

# Mumbai's housing makeover

A model for urban planners

## Men's Style Special

John Hurt casts monochrome tailoring in a new light

# FT Weekend

Middle East edition

Lunch with the FT Thaksin Shinawatra | Life & Arts Putin, power and passion | Person in the news Demis Hassabis

SATURDAY 12 MARCH / SUNDAY 13 MARCH 2016

## Faithful lifted up

A makeover of Mumbai's Bhendi Bazaar will rehouse 20,000 people, mainly Shia Muslims, in new high-rises – offering a model for urban planners. By Amy Kazmin

Mumbai's Bhendi Bazaar, known for its tempting street market food and eclectic shops jammed below decrepit homes, is typical of many colonial-era parts of India's cities. Its 150-year-old, four-storey buildings, with their steep wooden staircases, were originally designed to house male migrant workers in small dorm-like rooms, with a single communal lavatory on each floor. More recently, multi-generational families have been crammed into the buildings' tiny rooms, many measuring less than 200 sq ft. Mumbai's state-controlled room rents have been frozen for decades. This has left building owners unwilling to invest in maintenance, so time and the annual monsoon rains have taken a heavy toll.

In one critical aspect, Bhendi Bazaar is different from other similar areas. Most residents are Dawoodi Bohra Muslims, a small, tight-knit Shia sect, whose members are known for their embrace of secular education and their business and professional acumen. In 2009, the community's then 98-year-old spiritual leader, Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin, made a radical proposal. Bhendi Bazaar, he declared, should be demolished, except for its holy sites. In its place should arise gleaming new skyscrapers to provide modern living suitable for his upwardly mobile flock.

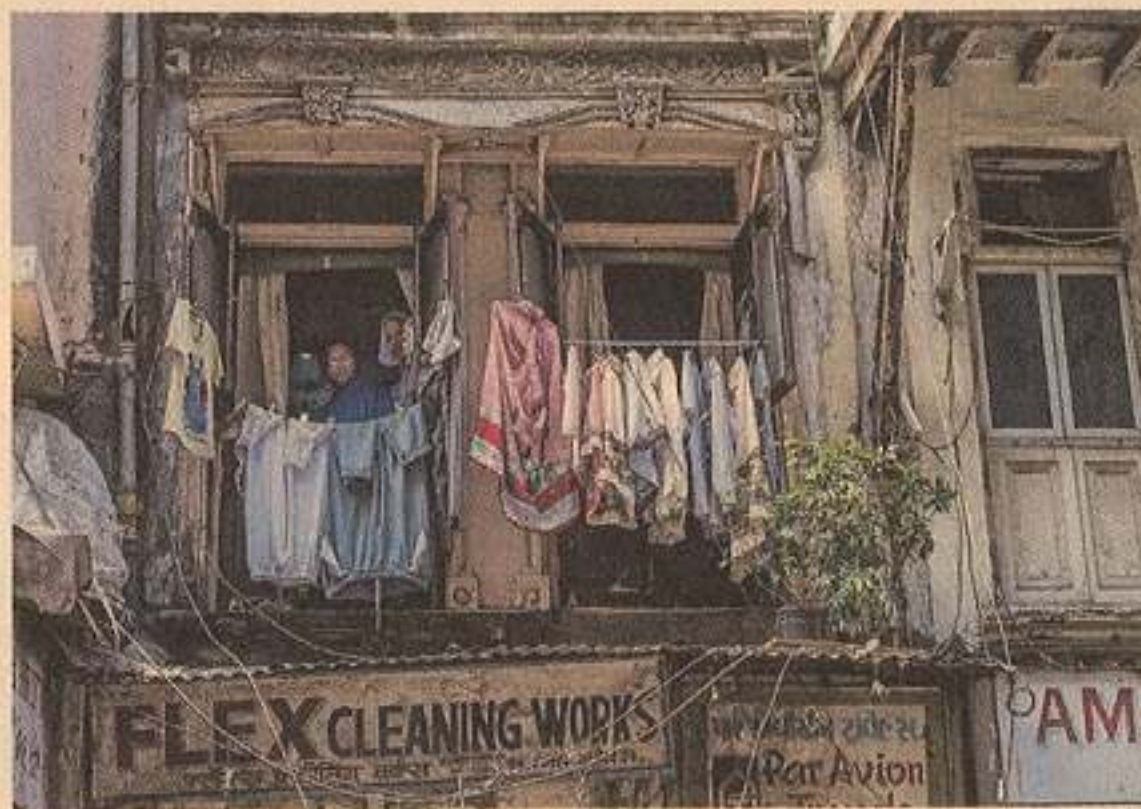
Razing several city blocks is a big ask in a city with powerful tenants' rights and where demolishing even a single decrepit building can be stalled for years by determined holdouts. The 16.5 acres the Bohra cleric had in his sights comprised 250 low-rise buildings, each with different owners, and housing about 20,000 people and 1,250 businesses.

