Reinventing Dharavi

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This address note was given at the launch of ‘Reinventing Dharavi - an Ideas Compendium’, a publication by Urban Design Research Institute.

The project on possible plans for a small township in the area occupied today by what is referred to as the slum at Dharavi, interested me because I have been long preoccupied by questions around why it is that in urban settlements, some areas are demarcated and segregated, and even ghettoised.

This kind of segregation is different from areas of the city where those with a common culture may choose to live. In the metropolitan cities of today, the world over, immigrants from elsewhere tend to congregate in a specific part of the city. It may be the pull of particular jobs, language familiarity, familiar customs or kinship links. This is virtually characteristic of a metropolis. But I am specifically interested in the concept of an almost enforced ghettoisation and the segregating of particular groups of people, and why this is done. I, therefore, accepted with interest the invitation to be the Jury Member for this Competition.

Where the segregation is deliberate and is generally of the poor, of minority groups or those socially unacceptable, it soon becomes a slum. The descent into slum hood is accelerated by the denial of sanitation and often of garbage clearance.

There is also of course the ghetto at the opposite end of the social scale, where the rich segregate themselves into gated communities for purposes of security and from the instinctive-inclusivity of wanting to live only among people with similar incomes. This has happened in parts of New Delhi in what are called ‘posh colonies’ where the initial intention was to secure the area against mobs attacking the colony in the time of riots, as happened in 1984. It is now explained as protecting the houses from organised burglaries.
I am told that the polite term for slums is urban informality. This hides the negative and dire meanings conveyed by the word - slum. Slums are popularly associated with modern cities. Industrialisation brings a working class that the governing elite wants segregated in a part of the city or just outside since this is convenient for the industry concerned. We forget that some pre-modern cities also had ghettos and these were up to a point similar to those of modern times.

**History of urban slums**

Slums are segregated areas of a city, generally ghettoised because that is where the poor live and where low status crafts are carried out. A social distancing is maintained not only because these are locations where the under-privileged live but also because of the nature of their work. One may well ask why this was encouraged. Probably because segregated ghettos are compact and therefore easier to control.

Yet, urban slums are part of our historical heritage and differentiated areas were central to the layout of our cities. At the centre of the city were located the royal palaces, the temples or mosques and, surrounding them, the homes of the state functionaries and wealthy merchants. Fanning out beyond, were differentiated areas where the various crafts were located, each with its own bazaar, and where the artisans lived. Outside the limits of the city was the location of those who performed services for the city, but were not welcome in the city.

It is difficult to locate slums from the remains of cities of the past, because slums do not survive time nor are they easily recognizable in the excavations of cities. This is because they are invariably jerry-built with poor quality building material. At Harappa, there was one small area of the city that had a small cluster of barrack-like buildings quite unlike the houses in other parts of the city. The location was close to one of the working areas.
where it is thought grain was pounded. Were these places which housed the labourers who worked in the area as some thought?

But these were in the vicinity of the major buildings and not segregated from them. In this case, the poor were cheek-by-jowl with the rich, possibly to minimise travel times for the poor and keep them working longer hours.

Cities of later historical times had a somewhat different layout and conformed largely to what I have described earlier. Except that by now, they appear to have acquired segregated areas and ghettos outside the city. Texts of Gupta times for instance, tend to demarcate between the city and the ghetto outside the city. Those living in the ghetto are identified by caste, occupation and the labour on which they are employed. Those that belonged to caste society, the varna, lived in the city but those that were outside the social pale of caste, the avarnas, lived beyond the limits of the city. By this time, they included the category of the asprishya, those regarded as untouchable. Every sizeable settlement is likely to have had these segregated areas where the outcastes were forced to live.

Fa Xian, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who visited India between 405 and 411 CE in the Gupta period, informs us that such people when they came into the city, had to make a sound on a clapper to identify themselves, so that people of caste could keep a physical distance from them.

Craftsmen in these segregated areas were often the potters and the leather workers, segregated because they were producing objects from contaminating material. There is an interesting continuity in the fact that Dharavi has been a major centre for the production of leather goods and pottery.

In earlier times and sometimes even to this day in some cities, specific crafts were generally confined to separate parts of the city. This had the advantage that raw materials came to one place and the finished products were collected from one place. It also encouraged competitive buying and selling. Occupations were
often tied into caste even in the city proper. Thus, in Chanderi the weavers who wove cotton and silk saris belonged to Muslim castes and the traders who collected and sold the textiles were of Hindu castes. But these groups functioned from within the city because they were regarded as low but not polluting.

The distinction was between those living in the City and those living in the segregated ghetto. Crafts in segregated areas were specific to the area, and this was determined whether they were in any way polluting.

This did not change in medieval times because the religions, other than those of the Hindus, such as Islam, Christianity and Sikhism, all introduced the category of the untouchable into the practice of their religions. The situation may have been marginally better in those times since those clearing carcasses of cows, were as far as we know, not lynched.

It is interesting that there are so few studies of communities that live in slums and probably earlier lived in segregated settlements, whereas there are so many studies of villages, rural areas, segments of urban life of the mainstream society. One would like to know about the life of the people who lived in these ghettos. And it was refreshing to read, in so many entries, that a host of questions about the various resident groups – notably around their occupation – engaged the attention of the authors.

These and other questions that continue to preoccupy me - and should be the concern of historians, social scientists, planners and architects - are:

- Are these segregated groups, clones of the mainstream society?
- Or do they form a society of their own? They would have every right to do so since they were demarcated by being called avarna – those without caste.
- What rules of socializing prevail in their neighbourhoods?
- What are the rules of proximity among different groups?
What are the rules of hierarchy in a society that is, in many ways, cut off from the mainstream?

Are there dominant castes among them who push the others around: if so which are these and why and how do they assume dominance?

Are religious practices different among them, or are there practices that characterise the entire slum and give it an identity as a community?

Or are there multiple communities even in the ghetto and does the ghetto nurture their differences?

Dharavi

Places such as Dharavi have of course undergone a lot of change, but it may still be possible to get to know about what we think of as a different world. Segregation of course is never total. People who live in the slums still come to work in the city. Or, as in Dharavi where their occupations have an intimate linkage with the city that sustains them.

Planning a new township, virtually, for Dharavi has posed many challenges to the competitors. One has had to ask how it functions, or, better how would we like it to function. Such an exercise however need not be limited to Dharavi. There are many such segregated areas in Mumbai, and for that matter in all cities.

The many studies that have been a prelude to the working out of each of these projects, actually provide a better understanding of Mumbai as a whole, since Dharavi and Mumbai survive because of their interaction with each other. This awareness needs to be understood by the city. I was, therefore, very interested to see how wide-ranging the entries to the competition were, and the extent to which the lives of its residents were taken into account.

One can only hope that at least some of the more positive features of this attempt to plan a new settlement, resonate with the City’s planners will be activated sooner than later.

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