Churches of Greater Mumbai – a physio-cultural appraisal

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Abstract. Greater Mumbai is a mosaic of diverse languages, cultures and religions. Churches in Mumbai reflect the long association of Mumbai City and Salsette Island which comprise the present day Greater Mumbai. The churches of Greater Mumbai are relics of art, architecture and culture, as well as multi-lingual and religious tolerance. They enjoy a great history which dates back to the 16th century. With the coming of the Portuguese and British, the churches and their surrounding environment have undergone a spatial and temporal change to withstand the needs of the society with increasing population and prevalent intra-urban migration. The contributions of East Indians, Goans, Mangaloreans, Tamilians and Keralites to the progress and development of the Church in the area is immense. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the environmental history of the churches chronologically with sketches and maps. The study also analyses the geographical background and population composition in and around the churches. It brings out the emerging spatial pattern of churches in Greater Mumbai as well as the changes that have taken place over a period of time. Moreover, the paper describes the contribution of sociofugal and sociopetal forces for generating the socio-environmental scenario in the contemporary spatial framework.

Contents:

1. Introduction

Greater Mumbai is a mixture of diverse cultures and religions. As different religions have to assert their identity, it is important to know the truth behind the origin, development and changes that have taken place within and outside the church premises. The sociopetal and sociofugal forces responsible for the changes have generated a socio-environ-mental scenario in the contemporary socio-spatial framework of Greater Mumbai. Little is known about the Christian community on the West Coast of India until the beginning of the 14th c. In the 3rd c., North Konkan (Western India), received the Gospel in apostolic times through the teachings of St. Bartholomew (The Catholic Directory of the Archdiocese of Bombay, 1982).
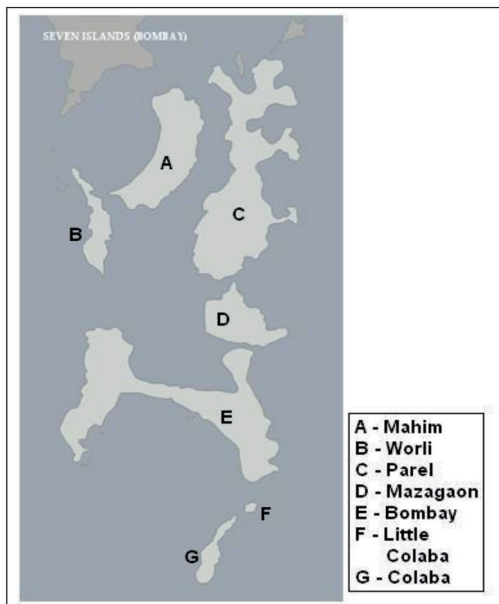
Fig. 1. Seven Islands of Bombay

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of _ Mumbai
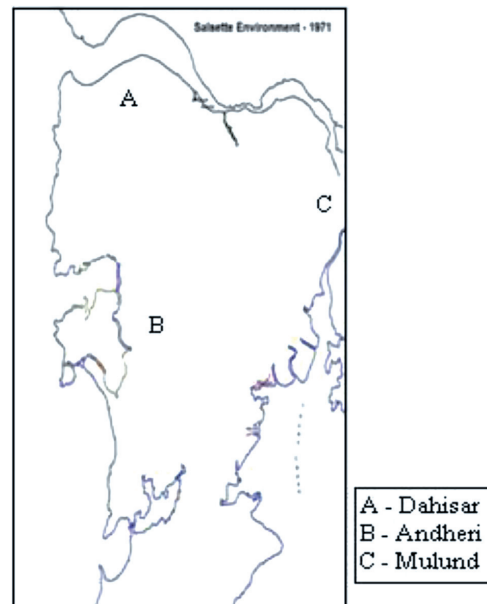
Fig. 2. Salsette Environment

Source: Survey of India, Toposheet 1971 -47E/3,47A/15,47A/11

The first Christians in North Konkan were casual merchants who came there from other Christian countries. In the 6th c., Kalyan in the north-east of Mumbai had a Bishop appointed from Persia, while Chaul to the south of Mumbai had Christians in the 10th c. As there were seven islands of Mumbai City, they were called Heptanesia. The southernmost of them was a narrow promontory of a rocky island known as Colaba. In a close proximity to it was a triangular island known as Old Woman's Island; further to the north-west was Mazgaon, to the north of it – Parel, to the west of Parel was the island of Mahim and to the southwest of Mahim, Worli. The four islands of Mazgaon, Parel, Mahim and Worli were surrounded by marshes. These seven islands (later known as Seven Islands of Mumbai) were inhabited from earliest times by the Kolis, the original inhabitants of Mumbai.