Yet today, the redevelopment of Bhendi Bazaar is well under way. The Saifee Burhani Upliftment Trust – an arm of the Bohra clerical hierarchy's community administration, or *dawat* – has already acquired 215 of the 250 buildings. Of these, 70 have been demolished, with 1,700 families installed in purpose-built temporary accommodation, which is being provided for free until their new homes are ready. It is the largest urban redevelopment to take place in India, or, as trust officials claim, in any democratic country.

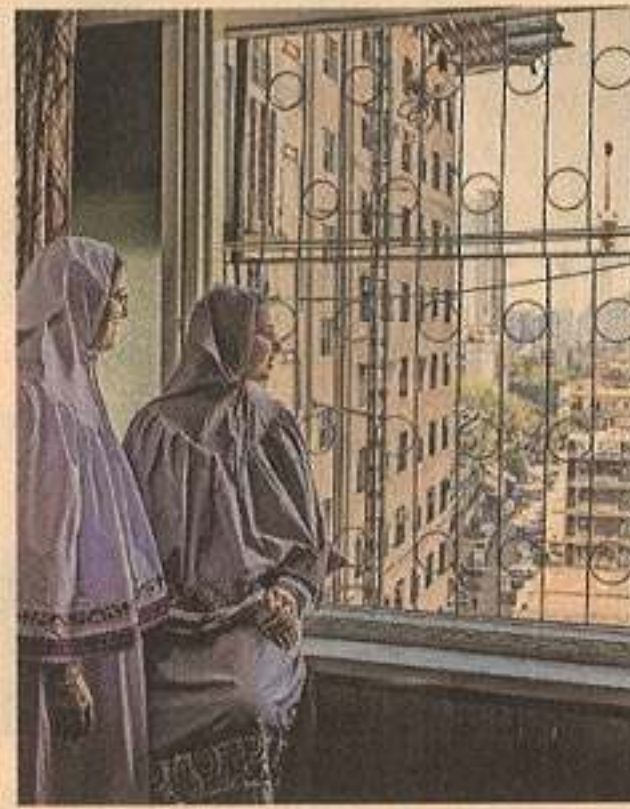
With construction just starting, the project – blessed by India's prime minister Narendra Modi – is being



A street in Bhendi Bazaar, Mumbai — Photographs: Atul Loke



Washing hanging from Duriya Mhowwala's one-room home



Fatema and Durriyan Tankiwala



Temporary housing provided free to residents waiting for their new homes

touted as a potential model for other dilapidated urban neighbourhoods. It still faces resistance from a clutch of building owners, demanding more money to sell, but the trust hopes the government will help it tackle this hurdle. Yet it is doubtful that the project could even have come this far without the pervasive influence of the Syedna – a dynastic leader formally called the Dai al-Mutlaq – on his flock.

**"The only reason we agreed to do it so quickly was because of His Holiness. We have a lot of faith in him"**

Faithful Bohras revere the Dai as a spiritual and temporal authority. When they come of age, they swear allegiance to him in all things, including rendering their property to his service if asked. Failure to obey, or challenging the Dai, can lead to strict social boycotts and exclusion from holy sites, even burial grounds. Given such devotional fervour, it was not hard for a trust chaired by Burhanuddin's eldest son, Shahzada Qaidjohar Ezzuddin, to secure support for the cleric's dramatic vision. About 70 per cent of residents in Bhendi Bazaar are Bohras and 65 per cent of the buildings – and half the businesses – are Bohra-owned. "Many times the Syedna says we should do something that we all look and say, 'This is completely impos-

sible – we will never, never, never be able to do that," says Adil Zainulbhai, former chair of McKinsey India, the consultancy, and a member of the trust board. "And somehow it happens. The faith of the community is so strong. If he says, 'Do it,' it will happen. People put [in] an enormous amount of effort and somehow make it happen."

It also helps that the project will give Bhendi Bazaar residents more private living space and modern amenities such as lifts and private toilets. Government rules say residents of a redevelopment area must receive the equivalent space in the new project that they had in their old buildings – and new units must be a minimum of 300 sq ft, even if residents' previous homes were smaller. However, the trust is improving on that figure. The smallest new unit in the development will measure 350 sq ft. Families with bigger units will get 10 per cent more space than they had previously as an "incentive" to move. In contrast with commercial builders – of whom most Indians are wary – the trust is expected to fulfil its promises.

"The only reason we agreed to do it so quickly was because of His Holiness," says Fatema Tankiwala, a 22-year-old law student, whose family was the first to sell the building they owned, and did so without haggling over the price. "We have a lot of faith in him . . . He says it's for our betterment, so we said 'OK, we'll go for it.'"

Continued on page 12



To watch the video of Amy Kazmin in Bhendi Bazaar, please visit [ft.com/bhendi](http://ft.com/bhendi)