

Srinath Perur ~ Story Of Cities #11: The Reclamation Of Mumbai - From The Sea, And Its People?

Of all the ways in which Mumbai has been called a city of dreams, at least one is literal. It is sometime in the late 18th century, and the engineers of the East India Company in Bombay are losing a battle against the sea. They're dumping boatloads of stone into Worli creek to build an embankment, but it has collapsed once and it collapses again.

That's when an engineer named Ramji Shivji Prabhu has a dream: the goddess Mahalakshmi and two others inform him their stone idols lie submerged in the creek. Can some space be made for them on land? Prabhu has them fished out and installed in a shrine built nearby on land gifted by the administration. The wall holds.

This story was found in a *bakhar*, a Marathi literary form that recounts colourful histories, and may seem a little fanciful for our times. But that embankment - the Hornby Vellard, completed in 1784 - was very real and can be said to have given shape to the modern city of Mumbai (the official name since 1995). It was built at the initiative of William Hornby, then governor of Bombay, and over the next few decades was followed by the construction of causeways to link the seven islets separated by sea and swamp.

Read more: <http://www.theguardian.com/mumbai>