

WHY CAN'T PUBLIC MONEY BE USED FOR PUBLIC SPACES?

BMC Discourages Residents Adopting Open Spaces From Using Funds Of Elected Reps

Clara Lewis | TNN

● In France, parks in various towns bear a plaque that says the safety and security of every visitor is the direct responsibility of the town's mayor.
● Last November in the US, mayors across the country collectively petitioned President Barack Obama to use the Land and Water Conservation Fund for urban parks and open spaces. Their goal: 'everyone in America should live within a short walk of a park that is clean, safe and vibrant.'

It's a raging debate in Mumbai. Why shouldn't more public money go into protecting and developing reserved open spaces—namely parks, gardens, recreation grounds and playgrounds?

The BMC is partial to the caretaker policy, which seeks to allow private parties to maintain open spaces as long as the private group gets a portion of the space to commercially exploit. If the BMC allows a citizens' group to adopt an open space—in which no commercial exploitation occurs—then it wants to insist that no MLA or MP funds go into the venture.

However, activists question this dichotomy of not allowing public funds to be used for public spaces. After all, the Carter Road promenade was restored with help from Shabana Azmi's MPLAD funds, while the Juhu beach revamp was aided by both Azmi's and Hema Malini's MPLAD funds.

There is also a track record of citizens' groups successfully maintaining open spaces. When the state wanted to develop and maintain Cross Maidan, it turned to the Organization for Verdant Ambience and Land (Oval) Trust, which had earlier successfully restored Oval Maidan, a Grade I heritage ground. "Rope in local stakeholders and form a partnership with residents. Money must come from the civic budget," says Nayana Kathapalia, trustee, Oval Trust.

Citispac, an NGO that for two decades has been fighting to preserve open spaces, has also emphasized civic funding and people's participation. The NGO had made the first comprehensive attempt to research and locate reserved open spaces in the city and found approximately 940 acres of



KICKING AROUND ON A DUSTY GROUND: Children play on a poorly maintained field hemmed in by shanties and garbage in the northwestern suburbs

such spaces. At a rate of Rs 11 lakh per acre, Citispac had calculated that it would not cost the BMC more than Rs 103.4 crore to develop and maintain these spaces during the first year such a project was taken up. "The expenditure in subsequent years would reduce," said a Citispac activist.

A more detailed documentation of reserved open spaces in the city, conducted over the past year by architect P K Das's team, revealed there are 4,695 acres of reserved open spaces in the city and 1,310 of them are encroached.

The BMC takes umbrage when citizens who have adopted a garden or park approach a local elected representative for funds. "The circular which does not allow the MP or MLA fund to be used for open spaces still stands," said Subhash Karvande, deputy municipal

commissioner, in charge of gardens. The use of civic corporator funds are also discouraged.

Activists argue that if an elected representative's funds can be spent on toilets, gutters and paver

Playgrounds must not be given to private parties, as the public will then not have access to them at all times, says environmentalist Samir Mehta

blocks, why can't they be used for open spaces. "Not everyone can travel to Juhu beach or the Gateway everyday. Open spaces are a fundamental right and improve quality of life. Our elected representatives must be allowed to fund

these projects," said an activist from Mahakali Caves, Andheri (East). The local ALM got into trouble with the BMC for asking local MLA and minister Suresh Shetty for funds to maintain the Meenatai Thackeray garden.

Hansel D'Souza, president, Juhu Citizens' Welfare Group, said citizens struggled and fought to save the beach and six gardens. "Now we have white elephants. The maintenance of one garden costs approximately Rs 50,000 a month. How do we raise the money every time?" he asked. Citizens pay taxes to the BMC. "By not providing funds, the BMC is shirking its responsibility," he said.

Activists alleged that the BMC behaves thus to ensure that open spaces are given on a platter to private parties for exploitation.

"When the BMC acquires a re-

served open space, it gives TDR to the owner. It then declares that it can't maintain the space and so gives it to a private caretaker. The city loses in two ways—more construction and zero open space," says RTI activist Amil Galgali. "When the civic body acquires an open space it must fund its development and maintenance. Local residents and NGOs are the best security guards, so they must be made stakeholders."

Private funds can be used to maintain public spaces, as long as no exploitation results and residents are involved. For example, a company can fund maintenance while locals help with upkeep. When old areas are taken up for redevelopment, one-third can be reserved for open spaces subsidized by luxury homes and commercial complexes in the area.

