Dharavi
From Mega-Slum to Urban Paradigm
Cities and the Urban Imperative

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Dharavi
From Mega-Slum to Urban Paradigm

Marie-Caroline Saglio-Yatzimirsky
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All photographs courtesy of E. Boissinot, August 2010.
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Transliteration of vernacular terms

Marathi and Hindi terms have been italicised in the text. They have been transcribed according to the usual rules and have not been conjugated. Caste names have been written with the first letter in capitals (example: Chambhars, Dhors), but not when used as adjectives (example: dhor practices).

Names of places and persons

The original names of places have been retained. The names of persons have been changed, except in cases where we had the agreement of those concerned. The original names of political personalities, particularly in Part IV, have been retained.
WHY come back to the subject of Dharavi again, undoubtedly the most widely known Asian slum in the world, 20 years after initiating research leading to an anthropological study of its communities? One may wonder whether the research scholar failed to separate herself from her primary subject. Owing to its human organisation, Dharavi reveals an urban form that is both unique and a future archetype of the gigantic, poor and illegal concentrations that are mushrooming in the multi-millionaire megapolises of the South. Its profoundly unequal multi-ethnic space, marked both by traditional hierarchies and new ways of marginalisation, is intensely dynamic and creative, much more than it was 10 years ago, offering alternative forms of solidarity, mobilisation and governance. I am therefore trying to pay a final tribute to Dharavi—the fruit of 20 years of work and intense curiosity. And yet, this study is meant to be even more humble than the preceding work—so by what strange epistemological mechanism has the subject of knowledge become even more complex as we went along? Today, I am saying my goodbyes to the inhabitants I met in Dharavi with the same admiration I had earlier, which has been incessantly reinforced with each field visit. In Dharavi, you will not find exhausted people languishing under the hardships of life, misery and exclusion—a sight that is quite commonplace both on pavements in countries of the South and also, perhaps for other reasons, in the countries of the North. You will see faces worn by suffering and hardship—but they do not give up. It is to all of them—for the lessons of strength and dignity they gave me—that I dedicate these lines on their living environment.
LIKE the first, this second study on Dharavi has been an adventure alongside the hundreds of witnesses from far and wide in my field surveys, friends and colleagues. I would first and foremost particularly like to thank Shariva Naik, Nilesh Kulkarni and the Malegaonkars for their kindness in facilitating meetings and fieldwork; Frédéric Landy, Nicolas Bautès and Véronique Dupont from the Social Exclusion, Territories and Urban Policies (SETUP) programme; and my colleagues from São Paulo University for the quality of their discussions.¹ For brief but intense hours that were given to me in the overwhelming world of Mumbai: Prasad Shetty, Anirudh Paul, Sunder Burra, and Kalpana Sharma. And also, Sujata Patel, who welcomed the idea of bringing out this book. Not to forget Eléonore Boissinot, for her photographic talents, and Jessica Hackett for her kind and professional proofreading.

Both the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO, Paris) where I have tenure as professor of Indian Studies and the Centre d’Études de l’Inde et de l’Asie du Sud (CEIAS, Paris) have been of great help in scientifically facilitating this study. Last but not least, the Institut Universitaire de France (IUF) which is supporting my project research

¹ ‘Social Exclusion, Territories and Urban Policies: A Comparison between India and Brazil’ (SETUP) was an international project which ran from November 2006 to May 2010, coordinated by M.-C. Saglio-Yatzimirsky and F. Landy and funded by the French National Research Agency. It aimed to understand the social and territorial dynamics occurring in slums in the four megalopolises of Mumbai, Delhi, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro. See http://setup.csh-delhi.com (accessed 14 September 2011).
on the morphology of slums in southern countries (2009–14), and gave me the time and the fundings to go through with this project.

And of course, my children, for whom India still remains a land of myths and legends, and Nicolas, at the centre of it all.
Introduction

‘Asia’s largest slum’

‘Dharavi, Asia’s largest slum.’ This terse yet striking expression is used not only by Dharavi’s inhabitants, but also by politicians, writers and academics looking to describe its massive size.¹ The superlative intimidates, yet only vaguely defines the object. Is it the largest in surface area or in number of inhabitants? Dharavi covers 3 sq km and in 2010 there were roughly 800,000—perhaps 1 million—inhabitants within a city of 15 million.²

Several factors contribute to amplifying Dharavi’s reputation, and mystifying it. First there is its location and its size. This enormous enclave of misery is situated in the middle of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) surrounded by middle-class neighbourhoods, which only accentuate the contrast.³ Originally, it was one of

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¹ ‘Dharavi, as its name was, was a famous slum. There were people in Bombay who claimed, with a certain amount of pride, that it was the largest slum in Asia,’ wrote V. S. Naipaul in his chronicle of India (1990: 53). Be it in scientific articles or more literary essays, Dharavi is always presented with excessive superlatives. It has always contributed to creating the myth of an outrageously sized city. The sub-title of K. Sharma’s book (2000) offers ‘stories from Asia’s largest slum’.

² The difficulty of using statistical data regarding Dharavi is a recurring issue in this book (see Chapter 1). Dharavi’s land area has been officially evaluated at 216.5 hectares, but its population varies from 600,000 to 1 million inhabitants according to different surveys.

³ The capital of Maharashtra, Bombay, was officially rechristened Mumbai in January 1996. The name comes from the goddess Mumba, venerated by
the coast’s fishing villages. Its specialisation in the tanning industry further heightened the repulsion of the ‘Mumbaikars’. The surrounding area is pestilential, the smell of rotting fish from the Mahim cove mixes with the stench from the remaining tanneries. Together they grab you at the throat. Added to this is the fear of the mafia; Dharavi is supposedly a hideout for the Mumbai mafia, a hotbed of underground economies. There lies the black line that stretches out into the middle of the swamp, a place criss-crossed by all tourists on their way from the airports towards the business centre to the south, as well as by urbanites in their daily commute on local trains.

Dharavi, however, does not keep the curious at bay; on the contrary, it elicits interest. Situated at the heart of Mumbai, India’s most industrialised megalopolis, it is the epicentre of the meeting of two systems. A traditional system, maintained by craftsmen, migrants from their villages, attached to their trade and the rules of their caste, is confronted with a modern structure transmitted by the city. If the city itself is a factor of change, Mumbai appears particularly malleable, transformed today by globalisation, international capital, new work rules, and the spread of western values. How do these two systems cohabit? What are the modalities of their encounter and coexistence?

