

# Urban India's largest ever makeover

But can the community-led redevelopment of the 125-year-old market become an urbanisation model? **Bindu D Menon** reports



**Getting a lift** Work in two of the nine clusters in Bhendi Bazaar has begun. In the 19th century, the Bazaar housed labourers working in the harbour of Old Bombay. The colloquial pronunciation of Behind the Bazaar (Crawford Market) became Bhendi Bazaar. PHILA NORONHA

There is verve in Bhendi Bazaar's air through the day. As early morning progresses to noon, the market situated in the heart of South Mumbai, turns into a shopping hub selling everything from carpets, antiques and lace, to apparels, hardware and religious paraphernalia. The sun beats down and labourers take a nap under the adjacent JJ Hospital flyover. Street vendors hail potential clients amidst vehicular noise and smoke. By evening, the Bazaar's legendary street food will take over, as people stream in to tinkle their taste buds with kebabs, cakes and baids (egg) rolls.

One of the sweetmeat shops here is the over half-century-old Tawakkal, which gets patrons from far and wide. But in a couple of months, Tawakkal will be knocked down and will be replaced by a gleaming high rise. But Tawakkal's owner, Shabbir Tawakkal is not worried.

The over 125-year-old Bhendi Bazaar, which is crumbling under poor infrastructure, will get a face lift that will be the largest of its kind for an urban neighbourhood in India. Popularly known as Bhendi Bazaar redevelopment, this ambitious project spread across 16.5 acres, will knock down 250 dilapidated buildings, 1,250 shops and relocate 3,200 families.

They will be replaced by 17 new buildings, divided into nine self-sustained sub clusters, accompanied by modern infrastructure such as wide roads. And yes, the neighbourhood will become greener. At present, Bhendi Bazaar has a solitary tree.

"We are looking forward to the redevelopment of Bhendi Bazaar. Like they say, change is the only constant and this place badly needs it both in terms of infrastructure and aesthetics," says the 57-year-old Shabbir, who has spent most of his life in the Bazaar. "Our next generation needs and demands a better life-style. We have immense faith in our spiritual head and we are looking forward to the redevelopment of this area," he adds.

Like Shabbir, at least 75 per cent of the families in Bhendi Bazaar belong to the Dawoodi Bohra and Memon communities. The rest are trading communities from Gujarat and Kutch regions. In 2008, the Dawoodi Bohra community's then spiritual leader, the late Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin, suggested bringing down the Bazaar, except for its holy sites. Instead, he proposed, skyscrapers befitting modern day living would be built.

The community is now led by his son, Syedna Mufaddal Saifuddin. The Bazaar also houses the Raudat Tahera, a mausoleum where the late Syedna and his father are buried.

As luck would have it, in 2009, the Maharashtra Government announced a cluster redevelopment policy seeking to redevelop the city in clusters rather than single buildings.

This opportunity to redevelop and rejuvenate the Bhendi Bazaar by way of Urban Renewal policy led to the estab-

lishment of Saifee Burhani Upliftment Trust (SBUT).

The Trust oversees the Saifee Burhani Upliftment Project (SBUP) commonly known as Bhendi Bazaar Redevelopment Project, which became a pilot, and also one of the biggest projects for urban rejuvenation of one of Mumbai's oldest and dying inner city areas.

"For us it is not just about building and resettling people from their old set up to a new one," says Abbas Master, CEO, Saifee Burhani Upliftment Trust. "The vision of the project is to provide residential and commercial tenants with an environment that fosters human growth in all aspects - spiritual, intellectual, social and financial."

If successful, the project could well become a blueprint for similar initiatives across urban India, most of which shares the problems that the Bazaar suffers from. The project, which was picked by Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a showcase smart city project in July 2015, is being keenly watched by both government and private agencies as it could set a precedent for urban renewal projects in India.

But to succeed, quite a few variables have to sync together.

#### The legacy

In 1889, Bhendi Bazaar formed part of the inner-city areas that housed labourers working in the harbour of Old Bombay, as Mumbai was known then. Proximity to the then elite market, Crawford market, gave better business prospects for the area.

The colloquial pronunciation of Behind the Bazaar (Crawford Market) became Bhendi Bazaar. Businessmen from various communities like Dawoodi Bohra, Memons, Gujarati and Sindhi, saw the opportunity in the area's strategic location and moved to Bhendi Bazaar.

As time passed, the buildings in the area were developed in the *chawl* or dormitory fashion. Initially designed to house bachelors who had moved to the city to

earn a livelihood, the *chawls* were soon full with entire families.

But as is oft in the rest of the country, neglect by building owners, inefficient policies and increasing population pressure resulted in the Bazaar's gradual decline. Built for another era, the 150-year-old infrastructure is deprived of footpaths or roads navigable by cars and doesn't even have a system for waste disposal.

According to Maharashtra Area and Housing Development Authority (MHADA), more than 80 of the 250 buildings are worn-out and have been declared dilapidated, unfit for living, MHADA also noted that over 70 per cent of the inhabitants are living as tenants in an area of less than 350 sq feet.

While the new Bhendi Bazaar promises to change all that, one of the most important tasks has been to ensure the rights of its residents. According to SBUT's Master, the Trust has bought 87 per cent of the buildings and is in the process of acquiring the rest, an excruciatingly arduous task. So far the Trust has demolished over 70 buildings.

