

## Sanjit Das

Documentary photographer represented by Panos Pictures, who lives in Kuala Lumpur and works throughout the world for editorial, development and corporate clients.

<http://www.sanjitdas.com>

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# Washing a City



When you walk down the stairs into the dhobi ghat, the air is full of detergent smell and a slightly pungent chlorine and added to it is a synchronized sound of thrashing on the flogging stones – this is the dhobi ghat, the worlds largest open air laundromat in India's financial capital, Mumbai. Spread across 4 acres, with 731 washing pods, it employs over 7500 workers who hand-wash over 750,000 clothes on a daily basis. Set up by the British East Indian Company in 1890 – it served as a mass laundry for military uniforms but over time, these washermen, commonly known as dhobis did laundry for the British and the Parsi households but now apart from households, hospitals, restaurants and the garment factories are their usual clients.

Times have changed now, besides the old fashioned method of washing – the dhobi ghat has automatic washing machines to deal with large orders. Dhobis start early, once the clothes washed and dried – they iron them and it is packed and dispatched to different locations in the city. The Dhobis however aren't the actual owners of the property – the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) charges a rent of Rs. 293 (\$4.6) a month – however it can only be rented to the Kanojia community, the community of Dhobis from Uttar Pradesh in north India. Though the community is predominantly from the same community, but people from different castes and

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community work together at the ghat.

Mumbai ranks higher than Paris for ultra rich home buyers and the dhobi ghat is an integral part of Mumbai 'town' and the dhobis working in these pods provide a service of placing clean table mats on the tables at the restaurants or the sheets at the operation theatre of the hospitals that the patients end up in.



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