



A fascinating chapter in the history of Bombay narrates the story of divine intervention that shaped the Mahalaxhmi Temple here in the lane leading to the temple, which at one point in time was submerged beneath the sea. Chapter 9, Verse 29 of the Bhagavad Gita says, “I am equally disposed to all living beings; I am neither inimical nor partial to anyone. But the devotees who worship me with love reside in me, and I reside in them (Mukundananda 2013)”. Similarly, Goddess Mahalaxhmi appeared in the dreams of a Hindu Merchant in the 1700s, which is said to have eventually led to the establishment of the temple.

An old practice of immersing Hindu idols in Worli Creek to protect them from Muslim invaders led to the structures remaining underwater for several decades (Shri Mahalaxhmi Temple Trust 2022). In the 18th century, during the tenure of Governor William Hornby, the coasts were required to be fortified and repaired (Edwardes 1909, 114). Governor Hornby started the Hornby Vellard project to connect the seven islands of Bombay. To accomplish this, he initiated the construction of two bunds, one in Mumbai and the other in Worli. At the southern tip of present-day Mumbai, the Mahalaxmi Temple stands adjacent to the village of Worli on the opposite side. The area now occupied by Atria Mall was earlier submerged beneath the water. Travelling from Mumbai to Worli naturally required a boat as the sea was impassable (Macnabb 1909, 86). Although the Hornby Vellard project faced scepticism from the East



India Company traders, Governor Hornby decided to develop this waterway. He envisioned the transformation of the creek into a causeway. He set out to fill the creek without permission from the authorities, connecting Mumbai to the island of Worli (Edwardes 1909, 121). The British referred to this ingress as 'The Great Breach', likening it to a window or a loop (Mumbai City Government 2023).

Hornby had assigned Shri Ramji Shivji Prabhu, a Pathare Prabhu, the duty of reclamation of the land between the Worli-Malabar Creek (Tindall 1982, 79). The Worli Creek would often flood the low-lying areas during high tide. Undeterred by the challenges posed by the sea waves, Prabhu and his team endeavoured to bridge the islands. Despite their tireless efforts, the project faced an impasse. With each attempt to establish the foundation, the sea would disrupt the progress (The Indian Express 2017). The task at hand remained unfinished, and the costs were escalating. The impending threat of suspension remained because, despite the disapproval of the Britishers, Hornby pressed on. He was determined not to face further delays.

According to the legend, Goddess Mahalakshmi appeared in Prabhu's dream, instructing him to retrieve the submerged idols from Worli Creek. She also said the breach wall would be sustained only if her deity found a home atop the hillock. Guided by divine vision and with newfound determination, Prabhu and his team got to work. They gathered small boats and cast nets into the sea with the help of local fishermen who volunteered. True to the vision in Prabhu's dream, three magnificent idols of Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati, and Mahakali were recovered. Subsequently, the construction was completed successfully without encountering any hindrance. Following its completion, Hornby gifted Prabhu a plot in the hillock. Prabhu invested an amount of 80,000 rupees to construct the Mahalakshmi temple on this plot (Ranganathan 2009, 67, 83-85).

The temple is an architectural wonder. The entrance of the temple features an array of statues. The Sabha mandap, a grand space within the temple, houses a silver-plated lion at its centre, facing the Gabhara (sanatorium). The Gabhara had intricate wooden idols covered in silver, including those of Lord Ganapati, Vithal, and Goddess Rukmini. The Gabhara also features the sacred Laxmi Yantram, symbolising wealth and prosperity (Darla 2019).

In the Gabhara, the deities of Goddess Mahalakshmi, Mahakali, and Mahasaraswati coexist, with Goddess Mahalakshmi taking centre stage, lending her name to the temple. She holds lotus flowers in tandem. The goddesses are seated on Simhasan (throne), with a portion coated in silver. Decorative depictions of elephants and peacocks adorn the front pillars of the Simhasan (Joshi 2023). The idols wear nose rings, gold bangles, and pearl necklaces. Rising to a height of 15 metres, the temple tower, referred to as Kalash, adds to the grandeur of the sacred space.



In Hindu tradition, each day of the week is devoted to a specific deity. Fridays, in particular, are revered as days dedicated to the avatars of Devi, the Goddess. Thus, the devotees visit in huge numbers on Fridays. From March to April and September to October, the sacred rays of the rising sun directly fall on the deities. The peak time of the year is during the month of Ashwin (October) during Navratri, the Festival of Nine Nights, to pay tribute to the Devi. In the initial three days, devotees honour the Devi as the manifestation of Shri Mahakali (Goddess of Creation and Destruction) or Durga, in the subsequent three days as Shri Mahalakshmi (Goddess of Wealth) and the final three days are spent worshipping her as Shri Mahasaraswati (Goddess of Learning) (Shri Mahalakshmi Temple Trust 2022).

The Mahalakshmi Temple is festive during Diwali, the festival of lights, and Annakut, during which 56 kinds of sweets and food platters, known as naivedya, are offered to the goddesses. The temple serves prasada to 500 pilgrims during the festivities. The Margashirsh month sees a gathering of devotees, especially women, offering prayers to the deities. Palkhi of Mataji, a procession carrying the goddesses on a palanquin, marks the Marathi New Year. This procession also marks the anniversary of the establishment of the Dwajasthambam, the sacred pillar in front of the shrine. The pillar is dedicated to Jayendra Saraswati Shankaracharya of Kanchi Kamkoti (Darla 2019).

A custom practised for generations at the temple is sticking a coin to the wall at the back. A devotee prays for a wish to come true with a coin in hand. If the coin sticks to the wall on the first attempt, there are chances that the goddess will fulfil the wish. The temple is also accessible from a pathway at the back, towards the sea, but the authorities have sealed it due to the ongoing Coastal Road Project. However, the BMC is designing a holistic pilgrim facility for the temple (Baliga 2023).

Unlike most temples, Mahalakshmi temple discourages the system of VIP Darshan and treats all devotees equally. The temple has become one of Mumbai's most frequented religious landmarks. Situated along the seashore on the northern side of Malabar Hills, the Mahalakshmi Temple, even after 300 years, continues to stand as a form of conviction for the people of Mumbai. The city is said to have been shielded by two chief temples, Mahalakshmi and Mumbadevi temple. For years, Goddess Mahalakshmi has continued to fulfil her role as a guardian to the city and its people.

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