**Misery and chaos**

The myth of slums starts as a tale of misery and gangrene, inextricably tied to clichés that abound when talking of poverty in India, as this description of Dharavi by V. S. Naipaul (1990: 58–59) testifies:

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fishermen, the first inhabitants of the area. Upon their arrival, the Portuguese named the port Bombaim, which is perhaps a distortion of the initial name, but more probably the translation of bom bahia which means ‘good bay’ in Portuguese. The British anglicised Bombaim into Bombay. The adoption of Mumbai, the result of the victorious campaign of the main nationalist Hindu or Maharashtrian party, affirms the original Marathi identity while rejecting the colonial heritage. Today, the media and official institutions use the term Mumbai and the city’s inhabitants use either denomination indifferently. We shall use the name Mumbai unless reference is being made to the city before 1996.
And then, in no time, we were moving on the margin of the slum, so sudden, so obvious, so overwhelming, it was as though it was something staged, something on a film set, with people acting out their roles as slum dweller: back-to-back and side-to-side shacks and shelters, a general impression of blackness and greyness and mud, narrow ragged lanes curving out of view; then a side of the main road dug up; then black mud, with men and women and children defecting on the edge of a black lake, swamp and sewage, with a hellish oily iridescence. . . . It had been hard enough to drive past the area. It was harder to imagine what it was like living there. Yet people lived with the stench and the terrible air, and had careers there.

Dharavi is home to hundreds of thousands of people crammed inside a place that concentrates the poor, in a space that seems chaotic and synonymous with the dislocation of social ties. However, it has nothing to do with chaos and drifting social beings. How did its organisation take shape?

**Overflowing vitality**

Dharavi has become an actor to contend with due to its size but also through a more astonishing aspect, its economic vitality; it is a pool of resources. For a segment of its population, for whom looking for work in Mumbai meant arriving in the slum, Dharavi is a central platform for the work market. ‘And yet people lived there’, V. S. Naipaul (1990: 60) went on to say, ‘subject to this extra exploitation, because in Bombay, once you had a place to stay, you could make money.’ This continued until the area was saturated. Dharavi is today probably the most industrious zone of Mumbai; a boundless activity developed, qualified as informal and which encompasses all the small industrial trades or services set up within domestic units or in small non-mechanised workshops that escape the scrutiny of work legislation. Urban informal activity is present in all sectors: pottery, clothing manufacturing, mechanical trades, small-scale food production, recycling, and Dharavi’s main pole of activity, leather work that spans the entire process from the tannery to the manufacturing of shoes and other leather goods.
The informal workforce will always be linked to an image of the unknown world that houses dangerous activities and illegal dealings: ‘The Dharavi slum was also an industrial area of sorts with many unauthorised business, leather works and chemical works among them, which wouldn’t have been permitted in a better regulated city area’ (ibid.: 59).

The functioning of this informal economy is at the core of this book. Leather work has been the backbone of Dharavi for decades: its original activity, the one that allowed its development, that linked its production to a larger market, and thus anchored it to Mumbai’s economy. Better still, leather trades have enabled this slum to enrich itself. Dharavi has little by little been transformed from an industrial peripheral zone into an attractive trade zone. Today, Dharavi is irrigated by flows of international capital, its production responds to a growing demand, and its wares are distributed throughout the Indian market. Because Dharavi’s leather-related activities are an exemplary illustration of how informal work adapts to market demand, it can be a basis for the analysis of its economy.

A global village

Dharavi’s globalisation is also cultural. This neighbourhood is situated at the heart of Mumbai, the economic capital of India within which a western mode of consumerism has spread due to the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991, the spread of technical innovations, and media influence. The arrival of multinational companies—such as automobile and electronic manufacturers—or the appearance of tidalwave trends such as cell phones or cable connections thanks to a new communication policy, have spread an Americanised cultural model. Mumbai’s middle class has fallen under the spell of this way of life conveyed by media connections and advertising. It lives in the neighbourhoods bordering Dharavi, while on the other side of the cove lies the Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC),

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4 As J. Nijman (2006) described it, can be characterised by its type and level of consumption rather than income. This middle class, concentrated in modern megalopolises like Mumbai, is more of an upper class as it currently accounts for no more than 90 million people in India.
the new Central Business District of Mumbai and Bandra, home to the Bollywood stars. This miniature Beverly Hills is the financial empire of Mumbai’s cinema. Dharavi is influenced through its youth and the parabolic antennas that constellate its roofs, an influence that modifies the population’s needs. All affordable items have entered here as they have elsewhere: Diet Coke, perfectly imitated Ray-Ban sunglasses, Nike shoes, etc. Of course the small television painstakingly bought on credit broadcasts intermittently; the film endlessly interrupted by power cuts is followed by 20 little heads thronging at the doorway and the cracks in the shed. Regardless of such interruptions, CNN broadcasts real cowboy movies throughout the slum. Only 10 years earlier, the national channel, Doordarshan had the monopoly; today, Mumbaikars are linked to 50 cabled channels including CNN, BBC and MTV. And the resourceful youths from Dharavi are the first to take advantage of the situation. The same holds true for telephony: in five years Dharavi moved from a few fixed line owners to a mushrooming of cell phone subscribers after the market was opened to international operators. The cultural phenomenon represented by the spread of the western consumer model is considerable. The imbrication of Dharavi’s economy within Mumbai’s global economy and culture separates it from the slums of middle-sized Indian cities; even from those of Calcutta and Delhi where the connection is less spectacular. How does Dharavi face Mumbai’s modernity?

A ‘bank of votes’

Dharavi currently commands political respect thanks to the concrete role it has progressively occupied in Mumbai’s civic activities, a city where more than one out of every two voters today is a slum dweller. From a neighbourhood that was to be demolished by bulldozers in the 1960s, it has today become a strategic electoral reservoir for politicians.

One of Dharavi’s characteristics, and more generally of Mumbai’s, is the favourable echo it has resonated back to the Hindu nationalist regional party, the Shiv Sena, especially during the 1990s. The latter espouses a communalist ideology, one that is based on the chauvinism of different religious communities, which fuels tensions between communities.
Indeed, the social and professional structure of Mumbai, where Marathi speakers represent only 40 per cent of the population, encourages the popularity of this pro-Hindu, anti-Muslim ideology. Difficulties related to migration, poverty and unemployment in Dharavi helped the Shiv Sena take root, starting with its creation in 1966 and growing into a political bastion in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, the Congress Party’s return to power in Dharavi marked a turning point in the expression of an electorate weary of communal tensions and more concerned by the concrete problems of housing and an improvement in its living conditions.

