

## Dharavi Koliwada: Where people are pushed to the edge

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Mumbai, India - Nov. 29, 2022: Jerry Pinto interacts with Samidha Patil during walk at Dharavi Koliwada, in Mumbai, India, on Tuesday, November 29, 2022. (Photo by Anshuman Poyrekar/ Hindustan Times) (Hindustan Times)

By Jerry Pinto

I was in Paris, in the Marais area, when I was tempted by a leather bag in a shop window. Since things were on sale, I marched in and bought myself the most expensive bag I have ever owned. And as she incised my name on a leather tag, the young woman at the counter turned a quizzical eye on me and asked, 'Where are you from?' 'Mumbai,' I said. 'Ah,' she said. 'Your bag is also from Mumbai. From Durraawee.' And so the brown bag you see in the picture has travelled home and this week it went to Dharavi to meet with Samidha Patil, partner and associate, urbz.com.

An architect by trade, Patil has a deep understanding of the way the Dharavi Koliwada functions and will take me on a guided tour of the place. This, she says, is where she feels at home although her father is from Worli Koliwada and her mother is from Mahim Koliwada and she grew up in the latter area because it had better access to schools for her and her sister.

“This feels like home,” she says and leads me past an outcropping of what Pranay Lal told me once is the original Deccan plateau, a dark deep grey stone that cooled from volcanic lava. She touches her head in a gesture of respect. “We don’t step on that stone,” she says. “It is sacred to us.” And indeed, later, she shows me a chthonic shrine, cut away from the rest of the world by a tiled bracket, smeared with shendhur and coconut.

The Koliwadas cling to the margins of the city, even as the economics of the megalopolis erode their identity. “Few young Kolis want to go out on the boats anymore,” she says. “And with that a huge body of information about the sea, the tides, the river, the estuary, the mangroves, all that will be lost.”

We walk by the mangroves which, she maintains, were not there even a couple of generations ago. The Meethi River flowed fast and free. The water in the estuary was so clean that you could see the bottom. When the river was slowed down by development, the mangroves came along. Then the Bandra-Sion Link Road was built—which cut off the community from the river and eventually their livelihood of fishing.

The road proved to be a socio-economic disaster for the Kolis and hampered the relationship of the community with its surrounding waters. The community tried to adapt, making ponds in the mangroves so that they could conduct small-scale pisciculture enterprises. But that too has now been stopped by the drilling of the metro. The vibrations have changed things, water movements seem to have changed and the fish have not responded well.

“Complaints have been made, letters have been sent but we have not heard anything,” she says. Even the pattern of residence has changed over the years with many communities coming from different parts of the country. “They came to Dharavi to get away from the complex and often brutal caste relationships that dominated so much of the country. The Adi Dravids were given land by the Muslims and they built a Ganesha temple that still stands today,” Patil tells me. It would be impossible for the Kolis to live in the richest metropolis and not be affected by the desire to live better lives. However, when you live in housing that is termed informal, homes that have grown over the generations, it is difficult to find solutions that do not involve the eradication of history and the greed of developers.

“At urbz, we work with local contractors to see how we can design optimum living spaces within the Jamaat,” she says. The Jamaat is a Koli self-governing organisation that is often but not always formed of representatives elected from the community. “The Jamaat is one of the landlords around here.”

We walk past the ruins of an old Customs House that dates back to the time when the British wanted to tax all that came into the island city by sea. “In 2013, new legislation declared all Koliwadas as slums,” says Samidha. “Although, now it has been reversed, the results of that are beginning to be seen.”

It is a question of optics really. How do you see human settlement? If it isn’t a building that conforms to a certain typology, does it automatically become a slum? How does that deal with the habitations built by the original settlers of the city? How does that deal with the gaothan? Can it be that only Matharpakadi is heritage because it looks familiar and that Worli Koliwada is not because it cannot be settled comfortably into a manual of types?

“It is not enough to have a fish festival,” says Patil who has vivid memories of her friends in school asking her to eat somewhere else because her lunch box had fish and they were not used to the smell. “Our settlements are older than the government and have a longer more inclusive history.”

(Keep walking. Send in responses to [jerrywalksmumbai@gmail.com](mailto:jerrywalksmumbai@gmail.com))