

In 1948, an eighteen-year-old boy from Tirukoyoor, in Tamil Nadu's South Arcot district, travelled to the city of Bombay. He knew little about the city, or city life. But he bravely ventured forth as it was difficult to survive in his drought-hit village.

**Shamsuddin thought he was coming to a big city. Instead, he found himself in a swamp—an area called Dharavi—where his uncle, Sheikh Hussain, lived.** He had apparently lived in this swamp since 1914. Says Shamsuddin, 'I found work in my Mamu's business—rice smuggling. In those days, Bombay city's limits ended in Mahim, just west of where my Mamu and his Sons lived.' Grain brought in from outside the city limits was taxed. But Hussain, his three sons and his newly arrived nephew had already worked out a way of getting around the system.

'Every day, my cousins and I would make several trips to distant Virar, then located outside Bombay, where we would buy rice for 1 rupee and 14 annas per pound. We would carry packets of it back as our personal belongings, get off at Mahim station, and walk through the *khadi* (swamp) to Kalyanwadi where Mamu lived. The rice would then be sold for Rs 10 per pound.'

Shamsuddin's uncle lived in Dharavi until 1954-55 and then went back to his village. His three Sons decided to emigrate to Pakistan. As a result, the rice trade stopped. Shamsuddin had no money and no work. He managed to find a job in a local coal company where he earned the royal sum of Rs 1.50 a day. After two years, his prospects improved when he got a better job at the Atlas Printing Press in Madanpura for Rs 56 a month. This gave him the confidence to get married, in 1959, to Hayatbi from Tambaram, Tamil Nadu. While his wife has never been to school, Shamsuddin has studied in Tamil up to Class VI.

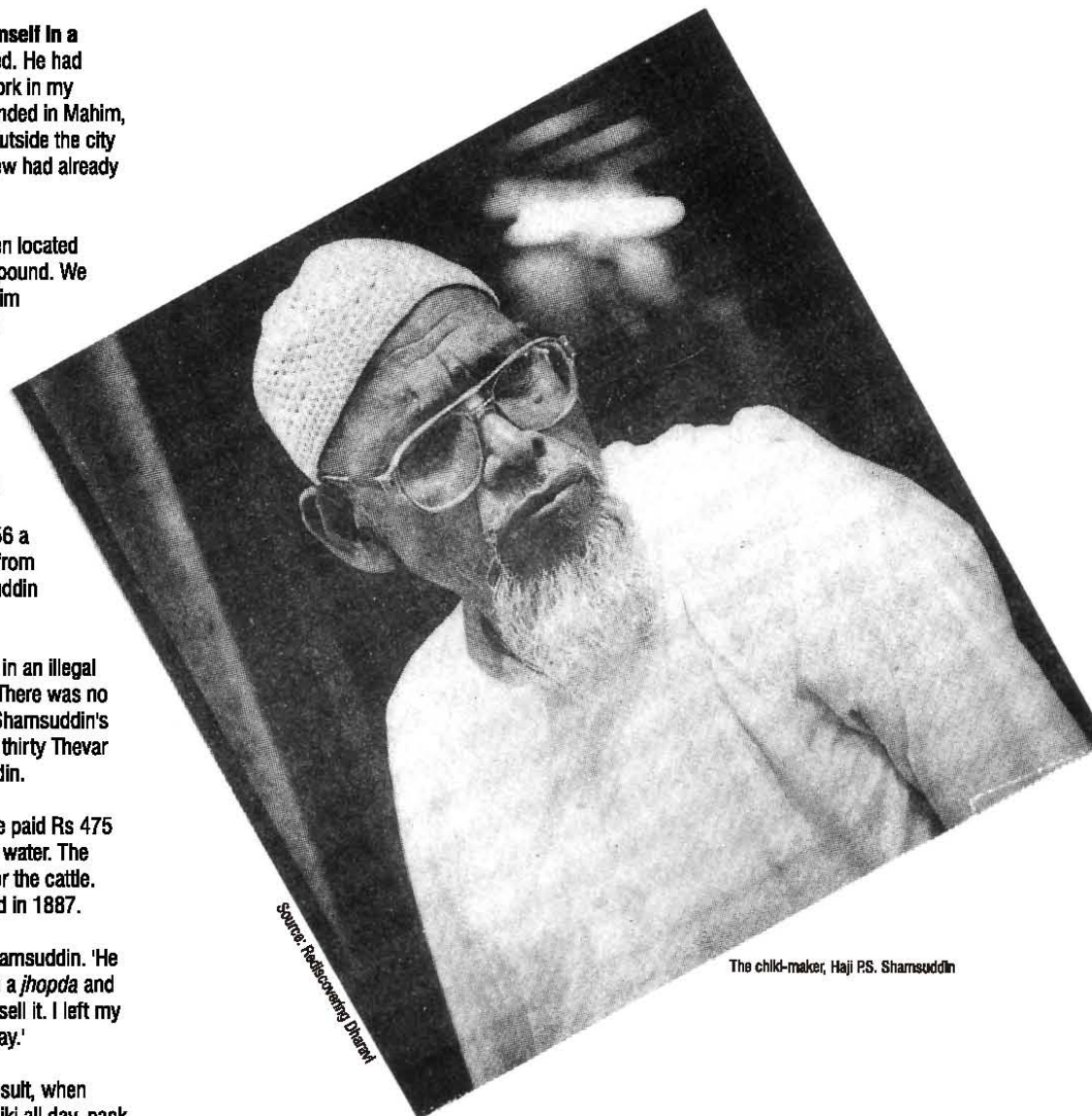
The couple survived on the paltry sum that Shamsuddin earned and lived in an illegal hut in Bandra where someone else from their village had already settled. There was no electricity, no water. Later, they moved to Kalyanwadi, in Dharavi, where Shamsuddin's uncle had lived. Theirs was the only Muslim house in the middle of about thirty Thevar families from Tamil Nadu. 'But there were no problems,' recalls Shamsuddin.

In 1961, Shamsuddin moved to Kuttivadi, which was a 'settled chawl'. He paid Rs 475 for a 10 feet by 18 feet room. In those days, he says, there was plenty of water. The municipality would keep the place clean; there was even a separate tap for the cattle. The chawl was named after Hasan Kutti from Kerala who built Badi Masjid in 1887.

'One man from Tirunelveli, Hamid, knew how to make chiki,' recounts Shamsuddin. 'He came to me and said, "Give me space and I'll make chiki." So we got him a *jhopda* and he began to make mysore pak and chiki. I would take it to the shops and sell it. I left my job at the press as this way I earned much more—a profit of Rs 25 per day.'

In time, Shamsuddin and his wife also learned how to make chiki. As a result, when Hamid left for Calcutta, they took over the business. They would make chiki all day, pack it up in old newspapers, and Shamsuddin would take it to the canteens of cinema halls to sell in the evening. He would return around 11 p.m.

He named his brand A-1 chiki after a chewing gum by the same name manufactured in



The chiki-maker, Haji P.S. Shamsuddin

Calcutta. Shamsuddin's business flourished until the riots of 1992-93, when all his workers ran away. 'That's when I lost interest and handed the business over to one of the boys who used to work for me. He now runs it and gives me a share of the profits each month,' says Shamsuddin.

The A-1 chiki factory is still located in Abu Bakr chawl, Kuttivadi, off Dharavi Cross Road. Today, it comprises two pucca rooms with lofts. Around twenty workers work in the two gloomy rooms. All of them are from Tirunelveli district and most of them speak only Tamil. They sleep in the loft above the place where they work. In one room, workers are busy making mysore pak, while in the other masala dal is being fried. The fuel for the stoves is sawdust brought from the timber market in Reay Road. Both rooms have become black with the smoke which billows from the sawdust-fired stoves.

Shamsuddin now lives in Nagri Apartments, one of Dharavi's high-rise buildings. His tiled, plush drawing room has two phones, a wooden cabinet with a TV set, curios kept in a glass cabinet and many other accoutrements of middle-class living. This distinguished looking seventy-year-old, in his white shirt, lungi and white lace cap, speaks Hindi with a pronounced Tamil accent. He has been on Haj and is now known as Hajisaheb—Haji P.S. Shamsuddin. His sons are educated and have their own businesses. One of them runs a medical store on Dharavi Main Road.

Haji Shamsuddin's story is not atypical. In fact, Dharavi is full of such stories—of men who went literally from rags to riches in one lifetime. What made it possible? Their own enterprise and hard work? A little bit of luck? Or the compulsions of survival, and the lack of a safety net, that forces people to attempt to do the impossible?

## Enterprise and ingenuity

Haji Shamsuddin's story is repeated many times in the lives of the people living in Dharavi. It is a story of ingenuity and enterprise; it is a story of survival without subsidies or welfare; it is a story that illustrates how limited is the term 'slum' to describe a place that produces everything from suitcases to leather goods, Indian sweets, papads and gold jewellery.

