Socio–Cultural Space Of Vasai During Portuguese Era: A Case In Historical Cultural Geography

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Abstract

Changes in the approaches and theories of historical geography in recent times have given rise to the integrated historical cultural geography. It analyses the evolution of socio-cultural space, basically, by examining the time specific power relations embedded in the respective spatial framework of a place. The interactive space of indigenous and exogenous forces, further, renders dynamism to its formation. The planned inception of the socio-cultural traits of the dominant power group in the indigenous social structure leads to processes of interaction and confrontation that finally reproduce a socio-cultural space of a place. In the 16th century, the establishment of Indo-Portuguese trading network led to the rise of cities along the western coast of India. Vasai was one of these cities that came up on the coast of north Konkan. Socio-cultural space of Vasai was produced by interaction and confrontation among culturally heterogeneous groups. Various names given to Vasai at different time periods are an indicator of the process of its changing cultural identity. The latter is also manifested in the innumerable social practices and cultural habits. This paper attempts to examine the formulation of socio-cultural space of Vasai as a product of cross-cultural interaction between the locals and the Portuguese.

Keywords: historical geography, socio-cultural space, loan words

1. INTRODUCTION

Changes in the approaches and theories of historical geography in recent times have given rise to the integrated historical cultural geography. It analyses the evolution of socio-cultural space, basically, by examining the time specific power relations embedded in the respective spatial framework of a place. The interactive space of indigenous and exogenous forces, further, renders dynamism to its formation. The planned inception of the socio-cultural traits of the dominant power group in the indigenous social structure leads to processes of interaction and confrontation that finally reproduce a socio-cultural space of a place. In the 16th century, the establishment of Indo-Portuguese trading network led to the rise of cities along the western coast of India. Vasai was one of these cities that came up on the coast of north Konkan. Socio-cultural space of Vasai was produced by interaction and confrontation among culturally heterogeneous groups. Various names given to Vasai at different time periods are an indicator of the process of its changing cultural identity. The latter is also manifested in the innumerable social practices and cultural habits. This paper attempts to examine the formulation of socio-cultural space of Vasai as a product of cross-cultural interaction between the locals and the Portuguese.

The establishment of Muslim rule in Gujarat in early 14th century led to religious conversion and subsequent outmigration (Chandra, 1997). The migrants went to north Konkan especially to the coastal strip where they mixed with the fishermen (koli) community who had settled all over along the coast. Among those migrated families, some were already converted Muslim families. The above infiltration of population also started taking place in an island located on the bank of the river Ulhas and on the coast of the Arabian Sea. This island was the ancient ‘Vasya’ or ‘Vatsapur’, that is, the
present Vasai. It is interesting to note that the society in this region was feudal prior to Muslim rule. Large-scale conversion by the local Muslim rulers led to in-migration from Gujarat especially Kathiawar and the migrants settled in the prosperous coastal zone of north Konkan. Muslims and Parsees got engaged in the trade of rice, flax, vegetables, poultry, butter and especially, in valuable timber that was found in the neighbouring forests. These traders had contacts with the agricultural landlords who had maintained the feudal mode of production and distribution (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, 1882).

