

CULTURE SHIFT

With the city growing into the suburbs, Shivaji Park is no longer the geographic or socio-cultural centre of Mumbai's life and politics. Rallies at the Park have been few since it was declared a silence zone by Bombay high court; cricketers too now come from the northern and eastern suburbs (eg. Rohit Sharma is from Borivli, Shardul Thakur from Palghar and Ajinkya Rahane from Dombivli). With the mayor's bungalow shifting to Rani Baug, an important stage for political discussions and decision-making has also shifted



Landmarks in the park



Nehru's rally after the 1962 war against China, where Lata Mangeskar sang 'Ae Mere Watan Ke Logon', moving the Prime Minister to tears



Bal Thackeray's first Shiv Sena rally in October 1966 (above) after the formation of the party at his Ranade Road residence; the Sena's Dussehra rallies have been an annual fixture at the ground for almost 50 years



Shiv Srushti, created in 1974 by historian and balladeer Babasaheb Purandare, was staged here on the 300th anniversary of the coronation of Chhatrapati Shivaji; it was followed by the staging of Jaanata Raja (above), another spectacle on the life of the king

The low-rise central Mumbai neighbourhood is morphing into a high-rise cluster, bringing demographic shifts in its wake



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Almost a hundred years after Shivaji Park opened to the public in 1925, it remains one of the city's iconic spaces, and a hub for the Shiv Sena and for Maharashtra culture. Its low boundary wall, known as the 'katta' for the conversations among those who come to sit there—from senior citizens to schoolkids—remains integral to the area's culture.

But though the maidan has barely changed, the skyline around it is transforming. Highrises of 10-20 storeys are steadily replacing the older two and three-storey Art Deco residences that

SHIVAJI PARK PADS UP FOR A NEW INNINGS

MEETING POINT FOR MARATHI MANOOS

CHANGE OF SCENE

A majority of Maharashtra youth from middle-class families in and around the Park have emigrated, with the result that senior citizens account for a bigger proportion of the population in the area

A couple of cremations at the ground—of Bal Thackeray and Lata Mangeskar—have slightly altered the complexion of the place. Now the Thackeray memorial will come up at the mayor's bungalow next to the Savarkar memorial and the Samyukta Maharashtra memorial (in addition to the Thackeray memorial on the ground itself).

FAMOUS RESIDENTS

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (in pic), Prabodhankar Thackeray, Milind Soman, Ajit Agarkar, Manohar Joshi, Sudhir Phadke, C Ramchandra, Vasant Desai, Acharya Atre, Kesarbai Kerkar, Vijay Manjrekar, Shanta Gokhale



The area is integral to some of Mumbai's most defining moments

- One of the serial bomb blasts in March 1993 took place near a petrol pump next to Shiv Sena Bhavan; the target was Sena Bhavan
- Swearing-in of Manohar Joshi as CM and Gopinath Munde as deputy CM in 1995 when the Shiv Sena-BJP combine came to power for the first time in Maharashtra. This was the first swearing-in of a Maharashtra CM that happened outside Raj Bhavan and on a maiden.
- Michael Jackson concert organized in 1996 by Raj Thackeray
- Vajpayee's election rallies before becoming PM in 1996 and 1998
- Sonia Gandhi's massive rally in 1998
- Thackeray and Modi's rally soon after Modi became Gujarat CM in 2002



Pics: S L Shanth Kumar, Sanjay Hadkar

CHANGING NEIGHBOURHOODS

encircle the park. A quarter of the 200-odd buildings in the area—or at least 50 buildings—have been or are in the process of being redeveloped.

As in other old neighbourhoods, redevelopment is bringing new populations to the area—and pressure on its amenities. "In days to come, almost all buildings will be redeveloped," says Shekhar Prabhavalkar, an advocate who has lived in the neighbourhood since 1957. "Life in the new buildings is comfortable, but local infrastructure will face challenges."

Vanishing art deco

The redevelopment surge was set in motion by two policy changes. In late 2014, the Supreme Court upheld the



re-designation of the larger Mahim shoreline as a 'bay', a classification that relaxed the area's building restrictions under the coastal regulation zone (CRZ) rules. And in 2016, the state government eased heritage rules for the precinct, retaining the heritage tag for the Park alone, leaving out the Art Deco buildings around.

Now, new development is erasing the original architectural ensemble, which gave the neighbourhood a distinctive signature. There are 116 Art Deco buildings in the precinct, says Atul Kumar, founder trustee of Art Deco Mumbai. The larger Dadar area, including both east and west, holds the city's largest number of such buildings.

These ground-plus-two-or-three-storey buildings were among the first examples of modest modern apartment living in Mumbai, Kumar notes. "The park itself is U-shaped, facing the sea, and the neighbourhood is designed in such a way that all buildings get sea breeze and



light," he says, adding, "It is a beautiful grid-like design."