**Every square inch of Dharavi is being used for some productive activity. This is 'enterprise' personified, an island of free enterprise not assisted or restricted by the State, or any law. It brandishes its illegality. Child labour, hazardous industries, adulteration, recycling, popular products from cold drinks to toothpaste produced in Dharavi—it is all there for anyone to see. Nothing is hidden because people here know that nothing will be done to stop them. Dharavi is an unofficially endorsed enclave of crass illegality that continues to flourish under the tightly shut eyes of the law.**

The atmosphere in Dharavi, even on a holiday, is like being on a treadmill. Everyone is busy, doing something. There are few people hanging about. The streets are lined with hawkers selling everything, from safety pins to fruits, and even suitcases. Behind them are a mad array of shops. Satkar jewellers, ration shop, Bhupendra Steel, Husain Hotel, Swastik Electric and Hardware, Shreenath Jewellers and Mumbai Polyclinic—that is a typical collection on 90 Feet Road. Hindu, Muslim, south, north, food, jewellery, hardware, health care, all down one street.



If you want to eat the best gulab jamuns in town, buy the best chiki, acquire an export quality leather handbag, order World Health Organization (WHO) certified sutures for surgery, see the latest design in ready-made garments being manufactured for export, get a new suitcase or an old one repaired, taste food from the north and the south, see traditional south Indian gold jewellery—there are few better places in all of Mumbai than Dharavi. Some of these goods are easy to locate as they are sold in shops on the main streets that criss-cross Dharavi. But much more can be found tucked away in some inner lane that can only be located if you are guided by a Dharavi resident.

**Estimates of the daily turnover of Dharavi can only be wild guesses as few people will actually acknowledge how much they earn for fear that some official will descend on them.** Much of the production here is illegal. But there is little doubt that it runs into crores of rupees. A rough back-of-the-envelope calculation by Dharavi residents added up to between Rs 1,500 crore and Rs 2,000 crore per year or at least Rs 5 crore a day! And roughly around Rs 11 crore per hectare per year! No wonder people think of Dharavi as a 'gold mine' without even considering property prices.

A 1986 survey of Dharavi by the National Slum Dwellers' Federation (NSDF) confirmed what one can see as one wanders through Dharavi's lanes. At that time, there were 1,044 manufacturing units of all kinds, big and small. A later survey by the Society for Human and Environmental Development (SHED) noted 1,700 units. The actual number is likely to be larger as many smaller units, which work out of homes and lofts, would have fallen outside the scope of the surveys.

The NSDF survey estimated that there were 244 small-scale manufacturers employing from five to ten persons. The forty-three big industries recorded in the survey are probably only medium-scale production units. These would include two factories making sutures—one of them a multinational company—one making what is called 'duplicate colgate', a toothpaste which sports an international brand name ('duplicate' everything is a speciality of Dharavi), soapmaking units, a mithai factory and some of the tanneries that did not shift even though on paper all tanneries were supposed to have been moved out of Dharavi to Deonar by the end of the 1980s.

The NSDF survey recorded 152 units making a variety of food items like chiki, papad, channa dal; fifty printing presses; 111 restaurants; 722 scrap and recycling units; eighty-five units working entirely for export; and twenty-five bakeries. These units are spread out all over Dharavi with big concentrations in Transit Camp.

The common point about all these enterprises, including some of the bigger ones, is that they have come up despite the government, and not because of it. Few of them receive the

benefits that the government offers small- and medium-scale industries. The majority do not abide by laws that apply to these industries. It is a mutually beneficial situation: the government does not have the headache of having to supervise and tax such a diverse 'industrial' sector, and the enterprises can flourish by flouting every law, including that of safe working conditions. Workers have no health insurance, there are constant lay-offs and redundancies as cheaper labour replaces the old, but neither the government, nor the entrepreneurs, nor even the workers, complain because in their own way, everyone gains something from this situation.

It is virtually impossible to capture the diversity of manufacturing activities in Dharavi. But they can roughly be divided into the traditional trades and the more modern ones. The latter include the leather industry—tanneries, finished goods and other leather-related products like sutures, or buckles. Also in this category is the garments industry, most of which sells its products in the local market. Then you have food—sweets papads and baked products. Dharavi has some of the most hazardous industries, like waste recycling and foundries making brass buckles. In the traditional industries are potters, jewellery makers and gold refiners.

**The leather business**

Officially, all the tanneries of Dharavi have been relocated to Deonar. In the past, when tanneries dotted Dharavi's landscape, the first thing that hit you was the stench. Ask anyone what they thought of Dharavi during the 1950s and 1960s and they will tell you that it stank. There were parts of the settlement that were covered with wool fluff from the hides after they were cleaned. Even today, there are lanes in Dharavi that are carpeted with wool from the sheep and goat skins drying in the sun. A small breeze can blow the lighter fluff onto the low rooftops and beyond.

Although twenty-seven out of the thirty-nine tanneries that operated in Dharavi were given alternative land in Deonar, only the larger ones shifted. Some of the small, older tanneries continue to operate in the inner depths of the settlement despite the official ban. Walk through the Tamil-dominated area of Palwadi, for instance, and you will chance upon some sheds. At one end, a former employee of a multinational company has set up a soap factory, producing detergent bars that are strikingly similar to the brand produced by his former employers. And at the other end you see the way leather was treated in the past in Dharavi. The overwhelming presence in the shed is that of an enormous wooden drum that creaks somnolently, like a behemoth which does not know how to stop. Inside its cavernous depths are scores of hides being swilled around in a chemical solution that is almost the last stage in leather processing.

In the old days, those who worked in the tanneries also lived there. The work was incredibly dirty and only men of the lowest castes were employed for the job. The raw hides would arrive from the abattoir at night. They first had to be washed as they would be full of blood. The next stage was to apply salt (sodium sulphide) and leave them for four hours. Then they would be salted one more time. Most of the hides would be sent off at this stage to other tanners.

But in some places, the hides were treated further. They were soaked in lime pits or in drums for four days. This would condition the leather to absorb the chemicals that would be applied later. After this, the hides were shaved—manually at that time, now by machine—to remove the wool and remaining flesh and fat.

The next step was to soak the hides in ammonium chloride, the deliming process. This fixes the leather and also removes any last remnants of hair. The hide becomes almost white at this stage.

Next came the chemical stage where the leather is processed over eight hours in chromium sulphate. It is left aside for one day before fat liquor is applied to the hide to soften it. Only after this process is it dried. The last stage is the dyeing and colouring.

Now that most of the tanneries have moved out of Dharavi; only the first stages of treatment are done there. The semi-processed hides are shipped off to Chennai for the final treatment. The processed hides then return to Dharavi to be crafted into finished products.

The first stage of the leather process is probably the worst. You walk into Kuttivadi, off Dharavi Main Road, and pass Innayatbhai's godown where the hides are being treated with sodium sulphide. The smell is enough to make you gag. Perhaps, over time you get immune to it. Innayatbhai clearly is not bothered as he sits supervising the work of his men as they apply salt to the hides.

According to Eklakh, 40,000 goats are killed each week in Deonar (on Tuesdays and Saturdays). These animals are brought to Mumbai from Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. These are the government's official figures of the number of animals slaughtered. But another 5,000 or so are slaughtered 'unofficially'. All these hides are brought to Dharavi for the first stage of processing. Each skin is bought for Rs 100 and resold, after salting, for a slightly higher sum. The margins are very small, says Eklakh. Apart from goats, the abattoir also slaughters 500 buffaloes and 200 cows a week. These skins sell at Rs 500 each.

**Most of those dealing in leather are either UP Muslims, or**

**Muslims and Hindus from Tirunelveli district.** The odd man out is Darab Pedar, a genial, bespectacled sixty-seven-year-old Parsi who is more comfortable in Hindi than in English. 'My father brought me into this way of life,' he says. 'We have to sail in the same boats as our fathers. What to do?' he asks rhetorically, a twinkle in his eyes.

The Pedar family's connection with leather goes back to the years before World War I when Darab Pedar's grandfather went to Aden to work in a German company. They would buy skins from Africa, put them through the first stage of processing, and then send them to Germany for the tanning and finishing.

In 1930, Pedar's father came back to India and found a job with a tanner in Dharavi. He worked there till 1957 when he retired, and a year later he died. After retiring, he had started his own business. His untimely death forced Darab Pedar to leave college and take on the business. Until 1978, Pedar worked with the largest leather manufacturer in India, Nagappa Chettiar. Altogether the Chettiar tanneries treat 50,000 skins a day which are supplied from 200 buying centres all over India. Pedar used to manage the fourteen buying centres in the western region.

In 1978, Darab Pedar left Chettiar and started his own business, the Veera Tanneries. As there was no space in Dharavi or Mumbai to establish a tannery, Pedar decided to set it up in Aurangabad, where he acquired sixty-five acres of land in an industrial estate.

Pedar's Dharavi unit procures hides from the Deonar abattoir, puts them through the salting process and sends them to Aurangabad for the rest. He deals in 1,000 to 1,200 hides a day.

Pedar estimates that the annual turnover in the raw leather business in Dharavi is around Rs 60 crore, over Rs 50 crore in sheep and goat hides and the rest in buffalo and cow hides.

