

**World Class Cities? Poverty, Inequality and Displacement
Civil Society Responses to Poverty Reduction
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The Trajectory of Urban Development

The year was 1981 and the Municipal Corporation was planning to evict pavement dwellers from the streets of downtown **Bombay** under the Slum Clearance Act that had been enacted ten years earlier. At this time, a concerned journalist filed one of the first “public interest” petitions to protect the rights of the pavement dwellers. In 1986 the Supreme Court gave a landmark judgement that held that, under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, the Right to Life included the Right to Livelihood, and hence, the pavement dwellers could not be arbitrarily evicted as their livelihood was dependent on where they lived. It was thus that the Slum Upgradation Scheme was conceptualised in the 80s, which later became the Slum Redevelopment Scheme of the 90s. These were accompanied by schemes such as Urban Basic Services for the Poor, the National Slum Development Programme, and, eventually recognizing slum-dwellers as informal sector workers, the Shahri Rozgar Yojanas (Urban Employment Schemes). Thus, urban planning seemed to be making a radical conceptual departure from exclusionary processes of removal of the poor to more inclusionary concerns for providing basic services and livelihoods.

Yet it was in this very same metropolis of indigenised **Mumbai** that, at the turn of the century, the government moved with massive force, with helicopters and armed police, to evict 73,000 families from the periphery of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park. Curiously enough, this action was in response to Court orders in another “public interest” petition, but filed this time by the Bombay Environmental Action Group (BEAG). What the BEAG appeared to be concerned about was the protection of a 28 square kilometre “National” Park, particularly the one-third reserved for “tourism”. But no one seemed to be bothered by either the sundry religious Ashrams inside the Park or the proliferating blocks of private apartment houses on its boundary. In a parallel development, 5.3 million square metres of land was taken from closed industries and dereserved for commercial exploitation, while workers were violently being deprived of jobs and homes. And currently there is the imperial project of vacating Dharavi, probably Asia’s largest “slum” and a powerhouse of small-scale enterprise, to convert it into prime real estate. What, then, is the nature of “public interest”, and how have the views of legislature, executive, and judiciary changed in the last thirty odd years?

The first *habeas corpus* petition, of what would come to be subsequently known as Public Interest Litigation (PIL), was filed by an advocate in the Supreme Court of India, in 1979, under Article 32 of the Constitution, on the basis of newspaper reports describing how under-trial prisoners had already been imprisoned for longer than the maximum sentence that could be imposed upon conviction. For the first time, the Supreme Court had to adjudicate in a matter where the affected party was not directly approaching it for redress. Seeking to overcome the hurdles imposed by traditional jurisprudence, the Court gave a landmark judgement touching upon several such cases before it. It stated: “Where the weaker sections of the community are concerned, such as under-trial prisoners languishing in jails without trial, inmates of the Protective home in Agra, or Harijan (untouchable caste) workers engaged in road construction in the district of Ajmer, who are living in poverty and destitution, who are barely eking out a miserable existence with their sweat and toil, who are helpless victims of an exploitative society and who do not have easy access to justice, the Supreme Court will not insist on a regular writ petition to be filed by the public-spirited individual espousing their cause and seeking relief for them.” But, unlike Tellis, the

BEAG was clearly not espousing the cause of “helpless victims of an exploitative society”. Thus, it appears that in two decades, the notion of the “public interest” had dramatically changed, as had the notion of a “planned” city.

