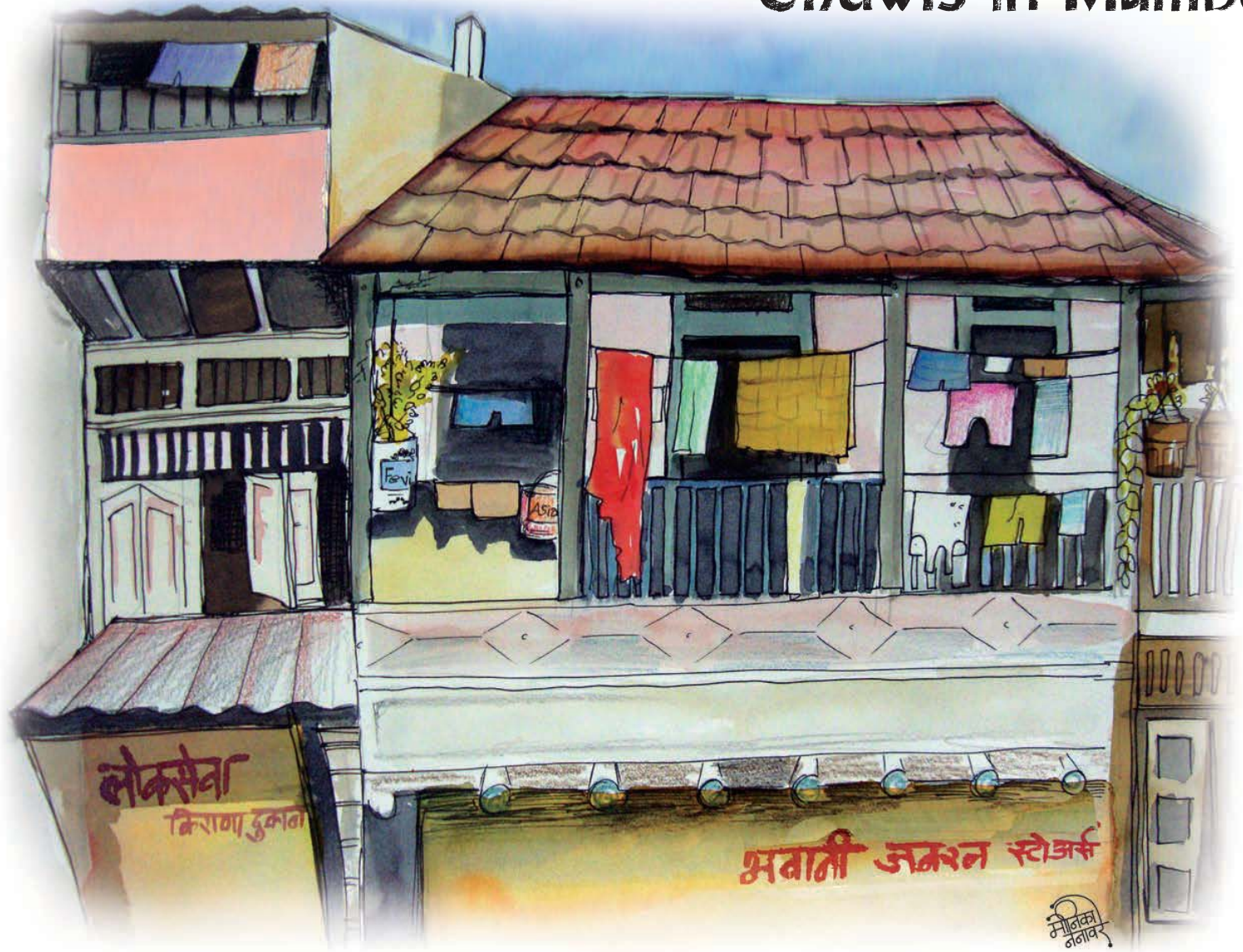


Visual ethnography on
Chawls in Mumbai



Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Prof. Nina Sabnani under whose guidance this project has been conducted. I acknowledge her inspiration and expert guidance throughout the project.

I also thank her for her support in every stage of the project.

I would also like to silently thank all Chawl residents that make it live.

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Introduction

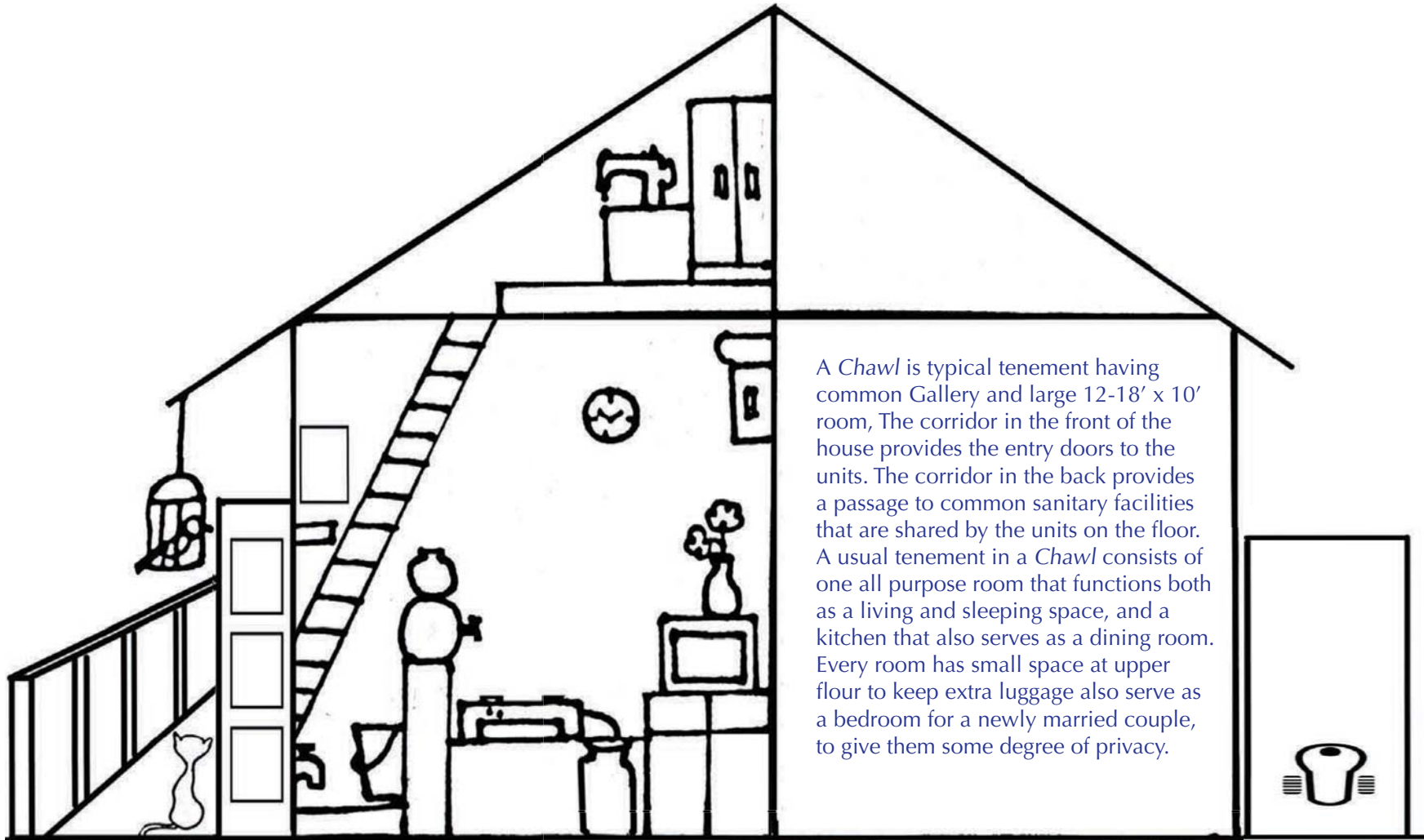
Two years back I used to stay in *Chawl*. There I got the opportunity to interact and understand the unique *Chawl* culture.