The political participation of the inhabitants of Dharavi is not only the result of their numerical importance. Their participation is also tied to the affirmative movement of the untouchables and lower castes that has characterised the Indian political scene since the beginning of the 1980s. What role does politics play in Dharavi and what role does Dharavi play in politics? How have the political parties manipulated the slum voters to such a point that they constitute a ‘bank of votes’? Have the voters been sufficiently emancipated to constitute a true political force?

A new township model?

At the same time, Dharavi’s central location has made it a prime target for real estate investors, dangerously linking finance and politics as only India knows how. Mumbai’s real estate boom turned the city into one of the world’s most expensive urban zones; this new centre developed and promoted itself to an incredible extent. Dharavi became the epicentre of Mumbai, at the crossroads of two local train lines, the very pulse of the city. Formerly a suburb, today Dharavi stands facing the BKC, where administrations and corporate headquarters have converged for the past 10 years. Moreover, it has been exactly 10 years since all eyes focused on Dharavi: real estate investors sensing the jackpot, politicians looking for a voting bank of a half-million poor and low-caste individuals, and entrepreneurs discovering

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5 A term borrowed from the sociologist, M. N. Srinivas.
a providential source of opportunities and a model of flexibility in a globalised economy. The municipality, empowered with its new title of future ‘first class city’, wanted to settle the question of the poor. It welcomed a rehabilitation plan, the Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP) that would radically transform Dharavi’s living space through homogenisation, verticalisation and modernisation. Most importantly, the former swampland would thus benefit everyone: the ‘notified’ inhabitants, the entrepreneurs and the middle class looking to live in the capital’s city centre. Recently, international newspapers front-paged articles on the ‘sale’ of Dharavi. The plan, however, was called into question early on by a segment of the civil society that considered it merely a gigantic financial operation organised to the detriment of its inhabitants. The plan also elicited global debate on urban poverty in developing and emerging cities that are overwhelmed by their slums and on the different modes of alternative actions. As Dharavi’s social, economic and governing modes of organisation began to jam the cogs of the formal city, it began to take on the mantle of a global model. Would Dharavi become a world model for the transformation of slums into townships?

Redefining the terms

An Indian slum

What is a ‘slum’? The term designates both a type of temporary urban housing—barracks and temporary shelters built with recycled material, pieces of wood and cardboard, tarpaulin and corrugated sheets—and the space thus built, stigmatised by the poverty of those living in them. These spontaneous dwellings are born of the people’s own initiatives and lack all basic infrastructure. The legal precariousness of slums translates into their physical precariousness as occupation is generally not guaranteed by any legal laws, which further aggravates their inhabitants’ vulnerability.

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6 J. Bouissou (2007) underlines the massive speculation over the land at stake.
Indian vernacular terms used to describe this type of space have evolved in a truly remarkable fashion, on the basis of stigmatisation depreciating urban development in the colonial period.\footnote{7} The two most popular designations in northern India are \textit{jhuggi} and \textit{jhompri}, which originally referred to village huts made of bamboo, thatch, earth, and brick. In the urban context, these terms acquired a pejorative meaning, designating a colony of hutments: in the Hindi-speaking areas, the term employed is \textit{jhuggi jhompri} (JJ). In Marathi-speaking areas we are concerned with for the purpose of this study, slums are called \textit{jhopad patti} (or \textit{zopad patti}), that is, literally, a band of \textit{jhopad} or huts made of straw and rags. This expression has become a generic term designating both slum zones and makeshift shelters. By using the term \textit{jhopad patti}, Dharavi’s inhabitants highlight their degraded living and housing conditions.

Among the different lexical and linguistic registers which must be separated, the use of English by town planners aids in imposing their official terminology, including the imported English (and colloquially employed) term ‘slum’. This rather vague term does not fall under legal vocabulary, which further increases the difficulty of finding a definition as such. That being said, there are two criteria—physical and legal—that emerge in official nomenclatures. Urban planning terminology, often imported by international agencies, the World Bank and NGOs, defines slum areas as degraded high-density areas with very precarious sanitary conditions. The combination of these factors represents a health and security risk for their inhabitants (Desai and Pillai 1970: 37–40). It is in accordance with the ‘hygiene’ criteria that Indian authorities classify a zone as a slum through an official notification, after which it can become the subject of a planning policy. The hygiene-related definition

\footnote{7 It was with the urbanisation of colonial India—seen as a factor for the breakdown of the socio-economic balance in the rural–urban continuum—that a negative terminology of the city developed. Hence, the term \textit{basti} (or \textit{bustee}), which designated small towns in pre-colonial North India, became the qualifying term used to designate slums. The term \textit{katra}, originally meaning a closed courtyard, also witnessed the same distortion in meaning. See the article by A. Kundu (1999). Also refer to the slum lexicon, in M.-C. Saglio-Yatzimirsky and F. Landy (eds), forthcoming.}
is sometimes taken together with psycho-social changes to stigmatise a population perceived as being deviant. Dharavi is not exempt from such descriptions as it is perceived as a degraded area concentrating different forms of deviance and criminality.

The flaw in this standardised vocabulary is that it uniformises spaces and conditions that are nonetheless considerably different—a prejudicial homogenisation that is condemned by L. Valladares (2006) in her study on the history of the perception of favelas—Brazil’s slums. In addition, it presents a monolithic reality and tends to conceal changes. However, not all slums are enclaves of poverty. Admittedly, they may be the most visible manifestations of urban poverty since it is here that the poorest of the poor are concentrated. However, differences in wealth within a slum and the cases of social mobility it may harbour call into question a too hasty amalgamation of slums with extreme poverty. Not all poor citizens live in slums and, conversely, slums do not attract the poor alone.8 It is all obviously a matter of definition and statistical sources and

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8 The poverty line is calculated on the basis of the income necessary to ensure a ration of 2,400 calories/person/day in rural areas and 2,100 calories/person/day in urban areas, i.e., Rs 266/person/month in rural areas and Rs 353/person/month in urban areas, at 1996–97 prices, according to the Statistical Outline of India (1997–98), and, respectively, Rs 358 (rural) and Rs 559 (urban) in 2005. Maharashtra harboured approximately 37.5 per cent of the poor in urban areas in 1991 (Indian average: 36 per cent), with the proportion having decline to 27 per cent in 1999–2000 (and 24 per cent for India as a whole), according to the Maharashtra Development Report, 2007. These figures seem to be underestimated, but nonetheless testify to the extent of urban poverty in Maharashtra—the most affected state in India. Furthermore, the definition of the poverty line is debatable, insofar as it does not include access to minimum facilities, living conditions, educational levels, etc. The latter statistics are based on the recent human poverty indicator.