In the first decade of 15th century, a separate Sultanate was founded in Gujarat as a result of the rebellion against the Delhi Sultanate. North Konkan, then, was annexed to Gujarat Sultanate. Due to the efforts of the Sultans, their regime in north Konkan was extended up to Mandu in the north and Chaul (modern Revdanda) in the south. Vasai was actually known as ‘Basai’ during the Muslim rule (Correia, 1998). During this period in 1450s Sultan Bahadurshah developed the settlement in the island of Vasai and named it Bahaddarpura. The vast empire of the Gujarat Sultanate was difficult to administer and hence the necessity of provincification arose. Thane-Vasai was made one of the provinces under the Gujarat Sultanate (D’silva, 1993). At the close of 15th century the Portuguese arrived in India. They started acquiring the areas on the western coast. Subsequently, they occupied Malabar Coast and made Goa the capital city. When they turned their attention to north Konkan, they had to face a strong Muslim resistance. Diu became the centre of their confrontation, mainly because the Portuguese eyed at its unique strategic advantages. Simultaneously, it was necessary for them to oust the Arab traders, who were dominating Indian Ocean trading network from Diu during this period. A fortress was constructed at Vasai by the local officer of Gujarat Sultanate to monitor and control the activities of the Portuguese. Contemplating it as a future threat, the Portuguese immediately responded by attacking Vasai. After the initial failures, they finally succeeded in signing the treaty in 1534 wherein Bombay islands including Mahim, Diu, Daman, Chaul and Vasai were transferred to them. The Vasai district then extended from river Vaitarana to Karanja (Nairne, 1894). A developed estuary formed by river Ulhas, proximity to the dense forest and the hill range to the east, nearness to Uttan which was famous for building stones as well as the presence of fishing and subsistence farming activities were the positive factors that motivated the Portuguese for long term development of trade in Vasai. Finally Vasai, now a Portuguese enclave, began its journey as the capital of their ‘Province do Norte’, that is, ‘Province of the North’.

2. DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Finding data sources for historical geographical work is a daunting task. The present work is mainly based upon the secondary data. It includes materials from the Imperial Gazetteers of India (provincial series) and Gazetteers of the Bombay Presidency (district series). Research works of social scientists from late 19th century till date, along with theses and dissertations related to the theme of investigation have been used for the analysis. Place names, when carefully analysed, provide much valuable sets of information. A study of the language used in the place names also gives an idea about the cultural background of the people. Place names have provided an important data for the present study too. Besides, archival references, religious texts, literary sources, travel accounts and classical geographical and historical works have been referred to. The secondary data, mainly in English, Marathi and to a lesser extent in Portuguese have been collected from the state archives of Maharashtra, libraries of the universities, colleges, government institutes and other research organisations located in Mumbai, Pune, Thane and Vasai. For the present work, visits were made to Vasai and its surroundings. Similarly, interviews with local people and researchers have been found useful to generate first hand information about the regional cultural landscapes.

Researches in historical geography often use a temporal mode of explanation due to their reference to processes of change. The present work uses teleological mode of explanation. Growth of heterogeneous urban socio-cultural landscape has been analysed with the perspective of historical materialism. It studies socio-cultural landscapes as the outcome of processes of historical development, closely linked with the prevailing socio-economic structure or modes of production. It has been useful to study the social processes that have reproduced the material and cultural environments of the people living in it. The present study thus argues that with the inception of new mode of production in the region by the Portuguese, the prevailing space radically got reproduced to represent a totally new set of heterogeneous socio-cultural relations. The collected data has been studied and analysed with this perspective. The collected data, though non-geographic in nature, needs geographical handling. Accordingly, the temporal data has been translated into a spatial form.
3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Changing Social Space of Vasai: Fishing, subsistence agriculture and salt making were the already existing economic activities in the region (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, 1882). The Portuguese however converted the agricultural land to plantation. Agricultural surplus thus produced, was invested in industries like food processing, cloth weaving, leather, bead production, building stone, timber and furniture. Increasing overseas trade and demand for warfare equipments contributed towards the growth of ship building industry. Gradually, the economic base of Vasai changed from fishing and agriculture to industry and trade. It also experienced a transformation from a rural to an urban base with centripetal movement of people, employment and capital (Karmarkar, 1996).

3.1.1. Impact of a changing economy and its transformed spatial organisation is also seen in the reshaping of the social relations. New processes give rise to new economic patterns as well as new social structures. While introducing new land use system, the land in Vasai was divided into estates and allotted to the fidalgos from Portugal. The local governor distributed many villages of the province to them as well as to the soldiers who used to fight in the warfare at home. Consequently, many rich fidalgos came here and started constructing palaces and other buildings around the citadel. They were the rich landlords of Portugal, a product of feudalism in Western Europe and thereby gained enough power to influence the social structure of Vasai. It was actually a more systematic inception of the feudal elements in the society of Vasai, which gave rise to new social classes – feudal lords and agricultural labourers (Karmarkar, 1996).