Even before the Christian era there were considerable trade links between India, Persia, Syria and Egypt in precious stones, muslins, pepper and spic-

es, undertaken both by land and sea. Sopara was the most famous port on the Western Coast.

However, it was observed that during the reigns of the Silhara Kings (810–1260) their kingdoms contained many mosques, churches, synagogues and fire temples. The Muslim Commandant, having his headquarters at Thane, destroyed a number of Hindu temples and Christian churches, according to the reports of a French Dominican Friar, Jourdain de Severac. He landed at Thane at the end of 1320, accompanied by four Franciscans (Blessed Thomas of Tolentino, James of Padua, Peter of Siena and Brother Demetrius of Tiflis). These Franciscans were murdered by the Muslim Governor of Thane on 9 March 1321 and are now known as the Martyrs of Thane.

According to Jourdain, the Christian community and settlements were dispersed. He himself visited Sopara in Bassein (now Vasai), where he found a small Christian community with a church. He baptised about 90 people there. A little later he baptised 115 people in Broach and 35 between Thane and Sopara.

The Indian Church, whether in the North Konkan or Malabar, witnessed the 'dark age' between the 9th c. and the beginning of the 14th c. The Christians were then reduced to "nominal Christians". It can be stated that the evangelising activities in Thane and Sopara constituted the first mission of Rome in the North Konkan – the first Roman Catholic Missionary in India. In the 14th c. the Christians of Europe did believe in the survival of an ancient Christianity on the Western Coast of India.

This account of the early times may be concluded with the story of the martyrdoms of St. Bartholomew and St. Thomas. However, the apostolic origin of Christianity in the North-Konkan is still disputed by some scholars.

Apart from being a sacred place of worship, the churches of Mumbai are a rich repository of architectural specimens. The contributions of East Indians, Goans, Mangaloreans, Tamilians and Keralites to the progress and development of Church is immense.

The study is an attempt to highlight the changing urban environment with reference to churches in the various time periods in Greater Mumbai. Greater Mumbai constitutes of the City Island and Salsette Island (Fig. 1 and 2). Today, the City Island

(Mumbai City District) and its extended suburbs (Mumbai Suburban District) are known as Greater Mumbai. At present, Greater Mumbai occupies an area of 481.5 sq. km, out of which the city proper on the main island covers an area of 67.3 sq. km, while the rest is taken by the inner and outer suburbs.

2.   Compilation of the database and documentation

The data were collected on the basis of field visits to the churches and studies of the available documentation. There were about 20 church records collected for the purpose of this investigative study. The collected data were analysed and represented through maps. The spatial analysis of the churches revealed the environmental history.
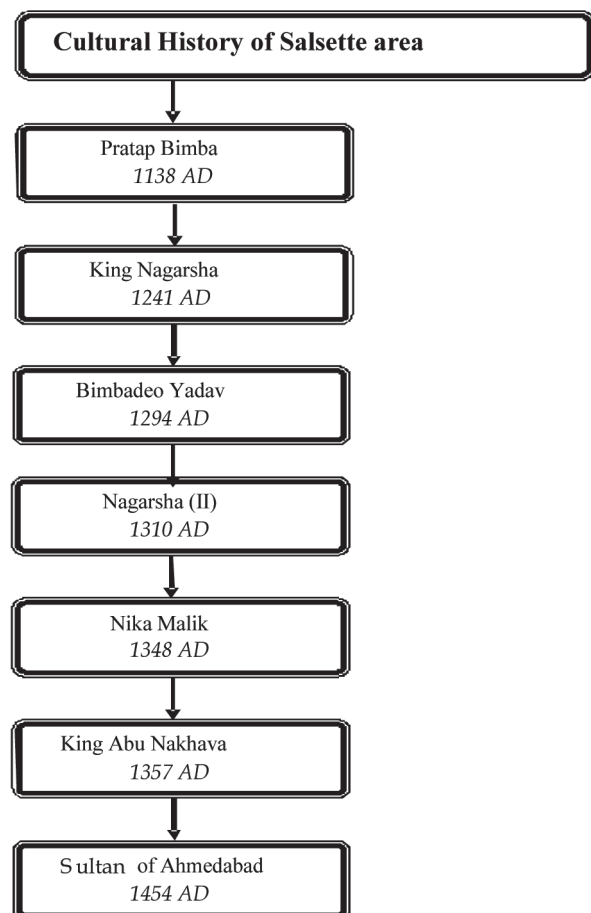

