Trans.Inst.Indian Geographers
ISSN 0970-9851

Evolution of a Hinterland: The Case of Uran in North Konkan

Rekha Mammen, Mumbai

Abstract

This article undertakes a phase-wise historical analysis of transformations in a peri-urban region of Mumbai before India's Independence. Relationships between local communities, traders, religious establishments and rulers through ancient, medieval, and colonial times are traced. The evolution of different forms of land use, patterns of exchange and settlements that developed in the region as a result of people-environment interaction is outlined.

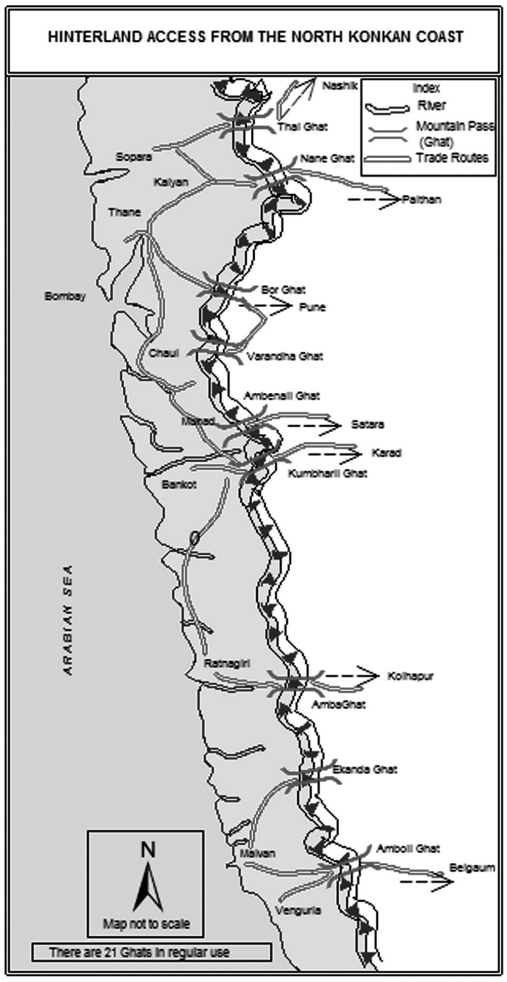
Introduction

Uran taluka presently constitutes a part of the peri-urban region of the Mumbai Metropolis. Different forms of land use, patterns of exchange and related human settlements evolved in the region through centuries of people-environment interactions. Here the events and processes that shaped the region through ancient, medieval and colonial times are traced in an attempt to understand the needs, potential and regional development requirements that had emerged by the time of Independence. This would create the base upon which one could assess the contemporary landscape as imagined through the development planning process and the landscape that has evolved through spaces of lived interactions. Today, Uran taluka is an actively transforming site with large scale corporate investment.

North Konkan Landscapes in Ancient Times

The North Konkan, where Uran taluka is located, is characterised by a long narrow strip of coastal plain bound on the west by the Arabian Sea and on the east by the Sahyadri ranges, known as the Western Ghats, which runs parallel to the coast. The region had an active maritime economy from the first millennium BCE despite the sharp rise of mountains near the coast with limited access (Figure 1) to the interior through difficult densely forested mountain passes such as the Bor, Devasthali, Kumbharli and Sevtya (Campbell, 2006). The high rainfall, tropical climate and fertile soil made the coast a considerably productive area. While the coastal strip produced rice, salt, fish/ dried fish, sea shells, betel nut, coconuts, coconut fibre and fruit, these in themselves were inadequate to sustain trade. Timber, including teak, from the dense ghat forests constituted another important item for trade. The various openings in the Sahyadris provided access to parts of the Deccan from where sugarcane, cotton, onions, garlic, turmeric, tobacco and pulses were sourced (Naravane, 2001).

North Konkan emerged as a significant trading region (Karmarkar, 1996) in its own right with the rise of trading centres like Kalyan, Thane and Chaul under the Andhrabhrityas (200 BCE – 400 AD).



