it [Bill for city improvement] succeeds in its object its benefits will be derived not only by the city but by the Presidency; and even the country at large. In fact, if the ideal is fully realized its good effects will reach in a manner the whole civilized world. As a great trade centre Bombay can claim kinship with the whole world….⁷

There was agreement that something had to be done to clean up the city, and the Trust’s goals were generous and necessary. Yet, there was also disagreement. The sources of their disagreement will be discussed later in this chapter.

It is worth noting that this discussion doesn’t include records of demands from the disadvantaged or ill-housed people to upgrade housing or to receive entitlements from the government. While riots and revolts did break out during the searches associated with the anti-
plague operations and there were the Deccan revolts of 1877 during the famine, there seems to be no evidence of the people in the city demanding better housing. The people who lived in the squalid and overcrowded buildings came to occupy the position of objects of the housing initiative; they were seen as standing in the way of a sanitized urban landscape which was crucial and necessary to Bombay’s commercial trade with the world. It was the will of those in positions of power which triumphed in the building of housing. They did this both on behalf of the poor and for their own gain. Reshaping the urban landscape was a priority most especially for those who experienced losses to their financial and commercial enterprises and wanted to re-stake their claim to the world of commerce. The Port Trust and Chamber of Commerce joined with the City Improvement Trust and the Government of India to restore business to plague-struck Bombay.

The Bombay Improvement Trust housed and rehoused a total of 9,928 people of the “poorer and working classes” in 30 chawls between the years 1898 and 1908, i.e., in the first ten years alone, and displaced even more people. By the end of its existence, before it was joined with the municipal office in 1933, it had housed a total of 44,900 adults and spent Rs. 148.27 lakh on its projects. They estimated that they spent Rs. 330 per housed adult. The total cost of the Trust’s activities always exceeded its revenues. In the initial decade of activity the Trust spent Rs. 21,37,364, and collected rent of Rs. 2/4 to Rs. 3/6 per room, making Rs. 1,01,797 annually in revenue. They estimated the “capital cost per adult accommodated at Rs. 215.”

The Trust was thus obviously losing money on the housing of the working classes, something it had anticipated and accepted as a condition of its function. In subsequent years, they continued to build housing for the working classes, but the financial losses started weighing

8 COBIT, 1933, 3.
9 COBIT, 1909-1913, 2.
on the institution and critics from both within and without pointed to its mismanagement of money, failure to achieve its lofty goals, and inability to sustain itself financially. The Trust was ultimately amalgamated into the Municipal Corporation after the depression of the early 1930s, putting an end to the ambitious intentions of its founders.

The slums of Bombay made an impression upon everyone who visited them, and bringing up the experience was an assured way to achieve consensus for any plan for intervention in the city’s housing affairs even during debates and disagreements. Everyone from census writers to concerned or frustrated urban inhabitants had used vivid descriptions of slum life to achieve varying goals in the past, and the motion to pass the Bill which would form the City Improvement Trust was no less one such moment. Lord Sandhurst, accompanied on one such visit by Mr. Balachandra Krishna and Mr. Dharamsi, had visited slums in Bombay and this made a major impression on his zeal for the Trust’s activities. In his final closing remarks at the Legislative Council Proceedings of 1898, Sandhurst said,

The re-housing of the poorer classes is one of the most important and attractive provisions of the Bill. I do not wish to refer too often to my visit to the slums with two honourable members, one of whom is alas no more. But when I visited those slums they reminded me most graphically of the stories that one used to read a few years ago regarding the dens and cellars in London; where the poorest classes of the great metropolis herded together; where those who had to live by the sweat of their brows had to drag out a miserable existence. We do hope that by these particular provisions of the Bill we shall conduce to a higher state of civilization and of greater vigour on the part of these people who contribute so much to the material wealth of this city. These people deserve our sympathy and assistance. We desire to place them in better houses, so that not only will it let the sun into their houses but into their hearts and into their very existence, and thus terminate the sad state of things amongst them which at present cannot but be one of unhappiness, combined with toil. My honourable colleagues, the times are troublous in Bombay, and the cloud hangs yet heavily over the whole of us in whatever position we may find ourselves placed. But I do believe that a brighter future must be in hand, and that the most efficacious way of bringing it about, is on the lines which I have endeavoured imperfectly to explain. With the confident hope and earnest belief that what I say is true I ask you to give a first reading to the Bill.10

10 BLCP, 1898, 17.
His words brought together the temporal and spatial framework in which Bombay’s slums were seen. For observers such as Sandhurst, the slums were not unlike London’s slums which had achieved notoriety all throughout the 19th century and continued to remain at the forefront of all urban officials’ minds at the turn of the century. Municipal officials and census writers circulated their reports on urban life throughout the Empire and read analyses of demographic growth and especially urban problems all throughout the British Empire.

Slum life had a lateral comparability on a scale of human progress, applicable only in those parts of the world where progress towards civilization had been deemed possible. Working classes in each such city were awaiting the benevolence of their local patrons to upgrade their housing and improve their living conditions. The local patrons were only all too happy to do so, partaking of the opportunity to demonstrate and enact the expected outcomes of what should have been the result of decades of intensified commerce, which according to imperial officials, they had inaugurated. Economic growth should have created just this possibility, the possibility for everyone to improve and raise their standard of living. It was not due to his generosity of vision that Sandhurst saw the working classes of Bombay as contributing to the “great material wealth of this city” who thus deserved an official Bill to improve their living conditions. His notion that the Bill would make it so that “we shall conduce to a higher state of civilization” was in line with prevailing notions about Indian society at large, namely that the society had once been a great civilization which had now fallen. Upgrading slums into more sanitary housing was a step in restoring that state.

City leaders praised magnanimous imperial visionaries as they worked together to rehouse the poor. Balachandra Krishna and a late Mr. Dharamsi accompanied Lord Sandhurst on
his tour of the slums. Plague conditions and overcrowding of labourers made an impression on all visitors and motivated reform. Mr. Dharamsi, however, succumbed to the plague himself, dying before the meeting to present the Bill. On his behalf, Krishna spoke of the “beneficent measure” of the Bill, which would always be remembered:

The plague will leave behind it many regretful memories, but there will be one bright spot on which the people will love to dwell; and when all the present misfortunes and hardships are forgotten as events of a remote past, the City Improvement Act will be cherished as a blessing, and will leave Lord Sandhurst’s name eternally associated with it.\textsuperscript{11}

**Assault on Urban Self Government**

The City Improvement Trust (CIT hereafter) was formed to remedy the sanitation problems in the city which harbored the plague. Through the improvement of overcrowded and insanitary housing conditions it was believed that the commercial status of the city would be restored. The only engagement with housing conditions had come through the Municipal Commissioner’s office before the plague. Now, the colonial Government of India was inserting itself within local urban affairs resulting in the enlistment of numerous actors in the projects of slum clearances and poor housing reform. Criticisms of the financing of the CIT’s work were based on the notion that the Government was giving the CIT full reign to take money from the Bombay Municipality. Prior to this moment, the Bombay Municipality operated like -and its officials believed themselves to be- a semi-autonomous institution apart from the British Crown’s authorities. The municipal corporation had local power. The introduction of the CIT

\textsuperscript{11} BLCP, 1898, 19.
reversed that, it was the institutional site through which the Government reinserted itself into local urban affairs.

The formation of the City Improvement Trust in 1898 began with a debate in the Legislative Council. Upon discussion of the formation of the Trust, the “Bill No. 1 of 1898: A Bill for the Improvement of the City of Bombay and to Provide Space for its Future Expansion” was introduced by the President of the Assembly, Lord Sandhurst, who acknowledged that it was unusual for the President to introduce a bill, but assured the members present that this was a “most unusual occasion and my action need not be considered a precedent…” Several key people were present. Both Indians and Englishmen had taken it upon themselves to be the caretakers of the city and placed themselves in a rather paternalistic role, seeking to care for the poorest of their fast growing city. It is important to remember that this meeting was conducted at the onset of the plague in the city. The meeting had been delayed for legislative reasons and because the illness had struck even members of the Council. Lord Sandhurst remarked,

There is, however, a compensating advantage in the delay, because it has enabled my colleague, the Honourable Mr. P. M. Mehta, to be amongst us again, and I only utter the voice of the Council when I say we are glad to see him amongst us restored to health and strength.

The timeliness of the formation of the CIT couldn’t be contested, Bombay’s conditions needed intervening in and only ambitious and drastic measures could restore the city’s sanitary credit.

The disease was the most important impetus for the bill’s introduction, but India’s particular conditions demanded “a bold and comprehensive scheme for the improvement and

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12 *BLCP*, 1898, 7.
13 *BLCP*, 1898, 7.
extension of the city of Bombay…” Lord Sandhurst didn’t miss the opportunity to stress the point that disease in a country such as India, mired as it was in customs and traditions, required the most immediate attention. He said,

"We dwell in a city which for density of population in a given area exceeds that of our great cities in the West, notably London. We have this city filled, nay crammed with people of various nationalities, creeds and castes, with their ancient customs and habits and beliefs, which make it extremely difficult to deal with them under circumstances of such an epidemic as the plague."

Lord Sandhurst vocalized some of the unique characteristics of Bombay which would require forms of intervention well above and beyond simple improvements in urban living conditions. These included the excessive diversity of the city of Bombay, the caste system, and the numerous religious practices, customs and beliefs which must have seemed strange to official observers.

Simpler solutions to the problems of urban sanitation had been proposed such as demanding death registration and creating building codes and bye-laws which would have to be enforced, but Sandhurst argued that such administrative changes would not permanently improve the condition of the city. The main goal of the Trust would be to ventilate crowded areas and restore the activity of building on sound principles. Prior to proposing the bill, officials had consulted the reports of the Bombay Extension Committee of 1887, the English Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890, and the Bombay Port Trust Act of 1879. Comparisons to the issue of housing England’s working classes were made repeatedly throughout the meeting of the Legislative Council.

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14 BLCP, 1898, 9.
15 BLCP, 1898, 7.
16 BLCP, 1898, 8-9.
For many, the Trust’s endeavors in Bombay were an opportunity to imagine Bombay’s future. Sandhurst spoke of needing to find permanent solutions which “strike at the root of the evil,” not just in localities where disease has struck in the past but in anticipation of the future needs of the city.17 Lord Sandhurst, speaking on behalf of the colonial Government of India, wanted to anticipate the future growth of the city. He would accomplish this by creating new powers to make new streets, widen thoroughfares, acquire houses which had been “condemned under section 178 of the Municipal Act as unfit for human habitation,” build poor housing, buy land, reclaim foreshores, and house the police.18 Diseases such as the plague were to never halt commerce in the city again in the way it had in 1897 and 1898. Mr. Hughes, speaking on behalf of the Port Trustees, said that the Port Trustees had unanimously approved of the Bill and “fully appreciated the value of the concessions Government propose making to the new Trust.” Apparently they were so excited about the scope of the Bill that they wanted assurance it was not just “a paper scheme, or does it really mean business.”19 Yet other critics, such as Balachandra Krishna, who otherwise resented the financial contribution to the new body which the Municipal Corporation would have to make, still conceded that “the future well-being and prosperity of the city depend upon its sanitary credit, and it is the bounded duty of both the Government and the Corporation to establish it with the utmost expedition.”20

Most of the conflict at the meeting was about the creation of a new institutional body, the City Improvement Trust, to carry out projects which many members of the Bombay’s Municipal

17 BLCP, 1898, 8.
18 BLCP, 1898, 10.
19 BLCP, 1898, 18.
20 BLCP, 1898, 20.
Corporation felt impinged on their authority within the affairs of the city. Moreover, the Municipal Corporation was being asked to fund many of the Trust’s projects. The Municipal Corporation had felt itself relatively autonomous up until this point, running their own assessments and expenditures of the city’s properties, managing the conduits of waterways through the city, and expanding on local forms of sanitation through the management of the halalkhors throughout the city. Thus, members of the Corporation felt the creation of a City Improvement Trust was a condemnation of their prior work. They worried that a new committee would undermine the Municipal Corporation’s authority and legitimacy in the city, and on practical terms, that the projects each initiated might be at odds with one another. A certain Mr. Daji Abaji Khare spoke first against the creation of the new body, assuring everyone at the outset that he didn’t oppose the goals of city improvement. He said, “The whole city must congratulate your Excellency’s Government upon having the interest of the city at heart and having set in motion the wheels for the improvement of the city.” However, his reservations had to do with what he perceived as the lack of effort and imagination on the part of government to enable an already existing city body, the Municipal Corporation, to accomplish these goals. He thought the justifications for making a new body were “not sufficiently convincing.” He even offered solutions to some of the main reasons cited against entrusting the task of city improvement to the Municipality, namely that it didn’t have enough money, the legal powers, or the staff necessary for the projects. Mr. Khare said,

All these defects can surely be remedied by this Council. You can give them adequate statutory powers, and then the Corporation can obtain the necessary funds and the powers. I quite admit that the Corporation as a whole will not be able to carry on the work; but they can
easily appoint a subordinate committee and engage a special agency and a special staff for carrying on the work.\textsuperscript{21}

Mr. Khare reminded everyone that he approved in principle of the need to improve the city but merely disagreed with the means. Lord Sandhurst was aware of these feelings and had tried to assure the critics,

Amongst the criticisms that I have studied I have seen the idea put forward that the aim and the intention of the Government of Bombay was to belittle the Corporation, to cripple its powers and to reduce it in the estimation of the public. Well, now, I can assure those honourable members who combine membership of the Corporation with membership of this Council, that nothing is further from the minds of Gov’t than this idea which has been put forward as representing this view.\textsuperscript{22}

Still, many were not convinced. The particular means proposed for the financing of the Trust only assured the Municipal Corporation members that the scheme was not in their best interest.

The Municipal Corporation had a simple proposal to avoid the problem of their reduced authority in the city: they suggested that at least half of the members of the City Improvement Trust should be appointed by the Corporation. The autonomy of the Municipal Corporation was fully challenged at this point, their proposal being rejected on the grounds that neither did the Corporation represent Bombay’s interests alone nor should Bombay be only the concern of Bombay officials. Lord Sandhurst argued that the Chamber of Commerce and the Port Trustees also had vested interests in Bombay’s trade and commerce. Furthermore, he argued that,

We have further had to remember that the interests which are deeply concerned in the welfare of the city are widespread, embracing not only the whole Presidency but other parts of India, of which it is a trading centre, and we have, with the sanction of the Government of India and Secretary of State, recognized this in undertaking to hand over to the Trust on very favourable

\textsuperscript{21} BLCP, 1898, 17-18.

\textsuperscript{22} BLCP, 1898, 16.
terms Government land valued at nearly Rs. 57 lakhs, and reclamation rights valued at Rs. 29 lakhs, the usufruct of which represents the contribution made by the general tax-payer to the cost of this great enterprise.\textsuperscript{23}

It became clear then that the right to control land within the city, and the potential to generate revenues from that control, was a major point of contention for all parties involved. The government had intervened and appropriated land on behalf of a newly formed body it created, and not surprisingly, sentiments among Municipal Corporation leaders were defensive. Furthermore, Lord Sandhurst decided that the members on the City Improvement Trust board would number 13 trustees in total selected as follows. Six trustees would be elected of which four of these would come from the Municipal Corporation, Government of India would appoint three trustees and the Chairman, and there would be 3 ex-officio: the Municipal Commissioner, military interests which would be represented by one seat going to the General Commanding Bombay District officer, and the Collector.\textsuperscript{24}

The spirit of reciprocity and sense of care for its inhabitants motivated the Trust to set out to expand the city for future use through the prevention of disease within its growing boundaries. Much of the language of leaders of this time was greatly benevolent, even paternalistic. The Trust proposed to use both new powers and old to accomplish its goal of caring for the city. Section 178 of the previously instituted Municipal Act allowed the “acquisition of houses condemned…as unfit for human habitation”\textsuperscript{25} which the Trust intended to complement by constructing dwellings for the poorer classes. Lord Sandhurst announced, “In all cases where the operations of the Board displace any considerable part of the population it will have to provide

\textsuperscript{23} BLCP, 1898, 9.
\textsuperscript{24} BLCP, 1898, 9.
\textsuperscript{25} BLCP, 1898, 10.
elsewhere for the housing of the people so displaced.”26 There was no intention to merely take
housing from people even if condemned as “UHH,” i.e. unfit for human habitation. The idea was
to properly house Bombay’s residents. The spirit was self avowedly one of liberalism. Speaking
of the reclamation project to be undertaken by the Trust, Lord Sandhurst said,

...I think it will be admitted that the spirit in which the project has been conceived in this as in
all other respects is one of extreme liberality. I can, indeed, assure the Council that feeling the
greatest sympathy for the citizens in the difficult task before them, it has been my earnest
desire to afford them the largest possible measure of assistance...27

Benevolence, care for the poor, paternalism, and a liberality of spirit were combining to create
the rehousing projects of Bombay.

The legislative body proposed new powers to acquire new lands for the building of
compensatory housing for those who would be displaced by slum clearances. This gravely
altered the rights of current landholders and property holders in Bombay. The only law available
by which a government body could acquire land until this point was the Land Acquisition Act of
1894 which required that owners of any property which a government body had an interest in
were to be given notification of their property’s impending seizure and thirty days to either
approve or object to the transfer. After this point, upon the Government officially announcing its
intention to acquire the property for a public purpose, owners were to have another fifteen days
to present a case. Under the new scheme by the City Improvement Trust, however, this was
going to be reduced in half to seven days. Compensation to property owners was also going to be
reduced, most especially in cases where the building was deemed “UHH,” when landlords would

26 BLCP, 1898, 10.
27 BLCP, 1898, 13.
only be given the value of the land plus the materials minus the cost of demolition.\textsuperscript{28} All of this was inspired by the English Act for the Housing of the Working Classes of 1890.

