

# DEGRADATION OF URBAN ENVIRONMENT: WHEN RESIDENTS' EXPECTATIONS AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATIONS DO NOT COINCIDE

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## ABSTRACT

The study endeavours to explore the degradation of the urban environment in Mulund, a suburb of Mumbai, in the context of the existing gap between residents' expectations and policy implementation. The results of the study indicate the presence of several urban environmental problems in Mulund. A vast majority of the residents are of the view that the policymakers are ignoring these issues. It is also found that there are not many policies that target the environmental issues of Mulund specifically. Based on these findings the study forwards certain suggestions towards effectively tackling the environmental problems of the area. The application of the suggested measures is expected to be greatly beneficial in bridging the existing gap between residents' expectations and policy implementation to address the urban environmental issues of Mulund.

**Keywords:** *urban, environment, residents' expectation, policy, Mulund, Mumbai, India*

## INTRODUCTION

Urban areas of today are no longer what they used to be a century ago. They have evolved in their essence and character. The urban influence has reached everywhere, transforming the "relationship between countryside and settlements, between rural and urban landscapes, and has created new patterns of interdependency between settlements at all scales" [1]. At present, more than half of the world population is urban and the number is fast increasing. The growing concentration of population in the urban areas is exerting tremendous pressure on urban infrastructure

and the environment [2]. Environmental and habitat-related issues of local, regional, and global scale are being exacerbated because of the population densification [3]. Thus, the urban areas of today have become more vulnerable to hazards and disasters than ever before.

The increased pace of urbanization in the global south has rendered its urban areas "central to the environmental challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" [4]. Thus, it has raised severe concerns across the globe, leading to various policy interventions for combating the crisis. The growing developmental pressure leads to

increased expectations from the local governments to respond with adequate policies to preserve a certain perceived quality of life [5]. However, despite the implementation of various policies, it is often seen that the urban environment continues to exhibit signs of degradation or decay. The existence of the gap between residents' expectations and policy implementation happens to be a major cause behind it. It is necessary to account for residents' expectations because they are the ones to confront these issues on a day-to-day basis with deeper insight into the existing picture. The paper argues that the formulation of policies without accounting for the expectations of the residents cannot be inclusive enough to solve the issues of the urban environment. To establish this, an attempt has been made in this paper to identify the existing gap between residents' expectations and policy implementation in the suburb of Mulund in Mumbai. In recent times, the suburb has undergone tremendous urban growth and transformations. As a result, it has moved past its suburban characteristics, becoming a part of the urban whole of Mumbai. This transformation of Mulund has not only brought about positive changes, such as development and progress, but it has also brought about negative changes, such as degradation of the environment.

The study seeks to achieve the research objectives and answer the associated research questions. These research objectives are as follows:

1. To identify the problems causing degradation of Mulund's urban environment, and
2. To identify and examine the gaps existing between residents' expectations and policy implementation for improving the quality of the urban environment in Mulund.

The research questions associated with the above objectives are given below:

- a) What are the main problems confronting the urban environment of Mulund?

- b) How do the residents view these problems? What are their experiences?
- c) What are the expectations of the residents from the policymakers? How far are the policies formulated by the government in consonance with the expectations of the residents?
- d) How will it be possible to bridge the gap between residents' expectations and policy implementation?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study area

The study was performed in Mulund, an important suburb that lies at the north-eastern edge of Mumbai, India (Figure 1). It forms a part of the T-Ward of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai. The suburb is bounded by the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in the west, the Thane creek in the east, Thane city in the north, and the suburbs of Bhandup and Kanjurmarg in the south. As per the 2011 census, the number of residents in Mulund is 341463 persons [6]. Although a study covering the whole of Mumbai would have been extremely fruitful, due to certain constraints the present study has been limited to the suburb of Mulund.

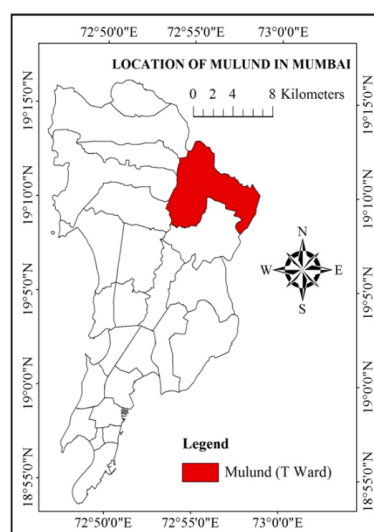


Figure 1. Map showing the location of Mulund (T - Ward) in Mumbai (Source: Prepared by the author using ArcGIS 10.4.1 software)

