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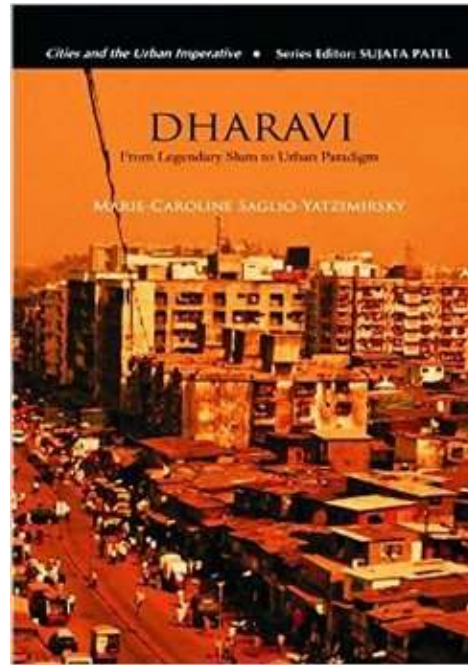
Radhika Govinda

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Saglio-Yatzimirsky, Marie-Caroline (2013) *Dharavi, From Mega-Slum to Urban Paradigm*, New Delhi & Abingdon: Routledge, 379 pages.

- 1 With a population of nearly a million and



physically covering a three-square-kilometre stretch at the heart of India's financial capital, Mumbai, Dharavi is known to the world as 'Asia's largest slum.' In the last decade or so, the crowded, labyrinthine slum has drawn the attention of entrepreneurs, real estate investors and politicians, sensing the money to be made and the votes to be got. A cursory online search reveals that it has been in national and international news, for being, among other things, the hub of a million informal enterprises, the breeding ground for Mumbai's underworld, the backdrop to the Oscar-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* and for Great Britain's Prince Charles deeming it a model to be emulated for sustainable living. If Dharavi has been a 'muse' for writers and journalists, artists and photographers, architects and urban planners (Bansal & Gandhi 2012; Boano *et al.* 2013; Campana 2013; Lantz and Engkvist 2009; Sharma 2000), it has equally been the subject of intense academic scrutiny (see, for instance, hot off the press, Weinstein 2014). Students of urban design, sociology and anthropology alike have been intrigued by its changing character and the predicament of its inhabitants.

- 2 What sets Saglio-Yatzimirsky's *Dharavi, From Mega-Slum to Urban Paradigm* apart from other academic writing on Dharavi is the in-depth, plural perspective it is able to offer on the slum, given that it is based on nearly two decades of intense anthropological research. Through participant observation in workshops, surveys of voting patterns and interviews with leatherworkers from the *Chambhar* (cobbler) and *Dhor* (tanner) castes, this research focused on the slum's low-caste leatherworkers (1993-2001), and more recently on the Dharavi Redevelopment Project that challenged theirs and other migrant slum-dwellers' right to live and labour in the city of Mumbai (2007-10). The book is a sensitive and nuanced account of how these leatherworkers, and migrant working class people more generally, make Dharavi their home and place of work, and how their life and labour get imbricated with the rest of Mumbai. Dharavi is also the place where many of them experience political awakening and where rehabilitation programmes turn some of them into citizens. It is organised into four substantive sections, one each on Dharavi's origins, population, workers and citizens.

