

Kalyan Dombivli Industrial Belt: A Tussle of Environment Vs Economy

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Abstract

Dombivli in Thane district of Maharashtra is a town known for its 100% literacy rate, social activities and a town of well-educated and aware people. Recently, however, it has been in news for all the wrong reasons. In February 2020, there was a major fire incident in a factory in the industrial region, MIDC. There was another incident of the roads turning pink on February 6th 2020, due to the spillage of pollutant containing debris on the roads.

After the two back-to-back incidents which threatened the health of the residents of the region, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra has announced that the industries in the MIDC area would be closed down and/or shifted elsewhere. The industry owners and workers are in jeopardy as they would lose their business as well as means of livelihood.

The Maharashtra Pollution Control Board which is the governing and monitoring body and is supposed to be the final authority on pollution control had served closure notices to 89 since 2016. But no action was seen till 2019 as per a RTI query. MPCB refused to divulge any details of the notices served.

The Dombivli MIDC is also becoming a hotspot for residential development with big developers like Runwal, Lodha, Regency and others buying huge tracts of land for development of residential complexes. Hence the question has arisen over the willingness of government authorities over taking action against the factories that have been openly flouting all environmental norms.

Is it a case of bribery by the factory owners to avoid the expenses of pollution control? Is it a case of bribery by land developers to deliberately turn a blind eye towards the flouting of environmental norms, so that one day it results in the moving of industrial region out of Dombivli leaving large areas open at a low cost for real estate development? Or is it a case of lassitude on the part of the government arising from callousness? The residents of Dombivli await an answer while their lives are in danger of a repeat of the Bhopal tragedy of December 1983.

KEYWORDS: Dombivli Industrial area, Pollution Control, Residential developments in industrial area.

Introduction: Dombivli is a suburb on the central railway in Thane district of Maharashtra state in India. It is known for being a typically middle-class town with 100% literacy and many social activities. The Government of Maharashtra allocated land on the outskirts of this town for MIDC in the 1960s. Gharda Chemicals, Vicco laboratories are some of the known names of the factories in this MIDC. There are about 810 industrial units in the Kalyan-Dombivli industrial belt.

The MIDC was exclusively an industrial belt till the 1980s, when the residential zone was demarcated in the same and promoters and builders got together to build

residential complexes in this region. Earlier there was a clear demarcation between the industrial region and residential area, both being separated from each other by green zones.

Eventually the green zones reduced and the plots were sold off for more development. This was beneficial to the MIDC as the sale of plots was profitable rather than letting the open plots lie unused. The importance of having the dedicated green open plots was undermined in comparison with the profits gained from the sale of plots. Who exactly was benefitted through the sale, is a matter of contention.

The residents, however, slowly realized that living in such a close proximity to the industrial area has its own disadvantages. The industries let off effluents in the big Nala which crossed its way through the residential area releasing a stench in the area. During rainy season this Nala often overflows and causes flooding in the region. The factories also let out smoke and other gaseous release which spreads an unmistakable odour in this area which has caused many health issues to the residents like headaches, throat irritation, breathing trouble and inflammation of the eyes.

Multiple complaints have been lodged with the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board, the MLA and MP of the region. But the problem has not really been addressed. Besides the Government decided to drop 27 villages in this area in the year 2000 from the Kalyan Dombivli Municipal Corporation and form Gram Panchayats in these villages. They were taken back in the KDMC in 2019. But during the interim period this region saw a mushrooming of multiple factories flouting all environmental norms, illegal constructions and satellite settlements mostly comprising of migrant workers.

Objectives: This particular research work has three objectives.

1. Explore the causes of the existence of the factories which do not follow the pollution control norms in this region.
2. There is also an attempt to find the cause of the frequent accidents of extremely hazardous nature in this region.
3. Try and find a correlation between the growing interest of real estate developers in this region and prevailing conditions.

Database and Methodology: This research work uses the methodology of qualitative analysis in Geography. In qualitative analysis, personal interviews, group interviews, questionnaires and public opinions, mainly collected through media weighs the possibilities and determines the final direction in which the results are formed.