## Methodology

The study is basically qualitative in nature, in which data of primary and secondary nature were collected, analysed, and synthesized. Primary data was collected directly from the field, using the methods of field observation, and residents' interviews, whereas the collection of secondary data was done by means of an extensive review of relevant books, reports, journals, and news articles. The narratives were collected from the residents by means of the interviews. In the case of qualitative research, it is common to use the saturation criterion to set a point where the data collection is to be discontinued [7]. Accordingly, the interviews were being conducted for the study for as long as the responses received became saturated. The sample selection for the study was guided by the purpose of the study and hence interviewees were selected consciously rather than putting it to chance. The interviews were conducted irrespective of gender, while making it sure that the interviewees belonged to diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The degradation of Mulund's urban environment

The degradation of Mulund's urban environment is associated with the decreasing of its green cover, the encroachment of forestland, growing traffic issues, and unethical garbage disposal in open drains and gutters, etc. Most of these problems are recent and have emerged because of the rapid infrastructural growth in the suburb.

The rapid urban growth and transformation that have taken place in the suburb in recent decades have had an adverse impact on its vegetation cover. Areas that were once covered by greenery now comprise high-rises that have been encroaching land parcels of Mulund piece-by-piece [8]. The residents of the suburb are aware of its decreasing greenery

and the older residents even recall the dense green character of the suburb that has ceased to exist.

A 73 years old resident of Mulund recalling its past greenery narrates:

*"Forty years back there were trees everywhere in Mulund. Houses were very few and the land was very cheap, yet people from other areas of Mumbai didn't prefer settling down here as they thought of the area as jungle."*

The area along the edge of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in the western half of Mulund has witnessed growth in the human settlement, while the forest habitat has faced encroachment. This has led to growing instances of human-animal conflict in the area. Over the years, there have been several cases of animal attacks on the residents and the pets, creating tremendous panic among the people. There is a severe threat of leopard attacks, as "the Sanjay Gandhi National Park is known for its highest density of leopards in the country" [9]. The slums and squatter settlements that have grown up along the encroached areas are the most threatened ones in this regard.

A 53 years old slum resident of Mulund narrates:

*"We live amidst fear of leopard attacks. The recent cases of leopards attacking people have made us really scared, especially if we need to access the common toilet facility at night."*

There are also several open drains and gutters in Mulund that serve as spots for unethical garbage dumping, as well as the flourishing of mosquitoes and flies. The scenario becomes further clear from the narratives given by the residents.

A 37 years old resident narrates:

*"I have seen people dump garbage in the gutters and drains of Mulund. Keeping these uncovered makes it easy for the passers-by and residents to dump their garbage in them. Even educated people can be seen to exhibit*

*such irresponsible behaviour. They don't realize that by doing so they are harming the environment."*

During the rainy season, various areas of Mulund face problems of water logging. The hilly terrain along the Sanjay Gandhi National Park and the consequently decreasing slope from "west to east" brings a heavy flow of runoff that deposit in the low-lying areas of the suburb. Such water logging spots are present along with the Lal Bahadur Shastri Road, Vasudev Balwant Phadke Road, and Navgarh Road, etc.

As narrated by a 57 years old resident:

*"Water logging is a serious issue in Mulund. It occurs along the toll plaza area and makes it difficult for us to drive our vehicles".*

A huge landfill spread across 25 hectares is located in Mulund. This 47-year old dumping ground has long exceeded its capacity and, until recently, it has been a great cause of distress for the residents residing near it. People living near the dumping ground had been complaining due to foul smell, smoke, and vector-borne diseases arising from it.

According to an article published in the Times of India in 2017:

*"The Mulund dumping ground has left citizens gasping for breath, not just because of the horrid stench, but also because of frequent fires which envelop large swathes in thick smoke. The dumping ground has become a health hazard for 3,000 flats of Hariom Nagar, barely 100 meters away."* [10]

This article has depicted the sad plight of the people residing near the Mulund dumping ground effectively.

With the growing population in Mulund, there has also been an increase in the number of vehicle ownership. As a result, over the years traffic issues have grown in the suburb.

As narrated by a 47 years old resident:

*"With the urban growth of Mulund, more and more people have come to reside in the suburb. Vehicles are a symbol of status. So, it is expected for the people living in the high class and middle-class areas of Mulund to own two-wheelers and four-wheelers. Even many slum residents have two-wheelers these days. Thus, traffic problems are growing in Mulund."*

Thus, it is clear that a number of urban environmental issues are confronting Mulund.