This phenomenon does not appear to be peculiar to some provincial governments, such as those of the centrist Indian National Congress or the xenophobic Shiv Sena of **Mumbai**. In **Chennai** (Madras), presided over by the anti-high caste Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, where 40% of the population is reported to be living in slums – as compared to Mumbai’s 55% - there are 69,000 families who are being relocated to areas far removed from the city. The areas they will vacate will be taken over by high-speed railway tracks, hotel resorts, commercial and residential complexes, and modern businesses. Much of the “clearance” is being undertaken in the name of “beautification” and tourism. The same notions of “environmental improvement” are prevailing in the Marxist Left Front-governed **Kolkata** (Calcutta) where Operation Sunshine was launched in 1996 to evict over 50,000 hawkers from the city’s main streets. Currently over 7,000 hutments are being forcibly demolished along the sides of stormwater drains and the Metro and Circular rail tracks. Rumours are rife that boats full of tourists will ply on the restored Tolly’s Nala. At the same time, lavish commercial and residential complexes are coming up unhindered along the Metropolitan Bypass, where the real estate prices rival those in downtown New York. And in **Delhi**, alternatively ruled by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party and the reform-oriented Congress, where sub-standard settlements house as much as 70% of the city’s population, judicial activism dominates the political landscape. Not only have hawkers and vendors, cycle-rickshaws, beggars, street food, polluting and non-conforming industries, petty shopkeepers, and diesel buses already been “evicted”, but slum demolitions in the last five years have displaced over half a million people and the land turned over for “public purposes” such as hotels, malls, parks, flyovers, and office complexes.

Smaller cities and provincial capitals, where 15-20% of the people are living in slums, are in the grip of the same malaise. **Hyderabad** was distributing land titles and housing loans to the urban poor in 1977 but the regional Telugu Desam Party was merrily leasing large tracts of land at heavily subsidised prices to business groups, international airports, cinema halls, shopping complexes, hotels, corporate hospitals, and railway tracks. Over 10,000 houses of the “weaker sections” have been demolished to make way for the new face of “Cyberabad”. **Bangalore**, again under the Indian National Congress, is in keen competition as it upscales to accommodate lounges and pubs, parks and apartment complexes, malls and layouts, “clean” industry and “green” business, and has devised an innovative collusion between bureaucrats, companies, politicians, and “citizens” to push through a mode of e-governance that makes land records available to the corporate and real estate lobby for easy purchase and commercialisation, using Transferable Development Rights (TDRs) as the instrument for raising funds from the market. **Chandigarh** displaced almost 40 villages when it was built, then it displaced those labour camps which housed those who originally built the city. Now the administration under the regional Akali Dal is again “beautifying” the environs by evicting the service class that inhabits the occasional slum.

In **Ahmedabad**, currently governed by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party, the closure of the textile mills in the 1980s led to 60,000 workers being laid off. There was a partial decasualisation and increase in regular workers in 1987-88 because of the growth of power looms, but these units were relegated to the periphery as the vacant mill lands were used for resource generation. Annual capital expenditure increased from Rs224.8 million in 1993-94 to Rs724 million in 1996-97; octroi increased from Rs972 million in 1991-92 to Rs2258 million in 1996-97; and property tax increased from Rs336 million to Rs907 million. The Municipal Corporation’s credit rating has thus gone up and enabled it to access funds from capital markets and obtain international credit. Development of a major commercial street was turned over to Arvind Mills, which converted it into a prime shopping street with outlets for national and multi-national corporations. But, in the process, the slum population has increased from 17.2% in 1961 to 22.8% in 1971, and 25.6% in 1991. In these slums, tenure is related to ration cards and/or Corporation passes but 28% have neither. And the ruling party in Gujarat has been particularly

innovative in using communal frenzy as a means of evicting large sections of the “unwanted” and taking over their land and property.

Jaipur too wants to become a national hub for economic activities, taking advantage of its splendid architectural heritage. The 1991 Master Plan had reserved 4460ac for industrial use, of which only 2490ac could be developed as such, the rest became residential. Textile and food industries registered the maximum growth of 60%, but there are over 100,000 casual workers, of whom 40,000 live on the footpath. The commercial of land has assumed huge proportions with land use being changed from rural to township development by private parties, and local authorities helping private developers in the acquisition of land. These developers are focusing on information technology, medical care, knowledge hubs, entertainment complexes, and world trade centres. A draft notification has already been issued to promote private sector participation and foreign direct investment in real estate. Preparation of the new Master Plan has been taken over from the Town Planning authorities and entrusted to private consultants. The only formal process of citizen participation in urban governance has been channelled through property-owning Resident Welfare Associations. This implies that the 310,000 people living in 101 slums will effectively have no voice in the running of their city.