3.1.2 Simultaneously, religion, especially Christianity played an important role in moulding the social order of Vasai. The Portuguese governors started ruthless religious conversion after establishing their hold in Vasai. Vasco da Gama had already stated that they had come to seek Christians and spices. In the entire process of conversion Christian missionaries played a pivotal role as agencies. Historians like Da'cunha (1876) were of the opinion that Franciscan priests came to Vasai in 1500, Dominicans in 1513, and Jesuits in 1542. Kelkar (n.d.) however opines that missionaries started their work in Vasai only in 1546 and with the coming of the Jesuit priests, especially St. Francis Xavier, the process of conversion received a momentum. Letters by the General of Goa and King John III of Portugal also supports this point. The Jesuits initially established a seminary in 1545 following which the King officially ordered the authorities at Goa and Vasai to start conversion and destroy the existing religion. The King of Portugal provided all kinds of help for furthering conversion. 200 temples were destroyed and nearly 10,000 people converted. Temples were located especially in Agashi and south Vasai. The Portuguese also destroyed mosques along with the temples and built their ‘Cruz’. In 1561, there were 50 to 60 Portuguese families and 3,000 converted Christians in Thane (Kelkar, n.d.). Approximately 15,000 Christians inhabited the coastal strip between Daman and Chaul. Vasai, especially, housed more density of Christian population in this entire region (Boxer, 1969). Huge churches belonging to Dominicans, Franciscans and Jesuits started being built in the fort at Vasai.

The Portuguese studied the existing social order in which the Brahmans dominated. The Brahmans therefore were initially targeted for interaction so that people from lower classes would also get converted. Actually many lower class people got converted to avoid torture from the upper caste groups. The Portuguese helped converted Christians in various ways. People were also attracted to Christianity due to the social service rendered by the missionaries. The figure of converted Christians in Vasai increased from 1600 in 1573 to 9400 in 1588 (D’silva, 1977). A new set of social group thus emerged in the region – Christians and non-Christians. Imposition of Christianity however produced anger in the minds of the local inhabitants who might have initially opposed this religious imposition. However, as the Portuguese ruled for more than two hundred years, the imposed religion rooted itself in the soil. Just as in Europe the descendents of the Saxons, Tetons, and Slavs (who in many cases were forcibly converted to Christianity), subsequently became fervent Christians, similarly the inhabitants of Vasai in the course of two or three generations became profoundly attached to the religion, which had been imposed, none too gently on their forefathers (Boxer, 1969). With religious conversion surging ahead, the priest class became very important whom the political authorities also could not challenge. They lived in affluence and were in general so influential that even the General of the North in Vasai felt his position to be precarious (Kelkar, n.d.). However, it led to a series of large-scale migration of the Hindus to east in the territory of Shivaji and of the Muslims to north in the territory of the Mughals. A series of socio-political changes took place. Firstly, the political authority changed from Sultanate of Gujarat to the Portuguese. Secondly, the Portuguese feudal lords took the place of local landlords, and thirdly, the rural society started changing with the support of the State (Karmarkar, 1996).
3.1.3. A strong need for labour of varied order was felt with the rising trade and industries. Similarly, the fidalgos investing in agricultural activities and minor industries required various types of labour. The growth of shipbuilding also gave rise to the demand for craftsmen. It further led to the system of slavery in Vasai. The lords and other elites began to obtain slaves from different parts of Asia and Africa. Initially slaves were brought from Japan, Macao, East Africa and Bengal and were engaged by the local agents and traders. The later helped in the transhipment of slaves. A limited number of slaves were also obtained by capturing Muslim vessels that visited Mecca every year or any other vessel that failed to comply with the Portuguese passport regulations, generally known as ‘cartazes’. In 1533, a naval officer named Diego da Silveria captured four thousand people from Vasai who were subsequently employed as labourers in constructing convents and churches in Goa (D’silva, 1990a). Usually the slaves were engaged as soldiers or farm servants. The number of slaves they owned decided the status of the fidalgos. The well-to-do citizens and officials of Vasai owned 15 to 100 slaves each. Some rich ladies even had 300 slaves. Male slaves were asked to do all kinds of menial jobs and hard work. Female slaves were used to do both domestic as well as outside jobs. At times they were engaged in selling clothes and pickles on the streets of Vasai (D’silva, 1990b).