Maharashtra was the biggest beneficiary in 2009–10 (17 per cent of the total amount) of the Union Government’s poverty alleviation fund, the Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana (SJSRY or Golden Jubilee Urban Employment Scheme), which followed other major central government poverty alleviation schemes, such as the Nehru Rozgar Yojana (NRY or Nehru Employment Scheme), the Prime Minister’s Integrated Urban Poverty Eradication Programme (PMIUPEP) and the scheme called Urban Basic Services for the Poor (UBSP).
the idea is not to give a positive view of slums, but rather of avoiding the use of certain clichés that hinder the understanding of an extremely complex space.

To the first discourse highlighting insalubrity must be added the legalist understanding of a slum as an illegally occupied ‘self-built zone’. This view is specific to cities in emerging countries where many ‘invaded’ localities emerge. The slums invading public or private land are called unauthorised—their inhabitants do not have the right to occupy the houses and land and are therefore perpetually threatened by summary evictions. Supplanting destruction, in general, housing policies, and above all, in situ rehabilitation policies have mainly been adopted for Mumbai since the 1980s.\(^9\) Slum upgradation schemes through tenure legalisation (see Burra 2005; Mukhija 2001b, 2002, 2003; Sanyal and Mukhija 2001) are enabled through the public sector implementation of projects that are increasingly open to the private market. At the same time, the participation of the local population in the conceptualisation and implementation of rehabilitation projects is gradually promoted. Consequently, the virtual recognition of occupation eventually leads to the legalisation of the inhabitants’ status. On this account, Dharavi is largely a ‘notified’ slum now and the status of residents who had settled there before 1995 (though the date was recently changed, replaced by the new cut-off date of 2000) has been increasingly legalised. However, the border between legitimacy and legality remains unstable, with often dramatic consequences for the population.

Therefore, Indian planners use two different criteria to describe a slum—primarily in terms of its insalubrity and second its illegality, with the exclusive or combined use of these criteria leading to a fair amount of blurring in the application of development plans in which the interests of the ‘squatters’ often do not tally with those of the authorities or property developers. These identification criteria dilute the nature of a slum to a pathological entity and define it negatively in relation to the quality of life and legal standards—a view that calls into

\(^9\) For a comparative study of urban slum policies in Mumbai and Delhi, with Mumbai’s rehabilitation policy clearly getting the upper-hand, see Dupont and Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2009).
question the study of Dharavi, which is neither a monolithic nor pathological reality.

But can Dharavi be described merely as a slum? For it actually meets the criteria used to define a city, both on the basis of its size and its history, and, in fact, is developing into a specific urban form that can be described as a mega-slum: with huge gatherings of the poor, that presents a new articulation of social ties in the city, and the fact that it organises itself around original models of interaction and production. Consequently, we shall reflect on the case of Dharavi and its imbrication in Mumbai in relation to these new international dynamics of the mushrooming of slums in the megapolises of the South—an outcome of the uncontrolled urban growth and global economic dynamics driving inequalities and fragmentation. But these international trends should not lead us to overlook Indian specificities of the slum phenomenon in all their aspects: those of the transfer from the village to the shanty-town, which is the basis for inclusion in the slum space (Gill 1994), economic and social specificities both in terms of its human organisation and the organisation of production (Desai and Pillai 1970; Sivaramakrishnan et al. 2005) and, finally, the political context of the application of public policies vis-à-vis slums, also specific to India (Dewan 2002). Far from a run-of-the-mill, sordid realism, would it not be legitimate to try to understand the urban type constituted by ‘the slum’? Furthermore, how can we talk of pathological realities when this mode of development is followed in a quarter to half of Indian megalopolises?

Untouchables

The specificity of Dharavi’s organisation is due among other factors to the significant proportion of so-called untouchable

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11 The proportion of population of Mumbai, Calcutta and Delhi living in ‘slums’ was estimated respectively at 54, 32.4 and 18.7 per cent according to the 2001 census, which obviously depends on the classification categories.
communities constituting over half its inhabitants. Being untouchable in the caste system essentially means being at the bottom of the Hindu hierarchical ladder. Other terms such as harijan (literally Vishnu’s children, a term used by Gandhi) or dalit, which refers to untouchables fighting for their political rights, as well as the institutional category of scheduled castes—all designate this group of 138 million people in 1991, rising to 185 million in 2010, that is, about 16 per cent of the Indian population.12

According to a traditional conception of Hindu society, untouchables are separated from the rest of society on the basis of the religious criteria of purity and pollution that create this hierarchy. In fact, ancient theoretical foundations of the caste system divide Hindu society into four varnas (literally: colours) or classes (brahmins or priests, kshatriyas or warriors, vaishyas or traders and shudras or servants), each class having its own functions and privileges in the ritual and social order. ‘People of class’ (sa-varna) are separated from ‘class-less people’ (a-varna), who are excluded from society, being considered too impure to belong to any class and therefore relegated to the most degraded tasks. Tanners and cobblers figure among them, as they work with animal cadavers and polluting material.

However, the subdivisions do not stop there; each class includes several jatis (literally: species), a vernacular term for caste, which designates a hereditary and endogamous status group. Sociologically, a jati (caste) may be defined by three characteristics: a specific status situating it in the hierarchy and in relation to other castes, endogamy and commensality rules and, finally, the practice of a hereditary profession, sometimes more theoretical than real. Leather untouchables are sub-divided into several jatis—each with its local, ritual and professional specificity.

12 This Marathi adjective, dalit, means ‘oppressed’, ‘scorned’ or ‘crushed’. While it is sometimes used as a synonym for untouchable, the term dalit is a more precise designation of the political movement for the socio-cultural emancipation of ‘untouchable’ castes. In Maharashtra, the movement is called the Dalit Panthers. The extreme flexibility of the term dalit therefore needs to be underlined—it is sometimes reserved for the Mahars and neo-Buddhists, especially in the context of Maharashtra, or used literally to designate activists championing the ‘cause of the untouchables’.
Those we call untouchables—a term stemming from the British administration, which had the advantage of circumscribing a group and highlighting its historical exclusion—never use it to describe themselves. Indeed, the pejorative connotation of the term that refers directly to statutory stigmatism is prohibitive. Those concerned gladly use the designation ‘scheduled castes’, which acknowledges their political existence and rights that position them as legitimate interlocutors of political institutions.13

In the field, the term jati is preferred as it refers to the birth group and not the caste group, since because of its pejorative connotation the latter evokes an inequitable classification system and is likely to be perceived poorly. That being said, we chose to translate jati by caste, for reasons of simplicity and for easier reading by those not familiar with these complex realities. In this study, we shall use the term of community when we wish to refer to a social group, which could be a caste or sub-caste, or a religious or ethnic group. In particular, it will be used to describe a non-Hindu group and, more specifically, to refer to Muslim communities.

