

## NEWS

## MARINE DRIVE, REIMAGINED

Several transformations over the years have led to a question: what to retain and what to lose

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**MUMBAI:** Reclaimed from the sea in the early 20th century, from its inception, Marine Drive was part of an objective to reimagine Mumbai, then Bombay. There were several deliberations over its original plan, and by the time the precinct came up, the proposed built area of 1,145 acres was reduced to 552 acres.

The Backbay Reclamation scheme, as it was called, was dogged with delays, scandals and allegations of corruption—finally taking shape in an avatar far different from what was originally proposed by town planner WR Davidge. Even so, the controversial reclamation gave the city one of its most notable identifiers.

Despite his many reservations about the final execution of Marine Drive, it led eminent architect Claude Batley to comment: "If you have any doubt of its worthwhileness, watch the happy throngs of promenaders, of all sorts and conditions, drinking in the sea air morning and evening; an asset that has never been put down as of any tangible value in the profit-and-loss account of the scheme."

These throngs of "happy promenaders", the people of Marine Drive, are at the heart of this precinct. Urban plans, after all, remain only infrastructure projects until people imbue these areas with their stories and histories.

Over time, the precinct has endured several transformations of its own. The uniform skyline has been altered with floor additions, a controversial walkway was added at Chowpatty in the 1950s, the lights on Queen's necklace went from yellow, to white and back to yellow. But is the precinct encountered with a more far-reaching reimagining? If yes, what do we retain and what do we lose?

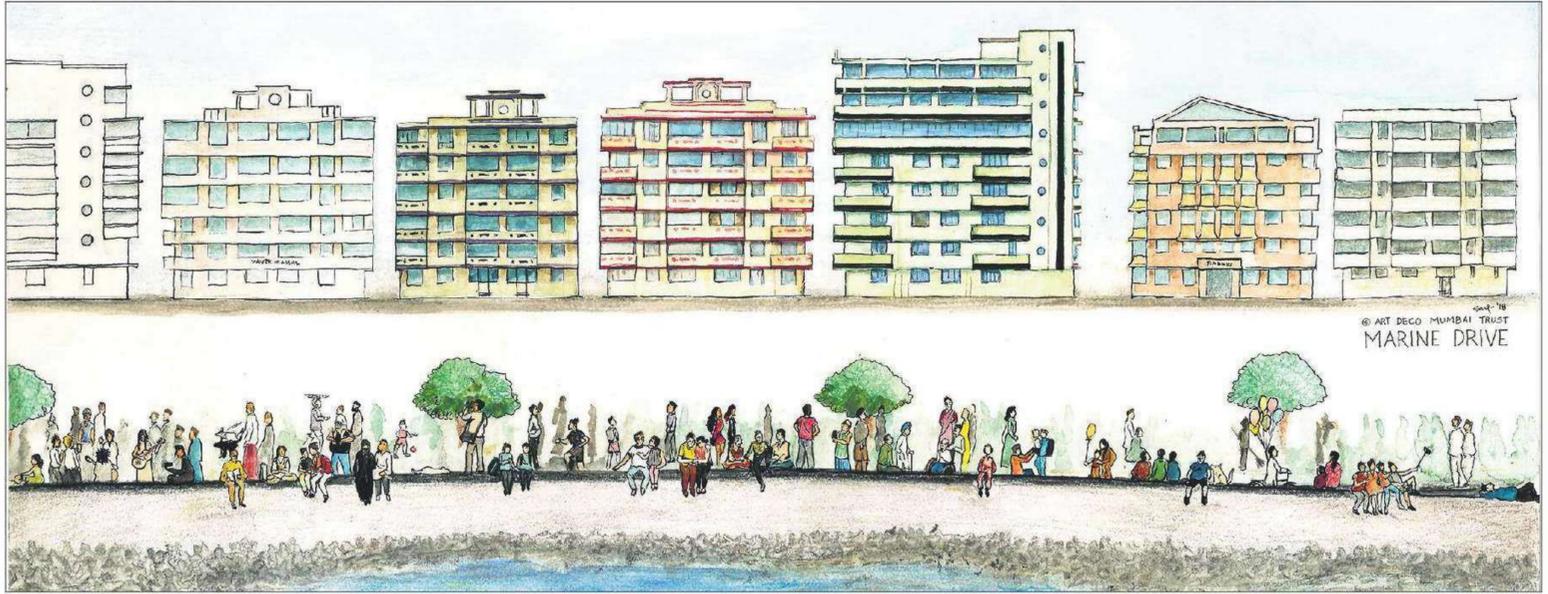
#### Interventions and what they threaten to erase

In May 2023, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) released a plan to "beautify" all the sea-facing Art Deco buildings along Marine Drive in a uniform colour, much to the chagrin of residents who had already spent their own funds to paint their respective buildings.

