

This is the seventh weekly report on how Dharavi is recovering. This information has been collated from newspaper reports and phone interviews with locals residents.

MORE THAN CORONA, ITS FEAR SPREAD RAPIDLY THROUGH THE BYLANES OF DHARAVI.

Claps and credits

Community leader and life-long Dharavi resident, Bhau Korde - now in his mid-80s - expresses his happiness transparently, when asked to respond to the spirited resistance that Dharavi gave to the virus. As of today, the number of reported cases in Dharavi is lower than the rest of the city. Newspaper reports have already begun talking about how the example from Dharavi is something worth emulating in similar contexts around the world.

According to Bhau, it is the residents who must be feted first, in their attempts against all odds to stand tall and face difficulties and challenges that the virus brought. The biggest asset Dharavi has, is the confidence that locals have in themselves, to tackle any situation.

Organizations, community leaders, local residents - all joined hands with the civic authorities, medical teams and non-governmental organizations to fight it out. Selflessly working around the clock, trying to reach as many families as possible, creating quarantine spaces in very challenging conditions, have now clearly shown their efficacy. In spite of huge challenges connected to proximity of people and spaces, the compact nature of the neighbourhood, combined with its intricate local organization, allowed for testing, outreach and checks for nearly half of the entire population of the neighbourhood. A major contributor to the success of the resistance.

In the initial months, there was unrest within migrant workers because of misinformation. Many community leaders tried their best to serve them and meet their needs, so they could survive in the city without hardships. However, nearly a 100,000 residents returned to their villages, which in a way also provided relief to the infrastructure of the neighbourhood. Our studies showed that this return is intrinsic to the cycle of living for many workers in any case. And for them, dealing with the density of the neighbourhood is connected to the freedom of mobility they also enjoy.

So in a way, even in their absence, the Dharavikars who chose to go back to the villages, helped the neighbourhood cope. Many informed us that they were waiting to return when things are under control.



A typical scene of monitoring and distributing supplies in one of the neighbourhoods

STORIES

"I don't want any risk"

Mrs. Mane a local resident, took the initiative to call government officials with a medical team in her neighborhood and test each individual from all 7 buildings in her housing complex. When asked why she did this on her own, she smiled and said, "What if my neighbors have corona? My family will be in danger. It's better to be safe. And as I was doing the testing of my neighbors, I thought let me follow this checkup routine in all buildings."

Self-care

"Many Dharavi locals took prescribed medication diligently. Building immunity is the name of the game and we've been taking care of our immune system for a long time now. Local doctors are also helping us with immunity boosters. We cannot risk getting admitted to a hospital for a cold or cough. The hospital environment is hazardous and we don't plan to risk our lives"

- Paul, Community leader

Mismanagement

"An old lady from my neighborhood fell in the washroom and got her leg fractured. She had a mild fever and was immediately admitted to Sion hospital to fix her broken leg. She died in 2 days but the hospital didn't allow the family to take the body home and the death report said the cause was Corona. This mismanagement is inducing more fear in the masses."

- Aayub, Community leader

The Police, which has an active relationship with local residents, including leaders like Bhau Korde, worked closely with community leaders. This helped organizations and volunteers to distribute supplies in a more efficient manner.

Community leader Giriraj, continues to arrange medical camps for COVID-19 testing to make sure Dharavi remains completely corona free. These camps are a powerful tool to track the spread of the virus. Initiatives like these boost confidence among the locals, one of the most important ingredients in tackling the situation.

Both residents and the media acknowledge the major role of the civic authority, BMC (BrihanMumbai Municipal Corporation) and other government bodies in their swift response to the situation. Individual practicing doctors also helped with regular checkups and prescribing medicines to improve immunity. Community leaders like Paul Raphael and his team stood at different crossroads of the neighborhood to spread awareness using a loud speaker - encouraging the wearing of masks and washing of hands.

This convergence of local leadership, huge endorsement of official action by residents, concrete steps taken by civic authorities and selfless service by medical staff from private and public hospitals - helped contain the excesses that the virus could have created in Dharavi.

“Individuals came out to help the community irrespective of religion or caste, this boosted the confidence of the locals. This is the greatness of Dharavi - pure brotherhood”
- Bhau Korde, Community leader

Dharavi’s Encounter with the Virus - a brief history.

Dharavi was under scrutiny after the death of a 56-year-old man who was tested positive for Covid-19. It was reported that with a population of over 1 million people (speculative figure), where a huge portion consists of migrant workers, keeping the contagion from spreading was going to be an impossible task.

Dharavi is reputed to be an overly crowded area with poor sanitation facilities, which would make isolation in case of catching the virus difficult. Along with that, it was reported that the people of Dharavi avoided telling the truth due to fear of being punished for breaking the lock-down or generally due to the stigma of being affected. This would make tracking the outbreak a strenuous task.

Yet, in the past month, Dharavi has been reported to have flattened the curve. According to the media, the BMC has been rigorously tracking and isolating people who had the virus or had been in contact with someone who was infected. The residents have been staying indoors to the best of their ability, struggling to survive economically in these unprecedented times. Local NGOs and individuals have been trying to help these people as much as they can. The BMC set up teams to go door to door and local private practitioners were employed so that people would be comfortable in approaching them. Eventually, the combined efforts of all the BMC and the people of Dharavi have worked. The number of recoveries is on the rise and the number of fresh cases is on the decline.

Dharavi is now portrayed as a success story. Headlines are encouraging other cities like Delhi to look up to the case of Dharavi and the BMC’s efforts.

