Inspite of the GODS

The 130-plus shrines in Dharavi are fascinating pointers to the way Asia's largest slum enclave developed, says an urban planner from Toronto

Neha Thirani | TNN

A temple on the side of a deserted highway in the Himalayas with no one visible for miles around. A tiny shrine partially hidden from view by a locked gate, tucked away in a small alleyway that seems to have been neglected for years. These sights might have gone unnoticed by most, but Edward Birnbaum, an urban planner from Toronto with an undergraduate degree in Hinduism studies, was fascinated by the inseparable intermingling of the sacred and the profane that he witnessed on a trip to India.

"During a 'reality tour' of Dharavi I saw countless shrines tucked between buildings and large temples with huge courtyards—and I wanted to know more about them," says the 28-year-old who then returned to Mumbai and worked with urban research collective Urbz. This preliminary curiosity in the intersection of his twin interests, religion and urban planning, sparked off a re-



IDOL WORSHIP Dhareswara Shiv Mandir is Dharavi's oldest temple

SACRED GAMES

search project that led him to map and document over 130 temples, shrines, churches and mosques in Dharavi and, in the process, discover extraordinary things about the slum enclave's history, communities, and morphology.

The actual process of mapping these previously undocumented sites turned out to be particularly interesting for Birnbaum, who spent ten long days in the different sections of Dharavi with his guide Shyam. "When we came upon a shrine, temple, mosque, dargah or church we stopped, I took a picture, tried to find out as much as I could from local residents about the site's history and then used my GPS to record the coordinance," says Birnbaum, who then incorporated all this information into a Google map that is linked with the photographs of each site. His findings ranged from the superstitious (temples that had caused death or illness to those who had tried to demolish them) to the uncanny (the 'tomato temple' where a local woman discovered that a tomato she had bought had the image of Ganesh on it).

In the process of research, patterns slowly emerged that had not been obvious to Birnbaum at the outset. "Some of the largest temples were constructed by untouchable communities which, upon moving to Dharavi, were free to worship in a way that would have been impossible in their villages," he says. "These communities were among the most proud and willing to talk." Another interesting fact was the concentration of certain sites of worship in certain areas, which pointed to the way in which different ethnicities had settled in different areas—Koliwada, the largely fisherman area near Mahim, has a dense population of churches whereas the area between the 90-feet road and the Dharavi main road has more mosques. It also became apparent that people had settled in the diverse sections at different periods of time, creating layered accretions of community; in the Jasmin Mills locality, Ambedkar temples were most frequently found whereas there are more shrines dedicated to Sai Baba and Hanuman, deities who have become more popular in recent years, in the newest built areas. Many of the religious sites were founded by the first inhabitants of the area—Birnbaum discovered some that were over 120 years old. "The oldest temple is the Shri Dhareswara Shiv Mandir built in 1900 while the oldest idol to be continually worshiped is called the Vetal Deo Mandir built in 1750," he says. "The structure has been rebuilt but the idol remains the same."

> Among his findings was a 'tomato temple' where a local woman discovered that a tomato she had bought had the image of Ganesh on it

But aren't these patterns visible in urban settings everywhere? Why is Dharavi particularly interesting for this purpose? According to Birnbaum, unlike planned areas of Mumbai, the spontaneously built nature and high density of Dharavi offers the opportunity to examine "how the built form of religion is expressed without formal limits". As Dharavi is a receptacle for migrants from all over India, there is a greater mix of religious sites than elsewhere in the city, with Kerala temples, North Indian temples, mosques and churches all coexisting in a small area. Often religious sites were linked to larger temples in other parts of the country—a common trajectory being "people from X part of India arrived in Dharavi and found it was too far to travel to their birthplace for a specific festival, or to worship a specific deity, so they decided to build a temple here".

The constant redevelopment of the area means that temples are often built as a form of protection to halt impending developments. "In recent years, there has been a push from the courts to demolish temples that are built on state-owned land," writes Birnbaum in his preliminary analysis. "For this reason, temples along the roadside or near public land are registered with the government, ensuring that they won't be demolished without a new space being provided."

While private builders allow a space in their apartment complexes to house a temple, cooperative built projects simply avoid the temples during construction. So, will these registered sites have the potential to affect the plans for the makeover of Dharavi? That remains to be seen.