**Financing the Trust**

Criticisms of the financing of the CIT’s work were based on the notion that the government was giving the CIT full reign to take money from the Bombay Municipality. The creation of the new Trust challenged the notion that the Municipal Corporation was the “sole depository of the function of self-government.”\textsuperscript{29} Power was genuinely experienced as devolved to the local level. The introduction of the CIT reversed that. This reinsertion of high imperial power within the local institution occurred through new forms of finance and business and commercial interests were no small influence in the making of public housing. Before the Bill to form the CIT had been introduced in the Legislative Council, Lord Sandhurst had already suggested it to the Chamber of Commerce one year prior, in February of 1897.\textsuperscript{30}

The formation of the City Improvement Trust has previously been studied with an eye to whether it was a success or failure. Most scholars exploit the gap between the Trust’s stated objectives and its eventual accomplishments, noting that many more people were unhoused, made homeless, and impoverished by the Trust’s operations because the Trust couldn’t gain hold of its finances.\textsuperscript{31} Overpaying for land in the city, and overcompensating homeowners when building thoroughfares and highways meant that the Trust ran out of money often and quickly,  

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{28} BLCP, 1898, 11.
\textsuperscript{29} BLCP, 1898, 20.
\textsuperscript{30} BLCP, 1898, 19.
\textsuperscript{31} Kidambi, *Making of an Indian Metropolis*; Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*.
\end{flushleft}
and in the process dragged the Municipal Corporation into debt with it. Instead of following this
gap between stated objectives and subsequent accomplishments, the remainder of this chapter
analyzes the Trust as a financial instrument connected to land in the city, and focuses on the
enlistment of new actors with new financial roles through the institution of the Trust in the city.
A major result of the creation of the City Improvement Trust was the enlistment of new people
into concern about the city as a place of commerce. Such new people included the city’s rate
payers, financiers, lenders, debtors, industrial leaders, those commercial interests concerned with
sanitary credit, and those civilians invested in the reputation, livability, and world-prominence of
their city.

What may have been unique to the colonial condition of the Trust’s formation and
actions, was that the Trust’s operations as imagined by the government officials, needed to secure
legitimacy in the eyes of a native “foreign population.” Thus, native leaders were sought who
could be “representatives” of the populace. These leaders were propertied men who resisted as
much as they could when their property was going to be acquired by the Trust. When they
couldn’t resist they demanded greater compensation for their property. Two schemes in
particular, the “valuation by a hypothetical building scheme” and the subsequent “plotting
scheme” allowed property holders to gain more money than what their property was worth based
on its potential to earn money in the future.

Such schemes led to a speculation frenzy in the housing and land market in Bombay, such
that real estate values surged between 1904 through 1907, pricing out more and more labouring
urban dwellers from adequate housing. This also meant that the Trust was paying out more than
it could afford, since it was backed by Government. Labour too was represented through
capitalists, often their employers such as the Mill Owners Association. Thus, the racial line which divided colonizer from colonized did not prevent the formation of financial instruments in property, or limit the logic or rule of property. The division between colonizer and colonized enhanced it through the creation of an institutional body with a limitless capacity to create demand for housing in the city. Financiers were central to creating that demand and urban land and housing became a financial tool which enhanced the influence of such moneyed interests.

Raising capital was a constant issue throughout the Trust’s operations, and the Government anticipated this at the outset of the Trust’s formation. The debate about the Trust’s formation, even once people agreed that the separate body should be formed, still hinged on the Municipal Corporation’s financial contribution to assist the Trust’s operations. The colonial Government of India came up with elaborate schemes which would both allow the Trust to raise capital and simultaneously keep debt off of the Government’s ledger. Capital was often raised through loans either in the “open market” or through Government. Future indebtedness was not something anyone within the Trust or the Government anticipated, although the leaders of the Municipal Corporation were critical and vocal for just this reason. Balachandra Krishna said that the “already crippled state of municipal finances is apt to land us in hopeless insolvency” if the Corporation undertook the work, thus he supported the creation of a separate body to improve the city.³² Eager to not have the task of improving the city delayed by the financial problems of the Municipal Corporation, he agreed to have it performed under a different institutional body. He like everyone else, of course, believed that, “Bombay is the gate of the trade of India. It has business connections with the whole world. The ravages of the plague have shaken its sanitary

³² BLCP, 1898, 21.
credit and have brought untold losses.” Still, he criticized the financial schemes undertaken to fund the project.

One example of this will suffice to show the ingenuity within the ranks of official power for raising the necessary capital to finance its ambitious schemes. According to the Government, housing the police force within Bombay was necessary because: “the continued existence of Bombay as a civilized community depends upon the discipline and efficiency of its conservancy staff and of its police.” Lord Sandhurst proposed means by which the money to house the police would be raised. His belief was that the Trust should take a loan to pay for the construction of the police quarters. The building, once constructed, would be leased to the government at a rate of rent such that within the term of the lease the entire loan could be paid off, including the principal and interest. At this point, the government would take over the buildings. The question could have been asked, why didn’t the government just take its own loan and house the police? What was to be gained by having the Trust, an as of yet nonexistent body, finance the purchase? Such questions raised doubts about the government’s intentions, but for Municipal Corporation leaders, it made them doubt their own expected contribution to the Trust’s finances. The government would end up owning the land for police accommodation in the end, they just weren’t purchasing it at the outset.

In other words, the government was, through the institution of the Trust, financing its own purchase of land to accommodate the police force they wanted to house in Bombay. It was also accomplishing this goal by not having any debt on its own ledger. By way of assurance to the future Trust members and the Corporation members present at the meeting, Lord Sandhurst

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33 BLCP, 1898, 20.

34 BLCP, 1898, 10.
said, “It will be seen that this is equivalent to Government guaranteeing the interest on the loan and undertaking to buy the buildings from the Board at their prime cost on the expiry of the lease.” He also assured them that the Government would bear the cost of repairs and taxes, and that no liability would be borne by the Trust. The majority of loans which the Trust would by necessity have to raise were to be public loans, and the security for those loans was to be provided by giving secured property to the Trust and reclamation rights near Colaba, and west of the island between Worli Fort and Malabar Point, against which they could borrow money.

The complicated nature of the Government’s proposition to finance the Trust, of which the police accommodations scheme was one example, raised suspicions. It was argued that the question of police housing was an “Imperial question” which hadn’t been properly communicated to the Municipal Corporation, who now were expected to contribute to housing the police through their contributions to the Trust. The entire financial structure raised concerns.

Balachandra Krishna said,

The financial provisions of the Bill call for closer scrutiny and attention. I have consulted several financial experts as well as experienced lawyers in regard to their clear meaning, and I am constrained to remark that they agree with me in thinking that the clauses are framed in a somewhat complicated and ambiguous manner and require to be made more lucid and intelligible. The technocratic nature of financing urban improvements served to both alienate and enlist new actors in Bombay’s improvement.

A logic of real estate development provided a guiding logic to the Trust’s activities. The revenue motive drove all the actions of the City Improvement Trust, or at least constrained them

35 BLCP, 1898, 11.

36 BLCP, 1898, 24.
visibly in the records they left behind. It is hard to know whether the second reason, a genuine concern for the housing conditions of the working poor, was only stated by officials to subsume other motives that they may have had at the time, within the logic of revenue production for the Trust. Trust officials justified beginning the scheme in Gowalia tank because of it “being likely to bring early profit to the resources of the Trust.” As any developer knows, the initial problem of cash flow has to be dealt with by building units with potential for immediate sale first so that assets can be later secured. Under this logic, “it was considered that the right policy was to postpone for a time the determination of petty projects in various quarters…”

A major scheme was also undertaken in the neighborhood of First Nagpada. Located at the center of the city, First Nagpada had been for decades the densest section of Bombay. Since this was such a large area where there were many plague cases, officials thought it worthwhile to initiate the “First Nagpada Improvement Scheme.” The population in First Nagpada was mostly labourers, and just over 11,000 people were planned to be rehoused under this scheme. There was no distinction between types of labour, both factory workers and domestic workers were called the labouring classes. The mortality rate in First Nagpada had increased one and one half times since the onset of plague. The Trust would purchase all the properties in the area and redevelop them at their will.

The financial calculus was always provided in the working of the Trust, but it did not always suggest profitably. The first four schemes were First Nagpada, redevelopment of properties and construction of new streets in Ward C, the creation of a very long road traversing

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37 COBIT, 1898, 5.
38 COBIT, 1898, 4.
39 COBIT, 1898, 5.
Wards B, C, and D for ventilation and mobility within the city, and roads in Ward D. These together were estimated to cost Rs. 182 Lakhs (1 Lakh is 100,000). Not including the projected increase in value over the years of the Trust’s operations, it was estimated that the Trust would recoup Rs. 115 Lakhs, and thus remain with a net liability of Rs. 67 Lakhs. This condition of being in debt, and in the red as far as the Trust’s ledger was concerned was both anticipated and criticized by the officials in the Bombay Municipality. The “sanitary credit” of the city was immensely important, however, both for the British Government who promised to secure the Trust’s debt believing it would one day recuperate the losses, and for those working in the City Improvement Trust.

There was also going to be a required annual contribution from the Municipal Corporation. The question of the rate-payers of Bombay and their contributions and risks in the planned enterprises of the Trust created divisions between the Government who spoke on behalf of the Trust and the Municipal Corporation officials who purported to speak on behalf of residents of Bombay. The Government of India was proposing to guarantee the financial operations of the Trust, through the requirement that the Municipal Corporation contribute annually to the Trust’s funds by means of increased taxation. Critics called this a “bludgeon clause.” The critics’ argument was that the Trust should be forced to stand on its own two feet just as other institutional bodies within the city had been asked to do. They should balance their own ledger, avoid undertaking projects for which they cannot pay, and pay the price for costly projects which either don’t come to fruition or don’t achieve anticipated revenues meant to compensate for the initial outlay in cost. A guarantee would, in effect, only encourage financial

40 BLCP, 1898, 12.
irresponsibility, shortsightedness due to lofty ambition, and worst of all, immediate insolvency. The members of the Municipal Corporation were particularly prone to voice such criticism because they were going to be required to provide a regular financial contribution to the Trust to carry out its work.

Lord Sandhurst, however, defended the guarantee on two main grounds: first, that it would allow the Trust to borrow money at a lower interest rate since Government backing would enable confidence in lenders, and second, that the guarantee would allow the Trust to raise funds prior to generating revenue. The rate of interest saved was estimated to be a quarter to half a percentage.\(^4^1\) The Government proposed to mandate that the interest on any loans taken out by the Trust ought to be the first charge on their revenues, and the Government also reserved a right to step in and increase taxation in case the Trust was about to default.

Balachandra Krishna was worried about the steady escalation in the contribution from the Municipal Corporation which would be required over the coming years of the Trust’s operations. The fixed rate for the Municipal Corporation to contribute to the Trust, justified because the Corporation too would benefit from the activities of the Trust, was fixed at two percent of the total rateable value of properties in the city, including buildings and privately owned land. Krishna worried that the future properties, those which the Trust would build, were also being subjected to a halakhore tax, the money to pay the caste community of sweepers and cleaners, as well as the cost of maintenance of sanitation and structure of new buildings. Thus, the Corporation would face new costs besides the two percent required of them which he felt was not clearly laid out for the Corporation to anticipate. Until the plague, the Corporation had almost

\(^{4^1}\) BLCP, 1898, 14.
always had reserves in its budget with which they could have made their first payment, due on
the April 1, 1900. The plague, however, had cost a lot of money to contain and surveil and thus
the Municipal Corporation had no reserves left to make its first payment. Krishna’s solution was
simple. He suggested a strict two percent ceiling and the promise of nothing more.42

It was in these ways that the government wanted to insure that the lenders would be
willing to finance the City Improvement Trust’s operations. When protests against the demands
on rate-payers were raised, Lord Sandhurst poignantly reminded those present at the proceedings
that compared to similar cases in England, “the power of the rate-payers of the great cities of
India to lend their credit to promote improvements in the shape of productive works in which the
inhabitants are vitally interested is as yet almost wholly undeveloped and that much out [sic] to
be done here.”43 Thus, a major result of the creation of the City Improvement Trust, would be the
enlistment of new people such as the city’s rate payers, financiers, lenders, debtors, industrial
leaders, those commercial interests concerned with sanitary credit, and those civilians invested in
the reputation, livability, and world-prominence of their city. The colonial Government of India
inserted itself within local urban affairs previously thought to be a depository of self-
government, resulting in the enlistment of such numerous actors in the projects of slum
clearances and poor housing reform.

**Market Failures for the Labouring Poor**

Balachandra Krishna ultimately conceded that the Municipal Corporation alone could
never have borne the financial burdens of the Trust’s ambitious urban reorganization plans, thus

42 BLCP, 1898, 25.

43 BLCP, 1898, 15.
the Trust’s formation had to be accepted. He did continue to object to the terms of the
Corporation’s required contribution, however:

The financial responsibility, moreover, will be almost insupportable for the Corporation. As
the Bill is now framed the Corporation is indeed to act as treasurer to the Trust, and is in the
last resort responsible for the Trust’s liabilities; but in view of the Trust being an independent
body, Government have made certain concessions which, I apprehend, they might not have
made if the work was to be undertaken by the Corporation itself. Government have offered:
(1) plots of valuable land free of charge for the first ten years and at a very low charge
thereafter for a further period of 89 years; (2) free use of reclamation rights for the first
twenty years after reclamation and at a low charge for 79 years thereafter; and (3) the power
to debit to capital account such provision for interest and sinking fund as cannot be obtained
from income.44

These three measures, essentially free land, free reclamation rights, and free money, underscore
the immense liberty under which the Trust was to operate. Its expenditures and rights to act
within the city were practically limitless. Market constraints which would have affected any
other type of market player, be it public or private, would have surely limited the success of any
plan, no matter how well-meaning. For the Trust, however, it was to have practically unlimited
financial resources for itself.

Housing the poor, sanitizing the city, and putting an end to the detrimental plague seemed
to need just such an unlimited budget. Enlisting private enterprise to solve the problems of the
plagued city were just out of the question. Private dwelling companies were nowhere in the
conversations or debates regarding the Trust’s operations. Housing would have to come at a cost
to the Trust, ratepayers, and all those foregoing the chance to house the poor at a profit. Krishna’s
words regarding this anticipated financial loss are worth quoting at length:

Under the first head the principal item would be building sanitary dwellings for the poor. This
is a necessary and useful measure but of a doubtful financial success. That the poor mill-
hands and servant classes need better ventilated and better situated houses cannot be gainsaid.
At the same time their income is so uncertain and scanty that it is questionable whether they
will have the means of taking such improved but costly tenements as the Trust might

44 BLCR, 1898, 20.
endeavour to supply. The wisdom of the Trust will be sorely tried in suiting sanitary requirements to the capacity of the payers. European experience will hardly serve as a safe guide here. Several English organizations, such as Lord Shaftsbury’s Co., the Artizan’s Dwelling Co., the Improved Industrial Dwelling Co., the Peabody Buildings, have proved successful as remunerative concerns. But the English working classes are a homogenous community getting higher wages and accustomed to a higher standard of living than their Indian brethren. [italics mine] The Indian mill-hand refuses, I am told, to occupy a room supplied by his employer at Rs. 2 a month. His earning is scanty, his habits are often intemperate and he is in a chronic state of indebtedness. He, moreover, is not educated enough to appreciate the blessings of hygiene. The buildings howsoever unpretentious will be more costly than the present workman’s chawls. The could not, therefore, supply letting quarters at the rates the workmen are at present accustomed to pay. In providing these buildings the Trust will have to be content with improved health and reduced mortality as the only return for their investment.45

The anticipated financial loss was going to be tolerated because of the Indian working classes’ “intemperate habits” and generally uneducated nature. Furthermore, the wages of the Indian labourers were already lower than their counterparts in England, thus private dwelling companies could never be induced to house the poor in Bombay as they had in London.46

The City Improvement Trust was therefore designed by Government legislation to act as a particular kind of public body. It was going to become the poor and labouring classes’ landlord through the building of public housing without the aid of private dwelling companies. It would become a player in the private market in housing inadvertently, without any concessions to private companies interests or gains but rather as a player like them. In attempting to solve the problem of maintaining sanitation in a city where numerous wage earners and casual labourers

45 BLCP, 1898, 23-24.

46 This notion of housing for the working classes being a market failure, i.e. a product that could not be expected to be supplied by market dynamics alone since the cost of production far outweighed the returns, preceded the same argument made in the United States. The writings of Edith Elmer Wood, a Columbia University doctorate in Economics, argued that the private market could not provide affordable housing for the working classes. The result of such arguments was the United States Housing Act of 1937 which intended the Government to provide housing for the poor in major cities. See E. E. Wood, Housing of the Unskilled Wage Earner (New York: Macmillan Company Press, 1919), 19. See also, D. Bradford Hunt’s, Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). For a discussion of the role of private dwelling companies in the rehousing of London’s poor, see J. A. Yelling, Slums and Slum Clearance in Victorian London (London; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986).
could not afford upgrades to their own housing or didn’t have a rational interest in pursuing such a goal because they saw themselves as temporary migrants to the city in search of seasonal work, the Trust functioned to bring the public good of housing the poor into a privatized sphere of market exchanges. The Trust had a role in the legislative and financial fields, i.e. it was the means by which the Government reinserted itself into local urban affairs, financed the purchase of land, and advanced its role as custodian of world trade. The Trust had a role too in the field of the housing market, i.e. it was a privileged buyer with a capacity to create demand in housing and land without any limitations on its access to resources such as money and financing to make those purchases.

It was this dual position of the Trust, as both public and private entity, which would eventually lead to its own unravelling, i.e. the actions of the Trust would result in changes in the market which would render it an ultimate failure in housing the poor and limit its institutional life. Its social location in both the market and in government meant that people from both those fields would be able to influence and guide the Trust’s development, often they guided it in directions at odds with themselves.

