

think

FOCUS

A CLOSE LOOK AT THE ISSUES THAT MATTER

DON'T URBANISE ME

LITTLE FARMS versus big buildings. Gram panchayat versus municipal corporation. Vasai's villagers protested on the city's sealink two weeks ago as part of their larger struggle to save their rural ecosphere and to define progress for themselves

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VASAI: Neelam Lopez, 55, believes her life has been picture-perfect. She grew up in a modest bungalow in the heart of rural Vasai, with the family's rice fields, fruit farms, cattle and poultry for company.

Now married into a similar household in the neighbouring village, she goes to the local church at dawn, teaches at an English school by day, helps her in-laws on the farms in the evenings, and on weekends, takes her eight-year-old son to Vasai Fort or the beach.

But this rosy snapshot is now threatening to fade. Vasai, 70 km north of a booming Mumbai, is often called mini-Goa by visitors, but change is hurtling towards it at a speed that its gram panchayat-run villagers are not willing to accept.

For the past two years, the indigenous residents of rural Vasai have been fighting desperately to save their land from being included in the two-year-old Vasai-Virar Municipal Corporation (VVMC), resorting to everything from hunger strikes to suffering lathi-charge for mass protests.

"Why do we need to be urbanised?" asked Lopez, speaking in chaste East Indian Marathi. "For the government, development means erecting a concrete jungle, but we have lived on this green land for centuries, and only ask for development of our agriculture."

In a 2009 gram sabha resolution, 49 of Vasai's 53 villages unanimously opted out of the proposed corporation. In March 2010, the state government decided to exclude 85 of those villages from the VVMC, but failed to act upon the order till nearly 2,000 agitators made headlines two weeks ago with their protest march on the Bandra-Worli sealink.

The government has now freed 29 of the 85 villages, but Lopez's hamlet, Vadavali, happens to be one of the remaining six villages whose fate lies hanging between corporation-style urbanisation and slow-paced, panchayat-style change.

For the villagers, many of whom handle service jobs in Mumbai along with their farming, the 'urban' represents everything that has gone wrong with the cities and townships next door.

"We don't want the land mafia to push us out, like they did in Mira-Bhayander and the Nalasopara sugar panna (municipal council)," said Lina D' Cunha, a member of the Jan Andolan Samiti, the local coalition of several political parties that is fighting for rural Vasai.

Pointing to those dense concrete clusters that line the horizons of Vasai's open plantations, the Samiti's general secretary Dominica Dabre agrees. "In the municipalities of Mumbai, Nalasopara and Mira-Bhayander, unauthorised constructions are on the rise, but we don't let that happen easily in our gram sabhas, because we have more local control," she said.

Peter Dias, former sarpanch of the 6,000 residents of Mulgaoon village, corroborates this claim. Four years ago, he says, the Vasai municipal council acquired 11 acres of his village land for a dumping ground. "I had to fight for six months to get the land back. I don't trust the intentions of big municipalities," said Dias, who finds panchayat governance much easier than the civic body he is trying to put Mulgaoon out of.

WHAT IS A...

MUNICIPAL CORPORATION
A body of civic governance working for the development of a city with a population of more than three lakhs. Corporations are controlled by the state government

MUNICIPAL COUNCIL
A smaller body of governance working for urban centres with a population that is more than 30,000. Councils are subordinate to the corporation.

GRAM PANCHAYAT
A rural body of governance in a village with at least 500 people. The periodic meetings of a panchayat are called gram sabhas.

- ICONS: SITARIX SHAH
- (Top right) Children run down a lane in a typical village in Vasai.
 - (Right) Neelam Lopez and her family walk among the banana trees they grow in the spacious yard outside their bungalow in Vadavali, one of the six villages that are fighting to be excluded from the municipal corporation.
 - (Bottom) Peter Dias, former sarpanch of Mulgaoon, a village that won the district level competition for its quality agricultural produce in 1995

PHOTO: PHARAD BORI

"Here, property disputes and other problems can be resolved faster and more intimately, because people know each other and there is less bureaucracy."

Some town planners such as architect Pallava Lakkar believe that membership to a municipal corporation would mean bigger budgets for administration and more organised development plans, with safeguards against haphazard constructions.

But for Vasai's villagers, seeing is believing. "The roads and drainage systems of Nalasopara's villages are better maintained than those in its municipality section," said Lopez. "So how can urban corporations be the only guarantee of development?"

In the old wooden houses and the newer cement bungalows of Vasai, the words 'development' and 'progress' mean something distinctly different from urbanisation.