Urban Renewal Mission in Context

Why have these changes taken place within a short span of fifteen years? The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) may provide the analytical instrument for answering that question. This Mission was launched by the Prime Minister in December 2005, without any debate or discussion in Parliament, with the promise of providing Rs1260 billion to 63 million-plus cities and towns for a massive and comprehensive programme of urban renewal. The Mission Statement specifies that 30% of the Indian population lives in urban areas and contributes about 50% of GDP. However, since the urban infrastructure is crumbling and the provisions of the 74th Amendment to the Constitution (that provides for a third tier of participatory urban governance at the local level, after the Union and State Governments) have not been successfully implemented, the Mission has been initiated to promote reforms and sustainable development. The Mission's objectives are, therefore, to develop infrastructure, set up management systems for effective maintenance, provide adequate capital investment, plan urban corridors and expansion, redevelop heritage areas, and provide civic services to the urban poor. It is, of course, not clear how the ‘problem’ of crumbling infrastructure has been analysed to arrive at the normative ‘solution’ of urban renewal in the above fashion – particularly in the context of the urban poor who are most affected by the lack of access to infrastructure.

The confusion is further compounded when the strategy of the Mission is spelt out. This strategy has eight components: rapid preparation of a City Development Plan (CDP) to cover a 20-25 year horizon; memoranda of agreement to be signed between State Governments, Union Government, and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) to implement reforms; preparation of Detailed Project Reports; definite role for the participation of the private sector in developing infrastructure; direct grants to nominated nodal agencies; raising additional resources from financial institutions, private sector, and capital markets by the nodal agency; transfer of funds from nodal agencies to the ULBs through grants or loans; and creation of a revolving fund for management and maintenance of created assets. How such planning, agreements, funds, and private participation will actually ease the pressure on infrastructure while providing services to the poor remains unsaid. Neither has any evidence been provided for the reasons behind the acknowledged “inefficiency” of the public sector in doing precisely the same tasks that the private sector is now supposed to perform in a spirit of social responsibility.

Which is why it is interesting that the Mission proposes to separate the infrastructure component from the services to the poor by setting up two Sub-Missions under different Ministries. Thus, the Infrastructure component, that will address the issues of renewal, water supply and sanitation, solid waste management, drains and sewers, urban transport, parking,

heritage conservation, and protection of water bodies, is delegated to the Urban Development Ministry. While the Basic Services for the Poor component, including integrated development of slums, slum clearance and improvement, provision of civic services, affordable housing, sanitation and waste management, maintenance, and coordination between health, education, and social security is under the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation. How these two Ministries will come up with a coordinated and integrated effort is a question that is not answered in the document. And implicit in the division is the understanding that the development of “infrastructure” (including such critical issues as water, sanitation, and wastes) is not going to be for the poor!

Some enlightenment about the real purpose of the Mission emerges when one looks at the proposed Reforms under the Project, which will enable the ULBs to access funds from the capital markets and promote public-private partnerships. Two kinds of Reforms are proposed – those that are ‘mandatory’, and others that are ‘voluntary’. To remove all doubts, the ‘mandatory’ measures are spelt out at both the level of the ULBs as well as the State Governments. The former are supposed to adopt modern double-accounting systems, e-governance, user fees to recover full costs, budgetary allocations by the ULBs to provide affordable basic services for the poor, and reform property taxes. The latter have to conduct elections to the ULBs under the 74th Amendment, repeal the Urban Land Ceiling Act, reform the Rent Control Act, bring down Stamp Duties to 5%, put in place a public disclosure law, and involve ULBs in urban planning and management. Thus, these mandatory reforms are clearly designed to aid in improving the “efficiency” of the money market, not necessarily that of services.

