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IS HERITAGE
A BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY?

THE BOMBAY **HERITAGE WALKS**

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With modest beginnings as a remote archipelago, Mumbai has seen a meteoric rise to become the commercial capital of India. Aided primarily by its establishment as a major British naval base and trading port in the late 19th century, the city's growth was spurred by consequential rise in commerce and industrialisation. Mumbai, today, is a collage of Colonial images entwined with contemporary advance – a reality that reflects the multiple conflicts of space, needs and accessibility faced by its burgeoning populace (Fig. 1). It is a city, clearly, with two conflicting and diametrically opposite worlds thrown in together. Although gifted with a natural harbour it was the industry and toil of the people that evolved it from a straggling group of islands into the megalopolis it now is.

Interestingly it was this group of islands that were summarily ignored during the initial trading forays of the region with other prominent centres such as Persia, Rome and China. The seven islands were inhabited since the Stone Age but not much physical evidence of maritime trade existed during that period. This slumber continued for several centuries while neighbouring ports traded with western countries from several centuries before the Christian era. It only rose briefly from this deep inertia in the 13th century post-occupation by a local king and slid back to its inert state when relegated to being a mere lookout post by the Sultans of Gujarat who occupied the region in the 14th century. The rise of the Islamic Empire, with sacking of Constantinople in 1453, created a barrier in the overland route (between Europe and Asia) resolved with the discovery of the all sea route to India by Vasco da Gama in 1498. This led to the advent of the Portuguese into the region, who took over the Islands from the Sultans in 1534 (Fig. 2).

Unfortunately due to lack of administrative capability and religious intolerance it was difficult for trade to flourish under Portuguese rule. A sad trade mainly confined to sale of dried fish, salt and coconuts in small quantities to neighbouring coast towns, existed at that time with just the rudimentary form of a port and fortification established. However, the activity generated enough interest to attract other European colonists. The 16th century marked the growth of monopolistic trading organisations formed under Royal Charters and thus the British East India Company (EIC) made its first appearance on the stage of history.

Initially the EIC struggled to cope with the duties vested in it plagued with natural misfortunes and the lack of a viable exchange for trading in spices. It resolved this issue by undertaking selling of Indian textiles in the East Indies and to use the profit to obtain spices, but faced opposition from the reigning Sultans of Gujarat, guided by the Portuguese. It led to the invasion and eventual defeat of the Portuguese fleet in 1612. But still Bombay continued in its relatively inert state.



Fig.1



Fig.2

Fig.1: The architecture of Mumbai reflects these very conflicts, when the old clashes with the new. Seen in this photograph is the listed neo-gothic High Court building and the Art Deco cinema in the foreground, while towering behind is the multi-storey Stock Exchange building. The dockyard is visible in the distance. (© Bombay Heritage Walks)

Fig.2: Map of the 7 Islands of Bombay. This was the topography of the city before it was welded through a series of reclamations into the shape that it now is.

It was ultimately a marriage, quite literally, between the British and the Portuguese that led to the handing over of the islands to the EIC. Thus Bombay passed as dowry through a marriage treaty signed when Princess Catharine of Braganza, sister of the King of Portugal, married Prince Charles II of England. It was then leased to the EIC as a loan in 1668. Once the handing over of Bombay was complete, preparations began to set it up as an international trading port. Construction commenced with building of a Custom House, a warehouse and a mole capable of berthing small ships. In 1715 EIC



Fig.3



Fig.4

directors decided to make Bombay the first port in India and the Company's ships sailing from Madras and Bengal were advised to call at Bombay.

With the integration of India under the direct rule of the British Crown in 1858, Bombay too underwent massive structuring. The Bombay Port Trust was formed in 1873, which was handicapped from the beginning by lack of funds. Their only property consisted of a sprinkling of lighthouses, 2 light vessels, 9 pilot boats, 3 signal stations and a boat shed. Further impetus to the development of the city was provided due to the following factors:

- 1) The 1869 opening of Suez Canal – the world's turnstile
- 2) The 1861 to 1865 outbreak of American Civil war that led to a boom in cotton trade from Bombay, which saw the establishment of several mills. With the founding of mills was ushered Bombay's change from a fishing village to a military outpost to a major trading centre.
- 3) Establishment of railway communication in 1853.

