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SLUMDOGS AND THE MILLIONAIRE: WHAT A PROJECT TO TRANSFORM MUMBAI SAYS ABOUT INDIA'S DEMOCRACY

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A mega slum redevelopment executed by Narendra Modi's key business ally has triggered political opposition and charges of opacity, arbitrariness, and cronyism. It threatens to uproot peoplefrom the city and banish them to its peripheries as Mumbai's turn to capitalist urbanism intensifies along with the suppression of its discontents. Fears of dispossession loom as the authorities decide who belongs and who doesn't – mirroring the wider nativist politics of Hindu supremacism, fused with unfettered neoliberalism

Heart of an economic powerhouse

It is billed as the world's largest urban regeneration project that will remake Asia's biggest slum sitting in the middle of India's financial capital. But the ambitious project to transform Mumbai has triggered charges of opacity, injustice and cronyism as it turns into a battleground against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's top-down politics.

Protests have been mounting against the $3 billion project to redevelop the city's 600-acre Dharavi slum, which was the setting of Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning 2008 movie *Slumdog Millionaire*. Redeveloping Dharavi, which is about three-quarters the size of New York's Central Park, and resettling its one million inhabitants is aimed at refashioning a city that is home to some 60,000 millionaires as the throbbing heart of an emerging economic powerhouse, but where half the population live in slums.

The seven-year project would seemingly deliver equitable housing and give the metropolis a look more befitting the financial hub of a country on the cusp of becoming the world's third-largest economy. The redevelopment process has, however, also sparked fears of displacing hundreds of thousands of Dharavi dwellers from the community and the thriving micro-economy they have built over decades on what used to be a swathe of sparsely populated marshlands.

Opposition parties allege the project was gifted away to Gautam Adani, a billionaire considered close to Modi. A Dubai-based consortium had initially won a 2018 tender to revamp Dharavi but the tender was canned and reissued in 2022 in a way, Modi's critics say, that allowed Adani Group to win it the second time. The government has subsequently showered Adani with more favours, such as tax breaks and extra parcels of land along with other redevelopment projects to sweeten the deal, deepening the charges of cronyism and resentments against the project.

Adani Group has promised to give eligible Dharavi residents 350 sq ft flats with kitchen and toilet. It's a considerable improvement over the unhygienic and cramped living conditions. The slum—a dense patchwork of tin roofs and concrete, open sewers, shared toilets and small factories—will give way to a new fancy new business district with steel-and-glass towers under the plan. But not all Dharavikars will get to live in new Dharavi.

Roughly 30 per cent or 300,000 of the people who can prove they are 'eligible', or legitimate, longstanding residents of Dharavi, will be provided with free housing in the redeveloped Dharavi itself. The rest who cannot will be rehoused in rental properties elsewhere in the city. That means about 700,000 people will be forced out, in what is likely to be one of the largest mass evictions in recent times, the prospect of which is feeding anger and protests. In the first list of slum households eligible for free housing released by the developer based on a survey of one small Dharavi neighbourhood, just 16 per cent qualified. The fears over displacement are thus only increasing.

“No need for consent”

These fears and resentments breed in an environment of suspicion resulting from a general lack of information about the project as well as the near-absence of people’s participation in it. A project supposedly meant for the upliftment of the people in the largest slum in the world’s largest democracy, the Dharavi redevelopment project couldn’t be any more divorced from people’s will. The government claims the project has “the people of Dharavi as its center” but when asked about the persistent resistance of a section of Dharavi to the project, the chief executive of the Dharavi Redevelopment Project recently told the media that “there's no need for consent” since the project developer was appointed directly by the state government.

Community organizers naturally find this approach deeply troubling. Raju Korde, whose Dharavi Bachao Andolan (DBA) —or the Save Dharavi Committee—has been agitating for the rehabilitation of all Dharavi residents within Dharavi itself, says this people-proofing of the project has been made possible through incremental changes in the law. Slum redevelopment used to require the consent of 70 per cent of the residents. This was reduced to 51 per cent a couple of years ago to make it easier for builders to undertake such projects. Dharavi is also a designated ‘vital public project’, which eliminates the need for even that wafer-thin majority consensus.