This status-related dimension explains the ostracism of ‘untouchables’, which has been continuing for centuries; they have been relegated to so-called degrading tasks, kept away from access to public goods, disregarded. Two recent factors have weakened these practices without, however, doing away with them: urban development and industrialisation on the one hand, and political expression on the other. The professional specialisation of castes was undoubtedly the first attribute to disappear under the effect of modernisation and economic changes, which actually led to the emergence of new professions, monetising trade and services, removing the inter-dependence of castes and, consequently, restricting the heredity of functions. These changes led to the reduction of practices of exclusion and organised societal stratification on the basis of income rather than status. These upheavals made some experts predict the end of the caste system, particularly in urban areas.14

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14 The issues we have raised go directly against the definition of caste and social class as two opposite ‘institutions’, one falling under the framework
However, nothing of the sort happened. Caste has remained at the heart of Indian society, although it has been remodelled and its functions have been redefined depending on whether one is referring to the religious, economic or political sphere.

In the case of Dharavi, the most represented castes are those of the leather untouchables, who had come and settled down here as dictated by various waves of migrations, particularly the Maharashtrian cobbler (Chambhar) and tanner (Dhor) castes. In fact, at one end of the hierarchy, professional specialisation failed to disappear—an effect of the stigmatism with which leather work is impregnated, while also being an effect of economic strategies aimed at preserving monopolies, as we shall see in our study. In addition, the protection of identities in the slum—a context disrupted by migration and day-to-day hardships—explains the strengthening of the caste structure, which organises space and certain private practices, including marriages. Finally, the Dharavi leather castes are part of the movement of affirmation sweeping through untouchable castes across India today: their weight in terms of numbers in one of Mumbai’s most coveted electoral constituencies is the reason for their political commitment.

Political society and civil society

Political progress, both practical and theoretical, is in fact the second most perturbing factor in the caste system. The untouchables, subjugated and stigmatised by their status as outcasts, have gradually been getting organised. Maharashtra is the birthplace of many a reform movement for the emancipation of the lower castes. In the late nineteenth century, an anti-Brahmin movement emerged in the south of the future state. The Mahar movement was the expression of the untouchables’ struggle, emerging at the beginning of the century, under the
aegis of their leader, Ambedkar (1892–1956)—a movement that continues today through membership of the Republican Party of India or other political formations.

Institutional support then emerged: the Indian Constitution of 26 January 1950 prohibited discrimination on the basis of caste (Art. 15) and abolished the practice of untouchability (Art. 17), whereas the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 provided for punishment for any violence against untouchables and tribals. The Constitution provided for the implementation of positive discrimination, reserving benefits and quotas for certain fringes of the population considered to be ‘backward’, that is, population groups like the untouchables designated as scheduled castes and those of the scheduled tribes. These quotas concerned admissions and scholarships in education, access and promotion in public sector jobs, and political representations—with seats reserved in the legislative assemblies at the national and regional levels. These measures, which directly impacted Dharavi’s untouchable population, have, in fact, partially promoted their upward mobility.15

Nonetheless, one specific measure was to subsequently trigger the radical politicisation of the issue—the adoption of the Mandal Report in March 1990, which expanded the quotas to other unprivileged sections of the population, such as the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The quotas amounted to about 7 per cent for scheduled tribes, 15 per cent for scheduled castes and 27 per cent for OBCs, with each federated state adapting these rates to the respective weights of the communities.16 Half of India’s population was now in the fray for the benefits granted on the basis of caste criteria, thereby making caste a driving force for rising demands. Indeed, the measure both ‘substantialised’

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15 With regard to the issue of quotas and untouchables, refer to the studies by Galanter (1984), and the recent work by Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998), and with regard to persistent inequalities, refer to the works by Vaid and Heath (2010) and S. Deshpande (2003).

16 The issue of reservations in India has led to intense debates, especially over the last decade, on the subject of the extension of quotas on the relevance of caste criteria and that of the sectors to which they could possibly be extended (private sector, etc.). See Ramaiah (1992), Zwart (2000).
and politicised castes.\textsuperscript{17} In fact, political parties stirred inter-caste antagonism to secure caste-based voters or ‘vote banks’.

Dharavi was directly impacted by the phenomenon of politicisation and casteisation insofar as it boasted 270,000 strategic voters in 1999 and 907,000 in 2009.\textsuperscript{18} Its population gradually freed itself from political manipulation, especially with the recognition of a legal status for a section of its occupants, which turned hundreds of thousands of Dharavi’s excluded persons into a political force and provided them with unprecedented negotiating powers. The mushrooming number of actors in the debate on Dharavi’s redevelopment and the legitimacy of its poor inhabitants in demanding their right to live there raise the issue of the nature of their mobilisation as to whether it was political mobilisation and/or citizens’ mobilisation.

\textit{Informal employment}

Dharavi first lured tanners, followed by cobblers and fine leather craftsmen. Leather work, which employed almost a quarter of Dharavi’s working population, became an exemplary illustration of what is called the informal or unorganised sector in labour sociology terms and which official economists and planners called the non-registered sector.\textsuperscript{19} The latter underwent intense development from the 1950s onwards; it was not the transitory phenomenon that was expected, as it grew with its inter-dependence on the organised sector. The informal sector could be defined on the basis of three separate criteria that do not interlock, as a more complete definition will specify:\textsuperscript{20} it

\begin{itemize}
  \item This term has been borrowed from Dumont (1966: 278–80), who designated the movement from a structural world where castes are interdependent to a world composed of concurrent closed groups as ‘substantialisation’. In the same way, Bailey underlined the ‘segmentarisation’ of the caste system, resulting from their politicisation. See Bailey (1969). These dynamics were then developed further in the political sciences to describe the ‘ethnicisation’ of caste (see Jaffrelot and Carin 2003).
  \item For more details regarding these figures, see Chapter 15.
  \item In theory, units of more than six workers are registered, which is refuted by the facts. Hence, the ‘non-inventoried’ or ‘non-registered’ sector corresponds more or less to the informal sector.
  \item See, in particular, Part III.
\end{itemize}
 Introduction

consists of domestic or very small units employing less than 20 workers—or 10 if they use electricity. Consequently—and that is the second criteria—the sector is not required to follow labour laws, particularly the Factory Act (1948), which is applicable for large-size industrial units. And finally, it is a labour-intensive and under-capitalised sector.