3.1.4. Emergence of these social classes finally produced a stratified social space. The peripheral status of agricultural labourers, non-Christians and slaves in the social space of Vasai was quite evident. A citadel, built at the place of earlier Muslim fortress, became the core of urban Vasai. As the citadel was the political and military headquarter of the ruling Portuguese, the governor and captains resided in the citadel. Many Portuguese fidalgos and governors from Portugal and Goa were attracted to Vasai and constructed their palaces around this citadel (D’silva, 1977). The settlement around the citadel was set apart for the upper class Christians and neither craftsmen nor Hindus were allowed to live (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, 1882). The local traders however were allowed to trade in the fort, but they were supposed to leave the fort before the evening (D’silva, 1977). For the purpose of security of the settlement a big wall was constructed (D’silva, 1977; Kelkar, n.d.). Local fishermen, agricultural labourers, soldiers and slaves, however, resided in the outer settlement, i.e., old Bahadarpura located at 1 to 1 ½ km from the site of citadel. It was renamed as Madrapore (present Parnaka in Vasai). No special care was taken to safeguard the lives of these people. Their status was peripheral in the new socio-cultural space of Vasai.

The exploited classes, especially non-Christians, also experienced marginalisation in socio-cultural relations. Dressing style of the newly converted Christians was systematically changed. The converted men had to wear red cap besides the normal dressing, while the females had to wear red saris. There were two aims behind it. Firstly, to know the converted people in the group and secondly, to let the people of a particular caste quickly know the converted people from his or her caste (D’silva, 1990a). As the converted were socially ostracised, the Portuguese made use of the situation and offered them helping hand, thereby earning faith of the converted. Such methods certainly took them away from the local culture. Similarly, by giving certain facilities only to the converts, the Portuguese very much maintained social discrimination. They followed specific policy regarding social and criminal justice and protected their Christian subjects against any law. Christian culprits, including the newly converted, were not kept in the prisons while non-Christians were severely punished for even minor crimes.

The non-Christians thus were devoid of any facilities from the rulers. Similarly, they were denied to follow any religious rites. Idols were destroyed and idol worship was banned; strong action was taken against the defaulters. All social ceremonies including wedding were prohibited in Vasai while organisers of other types of ceremonies had to pay heavy taxes (Kelkar, n.d.). Gradually it became clear that the Portuguese were more rigid with the Hindus than with the Muslims. Accordingly, mosques were not destroyed, but had to pay commission or taxes (Boxer, 1969). This dual treatment was mainly due to the numerical dominance of the Hindus and the social dominance of the Brahmins (Karmarkar, 1996). In the stratified social space thence produced, the Portuguese explored the possibility of introducing their own culture. Separation of converted Christians from the unconverted locals (who were residing in the outer settlement and not in the one enclosed by the fort wall) provided them an opportunity to incept their own culture in the local society.

4.1. Changing Cultural Space of Vasai: The Portuguese introduced state controlled violence into the Indian Ocean (Pearson, 2003). This violent aggression was necessary for them to establish a firm footing in an alien soil. However, the violence relatively reduced after the formation of their empire. The Portuguese ruled Vasai from about 1534 till they lost it to the Marathas in 1739. The long Portuguese rule had a strong impression over the making of the cultural landscape and the social practices of Vasai. Europeans of that age, including the Portuguese, had considerable disregard for the
non-Christian people and had little interest in understanding cultures other than their own (Diffie and Winius, 1977). This attitude reproduced the new cultural landscape that actually exhibits the dominance of the Portuguese culture. Interaction of the local people with the Portuguese who were belonging to different cultures, customs and social practices led to the formation of a complex cultural space.

