

# MULTIFUNCTIONAL STREETS OF MATUNGA: TRANSITION FROM TRADITIONAL CONTEXT TO URBAN FABRIC

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## ABSTRACT

*Matunga's multifunctional streets reflect Mumbai's transition from a British-era planned suburb to a 21st-century cosmopolitan neighborhood. Developed in the early twentieth century, Matunga's urban fabric—characterized by human-scale buildings, educational institutions, religious landmarks, local markets, and small open spaces—continues to support a vibrant public realm rooted in everyday life. Institutions such as Shankar Math Mandir anchor spiritual practices within the street network, while nearby flower lanes, agarbati and puja material streets, and traditional silk saree shops sustain ritual-based and local economies. Street mandis and iconic South Indian food streets further reinforce Matunga's walkable, mixed-use character and cultural identity. Educational institutions animate the streets throughout the day, generating continuous pedestrian activity and informal social interaction. Small neighborhood gardens and spaces such as Napoo Garden and Nana-Nani Park function as social nodes where children play, students gather, and elderly residents engage in conversation, while adults casually monitor these activities—often through digital engagement. These everyday spaces facilitate ongoing social, economic, and political discourse, embedding civic life into ordinary streets and parks. However, the increasing presence of high-rise redevelopment poses a serious threat to this context-sensitive fabric. Construction dust, infrastructural strain, and the anticipated rise in private vehicle ownership risk overwhelming narrow streets and eroding the authenticity of Matunga's people-centric urban environment.*

**KEYWORDS:** Mixed-use streets, Neighborhood identity, high-rise redevelopment, Cultural landscape, Street-based economies.

## INTRODUCTION

Matunga from British Suburb to Cosmopolitan Neighbourhood. There's a lot that can be said about Matunga. Once a part of the kingdom of King Bhimdev of Mahikavati (present day Mahim), then a swampy bog, and now a quaint neighbourhood shrouded with a canopy of trees bang in the middle of the city, and yet somehow detached from the chaos of it. Some say that Matunga gets its name from "Matanga", the Sanskrit word for elephant, as according to lores, King Bhimdev housed his elephant stables there.



Matunga's history is deeply embedded in the broader urban development of Mumbai, shaped by colonial planning interventions and post-colonial socio-cultural change. Originally part of the seven islands of Mumbai, the area known as Matunga was sparsely inhabited until the late nineteenth century. Following the devastating plague epidemic of the 1890s, the British colonial administration sought to decongest the island city and improve living conditions by initiating planned suburban schemes. As part of this effort, the Dadar-Matunga-Wadala-Sion plan of 1899-1900 was formulated by the Bombay City Improvement Trust to evenly distribute population and introduce better sanitation, broad roads, parks, and mixed land uses beyond the crowded central city. This plan designated approximately 440 acres of land for systematic residential, commercial, and institutional development, with regulatory measures such as a three-storey height limit and open spaces between buildings to

enhance health and urban order. Under this framework, Matunga was developed as one of the city's first.

By the 1930s and 1940s, Matunga's evolving urban fabric began to attract diverse populations, including a significant South Indian community, which contributed to its cultural identity through temples, cultural organizations, and food traditions. Integral institutions such as technical and commerce colleges were established, reinforcing Matunga's role as an educational hub within the city.



(<https://www.cntraveller.in>) In the post-Independence period, Matunga's planning ethos was sustained even as demographic and economic patterns shifted. The neighbourhood's combination of residential quarters, institutional clusters, markets, and cultural spaces gave rise to a cosmopolitan social landscape, distinguished by inter-community interaction and a blend of tradition with metropolitan life. Over time, iconic Irani cafés and South Indian eateries became synonymous with Matunga's cultural texture, further cementing its status as a microcosm of Mumbai's plural urbanism. (<https://www.grazia.co.in/lifestyle/time-stops-in-matunga>) Today, Matunga stands at the intersection of heritage and transformation. While its early twentieth-century planning legacy continues to influence street patterns, building typologies, and open spaces, contemporary redevelopment pressures—the rise of high-rise projects, increasing land values, and changing

demographic demands—are introducing new dynamics that challenge its original urban fabric. These shifts make Matunga an illustrative case for examining how colonial-era planning frameworks interact with post-colonial cosmopolitanism in the context of rapid urban change

**AIM**

The aim of this thesis is to examine the multifunctional streets of Matunga to understand how historical context, social practices, and physical urban fabric have evolved from a British-era planned suburb to a contemporary cosmopolitan neighborhood, and to assess the impact of recent redevelopment on street life and place identity.