Fig. 3. Cultural History of Salsette Area

Source: Authors' own compilation

There were four small Rajas holdings in the Salsette area. Most of the region was wild and scarcely populated. Prosperity, enjoyed by the people during the height of the Silhara Kings, was gone. Therefore, Pratap Bimba, the younger brother of Govardhana Bimba of Champaner, decided to repopulate the region. In 1138 he marched with an army of 10,000 horsemen, accompanied by one Naikrao as his chief of the staff and Raghunathrao as his minister. Pratap Bimba did not require more than two months completing the conquest from Daman to Walukeshwar. Then, he established his capital at Deerghipati, renaming it Mahikavati (Mahim). As a result, Pratap Bimba established his power in Shasti and the Seven Islands, where he ordered 66 different families from Champaner and Paithan to be settled there. His son, Mahi Bimba, brought to the islands the following: 27 families of Somavamshi dynasty, 12 of Suryavamshi dynasty and 9 of Sheshavamshi (bhandari) caste. It is believed that the name Salsette is derived from the word *Shasti*, which in Marathi is Sahasashta that could be the 66 families which king Bimba brought from Paithan. PratapBimba and his successors gave peace and prosperity to the land (Joshi, 1956). They were occasionally disturbed by other Rajas but they successfully defeated them andestablished their power on the islands. All the villages are south of the Bassein Creek.

In 1241 Nagarsha, the King of Ghanadivi, attacked Janardan Pant, the Prime Minister of Keshavdev, who was the son of Mahi Bimba. The power passed on to the hands of Janardan Pant as Keshav died without a male successor. King Nagarsha became the ruler of Mahim and all the Shasti islands (Fig. 3). By 1294 Bimbadeo Yadavhad attacked Konkan. Bimbadeo Yadav was succeeded by his son Pratapsha. Tripur Kumar and his son Nagarsha II attacked the forces of Pratapshain around 1310. Nagarsha II was helped by one Jaitchuri and his son Bhagadchuri. Bhagadchuri invited Muslim Nika Malik of Wadnagar to attach the domain of Nagarsha. Nika Malik, who was waiting for such an opportunity, destroyed the forces of Nagarshain 1348. With this defeat the Hindu dominion ended. After the death of Nika Malik, the Seven Islands and Shasti were handed over to the Nayate King Abu Nakhava in 1357. Dafarkhan, the son of Ahmedshah and the sultan of Ahmedabad, conquered Mahim. It was during this time that the independent

kingdom of Mahikavati (Mahim) came to a close and the Ahmedabad Sultans began to rule the land. The independent principality of Mahikavati, which consisted of the Seven Islands and Shasti and was first established in 1138 by Pratap Bimba, was thus merged under the rule of the Sultans of Ahmedabad in 1454.

Mumbai is situated on an off-shore island group (Seven Islands) off the mouth of the Ulhas River. These islands were covered by fishing hamlets. In fact, these islands were discovered by the Portuguese as a site for a good natural harbour, but were given to the British in 1661 as a part of a marriage dowry.

3.   Characteristic of Salsette

Originally, the entire coastal environment was a mosaic of tidal inlets with mangrove, mudflats, salt marshes, islands, inlets, creeks, hillocks and estuaries.

Slow siltation, over the centuries of carrying a heavy sediment discharge during monsoon downpours, was a result of intensive deforestation. Urban development has led to massive land reclamation and today approximately 20% of Salsette is a result of this process. Thus, the present day configuration of Salsette is a product of a succession of land reclamation andcoastal area siltation which joined island areas together. Salsette itself substantially increased its areal extent through the welding of Trombay and a number of outlying islands like Versova and Madh with the Mainland Salsette in the early part of the 20th c. This region was inhabited from the earliest times by fishermen and agriculturists, mainly the Agris, Kolis and Bhandaris.