- 3 In the first section, Saglio-Yatzimirsky argues how any discussion on Dharavi's origins defies stereotypical characterisations and straightforward comparisons. Low-income migrants from all over India have come and settled in what was once a fisherman's village. Contrary to popular belief, Dharavi is not a transitory settlement area. Having continued to receive a steady flow of migrants long after the industrial labour flows to Mumbai declined in the 1980s, the slum is home to migrants from diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds, many of whom have now been residing and/or working here for more than a couple of generations. Attachment to both the slum and the village from which the migrants originate often varies according to the concerned community or generation of migrants. While the village, no doubt, remains an important reference point, visibly manifested in the way marriages continue to be arranged, the slum has its own power logics, not directly transposed from the village. In this sense, Dharavi is not to be mistaken for an 'urban village' (Saglio-Yatzimirsky 2013: 96), and it is not even an 'urban ghetto' (p. 101). It is neither forcibly isolated nor willingly inward-looking. Depending upon the context, its inhabitants choose to identify with their village roots, the local culture in the slum and Mumbai's urban modernity. In fact, the integration of Dharavi's economy within Mumbai's global economy means that it is unlike the slums of middle-sized Indian cities. Indian specificities of social and spatial organisation, especially caste, equally limit the scope of broader global comparative analyses with American cities, which draw on the Chicago School of urban sociology.<sup>1</sup> In Saglio-Yatzimirsky's own words, 'Dharavi is not an offshoot of villages nor is it a rejection of the city; it is a society in its own right' (p. 108) with an informal economy which has successfully adapted to global markets, establishing an 'urban paradigm' which merits its distinct body of research.
- 4 The author has chosen the leatherworking community as her central focus and entry point for understanding Dharavi's dynamics, especially its socio-economic organisation. This is an apt choice. For decades, the slum has attracted leatherworkers and has had a booming leather industry. Even when tanneries were closing down elsewhere in the city, they continued to thrive here. Leatherworkers make up a quarter of Dharavi's population, and leatherwork accounts for nearly 15% of its businesses even today.
- 5 The second section of the book aims to provide an insight into the caste and community composition of Dharavi's leatherworkers. The leatherworking community in the slum consists of Maharashtrian low castes, and immigrant leather working castes and low class Muslims from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. The Maharashtrian *Chambhars* and *Dhors* remain the two largest castes numerically, and the story of Dharavi is in a sense the story of their struggle to overcome the stigma attached to their low status, which in turn is derived from the intersection of their low caste and class backgrounds.
- 6 Through her reflections on caste dynamics in Dharavi, Saglio-Yatzimirsky also offers some more generalisable insights, which anyone trying to make sense of the intersections of caste, labour migration and identity politics in urban India would find useful. One such insight has to do with how, in spite of the routes to emancipation that education and employment offer to low castes, status-related considerations continue to define their sense of identity and to structure interactions amongst themselves in both the private and professional realms. Strict marriage rules are perhaps the most obvious indicator of caste considerations within the private sphere such that an

alliance between a *Chambhar* girl and a *Dhor* boy would be considered inconceivable. The *Chambhars* also highlight their superior status compared to other untouchable castes, including the *Dhors*, in the professional sphere. They identify themselves as artisans (*karigar*) and claim to deal only with treated leather, which is deemed pure, unlike other untouchable castes who work as labourers (*kamgar*), handling raw leather, considered dirty and impure.

- 7 The third section of the book is specifically devoted to the organisation of leatherwork and the labouring lives of the leatherworkers in Dharavi. The author explains how there tend to be generational differences in leatherworkers' engagement with their traditional occupation.<sup>2</sup> If the first generation practices the traditional occupation of leatherwork, the second generation prefers to leave it behind in favour of professional jobs, thanks to opportunities having opened up for them because of their access to education and reservations in public sector jobs. The third generation seems to return to leatherwork, in the case of *Chambhars* less as artisans and more as traders, because they see the commercial advantages the occupation has to offer. If the second generation rejects the occupation of leatherwork because of the stigma of untouchability attached to it, the third generation has found creative ways of overcoming that stigma. Leatherwork units, themselves, are neither uniform in size nor similarly structured. Nonetheless, two broad types can be identified: the family unit and the extra-familial workshop. Caste, religion, language and regional affiliation are decisive criteria for recruitment in extra-familial units even though workshop supervisors would never openly admit to this being the case, lest they be accused of discrimination. Working conditions in this sector tend to be unpredictable, as a result of which the workers are often underpaid and the borders between the different types of units are not always clearly defined. It would, however, be wrong to deduce from this that Dharavi's leather sector has a problem of unemployment. In fact, there is less chronic unemployment in the slum compared to the rest of Mumbai, and less in Mumbai compared to the rest of Maharashtra.
- 8 In a city where more than one in every two voters is a slum-dweller, making sense of politics in Dharavi is crucial to understanding politics in Mumbai. It is also likely to yield rich insights about the politicisation of low castes in urban India. Indeed, in the fourth section of the book, the author delves into the politicisation of Dharavi's leatherworkers—a phenomenon that has come about gradually, with caste-based and voluntary associations being formed, and political parties like the Shiv Sena seeking to 'Hinduise' the low-caste leatherworkers, with a view to recruiting them as foot soldiers in their project of creating a Hindu nation. These developments shed light on the changing role and function of caste, and the struggles of low-caste leatherworkers to be treated with dignity in urban India. Saglio-Yatzimirsky observes that since the 1992 anti-Muslim riots and the subsequent landslide victory for the Shiv Sena in the 1995 elections, the leatherworkers of Dharavi have been able to increasingly see through the political games that parties play.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, they have chosen to cleverly mobilise using different identity labels, depending upon the context in which they find themselves: '[they] claim to be *dalit* groups at election time, scheduled castes when they want to take advantage of the positive discrimination policies, poor vis-à-vis urban authorities [and] *Charmakars* (leather artisans) when they face threats concerning their working conditions, etc.' (pp. 330-31).