**OBJECTIVES**

- To analyze the physical urban fabric of Matunga, including street networks, building typologies, land-use patterns, and open spaces.
- To study the multifunctional role of streets as spaces for social, cultural, economic, and political interaction.
- To examine the relationship between everyday activities—such as street markets, religious practices, food culture, and education—and the functioning of streets.
- To assess the impact of high-rise redevelopment, construction activity, and increased vehicular load on pedestrian life and street character.
- To evaluate how traditional context and community practices are negotiated within a changing urban fabric.
- To derive insights that may inform context-sensitive urban design and redevelopment strategies for similar neighborhoods.

**STUDY AREA**

Period	Key Events & Developments	Urban Significance
Pre- 1890s	Matunga largely comprised marshy land and sparse agrarian settlements on the northern edges of Bombay island.	Peripheral landscape with minimal urban development.
1899–1900	Formulation of the Dadar–Matunga–Wadala–Sion Scheme by the Bombay City Improvement Trust following the plague epidemic.	Introduction of planned suburban development to decongest the island city.
Early 1900s	Opening of Matunga Road railway station; layout of wide roads, residential plots, parks and institutional and institutional zones.	Establishment of Matunga as a planned British-era garden suburb.
1920s – 1940s	Growth of educational institutions and cooperative housing;	Formation of Matunga’s academic, cultural, and

	settlement of South Indian communities.	religious identity.
1950s–1970s	Post-Independence densification; emergence of street mandis, silk saree shops, flower and agarbati lanes, and South Indian food streets.	Consolidation of mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented urban fabric.
1980s–2000s	Increased connectivity, commercial activity, and city-wide footfall; strengthening of cosmopolitan character.	Streets function as everyday social and economic public realms.
2010s–Present	Redevelopment and high-rise construction driven by real estate pressures and regulatory changes.	Tension between traditional context and changing urban fabric; threats to walkability and local identity.

A Sacred Walk Through the Temple Lanes of Matunga Every morning in Matunga begins with prayer, gently unfolding along its quiet, tree-lined streets. On Nathalal Parekh Road, the presence of Shri Sankara Math (Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham) creates an atmosphere of calm discipline and spiritual learning. Closely linked to the Advaita Vedanta tradition of Adi Shankaracharya, the Math functions not only as a place of worship but also as a centre for philosophical discourse, Vedic studies, and cultural education. Shri Shankar Math was founded in Matunga to propagate Vedanta philosophy and Vedic teachings and serves as a centre for Advaita learning for spiritual aspirants (Fonseca, n.d.; Sri Sankara Mattham, n.d.). Devotees and students arrive early for chanting sessions, meditation, and philosophical discourse, giving the lane a reflective and peaceful character. Nearby establishments like bookshops, flower stalls, and small prasadam counters complement these rituals, creating a devotional corridor\*\* that supports daily worship and spiritual engagement (Sri Sankara Mattham, n.d.). Unlike crowded commercial streets, this stretch remains largely peaceful, supported by surrounding residences and educational institutions. The proximity of the Asthika Samaj Temple strengthens this spiritual belt, forming a continuous sacred corridor. Bookshops, flower stalls, and small prasadam counters appear modestly along the pavement, maintaining the lane’s contemplative educational institutions. The proximity of the Asthika Samaj Temple strengthens this spiritual belt, forming a continuous sacred corridor. Bookshops, flower stalls, and small prasadam counters appear modestly along the pavement, maintaining the lane’s contemplative character while supporting daily religious activities. As the

day progresses, spiritual life blends gradually with everyday routines. Moving towards Telang Road Extension near King's Circle, the street becomes more animated around the Shri Ram Mandir. Over the years, the Asthika Samaj complex has also expanded the number of deities installed within its precincts. These include:

Lord Karthikeya — the warrior god and son of Shiva, worshipped for courage and victory.