The main reason for the mushrooming of small informal units in Dharavi, among others, is because of the benefits it offered in terms of eschewing labour laws and the opportunities of employment at very attractive costs. Hence, the informal sector continued to grow. In a competitive labour market, it accounted for the most immediate means of employment and wealth generation. Its limitations were job insecurity, the absence of workers’ protection and, to a certain extent, their dequalification, especially in the case of initially skilled workers. This phenomenon accelerated in the 1980s with the collapse of Mumbai’s textile industry, initiating its productive restructuring from an industrial centre to a financial and services’ capital, pushing thousands of workers, who had become casual workers, into the informal sector (see D’Monte 2002; Menon and Adarkar 2004).

However, the absence of ‘formal’ production and distribution structures in this sector did not prevent it from having its own rules, often borrowed from the ‘traditional’ organisational rationale, based on artisanal specialities of castes, family divisions of labour and caste-based trading networks. We shall analyse how firm these rationales endured in the leather sector and what role they played in the development of contractual rules—those of the globalised market.

How to enter Dharavi

Theoretical keys

The complexity as well as the advantage of studying Dharavi lies in the multiplicity of approaches required. The slum is a living phenomenon and to understand its dynamics, the perspectives of urban sociology and social anthropology have to be brought into play. In addition, it is a work space—its very raison d’être—which presupposes an economic perspective. Finally, its future also depends on its political definition.
As far as the sociological and urban aspect is concerned, Dharavi’s genesis is linked to the spontaneous urban growth phenomena witnessed in emerging countries. The Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo *favelas* or Mexico’s *jacales*, the slums of Sub-Saharan African countries or of other Asian countries offer similar examples. The comparison is even more telling when you look at the characteristics of ‘slumification’ in ever-growing megapoles. The slum’s interaction with a wide socio-economic space makes it impossible to treat it as a marginal phenomenon and shows how much Dharavi’s development fits into the overall urban scheme.

To understand the singular social organisation of space thus constituted, we shall draw inspiration from the Chicago School of Sociology’s urban district approach. In the 1930s, its representatives questioned the settlement and assimilation of immigrant populations by forging concepts of social disorganisation, marginality, acculturation, violence, etc. We have taken one of the Chicago School’s premises as our own—the concerned micro-society is not so much disorganised as it is organised differently from the surrounding society, whence the advantage of analysing its operating rules and hierarchies. Consequently, the notion of a culture of poverty that much too often goes hand in hand with studies of slums and poor districts seemed to be too simplistic, insofar as it presents endogenous and homogenous poverty. The Dharavi example radically

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21 The studies by Sassen (1991b, 1994) on the development of globalised capital cities were a major source of inspiration. An application to Mumbai was given by Banerjee-Guha (1995, 1997).

22 See Whyte (1943), Suttles (1968), Park et al. (1925). Nonetheless, the development of India’s big cities did not follow the same configuration as that of American cities. But these methodological limitations should not prevent us from using these analytical tools to better understand Dharavi.

23 There is reason to differentiate the incorporation of the kind of assimilation that tends to absorb and eradicate minority cultures. The initial reflections of the Chicago School (1920–35) raised questions about the ‘assimilation’ process through which immigrant populations ended up constituting a single society. The concept was widely criticised in the 1960s, and the study of inter-ethnic relations thenceforth gave preference to differentialism and the respect of ethnicities (see Schnapper 1998: 191–224).

24 The expression, borrowed from Lewis (1966), is still used by sociologists.
invalidates it, as its population is far from uniform—as we shall see. It is organised into a hierarchy of castes and communities, stratified into economic and social classes, while being characterised by diverse dynamics of social mobility. Furthermore, new social inequity factors have redefined the dynamics of segregation and urban exclusion thus far explored.25

The reference to the sociology of ethnicity makes it possible to link the issue of identity to the territory. Founded by the Chicago School, developed since the 1960s in studies on immigration and redefined in the current globalisation context, the ethnicity theory strives to explain how the affirmation of a culture and common values makes different migrant groups find a medium of expression and position themselves in relation to other majority groups.26 The problem of the constitution of an ethnic group is posed in terms of borders and inter-ethnic relations (Barth 1969). Thousands of rural folk that descend upon the megapolis try to position themselves in an already saturated space and enter into competition, if not conflict, with the residents for economic resources or space. We shall strive to define the strategies that ethnic groups take up—gradual assimilation or the strengthening of ethnic identities with the enhancement of caste values or language groups, or even their politicisation. Between the cultural uniformisation peculiar to urban globalisation and its opposite—the resurgence of distinctive identities—Dharavi’s cultural expressions are plentiful and protean. Admittedly, the relationships between different (sub-)cultures reveal the awareness of primordial identities transposed onto the make-believe of land, language and the past. The political instrumentalisation of imaginary constructs may therefore lead to explosions of ethnic violence, which Dharavi experienced in 1992–93 and more sporadically later on. But the relationship between different communities also implies a unique style of co-habitation. The underlying question is the following: does the integration of migrants in the urban cultural universe lead to their social assimilation, that is, to civic recognition (right to vote, access to jobs, legitimacy, etc.), or conversely, do the difficulties

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26 For a comparative look at theories regarding ethnicity, see the work by Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart (1995).
of economic and political integration take over from other factors of stigmatisation, that is, poverty and untouchability in this instance?

Our reflection on ethnicity includes a specifically Indian variable—caste, and precisely, untouchables. We shall therefore look into the complex relationships between the formation of an ethnic group and belonging to a caste. Among reference studies on castes, particularly Maharashtra’s leather untouchables, the monographs from the beginning of the century must be separated from more contemporary studies. The former are a rich and interesting Orientalist source, full of details providing information both on the colonial vision as well as on the subject of this study. Among the latter, we have selected the sociological works of specialists of Maharashtra’s castes and local untouchables. However, the most interesting readings for our purpose are those raising questions about the forms of mobility of leather untouchables and their identity strategies, partly challenging the ideological hierarchy based of the purity/pollution criteria as they promote egalitarian values and political action.

Economic issues are at the heart of the inter-ethnic relationships of a population whose primary motive for migration is work. It also structures this population’s relationship with its

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27 Among these sources is the monograph by Enthoven (1930) on the castes of Bombay Presidency and the one by Briggs (1920) on the Chambhars, among the strictly colonial sources, while we also consulted the *Gazetteers* published by the British administration.