While the days of leather tanning are more or less over in Dharavi, finished leather goods have taken over as the main leather-based business. As you come to the end of 90 Feet Road and turn onto the Sion-Mahim link road, you see gleaming leather showrooms with names like Jazz, Leathercraft, Step-in and Ideal Leather on either side of the road. Behind their plate glass windows are displayed the latest designs in leather handbags as well as briefcases and suitcases. Within their air-conditioned confines you find wallets, belts, photo-frames and all manner of leather goods. Many of these are either surplus or rejects from export orders placed with leather goods manufacturers in Dharavi. They sell these goods at half of what you would pay in similar shops in south Mumbai. Bargaining, is the norm. Everyone works on narrow margins and is willing to sell the same product for a marginally lower price.



This is the famous leather street that has made Dharavi a name even the rich of Mumbai now know. But the leather processed in Dharavi is usually not of a high enough quality to be used in finished goods. For them, processed leather is trucked in from Chennai, which now has most of the tanneries.

While the finished goods sit in air-conditioned splendour, the men who labour over these products have none of these comforts. They sit instead in cramped lofts or workrooms and work in bad light, poor ventilation and in stifling heat to produce the most beautifully finished and crafted leather goods.

Siddhant Leather Works is one of the oldest finished goods workshops in Dharavi. It is located inconspicuously in a lane behind these flashy showrooms. In a narrow room sits young Manish Mane who runs it now. He inherited it from his grandfather, Shankar Mane, who came to Bombay looking for work in 1933 from the border area of Solapur and Satara districts of Maharashtra. Shankar had worked with leather in his village, as had his father. Thus, he easily found work in the only leather manufacturing unit at that time, the Universal Trading Company, located at Princess Street, where he made leather bags and earned Rs 20 per month.

In 1942, when Hindu-Muslim riots broke out in Bombay, Shankar Mane went back to his village. He only returned in 1946 after peace between the communities had been restored. Fortunately for him, the owner of Universal Trading Company decided to help him set up his own workshop. Thus, in 1951, Mane bought a 36 feet by 12 feet room in Dharavi's Parsi Chawl for Rs 1,800 and established Siddhant Leather Works. Manish and his fifty-five-year-old father, Shivram Shankar Mane, continue to conduct business in this room.

But much has changed in the surroundings. This area was called Parsi Chawl because it was owned by a Parsi. Originally, it consisted of stables for cows, buffaloes and horses. Once the British left, the stables were converted into chawls—single-room tenements with a loft and a tiled roof. Many of those original structures have survived. Shivram strengthened and improved his tenement in 1955 and still has with him the municipal clearance and approved plans. These contain some quaint suggestions; for instance, the municipality laid down that all the windows should be made of teak!

Shivram's former boss gave him one leather sewing machine with which to start work. In time, he was able to purchase eight more machines. In those days a sewing machine would cost between Rs 150 and Rs 200. Today, you have to pay as much as Rs 36,000 for a machine, and this can go up to Rs 80,000.

Unlike his father, who left school and came to work in Mumbai, Shivram studied up to Standard XI. He has two sons and two daughters and has made sure all of them are educated.

When Shivram began to work out of Dharavi, there were only two others doing the same work. Today, there are between twenty-five and thirty larger leather goods manufacturers in Dharavi while there are more than 5,000 doing jobwork. These are people with one or two machines who work out of their homes on the basis of orders they get from bigger businesses. Shivram estimates that in the area where they live, almost every home has one or two people doing jobwork.

The workshop has six men making jewellery boxes on the ground floor and three boys in the loft making parts for leather briefcases. Aftab is a seventeen-year- old



Source: UDRI

from Madhubani district in Bihar who is busily making the parts. He says, 'When I first came to Mumbai, I lived with a relative. I somehow managed to find work and realized how nice it was to have money.

As a result, I decided it wasn't worth going back to my studies in Bihar.' Altaf is typical of the bright and precocious boys you meet in such workshops in Dharavi. He has an opinion on everything: 'Laloo cares for the poor, that is why he is popular,' he says about Bihar's colourful former chief minister.

Shivram points out that the place where the shops stand today was marshland when he came to live in Parsi Chawl with his father. At that time, the majority of those working in finished leather goods, which included many making chappals and shoes, were Maharashtrians. A substantial number were from the Satara area. Today, Shivram says 60 per cent of those doing this work are Muslims, from UP and Bihar. The Maharashtrians like Shivram who are still in the leather business make mostly bags and wallets. Very few use their traditional skill of making chappals and shoes. You have to search the lanes to find such a person.

One such person is Damodar Ramachandra Kamble, who runs a shoe workshop in Parsi Chawl. He established the Jaishree Leather Art in 1982 and concentrates on export orders that require him to make just 'uppers'. These are then sent to a factory where the sole is added. The shoes are then exported to Australia and Japan.

Kamble claims he is the only person in Dharavi doing this type of work. He has about twenty workers spread over a room of around 10 feet by 20 feet and a loft—quite spacious by Dharavi standards. The work area is also well-lit and not stuffy like the other workshops. His workers come from all parts of India, including UP and Bihar.

Kamble, who is from Neena village in Pune district, says his parents also worked on footwear. 'Our circumstances were bad, so we had to come to Mumbai. I used to be a worker for fifteen years in a leather factory. I started this business with no workers. Then gradually I employed more people. Today, I have an annual turnover of Rs 1 crore,' he says proudly.

**Proximity to the abattoir in Bandra also produced another trade—that of making sutures. Apart from Johnson and Johnson, the multinational company which has a factory in Dharavi, the other person best known in this trade is Abdul Baqua who runs the Ideal Trading Company. His factory has been certified by WHO and he is proud that despite the filth of Dharavi, his factory can maintain the highest standards of hygiene and manufacture sutures that are meant exclusively for export.**

Baqua's story is one of the many success stories that one constantly encounters in Dharavi. He came from Azamgarh district in 1948 at the age of thirteen. He knew no one in Dharavi but had to leave his village because his father had died when he was just two years old. Although his mother married again, they were financially in dire straits.

'I heard there were some people from Azamgarh in Dharavi. So I came here and slept in the mosque, in Badi Masjid. During the day I worked as a cleaning boy at Rafiq UP Restaurant across the road for Rs 15 a month. I worked there for four years, until 1952, and saved absolutely nothing. Dharavi was terrible in those days. It was a swamp. We had to wade through it to come from Mahim station,' recalls Baqua.

Discouraged by this, Baqua went back to Azamgarh in 1952 where he set up a ration shop. Ten years of selling provisions got him nowhere. In 1962, Baqua came back to



Bombay to try his luck again but did not bring his family. He had no funds to start a business. A friend who had gone to Coimbatore, where he was manufacturing sutures, asked Baqua to join him there. In time, Baqua mastered the trade. He was able to launch out on his own and began making sutures which were sold to big companies like Johnson and Johnson and also exported. Within three years, Baqua had managed to accumulate enough capital to buy a proper house and live comfortably in Coimbatore. One of the companies to which he supplied sutures was an Italian company based in Bombay. The owner, an Italian Jew, invited Baqua to work with him in Bombay. They went into partnership and worked for some years exporting sutures. In 1970, the Italian said he wanted to move back to Italy and had no interest in continuing the business. Baqua took over his orders and set up a factory in Dharavi in 1970 registered as the Ideal Trading Company.

Thus, Baqua's sutures complete the circle of the leather business—from hides, to finished goods, to sutures. Each of these has a place in Dharavi because of the original location of the abattoir at Bandra. Despite the other changes that have taken place in the city, and in Dharavi, the leather business continues to be the dominant trade with which Dharavi is associated.

Shirt off your back

Off Dharavi Cross Road, a slushy lane opens out into Kuttiwadi. On one side are the oldest bakeries of Dharavi. On the other are a row of godowns. The first is one of the primitive leather processing units that can be found in many lanes of Dharavi, identifiable by the stench that escapes through their open doors.

The next godown, by contrast, is a garments factory. There are three long tables ready for the master cutters, the paper patterns pinned to the walls, the bales of cloth on one side. Mustaqeem, a bespectacled young man in kurta-pyjama and white sandals, sits in a small air- conditioned cabin at one end. The cabin next to him has a computer which connects him to markets in distant US. On his desk are phones, a fax, and on the side is a rack with samples of ready-made garments. Mustaqeem exports garments to the US where they are ultimately sold through Wal-Mart and Kmart.

But in 1970, when Mustaqeem came to Bombay as a lad of thirteen from UP, he did not dream that one day he would own a garments factory and export directly to the US. His family members were landowners in UP's Rae Bareilly district, better known as the constituency of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. Over time, with the division of land, the family was reduced to penury. This forced Mustaqeem to venture out, looking for work in Bombay, even though he had not completed his school education.