It is a recognised fact that ports are gateway cities, the emporia of the region and a result of this is reflected in their development and rise. Such was the case even for Bombay that saw the import of several architectural styles. Foreign terms such as "neo-classical" and "Victorian Gothic" became common place and blended well with vernacular detailing, leading to an interesting confluence (Figs.3 & 4).

Fig.3: Amongst many additions to the skyline of Bombay were the ones along the waterfront. Like most international ports, such as Liverpool and New York, it was this view from the sea that revealed the city in its true sense. Seen in this photograph is the entrance portal to the city or the Gateway of India with the Taj Mahal Hotel in the background. (© Bombay Heritage Walks)

Fig.4: Architectural imports in the form of Art Deco also made its appearance in Bombay, which was then modified to suit local needs. This style gained so much popularity that the city has the 2nd largest collection of Art Deco buildings in the world. (© Bombay Heritage Walks)

The Age of Steam in the late 19th century signalled the decline of the Indian ship building industry. Saturation of the Mumbai Port also led to the shifting of operations to a sister port developed across the harbour. This released a huge chunk of port land which was now available for an already congested city. Currently the Mumbai Port Trust owns over 1,800 acres of land, which includes 28 kilometres of waterfront area. Realising the potential of this property, the State Government set up a task force to examine the best possible distribution and landuse of this area. Studies suggested that de-industrialisation of the city and stoppage of port-related activities call for changes in the use of the Port Trust land. The Port Trust, however, disputes this claim and contends that it plans to undertake expansion of port activities, dismissing the decline of Mumbai Port. Whether on the decline or not, Mumbai's trading days were far from over and it re-evolved as a business hub, with the establishment of the first Stock Exchange in Asia. Gradually architectural gems, developed as a result of trading and related activities, made way for modern buildings (Fig.5).

Fig.5: Present map of the city with an overlay of the older 7 Islands. (© Bombay Heritage Walks)

In 1990, the State Government of Maharashtra introduced, what was hailed as 'path-breaking' draft regulations (under Mumbai's Development Control Rules) intended to protect over 600 heritage sites.¹ The city's primary Planning Authority in 1992, constituted an Advisory Committee for Urban Heritage Conservation to oversee all development proposals relating to the listed sites. In 1995, the Heritage Regulations for Greater Mumbai were formally gazetted as law – the first of its kind in India. Periodic seminars by Non-Government organisations (NGOs) and pressure groups provided a useful forum for public discussions and interaction with decision-makers on heritage and planning issues. Sustained focus by the print and electronic media since the mid-1990s as well as efforts of NGOs aided a renewed public awareness about the city's built heritage and the need for its preservation.

A heightened consciousness about their heritage environs resulted in the formulation of many welfare associations. Kala Ghoda Association (KGA) was one such non-profit organisation formed to physically upgrade public spaces and buildings in the historic art district. They also initiated an Arts Festival in 1999, focussed primarily to showcase one of the most beautiful Victorian promenades in the city and to display local talent with this setting as the backdrop. It was during this first festival in February 1999² that we volunteered to lead open-to-public heritage walks. In addition to this we were already working on several urban improvement and preservation projects. The walks drew large crowds comprising locals as well as visitors. It was then that we realised that a public movement such as this was long overdue in Mumbai and a potential business opportunity for us as well. There was much public enthusiasm on discovering the real essence of Mumbai. Buoyed by the overwhelmingly positive reactions from participants, we formulated 'THE BOMBAY HERITAGE WALKS (BHW)' group on April 18th 1999 – also World Heritage Day (Fig.6).

