ABSTRACT

Nature is a phenomenon that has been made and remade through innumerable people-environment interactions. The latter evolved over millennia as communities made resource-use choices to meet needs of subsistence followed by production for exchange and finally accumulation of wealth. These choices involved an ongoing process of organisation and reorganisation of economic, socio-cultural, political and physical space. An important part of emerging landscapes was the creation of central places or cities. These centres depended on, and in turn supported the associated hinterlands through a functionally symbiotic, at times, exploitative relationship. Relationships with the hinterland were however dynamic and changed as urban centres prospered and developed diverse functions: administrative, manufacturing, industrial and financial. These were influenced by the nature of integration of centres and regional spaces within a wider political economy. Since the 1970s the emergence of global cities has however intensified the exploitative and disharmonious relationships between cities and their regions in which urban and associated demands overpower rural needs and requirements. Widening disparity characterises the current hinterlands featuring disjuncture between people and resources that are then fraught with conflicts, contradictions and struggles. Communities are increasingly alienated from their natural environment, get dislocated and disempowered as their lands are appropriated to meet development demands.

The above phenomenon is evolving more rapidly in current times and peri-urban areas have emerged as sites of colonisation and distortion. The wider social, political and economic arrangements that govern these processes need to be understood in order to explain the crisis arising out of the nature of resource extraction taking place with transforming community-environment relationships. Essentially, uneven development and environmental degradation are intricately linked with the placement of local and regional development initiatives that work within a broader context of development discourse. The same has been a major concern in environment-society research for quite some time. Related studies suggest the need to attempt at identifying the basic processes
involved and the structure upon which they rest that may lead to some suggestions for the kind of theory and practice required to promote greater equality.

In India the process of integration of cities, towns and rural areas in the ongoing globalisation process is leading to the rising importance of selected large urban agglomerations. Among these is the emergence of Mumbai as the centre of control within the country with supporting structural changes in the region’s economy and related land use. The evolution of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) is closely linked to the socio-economic history of the wider North Konkan Region of which it is a part. The Konkan region of Maharashtra receives amongst the highest quantities of rainfall (250-300 cm) in the State every year and is ‘naturally gifted’ with numerous freshwater wetlands and lakes. However, from the prevailing planning perspective it seems that the hinterland contiguous to Mumbai city was devoid of people and their livelihood, and only served as a vast repository of natural resources that could be tapped with the most cost-effective technology to solve Mumbai’s growing demand. The infrastructural developments (roads, highways, pipelines, pumping stations, etc.) appear to have served the purpose of enabling more and more extraction of resources from the hinterland. The (mis)use of resources has gone hand in hand with the land grab processes, and reshaping of the land market.

The peri-urban area of Mumbai is part of (and adjoins) the space that has been reconstructed through supposedly ‘planned’ urban development processes. While the entire peri-urban region of Greater Mumbai falls within the MMR, the researcher has taken up a study area in the southern border area of New Mumbai, a special planning region within MMR. The study villages are located both inside and outside the said region. Considering the shrinking of northern boundaries and extension of the southern it would appear that the direction of growing urbanization and rapid change is towards the southern part of the region. The general argument is that a planned urban project should ideally produce more equitable benefits to its populace, and that these villages should stand out in contrast to the level of development in villages outside the project area. Villages in the study region, located in Uran taluka, one of the actively transforming sites within the MMR with large scale corporate investment, have been selected accordingly.
Research Objectives:

1. To examine briefly the process of transformation of nature and evolution of landscape.
2. To historically examine society-environment interactions and growth of economic landscape in the broader regional space with a special focus on the study region.
3. To analyse the trajectory of interventions in the region that have led to transformation of the social, economic, physical and political landscape over time.
4. To briefly study the changing responses of the community to the above process over time.
5. To analyse the implications of the transforming landscape and develop a critique.

The researcher used a multiple case study design with the selection of eight case study villages located in Uran taluka keeping in mind the different patterns of land use and sources of livelihood. Four villages are from within the New Mumbai area – one of which is a relocated village - and four from outside the planned city, in the eastern part of the taluka, where private acquisitions and developments have already begun. A questionnaire survey was undertaken and selected life histories and narratives were collected to understand the dynamics of relations between people and the environment over time. Printed, published and unpublished materials written by people from the study area have been collected to identify people’s ideas and responses to the ongoing transformations. Extensive archival work was also undertaken to understand the conditions created by the specific history of the study region.

The research is discussed in six chapters. In the first chapter, entitled ‘Nature, Resource and Landscape: Transformation and Reconstruction’, the problem identified for study is delineated, based on a review of literature on the transformation of landscapes in general that takes place through interventions in the form of policies and otherwise by various power structures. The contributing factors and processes as well as the perspectives that have developed in order to understand such reconstructed landscapes, are considered. The focus is on the evolution of relationships between people and nature involving a dynamic interaction between changed dealings with the environment and
related accumulation of knowledge regarding nature. The chapter looks at formation of different types of societies as people organised themselves and their labour to meet the requirements of changed relationships linked to the variety of choices made. Human-environment relationships are seen at any one point in time to be part of an ongoing process of change, a product of historical development that leads to evolution of landscapes. The chapter offers a brief review of literature on the above aspects focusing on transformation of landscape, uneven development and city-hinterland relationships. The chapter concludes with an introduction to the study area, identifies objectives of the study and elaborates upon data sources and methodology. Emphasis is on the need to historically situate extant social structures, nature and related features in order to grasp their full meaning and significance for future political agency.

