

From crumbling chawls to high-rise homes

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The textile strike in early 80s marked the beginning of the bad times for over 2 lakh Mumbai families, with Lalbaug — the heart of mill-land activity and the hub of textile workers — bearing the worst brunt. Crammed in tiny one-room tenements, facing loss of income, thousands of families stared at a bleak future and lived a life of penury for more than two decades. It took the real estate boom at the turn of the century that not only transformed the landscape of Lalbaug, but also the fortunes of some of its residents. For instance, the city's first cluster development project saw the crumbling Haji Kasam Chawl making way for modern 23-storey high-rises, loaded with all the attendant amenities — and a lifestyle for more than 1000 rehabilitated families. "Our 10ftx10ft homes were so small that if two people sat down to eat food, other members of the family had to step outside. Half the family slept on lofts and privacy was unheard of," says Sanjay Gurav, Secretary of the 23-storey Vignaharta Society at Lalbaug, adding that the redevelopment came as a boon for the residents. While a small percentage of the original residents sold their new homes for high prices and settled in the suburbs, a majority of the rehabilitated residents have adjusted to life in the high-rises. "Almost 85 per cent of the original residents have stayed put," says Gurav, adding that almost all members are from the Malwan coast. The high-rises have not only given them a new lease of life in their own old neighbourhood, but also the cultural and socio-economic comfort. "Festivals like Diwali and Ganpati bring us together like the good old days; we have the best of both worlds with new homes and old neighbours," says Gurav.

The modern homes with carpet



(Left) Haji Kasam Chawl before redevelopment and (right) Vignaharta CHS after the completion of the project

area of 370 square feet not only come with nearly four-fold living space, but also bring a lifestyle that has upgraded the standard of living of the erstwhile chawl residents. "The children have enough space, the kitchen is separate from the living room and we are enjoying a self-contained, independent existence," says Nilakshi Chanwankar, who stays on the 14th floor, adding that ever since they moved into their new homes in 2012, they are able to even invite guests. "Residents with boys with marriageable age are getting proposals; today's girls don't want to stay in a chawl," says Chanwankar. Barring the elders in the family, who have lesser freedom of movement and no open doors, others have acclimatized smoothly to the new lifestyle. It only helps that the new buildings are the city's first green buildings for rehabilitation, with lifts from Switzerland and imported fire-fighting systems.

It took just one real estate project to change the fortunes of a thousand families, and a developer with strong fundamentals. "The developer completed our new building in just one year without shifting us to any transit home or uprooting us, and only after we moved in here, we gave up our ten-



ements in the chawl," says Priya Sawant, who stays on the 23rd floor at Vignaharta, citing the example of her sister who was not so fortunate with the developer who took up their chawl's redevelopment and having vacated her home, is staying on rent for the past eight years.

Even in pure real estate terms, the cluster redevelopment has brought a windfall for the chawl residents. Where the old tenements did not even fetch Rs 4 lakh till six years back, the going rate for an apartment in the new high-rise is north of Rs 1 crore. "We have not only built good homes with quality materials and amenities, but have also given the residents 10 years of free maintenance of their buildings so that they can completely settle into their new lives without any burden on their finances," says Nishant Agarwal, managing director of Avighna Group, the developer of the project, adding that cluster development is the way forward not only for central Mumbai, but even for other dense neighbourhoods across the city which would be conducive for systematic urban renewal.

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