I highly appreciate by their way of living, their culture and perspective towards life. They enjoy each and every little moment of life. There are no boundaries in their minds as well as their homes. They are always with each other in all good and bad times; and are connected to each other like a big family.

There is love, laughter, hope and stunning space management. Many homes here pack in a washing machine, 165-litre fridge, television, music system, idols and images of God, and even a wall-attached fold able dining table. Tenements are so small that it is difficult for the residents to stay all day confined at home. They mostly use their home to bathe, eat food and sleep. Rest of the time they are out of the house. So groups are formed according to age and each group has its meeting place. During holidays and vacation half the day is spent in company of friends.

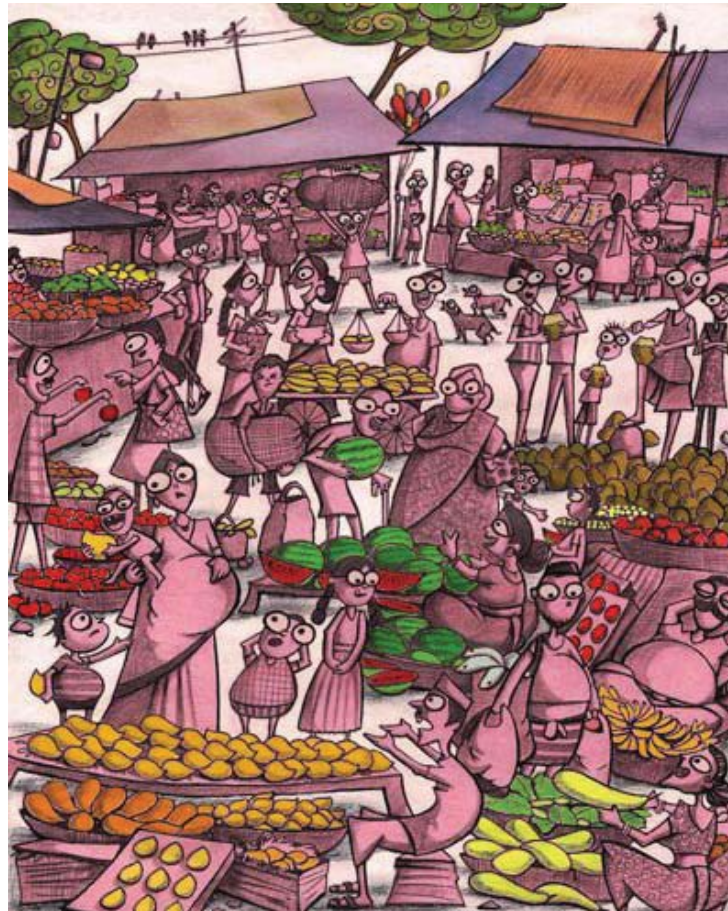
Chawls are disappearing slowly from Mumbai as more options for self-contained apartments are becoming available. Due to better transportation, people are willing to stay further away from Mumbai and commute. However, while the *Chawls* ruled, they contributed to bringing the society closer together. Public festivals were nurtured by these communities. But most of all, it was feeling of being part of one BIG family.

Architecture of Chawls



Side section of room in Chawl

Visual Ethnography



Visual ethnography is the visual documentation and studies of the people the place or the culture. It has describes their present situation surrounding and interaction with them. In this study observations are done with some structure which involves specific time for study, observation of particular person and the understanding of the nature of that subject.

This project on “chawl in Mumbai” Has been my first attempt at doing visual ethnography, I tried to observe things from subject point of view while maintain the balance of observer’s perspective and reality.

Ethnography of the “chawl in Mumbai” is done in one month’s span this project will give overall experience of observation done in this span majority in the form of image.

For me image is a direct expression of the world we live in. Of what we see and experience as participants in that world. Through my photographs and ethnographic explanations I try to provide viewers a glimpse into that reality, events in everyday routine life that we often overlook.

Methodology

One of the most common methods for collecting data in an ethnographic study is direct first-hand observation of daily participation. This can include participant observation. Another common method is interviewing, which may include conversation with different levels of form and can involve small talk to form and can involve small talk to long interview.

General

This includes getting to know people initially by roaming around the market without any intention, it allowed me to be more observant and patient, it established the basic connection with the market.

