



The city we 'saw', the city we want

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- Invited for the theme of 'Reimagining the Post-Covid-19 City'

A city, perpetually enveloped in pollution smog, has suddenly seen blue skies. Birdsong, drowned out by the ear-splitting sounds of blaring horns and human voices, has been heard after ages. The scarce open spaces appear more open, the dwindling population of trees appears more abundant, and the denizens of this magnificent metropolis are waking up each day to a place they had forgotten ever existed.

The Covid-19 pandemic pushed Mumbai back to an era when life was slower and possibly more humane.

Yet, the crisis has also torn open the veneer of comfort that we derived from being the most prosperous city in India.

Behind the glitter was the reality of half our citizens living in conditions that made a mockery of the recommended precautions of physical distancing and hygiene considered as essential to remaining safe during this pandemic. No amount of disinfectant would provide a barrier against the spread of a disease that is indiscriminate in its targets.

While this half of the city lived in perpetual fear of infection and even more of seeking help if they contracted the disease, the better-off half locked their gates, disinfected every nook and cranny with a vengeance, and looked upon anyone and everyone who did not belong to their class as a possible spreader of the virus. Even though the virus entered India through people with the ability to fly around the world, this little detail was soon forgotten when the barricades went up.

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Being ‘locked-in’ also forced a stillness, a slowness, and limited movement that was novel for this class of people. As a result, some of them were forced to witness scenes they avoided because they never walked the streets. Now some of them ‘saw’, perhaps for the first time, people who had lived on pavements even in their rich neighbourhoods for decades, providing essentials such as fruit and vegetables. They were compelled to acknowledge the importance of the small neighbourhood shops that had survived despite the onslaught of malls and e-commerce.

They could not miss the sight of the silent women and men who cleaned the streets and the gutters, who collected and sorted the garbage, who delivered medicines and groceries. They felt the absence of those who fixed and repaired practically anything, kept houses clean, provided freshly cooked food and cared for the very young and the elderly.

This often unacknowledged and virtually invisible army of women and men populates the informal settlements, the overcrowded buildings and chawls, the very locations where the Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked the greatest damage. According to some estimates, more than half the containment zones in Mumbai, consisting of areas with a high prevalence of infection, and a larger percentage of recorded deaths, were in these dense urban poor locations.

This should come as no surprise. For even in the best of times, the majority of people living in these settlements suffer from inadequate basic services and find it virtually impossible to access affordable health care in this, India's richest city. The neglect of publicly funded health care institutions at the cost of a proliferation of private health care has already extracted a heavy price from the urban poor. At a time of a pandemic like Covid-19, it is not difficult to imagine the crisis confronting them.

Looking ahead, even if we are not in a position to remodel Mumbai, can we at least reimagine it? Can we repair some of the fault lines that lie exposed because of this pandemic?

The priority, I believe, must be affordable housing. It is unconscionable that in the year 2020, this city is still known for its urban-poor settlements, including its most renowned, Dharavi, rather than for any other attribute. Each time there is a crisis -- a flood, a fire, a pandemic -- these areas take up a larger space in our minds than the physical space they occupy. Yet, the urban-poor are the constant, the essential citizens of Mumbai who serve but receive little.

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How we achieve this goal has been a long and multi-layered discussion for many decades. But in the end, it remains unaddressed while more spaces get cornered and fenced in for the better-resourced people of the city. It is not just a case of shrinking spaces but a shrinking commitment to finding a solution to the housing crisis.

Inextricably linked to affordable housing is the obvious need for affordable health care. Mumbai once had some of the best-run government and municipal hospitals. Most of them have been under-resourced and neglected. Somehow they have upped their game during this crisis. But clearly, they are inadequate. And the private sector in health care has had to be literally bullied into stepping in to fill the gaping holes in this pandemic season.

This, too, must be a priority. We cannot sink back into the complacency that allowed our public health institutions to become so moribund.

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As and when this crisis ends, one that has affected everyone but some more than others, I hope that we do not revert to business as usual. Instead, we should use imagination and resources to restructure this city's priorities so that those who literally hold it up can also live a life of dignity.

Kalpna Sharma is an independent journalist, columnist and author based in Mumbai. In almost five decades as a journalist specializing in developmental, environmental and gender issues, she has worked with Himmat Weekly, Indian Express, The Times of India and The Hindu and as Consulting Editor with Economic & Political Weekly. Her column on gender, 'The Other Half', ran for 30 years, first in Indian Express and then in The Hindu. Currently, she writes a media column in NewsLaundry.com and a gender column in Mathrubhumi.

She is the author of 'The Silence and the Storm: Narratives of violence against women in India' and 'Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slum'. In addition, she has edited 'Single by Choice, Happily Unmarried Women' and 'Missing: Half the Story, Journalism as if Gender Matters'.