Source : Naravane, 2001

Figure 1

Western India, however, started facing a decline especially after the 3rd century AD (Sharma, 1987) that persisted even in the Gupta era. Trade with Romans, Chinese and Parthians declined considerably, leading to revenue losses to the state, merchants, artisans and others. Failure to improve agricultural production in the hinterland of the erstwhile historical towns such as Sopara and Panvel led to a social crisis that affected a wide range of people, from the peasants right up to the city dwellers and brought in feudalisation (Sharma, 1965). A system of village artisans evolved to serve village needs that crystallised into a group of twelve artisans called the bara balutedar (Kosambi, 1965), thereby reducing the need for a cash economy and making the village a fairly insular entity. Regional variations of this system naturally emerged as a consequence of the peculiarities of the differing local resource conditions. This is seen in the instance of Uran taluka where the service castes served groups of low-lying villages from their location in upland villages such as Uran, Jasai and Chirner where water, fuel wood, and other material resources needed for their respective trades were available in adequate supply. At the beginning of the early medieval period (Karmarkar, 2005) there was large-scale migration of Brahmins and craftsmen from declining urban centres to the countryside where production of crafts and agriculture picked up (Sharma, 1987). This could be the origin of the compulsion reported in Uran taluka for every low-lying village to ensure a place for at least one Brahmin and one Nhavi (barber) family.

Since the predominant source of revenue for rulers was either agriculture or/and trade, much of the conflict between them was to gain control over fertile tracts of land and coastal areas along with their inland networks (Thapar, 2002). The expansion of political power in the Konkan was largely based on increased revenue from the introduction of agriculture in new areas, and was often achieved by land or village grants to Brahmins and to temples. The process also involved the conversion of local societies to peasant cultivators in areas where such cultivators had not existed before, and the Brahmins brought them into the caste system by allocating the sudra caste status to them.

Uran, then a village on Karanja Island, seems to have gained importance as the head of an administrative division during Shilahara rule. The Shilaharas ruled over 1400 North Konkan villages from 765/810 to 1260 AD - more than 400 years (GOM, 2009) with a commercial hinterland extending up to Rajasthan (Thapar, 2002). The nature and extent of trade during this period indicate complex trade links and associated influences that existed at that time. The important places in this period were Thane, Sanjan in Dahanu, Sopara, Chaul, Lonad and Uran. Many villages and gardens were established on Karanja Island and the area appears to have experienced a period of prosperity (Nairne, 1896). Till the 18th century the island, eight miles long from north to south and four miles wide from east to west, was cut off from the mainland by the Bendkhal creek which at high tide was filled through its whole length. The creek to the east was earlier broken up into several salt-pans. The erstwhile island consisted of two rocky hills in between which there were grass and rice lands, wooded with mango trees and palms. Other than Uran, nineteen villages were part of Karanja Island.

Description of the subsequent arrival from Paithan of a king called Bimba in Thane in the late thirteenth century, suggests that his reign also constituted a period of expansion of paddy cultivation and salt production in the region that required an influx of migrants who could undertake the work. One of the earliest references (Thakur, 2007) to reclamation, salt pans and cultivation of such kharapat or 'saline land' located along the banks of tidal creeks in the Konkan was found in a rock edict dated 1367 A.D near Alibag. A distinctive feature of Uran that is shared with the neighbouring Alibag and Pen talukas in Kolaba District, is the large area of salt marsh and mangrove swamps reclaimed for the growth of rice (Bombay State, 1908) and the production of salt. Thus each taluka constituted a resource for additional cultivators and labourers for rapid expansion.

Medieval History of the North Konkan

With the discovery of the sea-route around the African Cape in 1497, the period from 1500 to 1800 AD saw a reorganisation of the economy of the region with the rise of strong maritime and continental power groups (Gupta, 2001). When the Portuguese arrived in the 15th century the western coast was under the control of four main powers – the Portuguese, Marathas, Angrias and Sidis – with the North Konkan region divided between two of them (Naravane, 2001). The region had been considerably neglected by its rulers in the previous two centuries, thereby giving space to local chiefs to dominate the countryside. The state of conflict between the petty chiefs and kings and the inadequately equipped navies of these kingdoms made Portuguese occupation of ports such as Chaul (1507) and Dabhol (1508) fairly easy. Bassein and its dependencies (Salsette, Bombay1, Parel, Wadala, Sion, Worli, Mazgaon, Thana, Bandra, Mahim, and Karanja) comprised one of the most attractive areas for occupation. The revenue sources of Bassein in the 16th century included horse trade, fishing, salt, timber, a stone quarry (basalt, granite), and shipyards (Ramerini, 1998). Revenues were also extracted from the surrounding agricultural area where

rice, betel, cotton, and sugar-cane were cultivated. The Portuguese soon controlled a stretch of about 100 km from Bassein (Vasai) to Daman called the Northern or Bassein Province which lasted for a period of almost 200 years (Ramerini, 1998). Their capital was established at Bassein and apart from a manor on the main island, Bombay was relatively uninhabited (Naravane, 2001).