Real estate developers who did not want to be quoted said that the trust is still facing resistance from building owners who are clamouring for more money. The area currently commands a price of ₹20,000-22,000 per sq feet for residential properties. "There are many chal-

lenges and we are taking legal recourse and hope to sought it out soon. Our aim is up-liftment of our people and not looking at the commercial angle. At the end of the day we were dealing with human beings and convincing each and everyone to be a part of the mission has been a humongous task," says Master.

The area has a prevalent system called *pagadi*, where tenancy rights are bought and sold by paying building owners a 33 per cent transfer fee to update official records. But in Bhendi Bazaar, several houses have no legal backing.

Help has come from MHADA. "We are helping long-term tenants support their tenancy claims and also providing the legal documents for staking their claims," says S S Zende, CEO and VP, MHADA.

"We are fast-tracking approvals and clearances needed for the project on a priority basis," he said.

The SBUT, on its part, has created teams which helped tenants with the certification, including obtaining old records and even having their homes measured, and are using old utility bills as record. A few of the tenancy rights are in dispute, and resolution is happening through the legal route.

According to the government rules, residents of a redevelopment area must receive the equivalent space in the new project that they had in their old build-

ings - and new units must be a minimum of 300 sq ft even if they previously lived in smaller houses.

"We went over the Government mandate and decided to make flats measuring 350-sq-feet. Families with bigger units will get 10 per cent more space than they previously had," says Master.

#### Community-led

The local communities are putting their weight behind the project. The project entails an investment of ₹4,000 crore, which is being largely funded through donations by businessmen from the Dawoodi Bohra community. There is no equity or loans involved in the whole project, said Master.

He adds that inputs were taken from various stakeholders, including residents, commercial tenants and expert consultants to shape the master plan and design the project.

In all, 13 towers will rehabilitate residential tenants and businesses, while four are proposed for free sale, which will be managed by the Trust. The trust also has an in-house architect team and is selling free-hold spaces, ensuring money flow.

Prof Uday Athavankar, architect and Faculty, Industrial Design Centre, IIT-Bombay says, "a key aspect to project like this is to establish the tenancy and also create a sustainable development. Unless there is a strong business model to the project, it may not be a sustainable model."

The developments are being followed by Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis. The Bhendi Bazaar redevelopment is one among 15 key infrastructure projects that the Chief Minister is monitoring in his 'war room'. He recently informed the legislative council that the project would take 8-10 years to be completed.

The Bhendi Bazaar project could become the key to de-congesting Mumbai, where half of the 19 million population lives in slums. "Vertical development is

the way forward particularly to de-congest a city like Mumbai whose infrastructure is crumbling each day. What you need is clear political direction and proper planning to ensure a smooth redevelopment," says Zubin Cooper, CEO, Bentel Associates Realty Design Consultants.

But not all are enthused by the makeover plan. Rattan, a hawker retailing bags and textiles fears that post the makeover, the Bazaar may become a no-entry zone with limited access to vendors like him.

SBUT's Master allays the concern, and says that the area will never be gated community. As per various estimates there are over 200 vendors in the neighbourhood.

#### In transit

In May, the project received nod to start construction. According to Master, the first and third sub cluster projects have been commenced and more than 1,700 families and over 450 businesses have been moved from the area.

To house the commercial establishments that have moved, the Trust set up Mufaddal Shopping Arcade (MSA) in Bhendi Bazaar. Businessmen can either opt to move their businesses in one of the commercial transit camps built by the trust or even move to a rented place. The rent will be reimbursed by the trust until they get possession of their own properties.

Similarly, a residential complex has been built at Anjeerwadi (Mazgaon) comprising of 950 units, and about 1,100 transit units have been availed from MHADA at Sewri, to provide temporary accommodation to the transit residents of Bhendi Bazaar. The Trust has also acquired additional 450 transit housing units from MHADA at Sion. Each house is furnished and includes a kitchen, attached toilet, geysers and a washing machine.

MHADA's Zende says that transit residences in Anjeerwadi were built in 90 days. "The transit camps have solar panels and a sewage treatment plant, and 24 hours water supply."

Hussain Javudwala, 54, who recently moved into one of the transit homes in Mazgaon, is nostalgic about his previous home. But his family of five, who have been living in a 250-sq-foot low ceiling house in Bhendi Bazaar, now doesn't have to wake up early to use the common toilet, or fill water, as was the norm before. Both, a toilet and water tap, have been provided inside the house in the transit camp. This model, says Javudwala, will continue in the new houses at Bhendi Bazaar.

Changes have come in other forms too. Murtaza Sadriwala, of the SBUT, points to the increasing number of cars in the transit camps. "The lanes in the Bazaar were so narrow that cars could not have entered".

For the likes of Javudwala, this could be the start of a new way of life.

#### The change

Post the redevelopment, slated to be completed by 2019, residents will catapult from tenancy status to ownership

Out of the 20,000 residents living in Bhendi Bazaar, 70 per cent live as tenants in an area of less than 300 sq ft for each family

The entire Bhendi Bazaar area has just one tree. Post development, it will get nearly 700 trees

Raudat Tahera, a mausoleum is at Bhendi Bazaar's heart

Most residents are Dawoodi Bohra Muslims, a small, tight-knit Shia sect



**The present** In a few years, life in the Bazaar, known for its food, will no longer be the same. PHILA NORONHA



**The future** A digital representation of the Bazaar, after the redevelopment