4.   Churches in Greater Mumbai

4.1.   Environmental history of churches in Greater Mumbai

Mumbai, the capital of Maharashtra and the commercial capital of India, is located onthe western coast of India at the intersection of the latitude of

18°53'45"N and the longitude of 72°52'E, spreading over an area of 437.71 sq.km.

The major geographical characteristics is the insular site, which originally consisted of seven islands of Colaba, Mazgaon, Old Woman's Island, Wadala, Mahim, Parel and Bombay. The significance of reclamation was realised in the 17th c. and the original Seven Islands were merged with each other over time. As a result, in the 1950s the administrative boundary was extended into Salsette, which was already connected to the City Island through two causeways at Sion and Mahim.

Churches found theirplace in such surroundings. Most of the churches are located in and around *gaothans* (local name for a village). The surrounding lands were basically marshy area, jungle land, paddy fields, ponds, creeks, coconut groves and mudflats.The only solution to linking these areas was reclaiming them. Churches were built around such reclaimed areas.

4.2. Churches and the urban landscape

The oldest churches in Greater Mumbai are located in the Salsette region. Out of 86 churches in Greater Mumbai 25 are located in the City Island area while 61 are located in the Suburban Salsette region. The oldest churches, which were erected around the 16th c., are in the Salsette region.

The Catholic population is in a steady decline in certain districtsof Greater Mumbai, some of the main reasons being migration to the neighbouring district. Catholic youth migrating to other countries, and certain areas having a large population of senior citizens which is reflected inthe socio-economic environment. The birth-death rate reflects the socio-economic progress made by the community. In this direction, the Church spreads the message that every individual should enjoy a quality life. Taking this into consideration certain middle-class couples opt for a single child.
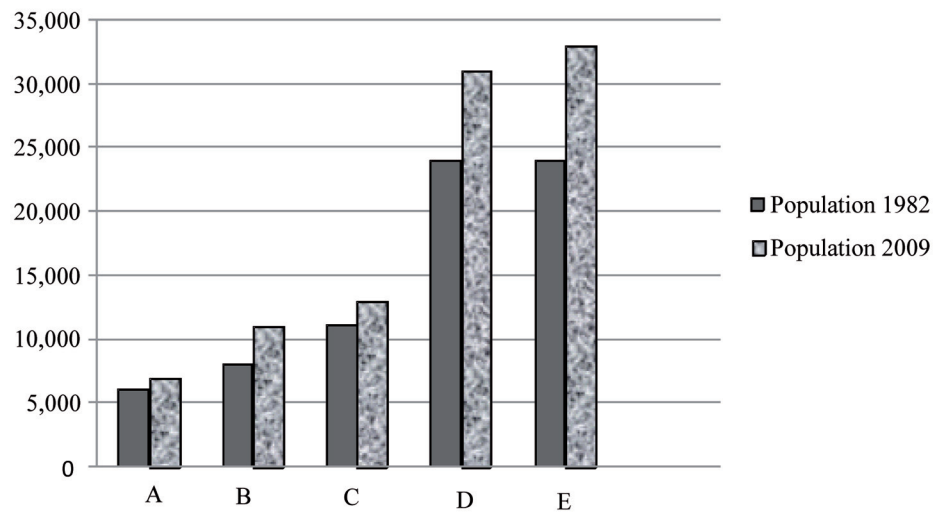
4.3. Churches
and the social environment

Churches have always played a vital role in the socio-economic development of the landscape surrounding them. They have been institutes of education, health, social welfare, non-formal education, special education, counselling and culture. In the early times of Mumbai, within three centuries, seven west-coast islands had evolved into the Bombay Peninsula, then into a flourishing trade centre, ultimately becoming the cosmopolitan, high rise metropolis of Mumbai.

From the 16th to 21stc. Mumbai's land use pattern has changed from coconut gardens, rice fields and fishing villages to cotton mills, docks and railways in the 19thc. and, more recently, to shopping malls, skyscrapers and urban slums (Dossal, 2010). In earlier times Mumbai reflected physical features such as swamps, mudflats, islands, rivers and their tributaries, lakes, forests and hillocks. Churches in Mumbai were located amidst these serene surroundings from the 16thc. There were 21 churches located in Greater Mumbai from the 15th to 17thc. (Fig. 4 and 5). Most of these churches were surrounded by mangrove and swamps which were reclaimed later on with the passage of time.

