

**Mobile library for peace, Dharavi, Mumbai
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Project summary

Mobile library project aimed to wipe out the marginalization that the slum communities in Mumbai experience, by providing them 'access' to information on informal education and healthier living through the simple act of 'storytelling'. The project also envisages a holistic and self-reliant community by providing a platform to build multicultural understanding and exchange of ideas, thereby bridging religious and other barriers to build an empowered and peaceful community. The project, now in its nascent stage was completely funded by the Davis peace project grant. The program will be executed for at least one more year in co-operation with Worldvision, Mumbai, who will help in the running of the project by providing for the volunteers for the library. And after a year of its execution take over the project into its various programs surrounding the Dharavi centre.

Project details

The mobile library project was initially imagined as a one-shop stop library with the motto of education to all, but with the limited scope of the issues that can be addressed and time constraints, the project was scaled down to a mobile library - as of now - just for the children in the settlement. The aim of the project was redirected to cover the gaps left open by the rundown governmental institutions in the role of education and not to replace the existing forms of infrastructure. The early forays into the settlement revealed that Dharavi is a bit unlike other 'more' marginalized informal settlements in Mumbai. It has a substantial presence of infrastructure in the form of schools, NGOs and other religious institutions, and the attempt was to first understand the existing infrastructural patterns through research and then make use of them by molding my program around such patterns and not as a parallel project of my own, which resulted in innumerable meetings with various community members, religious heads, school authorities and resulted in the formation of an informal network of interested members of the community who were helpful during the execution stage. The scaled down library rather than being a parallel educational system, now aims to spread its message through the simple act of storytelling and tackles issues ranging from illiteracy, health, hygiene and communal harmony. The Mobile library is thus only a metaphor for the holistic approach to informal education and hopes to create awareness in the slums of Dharavi, and also will attract students to books, elders to commune and break invisible barriers to build peaceful and healthy communities.

The project had to go around a lot of roadblocks, starting from the prolonged extensive survey and exploration of the community. The survey was necessary as it helped to narrow down to the actual requirements of the people (and the target group), and helped to locate the hotspots in the community, where the library could station itself. The interaction with the community was not a tough proposition for me, but working around the apprehensions of a community who thought they were being invaded by someone from outside was. It took a lot of community visits and meetings before I could talk and mingle with them freely, thus leaving me with very little time to actually execute the project. The execution of the peddle cart and a motorized library faced some tough budget constraints, and hence making the vehicle construction a perfect example of frugal engineering. This complex assembly process had further been delayed due to the onslaught of heavy monsoons, which bring life to a standstill in Mumbai. Especially in the informal settlements. But it were such constraints, that made the project exciting and challenging, thereby pushing the community, NGOs and me to come up with innovate and cheap solutions, thus being much more close to ground realities of day to day existence in informal settlements of Mumbai. The toughest task I would say was collaborating with the community, and the NGOs side by side in the formulation of a program catering to both their needs. Also the procurement of books for the libraries

was an arduous task, as I had to travel the length and breadth of the city looking for books in various languages, cultures, religions and of course age groups, thus seeking a fine balance in the type and quality of the books to be housed in the libraries.

The program is imagined as a library that will halt at selected locations and cover a specific section of the Dharavi every day. It will cover the whole community in a span of a week, thus providing access to books to the children at least once every week on pre-decided days. The library program covers about two schools everyday where it allows children to enjoy the books and play with the toys as well as listen to the stories as narrated by the volunteers. The library will then continue to the two other hotspots selected in the community to be stationed for 2-3 hours to allow children to enjoy the books and the wealth of information. At present the project is impacting about 400 students in various hotspots in the community, but with the hiring of a driver and permanent volunteers, it will be the source of joy and medium of education to about a thousand underprivileged children in Dharavi. The program is also divided into the weekly, monthly and yearly activities; ranging from everyday storytelling, to monthly workshops on health and hygiene as well as yearly celebrations. The various hierarchies of the library (peddle cart and motorized three-wheeler) will help in the access into Dharavi and across various other communities throughout the city respectively. This hierarchy of the libraries is aimed to improve access into the community and in future to create a network of libraries with a fleet of vehicles of different types catering to various parts of the city by engaging with NGOs active in that area.

Definition of peace

Peace, as I learned in the execution of the mobile library in Dharavi, can have as simple meanings as 'hope', 'chance' and an 'opportunity'. Peace now means to me a 'hope' in one's life to rise above the circumstances that you are born into, a 'chance' to erase the stigmas attached when one is born in the jhopadpaatis (informal settlements) of Mumbai and an 'opportunity' to be at level playing field with the other children living outside the informal lifestyles. I was saddened to notice that how small kids of no more than six years of age had indoctrinated the so-called societal norms of how the English speaking, Private school going children living in high class societies were so much better than them, just because they were born somewhere else into different systems and lifestyle. It is this mould of marginality and helplessness that I wanted to end, and empower the next generation through informal education, and to motivate them to get beyond their limiting circumstances. Peace, is thus nothing more than a chance and a hope for the kids to lead a normal lifestyle, where they are not forced to quit school to work or due to lack of awareness, where they are not healthy and ignorant about the world outside of theirs, but where as children they enjoy, play, educate themselves and become the source of joy to the community around them. My project will contribute to peace in the community through empowerment; confidence building and more importantly act as an opportunity for them to congregate, and galvanize their thoughts into actions for bigger purposes.

The mobile library project has taught me how everyone can and should contribute to their community, and how much you learn when one attempts to do so. I through this project have learned so much about common people and, how resourceful and innovative they are in dealing with unfavorable circumstances. I have also learned to acknowledge their tactfulness and optimism, as the untapped resource that all institutions in such informal settlements need to address and make appropriate use of, rather than donating for charity.



Images of storytelling sessions by volunteers in the mobile library project. Image (1) a girl reading out stories to her peers in Prabhudd nagar society contact centre in Dharavi. Image (2) Volunteer recording the number of participating students in Rajiv Gandhi nagar contact center. Image (3) Volunteer engaging the students in Question and answer session after each story.