

## Learning from Marine Drive



If any one of us had been around 80 years ago, Marine Drive would never have got built. After all, there are many compelling reasons to oppose it. It brings more traffic. It involves reclamation (that filthy eleven-letter word!), adding more buildings between us and the sea. It's obviously very bad news. Why don't we just continue using Queen's Road?

Yet, aren't you glad it happened? Not only is Marine Drive a vital artery for the city, it is also without any doubt Bombay's single more powerful urban image. The presence of this great gesture, precisely defining the edge between land and water is one magnificent sweep, is what sustains us as we battle with the urban mess and chaos that constitute 99 per cent of Bombay (just as the imagery of Manhattan's skyline creates the *élan* necessary to survive Brooklyn or Queens).

Obviously, we shouldn't endorse indiscriminately every new development that comes along. Of course any new scheme has to be studied. But this has to be done intelligently and with a clear understanding of the broader issues involved. Unfortunately nowadays this is very seldom true. All day I might earn my living doing something dreadful (selling babies?) but in the evening I step into a telephone booth, put on a cloak and emerge as Superman. Hey presto: an environmentalist! And regardless of my total lack of any experience, or any training, or any intuitive insight into the complex problems I am seeking to address, the public accepts at face value my pronouncements. Do we really need this to happen?

In actual fact, much of history is the story of interventions — the consequences of which are extremely difficult to predict. Every change, small or big, gradual or sudden, causes hurt — but the wound heals, eliminating the negative aspects of each intervention, and capitalising on its positive advantages. That's a process intrinsic to the nature of human beings. Yet it's seldom understood. A century ago we would have all opposed the building of railways. After all, the British were introducing them for their own selfish purposes and for all the wrong reasons.

Besides, why on earth should we import the highest technology Europe had to offer? Surely what we needed instead were better bullock carts? And of course we would be right. And of course we would be wrong. Because the railways have been the single most profound agent of change in this vast sub-continent over the last century. And in ways perhaps nobody could have ever predicted, they transformed our lives. They have made it possible for every Indian, including the poorest, to return to his *mulak* at least once a year, at a price he can afford. This may not have been exactly what the British had in mind, but this is what actually happened.

Does this mean that we should accept all development indiscriminately? Certainly not. If there are two alternate ways to achieve a goal, of course we should choose the one which is more resource efficient and more gentle on the environment. But we must understand that almost all development involves a certain exploitation of resources, just as conservation implies the reverse. Obviously, what we need to do is not just maximise one extreme or the other, but find the point of balance between the two, i.e. that point of trade-off where both objectives are optimised.

In most cases, that point is surprisingly easy to perceive. For instance, given the need for generating employment and the costs of pollution, it is not very difficult for any of us to identify — and advocate — the point of balance between the two. The irony is that few of us actually, live our lives anywhere near this point of optimal trade-off. In other words, what we advocate and what we do can be two very different things. Thus, while living in the pollution of Bombay, I can advise the poor fishermen and farmers of Alibag to continue to exist as they do right now. But why do I myself live in Bombay — despite the nauseous pollution. Is it the excitement? The power? The money? Each of us should ask ourselves these questions. They are of fundamental importance, not only in human and moral terms, but in economic and pragmatic ones as well.

It is grotesque indeed that people living at a per capita consumption of 20 times or more than the world's average, in New York and Los Angeles (and Paris and London), weep great crocodile tears over the fate of rain forests in Brazil. If we really cared enough about the fate of planet Earth, we would firstly take really drastic steps to cut down the use of resources in our own everyday lives. Secondly, all the polluting countries would offer to pay a tax to Brazil so that she does not have to cut down her rain forests. This money could then be used to raise the standard of living of the poverty-stricken tribes that inhabit the Amazon.

Or to get closer to home, I agree that there are compelling reasons to preserve Silent Valley. But if this is at the expense of producing hydro-electric power (and hence economic growth) in Kerala, then I must ask myself: Living here in the pollution of Bombay, what is my moral right to have an opinion on this Problem? Because of the lack of employment in their own state, thousands and thousands of Keralites are driven to find work in the Gulf, where they live a miserable existence, denied the elementary freedoms. But of course their fate need not concern us at all. What is wonderful is that we have Silent Valley — and we can eat it too, we have Bombay!

No, the fact of the matter is that decisions that involve all of us should be taken exactly that way: by all of us. Those of us who live and work in South Bombay do not have the foggiest notion of what it means to commute up and down twice a day, jammed in overcrowded trains or stuck in never-ending traffic jams. Yet we oppose vehemently (the knee-jerk reaction!) any attempt to ease these journeys. Now that the population of Bombay has crossed ten million, can we honestly believe that we do not need at least one major new north-south artery? Certainly its alignment might involve some reclamation (that word again), but what's wrong with that — as long as the strip of land so gained is used for public purposes — like schools, hospitals, maidans, and all the other amenities this city so desperately needs. And in order to ensure that it is used in an equitable manner, this expressway should be reserved exclusively for public buses during the rush hours (say 9 to 10 every morning and 5.30 to 6.30 every evening). During the rest of the day, there should be reserved bus lanes, free of private cars and taxis.

Still I know, our “environmentalists” will oppose the new artery as a pollutant and a eyesore. Well, regarding pollution, don't they realise that all the lakhs of people who live in Mahim and Dadar will at long last be free of the horrendous petrol fumes caused by hordes of motor vehicles struggling through those congested areas? That's a decisive advantage (unless of course you happen to live in Malabar Hill or Colaba). As for the eyesore bit, all one can ask is: what are the credentials that accompany such opinions? Do they really understand what they are pontificating about? Take a look at Marine Drive. But then again, that would take us back 80 years or so. When things actually got done.