

The Third Face of Mumbai

A newspaper reporter interviewed me recently. One of the questions she asked me was about the poverty in Mumbai, and our tours to Dharavi, Asia's largest slum. "Is this not voyeurism?" she asked me. "The affluent stare at the poor; and you make money off it?"

The answer to this question is complex, so here is an attempt to look a little deeper at the issue.

First of all, there is no avoiding the poor in Mumbai. The slums are all-pervasive. In many parts of the city, there are shanties by the roadside. At Colaba, where many tourists stay, there are many homeless people visible. They are dirty and unkempt, living on the pavements. On a recent drive through the Fort Heritage District, a semi-naked man walked past us, his body caked with dirt, his clothing in tatters. At traffic signals, tourists are accosted by beggars with shocking sores and disfigurements.



For overseas visitors, the image this creates is of two bewilderingly different Mumbais – one that is rich and glitzy and safe in their five-star cocoon, and the other that lives a hellish life on the streets, begging, cringing, with no self-respect whatsoever. There is no room for an understanding of a third Mumbai – the Mumbai of the hard-working poor. The Mumbai of the aspiring migrant, with his fierce drive for survival, for self-improvement. The Mumbai of small enterprise. The Mumbai of cottage industries. The Mumbai of poor yet strong women, running entire households on the strength of their income from making poppadums (papads).

Every morning, these women put food on the table, braid their daughters' hair, and send them to schools. They have hope for the future, you see? This is the Mumbai of dreams, which I want my

guests to see.

Dharavi is one place where this third Mumbai is visible. In the poppadam units, in the little tailoring shops, in the potters' village of Kumbharwada, in the little wholesale grain stores, in the children who proudly go to school - everywhere Dharavi displays a spirit that is fierce and energetic.

Every time my visitors go into Dharavi, they come back with a first-hand insight into this third Mumbai. Apart from the "people aspect", there is the educational / business value of going to Dharavi. There are many interesting themes to see and learn from:



Market-driven Recycling: Unlike the West where recycling is forced by government mandates and laws, in Dharavi there is a labor-intensive market for recycling which has a sophisticated delivery chain from sourcing, treatment and reselling. You can see how the recycling chain has a fine pricing mechanism that provides incentives to individual households to recycle. **Urban Villages:** You can see examples of traditional communities which still have rural ways of life although they live in a big city. Although urban life is usually associated with alienation and a sense of loss, here in Dharavi, the urban villages have strong community ties through the land-use pattern, shared festivals and food. This results in the same cohesive living patterns that we see in villages. Behavior is controlled by social norms and therefore there is no breakdown of law and order even in a slum. **Migration Mechanics:** According to the latest McKinsey Quarterly, by 2050, 700 million Indians will migrate to cities, with up to 35 mega cities forming newly. This is migration on a scale that has never been witnessed before. How do migrants fit into the new environment? Through speaking with ordinary people, you can try to understand how multiple generations migrate to cities and their lifestyle changes. **An Intelligent Networked Market:** All the needs of the various industries in Dharavi are met by other supporting industries within Dharavi. For example, the garments industry in Dharavi supplies bits of waste cloth to the potters village to feed the fire in the kilns, and there is a

transporting system to bring the cloth. Orders are placed on cell phones. For the many large scale bakeries in Dharavi, there are flour mills located sensibly nearby. The gold shops in Dharavi are located in a cluster, to encourage increased foot-falls in that area. Thus you can see that although there is no planned development as defined by conventional urban planners, the MARKET itself is very sensible and is well organized to meet its own needs. Co-operative Movements: You can see the papad-making industry which is entirely run as a women's cooperative. Here we see a living example of Gandhi's statement that India's millions can only progress when we encourage cottage industries.

Frankly, seeing Dharavi is not even remotely voyeuristic. It is much more than just a place of poverty; it is a shining example of entrepreneurship and creativity. Dharavi stands up and demands respect, and guess what - it gets it from every visitor who goes there.



One of my American guests summed this up very well, after a 2-hour visit to Dharavi: "To me, this place dispels the myth that poverty is due to laziness - that the poor somehow deserve their lot in life because they are lazy or stupid or otherwise lacking in some important character trait that the successful possess. Dharavi is a resounding rebuttal to that belief."

Photos: Flickr, Mumbai Magic

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