“There is no clear blueprint, there are no public consultations. All we get is half-baked information in media, creating scope for misinformation and confusion.”

With the absence of any need to garner public confidence, charges of opacity abound, beginning with the very entity in charge of the project itself. Dharavi Redevelopment Project Private Limited (DRPPL) was formed as a partnership between the state government (20 per cent) and the Adani Group (80 per cent) to execute the project. Late last year, DRPPL became Nav Bharat Mega Developers Pvt Ltd (NMDPL), a special purpose vehicle (SPV). These are a class of legal entity created as a subsidiary of a parent company that are designed to hold assets or undertake short-term projects, and shield the parent from financial risks and potential liabilities. This name change was not publicized and never explained.

Korde calls it a sleight of hand designed to allow illegal practices that a government-linked entity cannot openly pursue, such as the easily manipulated ‘surveys’ being used to decide who will and won’t qualify for free housing. Surveys of this nature are meant to be conducted only by government officials but in Dharavi, says Korde, they are being conducted by the staff of NMDPL, in violation of established guidelines.

In many parts of Dharavi, survey teams have been met with protests and barred from entering. Yet this enumeration—essential for assessing the scale of rehousing obligations—appears to have been bypassed altogether, and a ‘master plan’ with precise resettlement figures has already been drawn up and approved by the government. The fact that the ‘master plan’ was railroaded without involving resident groups or public consultation for suggestions only compounds the doubts and suspicions.

This is one of the many signs of the disconnect between the project and the people that Jasmin Saluja, an architect and urban designer who has been working on Dharavi, finds irreconcilable with the idea of community participation that lies at the heart of urban regeneration projects. “There’s complete indifference to what people want, and a total lack of transparency. Projects like Dharavi need consent. Consent was indeed given to the idea of redevelopment, which people want. But they have no idea how it is being implemented. There is no clear blueprint, there are no public consultations. All we get is half-baked information in media, creating scope for misinformation and confusion,” says Saluja, who has been advocating for a community land trust model for Dharavi that centres on affordable housing and community-driven development.

People versus profit

But community is the least of the government's concerns for this project.

"People are not a consideration. The idea is to free up as much land as possible and sell it to buyers by turning it into a world-class development. Earlier, we had a model of slum improvement as a path to social housing. Now that model is gone. All calculations are now made on the basis of land value," Saluja says. "Profit is the only motive, rather than development for the masses. There's a lot of money to be made by other 'stakeholders'. It's a uniquely capitalist model of redevelopment that overrides all other considerations such as equity and sustainability."

This profit-centric orientation of a public project has been enabled by Modi's decade in power that has intensified the shift towards neoliberalism that India has been witnessing since the 1990s as it began to move away from the old 'license raj'—the system of heavy government regulation and red tape that dictated private business in India up until the early 1990s—and embraced capitalism. The result has been a fusion of state and capitalist interests leading to rent-seeking. It is particularly rife in sectors like energy, mining and infrastructure —such as the Dharavi project—where private profit is derived from public resources with government support. Privatisation and public private partnerships (PPPs) have become the default administrative credo. Not only has the state been divesting public sector units to private players in a broad range of industries, it has progressively retreated from even its fundamental obligations of provisioning public goods and services by ceding the responsibility to private capital.

India's urban development model since the 1990s liberalisation has increasingly involved private companies in delivering public services and then making citizens pay user charges. As a result, access to basic services like health and water has become more and more dependent on citizens' capacity to pay, transforming rights holders into consumers. Mumbai's municipality this year decided to sell five government hospitals to private enterprises, in a move that will particularly affect slum dwellers, the biggest users of these hospitals. The civic school system is being handed over to private developers. The fleet of public buses has drastically fallen over the past decade as the government has increasingly resorted to leasing buses from private operators.