The research work relies mainly on the secondary data available through the reports of the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board (MPCB), Kalyan-Ambarnath Manufacturers Association (KAMA), Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC), Kalyan Dombivli Municipal Corporation (KDMC). The media reports of the various accidents have been used. RTI queries and the answers obtained through them are used for reference purpose.

Primary data is generated through interviews with some factory owners in the area. Residents were interviewed for their experience and the health issues faced by them. The data was analysed to draw logical inferences and towards the end some questions are posed for the reader to probe into this problem further.

This research work does not try to malign any organization or individual but only tries to ask relevant questions as to who the real sufferer is and who the real beneficiary is, between the ongoing environmental and economic tussle in the Dombivli MIDC.

Discussion: The Kalyan Dombivli MIDC is a house to multiple industrial units divided in the phase I and II. In phase I there are 203 units and in phase II 607 units. Out of the total 810 units, 72 have reportedly closed down due to some problems. The remaining are performing well providing employment to many workers. Most of these industries are engaged in manufacturing goods and providing services. There is a fair number of engineering as well as chemical units particularly dyes in this region.

In the past decade or so, many complaints regarding rising pollution in this region have been filed with the Government of Maharashtra and the MPCB. Residents have repeatedly complained of ill-health like breathing troubles, headaches, throat pain, eye irritation, etc. due to the foul odour and smoke/smog in the MIDC area. MIDC and MPCB have been supposedly looking into this matter and the MPCB had served notices to 89 factories to shut down from 2016. An RTI query however has revealed that hardly any of the factories had closed down by the time the RTI was lodged. The MPCB refused to divulge the details of the names of the factories and also mentioned that they give a deadline to the factories to stop functioning unless they comply with the pollution control norms. If the factory complies with the norms before the said date, then, the MPCB does not shut it down in the interest of the employees' benefits.

On the other hand, however, the records of the MIDC show that some of the factories have closed down without any plausible reason and the plots were later sold off to real estate developers. The closing down of the Premier Company was considered one of the biggest losses, the incitement being the disagreements between the owners and the workers' union. The entire plot is now being converted into a large scale residential complex by one of the leading developers.

There is also a rise in the number of unexplained accidents and blasts in the factories which are a threat to the industrial region as well as the neighbouring residential region. The actual cause of the accidents is often not known. It is also not revealed whether the accidents are deliberately caused in order to draw some benefits by the factory owners or to cause some mischief. In the interaction with some of the factory owners, there was a general complaint that running businesses was no longer as profitable as earlier. And some of them were willing to shut down and sell off the plots for a huge profit if that were to be offered to them.

In February 2020, there were two separate incidents which drew the attention of the media as well as the government to this Dombivli MIDC. One was the debris dredged out of the Nala which spread on the road and turned pink on exposure to the air. It was foul smelling debris and loaded with chemical dyes which stained the road pink on 6th February, 2020. In another incident, a factory named as Metropolitan experienced terrible fires after some blasts inside the premises. It was a huge fire and took a long time to be brought under control. The smoke which emanated from the fire spread over a large area and caused throat irritation, breathlessness, giddiness and eye irritation amongst the affected. Following these incidents, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Shri. Uddhav Thakrey, announced that the factories in the Dombivli MIDC be shut down or shifted elsewhere.

The interviews with the factory owners have revealed a feeling of fear amongst them and the workers. There is a feeling of uncertainty and an argument that all of them are being penalized for the mistake of a few who are flouting the norms is evident. They want a strict action by the MPCB on the truant factories and wish that the others would be left in peace to do their job.

Conclusions: The various discussions have revealed that there are more questions in the ongoing events rather than answers. Some of the questions are:

1. Why has the MIDC allowed residential area so close to the industrial area and why have the green zones been compromised?
2. Why has the MPCB not taken stringent action against the truant factories inspite of repeated complaints?
3. What is the intention of the recent statement ensued by the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, that the factories in MIDC will be shut down and/or shifted elsewhere?
4. What will be the fate of the factory owners and workers in case the threat were to be carried out?
5. What is the solution to the health hazards posed to the residents of this area due to the frequent flouting of all environment norms by the truant factory owners?

The researcher does not have the answers to these questions but finds it important to raise these queries.

Disclaimer: The researcher has no intention of maligning any institution or individual but wants to only ask relevant questions.

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