



CITY OF CROWS

by Rob Appleby

introduction

INTRODUCTION

**“Three things you’ll find even in heaven:
taxidrivers, paanwalas and hutments”**

- Bombay taxidriver

The Bombay slums are a byword for crime, squalor, dirty politics and communal riots, and Dharavi, the much-vaunted “largest slum in Asia”, is the biggest and most feared of the lot. Scene of some of the worst excesses of the post-Babri Masjid riots of 92/93 in which an unknown number of people lost their lives and entire districts were burnt to the ground with the collusion of the city’s leading politicians, its reputation for random violence and extreme poverty is still strong in the minds of Bombay’s middle classes and the media, Indian and international alike.

Drive downtown past Mahim Creek on the western express highway and you’ll see the distant hutments huddled on the edge of the mangrove swamp dividing North and South Bombay. The smell of the swamp is overpowering and the beggars at the stoplights thrust their hands in through the windows of your car, many of them sporting some extraordinary mutilation or deformity. The giant water pipes running over the Creek are busy with people walking on top of them to work in Bandra. Huge hoardings advertise Bollywood movies, internet services and sometimes just the enormous red number of the hoarding company itself. The noise and pollution are intimidating and the slum in the distance seems like a gigantic anthill, disgorging its insect-like denizens every morning and calling them back in the evening. A threat to civilised city life. Certainly nowhere for an outsider to venture.

Well, not really. Things move on, and Dharavi’s reputation no longer reflects its reality. If Bombay has a heart, it must be this settlement of nearly a million people dating back to the nineteenth century (the oldest house dates back to 1840, and the cross at Koliwada is dated 1853), made up of immigrants to Bombay from all over India, many of them still pursuing their traditional livelihoods in the context of the country’s most cosmopolitan city. When downtown office workers break for a snack,



they are likely to eat idlis (fermented rice cakes) or sweets made here for consumption on the pavement outside the Bombay Stock Exchange. Leather goods, traditional pottery items, clothes - a vast range of goods are made in Dharavi for sale in India and abroad. And though the stigma of living here still attaches to them, many young residents are studying computer science and business administration and opening businesses here and

elsewhere. Far from being an economic refugee camp, as it is so often portrayed, Dharavi is a vibrant, energetic business and manufacturing district for many of its residents.

There are problems, of course, the typical insecurities of the slums: the threat of having your house demolished by the authorities, unavailability of capital for new businesses, the constantly changing legislation which threatens livelihoods and homes, the grinding bureaucracy in the way of every

new venture, lack of infrastructure and overcrowding - these are some of the complaints most often voiced by residents.

The heart of the matter is housing. While official real estate prices are among the highest in Asia, Bombay has made no provision for the unceasing influx of people from small towns and villages all over

India. Half of the city’s people (an unknown number, but certainly in the five to seven million range) live in its nearly 2000 slums, and their place of residence is often no indicator of their economic status, although the better-off will generally prefer to find proper housing elsewhere. The fact is that often better housing is simply not available at prices that even the well-off can afford. On the other hand, slum residents have no guarantees or security, and

do not own their homes. As a woman living on the edge of the Central Railway said to me while I was photographing her washing her family's clothes just a couple of metres away from the passing commuter trains: "If we could ask for one thing, it would be better sanitation. And to keep our homes". When I revisited the area nine months later, those houses were being demolished, although recent changes in official attitudes have led to legislation ensuring that residents are relocated to new housing within the city rather than, as happened in one notorious case in the early '80s, being driven in their thousands to the city limits and told to walk "home" - back to the villages from which their parents and grandparents came to Bombay. This obligation on the part of the authorities means that wholesale slum clearances are now probably a thing of the past, even though the residents are still not registered owners of their homes or land. Although it might seem evident that formal ownership of property is the key to economic growth, such perceptions, and the policies that might grow out of them, are far in Bombay's future.

