

The great divide

With Mumbai growing rapidly, many projects with world-class amenities are in the suburbs. So why is South Mumbai still such a prestigious address, asks Archana Sinha

Innumerable tall buildings have come up in the suburbs in recent years, offering world-class amenities, and complete with malls and multiplexes in the vicinity. Essel World, India's first modern amusement park, developed off Malad, has been attracting crowds from across the city. Thane, Navi Mumbai and other areas have developed rapidly, offering a choice of dwellings from villas, to rowhouses and apartments, in sprawling townships.

Despite all this, a sea-side flat on Cuffe Parade or on the Queen's Necklace at Marine Drive seems to be the secret desire of many, and would be the first thing on your wish list. So what if it is astronomically priced!

Rohini Gupta, a writer and a columnist, who is an active member of Mocha film club exclaims, "I live in Marine Drive and will never shift out from here. Life is just perfect. South Mumbai is thriving, culturally and socially. It has all the premium corporate houses; the embassies are here. We have theatres, art galleries, and film clubs, all within five minutes' drive. In summers, when the entire city is steaming, I get a good sea-breeze. It is never hot at Marine Drive."

Ashad Mehta, president of the Oval Maidan Trust and theatre personality Cyrus Dastur, who lives in Tardeo, also feel the same way. Says Mehta. "The exclusivity has everything to do with the royal lifestyle of the British era. During the '40s and '50s and in some cases even before that, the social, intellectual and business activities were concentrated in South Mumbai. All the landmark areas of Mumbai are located here as much as the traditionally reputed schools. There is a charm attached to it, the snob value. And now that there is no space to expand while the demands are high, it is but natural that prices are skyrocketing."

Not just the prices, it's also the attitudes that differ. At spiffy South Mumbai parties, for instance, you are quite likely to hear, "I can't travel by those overcrowded trains. I'd never live beyond Napean Sea road!" Sometimes, they are blissfully unaware of the amenities in the suburbs. When one young lady told an elderly acquaintance that she lived in Chembur, the horrified response was: "But do you get vegetables there!"

Ravi R, living in Cuffe Parade, says: "It is a question of what they are exposed to. South Mumbai residents have never had to face floods, theft and other such dangers. The snob value is not warranted but it exists, like all over the world between customarily acknowledged heritage areas and newly developed ones. It is like the difference between a BMW and Maruti 800. There may be richer people in other parts but it is like living in Beverley Hills in Los Angeles and living in New Jersey."

With plush new business districts developing in the suburbs, the situation has been changing even if it is not very apparent right now. Dastur has many friends who work in Andheri and travel from South Mumbai. They do not cock a snook at the thought of travelling to the suburbs. The recent settlers in the town and the youngsters mingling with their friends from suburbs have a more flexible attitude, he feels.

Vinay Jain, a film and a TV actor who lived all his life in Cuffe Parade, now stays in Powai. "It was practical for me to move to the suburbs, which have all the studios and everything associated with my profession. But I deferred the decision, until I found a good home off Hiranandani Gardens, with a private lake. It is slightly secluded from the main road and very aesthetic in its appeal with lots of green cover."

Vinay is nostalgic about the cultural scene of South Mumbai, but he is happy being in Powai. "Coming to think of it, living in suburbs is quite good. It is complete with all modern amenities, the malls, the multiplexes Basically the reluctance to move from South Mumbai is in the mind; it is more psychological."

Milan Kothary, MD, GVA Intercapitalis, property consultants avers, "Recent growth has seen some good buildings come up in areas that were traditionally under-rated. Lodha's Bellissimo coming up in Lower Parel, is a high-end residential building... Good buildings in the not so hot destinations will become destinations by themselves in future, as they will offer

quality living. At the end of the day, there will be a few people looking at value for money."

Of course, some amount of snobbery is still attached to South Mumbai - the reason being its 400-year-old legacy, which gave the administration enough time to establish what was relevant to the lifestyle then.

Yet, living in South Mumbai has its downside; for instance, one hears of constant parking woes and other problems. Many old buildings also run the risk of short-circuit in the electrical lines, as the wires are old.

The development in the suburbs is recent; it started only around the 1930s and the progress is commendable. Many good shopping centres in the suburbs are attracting crowds from far-flung areas like Worli, Bandra, Khar and other places. Good schools have sprung up and reputed hotel chains and hospitals have bought land for the future. Overall the new areas are promising quality lifestyle in cleaner surroundings with wider roads and better infrastructure.

So while the charm of South Mumbai continues to fascinate people, it is really the new areas that people will prefer over time.

