



FAULT LINES IN THE NEOLIBERAL CITY: SLUMS AND URBAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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Neoliberal city and its marginalised majority

Cities in developing nations, with extremities of wealth and deprivation starkly embossed on their landscape, are the quintessential embodiment of the excesses of neoliberalism. The impact of neoliberal policies is most pronounced on the marginalized majority battling to meet the exigencies of daily life in the slums. Unlike the middle or elite classes who are mostly content with being part of the seeming idyll of the neoliberal apparatus leading their lives as atomized individuals, in case of slum dwellers the very nature of their precarious existence compels them to organize themselves at the community level. With 56% of its population scattered across slums that together occupy only six percent of the total land area (Mumbai Human Development Index, 2009), the financial capital of India is a microcosm of third world urbanism and its informal settlements are a fertile ground for social movements against “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2005:160). However, the ravages of the neoliberal city have both spawned and systematically decimated urban social movements in Mumbai’s slum settlements.

According to Castells, urban social movements occur when grassroots

mobilization against the institutionalized dominant interests results in “the transformation of the urban structure” (Castells, 1983:291). Such movements must “combine struggles for improved collective consumption with struggles for community culture as well as for political self-determination” (Mayer, 2006:202). Considering the inescapable structural rigidity of a stratified neoliberal city, an overnight radical change may be utopian. This is why urban social movement is an all-encompassing term that includes everything from disparate struggles seeking access to resources and essential services to more consolidated movements demanding an agency of the slum dwellers in attaining their right to shelter without the involvement of the market. Sustained small victories on these fronts cumulatively translate into an indelible fundamental change in the urban structure over a period of time.

The alienation of urban structure

The alienation of urban planning, that was orchestrated in the architectural choices of GE Haussmann’s Paris in mid-19th century and a century later in Moses’ New York¹, has been exacerbated manifold in modern day Mumbai. The steady gentrification of Mumbai in a bid to transform it in to a ‘world class city’, where the skyline and

1. Harvey points out how both Haussmann and Moses were known to resolve the capital-surplus issue by investing heavily in transformation of urban infrastructure and lifestyle, a process that further marginalized the working class in Paris and African-Americans in New York. (Harvey: 2008)

infrastructure reflects the burgeoning wealth of a few, has pushed the poor further to the peripheries both in spatial and social terms. The speculative capital and the foreign direct investments fuelling the city's real estate has seen the average cost of a house in Mumbai going up to Rs 26 million even as its per capita annual income is a mere Rs 0.14 million (The Times of India & The Indian Express, 2012). This failure of the State and market forces to provide adequate and affordable shelter to vast numbers is responsible for its 'urban marginality'².

While both the colonial and newly-independent State provided for the housing needs of the majority in Mumbai, the late 1970s and 80s saw the city government taking on the World Bank defined role of the 'enabler' with emphasis on improving slums while still providing them with basic services. All this while, local government agencies continued to create affordable housing and urban displacement was under check as the middle class conscience propelled them to oppose forced evictions of the less-privileged.

However by the nineties, the shift in World Bank policies saw the sudden withdrawal of the State leaving housing to the vagaries of the market. Since then, social exclusion was deepened

by the closure of Mumbai's textile mills and its transformation into gleaming residential, commercial and shopping complexes, through relentless eviction drives against hawkers and squatters and privatization of basic services. (Banerjee-Guha, 2009). The 'Shanghaization' of Mumbai was the ideological construct, the heterotopia created by the State, private developers and international funding agencies which ensured middle class complicity in this marginalization. A heterotopia in this context is that aspirational place which "incites, compels and invites people to see themselves reflected in some utopia" (Deshpande 1995 on Foucault: 3221). The use of the heterotopia of transforming Mumbai into a world class city renders the quotidian city swarming with its squalid slums as an inadequate and imperfect space and the urban poor as a hurdle in the path of attaining that immaculate urban splendor. The alienation thus was complete leaving slum dwellers, construction workers, domestic help and daily wage workers that service and build the city, to fight their own fragmented battles with no support or solidarity from the rest. A schism is created not only within various classes but within slum dwellers themselves with exclusionary slum rehabilitation policies that 'tolerate' certain slums that have been constructed before an

