

Makeover man

After building customised homes in New York, Mukesh Mehta has turned his attention to slums. He is the consultant for the Rs 9,300 crore Dharavi Redevelopment Project in Mumbai

BRAHKSHAVASHU is not a word you'd find in a dictionary, but apparently, it's an effective motto for life and business. That's what Mukesh Mehta, project management consultant for the Rs 9,300 crore Dharavi Redevelopment Project, claims. The idea behind the tongue-twister word: "I think like a Brahmin, fight like a Kshatriya, ensure that there are tangible gains in my business ideas like those of a Vaishya, and I slave on my work like a Shudra."

"I've used this well," says Mehta, 57, the man who first presented the idea of a swanky township replacing Asia's most notorious slum sprawl in Mumbai, almost 10 years ago. On Friday, global tendering began for the much-delayed project, now part of the financial capital's ambitious makeover.

Having trained as an architect from Pratt Institute, New York, Mehta returned to an India that was going through the Emergency. Private construction activity had come to a standstill, so he picked the next best option, entering his father's steel business and going from "990th among 1,000 traders" to among the top manufacturers.

He remembers Diwali puja that year, when he told his brother Harendra, six years his senior, that in six months they should increase production from 200 tonnes a month to 2,000 tonnes. "He looked at me like I'd landed from Mars," Mehta got that look repeatedly through the course of

his various proposals: when he suggested Dharavi's makeover, a slum-free Mumbai, a slum-free Nagpur, a slum-free Hyderabad, among others. In any case, the Mehta brothers not only became the top steel traders in the country, selling steel and advising

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neither had enough money nor a clear idea of where he would end up. Then, after several rejections from banks in the US, he told one banker: "In three years, your bank will be too small for me. You'll regret not having me as a client." He got the loan, going on to "teach the Americans how to live", building top-of-the-line

homes at super-luxurious Centre Island, Nassau County.

That cockiness remains—nothing is ever too big to dream about, nothing too impossible to achieve. When he was invited to attend Clinton Global Initiative's recent New York meet, he made sure that besides catching up with journalists who'd interviewed him on Dharavi in Mumbai, he got

five minutes with Bill Clinton. "They've shown interest in my idea of slum-free cities globally," he smiles, then winks, "Let's hope, huh?"

Today, Mehta is the official consultant on schemes to turn Nagpur, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad and Bangalore slum free. He's also consultant to Mumbai International Airport (Pvt) Ltd, which will soon undertake the rehabilitation of nearly 80,000 shanties encroaching upon airport land. Include Dharavi and these are projects that cost over Rs 40,000 crore. "With his average fee at 1 per cent of that," says one bureaucrat whom he meets often in Mantralaya, "Mukesh Mehta is making his money legally, so his image is actually rather clean."

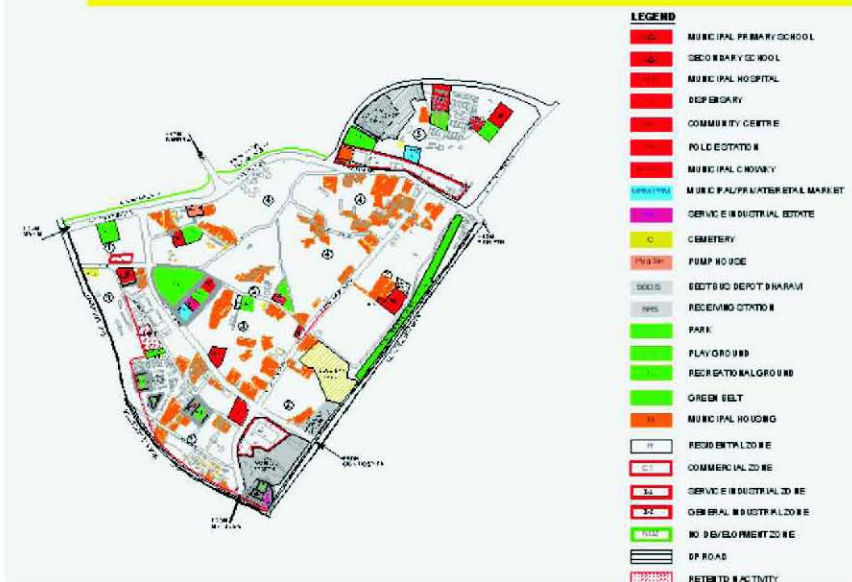
Mehta says he vowed to shed his "petty manipulations" in business in 1998 when he was battling tremendous personal, professional and financial crises. "Since then I've walked the straight line. I've paid off every penny I borrowed, even to those friends who'd written me off as a bad debt, with interest. Sometimes, with interest on interest."

At 57, Mehta is as restless as a teenager. "I get bored," he admits. "I'm now done with the creative part of slum redevelopment. Another thing I learnt in the US was time management. If there's anybody in my organisation who can do the job, I delegate it." Mehta is now busy with other creative processes, dabbling in oil on canvas and dreaming up new initiatives. "I have all the time in the world," he says. "All I do is think."