- 9 The author states that a closer scrutiny of this politics of labelling reveals how the leatherworkers reject, as much as they can, any attempt to call themselves '*dalits*.' This observation resonates with what scholars like Manuela Ciotti (2010) and Hugo Gorringer (2005) have found vis-à-vis low-castes in rural Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, respectively. But if Ciotti has argued that the *Chamars* of Uttar Pradesh, traditionally known as leatherworkers, reject the '*dalit*' label because of the stigma of untouchability they continue to believe is attached to the label, Saglio-Yatzimirsky claims that the *Chambhars* of Dharavi reject the label because of the more politicised, neo-Buddhist *Mahars*, having appropriated it for themselves. The *Chambhars* and *Mahars* have had a long standing local rivalry. Both communities compete for the reserved posts in government offices, to which only a lucky few are appointed. This creates intense jealousy, leading them to resort to differential identity politics to distinguish themselves from each other.
- 10 The politicisation of Dharavi's leatherworkers has culminated in their collective mobilisation against the Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP) since the early 2000s. As it stands, the discussion on the DRP and the mobilisation against it form part of the fourth section of the book. However, given the depth and range of insights offered, it might have made more sense to carve out a separate section on the matter. Whilst the DRP is not the first rehabilitation programme to have been launched in Dharavi, it is without doubt the most ambitious one: it intends to turn the slum area into a township. The project has given rise to indignant protest and activism by Dharavi's inhabitants, organised under the auspices of civil society organisations and networks, political parties, and caste- and trade-based associations. Some have opted for formal, legal channels for registering their protest, others have opted for more informal means like protest marches. Their long-standing criticism of this and other rehabilitation proposals has been that these have always been imposed from above. In case of the DRP, there is considerable discontent with respect to the issue of housing: the criteria on which slum-dwellers become eligible for housing under the project ignore all people living on rent, those living on upper floors of buildings, and those who do not have legal documents to prove that they have been residents of the slum since 1995 (which was later extended to 2000). Activists and intellectuals have raised questions about how realistic and achievable the promise of 'free housing' is even when it comes to those who are eligible. What has been most criticised about the DRP is its economic design. Ironically, a project meant to 'modernise' and improve the slum's economic core portends to threaten it instead. Critics argue that the project spells the death of Dharavi's informal economy, specifically the production fabric, which thrives on flexibility with regard to space and labour. In the case of the leather industry, Saglio-Yatzimirsky explains how allocating consolidated but enclosed work areas and grouping industrial units in specialised districts translate into the absence of open spaces for storing hides, drying them once they have been dyed, storing leather scrap, etc. It also entails considerable increase in production costs, such that the leatherworkers are likely to decide to abandon the trade altogether.
- 11 How Dharavi's future unfolds and what it holds for the newly politically awakened Dharavikars (its inhabitants) is a matter of concern for not only themselves but also for urban development authorities and town planners within and outside India as slum rehabilitation is a growing challenge for metropolises in the Global South. If the collective mobilisation against the DRP is successful and alternative plans see the light