A CHILDHOOD LOST TO COUCH

A dearth of grounds has circumscribed children's play time to computer games and TV. With this, their mental space for original thinking is shrinking as well



Cooped-Up Development

● Open spaces are vital to a child's development. They provide a child with an outlet for physical energy, thus contributing to the overall well-being
● They expand a person's thought and actions, and thus prove to be stress-busters
● Green spaces and water bodies have a mitigating effect on anxiety disorders, medically unexplained physical symptoms and depression

DANGEROUS SPORT: These kids have no option but to play on the road

Madhavi Rajadhyaksha | TNN

The changing nature of parental tussles with their school-going children in Mumbai homes is perhaps the most telling indicator of how open spaces, or rather the lack of them, have altered the quality of life for most Mumbaiers. Till a decade ago, children would fight for a few more hours of play time outdoors. Today, however, parents have to literally struggle to get their children out of the couch and into the compound.

Health experts believe the disappearing parks and playgrounds are redefining growing up for GenNext. "Children must have outdoor facilities to run about and play for their normal growth,"

'Studies suggest that anxiety disorders, unexplained physical symptoms and depressive disorders reduce when there are open spaces'

says Dr Y Amdekar, paediatrician and medical director of Wadia hospital. He explains that outdoor play equips children not only with physical exercise, which contributes to overall well-being, but also teaches them several behavioural aspects such as interacting with nature, developing friendships and becoming independent. "A sedentary childhood adversely affects the mental faculties of children. With video games and television, for instance, children merely use their reflexes rather than their thinking prowess," he says.

The couped-up existence affects adults as well. Lolling around in a park, jogging along the seaside or picnicking in a forest could be the most effective balm for Mumbaiers' collective angst, es-

calating stress and pent-up frustration, believe mental health experts who say open spaces are known to expand the horizon of people's thought and actions.

Shankar Das, chairperson of the Centre for Health Policy, Planning and Management at TISS, says there is an increasing body of empirical evidence in recent years that demonstrates that open space and natural environment can promote mental health and relief from stress. "Access to outdoor spaces and open air recreation offers respite from routine activities and causes the mind and body to relax. Research studies suggest that anxiety disorders, medically unexplained physical symptoms and depressive disorders reduce when there are open and green spaces near the patients' homes," he says.

Open spaces are vital to citizens' survival as the mind, body and nature are all closely interconnected. "Space is suggestive of your own area of freedom. People who stay in areas with the most open space are likely to have an open view of their life and their futures," says Shubhangi Parkar, psychiatrist at KEM Hospital. She believes Mumbaiers who are forced to live a four-walled existence are unconsciously always trying to create space for themselves. "This keeps the mind constantly agitated. Mumbaiers often avoid going into communities which limits their interactions as well," she says.

Das believes policy makers and urban planners need greater inclination and motivation to work towards creating and maintaining such spaces. "Such spaces are even more valuable in terms nurturing the mind, body and soul in a densely populated city like Mumbai."

It's absolutely vital to have access to open spaces as it puts one in tune with nature. The vastness of nature has the capacity to put one's problems and thoughts in perspective. Open spaces thus have several benefits, starting with creating self-awareness, sensitivity to one's thoughts, awareness of others, opening up one's mind and thought, thus promoting a sense of overall well-being. It is essential for Mumbaiers to reclaim access to spaces they have or create opportunities wherever they can. Bring back picnics or encourage children to go out and play

Shamsah Sonawalla | PSYCHIATRIST, JASLOK HOSPITAL

Outdoor or open spaces clearly have benefits for children. Apart from improving physical activity and hence fitness, they reduce the risk of obesity. Physical activity is also a good stress-buster and helps children improve their social skills and interaction abilities with peers. A healthy body always helps to have a healthy mind. Studies have shown that outdoor physical ability helps concentration and cognitive skills in children

Dr Indu Khosla | PAEDIATRICIAN

FEELING BLUE, NOT GREEN

Madhavi Rajadhyaksha | TNN

It is not for nothing that open spaces are called a city's lungs. Parks, water fronts and mangroves determine pretty much all of a city dweller's health and well-being. The quality of open spaces, after all, determines the purity of air citizens breathe, defines play activities their children indulge in, affects the incidence of infectious diseases as well sets the benchmark for citizens' physical activity.

With open spaces in Mumbai rapidly shrinking, Mumbaiers, though, experience more of the ill-effects of these spaces than gains.

Chest physician Salil Bendre of the Environmental Medical Association of India puts it simply. "An environment replete with plants and trees enables air (oxygen) flow and makes it easier for people to breathe. However, overcrowding in terms of concretization and construction of infrastructure projects in the city prevents the natural flow of air."