Close observation of people, product and shops

This process included using media like sketches, notes, and photographs to document the chawl again with no particular focus. This helped lay a ground for a ground for study and reflection of the subject area.

Focusing

In this process, focus of observation is more into a participation area or person. It's a beginning of interviewing and recording more insights.



Chawl

A *chawl* is one of the most iconic archetypes of Mumbai and can be found in the older parts of the city. Girgaum is well-known for having some of the most beautiful and oldest *Chawls* in Mumbai. Many of them are decrepit.

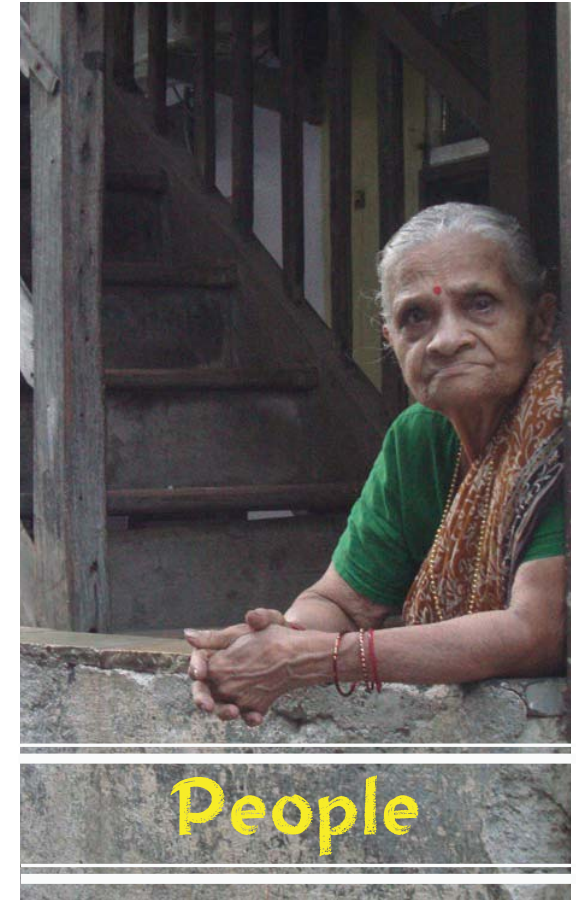
The word "*Chawl*" is a slightly anglicized version of the Marathi "*Chaal*", which means "anklet" and by extension "corridor" or, to use the Mumbai word, "gallery". The very etymology of this architectural form, then, reveals what kind of residential space it was one in which the boundary between private and public space was blurred, and communal areas were as significant as private ones.

Many *Chawls* can be found in Mumbai where they were constructed in abundance to house the people migrating to Mumbai because of its booming cotton mills and overall strong economy.

Lifestyle

People living in a *Chawl* have little privacy. Due to the close nature of the quarters, trivial news and gossip travels quickly. On the other hand, however, this intimate living situation also leads to a friendly atmosphere, with support networks akin to familial relationships. There is more togetherness, cooperation and help. If male member had to go out of Mumbai or a family member was admitted in hospital, one need not worry on home front. Neighbours would take care of children, and food was never a problem. Someone is available to attend hospital or be with you just to give company and courage. Somehow money needed for treatment was arranged. Almost everyone was invited to attend marriage. Everyone in your *Chawl* knew almost everything about you, your extended family and sometimes about your guests as well.





In the *Chawl* various kind of people live together, grow together which build strong relationships with each other. They are like a big family which stands together in good and bad times. "*Chawl*" is a place where one can find people just sitting around and chatting, children playing and budding lovers exchanging glances. The residents are from middle class. Usually the earning members are men while the women are house wives.

➤ Balcony is a best place to gossip and overview all activities in Chawl.

▼ Senior citizens playing cards at backyard of Chawl.





Cultural activity

The *Chawl* has been very active and vibrant in all the social-economical movements that has affected the lives of people in Mumbai. That includes the festive mood of Mumbai, in all the seasons, like Govinda (Gopalkala), Ganeshotsav and Divali (Dipawali). There is a Mandal in the wadi where everyone comes together to celebrate.

- World cup celebration
- ▼ Pooja programme



First festival of the year was Kite flying on 14 Jan. We would gather on terraces and it was a fun filled day. Holi was no-no as there was no water to take a bath in the afternoon. Monsoon session would start with Govinda. Ganpati festival is the pride of the place. In most Marathi homes they had Sarvajanik Festival of Ganpati and majority Gauri as well. It was 10 days of fun, music, orchestra, 3 act Drama etc. culminating in the Grand Visarjan which would start at 9 p.m. and end with immersion at Chawpatty beach at 1 am or so.





Festival competitions encourage budding artists to show their skills.

- ▶ In cultural activities children also become part of Management .
- ◀ Rangoli competition, food decoration competition have participation from all ages.

Children at Chawl

Card and carrom sessions, cricket matches in the courtyard with many spectators hanging around the common passage is a common sight when you enter these *Chawls* on a holiday. Having spent childhood in such a place makes you more versatile person compared to any present day child who spends his life in a closed flat system of *Mumbai*.





"With plenty of time on hands we indulge in many games Cricket being favorite. But we also play Kabbadi, lagori and Marbles. Carrom is very popular and Table Tennis is played on small wooden benches"
said Anu, 11 year old child who lives at Lilavati Chawl.