His first home in the big city was in the disreputable Kamathipura area, better known as Bombay's red-light district. A relative who lived there allowed him to stay with him. Mustaqeem started work in a ready-made garments factory where he was not paid but given the chance to learn the trade. Every morning he would go there at 7.30, clean the place, wash the machines, serve tea to the workers and then hang around till everyone left. Only after that could he try the machines and learn how to sew. All the workers were from UP and as they had no place to live, they usually slept on the road outside the factory. Within four months, he had learned how to stitch on the pedal machines and become a good tailor. 'My motto was that if I work hard, God will honour me. I would tell the workers that one day I too would own a factory.'

In 1974, Mustaqeem managed to persuade a relative who lived in Dharavi to let him put two sewing machines in his home. Mustaqeem operated one machine and hired a man to run the other. They worked all day and would somehow manage to find jobwork. But expenses were often higher than what they earned. So, while in the past he could send some money home as he earned a regular salary in a garments factory, he could not do this once he began his own business.

But slowly, he says, he was able to expand and eventually had ten machines placed in additional rooms that he managed to rent. The men who worked there stayed in these rooms. At this stage he felt confident to ask two of his brothers to come to the city to help him while the third stayed behind to look after the land. Today, Mustaqeem exudes prosperity even though he still operates out of a shed in Kuttiwadi which becomes unapproachable after a downpour.

There are only a couple of other garments exporters in Dharavi but there are dozens who take on jobwork for exporters. They are around every corner in the rebuilt Chamda Bazaar or Bageecha area which was razed to the ground during the 1992-93 riots. But the majority of garment manufacturers in Dharavi cater to the local market.

They include men like Haji Abdul Haq Ansari, who was forced to move his workshop to Dharavi when his factory in Mazgaon was burnt during the riots. During that time he was imprisoned and his hands broken. The bitterness has not gone and the sadness is evident in his eyes, in his body language.

Today, Ansari has a workshop in Indira Kureishi Nagar, another of the many nagars off Dharavi's 90 Feet Road. Once you enter it through a narrow lane, you find yourself transported to another part of India. This is not just a part of Uttar Pradesh but a specific district in that state, Gonda. Like Ansari, the majority of people living and working in Indira Kureishi Nagar are from there.

Among them is twelve-year-old Jameel, who sits cleaning an

embroidered material. He works for twelve hours, sleeps and eats in the workshop, has no problems about having left his native place to live in this squalor. What will he do when he grows up? 'Maybe I'll also own a factory,' he says, not an unrealistic dream given the number of people you meet who have done precisely this.

Jameel's boss, Ansari, came to Mumbai from UP in 1965 and began doing small stitching jobs. Now he has several machines and workers and gets job orders from exporters. He says he is one of the smaller jobbers and can make around Rs 7 lakh per year. The bigger Ones, he feels, can make double that amount. In his Shalimar society of seventy people, formed post-riots with people from Gonda ('So that we can protect each other against harassment and extortion'), half the members are big jobbers. Ansari turns out 500 to 600 shirts a day. Workers are paid on a piece-rate basis and can earn up to Rs 150 per day. They are mostly from Bihar and some from Tamil Nadu. Ansari thinks there must be at least 500 people like him doing jobwork in Dharavi and another 100 doing hand embroidery called zardozi and machine embroidery.

The zardozi work requires great skill and is usually done by young boys from Bengal and Bihar. You find them sitting on the floor with a piece of cloth tautly stretched before them on a rack, doing intricate embroidery with gold and silver threads. It is painstaking work, often done in bad light. As with other trades, the workmen eat, sleep and work in the same space.

You also come across men busy doing machine embroidery. It appears that the majority of men in this trade are from Bengal. The constant and virtually nonstop whirring of machines can usually lead you to one of these workshops. The machine embroidery is mostly done for the local market.

Dharavi's garments business, unlike the leather trade, seems to have remained immune to the ups and downs of the export trade because it caters mainly to the local market. You will find evidence of this in one of the lanes of Social Nagar where there are over a dozen shops on either side selling cloth and ready-mades. This is your typical souk, your *kapda* bazaar that can be found anywhere in India. Daylight never reaches the lane separating the shops. All the shops have tubelights, fans, linoleum floors and some, like Waqar Khan Pyare's, have fancy shelves packed with shirts.

Here's another of Dharavi's rags-to-riches stories. Waqar, who had studied up to Standard VIII in his village in Bareilly district in UP, came to Bombay in 1978 when he was thirteen years old. His family once had a lot of landed property. But they had gradually sold their land to survive. Left with too little for all of them—his parents, two brothers and two sisters—to live on, Waqar, the eldest, was sent to Bombay where he lived with an

uncle in Dharavi.

Waqar began working by buying and selling bananas. He did this for a year. Then he found a job selling ready-made garments in front of Dadar Station. Like other unauthorized hawkers, Waqar had to contend with daily harassment from municipal workers. But he somehow stuck on with the job and put some money aside.

With this money he rented two sewing machines. He set these up in the room where he lived, rented for Rs 5 per month, and started taking on jobwork. He was lucky to find a client who gave him regular work. He realized that there was a lucrative local market which could be supplied. Today, with twelve workers and three shops, Waqar sells shirts all over India and has a turnover of Rs 70 lakh a year.

Food, glorious food

You can hide garment units in lofts but you cannot hide the smell of food. Imagine the overpowering smell of ghee assaulting you as you make your way through one of the many garbage-encrusted roads in Dharavi. If you look behind the high gates next to Diamond Apartments where Abdul Baqua, who makes sutures, lives, you will see a factory-like structure set within a large compound.

This is the place where gulab jamuns, rosogullas, chamchams, motichoor ladoos, kaju barfee and many more delectable Indian sweets are made. The next time you bite into a soft, sweet, gulab jamun at a five-star hotel in Mumbai, you will probably be eating something manufactured in Dharavi.

Punjabi Ghasitaram Halwai Karachiwala is located today in what was the Diamond Aerating Works, a soda water factory that was built in 1949. Ghasitaram moved to this spot in 1978 from another location in Bombay. The business was founded by Govardhandas Ghasitaram Bajaj who had come from Karachi after Partition. He had decided to continue with the sweet business in independent India. His family had run a similar business in Karachi since 1916. His sons continued the business but split in 1978. One of the brothers now has the factory in Dharavi.

Mohan Katre, the manager of the factory, takes great pride in every aspect of his work and has been with the Bajaj family since 1951, when they began with a small sweetshop in Kalbadevi. Theirs is the biggest Indian sweets manufacturing factory in Mumbai and possibly in India, says Katre.

The factory remains as it was when the Diamond Aerating Works owned it. In a huge cavernous high ceilinged hall, there are groups of workers doing different things. At one end are six stainless steel boilers for heating the milk. On the side are iron kadais, where the milk is converted into khoya for Bengali



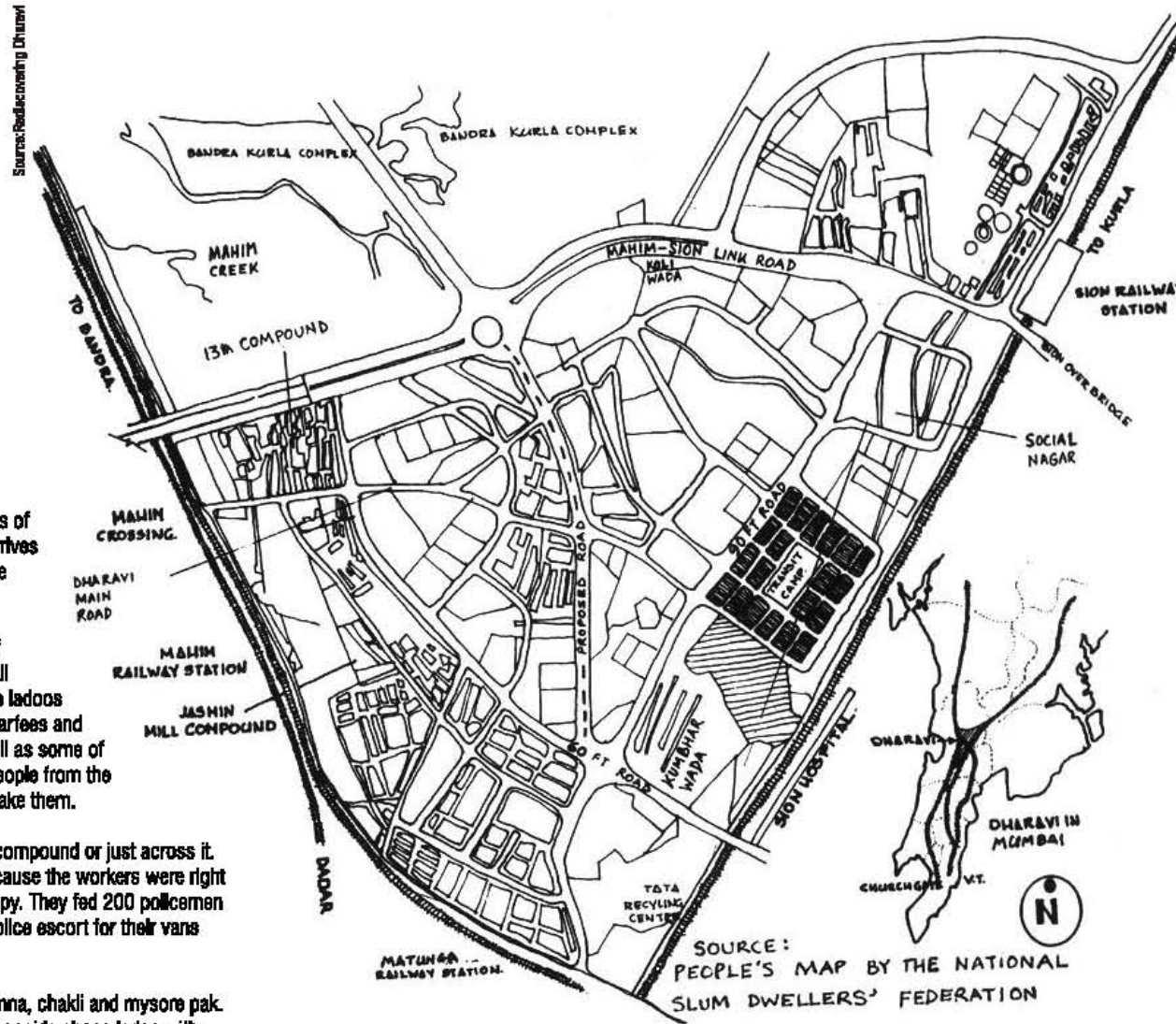
sweets and for gulab jamuns. The factory uses 2,000 litres of buffalo milk and 800 litres of cow milk every day which arrives at the factory gates from Vasai, Dahisar and Turbhe, on the outskirts of Mumbai.

