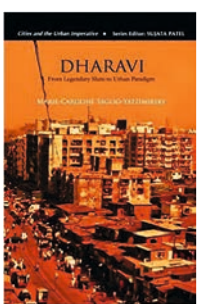


Dharavi, Mumbai: a special slum?

Dharavi, a slum area in Mumbai started as a fishermen's settlement at the then outskirts of Bombay (now Mumbai) and expanded gradually, especially as a tannery and leather processing centre of the city. Now it is said to count 800,000 inhabitants, or perhaps even a million, and has become encircled by the expanding metropolis. It is the biggest slum in the city and perhaps the largest in India and even in Asia. Moreover, Dharavi has been discovered, so to say, as a vote-bank, as a location of novels, as a tourist destination, as a crime-site with Bollywood *mafiosi* skilfully jumping from one rooftop to the other, till the ill-famous *Slumdog Millionaire* movie, and as a planned massive redevelopment project. It has been given a cult status, and paraphrasing the proud former Latin-like device of Bombay's coat of arms "Urbs Prima in Indis", Dharavi could be endowed with the words "Slum Primus in Indis". Doubtful and even treacherous, however, are these words, as the slum forms primarily the largest concentration of poverty, lack of basic human rights, a symbol of negligence and a failing state, and inequality (to say the least) in Mumbai, India, Asia ... After all, three hundred thousand inhabitants live, for better or for worse, on one square km of Dharavi!

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*Dharavi from Mega-Slum
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Dharavi's leather workers

Several socio-scientific studies on Dharavi have been written as well, most of these since the turn of the century and by researchers from all over the world. The book of the French anthropologist Marie-Caroline Saglio-Yatzimirsky forms to some extent a good example of this scholarly attention. Her book gives a detailed account of many aspects of life in Dharavi and of the changes that have taken place in the slum. Her study, however, actually reads like two books telescoped into one another: the core of the imaginary first one is largely a monograph on the workers and their dependants in the leather industry in Dharavi, based on ample fieldwork in the 1990s, well before the slum attracted most domestic and foreign scientists. It has been translated and updated from her French publication in 2002 (Parts II and III, following a broad introduction in Part I). The second imaginary book is concentrated around an analysis of dramatic changes that took place with regard to the slum during the 1990s and the 2000s (roughly Part IV). In the first study the living and working conditions of the several communities of workers and their families in the leather industry, their mutual relations, migration histories, their ways and degrees of integration in new urban setting, etc., are described and analysed in much detail. The leather workers are mainly sub-groups of untouchables (Dalits, Harijans) in (or rather outside of) the Indian caste system, who migrated from a variety of regions (Tamil Nadu in S.India, nearby Maharashtra, Bihar in the North of the country) to Mumbai, and hence Saglio-Yatzimirsky has given a welcome brief introductory exposé of the caste system and the place of untouchables in Indian society in her comprehensive first part of the book. Similarly, her overview of the usage and the meanings of the often misleading, but so convenient, term 'slum' and its local Indian equivalents is useful.

The mentioned 'construction' of two telescoped books also matters because the focus on Dharavi's population and its workers (Parts II and III) is almost completely restricted to its leather workers, while in Part IV the focus is almost completely on external pressures on the whole of the population of the slum. The leather workers are, as the author states: "the best example to gain an understanding of the interconnections between Dharavi's migrants, residents and workers and the rest of Mumbai" (p.25). This is understandable, but they constitute only a quarter of Dharavi's population. A bit more information

on other categories of the population, in terms of work, caste, region of origin, relations, etc., would have yielded a more balanced picture of the heterogeneous and complex society of Dharavi. Nevertheless, this well-written monograph on the leather workers in Dharavi forms interesting reading, and results in a lively portrait of their communities. Unfortunately, the author is rather vague in the account of her database, apart from an impressive pile of written sources. She writes about participatory observation, surveys and interviews in general words only (pp.22-23), but whom did she observe, survey and interview and what did she discuss and ask?

Redeveloping Dharavi?