It turns out that there is nothing voluntary about the ‘voluntary’ reforms either – they have to be carried out within the space of seven years earmarked for the Mission. They include modifying the rules to make construction and land development easier, simplifying the procedures to convert agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes, implementing property title certificate schemes, providing 20-25% of land for EWS and LIG housing against matching grants and aid, computerising land and property registration, and promoting public-private partnerships. At first glance, all these reforms appear to be benevolently designed to improve governance and delivery mechanisms. However, a closer reading shows that, in fact, they are all targeted at benefiting those who own money, land, and property and making property transactions easier, particularly for the large private builders and developers. Even electronic systems of keeping records and providing access to information favour this class above all others.

The supreme irony is that this Mission, explicitly favouring the private owner of capital, has been blessed with the name of Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the foremost proponents of socialist development through the agency of an active public sector. What is probably even less appreciated, though, is that the JNNURM does not stand alone. In fact, it is part of a larger package of programmes that includes the Master Plans, the Small and Medium Town Development Project (SMTDP), the Urban Environment and Infrastructure Improvement Projects (UEIIP), the New Economic Policy (NEP), the National Transport Policy (NTP), the series of agreements under the World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations, particularly the Non Agricultural Market Access (NAMA) that permits foreign corporations to invest in infrastructure projects, and the Tenth Plan – all of which promote public-private partnerships and user charges as self-evident truths. It also shares the same genealogy of state intervention as the National Slum Development Programme (NSDP), the Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana (Silver Jubilee Urban Employment Programme) (SJSRY), and the Valmiki-Ambedkar Awas Yojana (Housing Scheme) (VAMBAY).

So why was the JNNURM necessary? The aggregate money appears huge, but when distributed over 63 cities and towns over 7 years it comes to an average of Rs2.8 billion per year per city. Many city budgets are already larger than the JNNURM component. Hence, clearly money is not the driving force. The second aspect is the emphasis given to the “efficient” private sector. Urban services are targeted at being provided by special agencies with private sector participation, not by municipalities. But, given the fact that the major investment is going to be in infrastructure, which has notoriously low returns, the likelihood is that it is the financial institutions

and markets that will provide the investment, and that, in turn, will increase the debt liabilities. Hence, recovery can only be from the sale of land and property and from increased taxes. This is where the real interest of the private corporations will lie, with the added advantage of cost-sharing being spread over the entire urban population in the name of decentralisation.

At the core of the JNNURM, therefore, is the new model of governance that is emerging. The “world class” mega projects of infrastructure can only be taken up with financial support and subsidies to the corporations. These will be facilitated by the setting up of new institutions for promoting reforms, such as Special Purpose Vehicles, Project Management Units, Non Government Organisations etc, which are all designed to bypass the existing democratic institutions that are accountable to the people. Centralisation of decision-making, while decentralising the debt burdens, and encouraging market-based financing and control, can only add to the influence of elite sections of consultants, bureaucrats, and business interests. Thus, planning of these projects (including the CDP) will be done with such haste and under such conditions of secrecy, that it cannot be based on verifiable data. The repeal of the Urban Land Ceiling Act is being done in the name of making more land available in the market, but will actually only favour the real estate lobby and the big builders. The city will go upwards, both in physical and economic terms, squeezing out the urban poor and even the lower middle class.