4.1.1. The churches and the palaces of the fidalgos introduced European pictorial art and architectural forms. The church front was the handsomest piece of architecture in Vasai. It had a noble arch, columns with fluted shafts and Corinthian capitals, and the monogram and a cross-sculptured on the lintel and above the pillars (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, 1882). The Church interiors were also notable for the richness of their decoration. Despite the wealth of woodwork and sculpture, church interiors were architecturally simple. Most of the pictorial art that survived in the portraits of the governor-generals and viceroys also made a strong impression (Harrison, 1975). The gigantic structure of the Churches created strong psychological impression in the minds of the indigenous people about the ‘Portuguese Empire’.

Specific changes in the house types were also noticed. These stately dwellings were graced with covered balconies and large latticed or oyster-shell windows (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, 1882). The long, two-storied house, with high pitched roof, balconies and verandas often running the whole length of the building, and many windowed, outward giving facades, with the inside ‘sala’ or saloon, its walls lined with chairs and sofas, elaborately carved or inlaid were the features that still survives in the Provinces of the North (Harrison, 1975).

4.1.2. Language also played an important role being a carrier of culture and acting as a mediator in this cross-cultural interaction. The language of Vasai is a mixture of Gujarathi, Marathi, and Portuguese. Although religion could be imposed on the local people due to active missionaries, imposition of language was found to be a difficult process. Problems of communication between the local people and the rulers were quite acute. Need thus arose for learning the dialects of the local language. The Portuguese priests and missionaries learnt the local language to use it as an easy medium for spreading Christianity. Later, Goan priests gave books to the priests in Vasai to teach the dialects of Portuguese to the local people. The name of the book was ‘Dilecto Lingua Portuguese do Norteiros’. Later in 1684, the King of Portugal made a strict policy for the use of Portuguese language (D’silva, 1986). Dialects of the regional languages changed under the influence of the Portuguese loan words. In case of Christians, Portuguese terminology was more in use.

Portuguese terms like boa-dia (good day), boa-noite (good night) and boa-tarde (good afternoon) became common usages. Banerjee-Guha and Guhathakurta (2004) have analysed the nature and degree of Portuguese-Marathi interaction at various spheres and levels with the help of Portuguese loan words in Marathi, classified under flora and fauna, socio-economic and political interaction, commerce, technology, household and daily use. Loan words, under flora and fauna, included batata (potato), ananas (pineapple), cha (tea), tabaco (tobacco), etc., while words referring to socio-economic and political interaction comprised of pagar (salary), dote (dowry), sorte (sodat), tronco (jail), pistola (pistol), etc. Similarly, words like natal (Christmas), Cristao (Christian), Padre (father/bishop) and deus (god), got incorporated in Marathi due to religious interaction between the missionaries and the locals.

Portuguese words, such as, Contrato (contract), umbreira (threshold), leilao (auction), etc. became very common usages in Marathi. Portuguese loanwords related to dress included patalona (pant), cumisa (shirt), jaketa (jacket), sapata (sandals), botas (shoes), meias (socks), etc. Number of words relating to household and daily uses like pao (bread), bacia (small plate), chave (key), balde (bucket), tual (towel), coita (sickle), falto (negligible) avo (grandmother), jantar (lunch), ceiar (dinner) became quite prevalent in the local vocabulary. Similarly Gujarati words, especially through the immigrants from Gujarat, got intermixed with the local language. Such terms included ate (here), tate (there), pote (self), mol (mild), savare (morning), sanje (evening) hambala (to take care), etc. (D’silva, 1986).

4.1.3. Items from Portuguese cuisine also made their appearance in the local food menu. These included items like Vindelo, Sarpotel, Temprat, Moillas and Touchino. Most of these dishes were prepared with mutton and pork in association with coconut, garlic and ginger gravy. Bafat was a breakfast dish made from prawns, potatoes and other vegetables (Rebello, 1996). Further, a large numbers of crops and fruits from South America were introduced in coastal Western India. Tobacco was introduced after 1590 through Gujarat (Gokhale, 1974). Sapodilla was also introduced in the coast of north Konkan. The Muslim name for cashew nuts badam-i-firangi reveals that the Portuguese also introduced cashews on the Konkan coast (Harrison, 1975). Similarly, they brought lal mirch or red
4. CONCLUSION

As the missionaries and the priests became stronger, the social role of the church became dominant. It, institutions served administrative, military, commercial and religious purpose of the Portuguese rulers.