Slum rehabilitation is among the biggest PPP initiatives. Public land is privatized as the government outsources its housing redistributive responsibilities to the highest bidder. The winning contractor squeezes residents into what the Bombay High Court calls "vertical slums" of shabby, densely packed rehabilitation buildings on a small part of the original slum, and develops the rest into high-end real estate that it sells at exorbitant rates.

Move over, small guy

The country's swing to the right under Modi has simultaneously coincided with a gradual decimation of small-scale, informal businesses on the one hand and the concentration of wealth in the powerful, formal Big Business on the other, on a scale rarely seen before in India. It's a symptom of the growing inequality in the country, which is considered more unequal now than under the British. The richest 1 per cent owns more than four times the total wealth held by the bottom 70 per cent of the population.

Prime Minister Modi in 2024
Image: PradeepGaurs / shutterstock.com

More than 75,000 micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs, in industry parlance) have shut shop in the last five years, according to the government, nearly half of them this year alone. Part of it is technology -driven, as India has been shifting toward capital-intensive growth driven by the rapid rise of automation and advanced digital technologies to cut costs, adversely hitting medium- and low-wage labour. But India's conglomerates have also gained from Modi'spolicies that favour scale as a means of rapid capital creation, and have in turn bankrolled his party's grand ambition to recast the inclusive republic as a majoritarian Hindu-first state through generous campaign donations. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) got more than 88 per cent of donations received by national parties in 2023-24, of which nearly 90 per cent came from corporate donors. It has been like that ever since Modi's rise to national power in 2014. A new kind of state capitalism has emerged, blurring the boundary between private capital and the state, in a collaboration that feeds off state resources to benefit rich and powerful corporate and government entities, resulting in a parallel concentration of power in politics and business.

Adani is the most prominent beneficiary of this trend. His growth trajectory has closely trackedthat of Modi. Called 'Modi's Rockefeller', he has been showered with government favours and contracts that have catapulted him up the league tables of the global rich from being a small regional business player in India before Modi's election victory in 2014. Such is the reach of his ports-to-solar empire that even India's diplomatic engagements now are said to move in lockstep with Adani projects outside India. At home, he is seen as an all-powerful extension of the ruling dispensation. Last week, the government ordered prominent digital publishers and commentators to take down posts mentioning Adani following a court order on a defamation case filed by one of his companies. Adani Group now control eight airports and 14 major ports across India. This month it received 1,020 acres on a 25-year-lease to build, own and operate a power plant at just Rs 1 (or about 1 US cent) an acre every year in the eastern state of Bihar. In Mumbai, he already controlsthe city's airport and its electric supply. Dharavi is his pass to dominate the city's ultimate golden goose—its ultra lucrative property market.

Gautam Adani
Image: Wiiki Commons

As Adani's new conquest, Dharavi is a site of this contest between state-aligned Big Business and the small-scale, informal sector. The sprawling slum doesn't only house people; it's also home to thousands of small-scale businesses that are faced with extinction if the area is redeveloped. These businesses engage a workforce of over 250,000 and generate a revenue of over $1 billion yearly. The redevelopment master plan has made provisions for industrial and commercial units, but most small factories that dot the slum are not going to survive as there is no clarity on whether and how these will be accommodated in a new, glittering Dharavi. Even the businesses that will survive dread the forced formalization because of the onerous industrial laws and tax rules they can no longer escape as they did, hiding away in the labyrinth of Dharavi's dingy alleyways.

Apart from numerous home-based enterprises, from making food products to stitching leather, Dharavi is a hub of plastic recycling, dyeing, aluminium moulding, leather processing, garment manufacturing, and pottery making units. A gentrified Dharavi with its gleaming office buildings and luxury towers like the city's shiny new corporate hub of Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC in local parlance) next door, is unlikely to accommodate these gritty enterprises. Their closure will put out of work tens of thousands of people already living in precarity. It will push these businesses and the people they employ to the city's fringes and break the vibrant economic ecosystem that has built around them.

