

## Looking beyond the visible: How slum dwellers of Mumbai negotiate environmental protection

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### 1. Introduction

A striking growth in urban populations of what have become known as ‘megacities’<sup>1</sup> has brought with it the depressing phenomena of ever expanding slums in ‘southern’ countries, especially since the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it is becoming increasingly difficult for geographers to demarcate urban and peri-urban areas as public land (whether within the inner or outer circles of cities) is encroached by a variety of slum developments. Millions of people live in these slums as they are pushed out of rural areas towards cities which promise livelihood and income opportunities, even if these are as undignified as rummaging through the city’s waste. And, as rural ties break down, and there is little hope of returning, generations continue to reside in the most squalid and appalling inhuman conditions of urban slums.

Slums are the most immediate, visible symbols of poverty and environmental degradation. Their visibility raises all types of political questions about the country’s national developmental policies, its political will, its capacity to tackle poverty and equality, and emotional moral and ethical questions related to their very existence. There is thus much written on various aspects of slum lives, for example, about slum livelihoods, evictions, health, environmental hazards and possibilities of planning<sup>3</sup> in order to understand the problems faced by millions who live here. This chapter hopes to further that understanding by looking beyond what is immediately visible by exploring how slum dwellers are constantly engaged in battles to protect their rights and better their immediate environments in order to improve their chances of survival. To what extent they are successful depends on their power to negotiate with state authorities and state representatives, their relationship with richer neighbours as well as their own social ranking within slum hierarchies.

To do this, I will begin by deconstructing the category ‘slums’. This is because slums are not homogenous, and in reality there is a vast differentiation between slum types, their geographies, histories and peoples who live here. I will explore these differences in order to understand how they reflect power or powerlessness of individuals and groups within various slum pockets, thus shaping their ability to negotiate environmental protection for themselves. My argument builds on a case study of Mumbai<sup>4</sup> (previously Bombay), and draws on empirical research that I carried out (a) in various slum localities whilst studying poor women’s income generation in 19... and (b) from a large survey of 16 different slum localities to explore various aspects of slum life with the central question of what consolidates a ‘slum’<sup>5</sup> carried out in ....

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<sup>1</sup> Definition, examples

<sup>2</sup> ref

<sup>3</sup> ref for al examples

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<sup>5</sup> ref study.

## 2. Differentiating between slums

Slums are also known by their regional and local variations, for example, as bustees (in Kalkota, Bangladesh), favelas (in São Paulo), and shanty towns (Johannesburg, Nairobi). They usually lack sanitation, are bursting to the seams and can be found in every conceivable public place<sup>6</sup> where individuals attempt to establish personal spaces and boundaries<sup>7</sup>. Whatever the term, it is important to recognise that all slums have their own histories, political contexts and differences in the legality of their existence.

In Mumbai, for example, which has a population of ...millions, at least 49%..., i.e. ... millions live in slums. In fact, all over India such large numbers now live in slums, that the Indian Government, for the first time included a special category to enumerate slum dwellers in the latest 2001 Census. To understand how slums are differentiated in India (as also in most other parts of the world), it is firstly important to consider how these are viewed by the state. This is because the state will sometimes be willing to support slum localities officially, whilst simultaneously being active in the demolition of those it considers to be intrusive to general public good.

### 2.1 'Official' and 'unofficial' slums

In Indian states, which locality is backed by the authorities is determined by a set of criteria identified through hugely complex central government and state government legislation. In fact legislation defining action over slums goes right back to colonial times, and throughout the history of Mumbai what officially makes or does not make a slum has been constantly battled over. Thus the legislation has undergone several amendments and changes in response to government criticism over the years about its lack of political will and capacity to tackle the problem. I do not have the space to discuss the intricacies of these here, so I will focus on the Maharashtra Slum Areas (Improvement, Clearance and Redevelopment) Act of 1971 which covers Mumbai<sup>8</sup> directly and purports to be the most comprehensible, inclusive piece of legislation. From time to time, following the loosely based definitions<sup>9</sup> of what makes a slum, certain localities are officially 'declared' as slums under the Act.

Official recognition of this type is very important for the survival of the slum, as it means that this slum is on its way to becoming a poor, but established residential area. Theoretically, the state government is now obliged to supply recognised slums with basic services of water supply, drainpipes, sanitation services and sometimes electricity. However, it is not in the interest of planners, politicians, private developers and ultimately state governments to give a green light of basics services provision to more than a handful of slum pockets. Therefore, those that have not officially been 'declared' continue to be denied access to water and sanitation, are environmentally and socially hazardous and continually threatened with demolition. Also, it is worth noting that it is not unusual to find newer settlements springing up around the edges

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, 'the City of the Dead' is a famous slum in Cairo where at least one million squatters have colonised abandoned Jewish cemeteries and ancient tombs of sultans and emirs. (p33 planet of slums). Mumbai is famous for people living in drainpipes.