Navagrahas — the nine planetary deities representing cosmic influences. Lord Kochu Guruvayurappan — a form of Krishna worshipped especially in South India. Swamy Ayyappan — a deity honoured for spiritual discipline and unity of devotees. (temples of India) Every evening, as the bells of Shri Ram Mandir echo through the lanes of Matunga, something special begins to unfold—not just in prayer, but in sweetness. Inside the temple, after the final aarti, priests carefully place plates before Lord Ram, Sita, Lakshman, and Hanuman. On these plates rest simple offerings: golden laddus, soft modaks, freshly cut fruits, and pieces of coconut mixed with jaggery. They may look ordinary, but in that moment, they are filled with devotion. Outside, on the narrow street near King's Circle, devotees begin to gather. Children hold their parents' hands, peeking eagerly toward the sanctum. Elderly couples sit patiently on benches. Office-goers pause on their way home, still wearing their ID cards. Everyone waits—not just for blessings, but for the little packet of prasadam that carries it. This temple serves as a strong anchor for the local Hindu community and plays an important role in neighbourhood life. Morning and evening aartis attract families, working professionals, and elderly residents. Parents bring children before school, and shopkeepers stop by before opening their stores. During Ram Navami, Hanuman Jayanti, and other festivals, the temple becomes the focal point of the entire street, drawing crowds from nearby areas. The surroundings of Shri Ram Mandir reflect a mixed-use urban character. Grocery shops, tailoring units, stationery stores, snack vendors, and residential buildings coexist along the same stretch. Religious activity therefore flows directly into commercial and domestic life. Tea stalls outside the temple become informal gathering spaces where devotees interact, exchange local news, and discuss community matters. This constant interaction gives the lane a lively yet rooted identity. Together, the streets around Shri Sankara Math and Shri Ram Mandir represent two complementary dimensions of Matunga's

spiritual fabric. Nathalal Parekh Road reflects introspection, learning, and quiet devotion. Telang Road Extension represents collective worship, social bonding,



and everyday participation. One offers silence and study. The other offers celebration and community. Yet both create continuity between faith and urban life. Students walking to college pause for blessings at Sankara Math.



Residents returning from work stop at Shri Ram Mandir for evening prayers. Vendors adapt their timings to temple rituals. Festival decorations spill across balconies and shopfronts. In this way, religious institutions do not remain confined within walls—they shape movement patterns, social networks, and street rhythms. Through these spaces, Matunga demonstrates how spirituality can coexist with education, commerce, and residence. The lanes become more than transit routes; they become shared cultural landscapes where devotion, dialogue, and daily life merge seamlessly.

Impact of High-Rise Development on Pedestrian Safety in Shankar Math Lane The proposed high-rise development near Shankar Math Lane (Nathalal Parekh Road) is expected to increase pedestrian and vehicular movement in an area currently characterised by low-rise residential and spiritual activities. Research shows that increased density without adequate pedestrian infrastructure raises

the risk of accidents, especially for vulnerable users such as children and the elderly (Sharma & Dehalwar, 2025; Amazing Architecture, 2025). Additional residents, service vehicles, and parking demand may reduce effective footpath width and create conflicts between pedestrians and vehicles. Studies also indicate that reduced visibility and enclosure caused by tall buildings can negatively affect pedestrian safety and comfort (ScienceDirect, 2025). During peak temple hours and school timings, congestion may further limit safe walking space. Therefore, without measures such as widened footpaths, traffic calming, and designated drop-off zones, high-rise development may compromise pedestrian safety and disturb the traditional character of Shankar Math Lane (Journal of Roads Safety, 2025). A day along the institutional buildings of Matunga reveals a dynamic blend of academic life, social interaction, and cultural expression shaped by its prominent colleges and surrounding streets. From early morning onwards, students gather near institutions such as Ramnarain Ruia College on LN Road, R.A. Podar College, VJTI, and ICT, gradually activating nearby lanes and public spaces. Popular meeting points like DP Café and several South Indian eateries on Laxmi Napoo road have become informal extensions of classrooms, where students discuss subjects ranging from the Indian economic structure and public policy to career opportunities and social issues. These cafés also attract working professionals and elderly residents, who use them as daily gathering spaces for informal conversations, often centred on politics, real estate trends, and urban development in India. Throughout the day, small groups occupy footpaths, compound edges, and shaded corners, transforming them into vibrant “addas” of intellectual exchange and social bonding. During festival seasons, especially Ganesh Chaturthi, students actively participate in organising local Ganapati pandals, reinforcing community ties and collective identity within the institutional zone. Ramnarain Ruia College, in particular, is well known for its strong tradition in drama and cultural events, attracting aspiring actors and directors from across the city. Many students regularly visit the campus to observe performances, interact with seniors, and prepare themselves for admission, viewing Ruia as a gateway to artistic and academic recognition. By evening, as classes conclude, these interactions intensify, creating temporary congestion and heightened street activity, before gradually subsiding at night. Thus, Matunga’s institutional corridor functions not merely as an