Reimagining urbanism

Critics of the project warn against the decimation of a growth-driver like Dharavi's throbbing "residential-industrial citysystem"—as urban scholar Jeb Brugmann calls it—and replacing it with sterile clusters of mixed residential, office and retail complexes. Brugmann, who authored the seminal *Welcome to the Urban Revolution: How Cities Are Changing the World*, points out that the whole dismantle-and-rebuild mode of urban renewal is outdated, and long forsaken. Rio de Janeiro's incremental reforms of migrant favelas into more stable, lawful and sanitary neighbourhoods with minimal clearing and relocation offers a positive counter-example. The idea of 'saving' Dharavi by razing it benefits none more than India's ill-famed builder-politician lobby, according to him.

Samidha Patil and Kareena Kochery at architectural non-profit urbz have also been exploring a bottom-up approach of empowering communities to build their own urban spaces as an alternative to foisting cookie-cutter architectures and 'development' aesthetics on them. Their studio seeks to imagine what Dharavi would look like if its people were allowed to incrementally improve their habitats and localities.

"People self-organize here to build their own localities and neighbourhoods. We recognize the skills and the knowledge available here. The process of home making is very need-based here, hence very cheap, and not at all speculative like in the rest of the city, where the middle-class is shut out of the real estate market," says Patil. "Why not allow Dharavi grow by itself? It has a very participatory model of development, why not strengthen it? This is the idea of urbanism that Asia once had – a community-driven development model that created the scope for a diversity of housing. That's all being replaced by the American model of monoculture housing of glass-panelled high-rises."

High-rises work out very well for big developers, of course. Resettling people from a horizontal sprawl like Dharavi into rows of multi-storeyed units frees up vast amounts of land. In Dharavi's case, right in the heart of Mumbai, one of the world's top 10 luxury real estate markets. According to the Dharavi master plan approved by the government, the developer will be allowed to sell in the open market residential, commercial, and retail property units on 43 per cent of the total project land, or 47.95 hectares, more than the land allocated to rehabilitate Dharavi residents—in whose name the project was conceived in the first place.

Dumping the rejects of new Dharavi

At least the 'eligible' residents who find a place in that 47.20 hectares will still be in Dharavi. The rest fear being treated like dirt, literally. The government has passed a proposal to shift 50,000 to 100,000 of 'ineligible' Dharavi residents (those who either live on upper floors in Dharavi's shanties or built their tenements after 2000) to rental housing in the eastern suburb of Deonar, the city's largest landfill and one of India's most toxic and active dumping grounds. Deonar has the dubious distinction of being home to India's tallest rubbish mountain. It has eight of those spread over 300 acres, with waste piled as high as 120 ft, equivalent to an 18-storey building. The 123 acres reserved in the dumping ground to resettle Dharavi residents currently has 20 million tonnes of dirt piled on it.

Sites like Deonar are notorious for toxic gases, foul air, soil pollution, and poisonous water. These landfills are also prone to frequent fires spewing toxic fumes. In 2016, a fire that broke out on one of the rubbish mountains blanketed much of the city with toxic plumes; the fire was so great that it was even visible from space, according to NASA images. Pollution regulations prohibit housing, schools, and hospitals within 100 metres of closed landfills, and Deonar's is a live one—releasing 6,202 kg of methane every hour. The average life expectancy in Deonar is 39 years compared to the national average of 73.5 years and the infant mortality rate is 66 (deaths of children under one per 1,000 live births in a year), against the national average of 24.5. None of these factors weighed on the government when it decided to move Dharavi's people there.