The most interesting aspect of the trade is that each set of workers comes from a different part of India. Thus, Bengali workers make chamchams and rosogullas, Punjabis make ladoos and gulab jamuns, Maharashtrians make kaju katris and barfees and the UP bhalyas make khoya and milk-based sweets as well as some of the savouries, like samosas. Katre says it is best to use people from the region where the sweets originate as they know how to make them.

Ghasitaram employs around 200 workers who live in the compound or just across it. During the 1992-93 riots, the factory was not affected because the workers were right there. The owners had the foresight to keep the police happy. They fed 200 policemen every day at the height of the riots. As a result, they got police escort for their vans when the sweets were ready for delivery.

A bigger food business is that of manufacturing chiki, channa, chakli and mysore pak. If you walk down Dharavi Cross Road, you will find on either side shops laden with goods which have been manufactured and packed in the homes and lanes just behind these shops.

Until 1992-93, Hindu and Muslim Tamils identified themselves with their region and not their religion. The riots changed all that. Even if Tamil did not turn on Tamil, the fact that Hindu Tamilians attacked UP Muslims or vice versa polarized the Tamil community along religious lines.



The exceptions are the child-makers of Dharavi. Of the twenty-seven involved in making chiki, only one, Haji Shamsuddin, is a Muslim. But he is the oldest and is respected as a father of the tribe. The others turn to him for advice and for help to settle even domestic disputes.

Dharavi's child-makers produce tons of the peanut brittle which is sold all over the city and outside. Ramaswamy from Tirunelveli district, for instance, lives in Kamaraj Nagar, which is an enclave of people from his district. His daughter, Selvy, is now studying to become a chartered accountant. Yet his wife speaks hardly any other language except Tamil and is afraid to speak to strangers. In one generation, there has been such a remarkable change—all from the profits of child.

In addition to chiki and mithai, you will see many women rolling out papads. Some of them are supplying them to Lijjat papad. This is a women's organization called **Sari Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad**. It began in 1959 with a few women in central Bombay rolling out papads to earn some extra money. It has now grown to an organization with 40,000 members throughout India. Lijjat has 8,000 registered members in Mumbai, of whom around fifty live in Dharavi. These women travel to Bandra every day to collect the wet dough from which papads are made. Within a couple of days, they are back with the rolled out papads which have been dried in the sun. For their efforts, these women earn an average of Rs 50 to Rs 60 per day.

Of course, not all the women you see rolling out papads are part of Lijjat. Many do this for private entrepreneurs and are probably not paid as much. There is also little supervision of their work. As a result, you often see the papads, which are dried in the sun on upturned baskets, sitting next to a garbage dump, or covered with flies. The Lijjat organizers insist that their members have to take care to maintain hygiene and that there are frequent inspections.

### Brun, butter and pay

Modern methods have not touched the manufacture of most of the food produced in Dharavi. Thus, despite the availability of electricity and gas, all the bakeries in Dharavi



continue to use wood-fired ovens, something they have done for more than fifty years.

Eighty-year-old Haji Abdul Shakur Jamaluddin is one of the oldest bakers of Dharavi. He owns the Maqdoomia Bakery which was started in 1952 just after the Nagina Bakery. Even at this age, he visits the bakery twice a day.

If Jamaluddin's story sounds familiar by now, it is. Like so many others, Jamaluddin's father came to Bombay in 1928 from Mohammadabad in UP's Bijnore district. He found a job in a bakery and learned the trade. Ten years later, Jamaluddin came to Bombay and went to school in the city. In 1952, his father bought a godown in Dharavi's Abu Bakr Chawl and set up the Maqdoomia Bakery. It has two ovens and bakes bread, butter (a savoury biscuit popularized by the Irani bakers), toast (sweet rusk) and bun. Every day, it bakes around 270 kg of these items.

Behind Maqdoomia, on Dharavi Main Road, is Mamu's Bakery. Forty-five-year-old Abdul Aziz Khan, better known as Mamu, 'owns' a large compound just off Dharavi Main Road. If you ask him whether he actually owns it, he quickly 'disowns' it. He's only a tenant, he says, and has a Muslim landlady. But for all purposes he owns this strategically located plot which has residential quarters on two sides and a bakery on the other two.

Mamu's Bakery is well known in Dharavi. The compound where his bakery is presently located was earlier a tannery. Unlike Jamaluddin, Mamu is not a baker by profession. He made his money in the firewood trade at the height of the illicit liquor era. Dharavi was the main brewing ground for country liquor, and firewood was needed for the stills. Apart from the liquor stills, hundreds of tons of firewood was needed for the bakeries.

Mamu estimates that there were between fifteen and sixteen large liquor stills in those days and at least fifty smaller ones. The bigger ones would produce at least 100 tubes of liquor a day and one tube could carry around fifteen litres. A rough calculation suggests that if all the stills were working to full capacity, Dharavi would have produced around 25,000 litres of its deadly illicit brew each day.

When the police finally decided to crack down on the liquor business in Dharavi, Mamu switched professions and became a baker. Today, he has two large wood-fired ovens in his bakery and bakes brun (a hard-crust bread) and slice bread (a regular loaf) in the night. These are supplied early in the morning to restaurants where people have Mumbai's special bunmaska (bun with butter) and chai before going to work. Mamu's Bakery also produces 150 kg of khari and 100 kg of butter biscuits during the day.

Mamu's workers are mostly from Azamgarh district. All of them are on daily wages, there are no permanent employees. The best paid are those who tend the ovens. They earn as much as Rs 80 per day and are in great demand. As a result, they rarely stick to one job. The next most skilled are those who knead and make the dough. The rest, the packers and cleaners, which include women, get paid only around Rs 25 per day.

The scene inside Mamu's Bakery is almost surreal. You see men dressed in loose cotton pyjamas and vests stoking the ovens and kneading the dough on long stone slabs. At the other end of the room, men and some women are greasing the trays in which the moulds of dough will be placed. Everyone works in unison; not a word is spoken. Each knows his or her task. So as the men cut and mould the dough, another team places each item carefully in the greased trays. Two men put the trays at the edge of the two ovens and push them in with long iron rods. By instinct, they seem to know when to pull the trays out. The trays of perfect, golden brown pay, or khari, or butter, are then left to cool before being packed in polythene.

The baked goods are sent either through *pheriwalas*, who go on foot with a tin box on their heads carrying freshly baked biscuits, or the cyclewallahs, who balance a tray at the back and two large bags packed with bread on either side of the handlebar. Most of these men are from UP although some are from the south. The new recruits are all Biharis. Each bakery has a group of *pheriwalas* attached to it. They get a place to sleep and, in return, they buy and sell the products.

In 1952, when Jamaluddin began his bakery, there were two other bakers. Today, there are over twenty- five in Dharavi. Most of them have two wood-fired ovens. At dawn, a pall of smoke hovers over the area where these bakeries are located. Residents complain but nothing is done. Controlling pollution is not a major preoccupation for people living in Dharavi.

### Smoke and fire

In Mukand Nagar, the smoke and fire is inside the rooms. If there is hell, you will find it in a narrow lane in this part of Dharavi where primitive foundries fashion brass buckles for leather belts and bags.

No one here has ever heard about labour standards or occupational health hazards. Such concepts have never interfered with a day's work in these production units that hark back to the beginning of the industrial era. All you need is a room, a hole, some coal, some sand and motor oil and poor men willing to destroy their lungs.