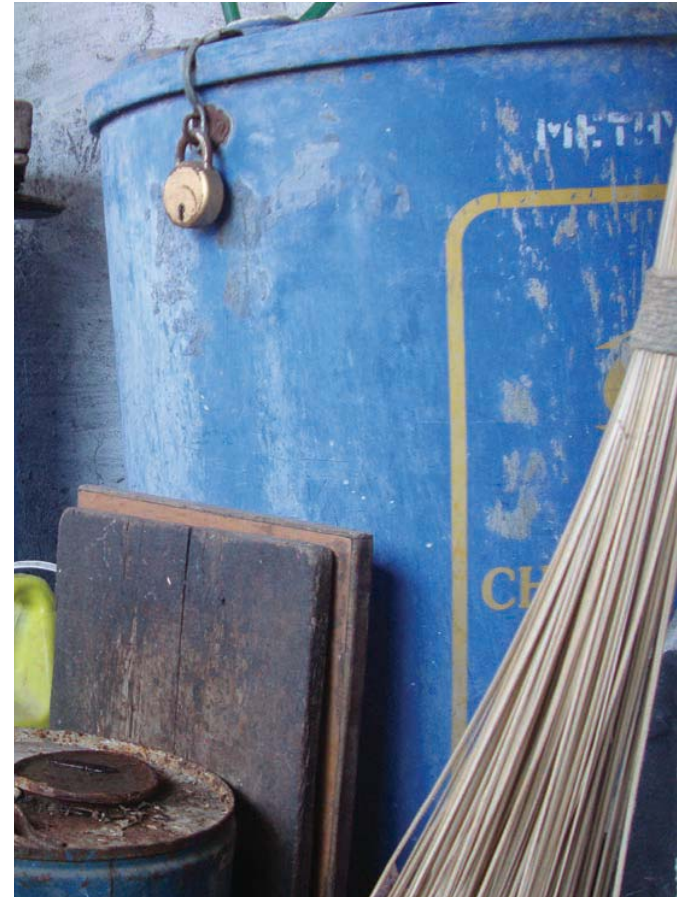




Adjustment



Back in the 120 square feet they call home, there are elderly parents, brothers, sisters and others from the immediate gene pool. All heaped under one roof in a single room, not because they are poor, but because Mumbai has very little space and too many dreams.



⚠ **Water security**

As water comes only for one hour in a day, so it is important to keep it safe from stealing.

⚡ **Kitchen+bathroom**

Upper part is used as part of kitchen while lower part is bathroom.



- ▲ Families on a floor have to share a common block of latrines, each block containing typically 4 to 5 latrines.
- At a first appearance its just wall of hall, but if you open it you will find kitchen cupboard inside.



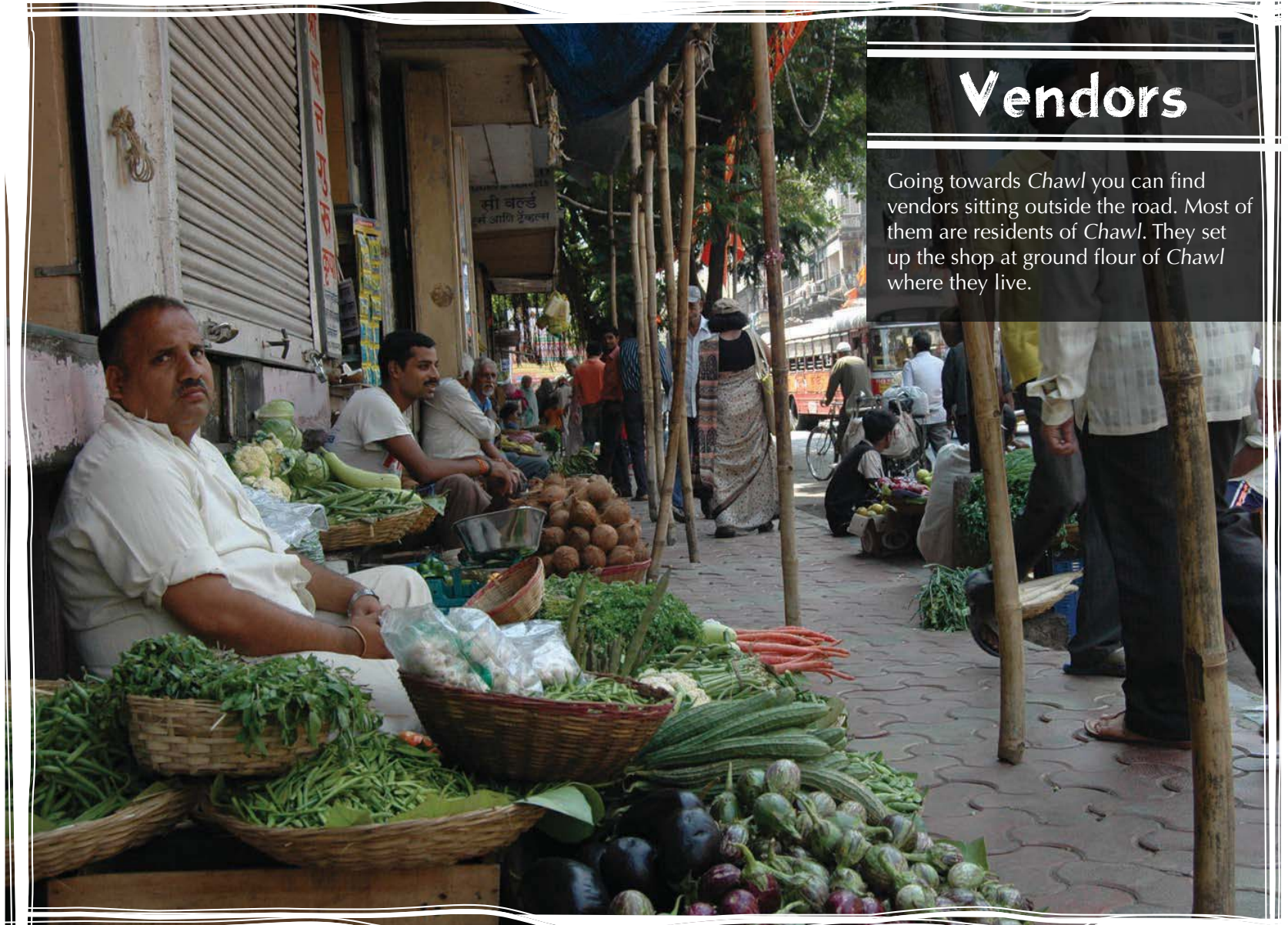


⚡ **Bulb apna apna**

Along the passage to the toilets each family install their own light connected to their home.

🔑 **Hidden cupboard**

There is common door for the cupboard and home entrance.



Vendors

Going towards *Chawl* you can find vendors sitting outside the road. Most of them are residents of *Chawl*. They set up the shop at ground floor of *Chawl* where they live.





