

Indian industrialist to build \$1 billion “home” amidst Mumbai’s multimillion slum-dwellers

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The richest man in India, Mukesh Ambani, is reportedly building a 27-storey skyscraper mansion in the heart of the country’s commercial capital, Mumbai (Bombay). The total cost of the project is expected to be US\$1 billion, roughly the average annual income of 1.5 million Indians.

Ambani is erecting his lavish “home” in a city that has 7 million slum dwellers. Several million more of Mumbai’s 12 million-plus residents live in substandard housing. Such is the price of real estate in Mumbai that even well-paid middle-class professionals cannot afford a decent dwelling. In what is clearly an unintended irony, Ambani has named his mansion “Antilia,” after a mythical island.

Due to a sustained real estate bubble in Mumbai, Ambani’s unbuilt house and the 4,532-square-metre plot on which it is being erected are already estimated to be worth more than US\$1.2 billion.

Mukesh Ambani and his brother Anil are the inheritors of their late father’s Reliance Group, India’s largest private company. Mukesh Ambani’s portion of Reliance Group includes the huge petrochemical division and textile-manufacturing plants. According to the Forbes’ 2007 list of the world’s richest people, the 50-year-old Mukesh Ambani is the 14th-richest person in the world, with a net worth of US\$20.1 billion.

Ambani’s architect has said the first six floors of the skyscraper mansion will be reserved for parking. Immediately above will be lodgings for 600 servants and their families. Eight floors have been reserved for “entertainment,” including a mini-theatre and a number of swimming pools, and several more floors will house a health club and rooms for guests.

Mukesh Ambani, his wife, three children, and mother will occupy the top four, non-service, floors, giving them a panoramic view of both Mumbai’s Arabian Sea

coastline and the city’s skyline as well as easy access to three helipads on the skyscraper’s roof.

Ambani and various aides and sycophants are reported to consider the proposed mansion as “comparable to those owned by his friends such as Lakshmi Mittal,” the UK-based Indian steel tycoon who last year bought the most expensive house in London for 60 million pounds.

Speaking to (India) *timesonline*, a Mumbai-based architect commented, “Our wealthiest citizens used to hide their money...they would not drive their Mercedes, they lived in small apartments. Even Mr. Ambani’s father lived in a small block of flats. They were afraid of the taxman. But that attitude has gone; Mukesh has made his money and good for him if he wants to flaunt it.”

While India’s rich now shamelessly flaunt their wealth, fully three quarters of India’s population of 1.1 billion live in abysmal poverty, with tens of millions regularly receiving insufficient nourishment.

According to official government estimates, the number of people living in substandard, slumlike dwellings has more than doubled in the past two decades, rising from 27.9 million in 1981 to 61.8 million in 2001.

The social misery and economic insecurity of the vast majority of urban and rural Indians have become especially acute since 1991, when the Indian elite abandoned a national economic-development strategy in favor of fully integrating India into the world capitalist economy and making India a cheap-labour producer for the world market. Even while the country’s economy has grown dramatically, many hundreds of millions of rural and urban poor have become further impoverished.

The agricultural sector, which provides more than 60

percent of all Indians with their livelihood, has been devastated by the diversion of funds from agriculture to the infrastructure projects favoured by Indian and international capital, the reduction in agricultural price supports, and other pro-investor policies.

The state of Maharashtra, whose capital is Mumbai, has witnessed the emergence of a new, abhorrent social phenomenon—suicides of indebted farmers. This year alone, 416 debt-ridden, cotton-growing farmers in the state's Vidarbha region have taken their own lives.

Meanwhile, millions of small-scale peasants and landless agricultural labourers have been forced to migrate to cities in search of work, greatly expanding the slums in the cities.

"The rise in slums is due to the lack of affordable housing provided by the government," said Maju Varghese, a representative of the Yuva Urban, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that works with Mumbai's urban poor. "The Government has withdrawn from the whole area of housing and land prices have gone to such heights that people can't afford proper housing. Slums are here to stay. The government has completely ignored this problem."

Mumbai, which has India's largest slum population, also has the dubious honour of containing Asia's largest single slum, Dharavi.

The slum, which is home to more than a million people, is considered by Mumbai's political and economic elite to be a blight on the city. A blight it wants to eliminate by a "slum clearance" campaign that will render—as such campaigns have repeatedly done in cities across India—the slum-dwellers homeless.

Recently, the government put the 223-hectare slum up for sale to international property developers, with advertisements splashed in newspapers all over the world, including the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*. The advertisements proclaim the sale as "the opportunity of the millennium," offering a "perennial source of income" to the successful bidders.

As part of the state and municipal governments' plan to convert Mumbai into a "world-class city," Dharavi's slum dwellings are to be replaced by seven-storey apartment blocks, hospitals, schools, gardens, jogging tracks and even a golf-driving range for an estimated cost of about US\$2.3 billion.

Arputham Jockin, the president of the National Slum Dwellers Federation, recently told the press, "selling

this land to the global market and giving it over for commercial use—how will that improve our lives? Ninety per cent of the people here want a stake in their future and a say in how it is transformed. It has to work from the bottom up. Not top down." He warned that a ruthless land-acquisition plan on the part of the state government could well result in a "bloodbath."

Opponents of the slum's demolition have already hung black flags over their homes. Most of those who will be "relocated" are not only threatened with homelessness but also with the loss of their livelihood. According to unofficial estimates, Dharavi accounts for US\$1 billion in annual economic activity driven by various cottage industries such as potteries, tanneries, bakeries, metal workshops and, prominently, garbage recycling.

So scarce and expensive is housing in Mumbai that even a small 8x10-foot hut in Dharavi is valued at between Rs. 150,000 and 300,000 (US\$3,600 and US\$7,200). As a result, an estimated 42 percent of the Mumbai's slum dwellers are forced to live on less than 10 square metres (about 108 square feet) of land with every 800 or so people forced to share a single toilet.

Sixty-year-old Razman, living in Dharvi for the last 10 years, showed his "house" to BBC reporters by stretching its walls with his outstretched hands. This small dwelling is home to five members of his family including two small children. Said Razman, "We want change and for conditions to improve for the people who live here. There is nowhere for my grandchildren to play, but I cannot afford to move from here."



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