



ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS: POSITIONING ‘AAREY’ AS A REFLECTION

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Abstract:

Reduction of green cover in mega cities is evident throughout the world and across the country. Mumbai is one such city experiencing rapid loss of green cover. The city’s green cover has been reduced to less than 13% owing to loss of land to various ‘developmental’ projects. The loss of green cover is often justified under ‘creative destruction’. The destruction should be seen at the backdrop of consequences of climate change faced by the city like seawater intrusion, urban heat island, flash floods and so on.

There has been increasing awareness about climate change and deforestation in younger population compared to the earlier generations. The same has been reflected through the environmental movement ‘Save Aarey’ recently. It was observed that India’s most important economic centre is taking down the city’s last remaining green spaces too. The 13000 hectares Aarey colony forest which is habitat to tribal villages and several animal species has been facing the threat of getting destroyed. The Mumbai civic body has approved the proposal of Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation to cut down over 2700 trees from Aarey colony in order to build a carshed for the metro. There has been a huge outcry to save the forest. The entire issue has been politicised with the entry of various political fronts.

The research was undertaken to understand what is the reaction of younger population to the politics of Aarey and what are the preferences of younger generation regarding environmental conservation. The research also attempts at capturing the dilemma of development vs. conservation. Primary data has been collected to substantiate the research findings. The research finally attempts in positioning the case of ‘Aarey’ in current environmental politics in the city of Mumbai.

Key Word : *Save Arey, Younger population, Green Cover, Climate Change, Deforestation,*

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Introduction:

Today, about 56% of the world population lives in cities. This trend of urban population is expected to continue in the upcoming decades. As urbanization has become a prime concern, to get fit in the “development” era. As this trend goes on, by 2050 out of 10, 7 will live

in cities. Megacities are said to be homogenized in their reorganization of urban space, but the reality check is different (Phadke,2014). Urbanization process is consuming the residual green cover that is left in the city region. Mumbai is one of these megacities experiencing a swift loss in its green cover. The

increasing pressure of urbanization in a city like Mumbai which is already overstuffed along with growing demands for more housing and infrastructure, is taking down the last remaining greenery of the city. The Aarey forest referred to as the lungs of Mumbai which inhabited several animal species and also habitat to the tribal village is at the point of destruction. The city has lost about 2028 hectares of urban tree cover in the last 5 years and further 2141 trees have been cut down in Aarey colony alone (Hindustan Times, 2022). The 13000 hectares Aarey forest a suburb located in Goregaon has become a centre of controversy since 2019, when the Mumbai civic body got approved the proposal of Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation (MMRC) to clear down 2700 trees in order to build a carshed for the metro(Hindustantimes,2022). The loss of green cover is often justified under “Creative destruction”, but the consequence that comes after is not curable. The Mumbai megacity is already facing such consequences as a result of deforestation of forest, wetlands, mangroves, and so on. The city also faces certain threat

due to its locality near the coast, it is expected to have extremities like coastal submergence, urban heat island, flash flood, storm water logging; and these problems will be directly affecting the underprivileged group leading to major migrations of these groups in and out the region resulting in Urban Climate refugees. Taking all this into consideration, there is a huge protest taking place in Aarey by the indigenous people along with various environmental groups. The entire scenario is politicised and the decisions keep on changing with the changing governments.

The politics revolving around Aarey, claims and counterclaims of the government of Maharashtra and those who are opposing the project created a background for the deeper inquiry into the politics of Aarey. In order to understand the common people’s perception and especially of the younger generation, a questionnaire survey was conducted by researchers. Our study was also focused on to know on what people give more importance to development or conserving nature.



