

SALTPAN

## The Last Defence

**Freny Manecksha**

*[Mumbai's saltpans stretch over 5,000 acres, nine times the size of the defunct mill lands. Governments and the city administration have been eyeing these protected areas for commercial development, ostensibly to house the poor. Environmentalists argue that these saltpans, with their thick mangrove forests, are Mumbai's last-defence against ocean flooding.]*

Both the Government of India and the State Government of Maharashtra have long been eyeing Mumbai's saltpans under the pretext of undertaking low-cost housing projects to relocate the city's slum-dwellers and upgrade infrastructural facilities. Saltpans are lands along the coast that were hollowed out to process salt; in Mumbai they are spread over approximately 5,378 acres. Although most of these lands are privately owned, since 1960 the Central Salt Department in Jaipur has taken the view that salt work lands belong to the central government, and that the salt manufacturers only have right of use to the land to produce salt under the terms of the licence.

More recently, the state government has been claiming that though owned by the central government, the salt work lands were leased out to the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Subsequently, the BMC subleased the land to various people on a 99-year lease, to manufacture salt. Though the lease is over in most cases, the lessees have not given up possession of the land.

These salt work lands are now slated to be exploited for private real estate and public infrastructure projects under the pretext of freeing Mumbai of its slums. At the meeting of a high-powered group of central ministers it was decided, in May 2008, that "efforts of various central and state agencies (will) be coordinated and urgent measures evolved for using these lands for rehabilitation of slum-dwellers." (*Financial Express*, May 29, 2008)

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, in the wake of the 2005 floods, called for the expeditious transfer of saltpan lands to the state government, in September 2006. But even as the state government seeks clearance for the saltpans to be used to rehabilitate 80,000 slum-dwellers and project-affected families in Mumbai, the BMC has ambitious plans of its own. The current development plan envisages converting saltpan lands for residential purposes, and creating commercial zones with "adequate infrastructural augmentation". The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) has welcomed the use of these lands for real estate.

The BMC is drawing up a revised development plan (a blueprint for the city's development) for 2014-2034 that suggests opening salt work lands for commercial development. One of the "urgent measures" needed to make this possible is to relax environment protection regulations governing coastal land use—these regulations, as applied to Mumbai, prohibit development on all but 240 hectares of salt work lands.

The move has triggered a heated debate among environmentalists, citizens' groups and those concerned with urban planning. The civic body's plans for the last few

stretches of saltpans would spell disaster for Mumbai, say citizens' groups and environmentalists. The latter argue that a major portion of the land is covered by Coastal Regulatory Zone (CRZ) guidelines, and that these lands cannot be used for development. Besides, saltpans form part of the fragile ecosystem that supports thousands of species of animals, birds and fish.

Environmentalists also claim that saltpans, with their thick mangrove trees, are Mumbai's last defence against flooding. "The saltpans are eco-sensitive zones that act as natural buffers against ocean flooding ... They absorb the rush of water from the sea," says the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), a research body.

Hearing a public interest litigation filed by the Bombay Environmental Action Group (BEAG) in the wake of the July 2005 deluge in Mumbai, the High Court ordered a total ban on the destruction and cutting of mangroves throughout the state. Mumbai alone has over 1,534 hectares (3,800 acres) of mangroves. Not stopping at a ban, the court also issued orders for the cessation of all construction activity within 50 metres on all sides of mangrove areas.

Environmentalist Nahar Singh says: "If they (the state government and BMC) go ahead with their plan, the city is doomed. It will mean more July 26, 2005-like disasters in the city." Vidya Vaidya, a member of the NGO Citispace, adds: "This will mean irrevocable damage to the environment." Activists allege that the BMC's latest move will benefit Mumbai's construction lobby that has been pushing for the city's last remaining open spaces to be opened up for development.

Rishi Aggarwal, an environmental activist who is also involved in issues of development and governance, is a staunch critic of the bid to build on saltpan lands. Aggarwal, joint secretary of the Mangrove Society in India, and part of the Mumbai Environmental Social Network, says any move to develop salt work lands without a proper scientific proposal or sound environmental impact assessment study would make it a purely greed-driven exercise, not an attempt to address people's housing needs.

Aggarwal points out that unilaterally freeing all saltpan lands would necessarily mean bending some of the CRZ guidelines because although all saltpan lands do not support mangroves, they do see tidal action. He alleges that structural engineers too have expressed concern over the wisdom of putting up buildings on such hollowed out lands.

The proposal to use saltpan lands first emerged in 2002 when the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA) warned that it was running out of land and asked the state to release land belonging to various departments like defence, the Bombay Port Trust, and saltpan lands.

In 2006, the then Union Minister for Commerce and Industries Kamal Nath and Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh worked out a formula of developing saltpan lands on a no-profit-no-loss basis. The scheme proposed allowing private developers extra FSI for commercial purposes after setting aside 225 sq ft houses to accommodate slum-dwellers.

In 2007, a committee of union ministers was formed to look into all aspects before a decision regarding saltpan development was taken. In May 2008, the decks were cleared for the private development of saltpan lands stretching to 2,177 hectares. This,

despite the Union environment ministry objecting to the release of lands covered by mangroves, which fell under the CRZ I category.

In August 2009, Union Minister for Environment and Forests Jairam Ramesh once again indicated that the central government leadership was unhappy about opening up salt work lands for development. Stating that saltpans were vulnerable lands, the minister added that a proper study should be conducted on the ecology, environment and socio-economic aspects of salt work areas before taking appropriate steps.

Earlier, in July 2009, around 180.42 hectares of salt work lands around the prime locations of Dadar, Naigaum and parts of the main city, were declared 'protected forests' under a state government notification. The notification identified 3,431 hectares of mangrove lands in the extended city as forest land to be protected by the state forest department.

According to S S Sandhu, Divisional Commissioner, Konkan division, who issued the notification: "Many of these vast tracts of saltpan lands have significant mangrove growth. When the Nagpur-based Maharashtra Remote Sensing Application Centre (MRSAC) began mapping mangroves in the city, these tracts appeared on the map. We simply followed the court directives and notified them as forests."

Although environmentalists are having a sigh of relief, government officials maintain that the new notification will not upset state projects. Shree Bhagwan, Chief Conservator of Forests, Thane range, explains : "These lands may be protected, but that doesn't mean the forest department is going to lock horns with the state over the development of any of these lands. We will make sure there is agreement on the issue."

Mangrove expert and member of Conservation Action Trust (CAT) Vivek Kulkarni says : "These are basically saltpan areas which have not been used for salt production for long. There is considerable mangrove growth on them that needs to be protected."

The next five years are going to be crucial, say experts, as rising sea levels threaten the city. One of the biggest challenges for the state forest ministry will be to save the saltpans and mangrove lands in and around Mumbai. It will also have to put an end to the large-scale destruction of mangroves along the city's coastline, failing which millions of lives will be affected. "Mangroves are a natural barrier between the sea and the land. Their importance has increased manifold because of the erratic weather patterns Mumbai is prone to," says Debi Goenka, member of Conservation Action Trust.

"Opening up saltpans is a bad idea," says urban planner Chandra-shekar Prabhu. Writing on the 26/7 catastrophe, which the government blamed on unprecedented rainfall, Prabhu said: "The writing has been on the wall for a long time. Why did this happen? Every city has its share of dissipation spaces—wetlands, wastelands, mangroves and saltpan lands. These act like sponges and take the pressure out of the high tide. In the past 10 years, each of these has been destroyed systematically in Mumbai. It is a carefully planned strategy. It is a transition from wetland to wasteland."  
□□□