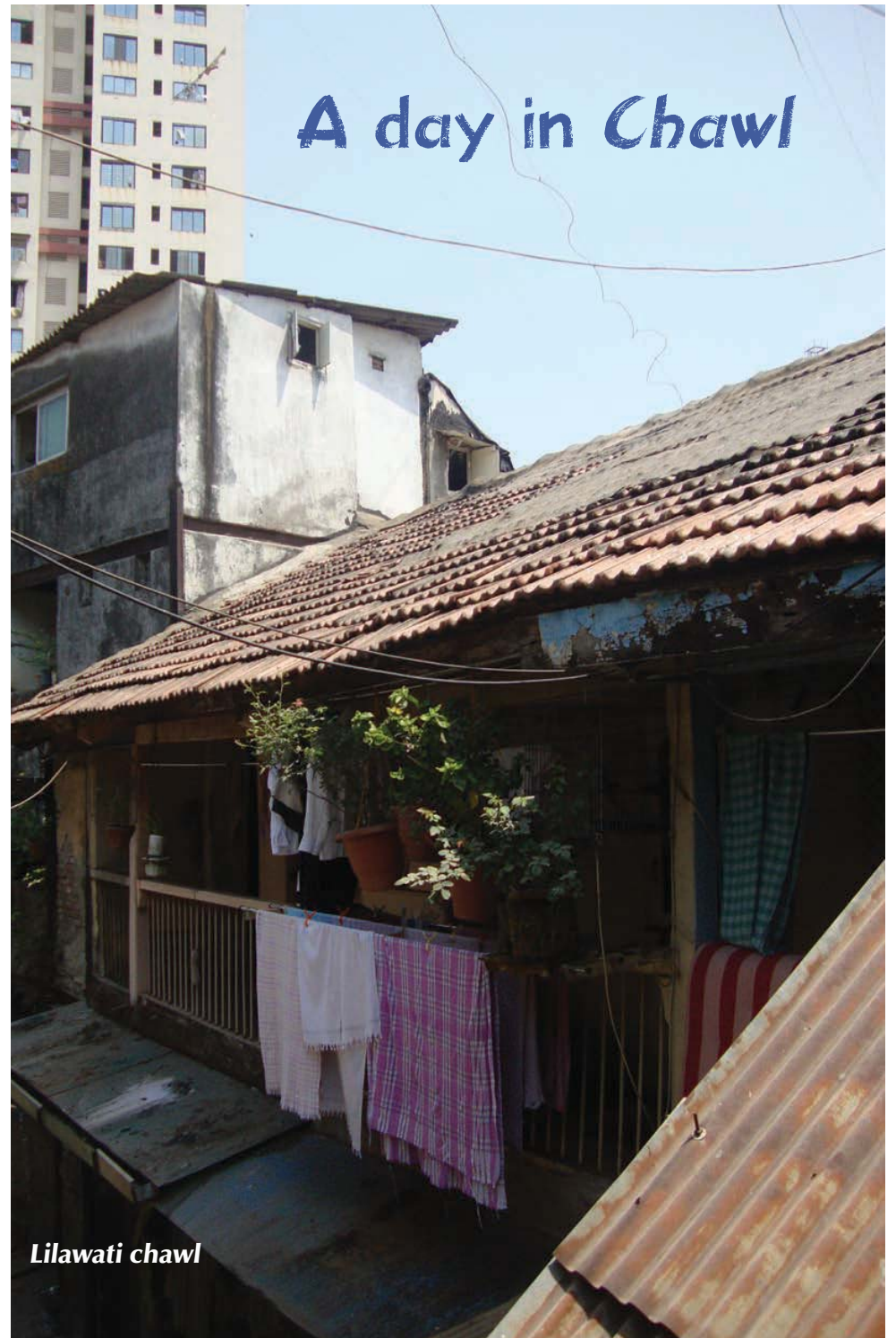


↗ Compact structure of shops near Chawl.



Owned by Mr. Zabava by zaoba wadi having 150 years old *Chawl* named “*Lilavati Chawl*” where I used to stay before two years.

Presently there are 54 families living in the inner *Chawl* who rent their houses under the ‘Pagdi system,’ (which protects tenants from eviction). The ethnic backgrounds of most residents is Maharashtrian.



Lilavati chawl



▲ 5.00 a.m.



▲ 7.00 a.m.



▲ 6.00 a.m.

A day in a *Chawl* starts early in the morning. Water supply starts at 5 o'clock and remains for only one hour. So house wives have to wake up early morning and start preparation for food for their family.



8.30 a.m.

Woman washing clothes and utensils outside the house.



9.00 a.m.

9.30 a.m. ▶ Breakfast time.



