

Life of Original Mumbaikars, Kolis

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Abstract— A group of fishermen, the *Kolis* have been living in Mumbai for the last 500 years. They have been known as the original Mumbaikars as it is believed that many prominent places in Mumbai have been named by this community. Their *Koliwad*s (meaning home facing the sea) are in various regions in Mumbai, such as Worli, Juhu, Thane, etc. Their livelihoods depend on fishing and at present, due to the increasing competition in the business, they are facing a lot of problems and due to this they have started looking at other means of income. Another major problem the community is facing is the new Coastal Road Development Project. The project poses a major threat to their land and there have been several resistances against this. However, this has not received any positive response and the community is facing the threat of being displaced from their inherent land.

The research aims to throw light upon the community, the various problems they are facing, study the reasons for their decline and look at options for revival and rejuvenation of the *Kolis*. The research will also look at how the area inhabited by the *Kolis* can become a potential tourist site by incorporating the abandoned Worli fort, keeping in mind traditional and cultural aspects.

I. INTRODUCTION

Kolis are an ethnic group of fishermen found in regions of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh etc. The area that has been chosen for the study is Worli *Koliwada* [1]. This community has been an important part of Mumbai city's identity and residents have been prime victims of the city's development. *Figure 01* shows how over the years the number of fishing villages in the city have vanished rapidly due to the city's growth and development.

The *Kolis* have been a part of Mumbai city for a long time now and they have witnessed and been a part of the changes and developments that the city has undergone. Even before Mumbai became the city that it is today, the *Kolis* have been inhabitants of the land. They are a crucial part of the city and have become a part of the identity.

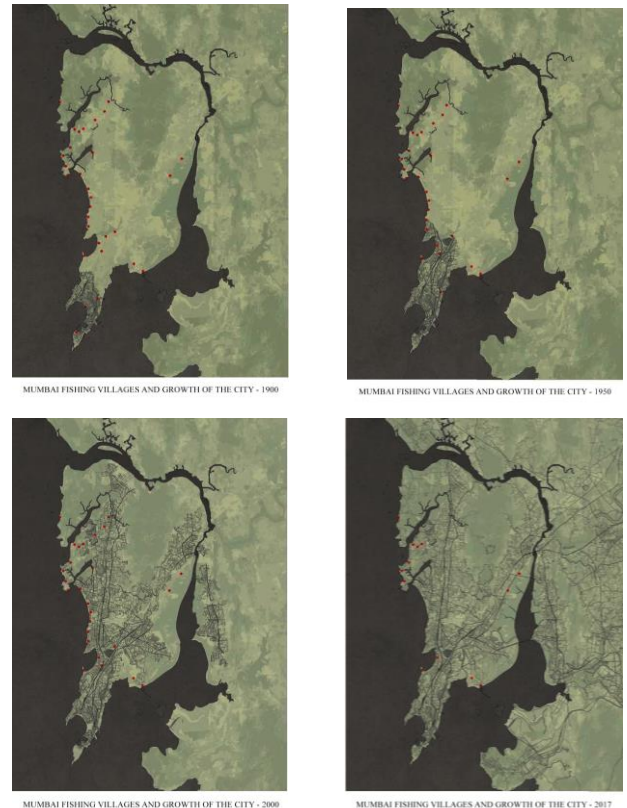


Figure01. Location and Growth of fishing villages in Mumbai, [Source: Kanekar, Sahil. "Re-interpreting the resource – Case applied Sassoon Dock, Mumbai." *Architectural thesis, Academy of Architecture*. 2013-2014.]