Figure1. The journey to save ‘Lungs of Mumbai metropolis, credit: lloydlawcollege.edu.in

Objective:

- To know about the common people’s opinion on the project and the controversy going on.
- How much relevant is this project according to the people.
- Understanding the preferences of common people with reference to development or environment

Methodology and Study Area:

This paper focuses on how the existence of forests is getting affected by urbanization. Aarey forest of Mumbai is taken as a key example as the study area is

focused on Mumbai. To know about the perspectives of people towards the deforestation taking place in Aarey, a questionnaire survey was conducted in the University Campus and Navi Mumbai. Secondary data has been taken from different articles, journals, newspapers, surveys.

Findings:

Even though Aarey forest is the lungs of Mumbai, most of the people are not aware of what is exactly happening behind the controversy. Some of them do not even know about the construction of the metro carshed in Aarey. It was also observed that on the survey taken, 68% were men who were aware of the controversy and only 32% of women were aware about the topic.

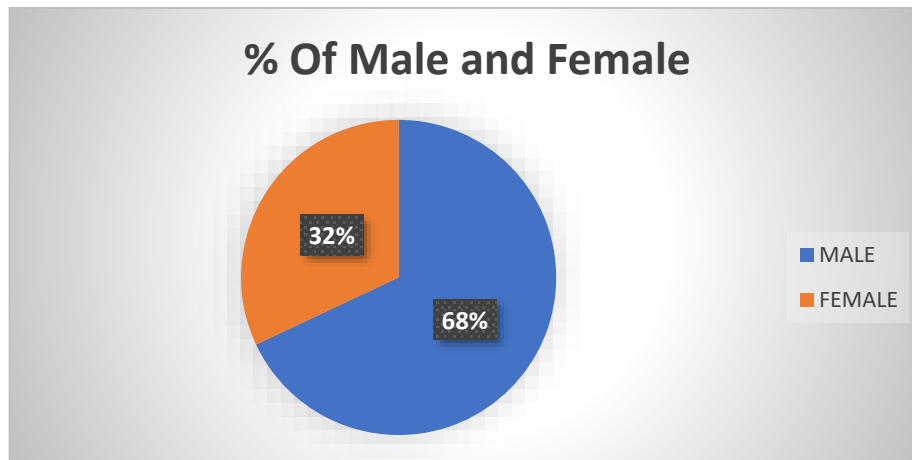


Figure 2: Showing the graph of percentage of male and female who are aware about the Aarey controversy.

- In 2019, the then government on grounds of environment protection decided to shift the carshed to Kanjurmarg from Aarey colony. People had mixed opinions about the construction of carshed in which 63% were not supporting construction in Aarey and also if metro carshed is needed, shifting to Kanjurmarg was a better idea according to them.

Shifting of carshed to some outskirts or to areas which are already deforested was one of the suggestions. So that there will be no need to cut more trees and development can also take place. This was reflecting the unwillingness of the people to support deforestation.



People protesting against the cutting down of trees in Aarey, source: TestHostEntry in 2020



- Interestingly, there were about 32% of people who were supporting the idea of “Development” over conserving nature. Their justification of development arrived with the logic of Mumbai being the financial capital of India, development cannot be ignored but conserving nature is equally important.
- Enquiring about the preference of metro over local train, we got about 52% of respondents were found

to be not preferring metro over local trains. About 17% of the respondents preferred opinions other than metro and local trains. 31% said YES that they will prefer metro. Mumbai is a city with a high network of local trains and which are less expensive than the metro. The same gets reflected through the responses that were collected for this question to get a perception on how much influence the metro can have in common people’s life.