The lane we walk down is barely three feet wide. On either side are dark, soot-covered rooms, 8 feet by 6 feet, the hell-holes that are integral to the buckle trade. As you enter the room, you see a square pit with glowing embers. It is covered with an iron

grill on which are placed burning coals. The fire blazes. An earthenware pot with pieces of brass is placed on the hot coals. The heat eventually melts the metal. The smoke from the pit fills the room. Through the haze you can see four figures, young men who are working using a medieval method to forge buckles out of this molten brass. Most of them are from UP. All of them say they will do this until they find some other work. None of them see this as their life's vocation.

Scores of moulds, boxes filled with a mixture of sand and motor oil, are scattered around the room. Each box has an impress on either side made with a mould. Several such moulds hang on the wall. When the brass melts, it is poured by one man into the mould. He closes the box, waits for a few seconds, opens it, and pries out the strip of brass buckles with a pair of thongs. The second boy picks up the strip with thongs, and pries each buckle loose and throws them into a tray. They are still too hot to touch. The middle strip which holds the twelve buckles together is thrown back on the fire to melt.

The tray full of buckles is then taken across the lane to the buffing unit where three men carefully polish each buckle till it gleams like gold. A day's work from one *bhatti* (foundry) can produce 1,200 or more buckles. The finished products are placed in plastic bags and taken to the *dhani* (owner) who waits at the end of this lane.

The *dhani* is Ilyasbhai, an ansari (weaver) from Moradabad in UP who has now become a brass worker. Moradabad is famous for brass but Ilyasbhai's family was not involved in it. Tall, dark and swarthy, he is often mistaken for a 'Madras'. In fact, this is why he is called Anna in the neighbourhood.

This dark and dingy lane in Mukand Nagar is home to several workshops making buckles and buffing units. The only people living there are those who work in these units. The dour expression on their faces tells you the real story of their lives. If you show an interest in their lives and in their work, they want to talk. While Ilyasbhai claims that his workers are paid Rs 200 a day, one of the workers says that they make, at the most, Rs 1,200 a month because they only get work for fifteen days in a month.

What happens when they fall ill? The instant reply is: the *dhani* takes care of us. But a moment later, one of them comes up and mumbles, 'Didi, if you want to know the truth, the *dhani* does nothing for us. If we fall ill, we have to fend for ourselves.'

This fear of speaking up about their working conditions also ensures that these workers can never be unionized. If they object to the working conditions, their boss will find ten other workers waiting to take their place. There is no shortage of labour in Mumbai. So if you have a job, you hold on to it, until you can get a better alternative. Such an attitude is an

automatic guarantee against unionization, and against improvement in working conditions.

These workers are breathing in pure poison every day—sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxide as well as particulate matter which could include, aside from copper and iron oxides, oxides of arsenic, antimony, cadmium, lead, mercury and zinc. Do they realize this? 'We place a piece of jaggery in our mouths and that takes care of the cough,' one young worker tells me philosophically. But what is the colour of their lungs? How long will they live if they continue to work here? No one knows or cares.

The buckle foundries are only one example of the hazardous industries that are hidden within the Dharavi complex. They remain obscured from view; they flourish because no one objects, least of all those who suffer serious health damage from working in them. Some efforts have been made by non-governmental organizations and even trade unions to expose the conditions in these sweatshops. But nothing comes of it because the people on whose behalf the battle is being fought are not interested in being a part of it. They want to live for today so that they can find a better alternative tomorrow.

### Recycling everything

Scrapyards are as hellish and degrading as the foundries of Mukand Nagar. But at least you can see the daylight. Recycling waste is a multimillion rupee business in Mumbai.

Dharavi's speciality is recycling plastic. According to the NSDF survey, Dharavi's plastic recycling industry is the largest in India. It employs over 5,000 people and the turnover in 1986 was an estimated Rs 60 lakh a year. Today, it should be many times higher. Every day, at least 3,000 sacks of plastic leave this area.

The recycling and scrap area of Dharavi is concentrated in what is commonly known as 13th Compound, located on the corner where 60 Feet Road meets the Mahim-Sion link road. Across the road is the Mithi river and the Mahim creek, ostensibly an environmentally sensitive area which is supposed to be preserved. In fact, it is a dumping ground. If you go back in the course of a year, you will find a good part of the swamp next to the road has been filled. In another six months, huts will spring up on this reclaimed land. And so Dharavi will extend a little more to the north and the new entrants into Dharavi will live in this swamp, much as their forebears in the rest of the settlement did five decades back.

But Sanola, Jaleel and Banwari compounds, which are some of the settlements that comprise 13th Compound, did not emerge from the marsh yesterday. They lie east of the railway track that runs past Mahim to Bandra and were solid ground for several decades. This is one area that could have been developed, either as an industrial area, or as a residential one, if the



authorities had been alert. Just when Dharavi's development began in 1986, a huge fire devastated this area. It was an opportunity to start from scratch. But like so many other opportunities, this too was missed. The area was left alone, and soon the surviving settlement was overtaken by recycling sheds. Today, both live in an uneasy alliance. Neither is willing to move or make a change.

**I am taken to Sanola Compound with the promise that I will see how motor oil is refined so that all the smells disappear. This oil is then apparently sold for the singular purpose of adulterating edible oils.** But, of course, if indeed this is done, no one will admit it. Instead, I am taken on a tour of the recycling business—oil, plastics, chemical drums, anything.

Nizamuddin from Azamgarh district was one of the first to set up the oil recycling business in Dharavi. He came to Mumbai in 1963. He says he only has a small business. There are fifteen others doing the same business in 13th Compound.

Nizamuddin buys around forty to fifty drums of oil (each contains 210 litres) a month from companies and garages. This is discarded motor oil. His job is merely to store these drums and resell them for a small profit to traders who filter it again. The recycled oil is used for such legitimate purposes as in tarmac for roads and several illegitimate purposes which no one is willing to admit.

A few sheds away from Nizamuddin's is a large shed where plastic is being recycled. This is just one of the 121 such sheds in the compound. On one side lie sacks of plastic waste. The recyclers—both men and women—sit in a row on their haunches. Placed in front of them are plastic basins. Without looking up, they sort out the plastic and throw toothbrushes, syringes and other pieces that are whole into separate basins. None of the recyclers wear gloves; none of them know that syringes, in particular, should not be recycled. Blindly, like automatons they separate the waste. The coloured plastic pieces are passed through a machine which breaks them into tiny pieces. This is then sold by weight to plastic manufacturers. The recyclers are paid daily wages of Rs 40 to Rs 45 per day for eleven hours of work.

Just outside the shed, where the plastic is being separated, are stacked large blue drums with the symbol of a well-known multinational company. Companies send their drums for repair and after paying a small amount, get them back ready to be reused. The badly damaged ones are recycled. Next to plastic recycling, the drum recycling business is the biggest—with 145 establishments doing this. But what about the remnants of hazardous chemicals that might still be in these drums? Do the workers handling them protect themselves? Such questions are never asked. Indeed, they never occur to the people running the businesses. And clearly, the multinational companies getting the

work done at Sanola Compound could not care less. After all, their hands are clean and they can show that they take good care of all their workers. What is done outside their factory premises, even for jobs done for them, is not their responsibility. So a little bit of First World-Third World politics is on display right here in Sanola Compound, in Dharavi, in Mumbai.

In the 13th Compound, everything is recycled. Cotton scrap, iron scrap, empty tins, empty bottles and plastic drums. Of the 722 small and big establishments, only 359 are licensed. The majority are small set-ups working out of lofts. A surprising fact that emerged from the NSDF survey was the absence of child labour, so common in the rest of Dharavi and particularly in the recycling industry in the rest of the city. Here, the majority of workers were between the ages of twenty- one and fifty. But as all the workers are on daily wages, it is possible that some of this information is not entirely representative as the composition of the workforce would keep changing.

The land on which these compounds are located belongs to the municipal corporation. About half the godown owners have a photopass (or passport as it is called) and are charged a rent. Nizamuddin hopes that this means that eventually they will get a better working area. But no one really knows the future of this business. Tomorrow, this too might disappear, as did the tanneries, and make way for more housing because of its prime location.

### The potter's wheel

In contrast to those who manufacture buckles or those who deal in marketing of scrap, the Kumbhars of Dharavi have an easier time. At least they have more space. But their life is hard, and there is no pot of gold at the end of their rainbow.

Ramjibhai Pithabhai Patel, born in Dharavi's Kumbharwada, represents six generations from Saurashtra who have lived and worked in Mumbai. They came from Junagadh, Verawal and Una.

Kumbharwada occupies twelve and a half acres of prime property in Dharavi. It is strategically located at the point where 90 Feet Road meets 60 Feet Road. Over 250 potters work in this area but there are many more families living there. Apart from the Kumbhars, some houses are also occupied by UP Muslims and some by Maharashtrians who are not in the trade.