New crops such as tobacco, pineapple, and cashew were introduced that became important sources of revenue (GOI, 1882) in the province. Although none of these crops appear to have constituted significant sources of revenue in Uran taluka, cashew trees are seen in some villages, e.g. Panje and Sheva. Enterprising villagers had planted some of the cashew nuts gifted to them by traders for their services as sailors (Patil, 2012). Such informal exchange perhaps also explains how two varieties of grafted mango, alphonso and pairi, whose origin was traced (GOI, 1882) to Goa were introduced in the study area during Portuguese rule. Of the numerous such interactions that must take place every day, some develop tremendous significance due to a combination of indirect and direct factors such as the development of new communication lines and market value. This was seen later in the case of grafted mango during colonial rule.

The Portuguese sustained and even expanded rice cultivation in their territories, with the construction of new embankments. These were funded partly by the Government and partly by the European settlers to whom the Government granted large estates (SSIC, 1908). A number of forts were built for defence and to retain control over the spice trade. One of these was built on Dronagiri hill (Patil, 2007) of Karanja Island as Karanja (Caranja) served as an important port and one of the main Custom Houses. Portuguese control over trade was accompanied by their efforts to control the local population through forced conversions to Christianity. Unlike Goa, where the Portuguese influence caused local converts to sever their connections with the land by taking up jobs in Portuguese households or the government (SSIC, 1908) in large numbers, in Uran the Christians took great pride in earning their living from cultivation, fishing, and toddy-drawing. Very few took up employment as clerks and shopkeepers in Bombay, perhaps due to the presence of a strong regional culture rooted in their relationship with the environment. Village grants were also made to headmen who had been converted to Christianity. However, the levels of revenue extraction and religious repression must have been severe for a significant large-scale riot was reported to have taken place on Karanja Island in 1613.

The growing strength of Dutch forces between 1595 and 1663 AD resulted in losses to Portuguese trade and territory. A strategic alliance with England - also a competitor until then - in 1662 led to the signing of a historic marriage treaty. The British agreed to mediate with and/or provide defence against the Dutch, while the Portuguese offered a dowry that comprised the city of Tangier, two million 'Portuguese crusados', and the port and island of Bombay (Danvers, 1894). Despite a natural harbour, the seven Bombay islands did not have enough space for port related activities such as dockyards and warehouses. The islands were separated at high tide and connected by mud flats at low tide. With their prior knowledge of the region, the

Portuguese retained control over nearby areas that were necessary for survival on the Bombay islands. Salsette was the most fertile and productive area of north Konkan and was the supply base of Bombay as well as Goa. Control over Karanja and Vasai were critical for the defence of Bombay, with Vasai also being an important source of timber for the Bombay dockyards.

Simultaneously, the region experienced the consolidation of Mughal powers and the rise of the Marathas under the leadership of Shivaji. To monopolise their major factory locations and the associated local production areas the British entered into the politics of the land and started supporting and/or opposing the dominant local Maratha families that were feuding with each other (Karmarkar, 2005). In this context, the peripheral areas came under the control of regionally based powers and their economy started getting controlled by local bankers and traders. New groups of independent rulers holding limited land emerged in the region, for example, the Angres of Kolaba and the Savants of Sawantwadi. The period of the Angres, who controlled the naval power of the Marathas, lasted for nearly 150 years from 1690 to 1840. Kanjohi Angre was the 'Sarkhel' or the admiral of the Maratha fleet in 1698, which controlled the Konkan coast from Bombay to Malabar (Meyer, Burn, Cotton, & Risley, 1909). They occupied Karanja Island in 1737. Most of the shilotris or embankments in Uran are said to have been built between 1755 and 1780 under the Angrias by wealthy men of high status or rank, who undertook to make the embankments and maintain them on special terms.