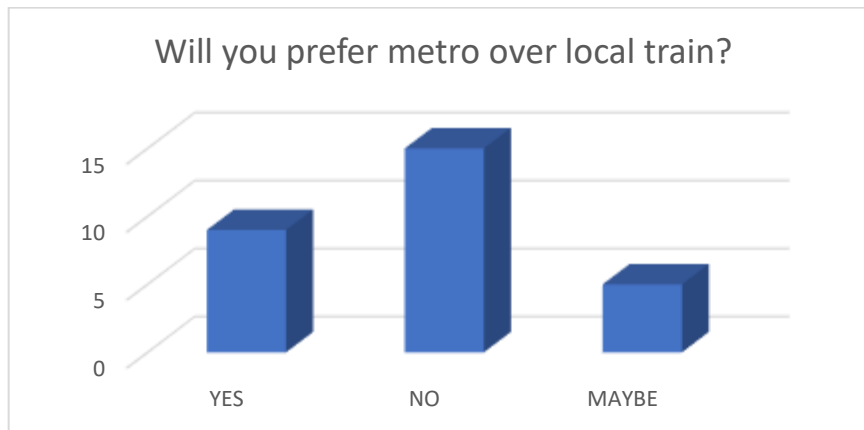


Figure 4: Graph showing will people prefer metro over local trains

Another gripping finding was around 75% of people were not ready to talk against the government indicating some fear in their mind about freedom of expression. They were also unsure about the kind of change such developments would really bring to their lives, either in the form of better infrastructure and improved standard of life or are they going to have lives more miserable? The helplessness about having

no rights to influence the pattern of development, participation in decision making, political representations and engagements People was expressed by almost all the respondents.

- A suggestion regarding underground metro as an alternative for overhead metro to reduce the traffic congestions and environmental destruction was also given by the respondents.

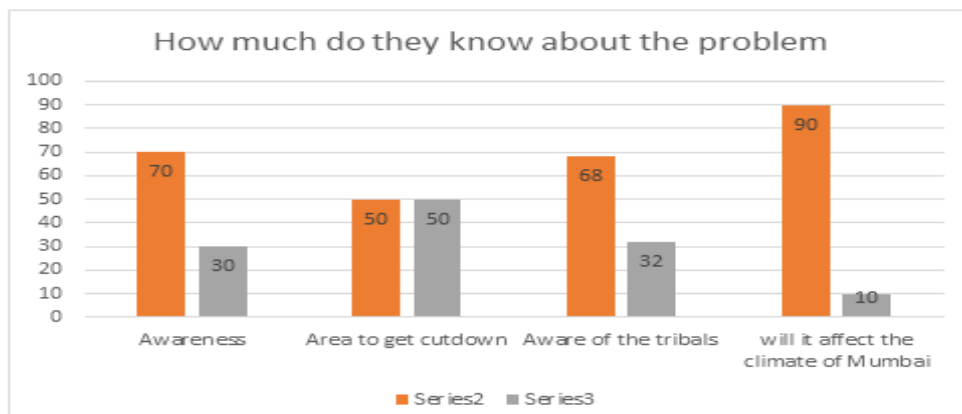


Figure 5. Showing the public awareness about the controversy related to Aarey



The ground truthing about Aarey forest and Sanjay Gandhi National Park revealed that the question of tribal population living for generations in the conflicted area is much more severe. They are not even getting the basic amenities like proper shelter, water and electricity. They fear that the crashed construction would also take away their land which is their only asset. While the middle class people are running behind better lifestyle, infrastructure and development, these people are living in fear, when they will be kicked out of their homeland.

Conclusion:

The debate on development and conserving nature is perpetual. It is understood that conservation and development both embrace the notion of human development. Though it is portrayed as antonyms, they are not against each other if the process of development is corrected to have eco-centricity as its core. There is an awareness now when it comes to balancing conservation and development. Selecting one cannot be the solution as eventually we would compromise both.. Conservation in our country is largely on preserving endangered species. Development comes as a disagreement to this conservation as these areas are

close to growing megacities and require more land to accommodate built environments with new infrastructure in order to serve the growing middle class. The piece that stands out of the puzzle is the millions of people who come below the poverty line. They will remain below the radar of this type of development as their means of production only get most of the time sacrificed for the development. Deforestation leads not only to deterioration of forest but also the tribes depending on the forest as a source of food, fuel and security.

Development is actually a “Necessary Evil”, it cannot be neglected nor to be given extra importance. It is needed but should not be like without any control on exploiting nature.

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