### **Residents' expectation and policy implementations**

It is natural for the residents to have expectations from the government. In terms of the degradation of the urban environment in Mulund as well, the residents expect the government to take necessary steps. The residents expect the government to ensure the healthy growth of Mulund's urban environment and to this end they expect the government to take care of the issues confronting the urban environment of Mulund. The issues requiring urgent attention of the government authorities, as identified by the residents are traffic issues, pollution, open drains and gutters, population growth, and deforestation.

However, a majority of the residents (77 %) feel that the policymakers have turned a blind eye towards many of these issues and there is either lack of proper policy or there is a drawback towards policy implementation.

A deeper investigation of the scenario brought the following findings on policy implementation into light:

- Although a number of policies have been implemented by the government in Mulund for the betterment of the suburb, there is a general dearth of policies targeting its urban environmental needs.
- The encroachment of the forestlands by slums and high-rises in Mulund is related to the improper maintenance of land records of the region. This has led to

several legal disputes on land ownership. It is only recently that some of these disputes have been resolved by the Supreme Court's verdicts [11]. However, a lot of damage had already been done. This signifies the need for maintaining proper land records so that any such issues emerging in the future can be easily resolved.

- The annual phenomena of water logging and floods in Mulund indicate the presence of an insufficient water discharge management system, requiring immediate policy action.
- With respect to the presence of open drains and gutters, too, no adequate policy measures have been undertaken.
- After years of conflict over the Mulund Dumping Ground, the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai finally declared its official shut down on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2018. The waste processing is planned to be carried out phase by phase within six years. This reveals a positive scenario in terms of policy implementation.
- The Lal Bahadur Shastri Road that runs from Mulund to Sion is well known for its traffic hassles. The Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai has come up with plans for widening the Lal Bahadur Shastri Road soon [12]. It is another positive sign, as the widening of the road will contribute to the reduction of traffic congestions in Mulund.

the aspect of e-governance can be beneficial in this regard.

- A special cell concerning the environmental problems of the area must be formed with representatives from the government as well as residents.
- Residents must be encouraged to come forward and get involved in the activities to combat the environmental degradation of the suburb.
- The existing issues, such as loss of forest cover, issues of water logging, existence of open drains, and gutters must be addressed at the earliest.
- The damage done by the encroachment of Sanjay Gandhi National Park cannot be undone; however, infallible steps must be taken to ensure that incidences of encroachment do not happen henceforth.
- The closure of the Mulund dumping ground has increased the pressure of waste disposal in the remaining two dumping grounds of Mumbai, i.e., Deonar Landfill and Kanjurmarg Landfill, which are again nearing saturation. Although plans are being processed for allocation of land for setting up new dumpsites, this is hardly a long-term solution. It is high time for setting up recycling plants and "waste to energy" plants to ensure effective management of waste.
- Setting up a system of waste collection where residents can earn incentives on the amount of waste they deposit can serve as a method of involving people more into waste management efforts.

### How to bridge the existing gap?

In order to bridge the existing gap between residents' expectations and policy implementation to address the environmental issues of the suburb, the following measures are suggested:

- Residents' expectations from the policymakers must be given due attention prior to the formulation of policies.
- A sound mechanism of interaction between residents and government agencies must be initiated. Strengthening

### CONCLUSION

The study brings to light the urban environmental problems of Mulund, namely, decreasing green cover, the encroachment of forestland, growing issues of traffic, and unethical garbage disposal. Furthermore, it identifies the gaps existing between residents' expectations and policy implementation. It is revealed that the residents on the one hand expect the local government to take care of these issues, while, on the other hand, a vast



majority of them feel that the policymakers are ignoring these issues. It is also found that there are not many policies that target the environmental issues of Mulund specifically. As the study brings to light the nature of this existing gap, understanding these issues will facilitate the process of formulating relevant policies for combating the degradation of Mulund's urban environment. Stressing on the need to bridge this gap, the study has proposed certain measures, such as initiating a healthy mechanism of interaction between residents and government agencies, setting up a special cell comprising representatives from the government and residents to deal with the environmental problems of the area, and undertaking infallible measures to stop the encroachment of forest land. Moreover, the key to effective amelioration of urban environmental problems lies at the timely implementation of effective urban policies. Therefore, it is highly necessary to address these issues soon enough before the problems go beyond control.

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