The choice of a dumping ground as a site for relocation is ironic given that dignified living is a stated goal of slum redevelopments. Addressing management students at a function, Gautam Adani recently said, “Every time I fly to Mumbai, the slums below disturb my conscience, as no nation can truly rise when so many of its people live without dignity…Redeveloping Dharavi is not just about laying bricks of yet another slum redevelopment program; it is about rebuilding dignity for those one million people who helped build Mumbai, but never benefited from it.”

Apart from the garbage dump, five other locations have been selected to resettle the ‘ineligible’, including three ecologically sensitive salt pan land sites totalling 255 acres, all of them about 20 km away from Dharavi. This will inevitably disperse and fray the unique Dharavi community. A self-contained and thriving economy aside, Dharavi has a strong community life that has richly contributed to the city’s cultural production. The slum, for one, is the biggest hub of India’s hip-hop artists and rappers, who populate Bollywood—the Hindi film industry that is based in Mumbai. It is a melting pot of a hyperdiverse India where poor migrants from all over the country have converged for decades, creating a life for themselves as well as community bonds that go missing in the steel-and-glass towers central to the clear-and-rebuild models of city planning.

City redevelopment in India often has religious and caste implications. As caste and class are almost coterminous and redevelopment tends to push the poor to the urban fringes, Muslims and lower castes are often cast aside to the periphery in urban renewal projects. In Ahmedabad city in neighbouring Gujarat state that Modi ruled as chief minister for over 12 years before taking national power, major infrastructure projects like riverfront development, road widening and flyovers displaced tens of thousands of Dalits, tribal communities, Muslims, and other marginalized groups. The city meanwhile teemed with new housing colonies catering to a rising middle class consisting of mainly upper-caste Hindus. This has created patterns of spatial segregation, reinforced further by exclusionary, though unwritten, conventions of keeping out other communities. Dharavi, composed of groups drawn from impoverished migrant—and marginalized—groups flies in the face of such norms of spatial divides by situating these groups in the heart of the city, offering a rare model of diverse urban co-existence in India.

A diverse community that thrived despite the state’s neglect. Architect Kochery, who sees in Dharavi a perfect example of resident-driven organic urbanism, stresses Dharavi’s self-containment, pointing out how the multiple sub-communities within Dharavi have even created their own safety net. This was most evident during Covid, when, despite the media stereotyping of slums as a hotbed of disease, death and poverty, Dharavi proved to be extremely resilient even as its poor residents wrestled with widespread loss of jobs and livelihoods because of a protracted lockdown. Residents organized themselves to support one another, took stock of individual needs and inventories, and even drew up lists of the neediest, and prioritized them according to the available supplies.

The many battles of Dharavi

As anxieties and resentments rise over the looming loss of community and livelihoods, Dharavi has turned into a battlefield for opposition parties pushing back against Modi’s hegemonistic politics of ultra-nationalism. They have joined forces with myriad civil society organizations resisting the model of Dharavi’s redevelopment and demanding dignified rehabilitation of all its residents within the new Dharavi when it is built.

Energized by their strong performance in the 2024 national elections, in which Modi’s BJP lost its absolute majority for the first time but kept power, the opposition bloc doubled down on its stance and made Dharavi the cornerstone of its challenge in the Maharashtra state election, also held last year. It promised to can the Adani contract and issue a fresh tender for the project if it won power. But wide hopes for an opposition revival were dashed as the BJP pulled off a victory in the state – amid charges of “industrial-scale rigging”. Work on Dharavi has accelerated since, with the ‘master plan’ and the relocation spots firmed up within months of the results.

Much now hangs on the municipality elections due in a few months. The main regional party opposed to the BJP maintains it will continue to resist the project if all residents are not declared eligible for free rehabilitation and guaranteed 500 sq ft homes in Dharavi. The Congress party has demanded a wholesale withdrawal of the master plan for its lack of public consultation and opacity. But given the fluidity of Maharashtra's politics, where parties and leaders are no strangers to switching sides, an elite compromise over Dharavi is not entirely ruled out either.