But a neighbourhood isn't just about buildings. From the early decades, the enclave was a magnet for educated Maharashtrians, especially with the opening of schools and institutions, says Bharat Gothoskar, founder of Khaki Heritage Foundation. "People would throng outside legendary classical singer Kesarbai Kerkar's house to hear her *riyaaz* (practice), while on Janmashtami there used to be a long line outside Shahu Modak's house to touch his feet (since) he played Krishna in many movies," Gothoskar says. He adds, "The fact that Modak was a Christian did not deter his Hindu fans."

Home to the Shiv Sena and MNS parties and a cradle of city cricket, the neighbourhood remains a sport and political hub—but of diminishing importance. Sachin Tendulkar was incubated here, but today's cricketers tend to come

from the suburbs and beyond. And with the mayor's bungalow shifting to Rani Baug, an important centre of political discussion has also moved away.

Shifting demographics

Residents like Prabhavalkar, who now lives in a redeveloped highrise on MB Raut Marg, have embraced the shifts. Fourteen of the 28 buildings on his road are being redeveloped. The 1930s buildings face leakages and structural problems, "so people opt for redevelopment," he says, adding, "They also get a bigger flat."

Prabhavalkar, who has written three books on the neighbourhood, feels the area's Maharashtra culture hasn't changed much. There is a demographic shift though: with the younger generation moving out or abroad, most residents are senior citizens.

Other residents are less happy with change. The park is losing its peace-

ful quality, says Rohit Katre, who has lived here for over two decades. "People come to show off their SUVs here," he complains.

Katre, who runs a real-estate agency, lauds the quality of new construction but is critical of other aspects of redevelopment. The new highrises have only 2-and 3-bedroom apartments, which makes them unaffordable for the middle-class, including the 'Marathi manoos', he says.

The small plot sizes, along with the large apartments, mean that many new buildings can have only one flat per floor. "Many clients tell me they don't want that, they think having a neighbour is important," says Katre.

There is also concern about infrastructure. Redevelopment is reducing parking space on Prabhavalkar's street, due to the slopes and access barriers of the new buildings, he says. The lanes are congested and noisy during morning

and evening hours. "The traffic police and BMC must resolve this as they have given permission for redevelopment," he says.

A senior civic official agrees that infrastructure is a worry. The precinct's roads and amenities, such as schools and playgrounds, were planned for a certain population, he points out. "Congestion hasn't happened as fast as Lower Parel since this is a largely residential redevelopment, but it will take a toll," he says.

Sandeep Deshpande, a former MNS corporator from Shivaji Park, is more optimistic. "The skyline has changed but the tree line hasn't changed much," he says, attributing this to the lack of malls and commercial offices. There have been no issues about water supply or garbage collection yet, he adds. "If redevelopment is held at a steady pace," he argues, "local authorities will be able to tackle it."

'The greats of cricket were all my neighbours'

Sandeep Patil

Everything that I am in life is because of Shivaji Park. My father led the Shivaji Park Gymkhana team for almost two decades. The greats of Indian and Mumbai cricket like Ajit Wadekar, Ramakant Desai, Vijay Manjrekar, Manohar Hardikar, Balu Gupte, Subhash Gupte were all my neighbours. In those days—the 60s & the 70s—they used to visit my bungalow. I grew up watching these stalwarts!

I started my cricket at the Young Maharashtra cricket ground in Shivaji Park under my coach, the late Ankush 'Anna' Vaidya. So, I've great affection for that place. You see, all the cricketers who come from Shivaji Park are flamboyant, and a bit nakhrewale (attitude)! Whereas, all the cricketers who grew across the Tilak Bridge—Madhav Mantri, Naren Tamhane, Sunil Gavaskar, Dilip Vengsarkar—were disciplined. This mainly happened because the Britishers used to have their camp across the Tilak Bridge, where you have the police headquarters there now. They used to play and practice there at the Major Dadkar ground in front of Ruia College and Poddar College. This is why all the Dadar Union players had better technique than the Shivaji Park players, but Shivaji Park produced one Sachin Tendulkar, who is equal to all the Dadar Union players!

For the last eight years, I've been living in Jogeshwari since my building went into redevelopment. However, I still go to Shivaji Park every week as my son lives there. I'm dying to go back there. I have my own property there. We had a bungalow, then my father built a three-storey building, and now I'm making a 24-storey building there.

Things change according to the times. It's not just Shivaji Park, but the entire face of Mumbai has changed. If you see Parel, it was a mill area, now you have all the big offices of the big corporates there. The municipal ward must take care of the ground at Shivaji Park, though. I've been reading in the newspapers about the dust and the bad condition of the ground, which isn't good for the kids who come to learn cricket. I hope conditions at the ground improve when I move back there after three years.

(As told to Gaurav Gupta)

Some famous cricketers and coaches known for their exploits on the ground:

Vijay Manjrekar, Subhash Gupte, Balu Gupte, Ramakant Desai, Ajit Wadekar, Sandeep Patil, Raju Kulkarni, Chandrakant Pandit, Sanjay Manjrekar, Sachin Tendulkar, Vinod Kambl, Pravin Amre, Ramakant Achrekar (coach), Ankush 'Anna' Vaidya (coach)