2. Urban marginality is "the inability of the market economy or the state policies to provide adequate shelter and urban services to an increasing proportion of city dwellers, including the majority of the regularly employed salaried workers, and practically all people making their earnings in the so-called 'informal' sector of the economy". (Castells, 1984: 185)

arbitrary cut-off date while demolishing the rest without providing them alternate accommodation. The millions of 'ineligible' families, uprooted from one place only to rebuild their shanties somewhere else within the city, do not even figure as mere statistics in official documents. This precludes the mobilization of the city as a "collective body politic, a site within and from which progressive social movements might emanate".(Harvey, 2008: 33)

Engels had characterized Haussmann's move to rid Paris of its slums as a method typical of the bourgeoisie that solves the housing question "in such a way that the solution continually reproduces the question anew" (Engels, 1872). Davis extends this description to state that big cities of the developing world has its equivalent of Haussmann in the coercive and unaccountable special purpose development agencies funded by the World Bank (Davis, 1999). In Mumbai, agencies such as the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority and the Mumbai Transformation Support Unit, that plan and execute infrastructural projects in partnership with private developers and with funding from international agencies, have constantly negated the urban poor's right to the city and worked towards creating more opportunity space for market forces.

The role of neoliberal policies in creating fissures within the urban landscape

The agency of the urban poor in their own mobilisation was very much visible in the British built-BDD chawls of Mumbai that were the stronghold of the Dalit movement or in the unionization that took place in the housing quarters of workers from Mumbai's erstwhile textile industry. The neoliberal city has, however, struck at the very root of any possible mobilization by instilling in those termed as 'ineligible' or 'unauthorized' a foreboding fear of displacement, by disenfranchising them and depriving them of necessities such water or electric supply. In the case of slum residents categorized as 'eligible', their regularization, as Davis puts it in the context of colonos of Mexico City, "undermines solidarity by individualizing struggle for housing and by giving titled home owners interests that differ from those of other slum residents" (Davis, 2007). This is especially evident in case of the long-derailed ambitious Dharavi Redevelopment Project that allows private developers to shift the residents to high-rises and make a staggering profit by constructing on the rest of the 2 sq km slum sprawl. The eligibility criteria have created a rift with 'ineligible' squatters fighting for their right to shelter, the tenanted squatters for their right to ownership houses and the shanty owners and small business demanding bigger houses or office space post redevelopment. This is the

reason why left leaning local groups such as the Dharavi Bachao Andolan Samiti, that are opposed to the very idea of redevelopment tailored to the needs of capital, were not able to garner popular support when they attempted to politically represent themselves by contesting municipal elections. The disparate self-interests that underlies these demands precludes a unified social movement of the kind seen in the squatter movement of Monterrey in Mexico City where the squatters declined legalization and collectively built schools, health services, civic centres for the community as they rightly feared that regularization would lead to dissipated battles (Castells, 1983: 212).

Regularisation of a few fosters clientelism in these mostly migrant communities that are already divided by caste, linguistics and allegiances to political parties turning slums in to a controlled laboratory for all kinds of factional and populist experiments of vote bank politics. This also carries the implication that those living in the slums are 'populations' that must be governed and showered with occasional political favours as part of the patron-client relationships as opposed to the 'citizens' who enjoy sovereignty and rights (Chatterjee, 2004); the trap of clientelism ensures social integration instead of spurring urban social movements that leads to social change. (Castells, 1983)

Inching Forward

With the neoliberal State fracturing collective social movements of the urban poor at every stage, the best offensive at the disposal of slum dwellers is "quiet encroachment" (Bayat, 2000). Bayat describes it as a non-collective but sustained attempt by the urban poor at meeting their immediate needs of shelter, livelihood and civic amenities through illegal, informal and non-institutional devices. He derives the concept from the Foucaultian omnipresence of power and uses it to shatter the myth of powerlessness of the poor. Neither the fact that their protests are mostly about seeking redressal of their grievances nor their lack of "organizational power of disruption" as in case of workers and students does anything to diminish its intensity as a social movement. The course of such actions may be engineered by necessity but over a period of time it leads to unintended consequences such as redistribution of land and resources and autonomy from State imposed regulations and institutions (Bayat, 2000). Such encroachments are characteristic of much of the daily life in Mumbai's slums that mushroom on its hill sides, creeks, footpaths and other open public spaces. They survive by stealing water and electricity from the municipal supply lines, they unauthorisedly enlarge their homes to accommodate their expanding families and hawk their wares illegally along pavements and public roads. They wage an unrelenting battle against, and on many occasions

