

*The year is 2050 and finally Mumbai is Shanghai. Steel and glass spires dot the island city which is packed with numerous flyovers, malls, multiplexes, up-market boutiques and coffee shops. Almost every inch of land including the former mangrove swamps and salt pans is covered with striking high-rises. As the vertical city ascends skywards, not a single shanty or slum can be spotted for miles. No hutments, no hawkers, no footpath-dwellers under the distinctive blue tarpaulins. It's almost as if the poor have vanished in to history. In reality, they have just been booted to the outskirts of the flawless city. But their labour is still in demand. So everyday they stand in line, punch a ticket and enter the metropolis in order to execute a multitude of menial services for its elite residents. Cleaning, clearing, cooking, babysitting, chauffeuring, disposing, delivering, constructing – performing the everyday chores for the extraordinary global city. But as soon as it's sundown, they shut shop and board express trains that whisk them out of the city within minutes. There are exceptions of course. Some, like child-minders, are required to render services after dark, so they have special permits that are renewed every quarter...*

Don't laugh this off as a wild fantasy. If you've been following the ongoing deliberations about rebuilding Mumbai in to a "world class city" in the mold of Shanghai or Singapore, then the scenario painted above is as close as you can get to the vision of the new Mumbai. For 'Vision Mumbai', an idea first mooted in a report prepared by international consulting firm McKinsey for Bombay First, a corporate funded lobby group, and further augmented by Vilasrao Deshmukh's state government is skewed in favour of designing and planning a grandiose global city that caters to the wishes of the elite even as it marginalises and pushes to the corners the most vulnerable sections of the city's population – the poor and the dispossessed, and especially the women, children and aged among them.

Besides, the idea of a spatially divided city – on class and race lines – is not a novelty for Mumbai. When the British took charge of Bombay, as it was then called, they physically divided the southern portion of the island city in to the Fort – where the British and some wealthy Indians held sway – and the native quarter or the Black town – where the bulk of the Indians lived and worked in congested and under-planned conditions. These included areas such as Kalbadevi, Girgaum, Mandvi, and Dongri.

But it is this new Mumbai that now interests us. This Mumbai where several crores are to be spent just for refurbishment of Marine Drive and for renovation of the facades of its Art Deco buildings, where 42 more flyovers and elevated roads are planned (in addition to the 50-odd flyovers already built in the last decade), where coastal expressways and trans-harbour sea links are being built, and where more land – especially in the erstwhile mill district – is expected to be earmarked for high-end housing, malls and entertainment hubs.

You don't have to be very bright to note that this make-over of Mumbai favours the well-off segments of the city. For example, the intense focus on building many miles of flyovers across the city is to largely benefit the few that use private motorized transport when almost 87 per cent of the city's 12 million citizens use public transport (trains and buses).

But then that's not surprising considering that the affluent have the most say in the running of the city. Most government-appointed panels that draw up long-term "visions" for the city are swarming with corporate big wigs<sup>1</sup>, prominent architects and urban designers. Many citizen groups that consult with local government are filled with middle-class professionals and retired executives. (Those in South Mumbai are often populated with residents who enjoy the luxury of rent-control apartments) Often their vision, blurred by corporate and

self interest, and admiration for the efficiency of Western (and now Far Eastern) cities, is narrow, immune to local realities, favours privatization and consumerism.

The government denies the poor and labouring classes a voice and so does the media which regularly lets the elite air their views on rebuilding the city, sprucing up the environs and generally uplifting the urban aesthetic but rarely asks the poor and the marginalized their opinion on the future of the city. These are the poor who are already paying a price for a botoxed Mumbai<sup>2</sup>.

Worse still, by repeatedly using language that describes them as "encroachers" and by paying more attention to the illegality of structures of the poor than to those of the rich, slum dwellers – who number seven million and form 60 per cent of Mumbai's population – are constantly treated as being less than full citizens. According to sociologist Sharif Bhowmik, slums, which occupy less than 8 per cent of the city's land, are projected as the cause of most, if not all urban problems. Yet high-rise apartments cause greater strain on public utilities (drainage, garbage, water and so on) as their consumption is much higher than in the slums<sup>3</sup>.

'Vision Mumbai' is blinkered because it is the vision of only a select few. It has blanked out the voices of the city's other stakeholders, namely slum dwellers, the poor and the working class. And across all groups, it has neglected to hear from the city's women. If all these constituents were given a say in the new vision for Mumbai, they would surely paint a different image for the city.

For the last two years, PUKAR's Gender & Space project has been talking to women across Mumbai about what they want from the city. Not surprisingly, they want ordinary and basic needs to be met first – mainly access to water, toilets, low-cost housing, livelihood, efficient

public transport systems, quality schooling and child-care, open playgrounds, and safe public spaces.

More interestingly, we also found that contrary to commonsense notions of urban beautification – tree-lined and fenced-in footpaths, streets clear of hawkers – women often prefer a degree of chaos, ambiguity and multiplicity to univalent notions of cleanliness and order. For many of them, clean lines and people-less streets do

not equal comfort or safety<sup>4</sup>. Hawkers often represent friendly and familiar 'eyes' on the street; restaurants/shops open late provide safety as they make available extra lighting and imply that more people are out and about; a slum nearby means easier access to domestic and child care help.

The suggestion here is not that footpaths should always be crowded with hawkers or that slums should never be upgraded. It's merely to offer another way of looking at the city through a different set of eyes and to indicate that urban planning and design needs to consider alternative 'visions' for the city.

The discussions around 'Vision Mumbai' have forced Mumbai to engage in a larger debate about its identity. What sort of city does it really want to be? The fictional city highlighted at the start of this essay, or a more inclusive city that prides itself on its rich cosmopolitanism and acknowledges the contributions and voices of all its constituents, especially its poor and working-class citizens.

If Mumbai's makeover is to set a positive example for urban renewal in other parts of the country then it must take everyone from the jhopadpatti-walas to the wealthy, men and women, the young and the old, along for the ride.

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2 To accommodate the new developments in the city, roughly, 90,000 shanties were razed in the early part of 2005, displacing over five lakh people, almost all of whom are yet to be rehabilitated. The demolitions disrupted schooling for thousands of children, and increased problems relating to sanitation and health for women. Several hundred hawkers were also removed from designated non-hawking zones. In fact, the attempt to wipe off the poor has even gone as far as trying to disenfranchise them by deleting their names from voter registration lists.

3 Anupama Katakam, 'Urban Development: For a new Mumbai, at great cost', Frontline, Vol.22, Issue 02, Jan 15-28, 2005.

4 Sameera Khan, Shilpa Phadke, Shilpa Ranade, 'Women want bright lights, safe parks & female cops', Sunday Times of India, Jan 30, 2005

1 A case in point is the Maharashtra government's recently announced Urban Renewal Commission to kickstart Mumbai's journey to becoming a 'world class' city. People appointed to it include several private sector head honchos like Deepak Parekh, Anand Mahindra, Jamshyd Godrej, and Noel Tata. But it has no representatives from organizations that represent the city's poor, its workers and its women.