

Poor Little Rich Slum: What We Saw in Dharavi and Why it Matters

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Rashmi Bansal and Deepak Gandhi (2012). Poor Little Rich Slum: What We Saw in Dharavi and Why It Matters. Published by Westland, Price: Rs. 250. Pages 189, ISBN: 9789381626184.

This is a very positive book. It aptly follows its tagline "What we saw in Dharavi and why it matters". Dharavi is Asia's largest slum. Spread over 1.7sq kms in the heart of Mumbai, next to the upmarket bandra kurla complex, it is often considered an eye-sore to the city's rich and the beautiful who would like to see "Mumbai like Shanghai if not Manhattan". But Dharavi is not just a filthy, stinky place where filmmakers flock to showcase poverty; it is a living, pulsating mega being, a city thriving within a city. The authors compare it with the enigmatic elephant that six blind men of Indostan are scrambling to describe in John Godfrey saxe's poem. Just as the six blind men describe different parts of the elephant and strongly believe it as the whole picture, thus having six very different observations of the elephant, Dharavi is perceived elementally differently by different observers. Builders see it as a gold mine in a city, which has one of the highest real estate prices in the world, artists, photographers, film makers perceive the human/philosophical aspect of it, while researchers consider it as a complex project to base their various studies while to the politicians, it is a virtual time bomb, a very sensitive, volatile bone of contention readily and optimally used as an agenda before every election.

The authors in this book however voice the residents' view. Though it is not the most original perspective, but the interpretation of the residents' voices has been done in a very poignant way. Evidently the authors have been quite affected emotionally during their inter face with the people here, as in each interview and experience narrated, their personal angst is clearly felt. However, if we cut through the sentimental top layer of the book, the treatment of the subject as the mega-hub of micro-finance with a sum total of \$650 million annual turnover is very interesting as it highlights successful entrepreneurs who had made a difference

and who are making a difference against the harsh conditions of survival like idli sellers, khari biscuit makers, leather fashion accessories exporters, hi-end fashion accessories manufactures and exporters and their rags to riches stories. The book also includes the aspiring tales of the dreamers who are venturing into tailoring units with help of urban micro finance loans slum tour agencies, as well as social empowerment projects by foreign educated social workers. They have researched the length and breadth of the slum, carefully choosing residents and social workers. The working conditions are hazardous and living conditions inconvenient at best from shared toilets, filth, open sewers etc. However, the book reveals in each episode how the many generations of residents here and sometimes the new migrants are oblivious of these facts "because he knows no other world". Even on given a choice, the preference to continue living the same way is very much shared by most residents who emphasize on the community and kinship feeling of Dharavi.

Interestingly, successful affluent entrepreneurs, some of them even generations old, choose to continue operating from their original base in spite of residing in a more upscale locality, because of cheap space and abundant cheap labour; thanks to the wave of migrants swarming to Dharavi everyday looking for work. The book also discusses the much hyped; government boosted "Dharavi Redevelopment Project" which was launched to develop Dharavi by restructuring it in an organised plan with modern civic, economic and residential benefits. The government's dilemma and changing policies regarding the disbursal of free houses and paid houses and the mixed opinions of the residents and the social workers about it is a very interesting read as it tries to search the core of the problem which lies in the earliest migrants haphazardly and randomly

occupying the then swampy marshlands of Dharavi illegally, thus giving rise to no legal property papers other than "pagdi papers".

The first half of the book clearly tries to portray the economic importance of Dharavi, the self sufficiency and the feisty pride of the residents. Slowly it goes into deeper issues like women empowerment, youth upliftment, education, health, hygiene, civic awareness by bringing forth various endeavors of various people from different fields and sometimes different countries to create a more holistic life and brighter future for the people here. Some of the most interesting projects mentioned here are Be The Local Tour (run by 2 local youths who employ young people on a free lance basis to give the slum tour highlighting the economic power of Dharavi thus trying to create confidence and opportunity for exposure with the foreign tourists and to practice spoken english while earning part-time salaries), Barefoot Acupuncturist founded by Walter Fischer who practices this art of healing and focuses on women and the hardship faced by them, 'Dharavi Rocks' project an ACORN and blueFrog initiative which gives the young rag-pickers of Dharavi to jam with the visiting musicians of blueFrog thus giving them an opportunity to live life beyond misery, find emotional vents in music rather than drowning in drugs, alcohols post working hours and eventually giving the talented ones an exposure in the music scene by launching albums created by them and Gurudutt Gymnasium, where former gold medalist and trainer of couple of state champions, Praveen Sakpal trains the young men in competitive body building thus creating a vice free focused life style and giving them opportunity to get government jobs in "sports" quota.

The contributions and Dharavi upliftment endeavors of many Mumbai luminaries like Dr Duru Shah, President of FOGSI, Dr Armida Fernandez, Dean and Head of Neonatology at Lokmanya Tilak Municipal Hospital, Sion, Social worker Jalinder Adsule of Nirmala Niketan, social activist Padma Shri Jockin Arputham have been mentioned along with the silent struggle of architect

Aneerudha Paul, Waterwallah team, scientist Ramji Raghavan who had left their high paying corporate careers and serious money for the hope of bringing some improvement in the lives of the people here. The most vital element of the book seems to be the economic self sufficiency, the feisty spirit and the dreams of the people here of a better tomorrow.

Through its various anecdotes and experiences, the authors basically try to drive home three messages. One, the pride, spirit and the economic strength of the slum; second the view points, aspirations and hopes of the Dharavi residents and why they choose to stay where they stay and third, the active endeavors of various people, organizations and the residents in making the lives of the people here healthier, empowered and aware.

In spite of a very benevolent task undertaken by the authors, who had based the book on research, sometimes it tends to become the mouth piece of their personal view point rather than actual facts for example raising questions of "how long Dharavi youth will be denied opportunities due to accident of their address". Although, research based, a lot of information happens to be based on hearsay and the reader looking forward to treat the subject from an informative, learning angle feels the lack of facts and figures. Inclusions of charts, maps, facts and figures would have made the read more informative, solid and structured with a stronger voice. The photographs by Dee Gandhi are very vivid and show us Dharavi through eyes of an artist. The book however is a very heartfelt piece of work, giving us a very interesting and thoughtful insight into the lives of the people here and help us see Dharavi not just as an eye-sore but more as a respectable self sufficient city within a city.

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