The electoral reversal of the opposition in last year's state election has also taken some edge off the movement and opposition unity on the issue may no longer be set in stone. Leaving aside the Congress, two of the three main opposition parties have in fact been the BJP's coalition allies in the past. And, one of the tallest opposition leaders in the state is known for his proximity to Adani. This relationship has been a bone of contention among Maharashtra's opposition parties, driving a wedge through their facade of unity against Modi.

Traditional political ideologies such as left and right have been subsumed under a technocratic governance model that gives capital a place of pride in the national economy and significantly tilts the balance in favour of capital against labour.

Adani's relationship with politicians across the aisle is a product of the central role money now plays in Indian politics, which necessitates cordiality between political parties and Big Business. India spends more on elections than the US, but with just 3 per cent of the latter's per capita income, making money the fundamental driver of electoral mobilization. It's no coincidence that the BJP corners most of the corporate donations to political parties. Its commitment to push the neoliberal envelope makes it a favourite as much as its winnability. But other parties are just as beholden to Big Business, making political protests against corporate projects almost a rarity in today's India. Opposition to Adani stands out somewhat in this trend as the Congress party targets his close association with Modi, but this hostility is not uniformly shared across the opposition spectrum, or even within the Congress itself. The party's own regional leaders at times have welcomed Adani investments in their states.

Apart from the campaign finance that tycoons like Adani bring to the table, the post-democratic or post-ideology politics shaped by neoliberalism, which valorises private enterprise and its role in national development, can make anti-capitalist politics feel like a relic of the past. As liberal democracy and free-market capitalism have come to be seen as the only viable political–economic model since the end of the Cold War, traditional political ideologies such as left and right have been subsumed under a technocratic governance model that gives capital a place of pride in the national economy and significantly tilts the balance in favour of capital against labour. Suspicion of capital has consequently lost its political currency, normalizing and even glorifying business elites such as Adani.

This has also had the effect of insulating economic policymaking from vibrant democratic contestation and prioritizing capital interests over popular choice. Unelected technocrats at the service of the democratic state now dictate what they consider to be optimum policy options rather than the people. "Government is reconceived as a management function deprived of its proper political dimension", as the philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek puts it. "In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists...) and liberal multiculturalists; via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus."

India is hardly the only site of this transformation. The global challenges to democracy that have emerged in the past couple of decades have at their heart this depoliticized, technocratic governance model that prioritizes market-driven policy decisions over ideological contests of rights and equity. As elites appropriated democratic institutions and policy-making, popular discontent rose, paving the way for populists and demagogues. These demagogues have thrived, peddling their identarian politics, as traditional class-based political alignments have been crowded out by identity-based solidarities, fuelling in turn the same neoliberal logic of depoliticized economism that helped them rise to power.

The 'post-political city', stripped of traditional politics, driven by the dynamics of economic forces and governed through managerial consensus, bears the full brunt of this depoliticization. In the case of cities, in particular, another change has happened: managerial governance focused on service provision has further shifted towards a more entrepreneurial mode aimed at fostering economic development and competitiveness.

As social theorist David Harvey lays down in his seminal From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism, entrepreneurial governance shapes urban spaces to maximize capitalist accumulation through redevelopment and capital investment rather than focusing primarily on the welfare or needs of residents, sidelining social equity and redistributive policies. In a fierce competition with other cities in an increasingly globalised and competitive world, "city governments become curators of their own image as they coordinate aesthetic strategies in a desperate attempt to divert currents of global financial capital."

The drive to create 'world-class' cities in the Global South has thus entrenched exclusionary urban practices that disproportionately affect low-income populations as elite consumption and global visibility are prioritized over inclusive development, resulting in the systematic displacement of the urban poor. Informal residents are depicted as encroachers or threats to public health and aesthetics, legitimizing their removal in the name of urban renewal while elite actors gain access to upgraded infrastructure and rising land values. Dharavi's redevelopment trajectory betrays all of these pathologies.