In 1924 Salsette was privileged to have physical features such as reserved forests, mudflats, salt-marshes, creeks, hillocks and lakes (Fig. 6). Churches found their locations in such setting. Most of thechurches were located in and around the 66 villages (Shasti) which were mainly *gaothans*. This clearly reflects that the 66 villages played a major role in the location of churches.These were regions which already had a settlement base so it was important for religious institutes to be constructed. Such villages often formed a central nucleus. The gaothans in the west of Mumbai had a larger number of churches compared to the east part.

The year 1971 reflects a major change in the landuse pattern of Salsette (Fig. 7). Most of the areas which were formerly covered by marshes were converted into saltpans. This may be due to economic necessity. Massive reclamation took place in and around the Salsette region. The number of churches also increased around the Shasti region.By 1971 there were 41 churches in Salsette, all located in the surroundings of the 66 villages. Reclamation and redevelopment has lead to the dissappearance of certain villages. The rural landscape was steadily being transformed into an urban landscape.

Fig. 4. Population size the in Salsette region

Explanation: A – 16th century, B – 17th century, C – 19th century, D – 20th century, E – 21th century

Source: Authors own compilation

	A	B	C	D	E
no of churches	9	15	20	57	61
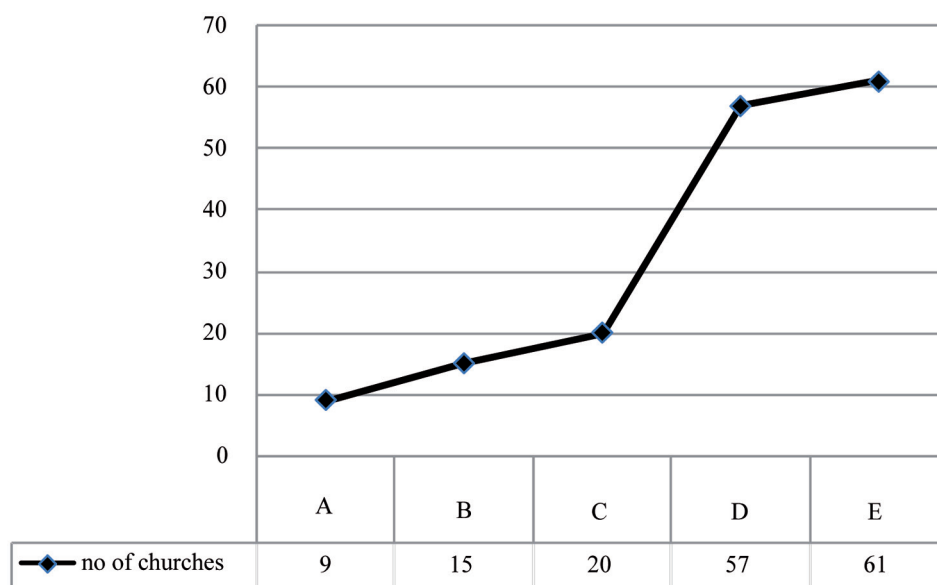
Fig. 5. Number of churches in various centuries in Salsette region

Explanation: A – 16th century, B – 17th century, C – 19th century, D – 20th century, E – 21th century