Ramjibhai usually has no time to stop and talk to people. Today, he is relaxing. It is Ekadashi, the one day when the Kumbhars do not run their potters' wheels. The room where we meet serves both as a kitchen and a bedroom. A child, Ramjibhai's grandchild, is crying inconsolably in his cradle while his wife, sixty- year-old Motibai, who only speaks the Kathiawadi dialect, makes tea.

Why did his ancestors come to Bombay? 'There was no work there,' explains Ramjibhai. 'The first Kumbharwada was at Naigaun in front of Chitra Cinema (in central Bombay). The government removed them from there to Sion (north of Dharavi). There a military camp came up, so they were then removed to Dharavi in the 1930s. In 1932, all the huts of the Kumbhars got burnt. One Velji Lakhu Seth saw what had happened. We told him that all we wanted was houses, we would manage the rest ourselves.'

So, according to Ramjibhai, Lakhu Seth got contributions from various business houses like the Birlas and the Tatas, and helped the Kumbhars to build their houses in their present location. Ramjibhai was born in the house built then by his father. He now lives there with his wife, their four sons, their wives and ten grandchildren.

'When I was growing up, this was an open space. People used to be afraid to come to Dharavi. They thought of it as a jungle. From here we could see Mahim station. We had a *sangathan* of Kathiawadis, so we felt quite safe. Things began to change around forty years ago when people from outside came.'

Ramjibhai's house is big compared to other houses in Dharavi. 'We need space to keep our mud, make the pots and have a *bhatti*. We have a backyard where several families share a kiln,' explains Ramjibhai.

In 1932, there were 319 Kumbhar families, today there are 2,000. The population of Kumbhars increased after 1947 when many of them left Junagadh and moved to Bombay. The Kumbhars already settled in Bombay accommodated the newcomers.

Life has never been easy for this community. Ramjibhai says that he has to work from seven in the morning to seven at night. In the old days, he would carry the pots he had made to Dadar (not far from Dharavi) to try and sell them. Based on what he sold, he would stop at a grain shop and buy his daily provisions. Thus, they lived on their daily earnings. The whole family was involved in the work.

Today, he says, they are slightly better off, as they can afford to hire workers to light the kilns. Plus, there are merchants who place orders for pots and buy from them directly. So they do not have to worry about selling their products. But because of this, the Kumbhars have not innovated or changed their designs. Barring a couple of enterprising Kumbhars who have learnt new techniques and designs, the majority produce the traditional pots for plants and matkas for keeping water.

Also, although the physical labour of making pots has lessened because of the workers who light the kilns, the Kumbhars now face greater difficulties in obtaining the raw material for making

pots. 'In the old days we used to get our mud from Parla and Andheri (suburbs of Mumbai),' says Ramjibhai. 'Now, we have to go to Palghar and Virar and much further. We face lots of difficulties in getting the mud.'

These difficulties, however, dim in comparison to those faced by the few Muslim potters who are also part of Kumbharwada. For generations, Hindu and Muslim potters lived together without conflict. The equations changed all of a sudden in 1992, when events in distant Ayodhya set the city of Mumbai on fire, dividing old neighbours and friends from each other, shattering camaraderie built upon common trades and interests.

One man whose life has changed since the riots lives just a few houses away from Ramjibhai. Ismail Khamisa, aged fifty-five, is one of forty Muslim Kumbhars. All of them come from Kutch and speak Kutchi as opposed to the Hindu Kumbhars who come from north Gujarat and speak Gujarati. Ismailbhai comes from Ratadiya village, but says he hardly knows about Kutch as he was born and brought up in the very house where he now lives and works in Kumbharwada.

Ismailbhai is a disheartened man. He says he hardly mixes with anyone and only does his work. Clearly, the riots changed a great deal in Kumbharwada when the police entered the locality and fired at the closely arranged houses. A visitor from the Konkan, who happened to be staying with Ismailbhai's neighbour, died in the shooting when he stepped out to go to the toilet.

Ismailbhai's grandfather was one of the early potters from Kutch who came to Bombay. They were four or five families who lived in Matunga. The government moved all of them to Kumbharwada and Ismailbhai has lived here ever since.

Ismailbhai has studied up to Class VII. One of his sons has been to college, the other is working with him, and both his daughters are married. He lives in a house next to two of his brothers.

After about four hours of work each morning, Ismailbhai and his son manage to make around 100 large garden pots. These are bought by a trader who gives them a fixed price. Ismailbhai cannot be bothered about marketing. He acknowledges that with more training, they could earn more. The Kumbhars are one of the communities in Dharavi who have remained poor.

### Lanes of gold

Sakinabai Chawl is one of Dharavi's oldest chawls, located off Dharavi Main Road, not far from Koliwada. Its narrow lanes are literally lined with gold—refined gold. Here, hidden from the outside world, is the home of gold refining, jewellery making and polishing.



In a small room sit four men, all from Sangli district. At the moment they have no work. At the entrance of the room is a coal-fired stove with a chimney above it, much like the old fireplaces. It also has mechanized bellows on the side. And the chimney, made of aluminium, runs along the side of the room to the top. No smoke enters this room. It comes as a surprise to find an environmentally-friendly workplace in the heart of Dharavi. What a difference from the foundries of Mukund Nagar.

The men explain the process. Gold is kept in small earthenware pots which are then placed in a small opening above the fire. Once the gold melts, it is made into a nugget and weighed. It is sold according to its weight to the jewellers. The gold that is thus smelted is from old ornaments, sold to pay off debts, or to buy new jewellery.

Across the lane sit three young boys, all jewellery makers from Bengal. They are squatting on the ground in front of low wooden tables. Their leader, Dilip, is probably not more than twenty years old. He has a pipe in his mouth through which he blows on hot coals kept in a carved out wooden pot. He is melting down little bits of gold. The molten gold will then be poured into a mould. And before long, Dilip will have produced another piece of gold jewellery. He shows us a pair of intricate gold earrings that he has just completed. Necklaces, pendants and rings are among the ornaments that they make.

Dilip's finished ornaments will be sent for polishing to another part of Sakinaka Chawl to either Todl from Thanjavur or Peer Mohammad from North Arcot. Both men operate out of narrow spaces which open out on the road. They live in lofts above these spaces.

The polishing of gold jewellery is done manually. One plastic basin has soapy areetha (an astringent berry) water in which the ornament is soaked. The excess dirt is then removed carefully with a brush. Next, without gloves, the men dip the ornament in a solution made of potassium cyanide. When I exclaim about the fact that this is dangerous, both acknowledge the danger but say that they are so used to this that they don't think about it.

Just outside this jewellery making centre, on the main road, are rows of shops selling jewellery. The designs are deliberately aimed at their primary market, that of Tamilians. And even though most of the shops are owned by Gujaratis, all the signboards are in Tamil. Thus, in one trade you have people from various states—Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bengal and Tamil Nadu—and different religions, Hindu and Muslim. Interestingly, Sakinaka Chawl was one of the areas in Dharavi where the few Muslim families living there were protected by their Hindu neighbours during the riots.

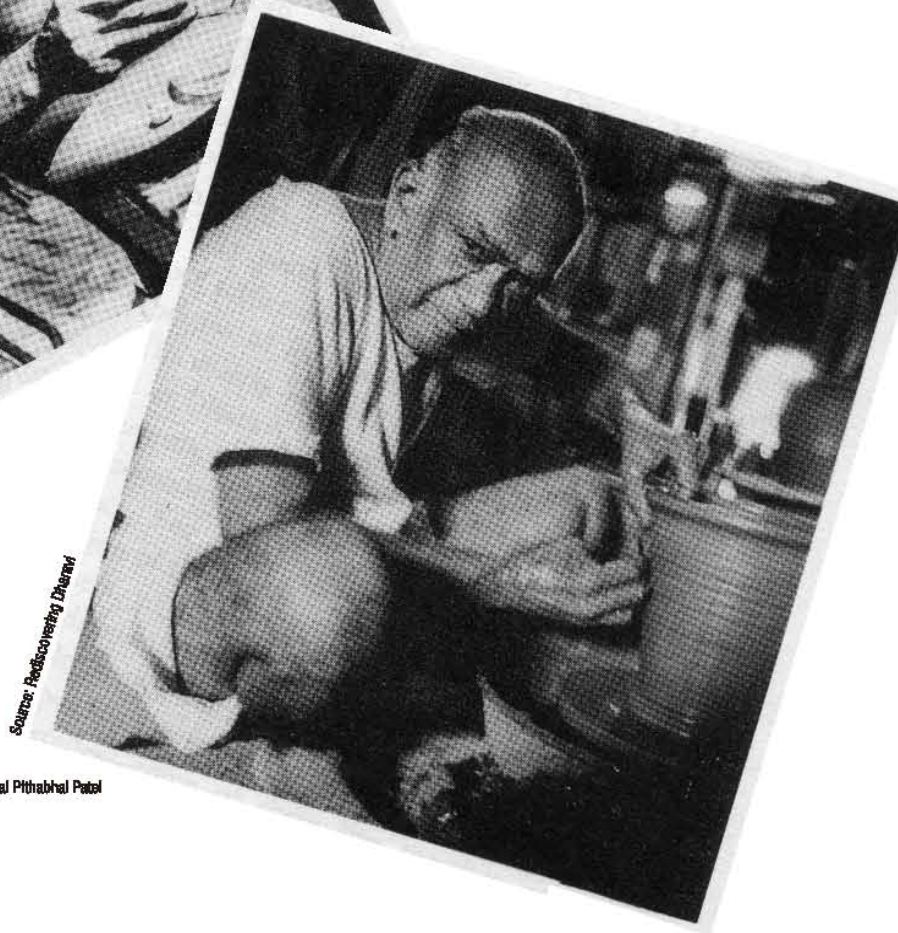
### New Industries, new recruits

The expected and the unexpected are both manufactured in Dharavi. Thus, bakeries or pots are no surprise. But soap? There are three or four 'factories' manufacturing soap in Dharavi, much of which is sold locally. One such soapmaker is Arumai Nayakam who used to work in



Crafting gold jewellery

Source: Rediscovering Dharavi



Source: Rediscovering Dharavi

The Potter, Ramjibhai Pitthabhai Patel

the Sewn soap factory of Hindustan Lever Limited (HLL), a job he inherited from his father who retired from the company in 1979. In 1989, when the company declared a lockout, Nayakam thought the time had come for him to move out. He used what he had learned as a worker in the HLL factory to set up his own cottage industry.