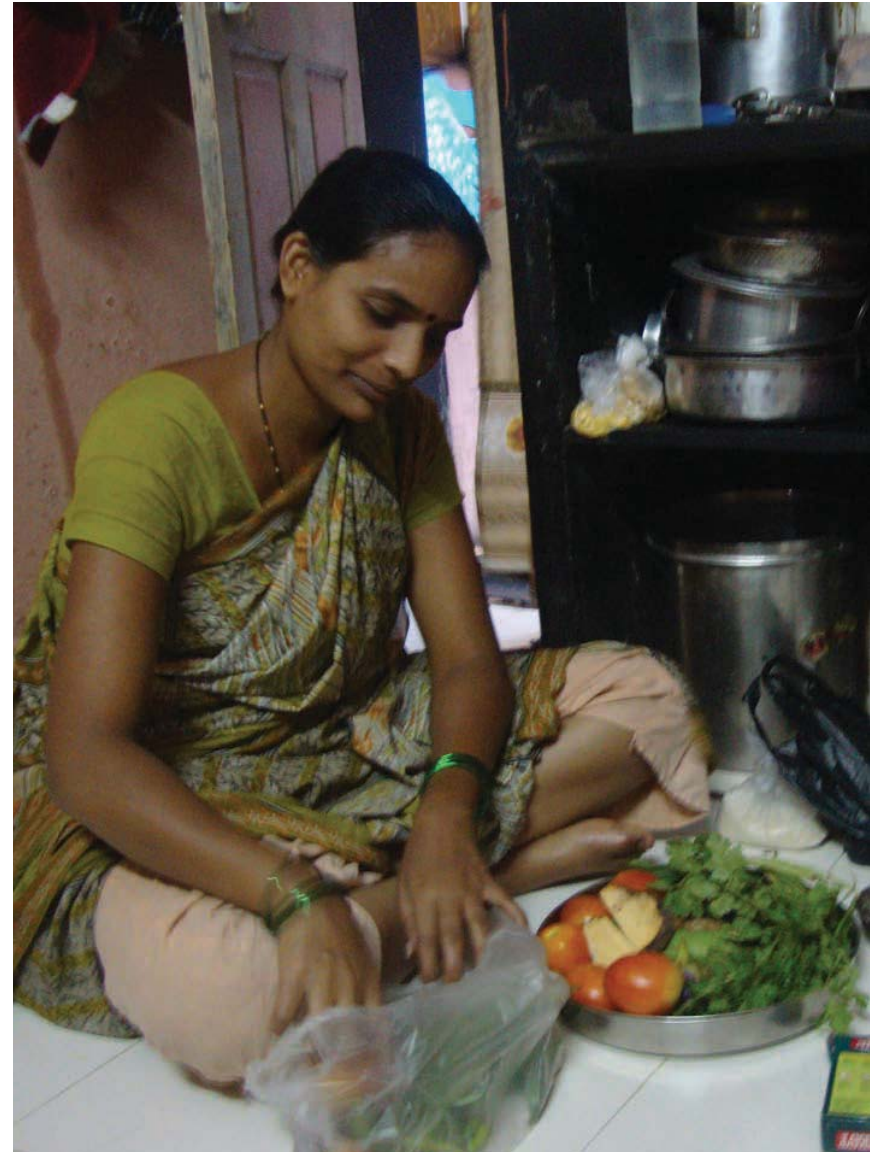
11.00 a.m. ▶
After the husbands have left for office, women utilize their free time for their side business.





12.00 noon

Women are arranging for meal.



1.00 p.m. ▶
People are having lunch.



2.30 p.m. ▶
Enjoying T. V. Serials.

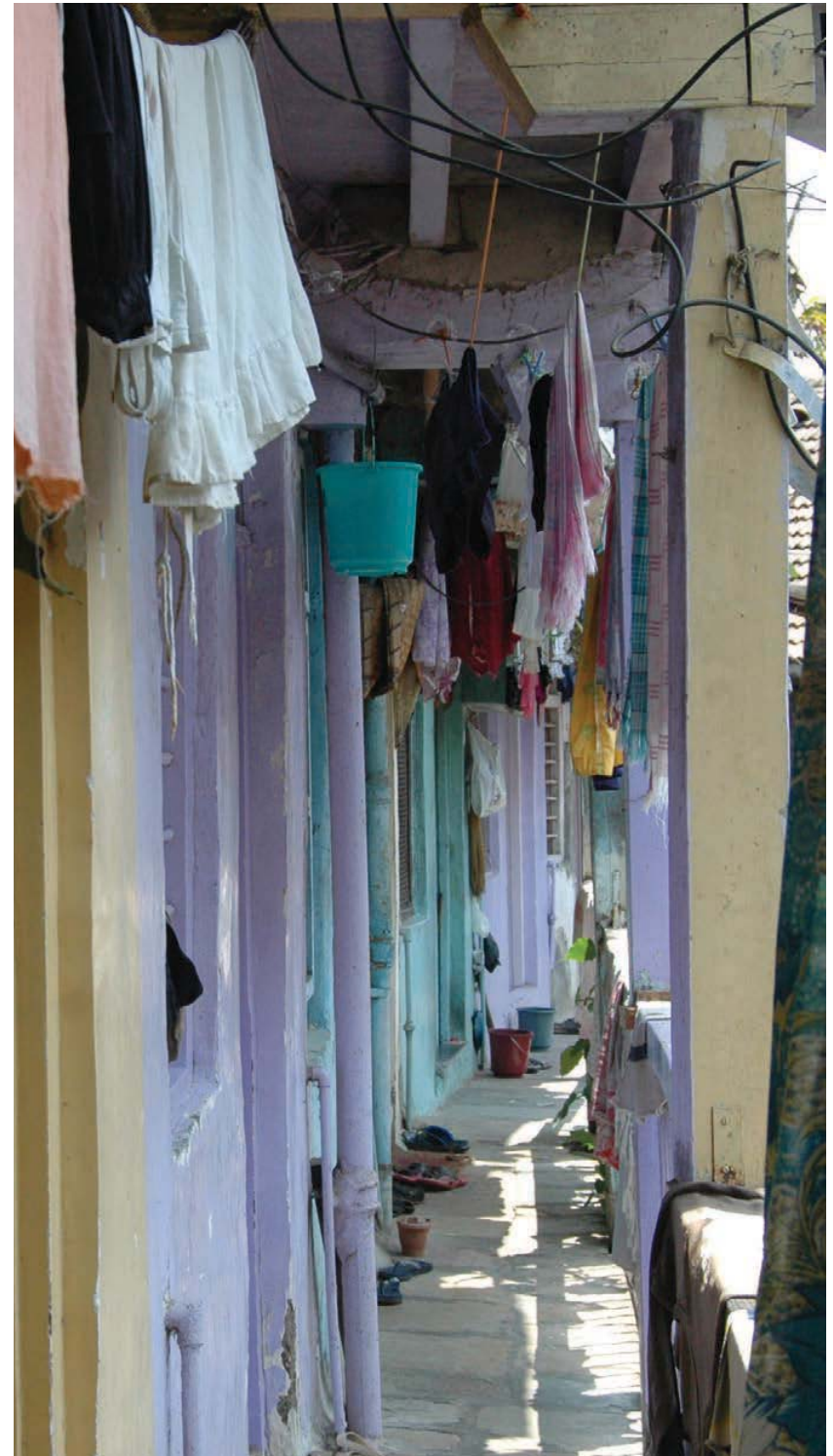


3.30 p.m. ▶

Silence in narrow corridor of *Chawl*, as the residents take a rest.

