

MARKET MAKEOVER

A Dawoodi Bohra trust is redeveloping the grubby and crumbling Bhendi Bazaar into swanky high-rises

By M.G. Arun

It's evening in Bhendi Bazaar, one of the most crowded markets in South Mumbai. On either side of the narrow, stone-paved lanes where men, women, children and motorcycles jostle for space, are old, dark and dilapidated buildings, some of them more than a century old. Clothes have been hung out to dry on the wooden-railed balconies. On the ground floor are shops that sell everything from sweets to fruit and clothes to hardware. The aroma of freshly cooked mutton pulao wafts in the air. Of the 100-year-old, five-storey Ibrahim Nooruddin building on Guzar Street, only the ground and mezzanine floors still stand. The building is being demolished for it comes under Cluster 1 of the grandiose redevelopment plan of Bhendi Bazaar in nine clusters. The Saifee Burhani Upliftment Trust (SBUT), a Dawoodi Bohra organisation, is rebuilding 16.5 acres of rectangular area off the bustling Mohammed Ali Road, three kilometres from the scenic Victoria Terminus railway station. Nearly 250 old buildings will be demolished to make

CREAKING CENTURY-
OLD BUILDINGS IN
NARROW STREETS ARE
BEING DEMOLISHED TO
CONSTRUCT TOWERS

space for 17 high-rises. Shamsir Pardawala, 62, runs the Parada Machinery Corporation, which trades in sheet metal, from Ibrahim Nooruddin building. The business was set up by his father in 1955. The sound of hammers knocking on stone can be heard as he talks about the redevelopment. "We support it, since these buildings are very old and the space we operate in is congested," he says, sitting in one of very tiny chairs in a small cabin that one has to stoop to enter. In a month or two, he will have to shift his office to the transit building, Mufaddal Shopping Arcade, in nearby Noorbaug. After four years, he hopes to move into a 500 sq ft space in a tower in Cluster 1 of redeveloped Bhendi Bazaar, which got its name from the vegetable—bhendi, or okra—that was grown in the area.

Like Pardawala, half of the 1,200 shopkeepers in Bhendi Bazaar belong to the Dawoodi Bohra community led by 103-year-old Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin, the 52nd Dai or spiritual leader. After the British developed Bombay, the Bohra and Memon traders from Gujarat began to settle in the area close to Mohammed Ali Road. Bohras are a close-knit sub-sect of Ismaili Shia Muslims which number one million worldwide. Around 18,000 Bohras live in the area marked for redevelopment, forming three-fourth of the 3,200 families that inhabit the area.

The entire project, announced in 2009 and expected to cost Rs 4,000 crore, is being funded by SBUT. All houses will have a minimum area of 350 sq ft. Many houses now are just 100 sq ft. "Initially, we were planning to provide a minimum 320 sq ft area, but when we took the project to the Syedna, he insisted that it should be at least 350," says SBUT CEO Abbas Master, a civil engineer and a former Wockhardt executive. He says the project is planned to improve the living conditions of the entire population in the earmarked area, not just the Bohras.

Boosted by the Maharashtra government's cluster redevelopment policy, SBUT has so far acquired more than 85 per cent of the buildings, received consent of more than 70 per cent residents, and demolished 20 buildings. Demolition of 10 more is on and permission



AN IMPRESSION OF THE AREA IN BHENDI BAZAAR (INSET) AFTER THE MAKEOVER

for another 77 has been procured. More than 1,200 families have been rehabilitated in transit colonies such as the Saifee Burhani Park with 750 rooms in nearby Anjeerwadi.

The 17 towers to come up will rise from south to north to catch wind from the sea. The tallest of the 17 towers will have about 65 floors. In an area bereft of any green cover, SBUT plans to plant 500 trees. The main roads will be 16-metre wide, with sidewalks and parking lots. Each self-sustained cluster will have rainwater harvesting and water recycling facilities, sewage treatment plants and solar panels.

However, a few experts feel the project would tear the social fabric. "Residents in the area have bonded for decades. Most of them live and work in the same area. That lifestyle will see a big change," says Mustansir Dalvi, a professor of architecture at Sir JJ College in nearby Dhobi Talao. Opening up the area to commercial development would lead to gentrification since high prices of land would attract only the well-heeled, he says. "By going in for cluster development, the government is ignoring other alternatives. Old and precarious buildings could have been brought down individually," he says.

But others say every redevelopment has its own pain. "There was much opposition to Singapore's redevelopment, but I don't think anyone is complaining now," says Niranjan Hiranandani, MD of Hiranandani Constructions, a top Mumbai-based developer. Any redevelopment in the area, where buildings often collapse, is welcome, he adds. In the last three years, more than 170 people have died in at least 11 incidents of building collapse.

Conscious of quality, SBUT chose international tendering. It awarded the project to Mumbai-based Mandviwala Qutub and Associates as master plan-

ners and architects and US-based Perkins Eastman International as consulting architect. As much as 80 per cent of the redeveloped property will be given back to the original owners, the residents and the shopkeepers, while the rest will be sold in the open market.

The daily life of Bohras revolves around Raudat Tahera, the 40-year-old mausoleum that stands at the heart of Bhendi Bazaar. The entire Quran is inscribed on its walls in gold. The structure was built in the memory of the 52nd Dai's father, Syedna Taher Saifuddin, who passed away in 1965. Shaikh Abdeali Bhanpurawala, secretary

of SBUT, says that due to people's faith in the Dai, it was easy to get the mandatory consent of 70 per cent of the residents for redevelopment.

As the evening darkens, the streets around Raudat Tahera get busier. People arrive to offer prayers. Men, women and children bow down before the marble grave of the 51st Dai. Outside, the din grows louder, and the smells from the eateries grow tantalisingly stronger. In four years, all this is going to change, as the 150-year-old market morphs into a modern township—for the better, the residents hope.

Follow the writer on Twitter @MGarun1

VERTICAL FACELIFT

Funded by Saifee Burhani Upliftment Trust, the Bhendi Bazaar revamp will cost Rs 4,000 crore



- The area to be redeveloped in Bhendi Bazaar has 1,200 shops and 3,200 homes.
- 250 existing structures will be replaced by 17 towers, rising from south to north to catch wind from the sea. The tallest will have about 65 floors.
- Residents will get a minimum 350 sq ft area to live in. Some of the homes now measure just 100 sq ft.
- More than 1,200 families have already been rehabilitated in transit colonies.
- Main roads will be 16 metres wide, with sidewalks and parking spaces.
- The area will be redeveloped into nine clusters.
- Each self-sustained cluster will have rainwater harvesting and water recycling facilities, sewage treatment plants and solar panels.
- 500 trees for the area which has no green cover now.
- 80 per cent of the redeveloped property will be given back to the owners while the rest will be sold.