<sup>7</sup> Over a quarter million single 'caged men' live illegally on the rooftops of HongKong, the cage being the wire structure they construct around their sleeping places in order to mark out their individual spaces. (p34 *ibid*)

<sup>8</sup> which parts including greater, new mumbai?

<sup>9</sup> Such as congested, unhygienic, public hazard.

of recognised slums so that they can gain illegal access to basic provisions found here. The overall effect of this is that boundaries between what is official and what is not thus quickly become blurred and are rarely modified. Therefore, it is quite common to find that even those pockets which have managed to negotiate official backing, and are entitled to some basic protection from the state, are very soon stretched to the limit.

## 2.2 Established and non-established slums

Besides state recognition, another way of analysing slum differentiation is through a consideration of slum histories and how long they have been established. For instance, in Mumbai, the oldest of slum housing can be traced back to colonial times in tenement housing, known as 'chawls'. 'Chawls' were originally constructed to house the many seasonal rural migrants who worked for the British East India Company in docking, shipping and other burgeoning activities in British owned textile mills of Mumbai. The rich but disturbing history of these tenements includes British attempts at containing disease such as the Bubonic plague that engulfed Mumbai in the 19... and saw labour fleeing on mass to the countryside. History also suggests that the overriding concern was not that several died during this outbreak, but that the exodus left both the docks and textile mills empty, leading to a huge loss of revenue for the British. The 'chawls' were thus a concession provided by both the municipality as well as private entrepreneurs to entice labour back to Mumbai. However, these concessions were minimal and there were simply not enough rooms, toilets and other facilities to go round. The situation worsened as rural taxation and British demand for cash payments forced even more to seek out income opportunities in Mumbai. Medical records<sup>10</sup> suggest that problems such as overcrowding, leakages of untreated sewage into the water system and poor land fill attempts that did not allow drainage soon led to further outbreaks of serious diseases.

There is no doubt that since Independence, there have been continuous attempts to improve 'chawl' housing. Many of these are now owned privately and the irony is that as Mumbai has expanded, the central location of these and the easy access to internal railway lines has made 'chawl's highly expensive and beyond the reach of the types of labour they were originally meant to house. The investment potential of these properties has thus generated much conflict between those claiming family or traditional entitlement to the land and private investors. For instance, there have been rigorous attempts to push out the 'Koli's<sup>11</sup> who occupy the prime site of Coloba, overlooking the historic picturesque Gateway of India and the ultra luxurious Taj Hotel which is renowned for its celebrity guests (including its most famous guests John Lennon and Paul McCartney).

Historically, migrants to Mumbai have been drawn from the neighbouring rural districts of the state of Maharashtra, (predominantly Satara and Ratnagiri). These were single (married or otherwise) male seasonal migrants whose pattern of migration was primarily determined by the demands of their agricultural lands and social relationships. Much to British frustration, therefore, the men came and went according to rural rather than urban labour demands. Of course, as time went on and rural poverty increased, some spend longer and longer in Mumbai, with their wives joining

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<sup>10</sup> Medical records...

<sup>11</sup> The original fishing tribe

them, with many people now having lost the association that they had once with the land. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, large numbers can also claim Mumbai as their birthplace. Nevertheless, urban families even today retain allegiance to the rural areas they originated from, and maintain family kinship networks between the rural and urban extensions of their household. This is evident in the complex household arrangements that are reflected in the constant movement between the rural and urban relatives that move in and out of residential arrangements in the older established 'chawl's.

Increased all-India rural poverty in recent times<sup>12</sup> has seen a significant change in patterns of migration. Instead of seasonal neighbouring migration, Mumbai now sees numbers of whole, destitute households arriving from all parts of India everyday. Another significant change is a sharp increase in women-headed households. These families often do not have ties with the 'chawl' residents and are obliged to set up home anywhere they can. They can be thus found in the illegal and unestablished squatter colonies on municipal owned land, along the railway lines and bridges, within large privately owned construction sites, public working sites and anywhere they can basically set up home in temporary, unplanned structures such as plastic covered tents, corrugated iron hutments and large public drainpipes. Here they live in constant fear of eviction from city authorities, rival groups of settlers and 'goonda's (Mafiosi) of the localities who thrive on the vulnerability of the poor, frequently terrorising them through violence. It is almost impossible to correctly identify how many of these unestablished slums there are in Mumbai, as they spring up again as soon as they are demolished. What is for sure is that in Mumbai, there is no getting away from these whichever way you turn.

### 3. Differentiating social hierarchies in slums

Two ways of differentiating between slums discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2 suggest that there are hierarchies which denote levels of power and powerlessness between slums. It is also equally important to recognise that there are unmistakable social hierarchies that determine individual status and power within slums. Thus, as discussed above, groups who have arrived earlier to Mumbai are able to negotiate localities which are closer to the centre, have better access to transport, livelihood opportunities, municipal schools and government Fair Price shops.<sup>13</sup> However, even within these groups, of caste, religion and gender will play a major role in determining how individuals will negotiate their positions within each locality. These are overlapping, cross-cutting categories and there is no neat way of deciphering which of these is the dominant demarking criterion.

