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### Dharavi: The Spirit and Community

Mumbai is financial, commercial, and the entertainment capital of India and one of the most strategically important and wealthiest cities in the world, giving it the status of a ‘true global city’. Due to the limitless opportunities that this city offers, it is also called the ‘City of Dreams’. However, not everything is as it seems. There is a huge financial gap between the rich and the poor. Their way of living varies vastly. More than half of Mumbai’s population live in slum dwellings, with little to no access to even the basic amenities and facilities like clean water, electricity and food. Unemployment is a major and common issue here. The streets are unhygienic and unsanitized which increases the possibility of spread of several diseases arising from unhygienic conditions among people living here, especially among young kids and children. This poor infrastructure of slums in Mumbai impose alarming issues which should be taken seriously and resolved immediately if the city has to continue its growth.

One of the slums shown in the documentary “*DHARAVI, Slum for sale*”, directed by Lutz Konermann and released in 2010, is called ‘Dharavi’, where these serious problems exist on a large scale. It is considered one of the most densely populated areas in the world. What’s worth

noting is that with rapid development of the city, now these slums are located just beside the areas where rich residents live, unlike in the past where they were isolated and located far away. Thus, indicating rapid spread of urbanisation in the city. As said by a poor worker in the documentary supports this idea of urbanisation, “once Dharavi was outside the city limits, nowadays it's at the heart of the constantly growing metropolis”. Even after all the problems that its inhabitants face daily, thousands of migrants come here everyday with the hope of a better job, by which they and their families will be able to lead a better life. However, they fail to meet their expectations and are forced to live in such conditions forever with the sole purpose of survival. In the documentary, private builders and architects see Dharavi as “a playground for ambitious urban planners”, where if their plan of rehabilitation and redevelopment succeeds, will be an inspiration for other slum development plans for the underprivileged in other countries, which will in turn make billions of dollars in revenues and profits. Thus, a win-win situation for both the urban planners and slums. This is what the renowned and experienced US-trained architect Mukesh Mehta thinks and plans to do as shown in the documentary. As stated in the documentary, he has been planning and working on this project to develop Dharavi since ten years. As a result, it shows his devotion towards the problem no one has wanted or dared to solve. However, in the end, his plans don't work out due to slum dwellers' resentment. They feel their community and businesses will be destroyed as a result of his plans. Hence, the question that comes to my mind is whether or not should the government or private builders compromise on the community and spirit of Dharavi for the sake of development. I wish to explore the same and analyse in this essay with possible solutions.

The documentary highlights the struggle of both the planners' and the slum dwellers' to achieve their respective goals. Initially, Mukesh Mehta is seen taking a tour of Dharavi, talking to the people about their problems and consoling them not to worry and that the government will work together with him to improve their lives. However, little did he know the challenges he would face while working on this project. The challenges arose because his plan to rehouse slum residents into high-rise buildings to free up space for other developments did not seem to appeal to many slum dwellers as they didn't wish to leave their lands where they had been living and doing businesses for generations. Moreover, not everyone was eligible to get housing. Mehta justifies that it is the government's responsibility to define the eligibility criteria and not his. As can be seen in the documentary when the potter says, "if you ask me who made Dharavi, I would say: my forefathers did. Our forefathers' blood is on this land, and we won't give up so easily!". This leads me to consider that their loyalty to their land and community is much more valuable to them. It acts as their identity and brings them a feeling of oneness, which they don't wish to let go in exchange for a house. Moreover, the documentary shows a highly respected seventy year old peace activist named Bhau Korde saying, "for generations people have been staying and developing their businesses here, but they're destroying the whole thing". This means the people didn't wish to leave their businesses just for the sake of getting a good house to live in. Even though Mehta promised them free housing in high-rise buildings, they were strongly against it. This disagreement can be seen when Mehta goes to Dharavi for a community meeting with slum dwellers to explain to them his plans. However, his plans don't seem to convince the people sitting there. They also wish to contribute and play a role in Mehta's plans. They don't support the idea of being controlled and just agreeing with the plans of a handful of developers. Mehta, at this point, is left confused and angry after the meeting. A member in the meeting says, "70% of