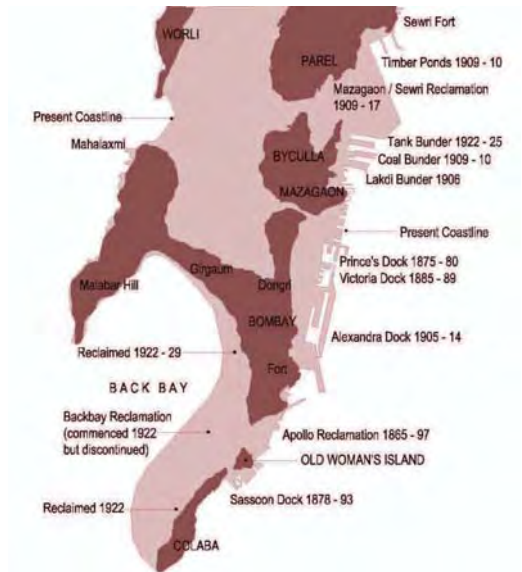


Fig.5

Notes

1. Listed heritage sites include buildings, public parks, sea-fronts and precincts.
2. Organised for the Kala Ghoda Association, in alliance with **R. Mehrotra** & **S. Dwivedi** to coincide with the release of their book 'FORT WALKS' during the Arts Festival.

In the initial years, BHW comprised of a team of architects who organised and conducted the heritage walks (Figs.7 & 8). People were taken on discovery walks in (what were then) little known heritage precincts all over the city. We covered a variety of locales from a holy Hindu pilgrimage centre to an early 20th century Edwardian neo-classical business district. It was the very first time that citizens and visitors were invited to explore the city's architecture and exposed to terms like 'Bombay Gothic,' 'Indo-Saracenic' and 'Art Deco.' Beginning with the encapsulated history of Mumbai's kaleidoscopic past, the tour would continue with the introduction of the walk route and heritage area to be covered. Each building of historic or architectural merit was then pointed out en route, while highlighting any special cultural or social anecdotes. Archival images were also part of the tour. Architectural styles, construction materials and methods, planning elements, ornamental details as well as any conservation efforts were explained to the participants. Walkers were encouraged to share their views as well and keepsake brochures were given to each participant.

Fig.6: Participants on a heritage walk at the historic Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai (Kala Ghoda Art Festival, February 08) (© Bombay Heritage Walks)

Fig.7: Tasks involved establishing a Walk Route (©Bombay Heritage Walks)

Fig.8: Components of each heritage walk presentation (© Bombay Heritage Walks)

Prior to introducing any new route, we undertook meticulous site-surveys and documentation, interviews with occupants, archival research and prearranged permissions for public entry – to name a few of the many tasks. Media support meant free listings for BHW in leading dailies and inexpensive tours (with discounts for students) translated into increasing popularity and enthusiastic community participation. For the first time ever in Mumbai, public entry was permitted into many otherwise off-limits Government-controlled heritage properties like the administrative wing of the Victoria Terminus and the 1800s Gothic-style State Police Headquarters.



Fig.6



Fig.9

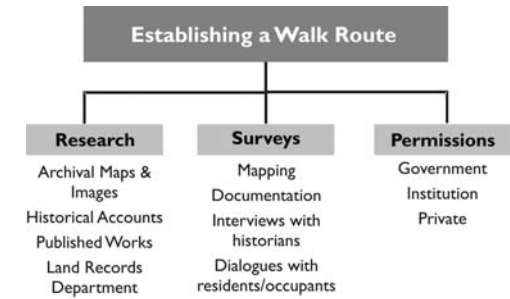


Fig.7



Fig.8

To encourage public participation, private homeowners in residential enclaves proudly opened up their heritage homes. Mumbai residents were finally waking up to the fact their city had so much history and architecture to be proud of! (Fig.9).

*Fig.9: Participants on a heritage walk in Khotachiwadi, a vernacular Portuguese influence historic district in Mumbai (October 07)
(© Bombay Heritage Walks)*

BHW allied with a number of organisations to arrange unique free-of-cost heritage walks – Dockyard Walks with the Indian Navy, a Freedom Trail in association with the Mani Bhavan Gandhi Sanghralaya (Gandhi Museum & Research Centre). In 2004, we were requested by the Asiatic Society of Mumbai to train student volunteers to conduct heritage walks as part of their Bi-Centennial Celebrations which were attended by the then President of India, Dr. Abdul Kalam.

