

Dharavi
Caste, Work and Protest in Asia's Largest Slum

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Located in the heart of Bombay, the mega-slum of Dharavi is one of the largest in Asia. In book combining various approaches, Saglio-Yatzimirsky analyzes the way Dharavi functions both spatially and economically, focusing on an unexpected paradox : characterized by its informal economy, this mega-slum is however well-connected to the national and international economic circuits.

Reviewed: Marie-Caroline Saglio-Yatzimirsky, *Dharavi: From Mega-Slum to Urban Paradigm*, New Delhi: Routledge, Series Cities and the Urban Imperative, 2013

The slum of Dharavi is a super-star. Located in the heart of Mumbai, this 3 sq km stretch of land hosting about 800,000 inhabitants, has recently become the center of media and academic attention. In the past few years, there has been a mushrooming of books dedicated to the area, among which *Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories From Asia's Largest Slum* (2000), *Poor Little Rich Slum* (2012) and *Dharavi, The City Within* (2013), just to name a few. Taken together, this series of investigations almost constitutes a distinct discipline that we could call “Dharavi-ology¹.”

Marie-Caroline Saglio-Yatzimirsky's book *Dharavi: From Mega-Slum to Urban Paradigm* (2013) clearly belongs to this body of works. It is not, however, a random addition to the list. Saglio-Yatzimirsky has indeed been on the field for two decades, well before the current frenzy began. Having started her investigations in 1993, she has witnessed the progressive invasion of her research object by journalists, fellow researchers and activists – an evolution she vividly describes. More specifically, her book stands out on three grounds: scope, depth and focus.

Scope, first: the book investigates Dharavi as a “total social fact,” a society in its own right. Using different approaches (urban sociology, social anthropology, political science), the author examines various dimensions of the slum (history, housing, caste relations, work, family, religion, politics, etc.). The investigation also moves across different scales, shifting from the micro to the macro perspective, zooming on the house of a particular slum dweller before taking us to the street, the city, the region and finally the global public sphere where the slum's future is currently being debated.

¹ I borrow this expression from Aarefa Johari, in an article for the Hindustan Times, published on January 6th, 2013: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/mumbai/dharavi-ology/article1-985667.aspx>

The book, combining ethnography and interviews, is also characterized by its depth. The present volume is in fact an updated version of one of the author's previous studies on Dharavi's leather workers², conducted from 1993 to 2001, and published in French. This new book is yet enriched with a whole new fieldwork, realized from 2007 to 2010, and focusing on the slum's redevelopment plans. Spanning over two decades (1993-2010), the research is therefore impressive. The author also lived at the heart of Dharavi between 1994 and 1995 and shared the life of a local family. While the ethnographic writing could have been further developed³, the book, featuring useful maps and photographs, fully brings out the complexity of Dharavi's urban life.

The book's focus also deserves our attention, since it is through the study of leather workers, a low-caste group making up one fourth of Dharavi's population, that the author explores issues of caste relations and work in this informal economy. It is also through the lens of current debates over the slum's redevelopment that the book analyzes issues of political mobilization, citizenship and right to the city. These two entry points allow for much detail in the descriptions.

The mega-slum, a new urban form

One of the main contributions of the book is to investigate Dharavi as a specific urban form: the mega-slum. As a slum, that is an illegally occupied self-built zone, Dharavi is located at the fringes of society. It is a marginal, interstitial space. Yet, it is also a huge spatial entity, as is evident from the excessive superlatives often used to describe it. Drawing from the classical insights of the Chicago school, Saglio-Yatzimirsky investigates the way space is structured in the mega-slum and finds social organization where common-sense understanding sees chaos and anarchy.

While applying American-based theories to an Indian case can be controversial for some authors⁴, the book shows that Dharavi is an ideal setting for the Chicago School's concepts. First, by its size and history, the slum meets the criteria of an actual city. Second, it is host to an incredibly diverse population: Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Marathis, Gujaratis, Tamils and Biharis coexist more or less peacefully in the area, leading to specific segregation patterns. Third, the slum is the result of several migratory waves: rural migrants from various regions successively came to Dharavi in search of jobs, success and social mobility. Keeping in line with the Chicago tradition, Saglio-Yatzimirsky examines how ethnic identities are redefined in the urban context and demonstrates that the mega-slum is a laboratory for the formation of new identities.

Caste in the city, an ethnography

² Marie-Caroline Saglio-Yatzimirsky, *Intouchable Bombay. Le Bidonville des Travailleurs*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2002

³ The methodological section remains short and little is said about the identity of the researcher and the way she was perceived by her informants. There are also very few interview excerpts and the respondents' life stories are merely used as examples to illustrate a point. Given the time the author spent in the field, the ethnographic descriptions could have been more dense and lively.

⁴ See Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*, New York: Routledge, 2006

While the Chicago school provides relevant tools to analyze migration, segregation and identity-formation, it proves insufficient to comprehend what is truly an Indian specificity: caste. Saglio-Yatzimirsky relies on Indian scholarship to investigate this issue, which is at the core of her analysis. If anything, the book appears as an ethnography of how caste operates in an urban framework.

