

The reality of life in Mumbai's Dharavi slum

Harvey Thompson
13 June 2009

The popularity of Danny Boyle's recent film, *Slumdog Millionaire* has led to a surge of media interest in the Mumbai slum of Dharavi which is partially depicted in the film.

An important part of many people's motivation for going to see the film will have been the depiction of severe poverty and an attempt, however implausibly realised in the story, to escape it. This popular concern, which took the studios by surprise, has assumed fresh urgency.

A slum clearance program by the state government, tied to potential corporate development, is set to worsen the plight of many workers and residents in Dharavi, confronting them with homelessness and the loss of their livelihoods. A more considered and serious approach to the phenomenon of slums like Dharavi is needed than has appeared in much of the world's press.

Dharavi, which rivals Orangi Township in Karachi, Pakistan, for the title of Asia's largest slum, is an administrative ward, stretching over parts of Sion, East Bandra, Kurla and Kalina suburbs of Mumbai. Spread over an area of around 200 hectares, according to official figures it has approximately 86,000 slum structures and an estimated population of up to one million, making it one of the most densely populated areas of the world.

In Mumbai there are other slums which are beginning to rival Dharavi in size and squalor. In a city of 15 million people, almost 60 percent live in slums or in over 2000 "slum pockets" across the city.

The Dharavi slum has been tolerated and even encouraged by successive political administrations due to its economic significance. It contains a huge conglomeration of cottage industries and primitive workshops that produce goods for the world market—an estimated 15,000 single-room factories—as well as an expanding industry processing recyclable waste from across Mumbai. The total annual turnover of Dharavi is estimated to be anywhere from US\$650 million to US\$1 billion.

Dharavi is located between Mumbai's two main suburban railway lines. To the north flows the Mithi river, which empties into the Arabian sea. Both its location and poor drainage systems make Dharavi particularly vulnerable to floods during the wet season.

In the lead up to the present international economic crisis,

however, real estate prices in central Mumbai reached record heights. Dharavi, where rents can be as low as US\$4 per month, found itself in the centre of the financial hub at the heart of Mumbai, India's largest city and the country's economic engine.

In 2006, the Indian Supreme Court duly sanctioned the sale of hundreds of acres of land occupied by textile mills in Mumbai to private developers, despite widespread protests. The prime land was slated to be used to build expensive shopping malls and high-end apartments for the elite. (See "Indian Supreme Court gives green light to sell off Mumbai mill lands")

The government provisionally approved a US\$2.3 billion plan called "Vision Mumbai" to create a "world-class city" by 2013, complete with shopping arcades and a golf driving range. The scheme was couched in semi-humanitarian language. An advertisement by the Mumbai Slum Rehabilitation Authority appeared in 20 countries in May 2007, inviting corporate bidders to "Redesign the township. Rehabilitate the families. It's a challenge. But rewards outweigh the Herculean task."

The Hindustan Times, May 31, 2007 was more blunt: "Considered an eyesore, Dharavi stands on 2 sq km of land estimated to be worth \$[US]10 billion".

At the end of last year, Mumbai authorities began the destruction of "unauthorised" dwellings in the Ganpat Patil sector of the slum. It was not known where the 10,000 evictees would live.

The clearances were carried out by police officers wielding long wooden sticks, who beat protesting slum residents.

The project to redevelop Dharavi is managed by Mukesh Mehta of MM Constructions. Formerly based in New York, Mehta is implementing a plan that, according to the *Calcutta Telegraph*, will transform the 174 hectares of the 223-hectare slum into "a glittering township of parks, skyscrapers, shopping arcades and good life."

Mehta made his money in real estate in Long Island, New York, and was hired as a consultant by the Maharashtra government to take charge of the \$2.3 billion project to emulate the development of Shanghai, China.