A few months later, in September, news emerged of the proposal to demolish the 70-year-old Taraporewala Aquarium due to structural instabilities. By the end of the year, the Savitribai Phule Women's Hostel, a five-storied Art Deco building, was brought down for redevelopment. This hostel was built around 1950 for students of Mumbai University, and was a safe and comfortable living arrangement for young women coming into the city by themselves. It embodied the spirit of freedom and security Marine Drive has offered people.

As 2024 has come around, the ambitious Mumbai Coastal Road project was opened. Along the stretch from the Princess Street Flyover to Girgaon Chowpatty, the promenade remains permanently altered to create wider space to accommodate the project.

Transient canopies have been placed in front of the gymkhanas (Islam, Hindu, Parsi and Catholic, which occupy consecutive plots of land), where the underground tunnels coming from and going towards the north emerge. These gymkhanas, once



An illustration depicting a usual day at Marine Drive, with people across demographics of age, community, class and gender enjoying the open and public character of the promenade.

SOURCE: ILLUSTRATION BY SHUBHIKA MALARA FOR ART DECO MUMBAI TRUST

open playing grounds with vistas of the sea, suddenly find themselves boxed in, with the sea view lost behind the tall canopies.

Lamenting this design, author and Bombay history fellow at Gateway House, a foreign policy think tank, Sifra Lentini says: "One must keep in mind that a city is only as good as its history. Development must go hand-in-hand with aesthetics and heritage, and Mumbai is lucky to have so many heritage precincts."

Lentini's views on the canopy are echoed by several Marine Drive residents. For Rohan Parikh, a 45-year-old entrepreneur who grew up on Marine Drive, south Mumbai is an ageing precinct, and "it is not ageing well." "The centre of gravity has definitely moved north. Thankfully, the art galleries and the NCPA [National Centre for Performing Arts] are still in south Bombay, so we have some cultural heft. And that's literally it," says Parikh.

The coastal road, which will eventually be connected to the Eastern Freeway with a 9.23-kilometre corridor, will reintegrate south Mumbai with the rest of the city, Parikh says. In fact, a 2023 Government Regulation (GR) now makes provisions for many such alterations, permitting the redevelopment of the Marine Drive precinct, with certain restrictions that require maintaining its uniform skyline. Another proposed project that has been in discourse for several years is the statue of Shivaji Maharaj in the Arabian Sea, one kilometre off the shore, overlooking Marine Drive.

In a deeply congested city with less than 2 sqm of per capita open space (for context, the World Health Organisation standard is 9 sqm/capita), Marine Drive remains one of the few bastions of a free, public and open space, making it all the more relevant in the 21st century. Changes along this precinct spell a more elemental change in the fabric of the city itself.

#### The "public" character of Marine Drive

"I would argue the promenade of Marine Drive doesn't belong only to the precinct of Marine Drive. It belongs to the city at large," says architect and professor Rahul Mehrotra. "And as the city has densified, the use of Marine Drive has intensified," he adds. "If not for Marine Drive, if not for that stretch of land, that stretch of sea, and that smell of salt in

the air, I would have left the city long back," says Mahithi Pillay, a resident of Powai who makes it a point to visit Marine Drive every month, if not every fortnight. On the weekends, it is as if the "city's guts spill out," observes Lentini, as people through the promenade.

What is the great allure of this strip of concrete by the sea? New York-based Project for Public Spaces presents criteria for what makes a successful public space. Some of these include comfort in people's body language, accessibility to all people at all times, showing public displays of affection, habitual or familiar use, and the ability to improvise uses for the space.

Marine Drive checks off many of these boxes. It offers a "neutrality", argues Mehrotra, which isn't defined by any adjacent built form, nor by any "clues that suggest how it can be appropriated." For the most part, its use is walking or jogging, and sitting along the seawall—activities that are not specific to any particular groups of people.

For architect and urbanist Neera Adarkar, this neutrality is also a product of the promenade's linear dimension, which gives it what she calls its "no nonsense" quality. It is not a garden or congregation space where people can gather, thus limiting the nature of activities. This linearity is also what lends a degree of anonymity to people using the promenade, enabling a broad demographic to enjoy it. "Nobody is looking at you, because it is linear. You are either looking at the sea, or at the world behind you," remarks Adarkar. A wider promenade or garden may introduce other activities, which in turn introduces hierarchies.

At any time of day, Marine Drive remains accessible and offers its patrons a degree of safety, by virtue of its openness. "I go at 5:30 in the morning for a walk, and I am alone, and it's perfectly safe," says Shobha Nayar, a 70-year-old resident of Marine Drive. For Jenai Wadia, a designer who has been renting her Marine Drive apartment since 2019, the precinct is a "safe and open space" to raise her children. "My sister's in a wheelchair, and in most parts of Bombay it's impossible with a wheelchair or a pram. But it's been very easy to access the Marine Drive promenade," Wadia says.

Then there is the temporal notion of the space, where with each passing hour its use evolves. The promenaders arrive in the morning and evening,

when the severity of the sun is low. It is the afternoons, however, that are the most interesting, when young couples brave the intensity of the midday heat to, ironically, enjoy a degree of privacy in a public space. Marine Drive enables them to hold hands and exchange physical touch without fear of being watched or reprimanded—a rarity in India. It is what makes the promenade dynamic, with its ever-changing use over time, offering different kinds of experiences to different people.

"If you can plan a space in a way that you consider what it could do at different times, you make it more neutral. When we make a space too specific, then the associations with what happens there narrows," says Mehrotra.

On 4 July 2024, as hordes of people trickled onto Marine Drive for the "victory parade" to celebrate India's T20 Cricket World Cup win, the ability to improvise in a public space became all the more potent. Of all the options available in the city to host a massive congregation of people, like the DY Patil Stadium in Nerul or Shivaji Park, Marine Drive was the chosen venue, despite its narrow linearity.

A stadium or a ground could be located anywhere, but the promenade and the sea serve as immediate identifiers of Bombay. The stunning footage of the parade was telecast around the world, with the Art Deco apartment buildings to one side, the magnificent Arabian Sea to another—this will remain an enduring image of the city, and Marine Drive is at the heart of it.

#### Marine Drive and the right to the city

Bombay has famously enjoyed a history of engaged citizenship. The urban landscape of the city, as it developed in the 20th century, was built through the "joint enterprise" posits historian Preeti Chopra, between the colonial government, Indian and European mercantile elites, engineers, architects and artists. The historical continuity with this period has defined citizens' actions in the city since, be it the making of the Bandra Bandstand promenade in the early 2000s, or the 14-year-long negotiation by citizens groups to bring UNESCO World Heritage Site status to the "Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Mumbai" in 2018. It is this inscription that probably nudged the coastal road to start northward beyond the Princess Street fly-



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HT PHOTO

over, saving the core precinct as a result.

The neutrality of the promenade, as Mehrotra articulates, is in the void of the bay. It is not organised around a monument or an object, but is instead a "reminder of our continuous engagement with the flux of nature, which is the tides of the sea." Placing a statue that disrupts this void would significantly change the meaning of Marine Drive and its use.

Urban spaces like these become all the more relevant, as much of its character and use is defined by people. While Marine Drive's design is inherently dynamic, its exuberance comes alive with how people interact with the space. With several simultaneous infrastructural projects being undertaken in the city, it is undeniable that Mumbai is in the throes of a rapid transformation. The people, for whom these new projects have been commissioned, however, frequently remain absent from the narrative, at a cost that remains to be

seen. But it is when people claim their "right to the city", to use Henri Lefebvre's frequently cited theory, that urban centres become more vibrant and inclusive, presenting opportunities to a broad demographic of people to lead a life of dignity in the metropolis. Marine Drive's accessibility is "indicative of a countercultural contestation to reject any monopoly over sea views," writes political scientist R. Swaminathan.

The urban planning of the precinct, despite early setbacks, presented the city's residents with a way of life that holds value to date, and perhaps carries principles of design that can still serve as prototypes for larger residential planning in the city. In any reimagining of Mumbai, therefore, Marine Drive remains significant; and in any reimagining of Marine Drive, one must not lose sight of its people.

Atul Kumar and Suhasini Krishnan are members of the Art Deco Mumbai Trust.

{ GOKHALE INSTITUTE OF POLITICS AND ECONOMICS } NOTED ECONOMIST'S REMOVAL AS VICE-CHANCELLOR SPARKED AN OUTCRY FROM ACADEMICS, POLITICIANS AND PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

## Irregularities, internal dissent: Inside Ajit Ranade's ouster

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**PUNE:** The removal of economist Ajit Ranade, 63, from the post of vice-chancellor of Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics (GIPE) has ignited a storm of controversy, raising questions about the governance of educational institutions.

Ranade, a PhD holder from Brown University, with degrees from premier Indian institutes like IIM Ahmedabad and IIT Bombay, was removed as GIPE vice-chancellor on September 14 following a fact-finding committee (FFC) report that investigated complaints of irregularities in the appointment and pointed out that his qualifications "did not meet the norms set forth by the University Grants Commission (UGC) guidelines".

Ranade's removal prompted an outcry from various sectors, including academics, politicians, and public intellectuals. Many have criticised the decision, expressing concerns about its impact on the institution's reputation and autonomy.



Ajit Ranade was removed as vice-chancellor of Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics on September 14. PRATHAM GOKHALE/HT PHOTO

According to Bhushan Patwardhan, former vice-chairman at UGC and ex-chairman of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council's executive committee, the UGC regulations must change in tune with modern times.