In 1770, the community experienced a rather life-changing move. It was the time of the British patronage and they had taken control of several parts in the city. As the city developed, the *Koli* community was removed from Dongri by the East India Company. This caused the marginalization and sidelining of the community. As more land was reclaimed, the men of the sea had to settle elsewhere. They were stranded in the Cuffe Parade, and they started their traditional deep-sea fishing here. The Backbay reclamation in the 60s would have caused further marginalization if the community had not approached the court. Now their lands are protected under the law. [3]

Recently, the community has been facing several issues, few of which have been highlighted in previous sections. The members of the community are now looking at various other livelihood options. The youth of the community are not interested in joining the fishing business and prefer taking up corporate jobs where they feel there is more scope for money. Due to the competition in the sea, overfishing is a

common scenario. The *Kolis* do not get enough catch as they are no longer the only ones in the business. [14][15][16][17][27][36]

To avoid further depletion and eradication of this community, strategic steps need to be adopted to ensure their protection and wellbeing. Therefore, the objective of the study is as follows:

- To conduct a literature review of Koli communities located in Mumbai with respect to history, education, socio-economic and cultural aspects, government schemes and policies etc.
- To undertake a detailed case study analysis of Worli Koliwada focusing on socio-economic, spatio-cultural, and infrastructural aspects.
- To outline and suggest the need for alternative redevelopment strategies to empower the *Koli* community in general and Worli *Koliwada* in particular

II. LITERATURE REVIEW ORIGIN AND HISTORY

Historically, there has been difficulty in identifying the people as *Koli* or *Bhil*. The term *Koli* was used to describe lawless people and it was during the British rule, that the definition of this word changed and was later used as a noun to describe them as nothing but inferior to the Kunbis (a term used to refer to traditionally non-elite farmers in western India. [1]

It is said that *Kolis* were the first inhabitants of the Mumbai city (then Bombay) and that they resided along the coast of the seven islands. It has been mentioned in several articles and videos that the etymology of "Mumbai" and several other locations in the city, have been from the *Koli* community. For example, Mumbai got its name from *Mumbadevi*, their goddess, and the patron deity of the city. Several other examples are Kolabhat which went on to become Colaba, Paalav (a type fish), went on to be known as Palva Bunder which then went on to be named as Apollo Bandar and Machagaon became Mazgaon. [2]

When the East India Company removed them from Dongri in 1770, they were stranded in Cuffe Parade. It is from here that they began piling their ancient trade of deep-sea water fishing. The Backbay reclamation of the 60s would have eliminated and marginalized them further, had they not taken this issue to court. Now their lands are protected by the law. The *Kolis* live in communities and this place is called *Koliwada* (house facing the sea) in various parts of Mumbai such as Worli, Versova, Thane, Juhu etc. [3]

Although there have been several efforts made to study the problems faced by the community through various studies

and surveys, there has been no effort made to understand the potential and importance of the Worli Koliwada.

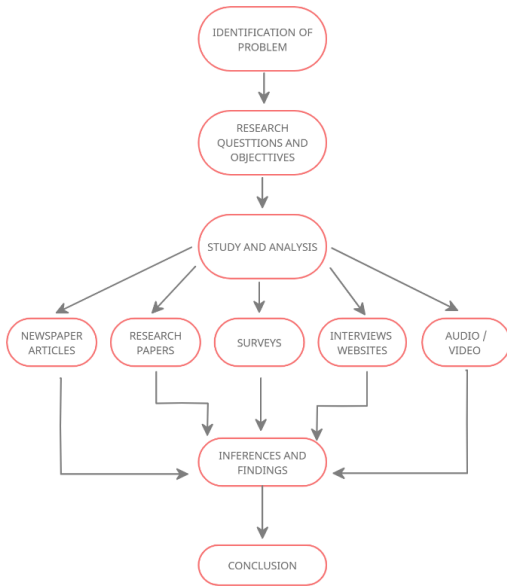
SOCIO CULTURAL ASPECTS

Development is crucial for the growth of any city or country. The various impacts, both positive and negative, can be seen clearly if one looks carefully into the micro level picture of the city/country. There is a constant need for development in our country, however, at what and most importantly, whose cost?

Mumbai has been known as the city of dreams and is one of the most populated cities in the country, with a population of 1.84 crores (as of census 2011). The city has served as a host for various immigrants who come looking for jobs and to settle down. Being the economic capital of the country, the city has witnessed and been a part of the fastest developments in the country. However, this development has also paved the way for disparities among the citizens at various social, economic, and cultural levels. Within the boundaries of this metropolitan city one can also find slums and people living in extreme poverty and living conditions. Slums like Dharavi are well known, and this is a clear indication that development does not favor all. To understand the life of this side of Mumbai, these aspects were studied:

- Education – Although they are traditionally fishermen, the *Kolis* have started educating their children due to the severe economic decline the community is facing. They do not want their kids to face the same problems and want better lives for them [21]
- Literacy Rates – Now that the members of the community have started educating their kids, the literacy rate has increased. From various surveys and research conducted, it can be observed that the youth in the community went on to pursue degrees and diplomas in the field of engineering and computer skills which were required for them to be hired for jobs. [21]
- Health – The health situation has improved but is still not the best. Many people still do not have access to good toilet and sanitation, and this paves way for the spread of diseases like diarrhea, malaria etc. The community has access to local government hospitals where treatment is provided at affordable rates. [21]
- Culture - The *Kolis* have their own set of cultural settings and festivals that give them their identity. From their dressing to their folk songs, the *Kolis* will make you feel at home and a part of their community in just a few minutes. *Koli* folk songs and dances incorporate elements that the community is familiar with - sea and fishing [21]

III.METHODOLOGY



The study has been carried out by looking into various parameters and understanding how urbanization and development in the city have impacted the community. This was done by referring to various secondary sources such as research papers, government documents, surveys conducted etc. The data available for the study, was majorly focused on all the *Koli* communities residing in Mumbai

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

SCOPE

- Although several studies have been done on the *Koli* community, Worli *Koliwada* has not been considered for an intervention
- This research serves as a background study for anyone who wants to conduct a research or take up an intervention in the area.
- Site has immense potential for a context-based intervention which will replenish and rejuvenate the area.

LIMITATIONS

- Due to the availability of limited information and data for the study, the paper looks at the concerns of the *Koli* community in general and has looked at Worli *Koliwada* in detail.
- Site visits were not possible because of the current COVID-19 situation.

Due to this the actual essence of the area could not be understood completely. The study has been conducted through various secondary sources.

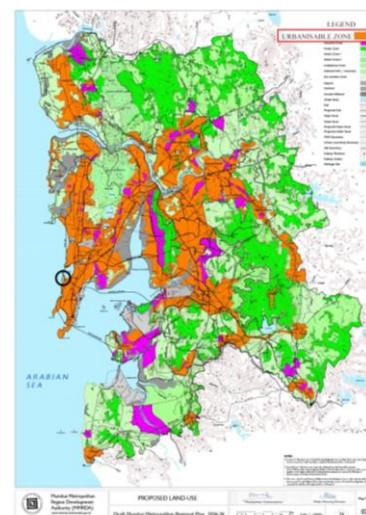
IV.CASE STUDY ANALYSIS – WORLI KOLIWADA LOCATION

LATITUDE - 19° 01'33N, LONGITUDE - 72° 49'14E

Worli is a locality in South Mumbai (*Figure 02*). Being one of the most prominent areas in the city, this area was initially one of the seven islands that made up the present-day Mumbai. It was a separate island and later joined with the other islands in the 19th century. Worli is connected to the closest suburb, Bandra, the sea through the famous Bandra - Worli Sea Link. The highlight of the area is the seaside promenade, giving the user a vibrant view of the Arabian Sea

LANDUSE AND GROWTH

The city of Mumbai has witnessed a tremendous increase in population since 1991. The population has almost doubled and is currently at an estimated 22 million, and most likely to keep increasing. This boom in population has been caused by the migration of people into the city looking for employment opportunities. The population density of the city is approximately 73,000 people per square mile, thereby making Mumbai one of the



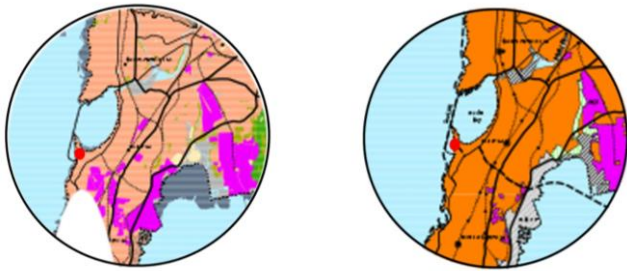


Figure 02 - Existing land use map 2016 (1st); Proposed land use map (2nd) [Source- - Affordablehousing.live, <https://affordablehousing.live/mumbai-master-plan-2036.html>]

most densely populated cities in the country. Due to the high land price, residents are often seen living in cramped and small houses, located very far from their workplaces. The percentage of people living in the slums is estimated to be around 41.3% in the Greater Mumbai region. [10][11]

From the existing land use map and the proposed land use map, it can be understood that there are plans to make the area occupied by the *Kolis* fall under the region that has been proposed to be a potential organizable area.