educational district but as a living socio-cultural landscape where learning, debate, creativity, and everyday urban life continuously intersect. Napo Garden Lane in Matunga functions as a narrow residential-access street that supports everyday neighbourhood life and local movement. Characterised by low- to mid-rise housing,

limited footpath space, and informal parking, the lane primarily serves pedestrians, residents, and short-distance vehicles. It connects nearby homes to temples, markets, and institutional areas, making it an important secondary connector within the local urban fabric. Throughout the day, children, elderly residents, and working professionals use the lane for walking and social interaction, reflecting its strong community-oriented character. However, shared use by two-wheelers, delivery vehicles, and parked cars often leads to congestion and pedestrian-vehicle conflicts, reducing walking comfort and safety. During festivals and community events, increased footfall further intensifies pressure on the narrow street space. Therefore, appropriate measures such as traffic calming, regulated parking, and improved pedestrian infrastructure are essential to preserve the lane’s liveability and social function. Some Highrise new building some are upcoming mentioned below Sawla Chheda Imperial (34-storey) – Developed by Sawla Chheda group, this tall residential tower (34 storeys) is coming up near Sir Bhalchandra Road, Five Gardens / Matunga area and is part of the changing skyline around Napo Garden lanes. It includes amenities like play areas, lifts, and landscaped spaces. Jade Avenue (G+30 Storey) – A high-rise residential project by Jade Avenue (on Bhimani Street, close to Matunga station) with G+30 storeys and premium apartments. Its scale contributes to the increasing vertical development character around Matunga streets. Nandivardhan Parkway (21 Storey Tower) – Developed by Nandivardhan Group, this 21-storey residential building in Matunga East (Sir Balchandra Road) is another high-rise that contributes to rising built density near Napo/Five Gardens lanes. High Rise Samruddhi Heights – A project listed as a “high rise” by High Rise Realty in Matunga East, indicating smaller vertical developments also underway in the area. Other notable developm ents in Matunga – Several existing and under-construction buildings such as Harsh Bakul, Shanti Heights, Ojal Shri Satya Sadan, Tejukaya Signare, Neetnav Bliss, etc., by various local developers indicate ongoing redevelopment and densification across the neighbourhood, which indirectly affect narrow lanes like Napo Garden Lane. While the provision of parking within the site aims to manage residential vehicles internally, surface parking and resident traffic generation may still increase local travel demand on narrow adjacent lanes such as Napo Garden Lane and feeder roads. This increased car presence could lead to higher vehicular movement, turning conflicts, and informal spill-over parking, placing additional pressure on pedestrian safety and existing circulation patterns in the surrounding residential streets. Assuming an average of 2-3 cars per household for both residents and visitors, the development can introduce approximately 5,000 vehicle movements daily on feeder roads in the vicinity of Napo Garden Lane and Lakhamsi Napo Road as residents, visitors, and service vehicles enter and exit the building. However, the internal access roads near Napo Garden Lane are only about 6 m wide with approximately 1.5 m pedestrian zones on both sides, a width that is below ideal

standards for high-pedestrian-use areas. Urban design guidelines suggest that narrow roads with limited footpath widths can compromise pedestrian safety, especially when vehicle volumes are high and mixed with non-motorised movement. In narrow streets like Napo Garden Lane ( $\approx 6$  m wide with only  $\approx 1.5$  m pedestrian paths), a high volume of vehicles – such as an estimated  $\sim 5,000$  vehicle movements per day associated with nearby high-rise buildings – creates persistent ground-level  $PM_{2.5}$  exposure for pedestrians.  $PM_{2.5}$  levels at traffic intersections in Indian cities have been measured at around  $218 \mu g/m^3$  (micrograms per cubic meter) in winter and  $\sim 98 \mu g/m^3$  in summer, showing how seasonal traffic congestion spikes local particulate loads well above regional averages. Long-term  $PM_{2.5}$  exposure is quantitatively linked to health outcomes. A study of urban regions found that vehicle-associated  $PM_{2.5}$  contributed to tens of thousands of premature deaths and hundreds of thousands of hospital admissions when aggregated over major metropolitan regions – highlighting the human cost of fine particulate exposure even at urban-scale averages.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is geographically limited to selected streets and public spaces within Matunga and does not represent all neighborhoods of Mumbai.