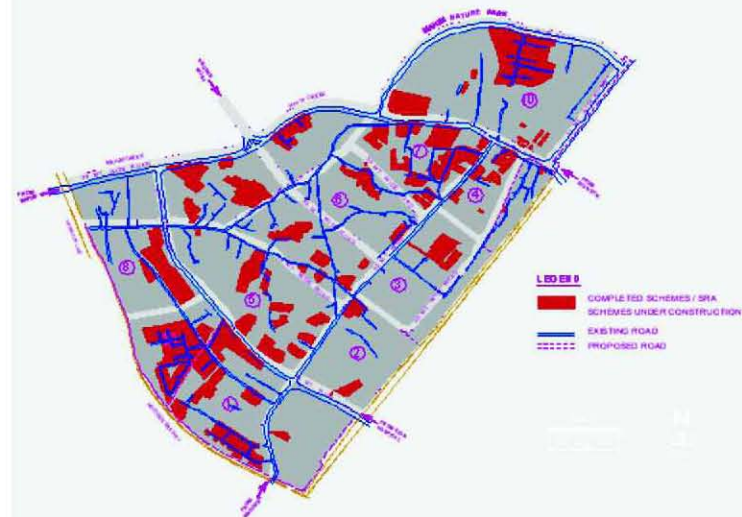


Mehta mooted the idea of a slum-free Mumbai

Dharavi Existing land Use Map



Map for Dharavi Dharavi Scheme Under SRA



SEALING DHARAVI'S FATE

Kalpana Sharma

The deed has been done. The Maharashtra government, after a delay of over nine months, has finally published advertisements inviting global expressions of interest for the redevelopment of Dharavi, reputedly Asia's largest slum. The Rs. 9,300 crores Dharavi Development Plan envisages a complete transformation of the slum, spread over two sq km and located in the heart of Mumbai. Calling it "The Opportunity of the Millennium", the government hopes that international developers will rush in, and bid for one of the five sectors into which the area has been divided. "Is it enough to turn you on?" asks the advertisement.

It is unlikely that people in Dharavi are "turned on" by a plan, that they feel has been made over their heads with little understanding of the complex histories, that have transformed this swamp into a hive of extraordinary productivity. Dharavi continues to intrigue and mesmerise countless writers, photographers, filmmakers and journalists precisely because it cannot be encapsulated in a simple term like "slum" or even a name like "Dharavi", which actually refers to the original fishing village around which the settlement has grown over time.

People in Dharavi are not disappointed because someone has planned for their lives and their area. They are sad that this has

been done with little regard to their views. They want redevelopment. No one wants to live in filth and squalor, without secure housing, water and sanitation, with inadequate health care facilities and schooling.

The question is not "why" redevelopment but "how". Should an area, that was once a swamp that interested nobody, that has been built up by the people who live on it, now be treated like another piece of valuable real estate to be developed to benefit a few? Or can there be a mosaic of styles and forms in its redevelopment, that will benefit those who live there even as it accommodates other requirements of Mumbai?

It is these questions that have been raised consistently, for over a year, ever since the fact that the state government was serious about implementing the Dharavi Development Plan became evident. Retired bureaucrats, urban planners, structural engineers, architects, students of architecture and urban activists have been jointly engaged in analysing the government's proposal and putting forth innovative alternative solutions.

For a time it appeared as if the government was actually listening. This group of people, representing a cross-section of interest groups and communities in Mumbai, came together for a series of meetings. The students of the Kamala Raheja School of Architecture in Mumbai, for instance, did detailed mapping of some sections of Dharavi, spoke to many people living in those settlements, and devised a series of alternative plans. These presentations were made several times, to senior Maharashtra government officials. The impression given,



rightly or wrongly, was that there was room for maneuver, that these suggestions would be seriously considered before any plan was finalized. Instead, it appears now that all this effort was so much water off a duck's back. The original plan stands almost unchanged. The fate of the people of Dharavi, it would seem, has been sealed.

Of course, there could still be hitches. One cannot assume that there will be a rush of interest as the five sectors for which bids are being invited are a complex maze of landholdings and structures, some of which cannot be altered. These are not open lands that developers can organise as they wish. Additionally, the government has laid out specific conditions for each sector that developers might not necessarily appreciate.

But regardless of how complicated the process is from now onwards, or how long it takes to actually execute the development plan, the process of the last year or more raises several pertinent questions, that are relevant for the future of Mumbai and its surroundings. They also relate to issues of change of land use that have become areas of contentious disputes between governments and people in many different parts of the country.

The first issue is that of transparency. From the start, there was a sense that there was a lack of transparency in the manner in which the plan was developed. Journalists who spoke to officials and the developer were told that extensive consultations had taken place with people in Dharavi. But once you went to the area and spoke to people, you found that either people knew nothing or they had heard vaguely that their settlement was going to be redeveloped.

Secondly, the government failed to answer serious questions regarding densities, about the exact number of families that would be resettled, about what would happen to those not considered "eligible" for resettlement in Dharavi, about how poor people would pay the outgoings in multi-storied structures and about what would happen to livelihoods that thrive on the informal nature of the economy. Take just the question of numbers. The government says it has plans to resettle 56,000 families, that is roughly 3.5 lakh people. But Dharavi clearly has many more people living there, over six lakh at the minimum. So where would half the population go?