Impact of Colonial Rule in North Konkan

Between the years 1803 and 1827 the framework of the Bombay Presidency took shape. The Konkan formed one of the five territorial divisions of the Bombay Presidency, the others being the Deccan, the Karnatak, Gujarat, and Sind. In 1817 Thana was made the headquarters of North Konkan, probably due to its location being strategic for access to the Deccan. In 1833 the region was divided into the two collectorates of Thana and Ratnagiri. Kolaba was added at the end of the Angres hold in 1840, made a sub-collectorate of Thana in 1863, and an independent Collectorate in 1869. The Konkan Division finally included the town and island of Bombay, the four districts of Thana, Kolaba, Kanara, Ratnagiri and the three Native States of Jawhar, Janjira, and Sawantwadi.

Karanja Island initially constituted an administrative sub-division of Salsette taluka and a customs division of Thana District in the Bombay Presidency that contained the three ports of Mora, Karanja, and Sheva (Hunter, 1886). The island was separated from Salsette in 1861 and the original revenue settlement was undertaken in 1865 prior to the transfer of Uran sub-division to Panvel. It was placed under Panvel vide Government Resolution 456 dated 3rd February 1865 (Bombay Government, 1882) and constituted a sub-division (petha) of 22 villages and one town, inclusive of three ports. The importance of Panvel arose first from its position as a receiving and forwarding port from Bombay to the Deccan and vice versa, and dates from a very long time back. Though the opening of the railway in 1856 lessened

its importance, it continued to play a fairly important role even later. The division was officially named Uran in 1881-82 by the British. Panvel and Uran mahal were a part of Thane district till 1883 when they were transferred to Kolaba district.

The subsequent promotion of private property and the evolution of the revenue system were based on the dualistic categorisation (Whitehead, 2010) of lands into productive and unproductive waste (varkas) arising from a conceptual disjuncture created between field and forest, caste and tribe. The concept of wasteland was thus introduced that referred to any land put to 'unproductive use', held in common or left idle. Several indigenous forms of land tenure2 in North Konkan were eliminated with the introduction of the British survey and the greater part of the Bombay Presidency was held on the ryotwari system. In the ryotwari system land was occupied by cultivators who paid their revenues directly to the government (GOI, 1908). This was generally held to be more equitable than the zamindari system used in other provinces such as Bengal. However, Uran, Alibag and Pen talukas had an extremely skewed distribution of land ownership as they had mostly shilotri (embankment) lands3. Given the time and labour required to reclaim the salt marsh and make it fit for paddy cultivation the reclaimers were usually wealthy investors. They had a superior status and were permitted to let out the lands and levy a charge to meet the costs of maintaining the embankment (Baden-Powell, 1892).

From 1835-54 rentals were reduced and there was considerable expansion in agriculture. Given the conditions in the area and the lack of irrigation facilities, the region had very few double-cropped lands. The predominant crop in the region was rice grown on the lowlands along the coast and in terraced rice lands further inland, with millets grown on higher ground. Sweet rice land was always ploughed and the seedlings grown in a plot or seed-bed that had undergone "rab" treatment which consisted of burning cow-dung, leaves, branches and grass, that had been spread over the plot and dried during the summer. This is a practice that is seen in the region even today, necessitating a close relationship between rice lands, meadow and forest. Salt rice lands (kharapat) were neither "rabed" nor ploughed, but the rice grown on saline land did not fetch as high a price or yield as much as the sweet rice (Bombay Government, 1925). The millets - nachni, vari, til, urid, tur, kurasni and harik - grown in the varkas lands were only grown for home consumption. These were generally grown as second crops after rice in lands with sufficient natural moisture. Coconut, mango, areca-nut and betel leaf were grown on the garden lands.

Beside its rice crop, which was of considerable value, the two special exports of Karanja Island were salt, mahua and date liquor. Export of dried fish, especially to Karjat taluka was another important source of income. The supply of fresh fish for the market of Bombay and of dried fish for the Deccan mainly supported the Koli population. The extraction of oil from sesamum, coconut, and groundnut, and the preparation of coconut fibre, also supported many families. There were 19 mahua distilleries on the island, all owned by Parsis, that relied on flowers brought through

Bombay from the Panch Mahals. The chief imports through Karanja, Mora and Sheve were firewood, mowra (mahua) flowers and dates, which were used in the manufacture of country liquor. Uran also had six cotton looms, three hand ginning machines and some oil-presses. The island was also a source of entertainment for sportsmen from Bombay who visited the island almost every day for the snipe and duck that were found in plenty in the area. The town of Uran became a centre with several wealthy Muslim and Marwari traders and businessmen. Many of them grew rich through the trade of salt, liquor and paddy and owned vast tracts of land.