4.1.5. Although the government generously provided financial aid to the missions, both in the form of land and cash, State intervention in the work of the missionaries was nil. Autonomy of the priests undermined the governmental authority and the state tended to become a theocratic state (D’silva, 1973).

4.1.5. The institutional network set up by the Portuguese also added to the identity of the region. These institutions served administrative, military, commercial and religious purpose of the Portuguese rulers. As the missionaries and the priests became stronger, the social role of the church became dominant. It, then, started building hospitals, schools, orphanages, seminaries and established many churches in Vasai (Fig. 1). These activities further prospered the institutional network. Following are some examples:

a) ‘Casa de Misericordia’ was the international hospital providing health facilities to the patients coming from all over world (D’silva, 1993). An old institution ‘Saint John of God’ established this hospital in 1681 (Correia, 1998). It was a well-known medical centre of the Portuguese’ Eastern Empire.

b) ‘Fátoria’ and ‘Mandovi’ were another two buildings that rose near the sea gate or ‘Porta do Mar’. ‘Fátoria’ or factory was used to store the export commodities. Afterwards, as this place became inadequate, it was turned into a grain storage and distribution centre. Mandovi was the place for collecting octroi. Similarly, it was carrying the task of issuing ‘cartazes’ or passes required for any trading vessel to safely sail through seawaters (D’silva, 1993).

c) Camara or corporation building in the fort was conducting the jobs like distribution of plots for shops, standardising quality of products and controlling their prices. Special officers were appointed for these jobs. Camara also controlled fish sellers, mutton sellers and artisans (D’silva, 1993).

d) A very large market for the entire region was located in front of the citadel gate. This market was full of import commodities from foreign markets. Farmers and fishermen from Madrapore brought fruits, vegetables, grains and various species of fishes in this market. Fidalgos, soldiers and local administrative officers formed consumers for the market. Many outsider sellers and buyers also were used to visit this market (D’silva, 1993).

e) The court building was built in 1552. It was under the subordination of the Supreme Court located at Goa. Appointments of the staff were also made from the Supreme Court (Nairne, 1894). The work of constructing a prison was completed by 1639. Stray thieves and minor criminals were kept in this prison. It was much more spacious and airy that that in Daman. At times when the ships going towards Goa were unavailable, criminals were kept in this prison (Da’cunha, 1876).

4. CONCLUSION

The Portuguese, who controlled the socio-spatial relations of Vasai throughout 16th and 17th century, belonged to a distinct cultural system. Thus the cultural sites and spaces were produced and reproduced in a diversified manner. This diversification can still be viewed in the socio-cultural landscape of Vasai in the form of language mix, religious practices, social relations, land use patterns and even in the built up environment. It was actually the space that supported the policies of the Portuguese to accommodate themselves in the well-established Asian trading network of which Vasai was a significant link. The contemporary socio-cultural space of Vasai can thus be seen as a product of the interaction between the local population and the Portuguese. In the present era, when culture is getting more and more politicised, it is necessary to develop a clear understanding about the process of evolution of a socio-cultural space that renders spatial identity to a specific society and economy.

All the elements of above-mentioned changing cultural heritage that provide identity to the region may not always have the same visual exposure. Some may have the symbols of architecture and

chilli from *Pernambuco*, peanuts either from Chile or Peru and other fruits like pineapples, papaya, lichee, tapioca, sweet oranges, etc (Nene, 2000).
house types, but some other complex cultural and social practices may not be directly seen. It is therefore necessary to conduct extensive reference, surveys and investigations to trace the changing social relations and cultural systems. Such changes can be mapped that goes a long way to analyse the complexities that underline the dynamic socio-cultural landscape of any region.

Fig. 1 Historical Space of Portuguese Vasai

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