

MUMBAI MULTIPLEX | DHAMINI RATNAM

# Eat, pray, live

**Bhendi Bazar, an 'iftar' destination that is facing redevelopment, celebrated Ramzan amid disbelief and hope**

As the rains lacerated Mumbai during the month of Ramzan, life in Bhendi Bazar continued as always. Pedestrians hurried past makeshift stalls selling snazzy *kurtas* and glittering *niqabs* on the traffic-clogged Mohammed Ali Road that snakes below the JJ Flyover.

Some would have turned into the squelchy Yakub Lane, thinking no doubt of its nightly transformation into gastronomic heaven during the holy month, along with Raudat Tahera Street, Pakmodia Street and 1st and 2nd Cooper Streets to its south.

Some would have made their way to the five mosques in the neighbourhood; others would have hurried home to one of the many buildings that date back to pre-independence.

It may seem that this is how it has always been, but the area—inhabited largely by Dawoodi Bohras, a sub-sect of Shia Muslims, and a smaller population of Sunni Muslims—has been in the process of transition since 2009.

The Saifee Burhani Upliftment Trust, a Dawoodi Bohra trust, undertook to redevelop 16.5 acres of Bhendi Bazar through the state's cluster redevelopment scheme. The plot, bounded by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Road to the south, Maulana Shaukat Ali Road to the north, Mohammed Ali Road to the east and Mutton Street (home to the famous Chor Bazaar) to the west, once had over 250 buildings. Of these 225 had long-residing tenants who paid a "cess" or repair tax to the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (Mhada). The trust proposed to redevelop the plot in nine clusters.

Since then, it has demolished 50 buildings, and is working on 10 more, "many of which were declared dangerous to live in by Mhada", says Abbas Master, the trust's chief executive officer.

The going has been slow, partly because obtaining



government clearances—there are over 50 required—is a time-consuming process. Then there's the issue of residents who haven't quite come around to the idea of what will no doubt be a massive change.

Like most redevelopment projects in Mumbai, a city where realty rates rise steadily every year, making it difficult to find affordable housing, this one too has become a site where the prayers, frustrations, hopes and desires of residents jostle for space. Over 1,250 businesses will be affected by the redevelopment, and most swivel between the axes of hope and disbelief.

Hatim Ali, the 60-year-old proprietor of Taj Ice Cream, the city's oldest handmade ice-cream manufacturer, is one of the hopefuls. "This is the only solution," he says, referring to the impending redevelopment. "The buildings have lived their life. This had to happen." Ali will be given a shop of the same size in the building that will come up in place of his 125-year-old shop.

Other shop owners are not too sure of the plan. The sexagenarian owner of a hardware store that opened a few years before independence, refused to enter into an agreement with the trust. "It's not that I don't want this place to be redeveloped," he says, requesting anonymity. "I simply don't know what we will do in the interim period, while our building comes down and a new one comes up. We have families to feed, and the project is going very slowly." Together with his brothers, he hopes to hold out

for as long as possible.

"What about the shops at Chor Bazaar? The location is world-famous. How can they just wrap up and leave?" he wonders.

The trust plans to build 17 high-rises ranging from 15-60 storeys. A complex of the tallest four buildings, which will come up at the northern end of the plot, will be sold to make money for the project; the remaining buildings will accommodate the residents of the demolished structures. Each building is expected to have a ground-plus-two-storey commercial space for all shop owners.

In the interim, says Master, another commercial shopping complex in Mazgaon—a few kilometres away—was offered to them. This transit camp for shops, however, hasn't achieved full occupancy yet. "Many shop owners are waiting for the government clearances to come in before shutting down."

Business is one of the defining features of this habitat, which has developed organically to meet the needs of its residents. The famous Chor Bazaar, located along Mutton Street, is part of the city's mythscape, as much as the famous eateries that line the by-lanes, such as Haji Tikka Corner and Tawakkal Sweets.

The trust also built a transit camp in Anjirwadi for residents who moved out when the demolitions began. It has also taken 1,000 flats on rent from Mhada's transit camp in Ghodapdeo. Both locations are a few kilometres from Bhendi Bazar.



DEVENDRA PARAB/MINT



DEVENDRA PARAB/MINT



Mariya Shabbir Sasdanwala, 42, has no time to indulge in nostalgia. Her family was one of the first to leave Galabhai *chawl*, where she lived for 19 years after marriage, with her in-laws, husband and his cousin. In 2011, the dilapidated structure was declared dangerous by Mhada—"I've fallen down those stairs several times," she says—and the family moved the same year to Anjirwadi.

Sasdanwala has started a tour company "for oldies". "Only women, above 58 years of age," she clarifies. Her husband, who runs a hardware store, helps her set up these tours by negotiating with the men on the other end of the line. "Insha Allah, next month, 45 of us will go to Aurangabad," says Sasdanwala,

who recently conducted a 15-day tour to Kashmir.

"We have no qualms waiting for the apartments to come up," says Fakhruddin Pipermintwala, another resident of the same transit camp. The 32-year-old supplier of safety equipment grew up in Mohamedi Manzil in Bhendi Bazar, where his great-grandfather bought a room when he migrated to Mumbai in the early 1940s. Five years ago, in July, Pipermintwala's son, Ebrahim, was born in that house.

The child has faint recollections of playing in the loft of their one-room home. The family, however, vacated the building in 2012 and it was soon demolished, alongside Tayebi Manzil, to which it was connected.

"We all lived like one big family," says Pipermintwala,

**Next chapter:** (clockwise from above) The trust's Anjirwadi transit camp; Fakhruddin Pipermintwala's wife, Zainab (right), and son in their transit camp home; Hatim Ali, owner of the 120-year-old Taj Ice Cream outlet; an aerial view of the plot up for cluster redevelopment in Bhendi Bazar; and the trust's model of what the area will look like after redevelopment.

who recalls playing cricket and football with friends on the common mezzanine floor between the two buildings. Now, they are all living separately—his closest friends moved homes and shops after vacating the building.

All the same, Pipermintwala isn't sorry. For him the wait will only lead to something better. The biggest advantage of moving, he says, is a quieter neighbourhood.

Already, over 1,500 people have been moved out of their homes, while another 18,000 still need to be relocated. "We will shift them out once work on those phases begins," says Master.

Not all of them, however, are looking forward to the transition. On 11 July, a beam fell inside Galabhai *chawl*. Though no one was hurt, by midnight officials from the state and municipal government, fire brigade and the trust convinced one of the two families still residing in the building to move out.

But the Masalawalas, the second family, continue to live inside the crumbling structure, though demolition work has begun on the side where the collapse occurred. The wall outside their house bears a thick sheaf of official papers from the municipal corporation, asking them to vacate the building. They have left those notices untouched.

dhamini.r@livemint.com