Other important sources of income in the region in the 19th century were sand, stone quarrying and salt making. Soil, weather and other conditions being ideal in coastal North Konkan for the production of salt, this activity also flourished. Salt production through evaporation provided considerable employment in the post-monsoon season, when many of the cultivators were not engaged in agriculture. It was produced in large quantities in Pen and Panvel talukas with the Karanja division constituting about 3000 acres. The officers who oversaw the salt works were stationed at the village of Uran (Bombay State, 1908). The British government soon established a complete monopoly over all salt production and brought in repressive salt laws. Older respondents who had worked on salt pans in the study area recall how supervisors ensured that the baskets used to carry salt were washed out at the end of the day so that the labourers could not carry away a single grain for personal use or private gain. Salt-pans were gradually closed between 1858 and 1872 to ensure a market for salt produced in Britain. About two-thirds of the area formerly devoted to salt-making in the district was brought under paddy cultivation. More than 14,000 acres in Kolaba District were reclaimed in this way (Bombay State, 1908), leading to the in-migration of many Agri and some Brahman families in the middle of the nineteenth century. The reclamation of saline land was encouraged by no revenue being levied for the first ten years, and full revenue only after thirty years. Advances were also made to cultivators under the Land Improvement and Agriculturists' Loan Acts.

The proximity to Bombay also led to a growing demand for grass from the grasslands of Uran as well as other uplands in the periphery of the city. Grass could be shipped from almost every point on the creeks or near the coast where it could be carted and several smaller ports came into existence to support this trade. In Uran taluka, Sheva evolved as a minor port solely for the sale of grass. The British revenue system had been founded on Locke's theory (Whitehead, 2010) that "land that is left wholly to nature, that hath no improvement of pasturage, tillage, or planting, is called, as indeed it is, waste; and we shall find the benefit of it amount to little more than nothing."(Locke 1971:13 quoted in Whitehead, 2010). The peasants obviously disagreed with – or to use the popular explanation for peasant behaviour – were too uneducated to follow British logic for they began converting rice land into meadow. This practice, first noticed by the British in 1861, was found to continue at the time of the first revenue settlement.

The grasslands then constituted a new target for appropriation. Entrepreneurs and traders from Bombay bought up most of the land from the original land holders to whom it had been leased at especially low rates for rice cultivation. The impoverished hinterlands – mostly grass and orchard uplands – were thus taken over by wealthy traders and businessmen in Bombay. The expansion of the city and escalating land prices created opportunities for speculation and investment that many of the businessmen used to expand their base for capital accumulation from fairly early in the city's evolution. The evolution of legal tenets and systems to aid in the development of land as private property has been an integral part of this process of ensuring an expanding base for capital accumulation by the elite. The Bombay Land Revenue Act, passed in 1879, determined the land rights of the citizens. According to this act the revenue was to be paid in cash directly to the government. The land could be confiscated by the government or the usurer if the situation so demanded. Land could be sold or leased out and the new system led to an increase in the rents for leased lands with landlords increasing their share of the produce and also demanding the addition of straw bundles with the grain given as payments in kind (Bombay Government, 1892).

Thus, the areas in the immediate periphery of Bombay – Salsette, Uran, Thane, Bhiwandi, Kalyan and Vasai - were converted into a source region (Figure 2) for food and other necessary supplies that included water, fodder, fuel, timber, sand, and bricks. The upland dry crops disappeared in many villages in Uran and other areas in the immediate periphery. Their place as food grains was taken by the coarser kinds of rice grown in salt lands. Forage and mango, for which there was increasing demand in the city (Bombay Government, 1892), replaced upland dry crops. Apart from reducing the nutritional base of the local communities, their supportive web of relationships was also broken. The tribals (adivasis) came close to starvation in the post-monsoon season as lands that were traditionally leased to them for the cultivation of grains, pulses and millets were converted to grasslands and orchards (Sinclair, 1885). This was in large part influenced by the extension of railways that had made the rest of the country customers for the fruit. Mango also began to replace the coconut, as they brought higher returns and could be grown on either warkas or rabi lands, which had some exposure to the sea breeze. Thus, the symbiotic relationship between urban centres and the hinterland that led to livelihood generation in the periphery was broken and widespread impoverishment and exploitation was seen.