Part IV is different. It covers in a thrilling account the interferences from a variety of outside actors with the slums of Mumbai in general and with Dharavi in particular, and has a much broader coverage than the leatherworkers in the earlier parts. Apart from some earlier slum clearance attempts, Mumbai's slums were successfully discovered as vote-banks since the 1990s. The Hindu-nationalist and populist Shiv Sena party won elections in the 1990s with the promise to build decent houses for slum dwellers. A 'Slum Rehabilitation Scheme' included a public-private partnership: private investors were invited to build market-oriented apartments in parts of Dharavi in exchange for the construction in situ of small high-rise apartments to be given free of charge to those slum dwellers who owned a house/hut. Those who could not prove to have lived there before a dividing cut-off date and tenants, i.e. most dwellers, were supposed to depart to the urban fringes. However, the scheme faded away before noticeable implementation: just 100 inhabitants of Dharavi were finally covered by it. This failing scheme was followed by a more grandiose 'Dharavi Redevelopment Project' (DRP) along similar lines of public-private partnership in the 2000s, and introduced with more top-down vigour, since Dharavi was gradually located in the centre of expanding Mumbai and very close to a new central business district in the making. Hence, the value of Dharavi land rose rapidly and (foreign) investors were expected to come and turn the city into a 'world class metropolis' "like Shanghai" (p.298). It was estimated that about one third of Dharavi's population would be rehoused in situ and free of cost.

The schemes caused much opposition among the Dharavites and NGO's working on housing, etc., in Mumbai, notably on the planned exclusion of a majority of the inhabitants while those included also protested against the planned forced separation between working and living spaces: their shops and workshops next to huts and houses were not foreseen in the world-class apartment towers! The world economic crisis of the late 2000s, the swelling protests, and (perhaps) the worldwide media, students, social scientists and town planners' coverage brought

the plans to the doldrums.¹ Under these conditions a new plan was developed that took the demands of the inhabitants of Dharavi into account. A pro-poor, bottom-up and to be implemented incrementally plan, according to Saglio-Yatzimirsky, and an example of "new forms of 'right to the city' demands" (p.326). Her book ends with this euphoria that is also expressed in the sub-title: "From Mega-Slum to Urban Paradigm".

This account of Dharavi comes to an end in about 2012, but events do not stop. The redevelopment of Dharavi is back in motion. In the Spring of 2015 a revised and 'final' DRP was published. In January 2016 private developers were formally invited to submit a bid for sector-wise redevelopment. Eligible inhabitants will each get 25 square metres in high rise buildings, while developers may place 40,000 apartments for sale on the market. Now, as the die is cast, it has yet to be seen whether the neo-liberal hunger for profitable urban land and up-market apartments will now defeat the combined resistance of a huge local society helped by NGO's, planners and scholars. Yet, the point remains that the inhabitants of Dharavi (and for that matter of all slums) deserve better living conditions than the state has (and should have) provided for them in the course of decades. It was half a century ago that the Bombay administration observed that "Private enterprise moved by profit motive is seen to restrict itself mostly to housing of higher income groups leaving the ones that need it most."² This lesson should not be forgotten when assessing the latest attempts to redevelop Dharavi.

Marie-Caroline Saglio-Yatzimirsky deserves praise for bringing in detail, the social, economic and political dimensions of the attempts to redevelop Dharavi to the fore. Her book matters also for planners, professionals and especially inhabitants of many more slums, in Mumbai and elsewhere.

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References

- 1 Quite a few MA and MSc students from all over the world did their fieldwork in Dharavi. A large scale involvement was from the Development Planning Unit, London, involving over 80 students and many staff, in writing about and re-designing parts of Dharavi for their Masters' degrees, in collaboration with concerned community organisations and some of the most influential NGO's of the city. See: Boano, C., Hunter, W. & C. Newton. 2013. *Contested Urbanism in Dharavi*, University College London.
- 2 Municipal Corporation of Greater Bombay. 1964. *Report on the Development Plan for Greater Bombay 1964*, Government Central Press, p.85.