The third is the issue of articulated opposition. Dharavi is geographically deemed one entity but in fact consists of scores

Dharavi gets its first bank

A million people, a thousand toilets and one bank branch

One of the casualties of BMC polls was Dharavi's development. When the polls were notified (i.e. officially announced) in early December, the code of conduct came into force.

That meant a freeze on all developmental spending, except for municipal works deemed absolutely essential, such as water supply or road repair. Hence work on the nearly Rs 10,000 crore Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP) stopped for two months.

DRP was conceived in 1999, but did not take off for many years. It has undergone many changes and in its latest avatar it will entail development of five sectors of about 250 hectares of Dharavi. The development will be under the Slum Rehabilitation Authority.

All slum-dwelling families, who can prove that they have been living in Dharavi before 1st January 1995, are eligible to a free flat with carpet area of 225 square feet. (The cutoff date may be advanced to January 2000.) A total of 57,500 such flats are being planned typically in seven storied buildings. Assuming 100 flats per building, this means that more than 500 tall buildings are coming up in Dharavi!

Developers will be chosen by floating a global tender, and winning bidders will be allowed to sell roughly 35 per cent property in the open market.

The profits that they will make on the



In Dharavi, 15 people share a tap which gives water only 2 hours a day

sale of this property will enable them to provide those 57,500 free flats and also some basic infrastructure. At current prices, the estimate of profits is in excess of Rs 5000 crores, since Dharavi's location is prime. Dharavi residents are within walking distance of seven railway stations, and within a stone's throw of Bandra Kurla complex.

Not surprisingly the DRP is running into rough weather. Unlike other schemes of SRA, wherein the concurrence of the slumdweller is necessary, under the development control regulations as applicable to Dharavi, this condition can be dispensed. Meaning the DRP can become mandatory, whether the current inhabitants like it or not. Already there is a Dharavi Bachao Samiti, agitating against the current avatar of DRP.

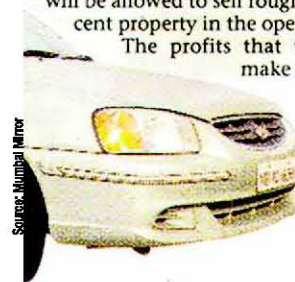
Dharavi has never been a simple place. For long it has earned the distinction of being called Asia's biggest slum. This was taken as a badge of honour by many who live and work in Dharavi. It is a mini-polis of a million people in the megapolis of Mumbai. It has thousands of entrepreneurs producing everything from export quality leather goods, garments, jewellery to processed food and papads and plastic products. An official census has counted 4,902 industrial units, although most probably do not pay any excise tax. The annual turnover is more than Rs 3,000 crore. Even if we assume that annual per capita income is about Rs 3,000 a month, the total income in Dharavi is about Rs 4,000 crores.

And yet this is a place where there are open sewers, no drainage and only one toilet for every 1,440 people. Where in rainy season, streets become channels for flowing human excrement. Fifteen people share a tap which works for just two hours a day. Otherwise they depend on tankers or wells or a prayer.

It's amazing that Dharavi can be simultaneously a thriving entrepreneurship driven economy with closely knit communities, and yet have inhuman living conditions. That's why Dharavi is no longer just a place or geography. It is a metaphor. For conquering all odds, and mute acceptance of odds which cannot be conquered.

One of the wonders of Dharavi economy, is that businesses work without any official working capital or loans from banks. Theoretically there should be potential of banking business worth at least a thousand crores. That is about to be kicked off, with the official opening of Dharavi's first bank branch next week. This may be the beginning of Dharavi's inclusion, financial or otherwise into the bigger megapolis.

Source: Mumbai Mirror



of contiguous settlements each with its distinct features, mix of communities and politics. A close look at voting patterns in Dharavi illustrates well the description that it is a mini-India not just in terms of the mix of people but also in the political choices they make. Organising all the people of Dharavi under one political banner is virtually impossible. Yet, the absence of organised resistance, for whatever reason, does not imply acceptance. The government appears to assume that because people are not openly objecting to its plan, they go along with it.

If so far people did not openly object, it is because they believed that through a process of discussion some alternatives could be forged, their views would be accommodated and plans that meet their needs would be formulated. Instead, the government has given an astounding demonstration of its deafness. The consequences of such indifference to the views of the urban poor could have far-reaching repercussions for the development of Mumbai.

If the urban poor, like the residents of Dharavi, feel that legitimate and democratic forms of negotiation and persuasion are fruitless, then they will be left with no choice but to choose other forms of resistance. For the future of Mumbai, and indeed for other large cities in India, it is essential that transparency and forms of consultation be built into development plans. This is the only workable style of governance in a democracy where poor people are becoming aware of their rights. It would indeed be tragic if Dharavi turns into yet another battleground over the "how" of development.

Reinventing Dharavi