29 See, after the anthropological works of the 1960s by B. Cohn (1955, 1968) and McKim Marriott (1952, 1968b), the works of Lynch (1969, 1970) and Khare (1984) developing original perspectives and alternative strategies for statutory forms of mobility. They challenge the Brahman-centric perspective and advocate the study of ‘internal’ categories and representations, i.e., those of the actors themselves. See, in particular, and in chronological order: Berreman (1971), Mencher (1974), Gupta (1984), Appadurai (1986, 1988) and Quigley (1993). For a further development of these problems and comparative examples, see Part II.
environment. In this connection, it would be tempting to analyse the slum as a ghetto in which a subsistence economy develops on the fringes of the predominant production and consumption activities.\footnote{The ghetto, as it has been defined in urban sociology, is directly inspired by the history of Venice’s sixteenth-century Jewish ghettos—it is a small area bringing together a considerable population of the poor, but one that forms a tight social organisation ensuring the physical and moral protection of its members. It is also characterised by its parallel economy and forms a political entity (Schnapper 1998: 298).} However, as we shall show, Dharavi’s productive activities are structured, if not incorporated, in the economic capital’s production and consumption processes. Whereas the development of the informal or a-formal sector has emerged as a characteristic of countries in the South, reflections on the Indian case have developed and built into a debate that pits the proponents of the necessary flexibility of the work such as Holmström (1993, 1997) against the sworn opponents of a system that heightens workers’ insecurity.\footnote{Hence, M. Pochmann (2000) defines a form of work that does not fall into the reference frameworks of wage-earners.} There are more than numerous references, particularly concerning two major issues—one related to job insecurity and the other to skill levels.\footnote{The abundant and extensive bibliography on the issue of the informal economy untiringly proposes the new debate. Among the latest summaries of the Indian case, see Mazumdar (2008). Insofar as our subject deals specifically with the leather sector, P. Knorringa’s study (1996a) on the leather production sector of Agra, in Uttar Pradesh, is a fundamental reference source, although Mumbai’s context is a determining factor for understanding Dharavi’s economy.}

Finally, Dharavi’s growth dynamic bears a fundamental political dimension, specifically in the sense of its inclusion in Mumbai’s electioneering chessboard and in the wider sense of the place the city reserves for the poor. The Indian political context promotes ethnic demands: the positive discrimination policy, the electoral battle that triggers religious and casteist specificities, the development of Hindu nationalist movements stirring up communalism—these are three factors that act as catalysts for the mobilisation of Dharavi’s population.\footnote{For this last aspect, we shall refer to fundamental studies undertaken by Gupta (1982), Katzenstein (1979) and more current ones by Jaffrelot (1993a) and Heuzé (1995) and, finally, the works by Blom Hansen (2001) and Chatterji and Mehta (2007) on forms of violence in politicised communities.}
reflection will obviously take Indian specificities of political mobilisation, nationalism or communalist violence into consideration, but it generally fits into the globalisation issue and its political impact on the mobilisation of ethnicities and the resurgence of nativism.

More broadly speaking and at the crossroads of the debate on the urban problematic and the political affirmation of slum dwellers lies the ethical dimension. By becoming one of the most coveted spaces in Mumbai, Dharavi welcomes the most post-modern and creative projects in terms of architecture and ‘urbanology’, which question the future of cities of this type, our manner of conceiving urban space, living spaces and urban links, our manner of elaborating the role of citizens and their rights to the city.34

**In the field**

In the field—and insofar as the aim was to fully appreciate the inhabitants’ living environment, their values and their relationship with space—only participatory observation could make it possible to perceive change. Our study is therefore based on the testimonies of the concerned persons and our observation of their ‘micro-stories’. In their working milieu, the anthropological approach enabled us to enter workshops and decipher the relationship between masters and apprentices and the sociological approach helped us describe their modes of production and place them in the overall reflection about their development. On the political plane, we followed the voting patterns of leather caste voters quite closely from 1995 to date and, based on our analysis, attempted to build a typical voter’s profile. Hence these ‘ladder games’—to use J. Revel’s expression (1996)—since we move from life stories to family mobility over several generations, from the individual to the family, from castes to political groups, have enabled us to demonstrate the social, economic and political dynamics that make up this space.

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34 See Appadurai and Holston (1999), Appadurai (2004), Ramanathan (2005), Sharan (2009) on Indian cities, etc., and at international level, those of Neuwirth (2005), Davis (2006), Brugmann (2009), etc.
During the surveys, we mainly used three languages: Marathi, Hindi and English. Most of the time, we communicated in Marathi with the Chambhars and Dhors. In some of the workshops, Hindi made it possible to get together individuals of different linguistic origins—for instance, Tamils, Biharis and Bengalis. Taking the help of a translator during interviews quite often proved necessary. Finally, English, the language of India’s educated classes, was used with the Chambhars and Dhors who spoke the language—essentially those who did not generally practice their traditional trade. The identity of a researcher is too vague to inspire confidence: you are either suspected of being from ‘the government’ or a ‘social worker’. We have been referred to, during the first phase as a student interested in social issues, and during the second period, as a journalist covering the mediatic Dharavi Redevelopment Project. From 2004 onwards, with greater media coverage of Dharavi, journalists, architects and town planners interested in Dharavi’s case have been criss-crossing its streets regularly and residents are no longer astonished by this sort of investigative presence.

A 20-year investigation

This book is the result of two separate anthropological investigations. The first undertaken over nearly eight years (1993–2001) led to the publication of an earlier book (Saglio-Yatzimirsky 2002) in French about the leather workers of Dharavi. It followed through with an initial choice of working with the original population of leather workers, retracing their daily lives, their work, their organisation, and budding political awareness. A second field study was conducted during the vast media tornado of 2007–10 around the issue of the DRP. It provided a new snapshot of Dharavi and has led to a better analysis of the dynamics uncovered during the original enquiry. The lapse of time between both studies offers a clearer view of how these issues have developed into complex entities. It is now possible to measure the distance between the issue of rehabilitation and that of increasing the value of urban real estate as well as the speculation involved, to consider the legitimacy of living in the city and the political manipulation of voices and strategies. In
10 years, new actors have entered the scene and taken over the stage in an imperious manner: the media as well as an entire third sector, NGOs and activists. The latter are the links between a heterogeneous civil society and the even more disparate population of Dharavi: men and women from communities that have established themselves over several generations, landlords, businessmen, temporary migrants, etc. The multiplication of these actors has considerably complicated analytical debate. Consequently, this study’s diachronic perspective makes it possible to reveal its constituent dynamics: in a city in the midst of urban restructuring, Dharavi seems to be everything but ‘artificial’, to respond to V. S. Naipaul. On the contrary, it is a concentration of Mumbai’s social, economic, political, and urban dynamics and appears to be a possible laboratory for future modes of inhabiting large cities in the countries of the South. The present work incorporates all the reflections on the origin of Dharavi, its history, its communities and their initial organisation of work from the French publication. The post-2000 terrain has made it possible to develop completely new chapters on recent political mobilisation and the issue of the Dharavi Redevelopment Project.