Our organisation was regularly featured by international travel writers, journalists in print and web media including various leading guidebooks like the Lonely Planet, DK Eyewitness Travel Guide, Frommers

Guide etc. and we were associated with several travel corporations. With Mumbai's growing status as a 'World City' and premier business plus travel destination, we were flooded with requests for walking tours by international visitors, on pleasure and work trips (Fig.10), and even student groups on scholastic sojourns. Knowledgeable travellers pointed out that they chose BHW walking tours, as an exhaustive Mumbai experience was not possible by merely traversing the city in a comfortable car or by leafing through guidebooks.

Notes

3. Among the several private tours that have been specially organised is one for Chelsea Clinton and her group (March 2000). Similar tours have been conducted by BHW for visiting professors and scholars like William Dalrymple, business delegations like Leaders' Quest (UK), staff from various embassies etc. Special heritage tours have also been conducted as part of events like the Kala Ghoda Art Fest (1999 to 2009), as well as for conferences organised by institutions such as the Urban Design Research Institute, Asiatic Society of Mumbai, International Association of Law Librarians (November 2007), Young Presidents' Organisation (YPO Meet, Mumbai Jan 2008), among others. Heritage tours have been organised by BHW for guests/delegations of corporates & institutions such as HSBC, Bank of America, Deutsche Bank, Citibank, Jindal Steel, GlaxoSmithKline, Tata Management Trainee Centre (Pune, India), L'Oreal etc.