A Vision of ‘World Class’

What is the ‘vision’ of the future that animates urban planners and administrators with such conviction across the land and thereby, ignores the aspirations of the urban poor? An overview of the City Development Plans recently prepared under the JNNURM provides several clues. **Hyderabad**, for instance, wants “to be an inclusive and futuristic city providing high quality services with universal access including the poor. It will be a slum free, citizen friendly, well-governed and environmentally friendly city”. “Our vision is to delight customer by providing pressurised continuous water in an equitable, efficient, sustainable manner and create Hyderabad a world-class city.” **Mumbai’s** vision statement is “Transform Mumbai into a City of the Millennium”, following from the guidance provided by the now-notorious McKinsey study. Mumbai has also decided to benchmark itself with the cities of Cleveland (U.S.A.), Shanghai, Singapore, London and New York. There is, however, no specific mention of the poor in all these visions.

Bangalore feels it “has evolved as a cosmopolitan and lovable City, with a global presence. To retain its pre-eminent position as a *City of the future*, the City shall enable and empower its citizens with... high-quality infrastructure for transport and communication... responsive and efficient governance” while dreaming of a city with “no more new slums” and “treating its less fortunate brethren in a humane manner through effective municipal administration”. **Kolkata’s** stated vision is “to provide sustained and improved quality of life through basic urban services in an inclusive manner and create enabling environment for attracting domestic and international investors to live, work and invest in Kolkata Metropolitan area”. And **Chennai** says that it’s vision for “the next 20 years is to develop it as a Prime Metropolis”, which will be economically vibrant and environmentally sustainable. **Ahmedabad** has the dream of a “vibrant, productive, harmonious, sustainable and environmental friendly, clean and livable city having a responsive local government offering its citizens a good quality of life”.

Chandigarh offers “world-class services to its investors”. “A beautiful eco-friendly city for all, providing 24x7 water supply.” And **Ludhiana** has decided that it would “become a leading economic centre of the country, and... [would provide the] best possible ‘Quality of Life’ to its citizens”. **Jaipur** wants to be “a vibrant, 21st century renaissance city”, and explains that this phrase “brings out clearly the need of the people to break out of the ordinary and to achieve an improved quality of life”. **Lucknow’s** vision is articulated as “a city with a dynamic economy driven by service sectors such as knowledge-based education, health, tourism and information technology that provides opportunities for all and makes it an attractive investment destination”. **Indore** “shall enter an era of prosperity with spatially restructured environment, improved urban

infrastructure to achieve better lifestyle, minimum basic services to the underprivileged with functionally sustainable development and dynamism of growth which will pave the way of it becoming a world class commercial city.” **Raipur** also wants “a beautiful eco-friendly city for all, providing high quality of civic services”.

The vision for **Coimbatore** is “to achieve improved service levels and better quality of life for the citizens of Coimbatore”, including “pucca houses for all slum households” and “education for all in slums”. Curiously, high-priced, showpiece infrastructure projects are notably missing from its checklist. Similarly **Pune** expresses its desire to focus on the basic needs of citizens rather than the creation of high-priced showpiece infrastructure projects purported to attract foreign investment – although this is not reflected in any particularly detailed proposals for the dramatic improvement of life in the city’s slums. **Guwahati** “is visualised to be one of the most admired state capitals of India with a unique image”, with the aim to “create a city without slums” by rehabilitating existing slums and preventing further encroachment through enforcement.

What is important about these stated visions is that not only has much effort been put in by the consultants to evolving them through a series of selective (and restricted) consultations, but also because they are a reliable indication of the how the cities wish to project themselves in the public domain, in order to access the funds available under the JNNURM. Hence, all the key catch-words and phrases about world class and competitive cities, enunciated in the Mission document, have been religiously regurgitated in these statements. But, at the same time, almost all the City Development Plans also get down to listing some very prosaic aims in terms of service provision to all its citizens, including the urban poor, which is often a consequence of the range and depth of consultations that have been arranged by the consultant – in other words, who have been invited to the table to air their views. What is revealing about this dichotomy is that the budgetary provisions almost invariably favour the former rather than the latter. Thus, city planners and consultants are clearly caught in a wedge between imagining the city as it *should* be and the city as it *actually* is. The impression gained from most of the CDP documents is that there were no serious stakeholder consultations or discussions held, especially with regard to the services for the poor.

