



Movement and the Making and Unmaking of Suburbs in Colonial Bombay

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The ability to move, particularly between the workplace and home, underlies our commonly held assumption about the foundation of salubrious suburbs. In colonial Bombay, I show that the early suburbs were predicated on the ability of tiny European elite to move to different parts of the city according to the seasons. The term “suburbs” was used Marianne Postans in her book on western India as early as 1838. By the mid-nineteenth century their movement would no longer be restricted to the several islands that constituted Bombay. Instead, tracing the governor’s footsteps they would move many miles away, from Bombay to Poona during the monsoons, to Mahabaleshwar after the rains, and back to Bombay for the cool winter season as the seat of governance shifted according to the season. In late nineteenth century Bombay, the growth of the mill industry would force Europeans to retreat to other areas of the city from their former suburban homes, which were now transformed into mill-districts.

In contrast to the freedom of movement that underlay the early foundation of European suburban development in Bombay, Indian suburban development was based on the necessity to flee the crowded and insalubrious native city districts. The bubonic plague that first struck the city in 1896 was most virulent in the native districts of the city, long subject to municipal neglect. After 1896, large numbers of Bombay’s native citizenry were forced to flee their homes each year during the plague season. Moving to different locations, often along the railway lines, they formed small communities that became the foundation of Bombay’s future suburban development. Rather than a planned expansion of the city, this paper shows the centrality of movement – the freedom to move, the inability to move, and being forced to flee – to the suburban development of Bombay.

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