Dias, for instance, can tell you how Mulgaoon progressed from being the best sugarcane producers in the taluka in the 1960s and 70s to winning the first prize for quality farm produce in the 1996 Thane district competition. He can talk of the farmers' eagerness to adopt new agricultural technology, of the five-year-old Cardinal Gracias public hospital built by the local diocese, and of how most Vasai children now attend English-medium schools.

Further afield, locals in Mardesh village can speak about how the recent surge of urban development in the neighbouring towns has coincided with a deterioration in the quality of their produce and a rise in the saltiness of their bore well water.

"We can no longer live completely on agriculture, but this has been our primary occupation



MANY VOICES, MANY VIEWS

MARY FERNADES, resident of Mardesh village
Encroachments by the concrete jungle are slowly destroying our ancient agricultural life. Just 30-40 years ago, my mother-in-law used to cultivate rice in the fields near Nalasopara station, where now you will see only tall buildings. If there are buildings in place of our food, we will have to buy food that we once could just grow. We are humble folk and cannot afford such lifestyle. Last year, when we started protesting against the corporation, men in police uniforms stormed into our village, beating up the women and children. But we are undaunted. We will fight even if it takes our lives.



PALLAVI LAKKAR, architect and town planner
The apprehensions of Vasai's villagers are valid. The current structure of urban planning and governance is conventional, and does not include departments to address the concerns of agriculture and fishing. But that does not mean we do not need planned development - it means we need to improve governance. New amendments and policies accommodating green land use must be introduced, and the VVMC would require a new structure with a focus on environmental planning and administration. To avoid haphazard development, it is important that they come under a municipal corporation, which can ensure planned development.



ALPHI D'SOUZA, head of the Mohai Gaathan Panchayat of East Indian villages
The villages of Vasai have preserved the rich East Indian culture and heritage that has not been able to survive well within Mumbai city. These gaathans have been around for centuries, and urbanisation would kill an ancient community life that needs to be preserved. There is no reason to disturb them. On May 8, we will be launching the Mohai Dhavan of Manori, as a museum showcasing East Indian life. If Vasai is urbanised, this museum will be the only remaining site of culture.

NEERAJ HATEKAR, professor of economics, Mumbai University
At present, the villagers live close to the city, work there and use its amenities - but they don't want to pay urban taxes. Land prices on the outskirts of Mumbai are shooting up and given that the villagers can no longer sustain themselves on agriculture alone, they will eventually find it more lucrative to sell their land to builders offering large sums. A corporation would be a good step, and these villages certainly need a special set of rules to enable the town planners to have some control over their resources.

CHANDRASHEKHAR PRABHU, urban development expert
I have been actively involved in fighting for the cause of the Vasai villages and have written to the government saying that they should not be included in the municipal corporation under any circumstances. Vasai has a fragile ecosystem and in the light of problems caused by global warming, it would serve as a buffer zone for Mumbai in case of natural calamities such as floods or a tsunami. Any development there would adversely affect Mumbai. Besides, gram sabhas are democratic bodies and their decision to keep out of the VVMC must be respected.

VASAI

Vasai, north of the Mira-Bhayander municipal corporation, is a taluka that falls in Thane district.

IT CONSISTS of four former municipal councils - Vasai, Nanchar-Mankori, Nalasopara and Virar - along with 53 panchayat-run villages

IN 2006, the four councils were dissolved to form the larger Vasai-Virar municipal corporation, and of the 53 villages, only four chose to join the corporation



for centuries," said a 58-year-old housewife from Mardesh, who did not wish to be named as she is blacklisted by the Mumbai police for protesting against the VVMC. "A municipal corporation can mean just one thing - our ancestral land will be taken away by builders, we will be forced to change our means of livelihood, and with increase in property taxes, we will also have to move into smaller living spaces."

Rural Vasai now gets water from the state-run Maharashtra Jyvan Pradharan, roads from the District Planning Commission and other state bodies, and electricity from the Maharashtra State Electricity Board.

"A municipal corporation can provide these too, but it has no department that can make provisions for agriculture," said Vinod Pandit, Vasai's independent MLA and president of the Jan Andolan Samiti.

Rajiv Patil, the mayor of VVMC, believes that not being part of the corporation is a loss for the villagers: the current state budget for Vasai's villages is Rs 8 to 4 crore, but Patil claims that the corporation had set aside Rs 40 crore for their development had they been a part of it.

"We were planning to build roads, dunes, buildings, hospitals, playgrounds, trees and even a library in the area, but they have opted out because of politically motivated rumours about a rise in taxes," said Patil, adding that the construction of a 40-metre ring road cutting through some of the villages has been stalled because of their exclusion from the corporation.

But the villagers have just one consistent demand - to allow them the means and opportunity to develop at their own pace. As Ding puts it, "Help us strengthen our agricultural economy and save our green cover, and we will show you that we want development too."