‘Removing’ Poverty

It is in this context that it is useful to investigate the Urban Poverty Removal Strategy (UPRS) spelt out by the Government of India, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme. According to the Strategy document, “poverty can be defined in different ways, but it is important that poverty is not only defined in terms of economic needs such as income. Poverty also has a social dimension (poor quality of housing and the living environment i.e. lack of access to basic services like clean water, health care, education etc.) Even a definition in economic and social terms does not describe poverty adequately. Apart from not having access to the benefits of development, poverty is also lack of choice and voice, of rights and security, of participation in decision-making.” It goes on to make some very insightful observations, such as, “The multidimensional character of poverty needs to be analyzed both with reference to the framework of asset ownership and to the cumulative impacts of poverty in its many dimensions. Having established the intricacies and complex relations and cumulative impacts of the different dimensions of poverty, one of the ways to address urban poverty is through a ‘livelihood perspective’. The discussion on Urban Poverty Reduction Strategies (UPRSs) revolves around the two moot questions - *the reasons ‘why people are poor’ and how can they be ‘brought out of poverty’*” (emphasis added).

The UPRS also lays great emphasis on ‘people’s participation’. “It is important that strategies for poverty alleviation are appropriately targeted, involve community participation and are innovative. There is now a widespread recognition that urban problems are not just a shortage of housing and infrastructure and that solutions require more than just budgets and bureaucracies—they are founded on people’s participation.” Additionally, the approach is to

facilitate access to livelihoods / employment through policies like the National Policy for Urban Street Vendors (NPUSV) and programmes like the Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana (SJSRY). In response to the above-mentioned thinking on poverty, a GOI-UNDP project on Urban Poverty 'National Strategy for Urban Poor' was conceived. The main objective of the project is to empower the urban poor so that they can contribute effectively to decisions that impact their lives. The project strategy aims to provide the urban poor with a forum to discuss their needs and the obstacles to meeting them. The project seeks to build capacity for implementation of innovative urban poverty alleviation plans, with the thrust on basic services and improvement in the socio-economic condition of slum dwellers. Emphasis will also be laid on providing a broader spectrum of livelihood options for the poor. It is expected that this will, in turn, improve the quality of life of the city as a whole.

In contrast to the Master Plans and the CDPs, that are prepared by public sector authorities and private consultants respectively, the UPRS has to be undertaken by NGOs working with the urban poor in each city. In other words, the Strategy implicitly recognises that it is only those agencies which have some kind of understanding and sympathy with the urban poor who can enable them to participate in the planning process. This also clearly underscores the fact that governments and consultants do not possess this ability to dialogue with the poor any more. It is also another reflection of the gradual withdrawal of the state from service provision, the concurrent attack on work and shelter, and the annihilation of democratic functioning in order that corporate structures can take over decision-making and policy formulation. The NGOs have also been given a period of 6 months to fulfil what should have been state functions, and to prepare the UPRS for 12 cities – all of which are also listed under JNNURM.

An examination of the Inception Report for the UPRS prepared for **Pune** reveals the gulf between what has been articulated as the strategy and what is actually being prepared. Firstly, different estimates have been provided about the numbers of urban poor. One estimate is that about 35-40% of the city's population lives in slums and average per capita income ranges from Rs517 to 786, and therefore, over 95% of Pune's poor lives in slums. But, on the other hand, a World Bank study is cited to show that those living in slums are not necessarily 'poor' according to income levels, because the accepted poverty line is Rs594 per capita. Consequently, the Report obfuscates the issue by stating that "*Migration, livelihood, proximity to work are no longer the only indicators of poverty in Pune*", and so looks for parameters of urban poverty other than income, like housing, access to better sanitation facilities, and capability to function in society. On this basis, it defines almost all slum dwellers as the urban poor, although how these parameters have been measured is not at all apparent. This, therefore, does not address the key question of "*why people are poor?*"