The poor and labouring classes who were to be housed and were the subjects of these debates about the Trust’s inception did not represent themselves. The Government of India and Bombay City officials relied on the representation of the population through its propertied and moneyed people as well as employers of the labourers. Krishna’s dissatisfaction with representation on the proposed Trust scheme led to him suggesting even greater representation by capitalists. When speaking of Bombay as the “Manchester of the East,” because between sixty to seventy-thousand people worked in the mills, he suggested that the Mill Owners Association
be granted representation on the Trust board. He made his case by reminding the group that the
mill industry brought four lakhs of rupees to the Municipal accounts and that they had “paid up
capital of about 10 crores rupees.” They mill owners, he argued, also had special interests,

...as employers of labour...The mill-owners’ representative will be a valuable acquisition to
the new Trust, for through him the Trust will be in direct touch with the mill-owning opinion.
He would be able to give practical advice when the question of providing workmen’s
buildings and chawls will come up for consideration before the Board, and the public will
have more confidence in this part of the scheme if they knew that men in touch with the
labouring classes and possessing a practical acquaintance with their requirements and
resources are being consulted with regard to them.\textsuperscript{47}

Krishna was so convinced that it was through employers that the labourers could speak, and that
through the employers, the Trust would be in “direct touch” with their special interests. Thus
labour didn’t represent itself on the Trust but was spoken for through employers.

The labouring poor were not the only objects of the Trust’s initiatives. Wealthy property
owners too had tremendous influence over the operations of the Trust and stood to benefit the
Trust itself through their own interests. Mutual benefits were to be had by rehousing the poor.
Some areas of reclamation were being criticized for their proposed role in housing the upper and
middle classes. The attention was being diverted away from the labouring poor, it was argued. In
defense, Balachandra Krishna said about the proposed right to reclaim land which was to be

\begin{quote}
It is also thought that reclaimed land will supply sites for the wealthy and not for the poor.
But it is to be noted that reclamation is meant here as a source of revenue to the Trust. It is
further to be undertaken before the land previously acquired is disposed of at profitable rates.
Past experience is not entirely against reclamation. The Back Bay scheme no doubt failed, but
that failure was due to various special causes. The Port Trust reclamations have on the other
hand proved successful and may furnish valuable guidance to the new Trust. Reclaimed lands
will give building sites for the wealthy alone; but if the congestion of the crowded localities
can be thereby reduced, that will not be an end to be despised.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{47}{BLCP, 1898, 23.}
\footnotetext{48}{BLCP, 1898, 24.}
\end{footnotes}
Reclamations of foreshore had been undertaken on numerous occasions by the Municipal Corporation, some schemes became notorious as ill-conceived projects such as the Back Bay reclamation scheme. The new land proposed to be brought into the field of housing and urban development by reclamations was promised to ease congestion in the city, providing more space for housing, port sites, and businesses for everyone. Krishna spoke of the mutual benefits when defending the right to reclaim lands for a wealthy neighborhood, that the benefit would be felt by the poor as well. The revenues from the reclamation would also benefit the Trust, something no doubt that the Municipal Corporation would have liked to keep for itself.

**Money against Chawls**

In such conditions, the Trust was bound to drive the housing market into a speculative frenzy. If the activities of the Trust were to progress, land and buildings within the city had to be acquired to be redeveloped. However, this proved either impossible or possible only at a very high cost and after considerable delay. Every step of the way and in almost every case in which the Trust wanted to acquire property, they were forestalled and delayed by legal and logistical efforts on the part of the current owners. This made their work very difficult and led to their adjusting of their goals in line with what could realistically be accomplished.

Previous discussions of the Trust’s operations in Bombay have sought to judge whether the Trust was a failure or a success in terms of housing units made for the poor, i.e. did it succeed in increasing the amount of sanitary housing available to the labouring poor of Bombay? Instead of judging the outcomes solely for the overt aims of the Trust, we can see that the Trust unwillingly functioned to advance the logic of private property’s development. It did so through
the institutionalization of what was marked as “native” resistance on behalf of “natives” to its efforts by property owners throughout Bombay. The Trust’s initial aims of willingly accepting the financial burden of housing the poor was an acknowledgement that the market couldn’t serve the needs of the poorest in the city, but it also underestimated market motives so much that the resistance to its intended acquisitions of properties for adequate poor housing drove property values up. Its paternalism unwittingly fueled a real estate bubble. That the Trust failed to provide enough housing was due not to a lack of will but because of the influence of money and financing in its operations.

How did the Trust secure the logic of urban property as a site of financing and moneyed interests? There were the practical and overt and visible drivers set at the outset of its formation. That the Trust had government backed loans which were guaranteed made it a lucrative scheme for lenders. The Trust became a buyer in the market of housing with no limitations to its work. There was no motivation to keep the cost of acquisitions down. There were also the inadvertent effects of imperial and urban leaders failing to understand exactly how money operated as an already-existing driving factor in the contests within Bombay over rights to build the city, even in building those parts of the city which officials deemed uninhabitable. The importance of the rule of property for the residents of Bombay was underestimated by all officials. Frustrated at times with the slow acquisition of properties, the Trust officials described in great detail in their reports to Government when they wrote:

To commence with, there was considerable difficulty in procuring the establishment necessary for making reliable valuations and establishing their figures in the face of extravagant demands made by the owners with the assistance of experts. Experience shows that in the initial stages of such work, nearly every case will be contested and the best available legal talent will be employed on behalf of the owners. The smallness of the holding was also a very troublesome factor; in a great majority of cases the properties stood on about 100 square yards of land and there was as much trouble and delay caused by taking up each such property as in the acquisition of very much larger and more valuable property. The
multiplication of legal proceedings necessary before any large scheme can be carried through is therefore a serious matter and one that cannot be avoided. Having obtained the necessary establishment and procured every possible detail relating to either site or structure of each property to be acquired, the actual work of acquisition is commenced by serving a notice on the owner to appear at the Collector’s Court with his title deeds and other documents. On the expiry of the notice it was not unusual for a representative of the owner to appear and state that the owner had left for his up-country residence owing to the prevalence of plague and to ask for a postponement of several months until the owner could appear. When the owner did eventually appear it was often without documents to establish his claim to the property and further adjournments had to be granted, first for the production of title deeds, then possibly for the establishment of sharers’ and mortgagees’ claims, and lastly for time to allow his surveyor to prepare and submit a valuation of the property. Several months having elapsed and the preliminary documents having at last been submitted to the court, the case is ready for hearing by the Collector. At this point fresh difficulties were encountered: first there was no established system of valuation, and for precisely similar properties one owner claimed on his rental, another on the assumed value of the site and structure, another on what he had paid for the property, and so on, namely, each on the basis thought likely to give the largest award. Every detail in the valuation prepared by the Trustees’ Officers was contested, and evidence was produced to show results favorable to the owners. This caused much delay and constant postponements were the rule rather than the exception.  

As we can see from this complaint, several obstacles combined to frustrate Trust officials. At minimum, and to buy time, officials were delayed by documents assessing the value of a property being hidden or produced at the appropriate time to gain the highest compensation possible for the owners. Numerous “experts” and “legal talent” were in great demand by residents who sought their representation on behalf of their property’s value. Just within years of forming the Trust,’ their stated intentions alone were increasing the demand of such talent, raising the social status of all kinds of property experts in the city. Rather than limit the effect of market dynamics in the city’s housing supply, the Trust’s operations were intensifying the market in housing, enlisting whole cadres of real estate experts, property-valuation professionals, and speculators to build the inflationary dynamic.

A major issue in the acquisition of properties was the small size of many of the holdings, and small holders were more likely to contest an acquisition. For the Trust to acquire a large enough plot to build on, contiguous property owners had to be compensated before acquiring

49 COBIT, 1902, 14-15.
land large enough to build the thoroughfare or building that the Trust intended to. Information compiled in 1909, exactly upon a decade’s work by the Trust, verified that small property owners were much more likely to resist and delay the Trust’s acquisitions. There were 33 cases which were “settled amicably” representing a total of 314,869 square yards at a cost of Rs. 31,56,082 to the Trust. In contrast, there were 252 cases “fought out” representing 234,180 square yards at a cost of Rs. 11,21,079 to the Trust. This showed that urban smallholders, were more likely to fight a case, since there were eight times more cases but only two-thirds of the square yards represented by those cases fought out. The cost too was just one-third for those cases fought out. Thus, battles over acquisitions were more likely over small plots rather than large ones.50 Those going to court over the city’s property acquisitions were owners of small properties and it is this group of people who overwhelmingly brought in servicemen, legal experts, and property experts and officials to fight make their cases against the Trust.

Even the rental market was affected by anticipated renumeration from the Trust. In anticipation of higher compensation and to secure it, landlords charged higher rents or sold tenurial rights at higher prices. This was a reversal of previous practices when landlords used to offer lower official rents to evade taxes. If they could show lower values earned from their property, they could pay lower rates to municipal assessors. Raising rents now, these higher earnings could be used to show Trust officials, who would one day knock on the landlord’s doors, that their property earned a high revenue therefore warranting the garnering of greater compensation. Thus, more labourers and seasonal migrants were priced out of housing making choices to enter more dense flat-shares. Where there may have been six men to a room before the

50 COBIT, 1908-1909, 3.
Trust’s formation, that number increased from 1898 through the beginning decades of the twentieth century, not in spite of the Trust’s efforts, but because of it.

Compensation was often determined based on averages of prior revenue from the property. If revenue didn’t prove to be a good measure then owners could be compensated based on value of land and materials of building, which could be reused and were conceived of as fixed assets the Trust would gain, minus the cost of demolition and transport of materials from the site:

\[
\text{compensation} = (\text{land value} + \text{materials}) - (\text{demolition costs} + \text{transport})
\]

If the building was condemned or unfit for human habitation, then the owner could not be compensated for the building but only the land, so as not to reward delinquent landlords who had likely rendered building materials unusable through neglect.

Those who couldn’t secure highest compensation based on previous revenues found new and ingenious ways to influence the Trust into providing higher compensation. A tribunal of appeals heard cases where the owner and city officials were in dispute about the value of the property to be acquired. Some landowners who didn’t have buildings on their land but rather one-story casual units which were constructed as if to be non-permanent,\(^{51}\) protested that they shouldn’t be compensated according to net revenues because the hutments didn’t garner much rent. They said their land was worth much more than the rent. Upon appeal of this method of valuation, the tribunal decided to admit a “valuation by a hypothetical building scheme.” This meant that rather than compensating based on achieved past revenues, the land should be compensated based on what rents could be acquired if the land were fully developed.\(^{52}\)

\(^{51}\) Kidambi calls these “cutcha” properties, using the language of today.

\(^{52}\) Kidambi, *Making an Indian Metropolis*, 86.
This resulted in a whole new set of experts and property professionals who could now draw up elaborate plans which would have brought in exorbitant rents. The Trust dutifully, backed by government and the enforced participation of the Municipal Corporation, paid out the elaborate compensation. This means of assessing rightful compensation meant that surveyors who assessed future revenues were “bringing in paper schemes for the erection of magnificent buildings upon sites which were already often fully developed according to the requirements of the neighbourhood and claiming an altogether fictitious value for the land on this basis.” People were being compensated for “the profit of a future development that might or might not be realized.” Speculation had become not just about the future value of a commodity, but was realizable in the present. The limitless supply of financing available to the Trust made paying the anticipated and inflated values possible.

The Trust eventually came to doubt this scheme, but did no better when in its place it adopted a “plotting scheme” method of value assessment. This method involved, “laying out a piece of land of this nature (on paper only) in building sites, providing for roads and passages and ascertaining what each plot would fetch if sold for building purposes by comparison with other sales of more or less similar plots of land in the neighborhood.” This too resulted in the Trust paying out “...very large sums of public money to which the Trust believe that the claimants have no right at all.” Surveyors and lawyers along with property owners and landholders managed to provide elaborate paper schemes and garner inflated compensation. Drawings and plans had become hot commodities through the Trust’s operations.

53 COBIT, April 20, 1909, 114, also cited in Kidambi, Making an Indian Metropolis, 87.

54 COBIT, April 20, 1909, 115, also cited in Kidambi, Making an Indian Metropolis, 87-88.
It seemed the Trust and Government officials who designed it to solve the problem of insanitary dwellings in Bombay had underestimated the ingenuity of propertied and moneyed peoples to continually secure and even elevate their status in society. What had been severely underestimated was the native Bombay landholder’s and landlord’s sense of their property entitlements. The rule of property was already secured in Bombay prior to the Trust’s formations and the Trust worked to inadvertently enhance it.

Abandonment of Poor Housing

By 1909, when the Trust looked back on its first decade of activity, it had removed 14,613 tenements and built 6,111 tenements. Clearly, more people were dis-housed by the Trust’s activities than were rehoused. In the 1911 census on the city, it was found that three-fourths of the city’s population resided in one room tenements. The overcrowding and housing problem had only gotten worse, and Trust officials as well as its numerous critics were aware of this problem. The institution of the Trust had its own learning curve, adjusting its methods as it learned what did and didn’t work. Moreover, it became very influenced by the need to exist on a sound commercial footing, i.e. bring in revenues to pay for its projects. Yet another issue, was the way in which moneyed concerns sought refuge in growing parts of the city outside of the Trust’s domain, where they could build more freely, away from the constraints of the Trust’s more stringent building by-laws. The chairman of the Trust said after the first world war, that:

Unaccustomed to such strict building regulations and to such close supervision and sanitary control as the Trust’s staff exercise both before and after the completion of buildings, and preferring freehold to leasehold tenure, builders and investors ... fought shy of the Trust’s

55 Orr, Social Reform and Slum Reform, 20-21, as cited in Kidambi, Making an Indian Metropolis, 93.

56 Cited in Kidambi, Making an Indian Metropolis, 99.
plots and preferred to invest money received from the Trust in compensation for their old properties in building on sites just outside the Trust’s estate, especially where they could take advantage of new open spaces created by the Trust for purposes of ventilation, and too often, in consequence of the weakness of the Municipal building by-laws, such investments have resulted in the formation of what will ultimately be recognized as modern slums.  

Orr was insightful and astute, the modern slum was created from the bottom up, by people eking out livelihoods in relations of exchange and production outside of official purview. Isolating the question of housing, as the Trust had done to remedy the problem, was an exercise in futility. So many other factors contributed to the rational choices people made about how they were to live. After the first decade of activity, the Trust increasingly housed the wealthy, arguing that those schemes were more commercially sound. Officials also argued that middle and upper class housing schemes had a useful and indirect influence on the conditions of the labouring poor, easing congestion in many neighborhoods. This was not true though, numerous labouring poor persons had merely lost their homes through the demolition drives.

There was a constant tension through the first two decades of the twentieth century, between the Trust’s desire to intervene in the market in housing on behalf of the labouring poor and its desire to encourage private enterprise in housing schemes. On the one hand was the awareness that poor housing was a market failure and on the other were the interests of the commercial elite whose fortunes were dependent on the private market in housing. As early as 1901, the chairman of the Trust had suggested encouraging private men’s capacities to house the

57 Orr, Finances of the Trust, as cited in Kidambi, Making an Indian Metropolis, 92.

58 Kidambi, Making an Indian Metropolis, 103.
poor since it would free up the Trust’s treasury, however there were always reservations too about these suggestions.\textsuperscript{59}

Housing labourers could have, in theory, been done by employers and companies, but wartime market forces and the threat of worker strikes prevented this. In 1903, the Millowners Association requested that the Trust build housing for its labourers in exchange for the association paying the rent for the property so that they could house their workers. This was a kind of mortgaging scheme for the Millowners Association, who wanted to become owners of the property by 1940, thus using the Trust to finance the production and acquisition of worker’s chawls. The proposal was denied however in the Legislative Council, and the Trust argued that it would only build housing for those displaced by the Trust’s activities, it was not going to build housing for other labourers who had otherwise no interaction with the Trust. In 1913, a scheme called the “Poorer classes accommodation scheme” was passed, which gave the Trust the legal resources to work with employers to build labourers’ housing in almost the exact same terms as had originally been proposed by the mill owners association, except the term was 28 years and not 37 years. Only one mill participated by then, the wartime economy had made the prospect of building poor housing much more dubious. Not only were materials more expensive, but the risk of housing workers all in the same building was becoming threatening with the rise of labour organization. There was a “fear of combinations facilitating strikes.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{59} Kidambi sees private enterprise replacing the public efforts in poor housing over the course of the Trust’s life. Instead, by seeing the two as a source of tension and debate within official discussions over the problem of poor housing, we can understand the fits and starts with which demolitions and rehousing schemes were initiated, and the way in which numerous urban interests, capitalists, merchants, and labour organizations, came to use housing as a site of conflict between them.

\textsuperscript{60} Kidambi, \textit{Making an Indian Metropolis}, 107.
being removed from the market, if kept in the market itself, turned out to be a good form of labour control.

By 1919, it was reported that 892,000 of Bombay’s 1.2 million people lived in single rooms. A combination of elite moneyed interests, and the maintenance of the ambiguity on whether private enterprise or public intervention could solve the problem of poor housing had rendered the Trust an official failure. As one scholar has observed, “Significantly, the most effective resistance emanated from propertied Indians who were able to subvert the very legal and bureaucratic mechanisms by means of which the Trust sought to alter the urban built environment.”

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Fig. 5.1 Map of Island of Bombay showing the work carried out by the City Improvement Trust between 1898-1933.

The Trust survived, even if barely, the wartime economy, however the depression of 1929-30 could not be overcome. In 1932, the Trust reported that, “All the members of the Trust staff voluntarily accepted an emergency cut in their salaries ranging from 5% for persons drawing Rs. 100 and over to 10% for persons drawing over Rs. 700. A saving of about Rs. 20,000 was thereby effected.”