Due to the increase in population, there has been a significant increase in the number of built spaces, like apartment complexes, villas etc., to meet the demand of the growing population. This is where land reclamation happens, and the most affected by these are the fishing villages and slums who will be displaced from their native grounds. From *Figure 6* it can be noted that there have been no major changes, as of now, in the Worli *Koliwada*. However, recent developments proposed are posing a severe threat to the livelihoods of these fishermen

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

The fishing industry in India has been an important part of its economy. It has been noted that India is the World's 2nd largest fish producer in the world. Nearly half of the inland fish production is from culture fisheries. The sector has shown a consistent growth in the total gross value included and records for 5.23 per cent of agricultural GDP. The fishing industry has also provided employment to about 14.5 million people in the country.

There are several fishing villages in the state of Maharashtra and *Kolis* have been in Mumbai ever since it was seven islands. Fishing has been their livelihood for over 500 years now and they are popularly called the "Kings of the Sea". This was since most of the fishing in the city was done by *Kolis*. Since fishing has been their traditional business, the *Kolis* are not well versed with any other mode of work. From a survey conducted, it was understood that there were more than one reasons as to why the people took up this occupation. [22]

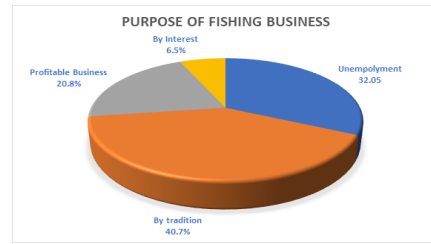


Figure 03 - Pie chart showing Purpose of Fishing Business among community members

[Source- ResearchGate.net, Interpreted by Author from research paper. [22]

From *Figure 03*, it can be observed that a large group of the community went into the fishing business because they have been doing this traditionally. This was followed by a group of people who went into the family business due to unemployment. There was a very small group of *Kolis* who did fishing because of their interest.

The *Kolis* have an intricate relationship with the sea. They can be called the caretakers of the various coasts that they have settled along. They have respected the sea and because of this they have been able to thrive for this long. However, the community has received a massive hit due to various external factors. [22]

A major issue that the fishermen are facing is the amount they receive after the sale of the catch. The long and overdue supply chain has not been of much help to the fishermen because they are not involved in the direct sale of the fish and therefore the money they receive after various links in the chain is considerably low. The more the number of links in the chain, the lesser is the amount the fishermen receive. The current chain looks like this.

Fisherman ⇒ *Auctioneer* ⇒ *Supplier* ⇒ *Agent* ⇒ *Exporter/Wholesaler* ⇒ *Fish Market* ⇒ *Consumer*

Mumbai, being the city of dreams, has received migrants from all over the country and even parts of the world, who come looking for jobs, and various other factors. Due to the increasing number of people in the city, the population has increased and has increased the demand for fish in the city. This has led to an increase in the number of people doing fishing. These new firms have technologically advanced machines and motorboats. The *Kolis* are finding it difficult to keep up with this trend using their traditional fishing nets and boats. The competition in the sea has caused a decline in their business and they are now looking at other livelihoods. [22]

There are other sources of income for the community other than fishing. Due to the high rental rates in the city, migrants find it difficult to find accommodation at affordable prices. In this case, they are suggested to find accommodation in the slums or fishing villages. However, due to the condition of the slums, people usually prefer to stay in fishing villages.