The second chapter, entitled ‘Historical Evolution of a Hinterland: The Case of North Konkan and Uran’, undertakes a phase-wise historical analysis of regional transformations before India’s Independence using archival data and secondary literature. The impact of relationships between local communities, traders, religious establishments and rulers through ancient, medieval, and colonial times is traced. The focus is on the formation of nodal regions and kingdoms that influenced and impacted these interactions. The evolution of different forms of land use, patterns of exchange and settlements that developed in the region as a result of man-environment interaction is outlined. Development of systems of appropriation and extraction of surplus in the region is discussed, in particular. The emergence and transformation of the study region is located within the larger context of key phases of regional transformation. The latter are linked to the shift from a pastoral to an agrarian economy, in turn linked to changing patterns of trade. Emphasis is on variations arising from differences in political economy, changing demand for goods and environmental features, as also rapid technological advances related to water transport and military arsenal that paved the way for expansion of control over land and sea. Replacement of unregulated, demilitarised trade in the Indian Ocean by monopoly over trade with the rise of strong maritime and continental power groups is seen to have led to a reorganisation of the regional economy. The establishment of colonialism, rise of Mumbai city and related factors that led to significant restructuring of
access to natural resources of the area, and therefore access to livelihood and employment opportunities are described and analysed.

The third chapter entitled ‘Post-Independence Reorganisation in the Hinterland: Emerging Socio-Economic Patterns in the Study Region’, details the various socio-economic patterns and livelihoods of the region as they have emerged in the post-Independence period. The policy interventions that have impacted people’s changing relation to their livelihood and environment are described. Emphasis is on implications of the post-Independence growth and development trajectory of Mumbai city for society-nature relationships in the hinterlands. The evolution of Mumbai Metropolitan Region in the 1960s and subsequently, New Mumbai in the 1970s, are discussed as these have directed the relationship between the city and surrounding region that is now undergoing a drastic transformation. The remaking of an independently productive region into a subsidiary source region for the metropolis and, in the post-Independence era, a sub-region that could be subsumed within the imperatives of a globalising city is described. The chapter attempts to trace the broad direction of socio-political and ecological change in the region and identify the forces directing these changes. The focus is on delineating the pattern of differentiation of the regional landscape that also formed the basis for selection of study villages in Uran taluka.

The fourth chapter, entitled ‘Construction, Destruction and Reconstruction of Landscape, Livelihood and Social Groups’, discusses the specific nature of construction, destruction and reconstruction of landscapes, livelihoods and social groups in the study region due to the above-mentioned processes. The complex web of relationships evolved over time to productively utilize the natural resources of the sub-region is traced. The impact of current development processes on these society-nature relationships and the various phases of transition in livelihoods from colonial to current times are described. The changing resource base and evolving systems for survival in the new scenario with the associated influx of people from other impoverished hinterlands have generated complicated dynamics and politics of control. Inter-generational shifts in occupation patterns within families, the distribution pattern of employment opportunities and their implications for various social groups along caste, class and gender lines are
discussed. The commodification of land, labour and nature has been an integral part of this process in which communities have been alienated from their environment. The impact has been varied in different parts of the taluka for which study villages have been chosen from different locations to examine the diverse ways in which people have negotiated the conditions created by the changing city-hinterland relationship. The impact of these processes is also traced in the eastern part of the taluka which today constitutes the site for several current planning projects. The discussion is largely based on the questionnaire survey, life histories and personal narratives from the study region.

The fifth chapter, entitled ‘Transformation of the Landscape: Impact and Responses’, discusses the conflicts and contradictions between the imagined landscape presented through the development and planning process and the landscape that has evolved through spaces of lived interactions. It examines the impact of the transformation on the locals and their response. The history of processes of land acquisition in Uran from pre-Independence times, related andolans and people’s struggles are studied to understand the nature of resistance and the complexity of their efforts at reconstruction. The people’s response has evolved with the shifting trajectories of development in the region, and led to changing relationships with the State, the environment and each other. Although peasant rebellion and protest were not unknown in earlier phases, the colonial, post-colonial and neoliberal phases of state construction and associated dispossession are considered here since they appear to form the points of relatively more drastic change in people’s relations with the environment in subsequent years, with increasing subservience of the region to external forces. The chapter seeks to understand the dynamics of political mobilization and resistance in the context of fragmentation of social structures and destruction of livelihoods that represented historical community-environment interactions. The chapter includes transfer of experiences through oral history, art/folk forms, and music.

In the final chapter, entitled ‘Nature, Community and Livelihoods: Locating Uran in the Larger Discourse’, the thesis seeks to question the processes that promote commoditisation of land and its transformation from an asset of livelihood and identity to an asset of compensation in the new development regime that thoroughly undermines
people’s participation in the development process. The consequences of systematic deprivatization of regional spaces, their resources and ecology-based livelihoods that is an integral part of a holistic development process are also analyzed, taking a critical look at the role of the current development process that is obtaining in the region. This chapter discusses the tenets and processes of land acquisition and the way in which this impinges on people’s land rights and livelihood options. The evolution and trajectory of discourse on land rights and acquisition in India is analysed. The chapter also traces the process of commodification of land and resources and its consequences for people and their relationship with the environment. The resulting transformation of landscape in favour of power structures and evolving discourse on compensation and rehabilitation for the displaced and dispossessed populations is questioned. Finally, the current model of development is critiqued and its implications for peri-urban regions are discussed with a view to identifying alternatives for regional development that promote more sustainable society-nature relationships.