In addition, upon the amalgamation with the Bombay Municipal Corporation, the Trust had a debt of Rs. 90 lakhs on its ledger. Faced with bank crises, the Trust sold off Rs. 50 lakhs of that debt to private investors and repaid the rest in 1932. Private parties offered loans, one in particular of Rs. 10 lakhs at the rate of 5%, which was less than the normal 7.5% raised prior. Private money markets took up what banks couldn’t do anymore. It was a “great inconvenience as in times of panic the Banks were not willing to advance money to the Trust.”

Also in 1932, a bill for the “amalgamation of the Trust with the Bombay Municipality” was introduced in the Legislative Council, and the combination was successful. The Trust’s tenure was over, as was any possibility that a public effort to solve the problem of poor housing could be imagined. The rise of nationalist sentiment by this point meant that the problems of the poor were increasingly blamed on the colonizers, and not the problems of rational markets. That poor housing was a market failure was forgotten, or at least put on hold until the problem of self-sovereignty could be resolved.

In that same year, the Trust report included a detailed map of the city of Bombay with amazing details showing the demarcation of Trust lands, those which were currently being demarcated because of encroachments-not necessarily poor encroachments but rather of any kind.

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62 COBIT, 1932-33, 1.

63 COBIT, 1932-33, 1.
due to the persistent ambiguity on where Trust lands began and where they ended. The map also plotted out areas where certain schemes were in effect. This was one of the earliest forms of evidence that Dharavi was once a “Trust acquired estate” because of scheme that was due to take place. There were also “Government lands vested in Trust for 99 years,” such as the areas known as the Race Course, Willingdon Park, Marine Line Maidan, and Cooperage. Parts of the map were marked with the letters “SH” which indicated semi-permanent huts, which were in several locations throughout the island. Notably, there was not a single occurrence of “SH” in Dharavi. One of the schemes undertaken that year was to fill in low-lying lands in Dharavi, as requested by the Municipal Health Department, most likely due to mosquitoes.64

**Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the moneyed relations which drove the project to rehouse the labouring and urban poor of Bombay through the City Improvement Trust, mainly between 1898 and 1920. It has shown how contradictory desires to both provide clean housing and enhance values in terms of urban investments led to the consolidation of the moneyed elites in Bombay and the eventual unravelling of an otherwise ambitious poor housing scheme. Tension between the already existing Municipal Corporation and the new City Improvement Trust played out as each tried to claim and abandon responsibility for housing the labouring classes. The Trust was seen as an assault on the principle of urban self-government. Ultimately through the decades of Trust activities, more people were dis-housed than rehoused, only serving to exacerbate the poor housing problem. Nonetheless, important things were accomplished through the Trust’s efforts,

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64 COBIT, 1932-33, Map in appendix.
namely, the status of the moneyed classes was elevated to caretakers of the city, and their power was consolidated.

I have argued that the Trust, in addition to being a particular kind of urban conglomerate, should also be seen as a means of institutionalizing new financial instruments of government lines of credit towards the building of poor housing and the making of new buyers in the domain of the housing market. Seeing the Trust as a financial instrument has allowed us to see that it became a buyer of unlimited resources, causing a real estate boom as amidst its paternalistic activities. Landlords eagerly sought out compensation from the Trust, even being rewarded for plots of land in which they had nothing but a set of drawings on what could have been built there. Such financial mismanagement and eagerness to recompense landlords eventually led to the Trust’s financial failures. While initially the Trust was consciously willing to bear tremendous costs to clean the city, to rehouse the poor, and to restore the sanitary credit of the city, those costs undermined its efforts. Leaders within it advocated for the removal of poor housing from the domain of the market and believed that they alone would be suited to be the landlords of the labouring classes. However, that goal was at odds with the desire to maintain the support of landlords within the city.

Later, the depressions of the 1930s made the financial initiatives of the Trust unsustainable, and the CIT was eventually amalgamated into the Municipal Corporation in the early 1930s. For those awaiting reforms and the chance at self rule, understandings and knowledge about the place of poverty within the urban economy was presented as a national problem. The problem of urban poverty came to be seen as one native leaders alone could address. For the labouring and poor urban dwellers, they were left to the whims of the market, a
familiar condition for those seeking housing in the ever-growing city. Boundary-making and the urban poverty problem is discussed in the next two chapters.
Chapter Six:
Karachi & Aden, Bombay’s Peripheries

Port cities across the Arabian sea of the Indian Ocean, as far as Aden and Karachi, were contained within the Bombay Presidency’s administrative rubric. Commonalities in the cities’ development combined with differences in administrative priorities to make these cities comparable with each other. Shipping was the main form of communication between these port towns. By the beginning of the 20th century, these growing cities started to produce urban leaders who believed their city was being used solely as a seat of power for those located elsewhere, particularly in Bombay. While Bombay’s City Improvement Trust was dis-housing and rehousing its labouring and poor dwellers to restore its “sanitary credit,” in Karachi and Aden the problem of poor housing did not find similar solutions. There was no Improvement Trust in these cities and it was hard for local urban leaders to develop the kind of institutional framework which would bring in Imperial lines of credit on the scale that it did in Bombay. Rising classes of merchants were able to use these seaport connections to establish nodes of commerce between the three cities, but in Karachi and Aden, they did so as a way to escape any limitations and regulations on their commercial enterprises.

Seeing Bombay from the outside, from the perspective of Karachi and Aden, this chapter demonstrates how the poor in each of these cities could be used as grounds upon which Bombay’s sub-imperial position was challenged and, in so doing, effectively delayed the resolution of the poor housing problem. This subsumption and delaying of the urban poverty problem was most visible in Bombay’s “peripheries,” in Karachi and Aden, where urban elites absolved themselves of solving the poor housing problem by appealing to the assumption, in Karachi’s case, that it had not modernized as much as Bombay, and in Aden’s case, that Aden’s
poor were not the responsibility of the Indian capitalist. While the process of urbanization had resulted in slums in all major cities across the Bombay Presidency, including in Bombay, Karachi and Aden, a particular engagement with the temporality of capitalist development sustained notions of regional distinction. These regional distinctions lent credibility to autonomy movements which eventually removed Bombay as the seat of power over these cities, but it also productively delayed the problems of the urban poor. In Aden, the total abandonment of the urban poverty problem was visible, while in Karachi, a desire to “catch up” to Bombay’s stage of commercial advancement meant that leaders advocated infrastructure for more commercial opportunities, not a restraining of commercial ambitions.

Karachi’s merchants resisted both Bombay and the construction of an exogenous origin story, emphasizing a long history of maritime commerce. While Karachi could be accessed over land, the most common form of transportation between Karachi and Bombay was by sea, making the route much shorter. Karachi’s merchants experienced their centuries-long history of trade and commerce as evidence of their right to commercial prominence, autonomy, and wealth on their own terms. Although they understood Karachi to be a new city, they didn’t believe a port or oceanic trade was new to them. They deployed Sindh’s long history of port towns and wanted to restore and revive their prior prominence which had dwindled because of their attachment and dependence on governance from Bombay. While Bombay’s precolonial history was understood by native locals as being insular and cut off from the rest of the world until the colonial imposition, i.e. many of Bombay’s leaders accepted the colonial narrative, Karachi’s precolonial history was understood as already connected to other world ports. That the British misunderstood Sindh’s commercial past had to be corrected.
Aden, in contrast, was a fueling station *en route* to further ports. The most prominent merchants had established corporate centers across the cities of Bombay, Karachi and Aden. Some merchants used Karachi as their main hub while others used Bombay. In either case, Aden was a common stopping point for all ships headed west; it was necessary for refueling, a logistical necessity which required a lot of manual labour to carry coal back and forth from depositories to the ships. The demand for labour led many migrants to Aden in search of work.

In both Karachi and Aden, the poor housing problem was no less an issue than it was in Bombay; however, solutions to the problem were hard to come by due to these cities perceived subsidiary role to Bombay. Challenging that subsidiary role contributed to the Sindh autonomy movement in Karachi, which had as one of its crucial components, municipal self-governance for the city of Karachi. The issue of housing for the labouring poor was thoroughly sidelined by the interests of Bombay’s merchants and those merchants in Karachi who wanted to “catch up.” Aden fared even worse, basically turning into a labour colony for Western India’s shipping industries.

Thus, as anti-imperial movements and regionalist aspirations grew in the early 20th century, it wasn’t only those in Bombay who were observant and critical of forms of extractive sovereignty. Cities beyond Bombay started to see Bombay as an instrument of imperial power and thus an obstacle to their own modern progress; they thus cast Bombay as a monopolizer of colonial capital and contested its right to authority over them.

**Karachi: Commercial Competition**

Sindh was the farthest province of the Bombay presidency from the capital city, Bombay,
and had a centuries-long history of port towns rising and falling as commercial adventurers from both outside and inside the region tried to secure their fortunes. Well established credit and merchant networks used these ports to transact across Central Asia, the Middle East, East Africa, and the Indian subcontinent well through the early modern period. After they were annexed to Bombay in the mid-nineteenth century, the desire to gain some autonomy from Bombay was felt for quite some time in Karachi even before the nationalist and sub-nationalist movements of the 1910s and 20s.

While Karachi may have felt like a totally new and modern port, Sindh had a long history of oceanic trade and social networks of commerce based in port towns preceded the rise of Karachi’s merchants. The kind of history that was constructed for the city of Bombay in which the British were given all the credit for the opening up of commercial opportunities, as we saw in the first chapter, was similarly at play amongst Karachi’s historians. Alexander Baillie published *Kurrachee: Past, Present and Future* in 1890. He reviewed the harbour and port’s history prior to discussing the British period. He said of the port’s pre-British past that,

> It is obvious that the princes of Sind had no ocean-shipping interests: that they attached but little value to imports and exports, except in so far as they might tend to increase their revenues, and add to their personal comforts, and consequently they lent very slight encouragement to the opening up of seaports, and gave no assistance towards their advancement, but rather opposed their creation and development.¹

The British propaganda campaign about their sole efforts at modernization demanded that Sindh’s previous rulers be cast as extractive, self-concerned, feudal overlords with no interest in the well being of Sindh’s merchants. British intervention was necessary to utilize the potential

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for commerce:

But when the disturbed condition of the country demanded the intervention of the British Government, the desirability of having a seaport was at once recognized by the Government of India, at that time the Honourable East India Company, and the advantages offered by the harbour of Kurrachee were fully appreciated. In a short time the foreign trade that sprung up attracted native traders from the interior, and European merchants from Bombay. Money was granted for harbour improvements, barracks were built, roads were made, and banks and other institutions were established.²

British modernization efforts, including infrastructure for trade such as roads, harbors, banks, and money transformed this practically ignored potentiality from a “miserable native fortress into a civil town of considerable size.” When Sindh was annexed by the British in 1839, the population of Karachi was a mere 8,000 to 14,000 inhabitants. Thirty years later it was thought to be 50,000 people. The value of trade in 1843 was estimated at Rs. 1,200,000. After just two years, it was estimated to have tripled, then in 1865 it was Rs. 46,500,000, and in 1885 it was Rs. 90,000,000. Baillie said of this growth that:

Such a rapid increase in population and trade is not uncommon in the United States, and other parts of the American continent, or even in Australia, but it would be remarkable in Europe, and is unparalleled in India.³

Sindh and its harbour was cast as a frontier of human settlement, like the settler colonies of the British Empire. The story being created was that the coast of Sindh were entirely isolated from world trade until the British arrived.

However, unlike observers of Bombay, Karachi’s merchants remembered a different past

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than the story the British were telling. They experienced their long history of trade and commerce as evidence of their right to commercial prominence, autonomy, and wealth on their own terms. Although they understood Karachi to be a new city, they didn’t believe a port or oceanic trade was new to them. They were aware of Sindh’s long history of port towns and wanted to restore and revive their prior prominence which had dwindled in their attachment and dependence on governance from Bombay. That the British misunderstood Sindh’s commercial past had to be corrected.

Understanding Sindh’s early modern history is important to countering official imperial history about Karachi and its trade. As early as the 15th and 16th century, the Portuguese had attempted to set up monopolistic trading routes down the western coast of South Asia, starting north by the Indus river, and moving southwards down the peninsular coast. Their role in the port city of Thatta was basically to be one of several intermediary groups in an already established nexus. Sindhi cloth traveled from Thatta down the river to Lahori bander and then across the Arabian sea up the strait of Hormuz. Thatta was a center of trade and courtly activity well before the Portuguese, being ruled by the Sumras and then the Sammas, a Sunni dynasty with allegiances to both Delhi and the Central Asian Mongols. This competition between Delhi and Central Asia for Sindh’s allegiance drove much of the battles within Sindh itself. When the Portuguese successfully acquired Hormuz, the Sammas controlled all of lower Sindh, and Thatta was the capital.⁴ Thus the profit from the trade of Sindhi textiles, through the collection of trade tariffs, went to the Sammas. Hormuz was an entrepot-state at this time on the island of Jarun, and Portuguese acquired it in 1515. Records from customs revenues kept by the Portuguese for the

1540’s at Hormuz show that one-third of revenue came from Gujarat, another third from Persia itself, another ten percent from Sindh, and the remainder from Basra and the Portuguese themselves. Thus Sindh was a very connected region. However, much contest over the port of Lahori Bander reveals that this area was seen as potentially more profitable due to its exclusive landed connections into central Asia. The possibility of two routes connecting Hormuz and Thatta, that by sea just discussed and that over land made the ports a profitable prize. Generally, these two routes operated as complements, when one wasn’t possible, the other was used. Hence the ten percent port revenue from within Sindh itself was only a fraction of profits to be made.

Both the Portuguese and the Dutch had made consistent speculations on what net profit would be accumulated if they could become the sea-based intermediaries between Thatta and Hormuz. A Dutchman Pieter Broecke said in 1619 of the region:

> From Lohoor one may navigate through a river into the kingdom of Sinde, which is also part of the realm of Chachalm or the Great Moghul. The main commercial centres there are named Sinde Tatta and Diolsinde. Here a great abundance of beautiful textiles are produced, which are mostly transported by the Portuguese to Ormus and from there to Persia and Arabia. This is mostly done by Italians, Persians, and Moors, who all of them are engaged in this important trade between Ormus and Bassora, a city in the Cinus Persicus.\(^5\)

Dutch traders were in control of Iran ever since 1623, when the VOC had a factory in Iran had noticed in 1634 that an estimated revenue of 680,340 Dfl was generated over land between Sindh and Iran, and if it had been carried by sea, a profit of 1,011,500 Dfl was possible.\(^6\) They also recognized that the Portuguese were purposefully making this difficult for the Dutch. Through


\(^6\) Willem M. Floor, The Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Diewel-Sind (Pakistan), in the 17th and 18th Centuries: Based on Original Dutch Records (Karachi, Islamabad: Institute of Central & West Asian Studies University of Karachi; in collaboration with Lok Virsa, 1993), 44-45.
alliances with local traders, and sales of arms to local rulers, the Portuguese had secured an allegiance, such that Dutch traders would find themselves stranded for several days at Lahori Bander and other smaller ports such as Karatje, the predecessor to modern day Karachi, without merchants even coming to visit them. Only when they learned that Thatta was where they ought to go, did they realize that the Portuguese had secured loyalty there.

The Dutch had almost nothing to trade which the Sindhis wanted, having arrived here only because of a command by VOC directors to get rid of the surplus sugar mistakenly accumulated in Batavia. Whenever they attempted to make a sale by first allowing the inspection of samples, they would be told that the same item could be bought cheaper from the Portuguese. Minimum prices for sales were set on all goods by the VOC, except sugar which was to be sold for one main reason, to get rid of the surplus.

Changes both in Persia and South Asia led to the decline of Thatta by the beginning of the 19th century. The Mughals gained control over Sindh, making Lahore the main manufacturing base, and Hormuz fell due to the Safavids and English. Aurangzeb established Aurangabander in the mid-1600’s, and thus the Mughals gained more control over the Western Indian coast and its oceanic trade. Similar contests for Gujarat by the Mughals, especially under Akbar against local Sultans prove that the Mughals had realized that the Indian ocean commerce and revenue it generated was crucial to their land-based imperial interests. The Portuguese role in this route was

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7 Floor, *Dutch East India Company*, 61.

8 Floor, *Dutch East India Company*. Accounts by Brahe throughout the translated text indicate this.

thus reduced by the 1630’s, after which the English set up more permanent factories, only to be removed and permitted again and again by the Talpur Mirs in the early 1800’s.

Interestingly in the case of Sindh, merchants often petitioned their regional statesmen, the Talpur Mirs, to have the English removed. The company needed to claim that trade had been stifled under the Talpurs, and that the East India Company was setting up factories in order to “benevolently” open up the region to commerce, which was evidently an anachronistic and self-serving claim. Evidence shows that the opposite was true. But former EIC officials such as Outram and Eastwick spoke out strongly against the East India Company, as did numerous agitators for autonomy in the early 1900’s. The heightened political discourse through the 1930’s would recall the great economy under Talpur reign, and use it to champion secession from the Bombay Presidency.

The British annexation of Sindh in 1843 by Sir Napier presented new challenges for the Sindhi commercial network and the routes established through the early modern 16th-18th centuries. Commercial activities were reoriented towards new centers in London and Bombay. Indigo production in Sindh, which along with Gujarat was once one of the highest in the world, was shifted to Bihar. Two networks based out of Shikarpur and Hyderabad respectively had different trajectories of negotiation. The Shikarpuris continued on the strength of previous network connections, while the Hyderabadis sought connections throughout the region under the control of the Bombay Presidency. It is true that colonial rule reduced the viability of Sindh as a financial and commercial network base:

While, prior to the annexation, Sind was a participant in a wide-ranging system of interregional and international trade, under British rule, its function was increasingly reduced to that of an outlet for the agricultural production of the Punjab. In the second half of the
nineteenth century, the bulk of the investment the British made in Sind was in the
collection of a modern harbour in Karachi and of railway lines linking the port with the
Punjab.\textsuperscript{10}

The global role of Karachi was established through a colonial economic relation in which grain
and raw materials were exported through Karachi’s newly built harbors and manufactured goods
from the industrializing world were sold in Karachi’s newly built marketplaces. A landed and
agricultural class of rural notables from Punjab, a mixed Hindu and Muslim business community
of Sindhis, a bureaucratic class of colonial administrators from the Bombay Presidency and
European merchants, all came together to motor the colonial economy. By the end of the 19th
century, the port city Karachi became the largest grain exporter of the Indian subcontinent, fixing
its role as an urban outpost for demands made elsewhere.