Reasons behind the success - according to Dharavikars

In the past 2 months, the summer was unbearable. With 40 degree celsius temperatures outside, it was difficult to stay indoors in cramped rooms that had minimum ventilation. Now as the air has become cooler because of the monsoons, people are staying indoors comfortably, and maintaining physical distancing in the neighborhood.

Many of the community leaders believe that because a large number of migrants and long term residents were eventually allowed to leave the city, it became easier to maintain discipline and keep track of neighborhoods in a more systematic way.

The spread of the virus was contained in Dharavi itself. Quarantine centers and testing camps stationed in Dharavi helped the locals have easy access.

Local activity, local leadership and community involvement in everyday life is already very high in Dharavi. This played a major role.

NEWS transition

- **March 29** *Mumbai's packed chawls gear up to keep coronavirus at bay, TOI*
- **April 01** *Mumbai on edge as Dharavi reports first COVID-19 death, The Week*
- **April 6** *How Mumbai is racing to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in Dharavi, The Print*
Mumbai Races to Keep the Virus From Asia's Most Crowded Slum, Bloomberg |Quint
- **April 8** *What is turning Dharavi into a COVID nightmare of such magnitude, The Economic Times*
- **April 12** *4 deaths & counting: Asia's biggest slum Dharavi has Mumbai's fingers crossed, The Economic Times*
- **April 15** *Mumbai's Dharavi cases rise steadily, hunt for quarantine centers, TOI*
- **April 23** *The impossible task of keeping Dharavi locked down, TOI*
- **May 04** *Dharavi tally crosses 600-mark, The Hindu*
- **June 14** *How COVID hotspot Dharavi, Asia's largest slum, fought against all odds to flatten the curve, The Print*
- **June 15** *Dharavi's unexpected COVID success story has lessons for Delhi, other crowded cities, The Print*
- **June 22** *Dharavi turns the corner with a steep decline in COVID-19 cases | Centre lauds Dharavi efforts, The Hindu*
- **June 23** *How Asia's biggest slum contained the coronavirus, BBC*
- **June 25** *Sena hails 'victory' against coronavirus in Dharavi, The Hindu*

Questioning Action

Ground realities inevitably contradict official information that gets circulated about the neighbourhood and the virus. Our respondents constantly questioned the risk of coronavirus and the system which was dealing with the lockdown. Perhaps this vigilance helped in its own way.

In a place like Dharavi where the density of population is at its peak, and where physical distancing is virtually impossible, the number of deaths should've been higher. How come the death toll is less than most of the other parts of the city?

I've been working on the field daily to provide food and supplies since April. I've seen very few cases and some days none. Then how has the media come up with numbers on a daily basis?

And now if numbers are reducing in densely populated Dharavi where many are stepping out, why are the number of cases from apartment buildings from other parts of the city still increasing?

My volunteers and I were covering most parts of Dharavi from door to door. How come we were not affected by the virus?

I've not seen a major number of patients in the quarantine centers. Some of the quarantine centers are about to shut. So where are the patients?

Why do we see the news reporters coming to Dharavi only when a minister is on a visit? I've not seen many news reports asking questions or having a conversation with the locals, the community leaders who know the situation better, the NGO officials, on-duty police officers, then on what basis are they reporting Dharavi's situation?



Community leaders continue to conduct weekly medical camps

Media Matters

In the global media-scape - Dharavi remains Asia's largest "slum" and continues to be perceived as a dangerous place unfit for living. After the first virus-related death which happened on April 1st, many news channels highlighted the issue. Dharavi started receiving negative global attention. Media sources kept pointing out the difficulty of controlling the virus and headlines like 'COVID hotspot' and 'Corona nightmare' added to the distressing situation. But now the positive news flowing from the same media - sources over the last couple of weeks is helping build more confidence in the local community.

"It was exaggerated in the beginning. There was no way to find the exact number of positive cases and the numbers shown on the news differed from the actual cases in Dharavi."

- Gulzar, Community leader

Misinformation about the spread

COVID positive numbers kept increasing in the last two months but many Dharavi residents kept questioning the medical reports. Many believed there was confusion in the reported number of cases - and felt strongly about it. When people with basic cold and cough went to the doctors, they were immediately admitted without being tested for COVID-19. Sion hospital became a feared space. Lack of cleanliness, over flooding of COVID-19 positive patients, and an unhealthy environment caused fear among patients with minimal or no symptoms. Many preferred staying indoors and treating themselves with home remedies. In some cases, a discharged patient with no corona history was handed over a final report which stated COVID-19, while others didn't get a proper diagnosis in the first place.

Many Dharavi residents had their own views about the city outside their neighbourhood. They felt that in high-end apartments, neighbours did not help each other as much. There seemed to be some sort of disconnect in these multistoried housing neighborhoods. In contrast, they felt that their own neighbourhood responded as one entity. Individuals took an initiative of working day and night during these trying times to support their families and communities irrespective of any discrimination.

The current situation, unlocking the future

Even though the number of cases is still increasing in the city, Dharavi is a bit more optimistic and is cautiously opening up. After all it is also a site for livelihood and survival and there are hundreds of thousands of people dependent on its economic activities. There is still shortage of foodgrains and basic necessities for a number of poor people. Small shops and restaurants have already started working. Small business owners and factory managers are hoping that the migrant workers will come back to the city soon. The hardship caused by the policy response to the COVID-19 crisis will be felt for many years to come. Though people have started roaming the streets in a relatively more relaxed manner, they maintain physical distancing and remain particular about wearing masks. Two quarantine centers are now shut because of a lack of patients and another one is on the verge of closing. Still everyone has fingers crossed.