4.00 p.m. ▼

A pleasant breeze in mid afternoon brought together ladies who were chatting away.



5.00 p.m. ▶

The *Chawl* come back to life from its lazy slumber.



5.30 p.m. ▶ Tea time.



6.00 p.m. ➤
Getting ready to kids.



7.00 p.m. ➤
Girl while doing Pooja.



6.30 p.m. ▲ Children starts playing at backyard.



9.00 p.m. Women are preparing for dinner.



10.00 p.m.
Family dinner.



10.30 p.m. ➤
Woman on their home duty.



11.00 p.m. ➤
After dinner all people get together for gossip.





Interview

Mr. Dawroon lives at Lilavati Chawl for 25 years with his wife, daughter, son and grandmother. After asking him about his experience he said, "I have lived in a chawl for a long time. Our doors are always open for neighbors even late at night, if there is an emergency. The neighbors are part of our family."

When I asked "Would you like to shift to a self-contained flat?" He replied, "Anyone who has lived in a chawl will never wish to shift anywhere. We celebrate all our festivals, puja and other cultural activities together. In apartments, people don't even know who their neighbors are! However, some residents do feel the need to upgrade to a self-contained flat. But here there is a culture of sharing food, even if it is just from a small bowl so we are happy with our big family"



One thing I highly appreciate about this family is, in free time they work to decorate wedding cards which give them a side income. After sticking 100 stickers they get nine rupees. For the whole year they save this money and obtain jewellery for their idols of Ganesha at the time of ganapati festival. I was speechless after hearing this.





▲ Neighbor chawl residents.

▼ I had the privilege of eating home made food, thanks to the loving care of Mrs. Aprna & Madhvi Varpe. They complained that I was losing my weight, but its was a compliment for me actually.



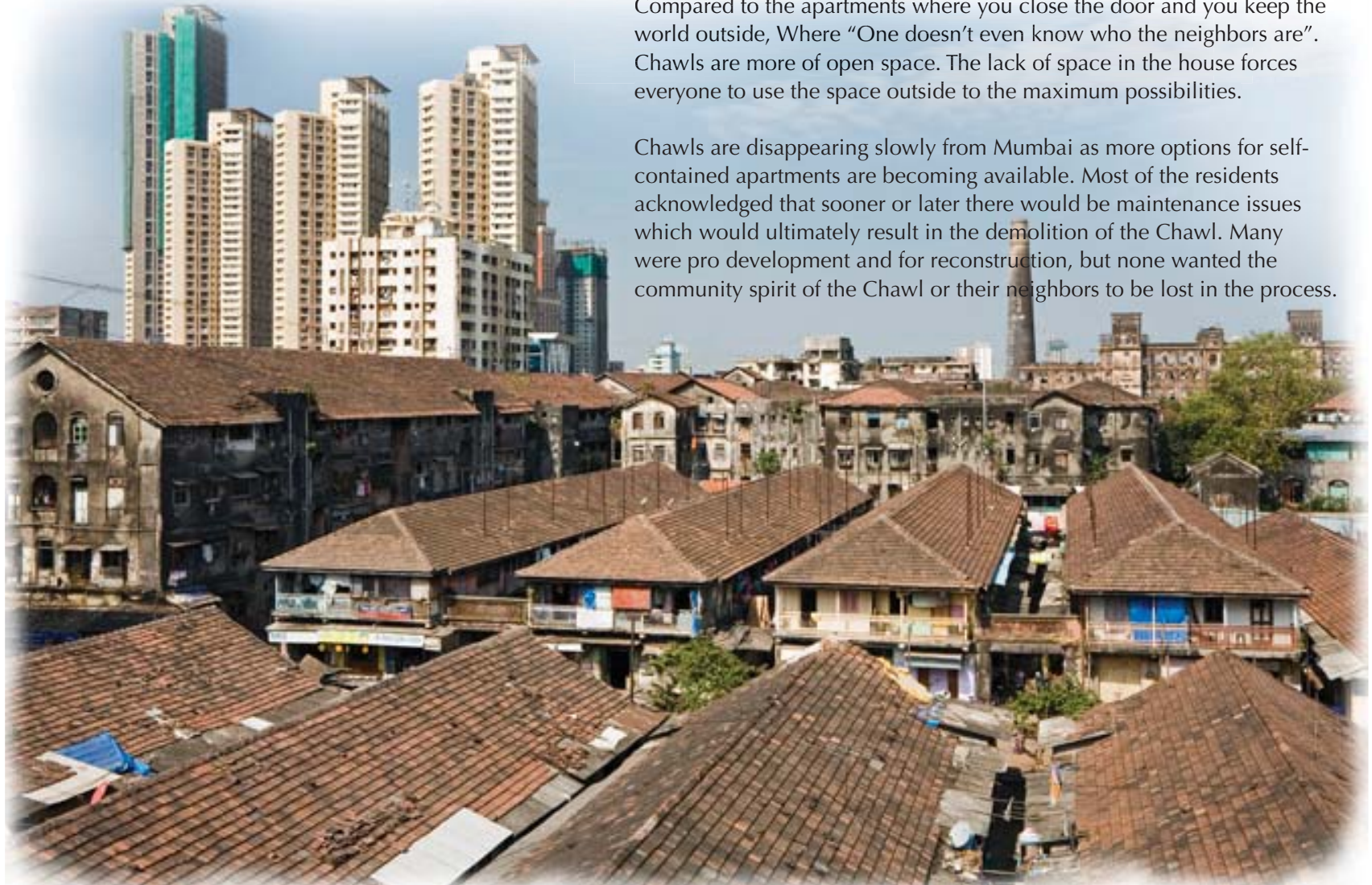
▲ People from *Lilavati chawl* "where I used to stay.

While living in a Chawl I never felt that I was alone & far from my family. All the Chawl residents were like my guardians. When I got an admission to IIT, I had to leave the Chawl. At the last day all my Chawl family members came to the corridor to see me off. I was leaving Chawl with a heavy heart, but felt grateful to get invitation from all to attend Ganapati festival.

This project gave me an opportunity to go back to the Chawl. All Chawl family members were happy to see me again, and were very enthusiastic about the project.