Some argued that Bombay’s revenue paid for the construction of the port of Karachi, but
later separatists contested the claim that Sindh had become financially dependent on Bombay
and argued that it was fully capable of supporting itself. The port benefited the Punjab the most,
and Punjabi officials were happy to derive opportunities from the port without having to include
Sindh as a part of its province, even when some British officials made such recommendations.\textsuperscript{11}

Another factor in the changes in Sindh through colonial rule involved the arrival of new
traders in greater numbers from Bombay, who for the first time, were sharing dominion with the
notably prosperous Sindhi merchants. Parsi contractors, Jewish traders, Gujarati banias, Marwari
traders, and Punjabis arrived for the first time at this rate to trade at the Karachi port, while

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\textsuperscript{10} Claude Markovits, \textit{The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750-1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to

\textsuperscript{11} Markovits, \textit{Global World of Indian Merchants}, 54.
\end{flushleft}
Ismaili Khojas and Kutchi Memons strengthened old ties.\textsuperscript{12} This replaced previous Shikarpuri and Hyderabadi bases, thus resulting in a steady decline in commercial activity for both upper and lower Sindh, out of Karachi. The Hyderabadi network, however, was able to survive and enter a larger global economy, through connection with Bombay.

A network of Hyderabadi merchants also called Sindwork merchants flourished after 1860. Through the annexation period, they were able to exploit connections to Bombay, and thus the world well into the contemporary period. The base of these Sindworkies evolved from local merchants, shopkeepers, and generally retailers into the network. Initially, however, the transition wasn’t easy. The Talpur Amirs had made Hyderabad their capital, and thus the Hyderabads had had state patronage of their financial and commercial skills. When Sir Charles Napier arrived, he moved the capital from Hyderabad to Karachi, thus eliminating the state’s patronage to Hyderabads commercial activities. Thus immediately after annexation, Hyderabad’s merchant community suffered due to reduced opportunities.\textsuperscript{13}

By 1860, however, the Sindworkies began trading along new network routes, through 1914, the outbreak of World War One. They traded in goods from all over India, through Benares, Kashmir, and the Punjab. The increasing demand for “ethnic Indian goods” internationally led them to prosper, as did their ability to adapt to new local environments. Trade in “Oriental” crafts at newly opening “Oriental” shops in London and other cities both in Europe and North America drove demand. They eventually became intermediaries in new locations for the sale of all sorts of “Eastern” goods, ranging from Chinese and Japanese silk and far Eastern crafts, to Egyptian products. The five major areas of global expansion for the Sindworkies were,\textsuperscript{12} Markovits, \textit{Global World of Indian Merchants}, 55.\textsuperscript{13} Markovits, \textit{Global World of Indian Merchants}, 115.
“Gibraltar and North Africa, Egypt, Java, the Straits Settlements and neighbouring Sumatra, and the Philippines.”

The outbreak of the First World War and the Great Game between Russia and the West had effects on both Shikarpuri and Hyderabadi merchants. Both merchant communities, but more so the Hyderabadi Sindworkies, took advantage of being subjects of the British crown and demanded legal protection and free travel across the British colonial globe. However, their previous pattern of travel into Central Asia, and thus Russia, could not be sustained through the early 20th century. There is evidence that some merchants traded in an age-old and highly valuable commodity through the rivalry with Russia: information. Functioning as spies, some merchants would sign contracts for information gathering in Central Asian locations for any fixed period of time. Legal problems arose on occasion because of this arrangement. In general, however, it seems the Sindhi merchants were unable to assess political tensions, and remained in Central Asia until after 1914, and suffered greatly by not disinvesting earlier.

In Russia, state officials had increasingly become weary of the role Indian merchants (and therefore British subjects) were playing in the money market. Emperor Alexander II (1855-1881) officially capped the interest rates Sindhi financiers could charge. This limited the financiers a little, but greater regulation was sought and increasing legal restrictions were enacted into the 20th century. In 1877, Governor General Kaufman published a seven point circular which explicitly forbade the possession of land, contracts, and gifts of land for more than six months, and officially regulated the repayment of debt to the “Indian moneylenders.” The merchants


responded unhappily through a series of letters but to no avail. The state government of Russia enacted radical changes to the entire banking system of the country, thus greatly diminishing the role of these moneylenders, and reduced their numbers in the population: “Within two decades of the publication of that circular, the number of Indians in the Turkestan Krai dropped to less than 1000, roughly two-thirds of the population having returned to India.” At this point, the connection between South Asia and Central Asia was greatly severed, the transformation in the banking and economy of Russia providing radical change and increased control over Central Asian trade. World War one also cut up the globe in new ways, such that South Asian British subjects travel and trade also became restricted in the Middle East.

Karachi’s merchants believed that it was only when the British annexed the region in 1843, had Sindh become a regulated province of Bombay such that the economy declined. As it was brought into the colonial relation, Sindh became a periphery to imperial centers in Calcutta and Bombay as well as London. Sindhi merchants began a movement to separate their city from Bombay’s governance in 1913 when a leader of Karachi’s Municipal Corporation, Harchandrai Vishindas, gave a speech that cited Karachi’s cultural uniqueness alongside Karachi’s relative impoverishment as proof that Karachi should be released from its subordination to Bombay. Karachi’s development had been neglected, its capacity for commerce was unmet, a deviation from its potential history. Regional distinction was linked to the problem of poverty, and the poor became the grounds upon which a contest over sovereignty between regional and imperial


leaders could be had.

The complaints against the Bombay Presidency included issues having to do with the decline of the port’s economic profitability. It seemed some great accident of misplaced trust that a British officer had annexed Sindh in 1843, and then by coincidence attached it to Bombay, a competing sea port. At the Sind Separation Conference of 1932, the speaker recalled the tale thus:

In 1830 when Alexander Burnes wanted to see Ranjit Singh in Lahore, his best way to get to him was through Sind, and the Sind rulers of those days gave free access to the British for the purpose. In 1838 the British armies were allowed free passage through Sind in their expedition to Afghanistan. It was because Sind was thus traversed by British officers and British-Indian troops from Bombay, that Sir Charles Napier took the opportunity to annex Sind in 1843. As is well known he did this against orders and practically acknowledged his guilt.

He went on to speculate on the counterfactual, that Sindh would have been attached to the Punjab or North India, such that Sindh would,

probably have been able to develop its port of Karachi with reference to its natural hinterland more freely than was possible in the rivalry of Karachi with Bombay when Bombay held the supreme power.\(^{19}\)

The question here was of a “natural” ocean-hinterland connection through a port, presumably a long established historical one, which was remembered in the 1930s as the changes had come. The ushering of the sub-continent into World War II by the colonial administration, and that too on the heels of the economic depressions of the 1930s, without consulting any provincial leaders, surely prevented any resurgence of local economies after the provincial autonomy Act of 1935. However, these were the stated ambitions in the interwar period.

Enhancing Karachi’s ability to participate in world trade was central to the demand for

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\(^{19}\) Hamida Khuhro, *Documents on Separation of Sind from the Bombay Presidency*, v. 2. (Islamabad: Institute of Islamic History Culture and Civilization Islamic University, 1982), 812.
autonomy in Sindh. Along with this demand, came the claim that the region’s and the city’s poverty would be remedied by that enhancement. The complaints were that the port had been insufficiently developed, that roads from Karachi to the interiors were lacking, that there was no railway connecting Karachi to Delhi, and that the basic infrastructure for trade was lacking. Because of these deficiencies, Karachi had not been able to serve as a center of commercial activity to the degree that other ports had. Bombay’s prominence had allowed merchants more accustomed to Bombay and its regions to out-compete merchants exclusively located in Bombay.

Most importantly for our concerns, was the claim that were there more money flowing into the port city of Karachi, there would be resources available to solve the poor housing problem in the city of Karachi. That there weren’t meant that the poor housing issue would have to wait. Thus, through the first decades of the twentieth century when the Bombay Improvement Trust was rehousing slumdwellers, as flawed as that project was, Karachi’s leaders could not enlist a similar plan for their city. Nor however, is it clear that such a scheme is how they would have chosen to solve their poverty problem. The sole desire amongst Karachi’s leaders were to enhance the port city’s ability to become a home for world trade. That commercial goal was first and solving the problem of poor housing would have to wait.

On a visit to Karachi in 1918, the Viceroy and Governor General of India, Frederic Chelmsford, and his wife were welcomed by the municipal leaders of the city. On their greeting, they addressed Mr. Chelmsford thusly:

In this connection we may venture to suggest the urgent importance of a direct broad gauge railway line between Karachi and Delhi….also the necessity of direct broad gauge railway communication between Karachi and Bombay via Cutch. The public have been long agitating for these railways, and it is hoped that Government will see its way to overcome all possible obstacles thereto....We may here...make mention...application made to Municipality for a large piece of land for the establishment of Aerodrom, Flying School, and Aeroplane Terminal Station for Western India. Should this ...materialize...will eventually annihilate distance between Karachi and England, to say nothing of Karachi and Delhi, and give an
impetus to the development of this City.\textsuperscript{20}

The “annihilation” of distance was necessary for increasing trade and all the addresses to Mr. Chelmsford on this visit were about that. Since the capital had been moved from Calcutta to Delhi, Karachi’s elites were keen to make sure that the shorter distance between the capital and Karachi should have great benefits from them. They had complaints about the lack of expenditure in the past on the infrastructure:

\begin{quote}
We are sorry to observe the entire lack of activity in the past, on the part of Gov’t and Local Boards in providing trunk roads leading out of Karachi. In fact, the proceedings of the last Legislative Council of Bombay have disclosed the lamentable fact that Sind has been very greatly stinted on this respect as compared to the other parts of the Presidency. The lack of good roads leading out of the City has not only been keenly felt by all classes of the population, who are thereby confined to urban limits, but their necessity is so patent for the development of the country, for travel, trade and business of all kinds, particularly in the vicinity of a rising city of the importance of Karachi, that it is all the more surprising that the matter has apparently received no attention from the Authorities concerned.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

They were correcting this prior lack of attention by extending the Town Planning Act to Karachi, which was being used to fill swamp beds, build roads through areas, remove obstructive sites on land so that they could create communications across town and into the interior, and acquire land for improvements for which they wanted to raise loans in the open markets. None of these measures involved rehousing schemes like those in Bombay. Challenging Bombay’s sovereignty over Karachi demanded showing that Karachi could exceed Bombay commercially, and be more viable as a commercial center. Then perhaps after establishing parity with Bombay, could the poor housing issue be addressed.

This neglect was not lost on the Governor General and Viceroy himself. Mr. Chelmsford responded to the above complaints, announcements, and welcome addresses by trying to redirect

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\textsuperscript{20} “Karachi Municipality: Administration report of the Karachi Municipality,” 1917/18, Appendix A, 47.
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the attention of the urban leaders towards their obviously growing labour and poor housing problem. He said:

Municipal work is a fascinating subject, and you perhaps know that it has a particular fascination for myself. It was the main interest of my early years of public life, and I find that I am inclined still to approach Municipal affairs in the spirit of my first enthusiasm. It is a difficult subject also. It demands a broad outlook combined with close attention to details; an insight into the problems of the future, together with a close grip on everyday affairs; optimism combined with prudence. The two chief duties of a Municipality may be summed up in two words: Circumspice, Prospice [sic]. Look ahead but at the same time look around you. I can tell from the address I have just heard that you are mindful of the great possibilities and needs of the future. I may however also say that my experience is that the quiet steady work of ward Members and Members of Committees, which does not often catch the public eye is the most valuable work of all. The reason is that such work, and especially attention to the interests of the poorest neighborhoods and classes, is the foundation of municipal work; and the foundation must be thoroughly sound if it is to bear a great superstructure.²²

He even tried to justify concern for the poor by citing its beneficial effects it would have on the war, something Karachi’s leaders were keen to prove that they could be helpful in:

You have rightly made mention of the war….you can help our common cause by conserving the man power of Karachi by seeing that the men who work at the docks and the sailors from the ships, live in surroundings which conduce to efficiency. You will thus add to the war services which you have already rendered.²³

Strangely, the imperial governor general was imploring local urban leaders to have more concern for the poor, and Karachi’s locals were contesting Bombay’s sovereignty over them for just this reason. But yet, Karachi’s leaders deferred the problem of the poor thinking it could be solved later after the economy had picked up. Theirs was likely a belief in the good effects of a liberal economy, namely, that eventually everyone’s standard of living would be raised by increased trade. The Viceroy and Governor General repeated and ended his response to them in the following manner:


In conclusion I may again refer to a matter which I have already mentioned in a general way, and impress upon you the extreme importance of extending a due share of both educational and hygenic advantages to the less favoured quarters of your city and of doing all in your power to brighten the lives and surroundings of the labouring classes. With the great possibilities of your city and the probable influx of larger numbers of this class, it will well repay you to bestow all possible care on the sanitation of new quarters as they arise and upon the decent housing of the poor....I thank you again, gentlemen for your kind reception...I shall now enjoy of becoming personally acquainted with the city and port of Karachi and with your leading citizens.24

The question was left unanswered: whose responsibility were the urban poor? Who was to blame in creating the problem? According to Karachi’s leaders, the poor housing problem had to wait until parity and equity could be established for Karachi in relation to Bombay. The poor were not yet to be beneficiaries of modernization. Merchant and commercial interests had come to dominate political life in Karachi and those concerns had to be met first.

Urban housing had been a source of income in Karachi too, just as in Bombay. Urban property could provide income without much effort, and Parsi families, some of whom came from Bombay or Surat benefitted: “The pattern is complex, for Dinshaw’s urban landholdings, rather like rural zamindars, brought in a regular income with but little attention.” Such diversified sources of income made Karachi like Bombay, but for Karachi’s wealth, the scale needed to increase which could only happen through withdrawal from Bombay’s grip.25 Upon the opening of the Sukkur Barrage, there was a cotton boom between 1933-1947 due to increased irrigation and thus more Bombay-based firms set up outposts in Karachi.26


While the poverty of Sindh and Karachi could serve as a reason to demand autonomy, its solution had to be more circuitous. First, the commercial interests had to be met, and then, presumably, more money would be available to make poor housing projects possible. Until then the infrastructure for trade would get the first priority. Demands for control over Karachi continued through the nationalist period in the first half of the twentieth century. The conflict over Karachi’s role in the global market increasingly escalated in the inter-war period. What began as a religiously mixed Hindu, Muslim, and Parsi group of Karachi merchants wrestling control of Karachi away from Bombay’s bureaucrats in the early 1900’s, turned into the fear of “Muslim Raj” by the predominantly urban based Hindu merchant communities by the 1940’s. This fear was in spite of Muslim leaders insistence as late as 1945 that the success of Karachi and Sindh depended on the Hindu merchant’s prosperity. The successful propaganda of the Hindu Mahasabha had successfully instilled in Karachi’s Hindus a fear of their own numerical minority status. The era of communal politics had begun.

Karachi came to be imagined as the political capital of a Muslim homeland, and not the global trading center for which it was originally developed. Even upon independence, the competition for control over Karachi was recognized as a threat to democracy in Pakistan less than one year after the country’s creation in 1947. Hashim Gazdar, speaking of the government of Pakistan’s move to detach Karachi from the adjacent Sindh province and centrally administer the city as the nation’s first capital, warned in May 1948,
Sir, if you do not want to make democracy a farce, if you do not want tracking towards absolute dictatorship, you should have respect for the people of Sindh…we do not want to give up Karachi.27

Gazdar’s foresight cannot be lost on any observer of the history of Pakistan, whose postcolonial history went on to be an oscillation between democratically elected, federalist rule punctuated by bouts of military dictatorships. The political imagination throughout suggested that to control the city was to control the country.

Aden: Labour Colony

If Karachi was a distant and subordinate city to Bombay, and thus constructed itself as temporally behind on the path of improvements and development, Aden was another matter altogether. Aden served as a fueling station for shipping industries settled in Bombay or Karachi and leading industrialists who sent ships through Aden’s port had no interest in investing in Aden’s infrastructure. Instead, Aden was a labour colony of the purest kind, where free labour was available in abundance and no prior relations existed between employers and labourers so that a purely rational interest in commerce drove the terms of engagement in Aden. Local leaders in Aden were doubly marginal to political power, numerous countries’ tradesmen had found in Aden an abundant supply of cheap labour and no demand whatsoever for representative government or representative politics of any kind which could induce them to include the labouring population into the imagination of the settlement of the city.

The housing conditions of Aden’s labourers were alarming and Bombay’s merchants had everything to do with evading responsibility for the housing conditions of the vagrants and

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coolies of Aden. In the beginning of 1921, the resident at Aden assembled a committee to look into the conditions due to a particular visit to the “pukka houses, their privies and chains.” These were more permanent constructions which the resident had expected to find in better condition than the temporary shelters erected throughout. Instead he reported, “The committee might consider the hillside better than the houses.” The committee was assembled to “examine and report on the dwelling places of the houseless vagrant population of Aden, beggars, coolies etc,” consider the sanitary effect on the rest of the population in Aden, and make suggestions.28 The committee learned that the percentage of people in Aden who were houseless amounted to 14.7% in 1911 and 11.1% in 1921, which was between 3500 and 4500 persons in total.29

Several solutions were suggested, some more controversial than others. The most visible problem were the arrival of Somalis into Aden. Officials believed that if they could control Somali immigration they would solve a major portion of the problem. However, they were reluctant to single out one group, and anticipated that the Government would “object to legislation against a particular race...” The population in Aden was also dependent on Somali immigration for the supply of meat. The scheme proposed by those in Aden would have every Somali who entered the port deposit a fee, Rs. 50 was the example, which they could retrieve upon leaving. If they didn’t leave then they would have forfeited the funds which could be used by the Government to pay for deportations. “Landing fees” were already collected and raising those in total would affect Indians, Arabs and Somalis and so it would be roundly objected to.30 Some other suggestions involved stricter enforcements of rules about housing and condemnation

of landlords who had allowed overcrowding. This too was rejected on the grounds that the problem was so great that there was nowhere else but the crowded buildings for people to live. The problem was one of insufficient housing.

But if the quantity of housing in Aden was insufficient, who would build it, and with what funds? One suggestion was that the Military works build huts for certain coolies, a common suggestion in Bombay too where huts had often been erected by the government in order to remedy the housing shortage. The main question that remained was who was supposed to pay for the houses that needed to be built, whether huts or more permanent structures? There were hardly any local funds in Aden and Aden being administered through Bombay and for the needs of Bombay’s commercial community, meant that the only people with a real financial capacity in Aden were Bombay’s capitalists. It was also due to their demands for labourers in shipping and fueling that the population in Aden had grown so much. Thus it was said that:

The next proposal is that all land in Hedjuff Bay to the south side of the main road should be earmarked at once for the housing of the coolis and casual labour employed in that bay, and with this object that all land in private hands in this Bay, to the South of the road, which has not already been built upon, should be rescued, and that inducements should be offered to capitalists to build approved types of house for the exclusive use of the coolies.

The basic idea was to have private ventures which depended on and worked through Aden build the housing themselves. However, here they were struck with the same problem as elsewhere, namely that the rents recovered from poor labour housing would never sufficiently cover the initial cost to build the housing. The coolies were paying roughly 8 annas (16 annas to 1 Rupee)


per month for their housing and their wage wouldn’t allow them to pay any more.\textsuperscript{33} Thus there could be no market incentive to build the housing in the first place, which is clearly why Aden was suffering from a housing shortage at all. Since that wouldn’t work the alternative suggested was the passing of a law which would require employers to pay a tax which would go towards the building of housing. A committee person said, “The responsibility for housing these coolies in a proper way should rest on the employers who benefit by their labour...”\textsuperscript{34} Although, the employers themselves would surely work hard to defeat any such legislation. The committee looking into the housing conditions in Aden was at a loss, it seemed no plan would induce the sufficient growth of the supply of poor housing in the port.

A questionnaire was sent out to the leading merchant houses and employers of Aden, as well as the police staff. The list included the firm of Cowasjee Dinshaw and Brothers, Mr. Kaiky Muncherjee, and other Parsi, Gujarati, and Sindhi firms who conducted their operations via Aden, mostly in the area of Tawahi, where private firms were operating sheds and housing units for their coolies. All of these were found to be insanitary and overcrowded, the inhabitants succumbing often to disease and malnutrition. It was firmly decided that the enforcement of overcrowding rules had to occur in Tawahi, but in particular that the owners of the buildings be dealt with not the inhabitants. The committee on the houseless in Aden clearly consisted of people who came to believe that the employers were unduly taking advantage of their labourers and the employers were to be surveyed and induced to cooperate with the sanitation needs of Aden’s population at large. Aden had become a labour colony for Indian merchants. Beyond the need to enforce housing regulations, the committee also suggested that the movement of Somalis

\footnotetext{33}{“Vagrant Population Report...of Aden,” 21.}

\footnotetext{34}{“Vagrant Population Report...of Aden,” 20.}
into Aden be restricted. The questionnaire was also used to gather additional information about whose responsibility the houseless population would be, and whether those questioned had any awareness of the gravity of the situation.

The Deputy Superintendent of Police of Aden provided some of the most interesting answers about how the problem in Aden had arisen. He spoke of the “half starved and emaciated Arab population” who used Aden for a place to get a few months work and then left. He spoke of the “indolent and impudent neighbor the Somali who though smart, getting tired of his nomad life, prefers to remain a few months at Aden, doing little work, but showing more arrogance.” Every Somali, he said, was “clannish” and thus always supported by his caste and thus never was a beggar. About the real business of Aden and where the wealth goes, the Deputy Superintendent said:

It is well known to every one that Aden itself is a coaling station, produces nothing but salt. One of the salt works is managed by an Italian firm and the other by an Indian firm. Although they have made a profit of millions of rupees in the last few years with practically very little capital they have not built a single house for themselves at Aden or a single hut for the comfort of their coolies at Shaikh Othman although they are said to have built palatial buildings for themselves in Italy and in India.

Messrs Luke Thomas and Co., Cory Bros., P. and O. Coy and C. D. Bros. as coaling and shipping Agents have also made their fortunes through the sheer hard labour of coolies but they have not tried to ameliorate the condition of their coolies by supplying them with free quarters or any kind of relief.

The export business of hides, skin, coffee, gum, was &c. is mostly in the hands of foreigners who excepting very few, themselves live in hired quarters and leave the place after making their fortune. The cloth and grain business is in the hands of Banias and Khojas of India who do not buy or build any houses for themselves or for hire except at their own native place in India. Very few Arabs prosper as big merchants as no sooner they get little money as brokers or merchants than they develop bad ways and having a shaky character soon fail in business and their properties pass to the hands of Jews who are at present the moving masters of riches and property in Aden. According to my knowledge 60% of the new houses under construction are now mortgaged with Mr. Banin and other Jews of Aden. Although the Rent Act is in force in Aden the landlords have succeeded in increasing the rents to nearly 100% throughout the last seven years which rent the cooli class of people cannot afford to pay at any rate.35

Aden was a thoroughly colonized labour colony and the frustration was felt even by the local

police who contrasted the “palatial buildings in Italy and India” while under-housing Aden’s local population. The superintendent also spoke with great insight on the population of labourers in Aden:

Local labourers are all from the Interior of Arabia. Their number is approximately 5,000. They consist of coal, ship and salt work coolies, contractors, Military works, and S. and T. coolies, buildings (day) labourers, boat boys and wharf coolies, etc. Most of these are houseless and sleep at the sleeping slums, makayas, eating houses, tea and coffee shops, in open places and in public streets in the bazaar. A few of the Settlement and Military works stone breakers prefer hill crevices as a resting place for the night. In fact these people are houseless but not vagrants or beggars. These daily labourers save about Rs. 30 to Rs. 40 in about six months time and return to their country. Most of these coolies hire cots for a night for which they half an anna. Each such person keeps his box at the eating house which contains what his coolie life requires. These sleeping slums, makayas, tea and coffee shops are not all provided with latrines hence these people have to make use of public latrines which are not only very dirty but very few in number. It will not be out of the way to mention that there is not a single urinal in the whole of Aden except one very clumsy at the Maala Wharf hence street corners, hill sides secluded places, sea-shores, coal stacks, and lonely bye-lanes are used as places for urinating and obeying the call of nature.36

This kind of vivid description could not even be found for Bombay or Karachi where there didn’t seem to be any inquiry into the housing conditions in great detail. Local leaders in Aden were doubly marginal to political power, numerous countries’ tradesmen had found in Aden an abundant supply of cheap labour and no demand whatsoever for representative government or representative politics of any kind which could induce them to include the labouring population into the imagination of the settlement of the city. The superintendent of police thought the only way to solve this problem in Aden was to get the cooperation of coaling and shipping agents, without their investment in Aden the housing problem would never be solved.

Capital was solely being extracted out of Aden, nothing was being reinvested in the place. Bombay’s merchants were a part of that problem and were not seen as co-colonial subjects. Bombay was seen as an imperial city in its own right, from the perspective of Aden’s officials.

When given the questionnaire, the merchant houses confirmed this perspective. They absolved themselves of all responsibility to house the labourers whom they employed, saying that there job was merely to pay a wage, not to provide housing. Mr. Framroze Cowasji Dinshaw, when asked whether he thought it would be a good business proposition for him to build houses or barracks for coolies said, “At the present moment I do not think it worth putting my money into properties when one can get 6% and 7% out of Government loans and more out of investments.” When asked whether he knew that the building he was letting out to his labourers was found to be in violation of a housing code against overcrowding, he said, “No I rent my house to a party and make no enquiry as to how many live in it.” He did say that he preferred them to have as few as possible but that he had no knowledge of the actual state of living conditions in his building as he gave it to another party to let out, but that he had “never seen it myself.”

When Mr. Mohamed Abdulla Hassonali, another merchant operating through Aden, was asked the same questions, he said that he was also unaware of the overcrowding because he let his building to a “muccadum” and “told him of the number allowed.” About whether he would consider building better housing he said, “I am doubtful and would only do so on a guarantee.” Mr. Cowasji Dinshaw had said the same thing, that “we only deal with the Muccadums and not with the coolies.” This was in fact a great example of a rational labour market in which there were no bonds or connections or any prior relationship between employer and wage earner, just the transaction of labour for a wage. Numerous layers of intermediaries often operated within the labour market, muccadums and sub-muccadums under them. When asked again whether he thought he had any obligation to his labourers he said,

No, we are not supposed to as we want to keep the wage low. I am supposed to pay them per hour or per day and they are to find their own quarters. We pay our Muccadums Rs. 20 or so per month as a retaining fee to look after the coolies.

He said he had no other solution than to recommend that the labourers sleep in the open air rather than in closed quarters because the open air was preferable. Another employer, Mr. W. Meek of Cory Brothers and Company, Ltd., said that the problem was that at Hedjuff he was only allowed to put up “kutcha houses which can be pulled down at an hour’s notice.” Had he been allowed to put up sufficient houses, he claimed he would have done it.

In total fifteen to twenty employers were questioned to varying degrees and they all said the same thing. They all absolved themselves of any responsibility to house their labourers in adequate conditions because they couldn’t make up the cost of the construction of the housing. They also claimed no immediate knowledge of the labour housing problem since they relied on a chain of jobbers to find and house the labourers. Aden was not their home, moreover. They lived elsewhere, as the police superintendent had said, in their palatial buildings some distance away. If Aden’s urban landscape was thoroughly excavated by the need for poor human settlements and succumbed to disease and decay, it didn’t matter, Aden was only a thoroughfare for the world trade routes which depended on shipping from the Indian subcontinent westwards.

Aden also functioned as port of embarkation for aspiring migrant labourers from the Indian subcontinent, but this ambition wasn’t always welcomed by the government. Merchant houses based out of Bombay of course needed the growing supply of labour, it would help keep costs down, and insure that their shipping needs would not be interrupted by needless strikes or


demands for better wages. The British government had authorized measures for the “repatriation of paupers and indigents” who were found far from home across imperial territory. Stories abounded of people boarding ships, disembarking at various ports, and finding themselves in new places in search of work and livelihood. Many were destitute Indians being repatriated, some were US citizens, in yet some cases Indians were found conveying an indigent Chinese person. Sometimes, when such a person was found not belonging to the place he had travelled to, officials would catch him and make petitions and pleas to be given funds to send him back home. Some of these pleas were challenged. Others secured funds to get sent back home and used the legal measures as a route back while others resisted authorities and sought to get away, and stay in the place in which “they didn’t belong.” Aden was a very popular destination for such adventure-seeking and often destitute migrants, probably because it served as a midway point for ships heading almost anywhere westwards.

In some cases, the indigents in Aden were temporarily housed by merchant houses mainly operating out of Bombay but having satellite offices and quarters in Aden. One letter from Captain F. de B. Hancock, the Acting First Assistant at Aden wrote:

To Assistant Resident, in charge Harbour Police, Aden.
Sir, I have the honour to inform you that the Governor of Jibouti has sent over to Aden by s.s. “Wissman” three indigent British subjects (Singalese) who were stowaways from Colombo on board the steamship “Cao-Bang.” These men are being maintained at present by Messrs. Cowasji Dinshaw & Brothers pending their deportation to Colombo, for which I have the honour to ask that you will make the earliest possible arrangements.

This condition, of being housed by the merchant house, was important to establishing the legality of their being classified as “indigent.” In response to the request, a letter was written back to

| 41 | No. 3048 of 1905, 25th May 1905. |
Cowasji Dinshaw and Brothers indicating that the three indigents would be deported soon, but they were to be reminded

...of Government Notification No. 2612, dated 20th April 1904, whereunder the landing of indigent persons in Aden is rendered penal.” In such a case, the owners of the ship “Wissman” would have been in violation of the “Aden Paupers & Pilgrims Regulations of 1887.

The resident at Aden built up their defense which rested on the meaning of the word “indigent.” He wrote,

The word “indigent” is not defined in the Regulation or the Notification; but it is reasonable to suppose that it means a person who can neither maintain himself by his own resources nor with the aid of any other person, such aid being certain, regular and unbroken. A wife or a child who has no means of her or its own can yet be properly said to be not indigent if she or it is regularly supported by the husband or the father. Similarly a person regularly supported by a relation or even a stranger cannot, I submit, be said to be an indigent for the purposes of the regulation. But the moment a person is thrown upon the uncertain charity of others, he should, I believe be considered an indigent person for the purposes of the Regulation.42

In this case, since the three travelers were being taken care of by Cowasji and Dinshaw, they were not indigent, and thus the owners of the ship the “Wissman” did not violate the regulations. Further, these indigents had been brought from Jibouti, a French port, and on the principle of reciprocity and since they were Singalese, and thus British subjects, they should be paid for to return.

Managing the mobility of paupers had become an issue across the empire by the early twentieth century. Merchant houses based out of Bombay were able to serve as suitable shelters from time to time for labourers and migrants, but in the process, they also served to continue the constant supply of labour which was necessary in to make commerce profitable across these distant ports.

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42 No. 3048 of 1905, 47-49.
Conclusion

This chapter has looked at Bombay from the outside, from the perspective of Karachi and Aden, subsidiary cities of the Bombay Presidency. The poor in each of these cities were used as grounds upon which Bombay’s sub-imperial position was challenged; and in so doing, served to turn the problem of poor housing into a competition for representation over the poor. Through a subsumption of the urban poverty problem, Karachi’s merchants were able to argue that it had not modernized as much as Bombay. Challenging that subsidiary role resulted in demands for municipal self-governance for the city of Karachi. The issue of housing for the labouring poor was thoroughly sidelined by the interests of merchants who made connections between Bombay, Karachi, Aden, and beyond. Merchants in Karachi wanted to catch up to Bombay’s stage of development through projects which would provide infrastructure to connect Karachi to regional hinterlands. Aden’s was conceptualized as nothing more than a labour colony for the Indian capitalist.

While the process of urbanization had resulted in slums in all major cities across the Bombay Presidency, including Bombay, Karachi and Aden, and indeed in commercial cities across most of the world, a particular engagement with the temporality of capitalist development sustained notions of regional distinction. These regional distinctions lent credibility to autonomy movements which eventually removed Bombay as the seat of power over these cities, but it also productively delayed the problems of the urban poor. In Aden, the total abandonment of the urban poverty problem was visible, while in Karachi, a desire to match Bombay’s stage of commercial advancement meant that leaders advocated building infrastructure for more commercial opportunities, not a restraining of commercial ambitions.
Particular regional contexts situated the history of these cities while their relation to Bombay drove the attitudes towards housing the poor. Thus, as anti-imperial movements and regionalist aspirations grew in the early 20th century, it wasn’t only those in Bombay who could control what Bombay meant within the colonial network of cities. Leaders from other cities imagined Bombay as a sub-imperial authority of its own kind. Those outside Bombay were critical of forms of extractive sovereignty or interference in their urban life which were centered in Bombay. People in cities outside of Bombay but connected to it started to see Bombay as an instrument of imperial power and contested Bombay’s role as a monopolizer of colonial capital. The problem of how to represent local urban poverty within regional and imperial frameworks is the subject of the next and final chapter.
Chapter Seven: Representing the Poor

In the rhetoric of late nineteenth and early twentieth century urban observers, the problems of urban poverty became sites upon which claims to unique regional political formations could be established. As we saw in the previous chapter, Karachi and Aden’s regional histories were used to obscure and delay the resolution of the urban poverty problem. In Bombay, similar dynamics drove the discussion about the location of the urban poor as well, but in Bombay, they took on a particularly anti-imperial vision. Rising national leaders in this period raised the question: who were the poor’s sovereign, and who should house the urban poor? In imperial policies there were attempts to patriate the poor, to find out exactly who they “belonged” to and return them to their original source. Determining the original source required figuring out who was responsible for them. Which nation? Which community? Capitalists or urban governments? Which empires? Were they a public problem or a problem for private interests?

This chapter follows the struggles to “repatriate” the poor, i.e. to return the poor to their place of origin or even citizenship. It argues that the outcome of such discussions around repatriation depended on an obfuscation of the history of urban poverty. That obfuscation of the poverty problem occurred in three ways: through the creation of urban representation, the absolving of imperial responsibility and forcing of return migrations through repatriation, and the making of anti-colonial and nationalist ideology by the Indian economists. Numerous records within the archives of the Bombay Presidency are called “Paupers and Indigents: Landing, Repatriation and Deportation” which contain cases of indigent travelers traveling far from their place of origin who either used imperial legislation and resources to find their way back home or
tried to avert surveillance altogether. In addition to these itinerants, the settled urban poor became contested sovereign subjects between the imperial state and emergent nationalisms. These emerging anti-colonial and nationalist movements deployed a particular reading of the role of the Indian city which deferred the problem of urban poverty.

This chapter begins with the problem of establishing representatives for the urban poor in the late 19th century during census operations. Then it follows the movements of paupers and indigents across the empire from the turn of the century and the desire on the part of officials to make their “homes” responsible for the poor. As cities became conduits of intensifying human mobility, by which paupers and indigents travelled, the question of how to understand the city and its relation to poverty came to the fore. The Indian economists in particular interpreted the city as a secondary effect of changing social conditions in the countryside. We consider the role of the city in the writings of a key thinker of the school of Indian Economics, Radhakamal Mukerjee, and the way in which the city was demoted in the nationalist imagination. Mukerjee wrote influential treatises on “India’s economics” and most importantly for our purposes, collaborated with one of the fathers of urban planning, Patrick Geddes. According to their writings, colonialism had established the port cities as bases from which “foreigners” exploited the agrarian countryside and drained India’s wealth to metropolitan London. “Natives” were now championed as the sole custodians of India’s poverty, and they laid the foundation for a national state-led economic development which was the goal of the self-rule movements. When discussions of labour and especially Indian labour, intersected with or interfered with the nation building exercises of such moderate nationalists, the question of labour became secondary to the problem of political representation and autonomy from the imperial order.
On Behalf of the Poor

While previous census takers had found Bombay’s population to be cooperative through the enumeration effort, the famine and plague caused major doubts in the minds of inhabitants about the goodwill of city officials. People feared their lives were being interfered in, or that when they were sent to the hospital they were being sent there to die without any contact from their families. Human activity was more concentrated in Bombay’s urban landscape than in London’s, or in official terms, “fearfully more intense.” The fear was on both sides. These doubts and the fear were responsible for causing a rupture between state and society at the turn of the 20th century, when inhabitants began to see themselves as a world apart from officials who claimed to care for them. This left the urban poor further vulnerable to the fluctuations of markets and in the hands of those who claimed to speak on behalf of them and care for them.

That this was colonial India only exacerbated the problem, adding an overtone of cultural distance between state officials and subjects of the state to the widespread privatization of representation for the poor. British officials felt particularly incapable of encountering those natives who were not acclimatized to English ways, such as those who didn’t speak English, weren’t educated in the English style, or had manners and customs quite foreign to colonial officials. Intermediaries were now considered necessary to manage the working and illiterate population in particular, which paved the way for the notion that an Indian elite should take care of the Indian poor.

One particular incident, which was discussed in the second chapter, showed how institutionalized this dynamic was becoming, that native leaders were taking it upon themselves

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1 COBC, 1881, 37.
to speak on behalf native masses. On the 31st of January in 1880, leaders of the Hindu community were invited to meet at the Municipal Hall to find ways to increase the cooperation of the “working and illiterate population” in Bombay. A public meeting was held at Madhav Bagh in the middle of Bombay in order to explain the real objects of the census to the masses who had developed numerous doubts about why they were being counted. To announce the meeting, notices were placed in newspapers and fliers printed in Gujarati and Marathi were circulated. Approximately four to five thousand people attended the meeting, over which native leaders presided such as Mr. Javerilal Umiashankar, Mr. Varjivandas Madhavdas, Rao Bahadul Gopalrav Hari Deshmukh, Mr. Gangadas Kishordas, and Mr. Raghunath Narayen Khote.

There were several doubts in people’s minds about the purpose of the enumeration efforts. Some thought the Census was being conducted to increase tax collection by the Government. A particular suspicion was raised about each family being asked how many males and females were in each household, and how many were married. This type of interference in their life seemed particularly startling. The leaders and officials presiding over the meeting answered that if the Government wanted to raise more tax revenue, they could do so without resorting to a Census, which only cost them money. They also explained that the main purpose of the Census was,

to ascertain the social and economic condition of the people, and the changes which had taken place in that condition at stated intervals, and to provide for schools, dispensaries, sanitation, and in a period of famine for increased supplies of food-grain, should the actual addition to the population be ascertained by means of the Census.²

² COBC, 1881, 21.
There were further questions on how to fill out the various columns of the forms, and what was to be done if someone were staying with you temporarily on the night of the census or had just left on the night of the enumeration. Interestingly, what should be done if someone is living on one’s verandah, sleeping outside, do they count as in the house? The answer was yes, every person had to be enumerated.

By the turn of the century, inhabitants had become irritated by officials with all their inquiries into various matters of peoples lives. In one particular incident, when asked about their religion, the householder who was filling out the schedule responded, “The spirit of the Inscrutable” or “Father, Monotheist; Mother, Atheist; and Son, Theist.” The Census writer commented that such answers were “clearly inspired by a desire, not uncommon among persons who should know better, to air a meagre wit at the expense of the Abstraction Office.”

3 During the plague most especially, critics were emerging who challenged the much celebrated rise of human mobility across the commercially free world.

Quantitative and qualitative analyses of housing conditions made it possible for some people to read the overcrowded urban landscape as inert, unchangeable and non-reformable while for other observers, the poor became marked as being of a different cultural type from those who lived in less dense housing. For local and imperial observers alike, Bombay’s labouring and urban poor came to stand in for all of Bombay. Until the moment of building housing through Government funds, the building of housing was a private affair and not something that the Government had any part in, just like in London. That there was too little of housing available was a failure on the people’s part who must have either preferred to live in

3 COBC, 1901, 20.
overcrowded conditions, either to save money, be close to neighbors and relatives, or afford seasonal work. This was all true even through major calamities or natural disasters which would cause the population to fluctuate rapidly. The cotton boom of the 1860s and the famines of the 1870s caused migration into the city, while the plague of 1896 and 1897 caused an exodus. Such rapid fluctuations in the population caused overcrowding in the former case while causing empty homes in the latter.

More importantly, such rapid fluctuations created pressures to find representatives who would speak on behalf of the poor in order to manage the urban poverty problem. There was no way a small cadre of officials and elites were going to be able to intervene in the dynamics of the whole city, instead, local representatives had to be found. To get a sense of just how small the British population was within Bombay, we can see the included Europeans in the census reports. In counting the number of Bombay residents who came from outside India, census officials reported,

Of those born outside India nearly 6,000 come from the United Kingdom, over 2,000 each from Persia and Arabia and 1,000 from Afghanistan. With the exception of our own nationality the remaining European nations are but poorly represented; Germany with 257, Austria-Hungary with 206, Italy with 175 and France with 135 being the principal contributors…

Britishers made up just less than 0.6% of the urban population, i.e. six-tenths of one percent in 1911.

In Bombay, it had been decided that Government intervention was necessary to manage the excesses of trade and create a truly public citizenry. The costs were the main impediment.

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4 COBC, 1911, 11.
The poor functioned as a limit to colonial rule. The British government was waiting for native leaders to organize systems of poor relief amongst themselves. The government would sit back and assess and judge whether the natives were financially and morally ready to start such programs, and then provide minimal resources in terms of legislative or financial support for such ventures. Native leaders would hear complaints like the health officers’, and wait for the British government to start such programs as they had heard existed in England. Meanwhile, the production and consumption of housing continued from the ground up. Besides the relatively minimal interventions in supplies of water, roadways, lighting or other amenities, urban officials were enlisted in the more scientific process of counting, assessing, and understanding the degree of land use in the city, in order to gain an accurate portrait of housing conditions in the city.

**Indigent Migrants**

As such port cities and commercial connections grew through the 19th and 20th centuries, labouring migrants sought opportunities in distant places. While rural to urban migration was a major factor in the urbanization of the subcontinent, the cities were also stopping points to locations beyond India. Migrants could be found in East Africa, Europe, and North America amongst numerous other places. A series of acts passed by authorities in the 1890s gave the Government the funds to send homeless travelers back to their place of origin.

There were doubts about the motivations of such indigent migrants. Officials were suspicious that they they were using government funds to pay for passage to new locations where they may find work or escape authority altogether. The indigence and pauper-hood of the found migrant had to be established by the local officials whenever they petitioned for government
funds to ship people back. Local officials were also suspected of collaborating with the indigent migrants to get funds and send paupers “home.” One circular meant to correct a misunderstanding about “the Instruction contained in the Circular Despatch of the 17th July, 1888, regarding the relief by Her Majesty’s Consular Officers of Distressed British Indians” which stated,

It is pointed out that these instruction were not intended to authorize the repatriation of Indian subjects at the expense of Indian revenues, without previous reference to the India Office or to the Government of India. It is considered desirable to discourage the arrival in Europe of impecunious natives of India by preventing, except under special circumstances, their gratuitous repatriation.

I am to state that the Instructions must be understood as authorizing only such temporary relief, in the way of maintenance, as may appear to you, in the exercise of your discretion, to be absolutely necessary, and that before you incur any expense as regards the provision of a passage to India, you should, in all cases, refer either direct to the Government of India, or to the Secretary of State for India, through the Foreign Office. When the requisite authority has been granted, you should obtain an undertaking that the applicant will return at once to India.5

Sending poor migrants back home was a potentially costly practice, and had the risk of being taken advantage of by adventurers. For example, a traveler named “Premchand” who was going to London from Sindh to work, was found in 1905 with only twelve pounds with him. He told authorities the “usual story” about being robbed while aboard a ship. In his other pocket, another two pounds were found but he claimed he was merely saving this and couldn’t do business with that money, so he was requesting authorities help for a return home. His request, being found as suspicious, was denied since he, “choose to visit Europe for his own purposes.” He was told to find his own way back home.6 The same reminder and letter from above had warned about the costs and concluded:

5 “Repatriation of Destitute Indians,” June 12, 1893.

6 “Strangers’ Home for Asiatics; proposed repatriation of a destitute native of Sind,” 27 Sep 1905.
Reasonable expenditure incurred in either case will be defrayed out of the revenues of India. The Indian Government will not undertake to defray expenditure incurred in assisting Indians to pass from one port to another, except under the conditions above stated. Proof of pauper-hood would be necessary to use imperial money to be sent home.

The poor were traveling and becoming a burden on local institutions such as hospitals, indigent travelers’ homes, and rest houses even within London. Authorities were trying to find ways to manage the growing problem, and the first step was to return the poor to their place of origin, where they could be taken care of by those who were presumably rightfully responsible for them.

Some people did manage to find help. A man named Arjun Sheoram was found in London. He was described as a “destitute native of Bombay” and worked as a domestic servant for a European woman named Sarah Bronson. Ms. Bronson wrote a letter about Mr. Sheoram, and complained that he had, “started behaving impertinent towards me...for two months, so I dismissed him.” Mr. Sheoram was diagnosed with a locomotor ataxy and was hospitalized in London, where he stayed “for free for 90 days...and officials are writing because one cannot stay longer than 60 days.” Limitations on number of days one could stay at a hospital for free, for example, became one way to control the costs. Numerous cases like these were found, from places as far as New Caledonia, Cadiz, Bologna, England, Jamaica, Peru, Noumea, Port Said, and even the United States.

The case from the United States was from California, a man who was associated with the beginnings of the Ghadar Party. He was not only stigmatized for being a poor traveler, but the finding of seditious pamphlets on his body made officials even more worried. His name was

7 “Strangers' Home for Asiatics; re assistance for a destitute 'coloured man'” 8 May 1902.
Sawan Singh, and he was described as a native of India, found in England, who had arrived from San Francisco. The pamphlet in his possession criticized Indians for allowing the British to make them stupid and subservient, and called on them to rise up. Sawan Singh was described as occasionally deranged and yet sometimes of perfectly sound mind. He was thought to be destitute and dangerous. He had approached authorities in London asking them to help him find a job but they didn’t help him. Instead, they sent him to Calcutta with instructions to keep him on surveillance.\(^8\)

Such cases, including the fear of seditious migrants, increased the desire by high imperial officials to manage the problem of poverty across the Empire. Sending indigent travelers back “home,” a word used by officials, not the natives themselves, belied a desire to patriate the problem of poverty within national communities. Costs for housing the poor had to be managed somehow, and imperial officials couldn’t afford such expenditures so they were seeking to absolve themselves of responsibilities by sending travelers back home. Some travelers, undoubtedly, must have been using the funds to get themselves from one place to another, having learned how to use officials and their laws for the accomplishment of their own aims.

**Indian Economists Representations of the City**

That was the social backdrop to the emergence of the Indian Economists as spokesmen for Indian development. They read Indian hunger as a symptom of British arrival and Western styles of modernization. Radhakamal Mukerjee and Dadabhai Naoroji together branded “Indian Economics.” Their thoughts became the ideological basis of Indian Nationalism by more famous

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\(^8\) “Sawan Singh, native of India, destitute in England, sent back to India,” 7 Mar 1907.
figures such as Gandhi, Nehru, and Jinnah. They all agreed that where there was supposed to be prosperity and increased standards of living as a result of British “improvements,” there was widespread poverty, famine, and hunger.

Dadabahi Naoroji was an intellectual and an industrialist, the paternal uncle of J. Tata, and a cotton trader himself. He gave a lecture in Bombay to the Bombay Branch of the East India Association entitled “Poverty of India” in 1876. This would later be expanded into his most famous publication “Poverty and Un-British Rule” in 1901.9 His conceptualization of the poverty of India in the late 19th century utilized new conceptions about territory and space.10 It also established poverty as the reason for anti-colonial agitation and compiled poverty statistics within a national and territorial framework. Naoroji made famous the “drain of wealth” thesis11 in which he argued that India’s status as a colonial outpost meant that much more wealth and tribute were taken out of India than was ever put back in. The trade relation was never equal and the balance always lay on the side of the English. His “drain of wealth” thesis argued that the British had set up port cities on India’s coasts so that they could extract surplus wealth from the interiors in the form of raw materials and ship them to England where they would be manufactured into secondary goods and then sold to the world including to Indians themselves. A political moderate, he didn’t criticize British presence on Indian soil but chastised the British for not treating India the way they would have their own country. He believed surplus wealth ought to be re-invested in India itself, not drained to another country.

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Radhakamal Mukerjee was particularly interested in town-country relations, and his friendship with Patrick Geddes furthered his interest in the Indian City. Geddes worked at the University of Bombay as a lecturer. He wrote the introduction to Mukerjee’s book, *The Foundation of Indian Economics*, published in 1916, in which he said,

> The[ir] little old university and cathedral townlet [thus] swiftly grew into a world-city, yet one fundamentally of slum, overcrowded from the depopulated villages of Highlands and Islands, of Lanarkshire and Ireland alike. The same process spread everywhere, in Birmingham and the Midlands, Lancashire, Yorkshire; each developed its Black country, and next throughout the world.\(^\text{12}\)

Geddes created a spatial temporality to each city’s slum formation. For him, the process which produced a “black country” in each town had its prototype in Glasgow and then spread from England to the rest of the world. The process of “black country” production in each town spoke to the uniformity taking hold of the world, the widespread presence of inequality and slums that could be expected everywhere, and the trajectory established Western Europe as first and the rest afterwards which created a temporal dominance for Europe, i.e. the ability to make the template and write the prototypical narrative of urban modernization. Against this hierarchy of urban life with English towns at the top, the Indian Economists wrote the possibility not of resistance to modernization but means for competition in prescribing their own path for modernization.

For Mukerjee, the British were held responsible for both India’s “new” commercial and urban life and its concomitant poverty and disease. His concern wasn’t that the modern system itself produced poverty, rather his concern was that Indians were not equal participants in Industrial modernity’s operations, nor were India’s unique historical conditions adjusted for.

While British arrival had created a rupture with India’s past, Mukerjee’s plan involved reintegrating what he saw as the best aspects of India’s past, his own romantic historical constructions, into the economic organization for India’s industrial future.

Geddes used Mukerjee’s ideas to accomplish his goal of town planning which included the preservation of the “heritage” of India, and picked out Mukerjee’s main point to be:

Etho-polity, culture, and art are not the finished products, the urban monopolies, the townsman now-a-days thinks them: on the contrary, their greatest renewals have come to him from the fields; and will again.

In accordance, Mukerjee had said,

In India more than in any other country the great intellectual, social, and religious movements have originated in villages, and, nurtured by their thoughts and aspirations, at last reached the cities. The soul of India is to be found in the village, not in the city. In modern Europe, on the other hand, the discoveries in intellectual or social life are made in the city and are then communicated to the village, which receive them as gospel truths. The city sets the example. The village imitates…[in India] The village is still almost self-sufficing, and is in itself an economic unit.\(^1\)

This was the particular relationship between city and country established by the Mukerjee, namely one of a difference with Europe. In Europe, the city was the site of history while in India the village was the site of India’s history. Perhaps Geddes’ reading of Mukerjee was more generous and Geddes used his reappraisal of the “urban monopolies” which townsmen presumed to have, an idea he learned in India, as a way of developing an influential strand within urban planning that was preservationist, for which he is remembered till today. Mukerjee however, thought such a condition unique to India and not equally applicable to Europe.

Mukerjee expressed alarm at the exodus into the cities of cultivators and other village men, but denied that an industrial/urban revolution was happening in India. According to him, the urban population of India was still fundamentally rural in nature. For him urban life was

\(^{13}\) Mukerjee, *Foundations of Indian Economics*, 3.
temporary while rural life was timeless and essentially Indian. Mukerjee stated, “Of India more than any other country it can be said that the nation lives in the cottage. Nearly 85 percent of the total population live in the country.”\textsuperscript{14} He thought migrants to the city were of a temporary sort, and said that migration

...does not involve a permanent change in residence…. The Indian factory hand is primarily an agriculturalist. His \textit{real home is in his native village, not in the city} where he works.\textsuperscript{15} [italics mine]

The notion of a “real home” justified a constant shifting of a critical gaze from the city to the country in early 20th century India. Whenever urban ills were found they were thought to have “real” origins in the villages and it was villagers who needed to be protected from the extractions of city life. This was thus the predominant view about urban life, its inhabitants, industrialization, and the village based economy of India, and explained why there may have been relatively little thinking on the city amongst nationalists in India.\textsuperscript{16}

Gandhi too had similar notions. He had blamed the railways for the spread of disease, famine, and poverty, characterizing the worst aspects of modernization by saying:

\begin{quote}
It must be manifest to you that, but for the railways, the English could not have such a hold on India as they have. The railways, too, have spread the bubonic plague. Without them, masses could not move from place to place. They are the carriers of plague germs. Formerly we had natural segregation. Railways have also increased the frequency of famines, because, owing to facility of means of locomotion, people sell out their grain, and it is sent to the dearest markets. People become careless, and so the pressure of famine increases. They accentuate the evil nature of man. Bad men fulfill their evil designs with greater rapidity. The holy places of India have become unholy. Formerly, people went to these places with very
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} Mukerjee, \textit{Foundations of Indian Economics}, 11.

