

# The Real Dharavi



It has been called Asia's largest slum. Yes, space is at a premium and people are cooped up in small houses and factories. But Dharavi is really the entrepreneurship capital of Mumbai. **Ryan Rodrigues** reports





**THE ROAD TO DHARAVI:** these are no narrow lanes

**FOR 30 YEARS** Jockin Arputham, a Tamilian from Bangalore, has been attending to the concerns of families in Dharavi, the centre of Mumbai, that has sometimes been called Asia's largest slum. The president of the Slum Developers Association, who is a Ramon Magsaysay award winner, tells us the Dharavi story.

"This place has had much better days. The land belonged to prosperous kolis, fisherfolk who lived along the Mahim creek; but as the city grew, the creek dried up," he says. The fishermen lost their livelihood, and the dry land made space for immigrants looking to settle. They came from all places: Tamil Nadu, the interiors of Maharashtra, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. Today the number of families who live under the corrugated tin sheds of Dharavi has crossed 100,000. That makes more than 600,000 people.

Dr Chandra Sekhar, joint metropolitan director at MMRDA (Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority) says his task is to rehabilitate 51,680 families within seven years. "We will spend nearly \$1.5 billion on this," he says. He has divided Dharavi into 10 sectors, and has taken up the first for redevelopment. There are 300 buildings today built over the last few years, either occupied by residents, or in stages of development.

Has it helped? Take just Amjad Ali, and his family of five. After a building was built over the plot they lived in, he got a new home for free. "With money I would have otherwise spent on buying a new house, I have refurbished my home," he says. The sum: a princely \$10,000. Ali

has a first floor balcony from where you can look down into the drawing room. Switch the lights off and fluorescent stars shine from the ceiling in dark. Ali says he makes his money from a bakery and chocolate making business, but he has a thriving leather business too.

Dharavi, in fact, is a lot more than the people who live in it. And these people whose businesses have survived against all odds, make it the entrepreneurship capital of the state. The cumulative size of these businesses is more than \$750 million, says Sanjay Ubale, secretary (special projects), Government of Maharashtra. "The place is teeming with it," he adds.

If you start from the fringes along six-foot road (that's what it is called), from where Dharavi abuts the western railway tracks, you'll find several shops that make up India's largest plastic and tin waste recycling industry. But then go further through alleys, and then through lanes - some so narrow you barely fit in.

The people who migrated from the state of Tamil Nadu buy jewellery for every festival. First came the jewellery shops. Then the customers. Festival demand has inspired supply. Even though these shops are run by businessmen from the state of Gujarat, they carry signs in Tamil. Then go deeper until you reach nine-foot road, and you'll find Kumbharwada, where women - descendants of Gujarati families, who came here a century ago - make clay pots. The business is not just growing, it thrives.

"Demand from the city has fuelled

much of this business," says Sheela Patel, director at the non-governmental organisation, Sparc. Leather shops flourish, and so do the workshops. The business of sweets and bakeries is flourishing too. One of Mumbai's biggest sweet shops, Ghasitaram's, has a large facility here.

But the biggest business today is the garment industry. At Suraj Bhai's facility, for instance, you'll find 50 people working three shifts, on eight computerised embroidery machines. To see these machines yourself you have to climb two floors up, and then go four floors down, right into a basement. Each floor is not more than five feet in height. In Dharavi, every shop has its own "setting".

"There are at least 20 workshops in Dharavi like my own," says Suraj. The money isn't made on single customers, but in bulk orders, where the product is offered at half the price. "People buy by the hundreds," he says. Then meet Mushtaq who runs a small leather shop, and says Dharavi has 120 shops like his. "These are just the front stores. Behind these shops are 1,100 workshops," he adds. Agrees Patel of Sparc: "At least 40 per cent of the people who live in Dharavi are employed in Dharavi."

There are many who share Patel's views. In the heart of Dharavi, in fact, hidden from the common eye, are larger facilities. Some cater to domestic demand, others manufacture for export. With a rapidly growing economy there is demand emerging from all quarters. Don't cry for Dharavi. In bustling Mumbai city, even Dharavi means business. 🌈



**AT ITS HEART:** Well known companies have a presence here



**THROUGH THICK AND THIN:** Mushtaq (centre) has one of 120 shops that sell leather goods in Dharavi. He says there are 1,100 workshops behind them



**BIRD'S EYE VIEW:** There are large workshops like these all across Dharavi. Some employ 100 people and more



**BAGGED AND BOOKED:** Tariq Azmi travels a long distance to Dharavi to sell bags. His best sales are when the customer buys in bulk. And in Dharavi, he says he finds many



**UP ONE FLOOR:** Bhavar Singh has a shop under this workshop. Six people do artistic *zari* work on sarees. Singh's workshop is only one of hundreds



**ALL DRESSED UP:** Suraj Bhai has about 50 people working on eight computerised embroidery machines. And there are at least 20 more workshops like this one



**GOLD THAT GLITTERS:** Many shops are run by Gujarati businessmen. But the signs are sometimes in the Tamil language. Because the biggest buyers are from Tamil Nadu



**UP TWO FLOORS:** The family of Amjad Ali. This house came free when a building replaced his shanty. Ali has spent \$10,000 in re-doing his flat

**BUSINESS BLOOMS:** Dharavi has the biggest recycling industry in India. But you'll find several other small workshops for welding and fabrication



**DHARAVI'S CHILDREN AT KUMBHARWADA:** Future potters?



**A POT OF FORTUNE:** Gujarati potters came here a century ago. Today the business is not just growing, it thrives