scuttle, attempts by private builders to capitalize on their land and relocate or displace them under State-sanctioned schemes. This “informality (is) largely the product of rigid and anti-poor urban regulations” (Bhowmik et al, 2011: 100) but it is also the counter-hegemony of the marginalized against the city and its neoliberal forces. While squatting is their last resort owing to the woeful dearth of affordable formal housing, the act in itself leads to them reclaiming and asserting their right to a city that denies them their due share. In a handful of cases, they have been able to forge alliances with others across class barriers. For instance, a project by the World Bank and the civic body’s to partly privatise Mumbai’s water supply was thwarted following vociferous protests carried out collectively by activists and citizens’ groups that opposed the privatisation of an essential service and by slum dwellers who feared that the privatisation would put an end to their illegal extraction of water and shoot up their water charges.

Breaking away from a dependent city

Mandala, a slum that has cropped up since 2000 on land reclaimed from swamps on the periphery of Mumbai epitomises the extreme tenacity of quiet encroachments in a city where the poor are forced to make their homes amidst the urban squalor in order to escape rural deprivation. In December 2004, Mandala along with 35 other slums across the city came under the civic

sledgehammer as part of a massive demolition drive during which more than 90,000 shanties were torn down in order to beautify Mumbai and ‘reclaim’ open spaces for its ‘citizens’. Six months later, there was a mass mobilization of all the affected slum families who came together to form the ‘Ghar Bachao Ghar Banao Andolan’ under the tutelage of the activist Medha Patkar’s National Alliance of People’s Movements. Egged on by the movement, 3000 Mandala families started rebuilding their broken homes, lives and livelihoods from the ruins. In less than a year, their homes were yet again mowed down. The demolitions were characterized by use of excessive violence wherein clusters of shanties were set on fire to ensure that the residents don’t rummage through the remnants and use it to reconstruct their homes (TISS, 2006). The residents responded by intensifying their protests, lying down before bulldozers, courting lathi-charge and arrests with the women being in the forefront of most of these resistance movements. After their homes were destroyed beyond salvage, the Mandala slum dwellers launched another sit-in protest at the Azad Maidan (the only legally earmarked public space in Mumbai for mass protests). However a Bombay High Court order favouring the eviction of the protestors led to demolition of their temporary tents and arrest of 100 slum residents and activists (Singh, 2011).

Over the years since then many of the residents have been living in makeshift shacks along the edges of the

cleared land or in rented shanties in the pre-1995 settlements adjoining the cleared land. In January 2007, Mandala residents took a bold decision of forsaking their lives on the fringes of the political society and embracing the legal route for demanding their right to the city. Of the total 45 acres of land that was cleared of encroachments, they requested the government for 13 acres of land for constructing modest homes for themselves under the central government's flagship scheme Rajiv Awas Yojana (RAY). If approved it would be Mumbai's first slum redevelopment project that is carried out by the residents themselves and not builders. It offers a viable alternative to the dictates of market based rehabilitation schemes as the city doesn't lose out of any public land, land that is given away to incentivize developers, other than the little that is required to house its urban poor. Also, it doesn't adhere to any arbitrary cut-off date for eligibility but gives an equal right to every person irrespective of his length of stay in the slum. Six years down the line, their proposal is languishing within the realms of bureaucracy with several who are part of the struggle seriously questioning the merit of their decision to not encroach their land yet again after bribing local cops and officials.

Nonetheless, the desire of the slum dwellers to build their own homes is an attempt to break their dependency on a neoliberal city that has been responsible for their disempowerment and dehumanisation. They are able to

present a unified front without a leader-centric totalizing narrative taking over; they choose alternative modes of urban renewal by rejecting policies centered on 'eligibility' criteria or market led rehabilitation projects. Theirs is a battle to not just wriggle unnoticed into an urban cartography subsumed by the heterotopias of a world class city but also to make a lasting imprint in policy space that would redefine the possibilities for production of urban space in Mumbai. They, thus, redefine urban possibilities beyond "mere competitive jockeying of individual cities for position within a global urban system" (Harvey, 1995: 420). Regardless of the outcome, such enduring struggles are, in itself, a victory against the neoliberal city that disowns its majority.

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