\textsuperscript{15} Mukerjee, \textit{Foundations of Indian Economics}, 13.

great difficulty. Generally, therefore, only the real devotees visited such places. Nowadays, rogues visit them in order to practice their roguery.\textsuperscript{17}

Gandhi’s ideas were undeniably romantic, he was criticized for it in his own time by his some of his contemporaries. He believed that Indian social life had been contained in local self-contained villages prior to the railways. However, his concerns pointed to the increasing view that cities were the locales of extractive markets, outwards from which radiated railways to spread disease and produce hunger. Emergent nationalism was predicated on the kinds of views set up by the Indian Economists. Cities were not the places in India in which ambitious national leaders could have any pride. Even Bal Gangadhar Tilak said in 1896: “It is indeed hard to believe that Bombay the beautiful can really be so unclean and unhealthy.\textsuperscript{18}

**Deferring Indian Labour**

Mukerjee disagreed with union organizers and the Marxists, who were demanding control of their wage. He believed economic organization demanded the greatest use of modern capital, yet without compromising or eroding the wanted aspects of Indian social life. Again distinguishing India from an undifferentiated “West,” he said,

\begin{quote}

disparity of wealth, the luxury of the few capitalists and the appalling poverty of labourers, and the consequent chronic social unrest, present a striking contrast with the spirit of co-operation which pervades the Indian industrial organization.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

The spirit of cooperation between labourers and capitalists was of course a kind of fantasy Mukerjee was championing. Mill strikes and labour conflicts between scavengers and the city

\textsuperscript{17} Gandhi and Anthony Parel, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 47.

\textsuperscript{18} *Mahratta*, December 20, 1896, as cited in Echenberg, *Plague Ports*, 51.

\textsuperscript{19} Mukerjee, *Foundations of Indian Economics*, 339.
made up much of political life in Bombay as early as the plague as we saw in earlier chapters. But Mukerjee denied that history. It is possible that Mukerjee was reading the indebtedness of migrants and workers and their sense of loyalty towards capitalist patrons as a “spirit of cooperation.” With this feature of an “Indian industrial organization” in mind, Mukerjee advocated the increase of “native” manufacturing and wanted more technical education for the people. Mukerjee also rhetorically posed the questions,

Should India adopt the Western economic institutions in order to repeat in her own soil the social evils of the West? Should the Indian industrial system be a feeble echo of the Western organization with its trade-union disputes, strikes, lock-outs, and social crises? Should India introduce into her country the conflicts of labour and capital, and thus destroy for ever the communal spirit which dominates her economic life even in the present day? He clearly thought that uniquely Indian social institutions of family and caste could result in the equitable distribution of wealth. Such Indian institutions would protect Indian industry with the kinds of conflicts between labour and capital which had pervaded the “West.” He was adapting industrialism to India’s unique cultural conditions and in the process eliminating any class based conflicts around the conditions of labour from the history of India. Mukerjee’s reading was kind of magnificent in its ability to ignore such conflicts around him.

For the Indian Economists, inequality was not read as endemic to markets but endemic to India’s subordinate role on a world stage. Mukerjee mapped the conflict between city and country onto Europe versus India. He thought India had to chart a different course for its modernity, which would involve new connections between town and country with the notion that

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they could “work together.” This led to the expansion of the labour market as new interiors could be exploited for labour and resources, and competitive pressures were embraced which would produce successive races to the bottom for decades to come. Since India’s creativity and vitality was to be found in its villages, a fundamental difference was posited between India and Europe/World where the city was the prime mover of modernity in Europe, while a mythically static, unchanging village was valorized in India. Whereas industrialism in the Western nations had divided their peoples into antagonistic classes, in Indian industrialism people would be brought together.

India will not adopt Western industrialism in its modern phase with its all too exclusive adherence to the principle of division of labour, its deficient organization towards general well-being….India will tend to establish a solidarity between the village and the city, the labourer and the employer, the specialist and the layman, the multitude and the genius, the brain worker and the manual labourer….India will not allow the city to exploit the village, she will retain the vitality of life and culture of the village.\textsuperscript{22}

This “solidarity” Mukerjee advocated for between “the multitude and the genius” didn’t overcome the hierarchy between those two, but instead absolved one of the burden of exploiting the other.

Pursuing this fantasy to its conclusion, Mukerjee imagined that the result of this unique Indian industrial life would be: “Thus, gradually, there will be developed in India a race of traders and merchants, who will lead India in the struggle for commercial predominance among the trading nations of the world.”\textsuperscript{23} The assumption to his prediction was that India did not have, prior to British arrival, a “race of traders and merchants,” nor did India ever lead “the struggle

\textsuperscript{22} Mukerjee, \textit{Foundations of Indian Economics}, 449.

\textsuperscript{23} Mukerjee, \textit{Foundations of Indian Economics}, 353.
for commercial predominance.” Mukerjee’s account of commercial development in India, when it did rely on historical knowledge, used ancient evidence, but didn’t reach into the few centuries prior to British rule into India’s early modern history of oceanic trace and commerce. Thus even as he criticized narratives of progress provided by the British, he accepted wholesale many of the myths of modernity’s ruptures, especially those we saw created in the first chapter.

Labour supply and labour control were the central issues in the management of India as a colony.24 The problem of labour concerned local and international merchants and was necessary to fulfill the dreams of developing India into a profitable enterprise. For many critics of poor housing schemes, the issue of housing was an effect of a labour problem and skeptics didn’t believe solving poor housing could ever remedy what was truly a labour problem. But solving the labour problem was next to impossible, especially since leading nationalists demanded that labour cooperation was the only way to achieve a united national front against the colonizers and allow India to “catch up” to the developmental stage of its masters - a necessary precondition to India’s freedom.

Even in 1921, 84 percent of the population of the city was born outside of Bombay. Employers blamed the lack of discipline in their labour force on the migratory nature of their employees. John Whitley of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, said in 1931:

> the main industries of India are manned by a mass of agricultural workers temporarily forsaking the mattock and the plough to add to their income by a brief spell in industry...[it is a] truth of primary importance that the great majority of those employed are at heart

This idea, along with the presumed indigenous institution of the “jobber,” explained for the capitalists the lack of effective labour discipline for production and explained for union organizers why labour couldn’t effectively mobilize on its own behalf.

Narratives of India’s difference due to its colonial relationship had influenced thinkers like Mukerjee, as we saw above, to suggest that cooperation between workers and their employers was the only way to overcome that colonial difference. In 1920, the All India Trade Union Congress was formed out of interactions with dispersed trade unions and the rising International Labour Organization (ILO). Often run by the main leaders of the Indian National Congress, the All India Trade Union Organization was a mainstream organization. In attempts to bring Indian labour issues on to the platform of the ILO at large though, dual standards were encountered. It was if the labour question in Western countries was not comparable to the labour issues in India.

Harold Butler, the director of the ILO, visited India in 1938, he said:

> It is clear that the introduction of industrialization is breeding the same problems in the East as the West, but against an eastern background their order of importance appears in a different light. The western mind is mainly preoccupied with questions of wage rates, working hours, unemployment, social insurance, protection against industrial accidents and disease, the safeguarding of women and children against exploitation, the organization of factory inspection, relations between employer and worker, to which have been added in comparatively recent years the questions of housing, nutrition and vocational training. All these problems have made their appearance over the eastern horizon...Nevertheless...it would be misleading to suggest that these problems, important as they are, dominate the social consciousness of the East. They necessarily yield priority to the fundamental and interlocking problems of population, poverty, illiteracy and disease.27

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25 Royal Commission of Labour in India cited in Chandavarkar, Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India, 125.


27 International Labour Organization, 1946, 67; as cited in Rodgers, “India, the ILO and the Quest for Social Justice since 1919,” Economic and Political Weekly March 5, (2011).
Ironically, poverty and inequality had become the condition for difference between the East and West. Poverty and inequality were not read as an outcome of similar processes across the East and West and thus the sign of sameness, an interpretation for which there was so much evidence. The problem of labour had to be solved in India by first “catching up” to the West and then addressing poverty later.
Conclusion: The City and Indian History

Those who migrated between city and country were central to the process of modern urbanization, providing a flexible labour pool and engaging opportunities differentially to integrate themselves into urban life at the turn of the 20th century. Upward mobility was possible; it was from the stock of a dynamic population in western India that enterprising migrants could turn into merchants, industrialists, tradesmen, and money lenders. Yet the social relations which kept people moving also created unequal successes so that ambitions were not always matched by outcomes. The stigmatization of poor housing only furthered the inequities which had led to it. Urban reformers emerged who sought to provide basic and clean shelter to maintain the viability of the city as a center for trade. However, moneyed interests brought their own agendas to the project of urban reform, ultimately undermining its ability to proceed. The possibility of government lines of credit for urban reform appealed to Karachi’s merchants as proof that they were being left out of an urban modernization process, while in Aden, merchants were able to escape demands for poor housing reform by appealing to the fact that as Indian merchants they were not accountable for the state of housing in Aden. Migrants moved in and out of the cities, bringing and taking with them capital and new ideas. In these processes, both the city and country were changed. Bombay, being embedded in global flows and exchanges, suffered through the war-time economy just as other cities did. Opportunities for the lowest ranks within the city were of the first to contract when depressive episodes arrived.

The civilizing mission imperialists embarked on made it impossible to see the dynamics of spatial and social mobility at play in the building of the city as an interconnected modern space. Eager to see India as potentially similar and yet perpetually different, Henry Maine for
example, thought that India contained within it the entire past of Europe’s history. Thus India was comparable to Europe in its ability to be like Europe, but different in that it was stuck in Europe’s past. A scholar of this imperial ideology writes:

For men like Maine...India was at once a land of Teutonic village ‘republics’; it was ‘the old heathen world’ of classical antiquity; it was a set of medieval feudal kingdoms; in the coastal cities ‘something like a likeness of our own civilization’ could even be discerned...  

Henry Maine confirmation of India’s difference with his own civilization found an exception in d India’s coastal cities. He stated the above in a lecture in 1875 at Cambridge after serving as a member of the Viceroy’s Council in India. The idea was that the cities were temporally ahead of the “village republics” and so closer to a future time in which Europe’s civilization existed. Societies were to move from kinship to territory or status to contract, and India’s coastal cities were approaching the latter but not quite there. Coastal India and its cities were ahead of India’s interiors temporally, and spatially akin to European societies. Rather than seeing city and country, commerce and agriculture, trade and cultivation, in a single temporal or spatial framework, Maine cast them as one behind the other.

This difference of Indian social life, its exceptional urbanism which can seem warranted because of the prevalence and persistence of urban poverty in cities like Bombay and Karachi achieved widespread currency for decades to come after Henry Maine’s speech. Radhakamal Mukerjee deployed it at the turn of the century and nationalists sustained the idea through narratives of colonial exploitation of national territory. Economic developers, modernizers, and even philanthropists have often found uniquely Indian configurations of poverty in cities such as Bombay and Calcutta.

Through implicit and sometimes explicit comparisons, this study has considered the historical development of inequality in housing and its formation on those very terms used by analysts of poverty in the North Atlantic. Doing so has implied that Bombay’s, Karachi’s, and Aden’s development are commensurable to their urban counterparts elsewhere.

Beginning with a methodological conceit of the commensurability of Indian social life has also meant that unique features of Indian urbanism can be situated in their particular contexts, so that the specific political economy of Western Indian life is connected to the world economy rather than read as a world apart. Issues like the wage, legitimacy of shelter, labour markets, and expanding markets in grains, cotton, and sugar were formidable structural constraints in which everyday migrants negotiated their changing roles, sometimes enabling the very structures which could later constrain them. The search for housing, its construction, and subsequent stigmatization made Bombay’s migrant workers similar to their counterparts in other world cities, and yet there were differences.

For example, the circular mobility of rural to urban migrants made it possible for many to flee Bombay during the cotton bust in the 1860s and during the plague in the early 1900s, both events triggered by Bombay’s connectedness to places beyond its formal and political boundaries. Bombay was perhaps the largest city in the world in the 19th century where population actually decreased during periods of distress. In no other major city did the working classes have homes to return to when urban opportunities disappeared or their livelihoods were threatened. However, the more difficult question is how to read the significance of that fact? Does return migration and a decline in the urban population suggest that Bombay was not a home, that migrants did not become urban in their outlook? Does it suggest that Western India
was only partially urbanized or occasionally urbanized but remained a predominantly agrarian economy? Or can we, by looking specifically at who was able to return home and who had cut off their ties to their villages assess the specific nature of mobility and urbanization for particular social groups? As we saw in the discussion on the plague and its effects, the lowest classes and many Muslim workers were unable to flee the city during the plague, having nowhere to go when the city became infested with disease. With this in mind, we can also reconsider the status of circular migration in the debates over India’s development.

The persistence of urban poverty in cities like Bombay and Karachi presented a problem for the legitimacy of colonial sovereignty by the turn of the century. It made urban intellectuals and social analysts doubt the credibility of the British civilizing mission. For the earliest critics of British rule, like Dadabhai Naoroji, India had not been treated equally to England. British rule in India had been “un-British” and unfavorable to Indians. Rather than developing India’s economy and capacity to sustain itself, the British, he argued, had merely extracted surplus wealth from the country and used it to develop England. This “drain of wealth” thesis became the signpost of nationalist agitation by the early 20th century and influenced nationalist and Marxist thinking on the subject. 29 Nationalists such as Gandhi and Nehru embraced the thesis and moved quickly to find the roots of poverty, which they likely noticed primarily in the cities in which they lived and worked, in agrarian exploitation, so that even the urban poor were seen to be effects of an original cause of poverty elsewhere in rural life. Village life became a major concern of most nationalists. The dynamics within the city, of commerce and labor, were rewritten as external to the drama of India’s history.

The salience of the ideas about India’s difference is particularly striking when we consider that these ideas emerged within an imperial Indian rubrics at the exact same time that “urban studies” was emerging as an analytic endeavour designed to understand and manage the excesses of urbanism in the United States. What we now refer to as the “Chicago school” is a good example. For these thinkers, the city was a social laboratory. Using qualitative methods and rigorous data analysis, the “school,” if it can be called one school given the debate amongst its cohort, spanned the turn of the 20th century into the 1950s. The University of Chicago had the country’s first department of sociology, opening in 1892. While anthropology was the discipline of the space of the village and “backwardness,” thus coinciding with the rise of colonialism and European territorial expansion into hitherto unknown areas of the world, sociology was homegrown and due to domestic changes within its environs. This period of intellectual activity coincided with a population shift from what was thought to be the “rural, homogenous, agrarian community to the vast, heterogenous, industrial metropolis.”

The Chicago school was nonetheless breaking away from sociology which was more speculative and fragmented. It sought to make models, use data to discern patterns, and create a whole analysis of the dynamics driving social relations. The earliest faculty were connected to German universities, and influential members included Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Louis Wirth. These figures were central in developing the “ecological model” of the city, i.e. the notion that the city had natural growth processes which could be observed and used to predict future outcomes of urban development.

Most importantly, many studies focused on areas of decay or slum areas to explain why

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such processes occurred, and how corresponding effects like crime, corruption, and “vice” fit into the urban whole. The assumption was that social ills within the city were produced precisely within the city as one organic whole which developed according to predictable models of urbanization. A critique of this view has come to be known as the “L.A school” of urban studies which challenged the assumptions of the Chicago school beginning in the 1970s, when deindustrialization was wreaking havoc on the viability of labor and the predictability of the urban spatial form. While the Chicago school had posited concentric zones of ecological evolution in the 1920s, by the 1970s, the L.A. school saw in cities sites of intensified local-global connections, such that unpredictable and haphazard development and under-development unconstrained by national governments and their agendas were the norm of urban life.\(^\text{31}\)

Nonetheless, for Louis Wirth the city was modernity. He said, “...what is distinctively modern in our civilization is best signalled by the growth of great cities.” The urban way of life could exist outside of what was formally a city. The urban way of life radiated outwards and influenced rural communities as well. Wirth shared with other contemporaries an almost irrational fear of the effect of cities on human society. Wirth said,

> The influences which cities exert upon the social life of man are greater than the ratio of the urban population would indicate, for the city is not only in ever larger degrees the dwelling place and the workshop of modern man, but it is the initiating and controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life that has drawn the most remote parts of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples, and activities into a cosmos.\(^\text{32}\)

It would be worth juxtaposing these ideas to the pervasive notion that colonial India was in


entirety a village, even its cities were seen as dense village forms, or at best as Maine said, something approximating “our civilization” but not quite there. If the urban way of life was consuming the West then the rural way of life was unshakeable in the East, it could not be overcome, and became reified as the essential India, made by the colonial encounter.

Such notions of India’s difference influenced urban intellectuals within India who even as they criticized colonial power, accepted wholesale some of the misconceptions about the formation of the cities. Misunderstandings persisted and led to the story of Indian cities being told as one of difference, of an almost modern space which couldn’t fully escape its past and come into the present. The Indian cities were overwhelmed by the constant intrusion of the past, by way of villagers constantly migrating to urban spaces and not transforming into urbane residents. Therefore they were not quite the same as but close to European “civilization.” The dominant way of correcting this problem by the 1940s became the notion that more commerce, privatization of markets, and subsequent individuation of people, would one day make India catch up, and be like the West. New attempts at development such as rapid industrialization, planning, and techniques for more intensive agrarian production would be sought for the remaining decades of the 20th century. Such projects would depend on precisely the kind of forgetting of Bombay’s modern past which notions of India’s urban difference so effectively sustain.
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