In the *Koliwad*s, *Kolis* who own double storey pucca houses, rent out the first floor. This assures the *Kolis* a monthly amount of Rs 4000-5000. But these contribute very little to the whole economy of the community. Many families are in debt because they have taken loans from various sources in the community itself and are now finding it difficult to repay the amount because of insufficient catch and sale of fish. [22]

INFRASTRUCTURE

ANALYSIS OF HOUSING

The *Kolis* have been living along the western coast of India for years now. Many of the people in the community live in either double storey or single-storey houses which were built by their forefathers. A survey conducted to study the condition and typology of houses that the people lived in showed that most of the population lived in either pucca or semi-pucca houses. Almost all the houses in the community, even though they have a different pattern, have an *oti* (verandah), a *chool* (kitchen), *vathan* (rooms), and *devgarh* (room of worship) [30]. There are 3 main types of houses found here: *Pucca houses*, *Semi - pucca houses* and *Kutch*a houses.



Figure 04, 05 - Images of housing typologies in Worli Koliwada [Source- "India: Worli Koliwada and Worli Fort, a fishing village obscured by the city's only highway", Minor Sights, 25 May, Year unavailable. <http://www.minorsights.com/2014/05/india-worli-fort-in-bombay.html>]

ANALYSIS OF SANITATION

Toilets - The *Kolis* have been living in very poor conditions for some time now. Pucca and semi pucca houses has toilets whereas kutch

Water supply - Drinking water is supplied by various organizations in the city. The fishermen village mainly gets the water supplied from the Municipal Corporation of Mumbai. There is a shortage of water supply and due to this reason, many households receive water on an hourly basis

The people use water for household purposes, drinking, cleaning fish etc. [21]

Electricity - The main supply into the fishing villages is by Bombay Electric Supply and Tramways Company Limited (BEST). The main activities for which electricity is required are household activities and other necessities like tube light, fan, bulb, television, mixer grinder etc. electricity is also required to run the cold storage and ice crushing machines. In most fishing villages, the electricity supply is in good condition. [21]

Waste management - Waste is usually collected by members of the SMPA (Swachh Mumbai Prabodhan Abhiyan) from the collecting units. The waste is either collected from houses or is dumped in the open shores along the western and eastern coast. There is an existing solid waste management system in Worli *Koliwada*. However, canals, water bodies and open grounds can be seen with waste. [21]



Figure 06 - Image of Existing Solid Waste Management at Worli *Koliwada* [Source Katare, Anjali. "An Urban village in Mumbai – Worli Koliwada." Architectural thesis, CEPT University Summer School 2016]



Figure 07 - Images of waste dumping in Worli Koliwada [Source- Photographs taken by Isha Chaudhari during site visit (Student at VIT's PVP COA, Pune)]

ANALYSIS OF TRANSPORT SCENARIO

The *Koliwada* is located along the Worli peninsula. The village is connected through narrow lanes and streets. Vehicular access into the area is restricted as it causes congestion and traffic. The houses are not very well organized and because of this reason, street layout is also not a convenient one. Internal roads connect the area, but these are not in very good condition. Kutcha roads can also be seen in areas leading to the beach side.



Figure 08, 09 - Lanes and streets in the Koliwada [Source- Photographs taken by Isha Chaudhari during site visit (Student at VIT's PVP COA, Pune)]

IMPACT OF COASTAL ROAD DEVELOPMENT

An ongoing 8 lane, 29.2 km long freeway, the Mumbai Coastal Road Development Project connects marine lines in the south to Kandivali in the north. The foundation stone for the project was laid in 2018 after 3 years of planning. Around 415 acres of land was reclaimed from the sea for this project. The project aims to reduce the travel time between South Bombay and Western suburbs from 2 hours to 40 minutes. However, this project has stirred up several problems and the most affected by this project are the *Kolis*.

