

Mumbai's Dhobi Ghat Slums - A Trade-Off Between Living Standards and Livelihood

The complications faced by Mumbai's largest washing colony exceeds merely sanitation and health issues

By Anushree Jonko



Figure 1 : Women of Dhobi Ghat ironing and folding washed clothes. (Credits: Anushree Jonko)

The smell of freshly washed clothes fills the lanes even before one properly enters the labyrinthine alleys of Mahalaxmi Dhobi Ghat - the world's largest outdoor laundromat. This laundromat serves as a tourist spot also where people from all over the world come to witness the efficiency of these dhobis and how they manage to live and work at these constricted spaces. Dhobi Ghat came into existence during the British Raj around 1890 and still goes on with as much fervour. Located under the Mahalaxmi Bridge in South Mumbai, the Dhobi Ghat can be classified as an urban slum where people from all over India have come to earn their livelihood and settle down.

The smell of detergent breaks the monotony of the usual stench of the city. The air smelled crisp, clean and fresh. But scents can be deceiving too. In a colony of over 7000 “dhobis or washers”, the sanitation does not justify their profession.



Figure 2 : The shanties of washermen right next to the washing pens making them extremely vulnerable to the toxic chemicals of detergent. (Credits: Anushree Jonko)

“Hum poore shahar ka mal saaf karte hain lekin humara mal saaf karne waala koi nahi”, (we clean the city’s dirt, but there is no one to clean for us) says Akhilesh Kumar, a 48-year-old dhobi (washer), who has been in the profession since 30 years. The living conditions of dhobis and their families in and around their congested, uncomfortable rooms are more than deplorable. There is not a single toilet inside these winding, washing pens. This community of washermen has to go out and use the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation’s (BMC) pay and use toilets. “The biggest issue here is the toilets. There are long queues in the morning and people relieve themselves in the ghat itself sometimes because it gets so unbearable”, Kumar added.



Figure 3 : People of Dhobi Ghat waiting in queues to avail Pay and Use toilets. (Credits: Anushree Jonko)

“We bathe inside the house and then wipe the floor dry”, says Meena Dewakar, a 22-year-old, who was busy helping her father out by ironing freshly washed and dried clothes. Women face more problems when it comes to toilets because unlike men, they have to be particularly cautious about their privacy. During menstruation, it becomes a serious difficulty as women have to leave the ghat and avail ‘pay and use’ toilets for which they have to pay three to five rupees for every visit.



Figure 4 : The lane where clothes are ironed. (Credits: Anushree Jonko)

Regarding the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan's toilet construction mission, the major problem that the dhobis face is the space for constructing these toilets. Even though the ghat was initially constructed just for work, it turned into a mix of workspace and household pretty soon. The washing pens or *taakis* cannot be broken to construct toilets as that would mean complete loss of business for that stone-holder. However, work has been going on for the reconstruction of dilapidated toilets, which had become dangerous for the people using it, near the dhobi ghat. The reconstruction of these toilets will make the lives of these washermen a bit less inconvenient. The most consequential health issue faced by the washermen community of Dhobi Ghat is diseases transmitted by mosquitoes. "Where there is water there will be mosquitoes. Mosquito-fogging is done by BMC but nothing changes because of the filth around this area", says Kumar. There were over 100 cases of mosquito-related diseases at Dhobi Ghat in 2019. Mumbai rains aggravate the situation as water gets logged in the winding alleys and workspaces. Sometimes the water makes way into the homes of the washermen and that adds to their already inconvenient life. Apparently, there is no solution for the water-logging because the washermen do not want to turn in their stones for reconstruction.



Figure 5 : The ghat serves as both, the workspace and living space for the washermen community. (Credits: Anushree Jonko)

Dhobi Ghat and its slum are popular tourist attractions. There is a hush-hush instance of rowdiness in this washermen community. At the entrance of the Dhobi Ghat, one would find men in clusters waiting to ambush foreign tourists. There have been cases of robbery, where tourists complain about getting their camera, jewellery and money stripped off. *“Paani mein kaam karte ho to magarmachh se panga na lo”*, (if you work in water, you should not make a foe out of crocodiles) said a resident of Dhobi Ghat who did not want to be named. The men are not part of the washermen community and come from outside but washermen from Dhobi Ghat do not want to be up in arms with them. The dhobis claim that they do not trouble them as long as they keep the goings-on confidential.

“Our job is one of mental and physical labour. Without one of these faculties, it is difficult to keep up with the profession. So after a long day’s work, alcohol is imperative for a good night’s sleep”, says Sudhir Kumar Pujari Kanujia, a 38-year-old dhobi who has been in the business for over 20 years. Rita Kumari, who was pulling out dried clothes from the clothesline, added, “Because so many of us stay in the same small room, children and adolescents are exposed to alcohol at a very young age but thankfully it does not manifest into a full-blown alcoholism issue.” According to the residents, alcoholism is not a major issue because it is more or less kept in check.

Kanujia talked fondly about his village and said that he longs to go back to his home in Uttar Pradesh. *“Ghutan sa mehsoos hota hai. Par majboori hai, paet paalna hai”* (I feel claustrophobic here. This work has become an obligation, but I have mouths to feed), he added.

On asking his 17-year-old nephew, Anshul Nirmal, about what changes he would like to make to Dhobi Ghat and his one small room home, he had only one suggestion to make - the need for more space.



Figure 6 : The narrow winding lanes in Dhobi Ghat. (Credits: Anushree Jonko)

The Dhobi Ghat with its shanty slums has become the flag bearer for a hereditary occupation. Every day lakhs of soiled clothes are brought in to wash, dry and iron and this is not just done by the “dhobi”. Women and children of all ages are seen folding clothes, taking them off the clothesline and ironing them. Although the malodour of harsh chemicals and wet soiled clothes fill their little rooms, and there is barely any hint of sunlight due to the clothes spread out to dry, the people of Dhobi Ghat take great pride in the work that they do and the place where they live. “A cleaner should always be prioritised”, said Kumar assertively.

Nowadays there are washing machines to expedite their washing which is financed by the dhobis themselves but still, a lot of work is done by manual labour and most of the washermen’s day is spent working in slimy, murky water. The livelihood of these dhobis starts and ends with inconvenience, compromise and reluctance. By choosing to be involved in a profession that cleans muck and grime, they now find themselves trading off healthy living conditions for a livelihood.



Figure 7 : Clothesline against the Mumbai evening sky. (Credits: Anushree Jonko)