Today, he produces two tons of detergent cakes per day, and markets them under various names—Radha, Zama and Sofil. The soaps bear an unmistakable resemblance to the brands marketed by HLL and other multinationals but cost less than a quarter of the price. In Dharavi, Nayakam has an assured market for his products.

His factory employs workers on daily wages and piece-rates. The women pack the cakes of soaps which are manufactured in a small room with a couple of machines operated by about a dozen men.

Interestingly, the workers of HLL had also resorted to soap manufacture to register their protest against the lockout. In fact, the soap was called Lockout and was sold to raise funds for the union!

Like Nayakam's soap, you find local soap sold in most parts of Dharavi. This is mainly detergent, used for washing clothes. But the price difference between these local brands and non-brands and those produced by multinationals ensures that the former have a ready market in Dharavi.

Each new wave of migrants has spawned a new trade that has eventually taken root in Dharavi. The latest community of entrepreneurs in Dharavi are the Biharis. No one knows how many there are as no survey has been conducted recently. The 1986 NSDF survey had counted only seventy-five Biharis. Today, they are clearly many more as you find them in every trade, particularly in leather finished goods. The people who complain most bitterly about their arrival are the old Maharashtrian leather workers. 'They (the Biharis) will work for half of what anyone else asks,' said one such worker. 'As a result, we are losing our jobs, and they are coming in.'

Abdul Malik is from Champaran district in Bihar. He came to Dharavi forty years ago for *rozi roti*. Today, this bearded, white-haired man of indeterminate age, has a shop selling handles, zips for suitcases and leather belts which he manufactures in his home. His shop also undertakes repairs of suitcases.

'People in our village used to be amazed at even the name, Bombay,' he says. When he first came to the city, he did a variety of odd jobs. In 1996, he started making suitcases, belts and bags.

Abdul Malik's home is his factory. In the loft, a group of workers from Bihar are making leather belts. One man can make 100 poor-quality belts or twenty-five high-quality ones in a day. Most of these workers sleep where they work. They get their meals from a *bissi*, which charges them a monthly rate of Rs 550 per person for two meals.

During the riots, many of the Biharis ran away, says Abdul Malik. But



they came back once normalcy was restored and also brought back with them more Biharis. The newcomers include young boys. No one knows how many of them are in Dharavi. According to some estimates, there are at least 15,000 Bihari boys working in different workshops in Dharavi. You can find them in every business. Hardly any of them are on the voters' list, admits Malik. So officially they don't exist.

According to some employers, the boys are reportedly willing to work for as little as Rs 500 a year which they send to their parents. They are given a place to live in, food, and are trained in a trade. After two years, they become trained and can earn independently.

### Is there a future?

Despite the variety and range of industries and manufacturing units, Dharavi continues to be regarded primarily as a residential area. All plans for its redevelopment centre on housing for its residents without taking into account the fact that people live in Dharavi because they find work there. Despite efforts by NSDF and its partner, Dharavi Vikas Samiti, to press home the point that Dharavi is above all an industrial area, the government refuses to pay heed.

Part of the reason for this is the Mumbai Development Plan which had envisaged decongestion of the island city. This meant not just moving industries out but also denying permission for any new industries to come up.

D.T. Joseph feels that the lack of planning for employment was a serious lacunae in development plans for Mumbai. 'The main thrust, according to me, lies in employment in an urban area. What is the context of urbanization? If you go back in history, urbanization occurs because people come in from the rural area, the economies of scale occur. This means employment is what you must begin with. But if you see any of your urban policies like the Development Plan, there will not be a word on employment.'

After many years of being involved in urban planning, Joseph concludes that the approach to planning in Mumbai was all wrong. It was elitist, particularly with regard to the island city, and did not pay full heed to people's needs. He says, 'Nowadays, I am of the opinion that even for slum redevelopment, you should think of bettering what is available for them. In Dharavi, if people are exporting, manufacturing, doing well, they are actually professional. Now what kind of accommodation is relevant for these professionals? Your rules should be such that they should enable them to come out of this on their own.'

In fact, the approach to town planning in India seems still stuck in colonial concepts which are inappropriate in the face of

current realities. Thus, you plan for green areas, for schools, dispensaries, but you do not plan for housing for the poor or for employment for the poor. If you move the sources of employment for the poor, such as factories, in effect you are denying them the right to live in certain parts of the city. Therefore, consciously a city is segregated into areas where only the privileged can gain the benefits of serviced areas while the poor are left to fend for themselves in swamps and land not wanted for any other purpose.

Yet, industrial Dharavi has grown and flourished because the State actually benefits indirectly from the illegality of the enterprises in Dharavi. Although many businesses escape taxes because of the nature of the work, they pay much higher indirect taxes to keep going. These are in the form of regular haffas which must be paid to the police, to the municipal corporation staff and often to the local dada. If these businesses were regularized, their outgoings would probably be much lower.

In fact, the city of Mumbai faces a similar situation with hawkers, who occupy many pavements in the city, selling all manner of goods. Most ordinary people appreciate hawkers because they can find cheap goods practically at their doorstep. But the municipal corporation grants licences only to a few of them. The rest are deemed illegal and live in constant fear of municipal vans which swoop down on groups of hawkers, confiscate all their goods, and levy a hefty fine. This is in addition to the daily hafta that hawkers pay to the police and the municipal corporation staff. The various hawkers' associations have been demanding that all of them be issued licences and given areas where they can sell their goods. But the deadlock between the municipality and the hawkers has not been broken. So the legal and illegal hawkers continue to block pavements in Mumbai and nothing changes.

Apart from the issue of legality, this kind of unregulated enterprise is a great waste of talent and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, it is scripting its own redundancy. Take leather finished goods, for instance. Until the technology for leather processing is enhanced to the point that it can match international standards, no amount of craftsmanship by those in the finished goods industry can capitalize on the export market.

This is already evident in Dharavi's leather finished goods market. People are underselling each other, selling almost at cost, to recover their investment as the majority are not able to meet the demands and standards of the export market. Instead of fashioning high-quality leather goods, most of the finished goods businesses in Dharavi are making much lower-quality mass market goods like jewellery boxes.

Similarly, the majority of those in ready-made garments are meeting the needs of the local market and not the export market.

With garments being given out to such a large number of jobbers, it is virtually impossible to maintain the level of quality

control that the markets in the West demand. As a result, the export that does take place is mainly to the Gulf countries where a limited range of garments are in demand. The rest of the garment business deals mainly in shirts sold cheap for a growing population of men employed in the formal or semi-formal sector not just in Mumbai but in small towns across the country.

The margins at which these businesses work constantly lead to the more skilled workers being forced out of the job market by those who are less skilled but cheaper. In the leather industry, for instance, many Maharashtrian workers, with generations of experience, have now been marginalized. They complain bitterly about the waves of Bihari youth who are being employed at half the wage, and less than half the skill. But as the skill required today is not of a very high level, it does not take long for a new worker to learn it. Thus, the nature of the business also leads to a certain level of redundancy. But unlike the formal sector, where workers are also being laid off as



Khatija in her house in Dargah Chawl

companies prune their workforce in favour of farming out production, these workers have nothing to fall back upon.

The choice before the government is to either recognize Dharavi as an industrial area and regularize some units as small-scale industries or continue to treat the enterprises there as illegal but do nothing to stop them. If it chooses the latter course, more likely given the past record, then the majority of workers in Dharavi will continue to work in cramped, unhygienic conditions with no security of work in the future.

Even if the area is granted the status of a small-scale industrial estate, the existing businesses will have to invest in upgrading their technology. At their present levels of low technology and low skills, they will not be able to manufacture the quality of goods that will earn them the required returns to survive legally. The choice is between scaling up or scaling out.