The Last Phase of Colonial Rule

The significance of Bombay changed dramatically with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which facilitated the development of foreign shipping that exploited its newfound proximity to Europe (Patel, 2006). The city was spatially organized around the port and functioned as the central node between the hinterland and England by strategically linking rail-lines and shipping routes with areas demarcated to serve the functions of trade, storage and distribution (Grant & Nijman, 2002). Extraction of raw materials and revenues from the hinterland was thus rapidly intensified in the late 19th and early

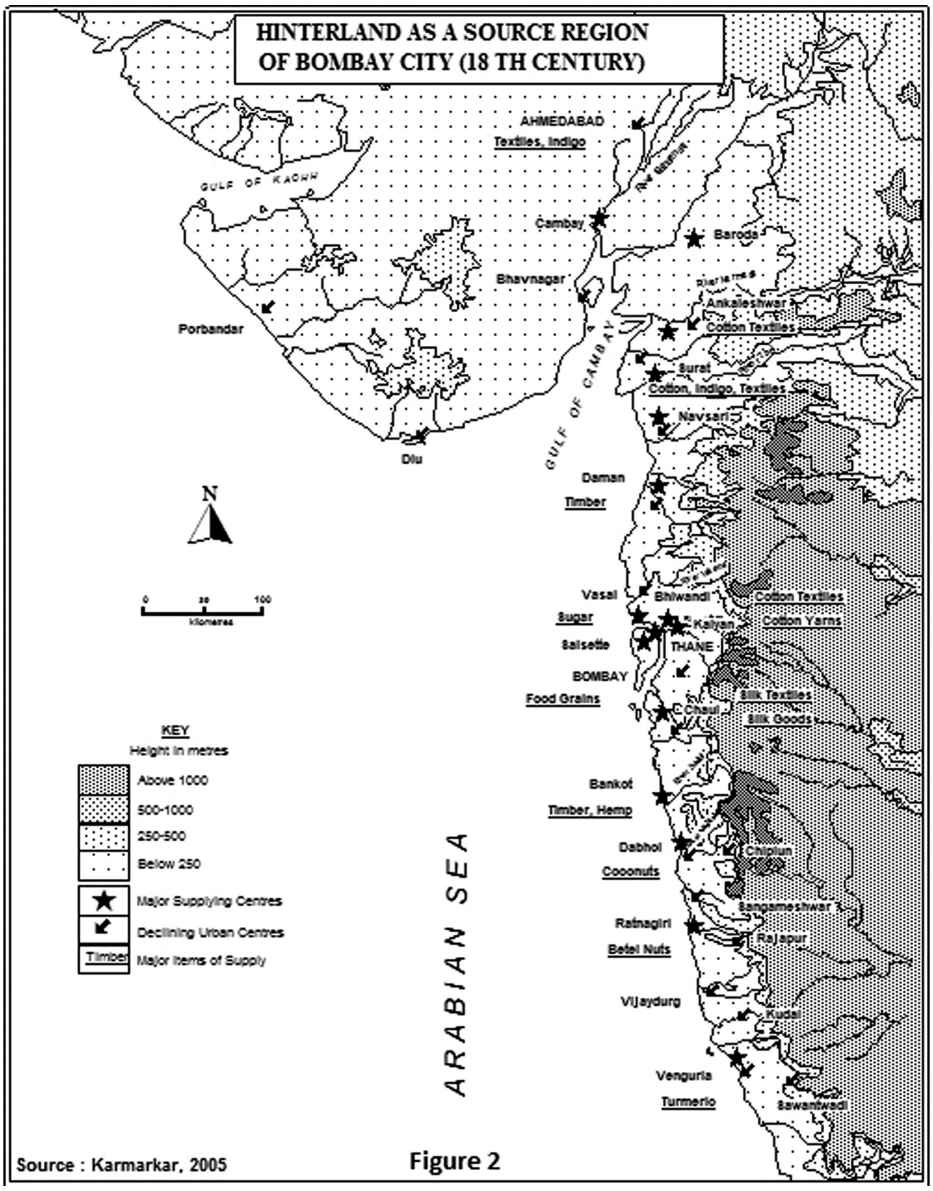


Figure 2

20th centuries. As the hinterland became organized and connected, the further development of towns and cities ensued, albeit in an unequal manner (Patel & Deb, 1995). Railway stations became significant points and the role of river ports such as Thane, Kalyan, Vasai, Bhayandar and Agashi lost their importance (Phadke, 1982). Konkan ports such as Ulwa, Mora, and Karanja continued to be important as ports subsidiary to Bombay since the road and railway facilities could not be adequately developed there. New jetties such as Dharamtar, Mandva and Rewas came up in

the 1860s to meet the demand for supplies to Bombay (Phadke, 1982). Bombay's domination over the hinterland increased as the existing ports, towns and cities became mere supply and revenue collection centres, losing their independent social, economic and diversified resource base. The port city served British interests at the cost of the associated hinterlands, indigenous inland cities and oceanic networks (Das Gupta, 1987).