Sources on and from Dharavi

Until around 2000, there were very few studies on Dharavi, an absence that can easily be explained by methodological difficulties. On the one hand, access to this district has long been difficult. More fundamentally, Dharavi did not lend itself to statistical surveys insofar as a section of its population is very mobile and defied any census. Therefore, there were only a few specialised studies on Dharavi or just some limited research on some of its communities.35

From 2000 onwards, with the gradual increase in the media coverage of Dharavi, largely promoted by the international debate on the Dharavi Redevelopment Project, academic studies

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35 See, for instance, the 1944 socio-economic survey of Dharavi, considered as a ‘village’ in Bombay’s suburbs (Tata Institute of Social Sciences 1944) or the study by K. S. Rajyashree on Dharavi’s ethno-linguistic diversity (1986). See Michael (1989) on Dharavi’s Tamil community.
mushroomed. There are extremely pertinent points of view, beginning with K. Sharma’s work (2000) presenting a fascinating journalistic summary by a witness of the 1992 riots, surveys carried out by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) or NGOs (Mashal 2010), studies in social and political science (Appadurai 2001; Burra 2005; Chatterji 2005), in religious sciences (Fuchs 2006), in urban studies, etc.

While our work, like that of K. Sharma, may claim to embrace the whole history and recent developments in slums, our way of broaching Dharavi is different. We will not be presenting Dharavi through the history of select, exemplary characters to illustrate its diversity. Rather, we will closely follow Dharavi’s growth path, as a space to live in, to work in and to gradually exist as a citizen. The leather workers remain the best example to gain an understanding of the interconnections between Dharavi’s migrants, residents and workers and the rest of Mumbai. The highly ethnographic nature of the perspective used makes it quite a unique approach to the subject.

Also, K. Sharma looks at the post-6 December 1992 period as a turning point, drastically changing the lives of the different groups living there. This is most probably true, and the testimonies of actors involved in the 1992 riots stands as proof. Nevertheless, we do believe that other forces, linked to the general neo-liberal policies affecting Mumbai’s spatial and social organisation for the last two decades have made the process of social reorganisation ever more complex in Dharavi, as K. Sharma emphasises.

Although the mentioned studies have tackled limited aspects of this incredible human construction and political and economic machine, no anthropological work, however, has attempted to apprehend the whole of Dharavi as a ‘total social fact’ (Mauss), leading one to think that this task were impossible due to its gigantic and complex nature.

At the same time, since Dharavi promotes an incredible imaginative world in which the cliché of the underworld competes with the universe of solidarity among the poor, both fiction and movies are often more correct than academic references. Bollywood movies have thus far described Bombay’s mafia as being concentrated in Dharavi, until the recent Slumdog Millionaire, while the recent gems of Anglo-Indian literature by authors
ranging from S. Rushdie (1981) to R. Mistry (1995) have tackled the city’s underbelly and its workers, and the highly documented novels of G. D. Roberts (2003) or S. Mehta (2004) described the crazy schemes of survival in Dharavi’s shanties or the aberrations the housing situation often throws up in Mumbai.

**The book’s progression**

Dharavi’s social organisation, at the centre of our study, is dynamic. The slum offers its inhabitants multifarious opportunities for mobility—first geographical, second social and statutory, and third economic, through employment. The first two sections of our study shall look into the residents’ gradual mobility thanks to electoral politicisation and the new challenges they face, in the shape of the DRP.

The first part examines the link between work-related migration to Mumbai and the genesis of Dharavi. After a general introduction, we shall seek to show that the slum is less the negative outcome or consequence of uncontrolled migration and unplanned urban development and more the outcome of an original way of adaptation by families and workers to modern economic dynamics. Despite appearances, the slum is highly organised: a recently established living and work space, with village, family and community rationales structuring and developing a unique social link.

The example of its majority population—that of leather workers—makes it possible to fathom Dharavi’s dynamics. The second part of our study therefore strives to provide a better understanding of this caste of leather untouchables, one that bears many stigmas—the ‘consubstantial’ one of untouchability and that of poverty. How do these groups get assimilated into the topsy-turvy universe of a slum? Considerations of status have emerged as a structuring vehicle of identity.

The scope of the work will be the subject of the third part of our study. Dharavi developed urban informal labour. By taking the example of the most developed sector—that of leather, we shall see how small leather craftsmen are linked to the international market through the area’s organisational modes of production and in terms of distribution. Here too, family and caste rationales find themselves at the service of market rationales.
We shall try to conclude by dwelling upon the limitations—particularly human limitations—of this globalised informal space. The fourth part of this work will focus on Dharavi’s leather workers as political actors. Different forms of caste, locality or more politicised associations demonstrate the gradual political socialisation of its population. Its mobilisation with regard to the housing question, which is an absolutely central issue in Mumbai, enabled its inhabitants to be recognised as citizens. Indeed, the law on their status as occupants granted some of Dharavi’s inhabitants a right to expression from which they had until then been deprived. However, the risk of this mobilisation has been taken over by political parties to further their own interests, especially with the Shiv Sena’s growing influence in the late 1990s. All this raises the issue of the political freedom of this population, which, today, has reverted to its traditional allegiance to the Congress Party.

The recent Dharavi Redevelopment Project predicament has accelerated this process by stirring up new actors around matters that are fundamental to international debate, that is, the issue of the place granted to the poor in this mega-city of the South and the mobilisation of public and private sector actors so as to ensure that they have the right to live in the city. Part Five of this work will explore this issue.

How did these tattered hutments built on the moving sands of a stinking creek turn into rather expensive, tidy little houses, in just a few years, soon to fall under the looming shadows of flaming new high-rises as an outcome of Mumbai’s giddying land speculation and the capitalist wave sweeping the city? How is it that along with the emaciated figures of labourers working in the shadows of the remaining tanneries, leather goods boutique owners are now busy weighing up passers-by from their gleaming shop windows? How is it that Dharavi today is pushing out the poorest of the poor to Mumbai’s outer suburbs, while parsimoniously distributing the right to free housing to some of the others within the DRP framework? And finally, it is space or more exactly the struggle for vital space that comprises the alpha and omega of Dharavi—its very raison d’être; but then, it may also sound its death knell.
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