Urban planning experts claim that the reclamation will push the boundary of the existing coastline by at least 100m towards the sea. This could lead to a variety of problems such as change in tidal patterns, erosion of beaches and blockage of the city's natural drainage systems along the western coast. These problems increase the risk of flooding the city. The fishermen have filed petitions in the Bombay High Court to stop the construction works, written several letters to the Chief Minister, however, no action has been taken in the community's favor as of now.[14][15][16][17][18][19]



Figure 10 - before CRP, after CRP

ANALYSIS OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND PHYSICAL CONDITIONS

The Worli peninsula is an ecologically sensitive stretch of land, surrounded by water on all three sides. The fishermen find it easy to catch fish in this part of the sea because there is a variety of fish available when we move into the deeper parts. However, ever since the construction of the Bandra-Worli Sea Link, there has been a severe shortage of fish because of the impact these concrete structures have on the creatures of the sea. The *Koli* fishermen say that during the time of construction, fishermen are banned from casting their nets in the area. The waste accumulated in the sea, during the construction of the Sea link was not cleared out, the water current has been altered, the locals were getting very little catch, breeding of the fish has been interrupted etc. are few of their main concerns. The impact of climate change can be seen in the marine ecosystem as well. It causes ocean warming, rise in sea levels, change in the chemical makeup of the aquatic environment etc. [17][27]

V. INFERENCES AND CONCLUSIONS

From the study conducted, several reasons for the rapid decline of community were identified. The following are the inferences and findings.

- Historical significance – *Kolis* have been an important part of Mumbai city's identity. They maintain cultural and ecological balance of the region.
- Socio Cultural – The community is actively involved in fishing and are one of the most welcoming groups. The *Kolis* have started educating their children as they do not want the same fate as theirs for their children. This has increased the literacy rate in the community. There are government health facilities providing treatment at affordable rates.
- Location – Being located towards the end of the Worli peninsula, the *Koliwada* is difficult to accessed through narrow lanes and streets. It is an ecologically sensitive region that needs to be preserved to maintain the ecological balance.
- Land use and Growth - Migration into the city has led to an increase in demand for land and housing. Due to unaffordable rates in the city, migrants settle down in fishing villages. Densely crowded because of this reason.
- Economy - Increasing demand in the city for fish has brought in more firms involved in fishing now. These firms have technologically advanced machines and motorboats and the *Kolis* are not able

to keep up with this trend with their traditional fishing nets and boats. Reduction in catch because of competition in the sea. The *Kolis* have started looking at other options to make a living.

- Infrastructure
- Housing – there are 3 types of houses – pucca, semi pucca and kutchha houses. Most of the Koliwada has houses with two storeys where the family stays on the ground floor and the 1st floor is leased out. This is another source of income for the *Kolis*
- Sanitation – Pucca and semi-pucca houses have attached toilets. Public toilets are not in a very good condition. Most houses have electricity and water supply. There is a Solid Waste management system already existing in the area. Open dumping of waste can be seen in areas near the beach, in small open areas within the community also.
- Transport – The Koliwada is connected through several narrow streets making vehicular movement difficult in the area.
- Environment - Due to various construction activities happening, the sea has been affected. Water current has been altered, locals were banned from fishing there, breeding of fish was interrupted. Climate change has also affected the aquatic environment causing ocean warming, rise in sea levels, change in chemical makeup of aquatic environment etc.

From the study, it can be concluded that the community is facing several problems, as mentioned in 5.1. It has also been noted that these problems have not been addressed and this has led to a severe decline of the community. Although several studies have been conducted about the *Koli* community, there has been no development or intervention that has been proposed in the area. There is a need to understand why actions have not been taken or if they have been taken, why is there no progress. The Government needs to work with the people and understand their problems in a more streamlined way. It is not necessary that the same solution will be the solution to all problems. Therefore, it is important to have a lot of interaction with the people and understand what they want.

The area is a potential site where a context driven intervention may be proposed. It is important to consider the traditional, cultural and heritage values of the site while proposing an intervention. Establishing a connection between the Worli fort and the Koliwada will bring in tourism into the area. The tourists can explore the community and end their visit at the fort. This will bring the necessary development in the area.

Another important reason why there is a need to preserve this community is because of its historical significance. As mentioned in the section 3.1., the *Kolis* have been an important part in the identity and character of Mumbai city. These people have grown with the city, and they are the native people of the western coasts. Displacing them will create an imbalance as they have been living in harmony with the sea for years now. Disturbing the natural balance of the environment will cause catastrophic reactions and this will not be good for anyone. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to maintain this balance for the good of the environment and people.

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