Kumbharwada, the pottery colony off 90 Feet Road, is emblematic of the pressures on livelihoods in Dharavi. When the Kumbhars, a community of

pottery from Gujarat, were first relocated here from elsewhere in Bombay in 1933 (after two previous relocations, always to the northern edge of the city as it was defined at the time), they found a swampy, uninhabited district with plenty of space for their kilns and houses. Now 1200 families live in an area of 22 acres. A visitor's first impression may well be that Kumbharwada is less crowded than the rest of the slum, since the houses are separated by wide lanes. But all free space is taken up by kilns for firing the



traditional earthenware pottery that the community makes for the domestic market and Indian communities worldwide. There is no room for expansion. The potters themselves are well aware of the need to address these problems; for instance, they know that to be competitive in the long term, they must fire modern ceramics rather than earthenware. But such projects are unrealisable without the infrastructure or space for new kilns,

combined with the limited means available to people who have no collateral and must look for investment capital within their restricted family groups. In the meantime many young people are turning to new occupations, such as carpentry, diamond cutting and the merchant navy, and plastic is replacing earthenware as a material for many of the articles produced here.

The city is the natural stage for such collisions between traditional community livelihoods and the new urban reality. Significantly, communities which have adapted and diversified, like the Kumbhars or the Kolis, the original fisherpeople of the Bombay islands, have prospered while those which have clung to single trades have tended to stagnate. Very few Kolis now make their living fishing: the Creek, where they once practised their unique style of net fishing, has silted up and the few remaining fishermen now breed the fish they catch in large ponds in the interior of the mangrove swamp. The majority of them now work in other jobs around Bombay, as diverse as hotel management and the merchant navy, and their community identity is no longer rooted in a particular livelihood. On the other hand, the metalworker's settlement near the water pipes has failed to prosper, while most residents continue to pursue their traditional trade.

But division of work along community lines is still a central feature of life here. This is strikingly evident in the case of plastics recycling, for instance, where each stage in the process is handled by a different community, often from very different parts of India. The bags are first collected by scavengers, often *gardulas* (brown sugar smokers), and sold to muslim merchants who then deliver the bags for washing to a lane of tamilians off 60 Feet Road. Their task is to wash and dry the bags, after which they are again packed off to another part of the slum for further treatment.

With its many industries, Dharavi also has its darker side. Many jobs are dangerous and badly paid, such as cotton carding or brass buckle

manufacture. Protection rackets and official corruption are rife when people have no legal right to live or run their businesses where they do. And despite the availability of schools in the slum itself, many children are obliged to work, often at stunting, unhealthy jobs.

The central event in the recent history of Bombay, the 1993 riots, has also left its mark on Dharavi. Chamra Bazar, the muslim tannery district, was largely razed to the ground. People speak of seeing entire rows of houses destroyed with only single buildings - those belonging to the "correct" community - left standing. Indeed, many of the hutments date from the rebuilding in the aftermath of the riots. But despite the events of the time, the ten years since the riots have proved beneficial for Dharavi in many ways. In particular, the police presence in the slum has increased, with small stations on many streets, and this has largely driven out the more blatant forms of organised crime, and enabled a middle class to emerge in what was previously a notoriously mafia-dominated area. New legislation has enabled residents' associations to engage building contractors to redevelop their dwellings into multi-storey apartment blocks, and it is tempting to see such initiatives as a tacit recognition by the authorities that the solution to the "problem" of Dharavi is to give the people themselves the tools to improve their condition. Dharavi itself is fast becoming a desirable residential area, with its new buildings near to the Western and Central Railways conveniently located for commuters to other parts of Bombay.

The word "slum" conjures up a degraded settlement of the impoverished, of those who have failed the test of modern city life. But my visits to Dharavi impressed upon me the boundless energy and ingenuity of its people, and their ability to incorporate traditional values into the changes forced on them by the pressures of life in Bombay. The challenges and obstacles are overcome every day, often in unexpected ways. The cross at Koliwada,

for instance, bears the date 1853, and is often cited as a testament to the age of the community. But as Jacob Patil, the *gaonpatil* or mayor of Koliwada, told me, the cross itself was erected in 1960. "I put that cross up in 1960, but I knew that a new cross would be knocked down by the police when they came to know of it. So I put the date 1853 on it, and pretended it had always been there, unnoticed. Now it's in the history books!"



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