of day, this would have tremendous positive implications for the legitimacy of slum-dwellers and their movements for justice in Mumbai but also other mega-cities like Sao Paulo and Johannesburg. By reflecting on Dharavikars' struggles with respect to the DRP, the book makes an important contribution to the burgeoning scholarship on the urban poor and their right to the city (Harvey 2008; Rodgers *et al.* 2012; Zerah *et al.* 2011). The author candidly admits how her own position on slum rehabilitation has evolved over the 20 year-period when she conducted her research in and on Dharavi; from having been in favour of the DRP she now considers that its implementation would be the death-knell of the slum's vitality, especially of its informally functioning leather industry. The consistently detailed and in-depth style in which the book unpacks these issues makes it possible for the reader to appreciate the complexities involved in living, working and mobilising in slum spaces, and how the slum dwellers and the large number of actors associated with them in big and small ways approach the idea of transforming the slum's character.

- 12 However, effectively representing the voices of those being researched is an issue that anthropologists are invariably confronted with, and is one that arises in this study too. How to critically analyse the social universe of Dharavi as accurately and sophisticatedly as possible while adequately capturing how it is perceived and experienced by the Dharavikars themselves? If the author's own rich ethnographic observations had been accompanied by longer and more numerous quotes by the Dharavikars themselves the very important findings of this monograph on issues of identity, belonging, labour, livelihood and citizenship would have been brought alive. The quotes would have also enhanced the representativeness of the author's own observations as well as the fluidity of the writing as such. Where the slum-dwellers' experiences are presented in their own words before examining the various meanings that can be derived from it and before articulating them in terms of complex theoretical reflections, it has made for a more engaging and authoritative account. For instance, leather workshop head, Mahadeo Kadam's observations about paying his Bihari workers on a monthly basis but paying his Gujarati workers on a weekly basis because of the former's trustworthiness in his eyes, or his sexist remarks about how he prefers not to hire women workers because 'they don't work as well as men' clearly illustrates the points that Saglio-Yatzimirsky wants to bring to the reader's attention about the prevalence of regional and gendered stereotypes in Dharavi's leather sector, which inform the discriminatory practices adopted by workshop heads in recruitment and payment (Saglio-Yatzimirsky 2013: 191). This brings up a related point. Where available, it is the voices of men that seem to dominate the text. While this might well be because women are fewer in number in the leather sector in Dharavi, one would have liked to hear the voices of these women. Also, a number of the analytic observations on the migrants' experiences of living and working in the slum and on the gender division of skills and labour in the 'domestic' workshops that the author does make could have been more poignantly expressed. This would have been possible had Saglio-Yatzimirsky engaged more deeply with feminist scholarship on gender, migration and labour than she presently has in this monograph.
- 13 The above observations notwithstanding, *Dharavi, From Mega-Slum to Urban Paradigm* is an outstanding contribution to the breadth of literature available on Dharavi. It is a must-read for scholars of sociology and anthropology of South Asia, and for scholars of urban studies, labour studies and development studies in the Global South context.

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## NOTES

1. The Chicago School of urban sociology emerged in the 1920s and 30s, was anchored in qualitative research, which treated the city of Chicago as a social laboratory and 'questioned the settlement and assimilation of immigrant populations by forging new concepts of social disorganisation, marginality, acculturation, violence, etc.' (p. 18). As representative of the body of work that emerged from this School at the time, see Park *et al.* (1925).
2. It is difficult to clearly delineate when the first generation of leatherworkers settled in Dharavi. Whilst in some of the leading leatherworking families, it was in the 1940s, for others it was in the 1960s and 70s. What is common to their professional trajectory, however, is how this first generation began work in the mills' industry as factory workers before amassing enough resources to set up their own business some 20 years later. The children and grandchildren of this generation, mostly sons and grandsons, either chose to join, abandon or modify the nature of the business, forming the second and third generations of leatherworkers.
3. In the Dharavi context as elsewhere, these political games range from corrupt politicians indulging in illegal door-to-door canvassing practices like distribution of blankets and free meals, to leading national and regional parties recruiting candidates from low castes to capture caste-based votes. The political game that has perhaps lasted the longest in Dharavi has been the



one played by the Shiv Sena to unite symbolically all the low castes associated with leatherwork as *Charmakars*, in order to mobilise them later against the Muslims as part of the pan-Hindu community.

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