

Informal Realities

In 2017, I had the chance to spend a couple of weeks in India with a group of photographers, travelling through the country. Mumbai was a very short stopover coming from the North and heading South, but somehow that chaotic and fast growing madding metropolis fascinated me deeply, even in the little time I spent there.

It's a common say that Mumbai is a beautiful city, but a terrible place and whether that is true or not, it is definitely a place of extremes. Stray dogs and exotic birds, the largest tropical forest in an urban area, some of the most luxurious and expensive developments of the whole Asia and yet 60% of the population living in slums or shanty towns. These contradictions are probably what makes Mumbai so interesting, and definitely what made me curious, especially about the life in the slums as I felt I knew so little.

The idea I had in my mind (and probably that most people have, developed by portrayals in the media, movies, or fast and superficial information) was simple: a dangerous area, consisting of an infinite amount of cramped shacks, with no sanitary system and poor people hanging around. But as Nigerian storyteller Chimamanda Adichie said, there is a danger with the single stories: they create stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

So I went down two of those areas: the Mahalaxmi Dhobi Ghat, a huge open air laundromat/shanty town, and Dharavi, the third largest slum in the world, hoping to find another story to tell. And I did.

At first sight, both Dharavi and the Dhobi Ghat look like a messy stack of tin roofs, squeezed between railways and upcoming towers, but once you get in, the maze of narrow alleys reveals a totally different and unexpected life. Sure, there is the squalor: both have their challenges and they do lack water supply, sewage, infrastructure of any sort; they have limited access to toilets, activities and educational programs (although Dharavi is one of the best educated slums).

But as soon as you go beyond the very first impression and forget about the smells and the flies, you start discovering that Dharavi has become a fully functioning circular economy, with over 5000 businesses and 15,000 single-room factories, many of which focus on sorting waste and recycling, with an estimated turnover of 1 billion dollars. Harvard Business School used it as a case study. We were escorted by a young guy, who brought us around and showed us the different areas of the slum.

The 13th Compound is at the heart of Dharavi's recycling industry, where an estimated 80% of Mumbai's plastic waste is brought by an informal network of garbage pickers, sorted, melted and transformed into reusable chips. Needless to say, the work environment is extremely hazardous and unsafe, toxic sludge flows down alleyways and child labor is widespread, but this is a parallel economy, the informal one that complement and sometimes substitute the formal one (like in the case of the recycling).

“Economic opportunity in India still lies, to a large extent, in urban areas,” said Eswar Prasad, a leading economist. “The problem is that the government hasn’t provided easy channels to be employed in the formal sector. So the informal sector is where the activity lies” So, although Dharavi is for some aspect a visual eyesore and a symbol of raw inequality that embodies the failure of the government to accommodate the millions of rural migrants searching for opportunity in Mumbai, it is also a hub of creativity and a vibrant society with a very strong sense of community. One should not fantasize about the life in the slum, obviously, but it is useful to remember that people come to Dharavi voluntarily because today Dharavi represents a possibility. It was once known as a very dangerous place, but nowadays the police say the crime rate is low, lower than many other areas of Mumbai, and although there is misery all around, people here do not speak about being poor, they speak proudly of their work and about getting ahead. There is an overlapping system of layers in Dharavi, where misery, work, politics and hope are interlaced together and when exposed, those layers reveal something far more complicated and organic, than the mere concept of a slum. It’s a society within a society. They say it’s a mini-India.

Dhobi Ghat is different, although the same, a city within the city, someone calls it a working urban slum.

Arriving from Mahalaxmi station, you can see the Ghat on the side of the railways, occupying a triangular plot just over 60.000 square meters. Once you go down the steps from the bridge and start walking, you’ll soon find yourself within a maze: rows and rows of wash pens, hanging clothes, ladders and walls of corrugated metal create a labyrinth of light and shadows. Constantly pervaded by an amazing smell of soap.

The Ghat is 150 years old. In the late 19th-century, the British built 730 something washing pens and flogging stones, and allotted them to dhobis (washer men) to wash their uniforms in the open air. Today it is worth 15 Million dollars per year, and it is estimated that half a million pieces of clothing are washed here, every day.

The Mumbai Municipal Corporation officially owns the land and charges the dhobis something like \$5 a month for renting the washing pens and for their maintenance.

Everybody has their own set of clients. The majority are hospitals, gyms, restaurants and hotels, but there are also a good number of laundry businesses in town which are basically subcontracting their work to the Ghat. Also many private clients: every household has a *dhobi* bag or a container where all the clothes that need washing are kept. The Dhobi would pick it up in the morning, without writing what he takes...he just knows. They have a code system, very similar to the one of the dabbawalas, to track down what came from where and where it needs to come back. Also studied by Harvard and currently used by Amazon.

Like Dharavi, there are different layers within the Ghat, which are physically split in section: the ground level is flogging stones and hand work, where the clothes are soaked then thrashed repeatedly on the stone before being boiled and hung out to dry. Some workers spend most of their day knee-deep in the water. But when you go up to the floor above, you’ll see the big washing machines. The top floor is the drying area, and it is amazing to see all the ladders everywhere interconnecting the levels. The Ghat is in fact a huge 3 dimensional maze: popping up at the top of

some of these shacks where you can see the towers of drying clothes against the upcoming towers of the skyline of Mumbai is quite something...

Walking around the Ghat really makes you feel you are in a parallel reality, a village with its own rules and its own life.

It can be a very lucrative business and the beauty of it is that most dhobis don't compete because there is enough work for everybody. Nonetheless it is not an easy life. A typical day starts at 4 am, when they bring the clothes from everywhere around Mumbai and start soaking them in water. The first break is for breakfast, around 8:30 which is a communal moment where everybody gets together, sharing food. Around 11am they have to start drying the clothes because the sun is becoming harsh and they can then rest while that happens. Around 3 or 4 pm they start taking the clothes off the wire, then ironing, folding, and everything gets back to their owner. The more they work, the more they earn, so it is not uncommon for the dhobis to work even 20 hours a day. They have passed down their business from generation to generation, and the area is also home to a number of families (between 200 and 500) who reside in the adjacent shanty shacks. Like Dharavi, some of those areas are pretty poor, the houses are no larger than a room, but most of them are kept clean and decent. They are proud of their work and the heritage it creates for their families, although they are also very conscious their kids need education and might want to pursue another road in life. The majority of the children go to school: speaking with them they have big dreams, being an engineer or moving abroad to study, which is an encouraging sign.

The living shacks have been deemed hazardous many times, and recently the government decided to demolish part of those, while evicting a number of families. The value of the land of the Ghat is huge, as it is in a prominent area of Mumbai, so developers have been making plans for its re-making since longtime now. Same for Dharavi: the plans for its redevelopment have been discussed many times, and it seems now that they are close to awarding the tender contract for the project to start. Sure, the governments should be able to upgrade the living and working conditions to a basic acceptable level, but they should be equally careful not to get rid of the micro societies and macro economies these places have created.

They are hugely important and almost essential in India and to a formal system that is not able to cope with the reality of its Country.

So this is ONE other story, to be added to the generic stereotype. Another angle to look at these informal societies that are in fact far more complex and dignified than what we imagine.