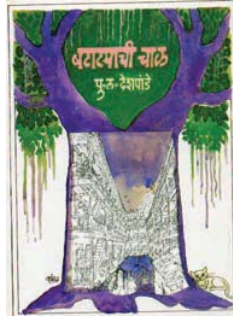
Apartments and Chawl



Compared to the apartments where you close the door and you keep the world outside, Where “One doesn’t even know who the neighbors are”. Chawls are more of open space. The lack of space in the house forces everyone to use the space outside to the maximum possibilities.

Chawls are disappearing slowly from Mumbai as more options for self-contained apartments are becoming available. Most of the residents acknowledged that sooner or later there would be maintenance issues which would ultimately result in the demolition of the Chawl. Many were pro development and for reconstruction, but none wanted the community spirit of the Chawl or their neighbors to be lost in the process.

Literatures Related to Chawl



- **Batatyachi Chhal**
This is the title of a humorous book in Marathi which Purushottam Laxman Deshpande wrote. The episodes in the book revolve around imaginary lower middle class families living in the 1940s in a fictitious tenement named “Batatyachi Chhal” located in Girgaon area of Mumbai.



- **Katha**
A slice from real life, this gem from Sai Paranjpe deals with the perennial problem of show-offs walking away with all the credit, while the meek end up with nothing, in spite of the hard work. Naseeruddin Shah plays a smart aleck and Farooq Sheikh his innocent friend. Dipti Naval is the simple neighborhoods girl coveted by both the guys. Absolutely delightful.

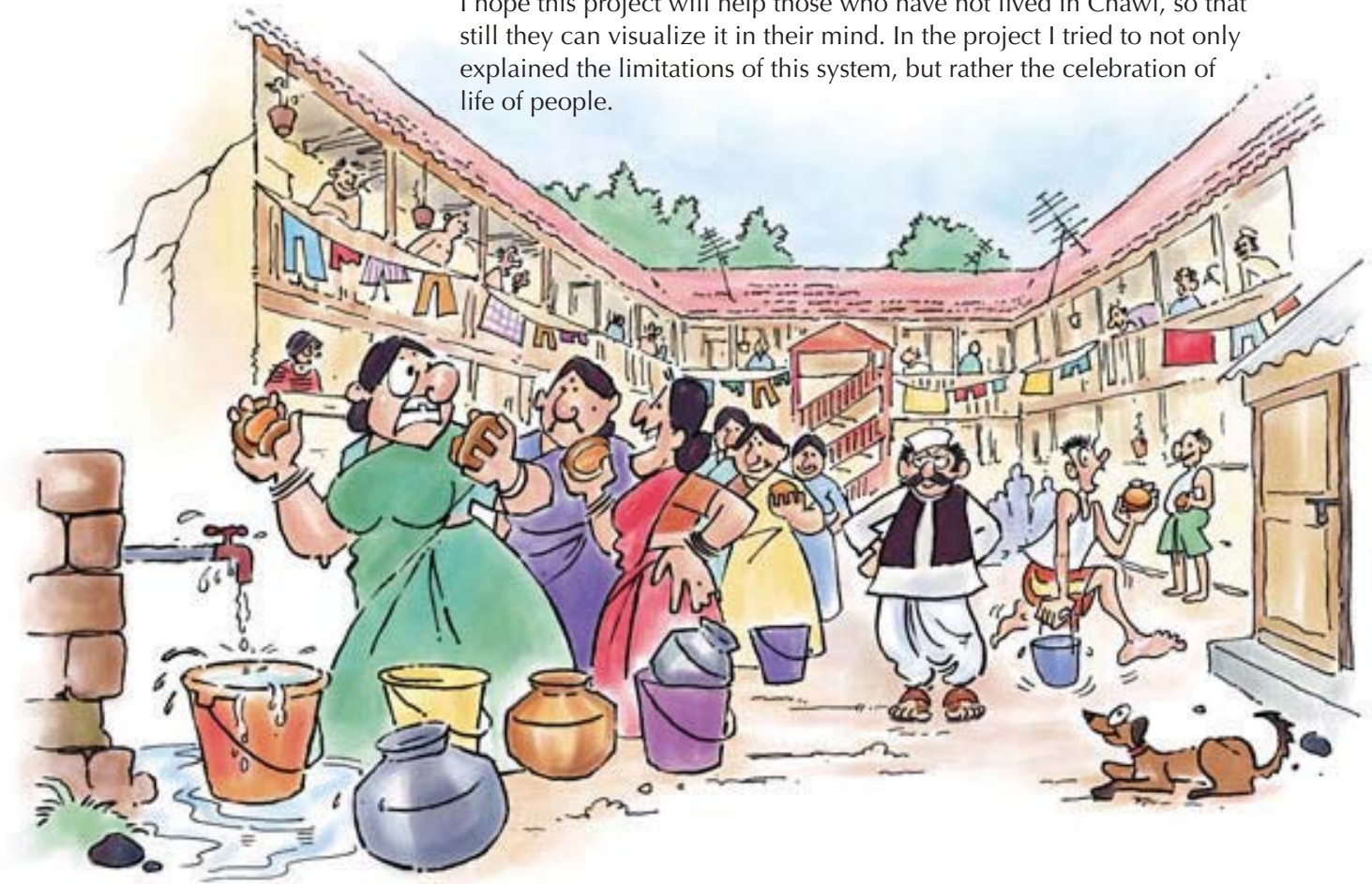


- **Chal naavachi khatyal vasti**
This is the play based on the chhal culture in Mumbai, Directed by Ninad Shetty. How all people live together with all their loves and sorrows, Perfect comedy for all ages. Every character staying in the chawl is very interesting person.

Conclusion

I highly appreciate those bonds of friendship, togetherness while living in Chawl. This project is important part of my experiences in life. It has helped me understand one's point of view towards life, made me more tolerant of other's idiosyncrasies, liberal in outlook and to be practical and pragmatic in life. It made me aware of the presence and importance of the "community spirit".

I hope this project will help those who have not lived in Chawl, so that still they can visualize it in their mind. In the project I tried to not only explained the limitations of this system, but rather the celebration of life of people.



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