



Mumbai, workers and the two pandemics

DATTA ISWALKAR, SHWETA DAMLE

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In 1896-97 India and particularly Mumbai was a hot spot of bubonic plague brought via the sea from Hong Kong. It killed around 10 million people in the country. Cramped and damp conditions in Bombay facilitated the spread of disease rapidly. Bombay also had inadequate drainage, sewerage and was so unsanitary with human and animal excreta. Soon Bombay emerged as the epicentre of the pandemic. British colonial rulers used ruthless means for controlling the spread of this disease - identification of patients, razing their houses and putting them in detention camps like arrangement. Those evicted and displaced were never rehoused again. Many workers, who had migrated to work in various mills in Bombay, fled the city from the scare of both the disease and the inhuman treatment in the military like plague camps.

Cut to 2020, 123 years later, Mumbai finds itself again in the grip of another pandemic, COVID 19. The methodology to deal with the pandemic is very colonial; the 'Epidemic Disease Act 1897' was invoked in March 2020, and all decision making centralised. Then our Prime Minister gave a 4-hour notice for a complete lockdown disregarding the existential realities of workers. Homelessness, joblessness and suffering became a reality in the coming days

Mumbai is one of the most populated cities in the country. With close to 55% of the population living, in slums, in appalling conditions and working in the informal sector. These people have been disproportionately affected due to the pandemic. For many, the lockdown meant no income. Initially, people thought

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it would get over in a few days. However, that not being the case, workers and their families panicked (the use of the word workers is deliberate) since it was not just migrant workers but also all workers living in slums).

The safety protocols to save from this new disease were a luxury for slum dwellers living in high-density slums. They used inadequate common toilets and had limited water supply access. Few slums even today do not have access to potable water. The prevailing conditions in slums made social/ physical distancing and other prescribed hygiene practises impossible to be followed. To add to it, this lockdown meant no economic activities. This situation made life particularly difficult for the daily wagers, hawkers, home-based workers, domestic workers and others.

Further marginalisation happened by systematically developing a narrative and shifting the burden of the disease's spread to the slum dwellers. This has resulted in many toilers becoming jobless even after the lockdown was withdrawn. The reality is that there have been relaxations in lockdown rules from 8th July onwards, but domestic workers and drivers have not got their jobs back, the hawkers have not been allowed to sell; instead, they have been evicted from many areas.

The questions to ask then are, 'What does this tell us about the last 123 years' development trajectory?' It narrates a story of complete neglect. We shall have to dig into the history and path of industrialisation India undertook. India did not take the classical path. Industries were brought to India by the Britishers for the following reasons: to achieve a monopolistic trading position, market for their goods and a good source for raw material, cheap labour, and employment for their upper middle classes (Maddison 1971). These factors resulted in extractive and exploitative relations. The welfare of labourers was not their priority. The technology transfer was primitive and that needed

workers with moderate to little skills. It was easy to keep them on low wages and let them fend for themselves. Depending on the meagre resources, workers created village-like housing arrangements closer to workplaces. The labour that came to work in the textile mills of Mumbai were left to deal with their living arrangements. The plague forced Britishers to invest in making decent living arrangements for their workers when it became a threat to them. Through an act of Parliament, Bombay City Improvement Trust was created on 9th December 1898 in response to the plague. All the vacant land was to be handed over to this body for development. The agenda was to create well-ventilated roads in central and crowded parts of the town. Well laid out mixed land-use patterns were created to decongest Central Bombay. This was completed in 1900. In 1920 Bombay Development Department was created to develop 50,000 tenements and develop the northern suburbs of the city. However, none of this could solve the formal housing deficit of Mumbai. There were always more people than houses, and houses always outpriced the earnings of workers. As a result, a big chunk of workers could only afford to live in slums.

Despite the presence of several industries and institutions, there was a substantial informal sector operating from informal spaces. Small scale manufacturing, domestic retail, non-durable products and domestic service were always outside the formal sector. One of the reasons for this was the trajectory of industrialisation adopted by India post-independence. The industrial growth post-independence was import-substituting industrialisation, and it would be the public sector that would invest in heavy industry. Therefore what was left to the Indian industrialist was small scale manufacturing, which decentralised production to maximise profits. Hence the presence of a large informal sector. Most of this informal sector lacked access to adequate wages and benefits, safe working conditions as well as formal housing.

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Post-liberalisation, there is enough documentation to show that informal labour increased along with the decentralisation of manufacturing. This led to slum becoming manufacturing sites for larger companies. Along with this, a substantial population was servicing this informal sector—all living and operating in the slum. One of the recent studies shows that of the 8 lakh population of Dharavi, 70 % of the working population is employed within the slums (pg 15, *Living and Working in Slums of Mumbai*, Gurber 2005). Any development of Dharavi will have to be work-centric and not merely habitat centric.

In conclusion, we see that the informal workers have been at a disadvantage and subject of neglect since colonial times. The city responded to the plague by institution-building, catering to the need to improve workers’ living conditions. The efforts have not been sustained over the period of the last 70 years. The neglect of informal workers on the front of access to better living conditions and access to affordable health services has been exposed in the current pandemic. Therefore, there is a need to look at cities and workers’ needs from the filters of work security, response to the pandemic, better living conditions, and access to health care and community living. Therefore, any reorganisation of the city needs engagement with communities as important stakeholders and consumers of these spaces; looking at the political economy of the slum that is integrated with the larger geography will also be equally important.

Few of the recent news articles appearing indicate a push to slum redevelopment. The last 20 odd years of slum redevelopment has resulted in addressing merely 12% of its proposed target, an abysmally dismal performance. Therefore there is a need to relook at things differently. The approach and strategy for sustained and inclusive development will happen only when we hear workers’ needs and take them in confidence. It has to be a collective upliftment of labour to make cities more livable.

Datta Iswalkar was the President of Girni Kamgar Sangharsh Samiti (GKSS). He led the struggle for the housing of the mill workers after the closure of mills. He was employed in Modern Mill at 7 Rasta Mumbai as a clerk. And since then had been associated with issues of workers in the city.

Shweta Damle is a founder director of Habitat & Livelihood Welfare Association who is attempting to understand various ways in which workers in the city are disenfranchised — at the same time, trying to raise the stake of workers by being creatively disruptive of disenfranchisement processes.