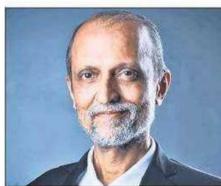
#### 'Unfortunate incident'

"New-edge universities need high calibre professionals and visionaries to lead and bring innovations. Mere paper qualifications should not suffice and qualitative evaluation is necessary for such high-level positions," said Pat-

wardhan.

Terming Ranade's removal as an "unfortunate incident", Patwardhan said, "A person of eminence should suffice the eligibility. Let the search committee decide who should be this person. The discretion should be given to search committees without any external interference."

While allegations against Ranade were numerous, GIPE chancellor Bibek Debroy's decision citing the FFC report focused solely on his lack of the required 10 years of academic experience—a criterion that some



believe was strategically used to oust the economist.

The issue of Ranade's removal is not the first time GIPE has faced leadership turmoil. Over the past two decades, the institute, once regarded as a centre of academic excellence, has seen multiple controversies surrounding the appointment of its V-Cs. For nearly 10 years, the institute had no permanent V-C, with interim charges being handed to faculty members.

The constant leadership crises have severely affected the institution's morale and the academic environment, leading to delays in promotions, research output, and recruitment processes.

Interestingly, the main complainant, Murli Krishna, who raised the issue of Ranade's eligibility, was himself suspended

from GIPE in 2018 over allegations of misconduct, while Ranade assumed charge in February 2022 for a period of five years.

Krishna said, "The then chancellor Rajiv Kumar, who was also the vice-chairman of NITI Aayog, appointed Ranade as the V-C. In the search-cum-selection committee, there was one member nominated by the UGC, one person nominated by the board of management of GIPE and the third member in the committee was nominated by the chancellor. There were at least 45 applications including those who fulfilled the criteria of 10 years of teaching experience. Moreover, the committee recommended four names for the V-C's post, the other three had good experience in teaching, but among them, Ranade was appointed for the said post."

"Why did the chancellor not oppose the appointment then? It is a fact that the committee has committed irregularities in appointment procedure," he said. Speaking about his dismissal from the institute Krishna said, "In 2012, I along with four other colleagues submitted a complaint to the higher officials about mis-

management in the institute along with all the proofs. But instead of acting on that, we got dismissed in 2013. We filed a petition against the same in the Bombay high court, and the court stayed the institute's decision and directed a departmental inquiry into the matter. Later in 2017, three of my colleagues got dismissed and one had already quit the job. After one year, I also was dismissed in 2018 for the second time."

"The other three people had filed a petition in Bombay high court and the case is still going on, while I choose not to file a petition," he said. When contacted Debroy, he said, "I have nothing to say in the matter."

#### Financial irregularities

Two faculty members, speaking on anonymity, have pointed to several factors that contributed to the friction between Ranade and the internal staff. They alleged that while Ranade pursued a vision of transforming GIPE into a more "corporate-like institution", his approach did not align with the ethos of a public, autonomous institute. His decision to hike fees, while introducing new

"high-paying" faculty positions, alienated both students and long-serving faculty members. "The institute hiked fee by 7% for different courses," claimed an official from GIPE requesting anonymity.

Further compounding the issue was Ranade's controversial transfer of ₹1.5 crore to the Servants of India Society (SIS), GIPE's parent body, for extending the lease of land in Nagpur. According to the UGC guidelines, such transfers of funds are prohibited, and this alleged misuse of funds has led to legal complications.

Pravin Raut, a member of SIS, said, "In Nagpur, SIS is holding a land of 27,000 sqft since 1911. The lease of the land will expire in 2030 and to renew it, the SIS secretary has demanded over ₹1 crore from GIPE in 2022. The institute transferred ₹1.5 crore in October 2023, while the actual expenditure was ₹1.2 crore. The amount shown in expenditure was more. And also, even as SIS is a parent body of GIPE, the funds cannot be transferred as per law."

Ranade's tenure saw GIPE divided into two camps—those who supported his vision, and

others who viewed his policies as detrimental to the core mission of the institution. While he pushed for development projects and new courses, these were sometimes met with resistance from faculty members who believed that V-C's approach was too "commercially driven" for a public research institution.

"The institute has started two courses and so the number of students which earlier was around 1,000, has increased to 1,500 in the last two years. A new hostel has been set up by the institute, and new faculty has been appointed for the V-C office," claimed an official from GIPE, requesting anonymity.

#### Ranade's next steps

Ranade, who has now approached the Bombay high court to challenge his dismissal, has argued in his petition that the termination is illegal, and failed to consider relevant facts. The high court has put on hold the economist's termination till September 23 when the matter has been posted for hearing.

Ranade declined to comment, citing that the matter is sub-judice.