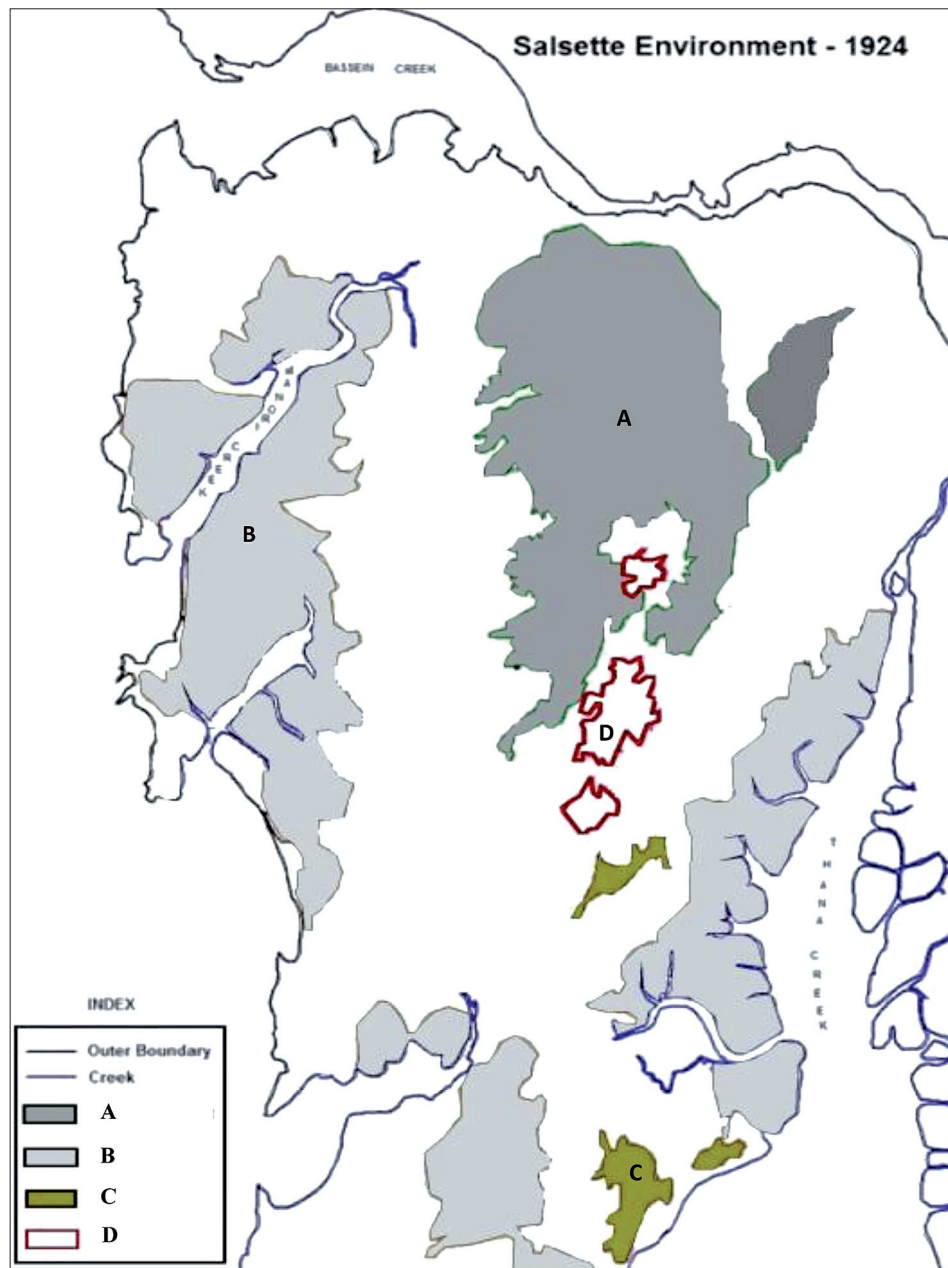*Source*: Authors' own compilation

Fig. 6. Salsette'senvironment-1924

Explanation: A – reserved forests, B – mud and marsh, C – hillock, D – lake
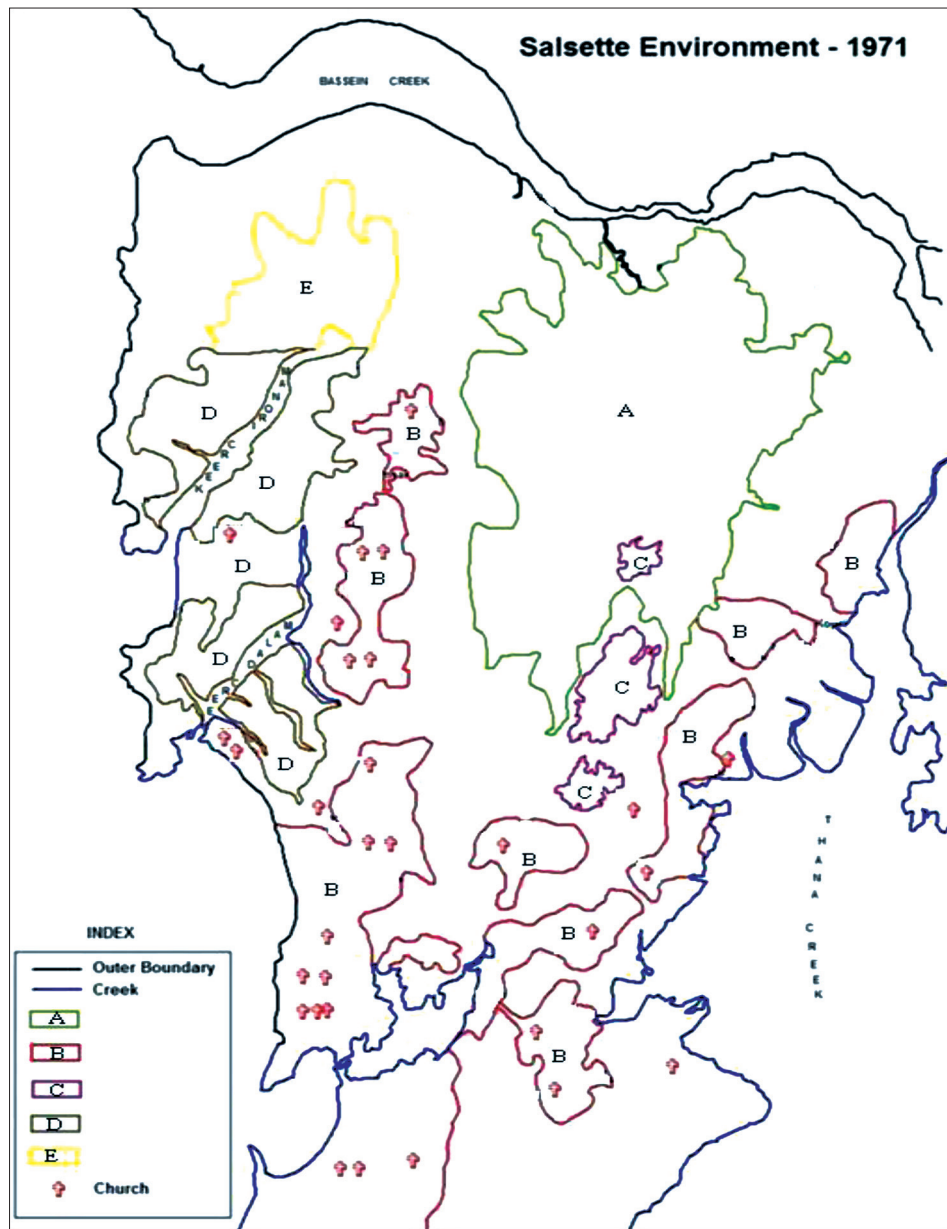
Source: Authors' own compilation

Fig. 7. Salsette's environment-1971

Explanation: A – forest, B – city, C – lake, D – mud and marsh, E – salt pan

Source: Authors' own compilation

Bombay Island originally consisted of seven islands separated by creeks. But in the Portuguese times theywere mostly closed up, and there remained only a lagoon of marshy land in the middle, partly used for rice fields, but partly flooded by the sea. In about 1800 this lagoon was reclaimed by the building of causeways and,in the course of time, filled in and built upon. Four larger churches (St. Michael's, Salvagao, Gloria and Esperanga) and two smaller ones (Parel and Sion) were built by the Portuguese before the English came in 1665. Later the next oneswere founded, e.g. Rosary Church, Mazgaon (1794), Cavel Chapel (1794) and the Colaba Hospice (1823).

From 1634 to 1720 the Portuguese Franciscans and secular clergy were in possession of the Island

of Bombay. In 1720 the Franciscans were expelled and the Vicar-Apostolic with his Carmelites took over their place. In 1789 the whole island reverted to the Goa jurisdiction, but this act was reversed in 1791 and the Carmelites were wholly restored. Finally, with a view to suiting both parties, the churches were divided between the Goa clergy and the Carmelites, and by this means the famous "double jurisdiction" was introduced in 1794. Various conflicts arose between the two jurisdictions and churches passed from one to the other until 1862, when the status quo was established. Finally, by the Concordat settlement of 1880, each party was confirmed in possession of what it actually had. The island itself was territorially consigned to the (Propaganda) (1) Archbishop of Bombay but the (Padroado) (2) Bishop of Damaun retained the churches then in the possession of Padroado, and personal jurisdiction over the congregations attached to them, as well as over subjects of Goan and Portuguese origin coming to the Island of Bombay.