Dharavi is commercial” indicating that people fear their business will close due to Mehta’s redevelopment plan. I consider it as an immoral scheme which will bring up social as well as financial problems. It seems that even though Mehta has a good intention towards these people and wants to make a contribution, but him being born and brought up in a privileged society makes him not fully understand the underprivileged people’s feelings and thus he fails to take into account some of the issues faced by slum in his plans. I feel that his plan has the potential to solve the problems of hygiene, but it wouldn’t benefit in the long run and would destroy the community sentiment among these people. According to Sunil Kumar Karn, Shigeo Shikura, and Hideki Harada’s “*Living Environment and Health of Urban Poor*”, “... Dharavi have more affection for their present social life and the type of employment, which they fear would be lost otherwise. Environmental problems appear tolerable to them when compared with the degree of social security, their present habitation offered.” (3585). In other words, they still appreciate the unique social networks they create within the area regardless of their other problems. It seems that Mehta didn’t consider this feeling of community among people in his plans. Nonetheless, there has been and will be a need for space in such an overly dense city and it seems to me that with increasing urbanisation and acquiring of lands, slums will be the first to be targeted.

According to Sapana Doshi, an Assistant Professor at the School of Geography, “Slums have become a frontier for commercial and infrastructure redevelopment” (10). This quote taken from her published article “*The Right to the Slum? Redevelopment, Rule and the Politics of Difference in Mumbai*”, explains that as the city is growing, the slums are being displaced gradually to free up space for further construction of buildings and shopping malls. Hence, in a way Mehta’s plans have been getting implemented, but in a negative way as these dwellers are

not getting housing. Instead, they are being compelled to move away. The same situation is depicted in the highly acclaimed film "*Slumdog Millionaire*", directed by a British director Danny Boyle. The film is based on real life struggles and incidents in slum and does a good job on showing the plight of the people here. One of the scenes in the film shows the two brothers (Salim and Jamal) sitting on the edge of an under construction apartment building when Salim says, "We used to live right there, man. Now, it's all business." (*Slumdog Millionaire*). This explains the fact that the slum lands are being cleaned up and used for building mega-projects on the same land. This leads me to consider that no matter how many people resist, the government and the builders have the ultimate power and decision. In this case, development at the expense of the poor. This is so because slums are suppressed communities without much resources to fight and not many feel the urge to go against them and spend their time protesting when they would have been spending their sweat and energy on working.

We also see the values of faithfulness, loyalty, and optimism throughout the documentary. What more do these people living in dark times want! They just need a little spark of light that would lead them out of hardships. This can be seen when Mehta is talking with people in Dharavi and the crowd gather around him and listen to him carefully and eagerly with enthusiasm. One person also adds that he often is compelled to work the whole day in order to get a good night's sleep. Moreover, the little girl in the documentary has big aspirations. This shows her optimism and courage to dream big, no matter the circumstances. She says, "I only have two wishes. One, to be an airhostess and the other to become a doctor." (*Dharavi: Slum for Sale*). Even in *Slumdog Millionaire*, the theme of faithfulness and loyalty is explored where Salim is loyal to Jamal and would do anything to protect his brother. Salim proves this when he

shoots himself after Jamal wins the “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” TV show, in order to prevent Javed (Salim’s employer and crime boss) from reaching Jamal to let him reunite with his love, Latika. For these people, these trustable qualities are what matter more than anything. Moreover, their community is their strength.

The slums in Mumbai should not be viewed as useless lands. Instead, a collective effort should be made to improve them keeping in mind the cultural and traditional aspects, and community values. Hence, the question that comes to my mind is whether or not should the government compromise on the community and spirit of Dharavi for the sake of development. I believe that with greater participation of slum communities in decision making policies of the government with regards to slum will bring forth better results with agreement of both parties. The government and builders should make the slum a priority and make a greater effort in implementing policies, instead of delaying. Unlike how Mehta went through his plans ignoring their suggestions and ended up nowhere.

## Works Cited

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