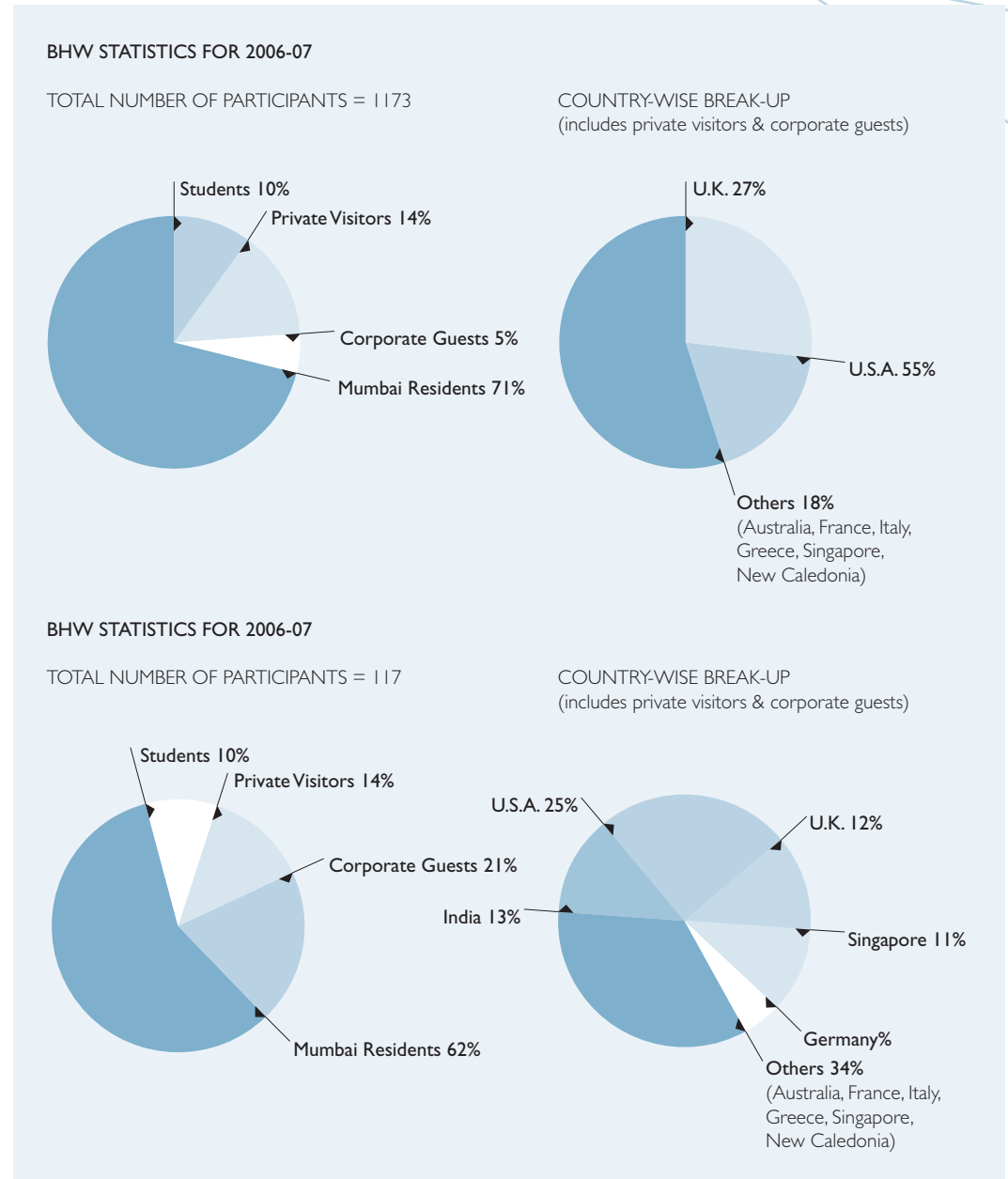


Fig.10



Fig.11

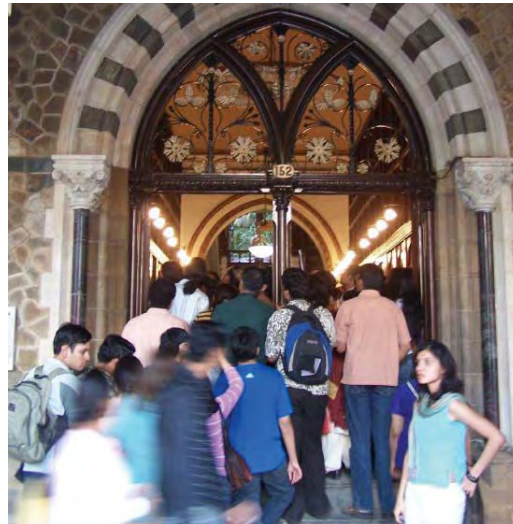


Fig.12



Fig.13

Fig.10: BHW Statistics 2006-07 & 2007-08 (© Bombay Heritage Walks)

Over the years, BHW has organised numerous open-to-public walks and heritage-awareness workshops for students. Specialised private tours have also been conducted including those for visiting dignitaries, consular guests and corporate heads from all over the world.³ BHW also regularly contributes to public heritage-education in the form of media articles, lectures, participation in panel discussions etc (Figs. 11 & 12).

Fig.11: BHW Co-founders Brinda Gaitonde & Abha Bahl with Chelsea Clinton outside the Keneseth Eliyahoo Synagogue, Mumbai (March 2000) (© Bombay Heritage Walks)

Fig.12: Students on a heritage walk in the Kala Ghoda area (August 2006) (©Bombay Heritage Walks)

Since 2005, the BHW group has grown beyond the original team of architects. BHW now has a team of talented, young presenters who lead the walking tours. Their backgrounds range from architecture, archaeology, ancient Indian culture, art history, literature and the fine arts. We strive to make each walk memorable and maintain a high quality in the presentation (Fig.13).

Fig.13: BHW Team (© Bombay Heritage Walks)

Through the past decade, the BHW team has tried to create a consciousness and sensitivity towards the Mumbai's rich architectural legacy and to offer interesting historical and cultural insights into the city. We aim to carry this forward in addition to launching other related programs like public exhibitions, lecture series and possibly setting up a "Heritage Helpline." As architects, we have always considered this effort as an extension of our profession and something we owe to the city that we have lived and worked in.

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