Not surprisingly, his clinic in Andheri, like most other neighbourhood centres, sees a steady flow of wheezing children and asthmatic Mumbaiers. Several connect the increasing incidence of respiratory problems such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder (COPD) and asthmatic bronchitis to the shrinking green environs.

Doctors believe that another common complaint among Mumbaiers—that of creaky bones and



RIGHT WAY TO HEALTH: Laughter clubs could gain from greener precincts

Down In The Dumps

WHO estimated environmental burden of diseases in India:

- An average Indian loses roughly 14 days of their life per year (disability-adjusted life year) due problems of water, sanitation and hygiene caused by unempt water bodies
- Diarrhoea, respiratory infections, malaria and other vector-borne diseases, road traffic injuries (due to lack of jogging and walking tracks) and neopsychiatric disorders are among the leading diseases due to environmental burden
- Nearly 86 % of annual deaths are due to diarrhoea related to the lack of water sanitation and hygiene

(Source: World Health Organization)

aching joints—would be significantly mitigated if they were to get sunlight on open grounds, dai-

ly, a seeming luxury in a city with over 20,000 persons packed into every square kilometre.

Today we have a situation where doctors tell Mumbaiers to go out, take a walk or citizens themselves are becoming more aware about the benefits of being active, but there is no space. Green spaces are important as they boost the overall well-being of people besides absorbing vehicular pollution

Rohini Chowdhury | INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ENVIRONMENTAL MEDICINE, KASTURBA HOSPITAL

Physician Hemant Thacker of Bhatia and Jaslok hospitals explains that open spaces covered with greenery boost the environmental health of a city, but points out that much of Mumbai's grounds and parks that haven't been utilized appropriately are reduced to dumps and garbage mounds, which adversely affects the health of citizens. "They become breeding grounds for mosquitoes, rats and termites, and contribute to the slush and muck flooding during the rain," he says. The effect was played out during the July 2005 deluge when the city was submerged in 944 mm of rain in a single day. The outbreak of infectious dis-

Today, we in Mumbai are in a sorry situation where we lack environmental common sense due to which most of our water bodies are poisoned with heavy metals. These metals are hazardous; lead for instance causes high blood pressure, heart disease, aggressiveness and intellectual backwardness. Open spaces would enable Mumbaiers to get away from their stress

Dr Altaf Patel | PHYSICIAN, JASLOK HOSPITAL

eases such as leptospirosis spread by rats and mosquito-caused dengue and malaria claimed hundreds of Mumbaiers in its wake. Open spaces then have a collateral health impact. The World Health Organization lists diarrhoea, lower respiratory infections, other intentional injuries, road traffic injuries and malaria as the top five diseases with the largest environmental contribution. Underlining the need for greening Mumbai, tree lover and gynaecologist Dr Anahita Pundole says the ability to sit and inhale in a park adds several years to one's life. "Some moments in a park are the best form of rejuvenation."

TOI Interactive 'WE, THE CITIZENS, SHOULD FACE THESE PROBLEMS TOGETHER & FIGHT AGAINST THE FORCES THAT THREATEN OUR OPEN SPACES'

Q. Should citizens be allowed to use public funds for open spaces?

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Yesterday we asked if Mumbai is losing its open spaces to greed. Here are a few of your responses:

It's a shame that Mumbai has only seven public swimming pools, which works out to one pool for more than 15 lakh people. Only the rich can enjoy the luxury of swimming in private club pools. Every municipal ward in Mumbai must have at least two small pools for the public. A water shortage cannot be cited as an excuse for not having enough swimming pools for the public. In Goa, even with an acute water shortage,

small hotels run over 100 small swimming pools, with recycled well water, along the 4km Baga-Calangute-Candolim stretch. — Robert Castellino

It's known to every Mumbaier that open spaces are a luxury for them. They are a thing of the past. With more and more new projects coming up, one can hardly see any space left in the city. If this is not the greed of builders, then what

is? They care two hoots about the common Mumbaier, who craves for an open space in which he or she can walk or run. They also don't care about children, who don't have places to play. — Ritwika Mutsuddi

In recent years, the BMC has become a byword for giving away space to anyone if the price is right. Even the state government machinery has encouraged people to do anything they want anywhere they want. — Richard Dias, Chembur

Like it or not, greed is tightening its grip as encroachment takes public lands away from us, the citizens of Mumbai. Builders, vendors and slum dwellers all mercilessly engulf open spaces. The lack of efficient management by the BMC only worsens the crisis. I believe we, the citizens, should face these problems together and fight against the forces that threaten our open spaces. We should be proud of our public lands and strive to protect them for the future. — Rushi Tawade