By 1920 Uran was no longer quite an island, the upper part of Karanja creek having been filled up, and the road from Uran to Panvel having no need for the wooden bridge by which it formerly crossed the creek at Jasai (Bombay Government, 1925). The landlords had been pressing their claims to rent and had used several coercive means to extract as much as they could of the share of the crops. The peasant struggle against tenancy that began in 1920 brought realisation that conditions were not happy for the villagers of the region (Thakur, 2007). The Agri peasants' discontent against the excesses of the landlords (the savkars, pandharpeshes, and khots) began to be seen with the demand of first claim on the land as tillers.

During 1929-30 the British attempted to implement a law preventing peasants from accessing forests, cutting trees and extracting natural resources. The consequences of this led to a a historic struggle by Chirner peasants – the local tribals, adivasi thakurs, Brahmins, Agris, Kolis, Kumbhars (potters), Sonars (goldsmiths), and other service castes – dependent on the forest for their livelihoods and survival. The struggle culminated in a confrontation between the Birtish police and peasants in September 1930 when 13 people were killed in firing and lathi charge by the police. The depression of the 1930s added to the plight of peasants due to a fall in the prices of agricultural products and created further grounds for peasants' and workers' agitations in the years to follow. Inter and intra-village clashes were seen between peasants employed by the savkar and those opposing them. The severe discontent that was simmering among the tenant farmers in the Konkan peaked sharply with the active involvement of Ambedkar and several other leaders. The peasants went on strike in Vashi of Pen taluka (1922-1925), in Chari of Alibag taluka (1932-1937), and in Bhendkhal of Uran taluka (1939-1943). The struggle continued until Independence when the struggle for land reforms took shape.

Conclusion

At the time of Independence this was an extremely productive region that had been formed through the sweat and blood of generations of people. A wide network of interaction between primary, secondary and tertiary hinterlands and the related movements of communities from different regions led to its unique socio-economic composition. The caste society of this region was and still is peculiar to the Northern Konkan region, particularly in the Pen, Alibag, Uran and Panvel talukas, where Agris are the highest in number and proportion. Occupational differentiation appears to be primarily based on the ecology of the region and the inhabitants' evolving material conditions. The history of the region depicts the complex array of factors that led to its constantly changing socio-cultural and ethnic profile. It brings one to realise, as Thapar (2002) points out,

how the game of identity politics and any claim based on 'who was there first' has no historical validity.

The communities of this region deserved redress for the injustices and exploitation they had faced over centuries. Additionally, past investments had created a region capable of contributing immensely to the productive base of the regional state and nation. Independence marked a phase when the nation could choose to build on these resources and re-establish functional and symbiotic relationships between urban and rural spaces for regional development. However, the lack of value given in the post-Independence period to the history of people-environment relationships here is clear from the dismissive description of the region as a 'common, undeveloped expanse...which was once a marshy sanctuary to salt pans and paddy fields' (CIDCO, 2012) that informs the development trajectory of this region today.

I sincerely thank Swapna Banerjee-Guha for suggesting the topic, giving direction and shape to this article through ongoing discussions and guidance.

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Endnotes

1 The name 'Bombay' is used in the text while discussing events and processes as they occurred up to 1996. Thereafter 'Mumbai' is used as the name of the city was officially changed in that year.

2 These included the dhep or lump, the kas or estate, the nangarbandi or plough system, the suti or special remission settlement, and the pandharpesha or high-class villager's settlement (Choksey, 1960). The suti tenure was common and the most important in the North Konkan and was similar to the mirasi, a term used to indicate any kind of hereditary right (Baden-Powell, 1892).

3 These are also called khars or kharlands which are plots reclaimed from the sea

Rekha Mammen
Faculty
Centre for Community Organisation and Development Practice
School of Social Work, TISS
Mumbai
Email: r_mammen@tiss.edu
rrkem@yahoo.com