For instance, there is little doubt that Hindus of higher castes are at the top of the hierarchy. However, even here regionality matters, with the Hindu Marathas (those originating in Maharashtra) being the primary group, represented by strong vocal political parties such as the *Shiv Shena*. Higher caste Hindus originating from other regions (e.g. Gujarat) are also as important, but perhaps have lesser political significance in the slums. The fact that several thousand lower-caste Hindus have converted on mass to Buddhism and Islam denotes their extremely inferior position in Hindu society. The converts known as New Buddhists or New Muslims are in turn, further differentiated from the inter-generational, long-established Buddhist and

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Muslim families that are often rich, holding strong social positions in Mumbai society. Along with those who remain Hindus, the lower-caste converts, nevertheless, continue to face discrimination in spite of state attempts at positive action.<sup>14</sup>

How these groups occupy spaces and negotiate participation within slum localities, thus depends on social hierarchies of this type. For example, there are all kinds of complex housing arrangements. 'Chawl' buildings are often owned by middle-class absentee landlords whose families have rented these out to several generations of dominant groups. Some individual families from these groups have also been able to purchase tenement rooms from these landlords over the years, particularly during the periods of British departure and the partition of India when many hurried to Pakistan. Others who have rented tenements for generations are protected by tenancy legislation and continue to occupy rooms at low rent. Newer arrivals of same caste groups are often enter into sub-letting arrangements with these families.

Whilst they may be very crowded, 'chawl' tenements remain an infinitely better deal than the corrugated hutments ('zopadpattis) scheduled castes, no matter how many generations of these have been established in Mumbai. In these (possibly legally occupied) make-shift accommodation, every inch of space is occupied with large family groups sharing hutments on sub-tenancy basis, through people who have managed to rent these from absentee landlords or the municipality. Those who squat illegally are in even more fragile and tenuous arrangements with 'rent' being forcefully extracted by gangs of 'goonda's who rule the slums. Within all this, women who head families (e.g. through widowhood, desertion) are in the most vulnerable position (whether in the 'chawl's or squatter colonies), being in constant threat of sexual and other forms of violence from landlords, tenants and 'goonda's.

##### 5. Negotiating environmental protection

There is little doubt that slums, particularly on such a massive scale as in Mumbai, are immediately visible signs of both environmental degradation and the social problems of urbanisation in the face of increasing rural poverty. In a city like Mumbai that is also the financial capital of India, these slums are also a sign of national incapacity to manage the increasing poverty of its people.

Whilst there is also little doubt that the immense numbers that occupy slum localities generate degradation through sheer demand and by simply being there, it is nevertheless important to look beyond the visible and consider how slum occupants are actively busy into protecting their immediate environment. Basically, it is not in their interest to do otherwise. In fact, given the peculiar geography and history of slums in Mumbai the very rich and the very poor to live side by side, unlike Delhi, for example, where the rich prefer to live and work in the beautifully Corbusier-designed New Delhi, almost segregating the poor to the run down parts of the Old Delhi, in fact this phenomenon is evident even in the first drive to the centre of Mumbai out of the .....International airport , involving a car ride through Dharavi, Asia's largest slum. The sight that greets even the most frequent and hardened traveller to Mumbai is daunting and totally incomprehensible. For here is the financial capital of India, with miles and miles of ramshackle squalid hutments of Dharavi dotted with plush high rise business blocks of the diamond and jewellery merchants. As is suggested by the

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<sup>14</sup> Scheduled castes

various municipal, private business partnerships and voluntary bodies that come together<sup>15</sup> to tackle the Dharavi problem, it is clearly in the interests of all to be involved in environmental protection of neighbouring areas.

In this, the poor rely very much on the rich. However, how they do this, and to what extent they are successful in this depends on several factors including their social status, know-how and networks defined through various caste, religion and gender categories as discussed above within the boundaries of overall agendas of the very rich.<sup>16</sup>

, during my empirical work in several localities I have come away with the impression that however legal or illegal the settlement, most slum dwellers in Mumbai are usually family oriented with most members contributing towards family welfare.

They look to politicians, activists, bollywood ngos, state some loose, some win

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, in this brief article I have attempted to show that

- Slums are not a homogenous category and there is much differentiation in both the geography and social make-up of these.
- Slums have their own political histories which are closely related to the labour needs of cities.
- It is in the interest of both the rich and the poor to manage slum environments.
- How this environmental protection is managed, depends on the power or powerlessness of particular groups.
- Slums, which at first glance, appear to be visible signs of environmental degradation, may actually be involved actively in attempts at environmental protection.

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<sup>16</sup> In Dharavi, for instance, the municipality, which lacked the full capacity to construct apartment blocks to rehouse slum dwellers went into partnership with private constructors, who immediately saw this as an investment opportunity, buying cheap land for themselves (Ref).