- Quantitative traffic, pollution, and demographic data are used at an indicative level due to limited availability of micro-scale, street-specific data.
- The research primarily focuses on street-level experiences and everyday urban life, and does not conduct an in-depth economic or real estate market analysis.
- Observations of social interactions are based on time-bound field surveys and may not capture seasonal or festival-related variations comprehensively.
- The study examines redevelopment impacts at the neighborhood scale and does not evaluate broader metropolitan policy frameworks in detail.



#### CONCLUSION

An important question arises in the context of Matunga's rapid redevelopment: with per square foot rates rising sharply, is the area gradually being shaped only for the affluent, thereby excluding middle- and lower-income residents? Continuous construction of high-rise towers primarily aimed at investors and high-income groups threatens the traditional urban fabric of Matunga, which has long been characterized by harmonious G+4 to G+7 buildings, human-scale streets, and a strong cultural identity. This balance between architecture, heritage, and community life has been central to the locality's character. Unregulated vertical growth risks eroding this harmony, turning Matunga into a congested and commercially driven zone rather than a socially vibrant neighbourhood. Moreover, the existing road network is not designed to accommodate 20-storey residential towers. During peak hours, the increased number of private vehicles from such developments severely strains narrow internal roads. The situation is further aggravated in market areas, where on-street parking reduces the effective road width, creating frequent traffic bottlenecks and unsafe conditions for pedestrians. In this context, citizen participation becomes crucial. Residents, students, and local stakeholders must actively engage in planning processes, question building norms, and raise collective voices against uncontrolled development. Only through participatory governance and context-sensitive planning can Matunga preserve its architectural heritage, cultural richness, and social inclusivity while accommodating necessary growth.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

##### Preserving Affordable Housing and Inclusivity. [{:https://www.orfonline.org/research/}](https://www.orfonline.org/research/)

Objective: Ensure that Matunga remains accessible to residents across income groups.

- Implement Inclusionary Housing Policies: Mandate that a certain percentage of new developments include affordable housing units to maintain socioeconomic diversity.
- Affordable Housing Incentives: Provide tax incentives or floor-area ratio (FAR) bonuses for developers who include affordable housing in their projects
- Community Land Trusts: Support the creation of community land trusts to preserve long term affordability and prevent displacement.

(<https://urbanacres.in/mumbai-cracksdown-on-dus>)

##### Balancing Urban Density with Heritage Conservation

Objective: Protect Matunga's architectural heritage and cultural identity.

- Heritage Conservation Zones: Designate specific areas as heritage conservation zones,
- limiting the height and bulk of new buildings.
- Architectural Guidelines: Develop and enforce architectural guidelines that ensure new constructions are in harmony with the existing low-rise structures and traditional styles.

- Adaptive Reuse: Encourage the adaptive reuse of existing buildings to preserve historical structures and reduce the need for new high-rises.

#### **Sustainable Infrastructure and Road Management**

Objective: Enhance infrastructure to support growing population without compromising quality of life.

- Road Widening and Traffic Management: Upgrade and widen key roads to accommodate
- increased traffic from high-rise developments, ensuring pedestrian safety and reducing
- congestion.
- Parking Regulations: Implement strict parking regulations and create designated parking
- areas to prevent on-street parking, thus maintaining road width and flow.
- Public Transport Enhancement: Strengthen public transportation links to reduce reliance
- on private vehicles and alleviate road congestion.

#### **Community Participation and Governance**

Objective: Involve citizens in planning and decision-making processes.

- Public Consultations: Conduct regular public consultations and town hall meetings to gather input from residents on development plans.
- Transparent Planning Processes: Ensure transparency in planning decisions by making all development proposals and environmental impact assessments publicly accessible.
- Citizen Advisory Committees: Establish citizen advisory committees that include local residents, students, and stakeholders to oversee and guide urban development.

#### **Environmental and Air Quality Controls**

Objective: Mitigate the environmental impact<sup>48</sup> of construction and high-rise developments.

- Dust and Emission Control Measures: Enforce stringent dust control measures at construction sites and mandate the use of cleaner construction technologies.
- Green Spaces and Urban Trees: Increase green spaces and plant urban trees to enhance air quality and provide ecological balance.
- Air Quality Monitoring: Set up continuous air quality monitoring stations to track pollution levels and enforce regulations to maintain healthy air quality standards. (<https://urbanacres.in/mumbai-cracks-down-on-dus>)

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