The 'post-politics' city

The pursuit of a consensual and entrepreneurial post-politics city also entails eliminating the political space of disagreement. In the words of geographer Erik Swyngedouw, "The only position of real dissent is that of either the traditionalist (those stuck in the past that refuse to accept the inevitability of the new global neo-liberal order) or the fundamentalist. The only way to deal with them is by sheer violence, by suspending their 'humanitarian' and 'democratic' rights. The post-political relies, therefore, on either including all in a consensual pluralist order and/or on excluding radically those who posit themselves outside the consensus."

As Mumbai's turn to 'world class' capitalist urbanism intensifies, so does the suppression of its discontents. The Maharashtra state Assembly in July passed a draconian law ostensibly to check left-wing extremism that civil society groups fear could be used as a tool to silence dissent against the state and undermine the fundamental rights of citizens. It grants the state government power to ban any individual or group it considers "unlawful", encompassing not only acts of violence or sabotage, but also speech, writing, signs, or gestures that "disturb public order", "create fear", or "encourage disobedience to the law." Amnesty International warns that these vaguely worded clauses of the law could be used against peaceful protests or civil disobedience.

The new law comes on top of the resurgence of the politics of religious polarization in Mumbai, and the wider Maharashtra state, driven by the BJP. By helping crack, and divert attention from, social cohesion and class-based political fraternities, the politics of Hindu supremacism directly feeds the capitalist urban governance that Dharavi's redevelopment represents.

To return to power in the state last year, the BJP and allied Hindu supremacist organizations doubled down on their politics of religious polarization. They have been organizing mass movements calling for an economic boycott of Muslims and targeting the community over interfaith relationships. The party consolidated diverse Hindu groups, encouraged them to work together and mobilize them to propagate hate speech and violence against Muslims, including attacks on mosques and lynching cattle traders. Muslim communities engaged in cattle trade have been on strike for over a month now against targeted harassment and vigilante attacks. One of the party's legislators is facing charges of declaring a bounty for killing Christian missionaries. Dharavi's search for the pure 'Dharavikar' mirrors this nativist politics of Hindu supremacism of who belongs and who doesn't, fuelled by unfettered neoliberalism.

Harnessing social divisions to fragment political opposition has allowed the government and its favoured elites to frame policies helping dominant groups and align with capitalist interests.

The culture war and the power of the agencies driving it have penetrated deep into society, even in Mumbai, a traditionally cosmopolitan city despite its history of politically engineered communal riots. A school in Mumbai last year sacked its Muslim principal after a far-right news website targeted her as a "Hamas sympathizer" and "anti-Hindu" for merely "liking" a pro-Palestine tweet; the Hindu right has found common cause with Israel and considers any Palestine sympathizer to be pro-Muslim and, by extension, anti-Hindu.

Harnessing social divisions like this to fragment political opposition has allowed the government and its favoured elites to frame policies helping dominant groups and align with capitalist interests. Capitalist control over city planning has consequently increased, shaping profitable urban spaces by pushing the poor to the less profitable urban peripheries and creating high-value city enclaves for wealthier groups to drive up property values for greater capital accumulation.

Dharavi tests the limits of this capitalist-managerial governance over ideological contestation in the 'world's largest democracy'. The 'Dharavi model' is now being considered for other cities. If the Dharavi project eventually goes through in its current form or even with minor adjustments as a compromise between competing political actors, it will be yet another indicator of the supreme power of corporate capital in mediating a broken politics and a defeat for redistributive politics and its protagonists. On the other hand, if the political opposition and civil society organisations ranged against Dharavi's redevelopment can force a reversal of the project, it will have offered a check on capitalist urbanism of unconstrained neoliberalism and the politics of social polarization that fuels it, and proven the resilience of the liberal forces in a troubled democracy. There's a lot riding on Dharavi.

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