After a long and broad introduction on castes and untouchability, the book examines the redefinition of caste hierarchies in Dharavi, “a place where a great diversity of castes lives in very close quarters,” and where half of the inhabitants are untouchables. Studying the most represented leather untouchables in the slum, the Maharashtrian Chambhar (cobbler) and Dhor (tanners), the author shows that caste is both transformed and revived.

The book demonstrates that caste boundaries are first rendered more flexible by local economic opportunities, which have progressively transformed professional attributes. Some individuals have also been able to experience upward social mobility through education, politics and ownership, disrupting established religious hierarchies. The popularity of Dharavi as a leather cluster has also enabled leather untouchables to claim the more noble and dignified status of artisans, a powerful destigmatization strategy.

But the protection of identities in a crowded and diverse urban environment also implies a strengthening of the caste structure. The obsession with status is still very much alive in social interactions, religious practices and marriage arrangements. Hence, while several analysts predicted the disappearance of caste in city environments, the author shows that this is far from being the case: caste remains a powerful “matrix” of urban social life.

India’s leather hub

Through her observations, Saglio-Yatzimirsky identifies a strong paradox: while a slum, Dharavi is characterized by an extraordinary economic vitality. The first words that come to mind upon walking in the area are neither sluggish poverty nor criminality, but activity and productivity. Each house is host to a workshop producing clothing, pottery and, more importantly, leather items.

The author analyzes how Dharavi leather workshops, which overwhelmingly belong to the informal sector (units employing less than 20 workers, thereby escaping work legislation), have progressively adapted to market demand. While resisting the rational and contractual logic (no accounts, no statistics), these traditional family-based workshops have proved competitive for the global market: Dharavi’s small leather craftsmen now work under contract for major companies belonging to the organized sector and their items are found in popular Mumbai showrooms, luxury stores and even the international market. The economic dimension, the author tells us, is actually Dharavi’s *raison d’être*. Running against common stereotypes about slums, the book therefore demonstrates that Dharavi is not characterized by an insular economy: it is in fact well-connected to the national and international economic circuits.

High political stakes

The book teaches us that, apart from being a significant production center, Dharavi is also a crucial political constituency. According to the author, there are three main reasons why politics are *the* decisive factor for Dharavi's future.

The slum is first a huge reservoir of votes. Since its official recognition by municipal authorities, some of its inhabitants have become legitimate voters. The slum is now part of Mumbai's electoral chessboard and political parties indulge in a fierce competition to gain the slum dwellers' favors.

Second, Dharavi's location makes it a lucrative real estate spot. As Mumbai continues to grow northwards, the slum has progressively become a central district, an embarrassment for city officials and private builders who envision transforming Mumbai into a world class city. As in other Indian metropolises, the imperative to "clean the city" has translated into sustained attacks against slum dwellers and the poor in general. Several urban regeneration plans have been designed to sanitize, modernize, verticalize and homogenize the slum. The book focuses on the most recent attempt, the Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP), a gigantic financial operation that involves a large variety of actors (public, private, non-governmental).

The third and last point is precisely that, in the context of the DRP, Dharavi's inhabitants have demonstrated an unsuspected capacity for political mobilization. Indeed, the plan resorted to a top-down approach without any citizen participation. Second, it concerned only the few who could prove their registration on electoral rolls prior to 2000. Third, and more importantly for the author, it completely ignored the specificity of Dharavi's way of life, where residential and productive spaces are closely intertwined. Overlooking this crucial aspect, it signed the death warrant of the dynamic local industry that the book sought to describe. Unprecedented, the mobilization of Dharavi's inhabitants has however successfully hindered the DRP, which came to a halt in 2009.

Conclusion: Dharavi, the anti-slum

This book is a story of change. It depicts Dharavi as an entity in the making, which started from scratch, thrived without being institutionalized and was progressively recognized and legalized. When the state finally got involved, as the book demonstrates, it was not always for the better.

This book also stands against clichés. It demonstrates that common definitions of slums (insalubrious, illegal, pathological) don't apply to Dharavi, which is as big as a city and has become a major production center, well-connected to mainstream economic circuits. The slum has also enabled the formation of a distinct, overarching identity that unites its inhabitants: as the book explains, Dharavi does not result from the mere transposition of village dynamics into an urban context. It is a full-fledged composite society that many identify as "home." The mobilization of the inhabitants to protect their way of life is also at odds with stereotypes about the political passivity of the poor.

In short, Dharavi appears as a new urban paradigm, which has the ability to foster a major debate on urban citizenship. The excessive media coverage of the DRP has enabled an international ethical reflection on the "slumification" of megalopolises. Indeed, mega-slums like Dharavi are no longer an exception, but a reality in various parts of the world, such as

Latin America⁵ and Sub-Saharan Africa. Just like Chicago, Dharavi is now a laboratory, a world model that needs to be studied. As such, the book analyzes the case of Mumbai as one that could set a precedent for the rehabilitation of slums in other countries. This makes it a very important read for anyone interested in the future of cities in the South.

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⁵ For a more detailed comparison, see the author's last edited book: Saglio-Yatzimirsky, M.C., Landy, F. (ed.) *Megacity Slums: Social Exclusion, Space and Urban Policies in Brazil and India*, Imperial College Press, London, 2013.