Salsette had about 27 churches. Bombay had 4 churches and 2 chapels. These were built mostly between the years 1534 and 1650, and a few others between 1650 and 1700. Their founders were mainly the four great missionary orders–Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans and Augustinians, and afterwards the Hospitallers of St. John of God.

After the Maratha conquest (1739) some of the churches were destroyed and others became dilapidated and fell into ruins. When the districts came under the British rule (1780–1800) there was a revival and many of the old churches were repaired, or smaller ones built out of the debris. In modern times, further renovation took place and new churches were gradually added.

The great period of mission-founding, as indicated by church-buildings, took place between 1534 and 1600. During this period the vast majority of the churches now in existence were erected. Comparatively few churches were built between 1600 and 1650, still fewer between 1650 and 1700, and possibly one after that date. After the destruction of churches by the Marathas in about 1740, there seems to have been at least half a century of desolation, during which many Christians were reabsorbed into Hinduism. The re-building of old churches, or the foundation of new ones, began in quite recent times. One or two churches were built

between 1780 and 1800, followed by a few more between 1800 and 1850, and a few more again between 1850 and 1886.

The number of Portuguese who came to the island was small indeed. S.M. Edwardes states that in 1634 there were only eleven Portuguese married settlers in the Bombay part of the island, which number probably did not increase much by 1665. As to the natives, the conversions are said to have been chiefly among the Koli caste scattered all over the island, as well as among the Bhandaris, who were perhaps the first to enter the Church. Some of these converts were organised by the English into a Christian Militia which was retained until the growth of a native army and the appointment of the local police which rendered their services no longer necessary. The Kolis of Cavel were the first parishioners on the Esplanade. Small numbers of Portuguese were scattered around Mazgaon and Mahim, and there were communities of converts living on the Jesuit estates of Parel and Naigaon. The Christian population formed a considerable proportion of the total population of 10,000, and the Indian converts contributed largely to the rise and development of Bombay – "Thousands of Indian families" – writes Dr da Cunha – "had been converted by the Portuguese to Christianity; and it was from them that the early British government drew its supplies of clerks, assistants and secretaries" (Da Cunha, 1900, pp.: 232–233). They were the first fruits of the instruction and education imparted to them by the Portuguese priests; at a time, moreover, when there was hardly a Hindu, Moslem or Parsi who could read the Roman characters. And they were the early instruments for spreading the influence of the new rule among the natives of Western India, or the first helpers to the expansion of the British power throughout the country."

5. Conclusion

Churches in Greater Mumbai were basically located in *gaothans*. Most of the population in these *gaothans* were fishermen or farmers. With the passage of time the physical as well as social environment of the *gaothans* have undergone a change due to increasing urbanisation and the changing social

mindset of the people. Redevelopment of *gaothans* at a microscale has changed the landscape of the entire region which now reflects a vertical growth.

The metropolitanisation of Greater Mumbai has led to in-migration as well as out-migration of different ethnic groups. The space crunch is the most vital reason for the conversion of the original *gaothans* into highrises. Some *gaothans* still exist while others have been replaced by skyscrapers.

The social environment has also undergone a profound change. *Gaothans* were originally closely knit which formed small nuclei. These communities were mostly joint families but with the change in social attitude, most of the young generation prefers to stay in nucleated families. The Salsette region thus reflects a changing scenario in a spatial framework, in terms of the physical as well as social environment in the years to come.

The physical structure of churches is also undergoing redevelopment due to which the heritage value is lost. Preservation of such relics of the past can only relate back to history making Mumbai a geohistorical anthropological museum and a true centre of diverse varieties and types of mankind, far surpassing the mixed nationalities.

Notes

(1) Propaganda was a congregation established in 1662 for the propagation of the faith (*de propaganda fide*) in Rome.

(2) The Portuguese word "*padroado*" means royal patronage, under the King of Portugal. The King used to nominate candidates for bishops who were later approved by Vatican; all missionary expenses were borne by the King of Portugal.

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