But a project based on the economic thinking of the heady days of the Nineties construction boom has come up against the reality of the global economic crisis. Four out of the 19 large corporations signed up to the Dharavi project had dropped out by March this year, including Reliance Engineering Associates

owned by Mukesh Ambani, who was previously behind an even more ambitious project centred in Mumbai. (See “Indian industrialist to build \$1 billion “home” amidst Mumbai’s multimillion slum-dwellers”).

With the drying up of credit, the remaining consortiums have requested toning down the original bid to match the “market conditions”.

According to the Indian government, half a million jobs have been wiped out in recent months in globalised sectors of the economy. The crisis has hit the export-driven production of Dharavi, with its reliance on textile industries, and has begun to lead to “reverse migration” of labourers back to the impoverished villages they came from. According to the *Wall Street Journal*’s livemint.com, an estimated 100,000 migrants have “either left or are expected to leave” Dharavi for villages in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar.

A picture of rapid decline of the slum’s main industries—some averaging a 50 percent drop in demand in the five months to March this year—is painted by *The Indian Express*.

There is an urgent need to tackle the growing social blight that is represented by Dharavi and replicated in cities across India and the globe. But no solution is offered by the prescriptions of the environmentalists who merely seek to ameliorate the worst excess of the slums while leaving them and their “ecologically-sound” structures intact.

For a number of environmental campaigners, areas such as Dharavi—with their small scale production units and recycling industries—are seen as the “green lungs” of the modern metropolis. Typifying this argument was a 2007 feature on Dharavi by the *Guardian*, quoting a spokesperson for Friends of the Earth saying, “In the UK we could do worse than looking to the recycling endeavour of slum-dwellers in places like Dharavi for inspiration... There is a lot to learn from the developing world, where a scavenger mentality, grass roots recycling and sheer necessity can lead to imaginative leaps in redeploying waste.”

The area of the slum referred to was the so-called “13th compound”, where 80 percent of Mumbai’s plastic waste is recycled by around 10,000 workers (many of them children).

The *New York Times*, February 21 wrote in a similar vein that “Dharavi is probably the most active and lively part of an incredibly industrious city. People have learned to respond in creative ways to the indifference of the state—including having set up a highly functional recycling industry that serves the whole city.

“Dharavi is all about such resourcefulness. Over 60 years ago, it started off as a small village in the marshlands and grew, with no government support, to become a million-dollar economic miracle providing food to Mumbai and exporting crafts and manufactured goods to places as far away as Sweden.”

What is ignored by those glorifying the “resourcefulness” and

“industrious spirit” of the slums is that workers and child labourers live in an area where as many as 18,000 people are forced to crowd into a single acre, where there is just one lavatory for every 1,500 residents, not a single public hospital, and only a dozen municipal schools. Open drains run thick with untreated human and industrial waste, water taps run dry constantly and cholera, typhoid and malaria are common.

Deprived of public services because of their illegal status, slum dwellers find themselves at the mercy of the land mafia and the water and electricity goons. The nexus between Mumbai’s political parties and semi-criminal business interests has served both lucratively in the past.

There can be no socially progressive solution, for Dharavi’s population or the world’s one billion slum dwellers, without a political struggle against the corporate and political elites. According to recent official surveys, around 65 million Indians—a quarter of the urban population—live in slums. This does not account for the millions more who live in sub-standard housing barely distinguishable from the shanty towns.

The sad fate of some of the children who acted in *Slumdog Millionaire*—whose families have since become the targets of extortion, tabloid entrapment and victims of the slum clearances (see “Home of *Slumdog Millionaire* child actor destroyed by Mumbai authorities”)—is a powerful reminder of the gulf between the film’s largely sanitised conceptions and the reality for those who live in the slums.

Contrary to most media depictions, the proliferation of the modern slum is not an unnatural excrescence on an otherwise healthy body. Nor is it the result of a lack of resources. It is the inevitable product of the capitalist profit system, whereby the accumulation of social misery for masses at one pole of society feeds the creation of vast wealth at the other. The only way to free humanity of the slums is to overthrow the system that breeds them by the combined struggle of workers and rural poor around the world.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact