

This issue of the Dharavi Weekly takes you through 11 personal accounts of religious and cultural celebrations from the people themselves, as a culmination of our now, 15-week long endeavour to document their lives. Moving forward, The Dharavi Weekly will transition into a fortnightly issue wherein we hope to give to you, our readers, a much more in depth ethnographic representation of these communities.

The 2.1 meter square settlement of Dharavi is home to a large population of Indians from all over the country. Being at such close proximity to one another, families exchange and imbibe each other's deep rooted values and customs, thus making each family in Dharavi unique in their religious propensities.

Many important festivals have come and gone in the lockdown, namely the Narli Pujan, Eid, Easter, Janamashtmi

and Sawantsari. These festivals often mark auspicious times for people to make large financial investments such as buying a car or a house. Restrictions on public gatherings, along with the collateral damage of the economic lockdown on financial capacities, has altered the scale of all festivities. While the lockdown's impact on household celebrations vary from family to family, public celebrations have been severely dampened, following strict guidelines periodically released by the State and Central Governments.

In the process of conducting these phone interviews, we came across stories of how the community has come together in support of one another to ensure collective safety and good health. Some families who admitted to living luxurious lifestyles before the lockdown feel a new determination to live humbly and frugally.

A Tale Of Multiple Cities In One Place

Bhau shares an origin story of Dharavi from approximately 113 years ago. It used to be a barren piece of land on the banks of the river Mithi. Families would bring their cattle here to graze. The village of Thirunavelli in Tamil Nadu, was facing an acute drought at the time.

Belonging to the Adhi Dravid Samaj, there were many families from the scheduled caste living in extreme poverty and were subject to many forms of discrimination. They were not allowed to enter any temples, or even step out of their houses as it was considered unholy for their shadow to be seen on the ground.

Their fate turned when a generous Muslim man offered to take them to Bombay. The community migrated



Holi celebration in Koliwada before lockdown.

in hundreds, and started a rawhide business in the region of Mumbai, now called Dharavi.

Being mostly uninhabited, except by the Kolis, Dharavi proved to be the perfect choice for the incoming Tamilians. The community felt free for the first time, with nobody to berate, question or oppress them in their new neighbourhood. They belonged to the Hindu community, but had for thousands of years been denied entry into a temple. In Bombay, they would never be asked their caste on entering a place of worship. As an expression of freedom, a public installation of the Ganpati deity was conducted under a peepal tree.

Further along, a nomadic tribe - the Konchikars - also found a home in Dharavi and have been residents of Dharavi for generations. The Konchikars' business involved the selling of coconuts and other fruits. This has changed with people pursuing various other businesses. The 70s saw the cobbler community of Rajasthan migrate to Dharavi. According to Bhau the reason for their migration is a mystery. They had a strong foothold in Rajasthan, and he doesn't know what motivated them to

A Coconut Offering

“Dharavi Koliwada is one village. We celebrate 1 Holi festival, 1 coconut festival and have 1 Dahi Ma deity's temple. Often villages have many deities based upon which they divided. We have not done this. In Koliwada, the Christians and Hindus all live together in peace as one united community”

In conversation with Digambar Koli, a history teacher from Dharavi, Koliwada, we hear about the various religious practices that his community takes part in throughout the year. Two festivals of importance for the Koli community are the Holi festival and Narli Pujan. During the Holi festival members of the community, especially newly weds, pray to the Holika fire to expel the darkness from their lives. They pray for forgiveness for any sins that they may have committed and ask to be blessed with happiness and wealth. This festival lasts through the night, people putting aside any anger or enmities towards one another. Luckily for the Koli community, they were able to celebrate this festival

before the lockdown began at the end of March.

The other important festival for the Kolis is Narli Puja. Here, the community worships the sea. As fishermen, they rely on the waters for a source of livelihood. Together, they go to their creek and make offerings of coconuts to the God of the Sea. Then, on returning they have a ritualistic competition. A person will tap their own coconut on another person's coconut to see which one breaks. The person whose coconut breaks must hand it over to the other person who is then declared the winner.

Through the lockdown, the Koli community have come together to organise food and rations for fellow members. They've held several awareness campaigns to ensure people are taking correct precautions to remain healthy and have come to amicable understandings with the local police station to ensure that they may continue necessary rituals smaller scales while maintaining social distancing protocol.

The Mass, A Movie?

Dominic Keni is a resident of Dharavi, Koliwada, an age old village that speaks English and the Koli dialect of Marathi. His community was one of the first people to populate the seven islands that came to be Mumbai. Members of this community are both Hindu and Christian, with Dominic being a Christian

member. He is even the president of the Dharavi Koli Trust the local organisation that plans and organises the local community gatherings for both the Christian and Hindu members of the village.

His family is religious and prays regularly. Because of the lockdown, they've been attending the weekly Sunday mass and prayers at home, which are being streamed live on YouTube. All places of worship within Dharavi currently only allow 5 people in at one time, including the priest himself. Dominic has thus, only once through the lockdown been able to physically visit his local St Anthony's Church.

His family is pleased with the ample time they now have, which allows them to pray more often during the day. They are also now able to watch and attend masses conducted by other churches, in and around Mumbai. They feel however, that all these advantages do not add up to the experience of being able to be physically present at church. “It feels almost like watching a movie or an advertisement”, he says, thus leaving him unsatisfied with the quality of his prayers. He says he doesn't feel as connected to God and that the many disturbances in his home environment add to this feeling.

This year, his family had only a small Easter celebration at home with their close family and friends. The usual festivities were not carried out. Dominic doesn't feel very hopeful about Christmas either, though he understands the gravity of the current situation.



This picture is of the Cross near St. Anthony's Church

Community Development Through Religion

Siddharth Medge, a 58-year-old resident of Dharavi, comes from the village of Jalgaon Bhusawal. He is a devout follower of Buddhism and the president of the Panchsheel Budh Seva Samiti (PBSS) and of the Dharavi Nagrik Seva Sangh (DNSS). The PBSS is responsible for the celebrations of their main festivities namely, Ambedkar Jayanti, Budh Purnima and Maha Pari Nirvaan. They are also responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the Buddha Viharas and disseminating the teachings of Lord Gautham Buddha.

During the lockdown, their regular prayers on Sundays and Thursdays have come to a standstill along with the weekly sessions for children. The temple grounds are being used as a space for storing grains, making and distributing ration kits during the lockdown. These activities have been conducted in collaboration with the Mumbai Roti Bank and Dharavi Police.

Every year for Ambedkar Jayanti, the PBSS organises a 3-day long event wherein they invite ministers to speak, have cultural exhibits for women and children and decorate the surrounding locality. They also help maintain the roads and organise regular cleanliness drives in their neighbourhood as well as at the beach. This year, their usual 3-day event was reduced to a 1-day event. Basic decorations at the temple and distribution of kheer was done in a ground with due social distancing. Budh Purnima too was celebrated in a similar manner, as opposed to an elaborate panel of ministers that are usually invited to speak. Maha pari Nirvaan, which is on the 6th December, witnesses a large scale distribution of cooked food in Shivaji Nagar, with ingredients and manpower coming from the Budh community in Dharavi. Siddharth was moved by the communal harmony between Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians in their neighbourhood, each helping the other to inclusively celebrate festivals.

Though a non-religious group, DNSS, under the presidentship of Siddharth, collected about 3.5 lakhs from the community and constructed a Police Chowki for the police in their neighbourhood without any assistance from the government.



This is an image by Siddharth Medge from Buddh Vihar, Dharavi.

An Agnostic's View of Religious Celebrations

Annappa Kunchikor belongs to one of the Nomadic tribes of India and speaks their native Kaikadi language, a mix of Telugu, Kanadda and Marathi a language born of their nomadic lifestyles. He is the 7th or 8th generation of his tribe to live in Mumbai. He runs a plastic product business which has been affected by the lockdown, but this has not disappointed him nor does he completely rely on his faith in God.

He tells us about how he was the first amongst his peers and community to support his wife in running a business, while everyone else limited their wives to household work. He was taunted by his peers but he never let that affect his ideals, instead he tried to propagate the same within his family. His daughter-in-law started selling fruits during the lockdown to earn an income and keep herself busy. He goes on to say that he is proud of what she's doing because she is self-employed and getting by solely on the strength of her beliefs. Despite her strong faith, she did not leave it upto higher powers but decided to do something about the situation on her own.

Annappa preaches the same thing, he believes that one needs to do things in their own capacity and then have faith in god. Not the other way round.

A spiritual but non-religious person, he implores his community and his friends to invest in educating their children or a long-term business plan rather than spending money on religious extravaganza, advice he lives by very strictly. He believes the government's protocol during the lockdown - to keep smaller idols, do visarjan locally, avoid large public gatherings and reduce spending on decorations is welcome and should become the new norm.

Islamic Practise through the lockdown

Gulzarbhai is a resident of Dharavi, originally from Awla in Bareilly, UP. During the lockdown, Gulzarbhai's religious rituals underwent many transformations.

With no directives for mosques to reopen, Gulzarbhai has calmly adjusted to homebound namaz, and shared some of the ways the mosque might function post-lockdown. People might also be asked to wash their hands and feet at home rather than at the mosque.

Unfortunately for the Islamic community, Ramzaan, Eid, Bakr-eid and Muharram fell either during or after the lockdown, the severe restrictions have resulted in more subdued celebrations. Ramadan saw an acute shortage of food for many needy families, whom Gulzarbhai helped by providing them with ration kits, food packets and fresh fruits. Some leeway from the government's side was provided to transport fruits in trucks and keep select few hotels open all night in certain localities. Prior to Bakri-Eid, there was a catastrophic mismanagement in the sale of goats. With all mandis closed, purchase of goats was shifted online making it difficult to inspect the goats before a purchase. The prices also skyrocketed due to demand-supply issues and transportation blockades, causing great inconveniences for customers and suppliers alike.

The recent festival of Muharram was a low-key event as well. Usually, takirs would be held in the mosque and on the streets in large gatherings. Water pots would be kept in public places for all to use. This time though, the government only allowed distribution of sealed water packets.

Gulzar Bhai also owns a garment shop, which suffered great loss in sales during Ramzan, one of the peak business seasons. He hopes that he can make up for it in the coming Diwali shopping season. He says that even if shops do resume business as usual, people will take many months to recover from their personal economic losses, and that shopping for clothes will be their last

Being 1 Of Only 4

Tarun is a second generation migrant whose father moved to Mumbai from Madhya Pradesh in 2003. His hometown was close to the Narmada dam and was one of the many villages that was cleared out to build the dam. It is now filled with water. This was the reason his father moved to Mumbai.

Tarun is from a Hindu family but is proud to have many friends from other religious backgrounds. He follows Dadupanth, a religious minority of which there are only 4 families in all of Maharashtra. The deity they worship is Lord Kuldevath. He feels that being spiritual helps one serve other people as well as the community, and makes one more empathetic towards other people's struggles. Although a strong believer in his religion, he doesn't feel that this is the most important part of his or anyone else's identity. He adds that often the most spiritual and generous people are the ones who have the least wealth.

His community has an annual 8 - day celebration in Jaipur, Rajasthan which they attend every year. The Mela, which is important to Dadupanth, takes place in February. This year it was difficult for them to be able to attend this festival with the complicated formalities around travel due to the pandemic. They therefore conducted the rituals at home in the company of close family. Tarun and his friends also celebrate festivals of other religions with the same enthusiasm.

Tarun feels that the indoor celebrations are more traditional and are a better way to mark auspicious days. He likes to follow the ancient rituals which is difficult to do when we turn these festivities into large public celebrations. This year, when people are forced to celebrate Ganpati and Janamashtami at home, he feels that the rituals and customs will be more meaningful. He sees this as a silver lining and has no complaints.



Tarun Swami with his grandchild, on the day of Janamashtami.

Being Somewhat Religious

Abbas is a Kutchi Muslim whose grandfather moved to Mumbai in 1921 from Anjar, Kutch. According to Abbas being religious is a way of life, but he says he feels embarrassed to call himself that, as sometimes he is unable to complete the 5 daily namaz prayers. He does love and respect his religion, however and tries to follow it as thoroughly as he possibly can.

Weekly prayers are part of his routine. Since the lockdown commenced, Abbas and his family have been praying from home. He says *"It is believed that gaining more blessings if you pray at the mosque, but that does not mean praying is forbidden or not accounted for"*. Most of their festivals, starting from ramadan to moharam have been affected by COVID-19.

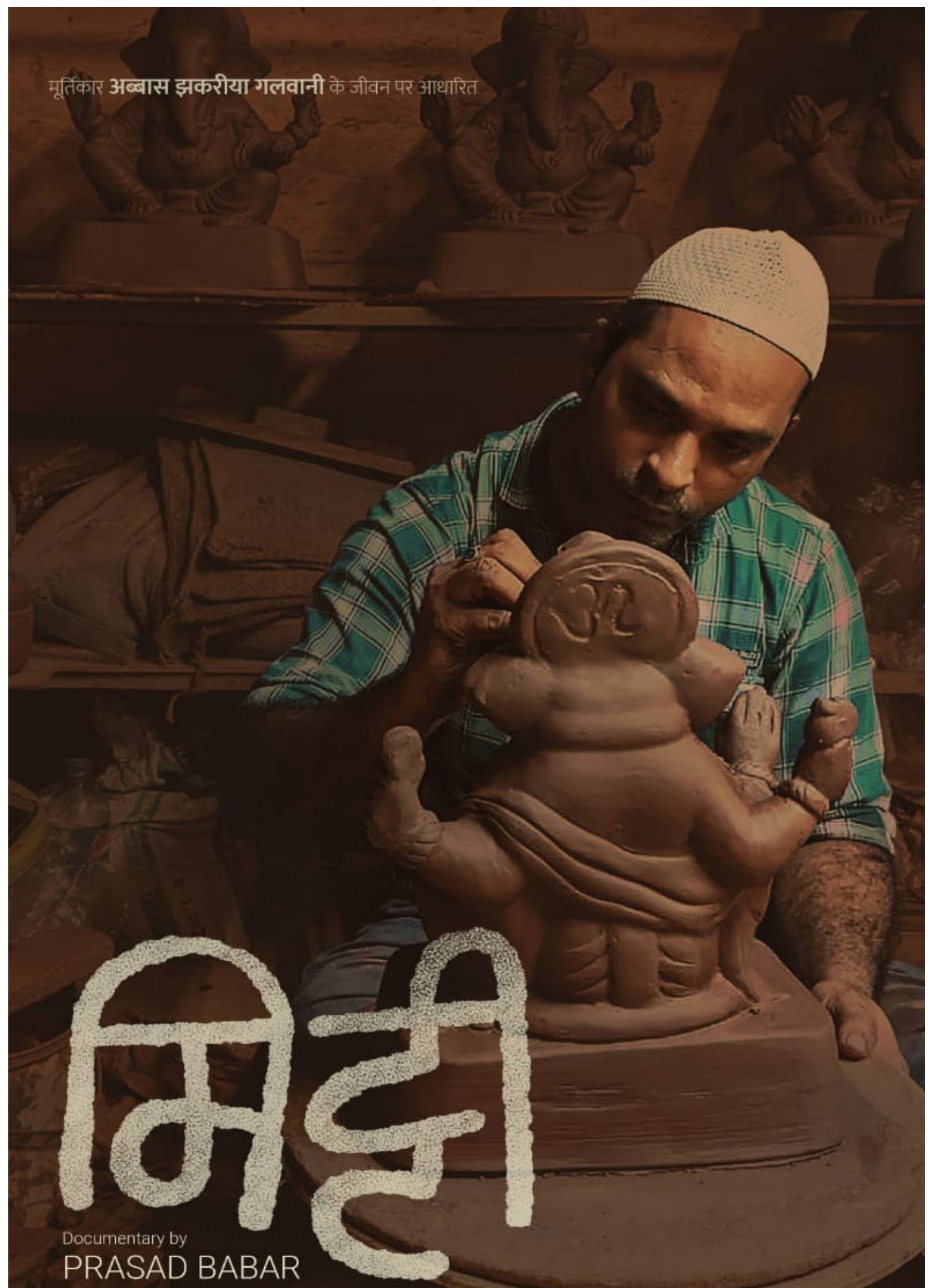
All celebrations and rituals have been limited to their own home. But given the circumstances, everyone understands

the responsibility. He says that Allah never asked one to spend a lot of money and celebrate these festivals, a simple prayer with a smile will suffice, your intentions are what matter the most.

The only drawback for not following the usual celebrations is that the kids are not excited and they didn't get any gifts this year. He says that each family's celebrations depend on their own capacity.

His grandparents had more traditional and simpler ways to celebrate festivals whereas today's generation celebrated more extravagantly.

Although having absolute faith in God, Abbas does not depend completely on Allah. He says *"if you're praying and an insect comes to bite you, you have to fend for yourself, you cannot expect Allah to protect you when you are being careless"* thus, one needs to take precautions against the virus and be careful, the rest can be left to God. One's belief must give them comfort but is not an excuse to be careless.



An image of Abbas' workplace for the mentioned documentation.

Humanity Above All

Our interview with Mr Paul Raphel was particularly insightful as he shared with us his humanitarian understandings of challenges we currently face as a country. Having worked to ease communal differences, Paul believes his identity is first that of an Indian. Although coming from a Roman Catholic family, he says he is understanding, accepting and respectful towards all communities and their religious practises. He often encourages his children to have diverse experiences of different cultures to help them increase their tolerance towards other people. He feels strongly that history has often been misrepresented and misunderstood to instigate communities against each other. An example of this is the Bhima Koregaon battles that are often spoken about in a way that frames the lower caste community as troublemakers who started the war whereas in actuality, they were merely defending what truly belonged to them. On similar lines he spoke about the city of Mumbai, the way it has been colonised and still continues to be run for the most part by people of superior ethnicities, namely the Parsis, the Goan Catholic and Hindu Brahmins. The Koli, who although being natives to the city, were given no importance whatsoever.

Another example he gave was of the way we understand Mahatma Gandhi's relationship with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Often we highlight the differences in their thoughts, but fail to recognise that at the end of the day they worked together for the same purpose and cared deeply for one another. He even quoted Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in saying *"If a political party gets larger than the country, the country won't progress. And if a religion grows larger than a country, it won't progress."*

A Kumbhar's Faith

Ranchod Das is a resident of Kumbharwada who claims that his forefathers along with the Kolis were the founders of Dharavi. Although his family has been in Dharavi for over a 100 years, they still have family back in Gujarat and make sure they visit them once in a while.

Ranchod Das is an optimistic person with absolute faith in god. He prays regularly and believes if a person is 50 years old, he should pray for 50 minutes,

his thumb rule being that you pray for as many minutes as your age.

They have their ancestral god and their temples, called Madh. Before the lockdown, everyone visited these madhs regularly and went to temples for bigger celebrations.

"If God doesn't wish it, you won't live an extra day" is his belief. He mentioned organising health camps for the residents of Kumbharwada and is proud of the zero case statistic. This has allowed them to get back to their routine with necessary precautions. They have a community hall, where they have held important gatherings such as weddings or death ceremonies. They did this while making sure there were no crowds and everyone followed social distancing.

Since the community is tight knit and enthusiastic, they have been celebrating all the festivals. For Janamashtami they went to the temple while following the precautionary protocols. Ranchod Das says that one should not leave the temple unattended, that is why they kept visiting the temple. Even for Ganesh Chaturthi they have kept a Ganpati at their place and will celebrate keeping protocols in mind.

A Small Price For Safety And Health

When asked about how his belief in God has helped him get through these challenging times, Jagdish Jain said he believes that God comes as messengers to us. He says that for him, God takes the form of a helpful policeman who gave him instructions as well as the doctors who helped ensure his family's good health. Being of the Jain faith, Jagdish and his family are currently fasting for Padushan though they will not be able to visit the Mahavir temple as they usually do at the end of this period.

Although he firmly believes in his religion, he is accepting of other Hindu Gods and even makes periodic visits to the Siddhivinayak temple, the Babulnath temple and the Ganpati temples in Bombay. Even nowadays, on his way to work, Jagdish stops outside the local Mahavir temple to pay his obeisances to God.

Jagdish's grandfather migrated from Rajasthan to Bombay more than 150 years ago. Since then, their family has been based in Mumbai and they only visit their village on a yearly basis when there is a

family wedding. Jagdish, his sister and his brother have all built their lives in Dharavi and live at close proximity to one another. Jagdish's children study at a local English Medium School.

When asked about the struggles of the ongoing pandemic Jagdish compares the times to those of his grandfather who had to hustle for work in order to educate and raise his children. Today, we are in similar times as people struggle to find jobs. "I myself had to shift from having a saree business to a cut piece business" He says. He believes that in times like these one must make adjustments and keep their priorities straight. Having no large celebrations is a small price to pay in order to safeguard himself and his children from the spreading illnesses.