For livelihoods, the Report documents the change in the workforce according to the 2001 Census, and illustrates that the service sector industry forms a major source of employment in Pune. It feels that "the probability of the urban poor being employed in this sector is therefore high" but provides no indicators from the data available with the NGO consultants to back up this claim. Public, private, self-employed, skilled/unskilled construction, professional, skilled/unskilled labour, and miscellaneous are given as categories of work, but no city-level associated numbers or percentages have been provided. Nor is there any explanation for variations across slums with respect to location. Even assuming that the urban poor live in the slums, it appears that there are 503 slums, of which 353 are declared, 150 are undeclared, and 129 are under process. In summary, while this gives a qualitative picture of the slum residences and livelihoods, there is no precise quantitative assessment presented of the nature and character of urban poverty and livelihoods – which is necessary for planning purposes, particularly for the UPRS.

Accordingly, while legal status, landownership, topography, density, kutcha house, paved lanes, gutter coverage, street lighting, toilet ratio, water connection, size of house are proposed as poverty indicators – they are actually indicators of vulnerability. For poverty, the relationship with livelihoods has to be made explicit. While, under the JNNURM for Pune, three industry clusters, an Information Technology and Biotechnology base, an Agro Business Centre, and a

Commercial and Service sector have been specified, it has been decided that “all settlements presently located in vulnerable areas are to be re-located”. But it is not specified how this ‘vulnerability’ under JNNURM compares to the ‘vulnerability’ proposed by the UPRS, and how it has been arrived at. Nor is there any analysis of how livelihoods and living conditions will be affected by the relocation of the slums. Thus, the UPRS for Pune conveniently ignores the whole issue of livelihoods and merely focuses on the relocation of the slums and the provision of basic services at the new sites. Similar patterns are discernible for the UPRS available for other cities. In a way, this supplements the central thrust of the JNNURM (and its wider global context).

Globalising Shelter and Work

Three trends become apparent when we look at this recent history of urban reform. Firstly, large sections of the urban poor are being displaced from space that they have occupied for many years by every government – regardless of political affiliations. These sections are often the ones who have been employed in the informal sector or are self-employed in the tertiary services sector. Their displacement has as much to do with the space they live in as with the work that they perform, and has been promoted by the bilateral and multilateral funding agencies. Secondly, the geographical and occupational space that they occupied is being transferred to larger private corporate entities or wealthier groups, such as commercial complexes and residential layouts. These units are also often coupled up with labour-replacing devices ranging from automatic tellers and computer-aided machines to vacuum cleaners and home delivery services, thus taking over the work earlier done by the lower rungs of the urban population. Thirdly, while the driving force behind these changes is manifestly the new globalised economy, it is offered on an environmental platter of “cleanliness” and “beautification”. This environmental activism, in turn, is the bread and butter of those professional “non-government organisations” (NGO) that are taking up the “public cause”, as well as the judicial, legislative, administrative, and commercial apparatuses – including a very amenable media – that provide them with legitimacy and political support. In vicious combination these three trends are transforming the urban landscape from the city as “home” to the city as “estate”.

The attack on work coincided with the early 1990s when India fell into the trap of structural adjustment laid by the global multi-lateral funding institutions. It is thus, revealing how decisions taken in one part of society affect another. It was in 1985 that an NGO filed a “public interest” petition in the Supreme Court against the limestone mines in the lower Himalayas, arguing that they were devastating the mountain ecology as well as despoiling the air of the valley below. After a series of hearings and investigations, the Court eventually ordered the closure of the mines on the grounds that the Right to Clean Environment flowed from Article 21 of the Constitution (Right to Life). However, when the workers in the mines protested that they would be deprived of the Right to Livelihood – as interpreted by the Court in the *Tellis* case – their appeal was rejected. The Court held that the Right to Clean Environment was “superior” to the Right to Livelihood. In this manner, of two children emanating from the same parent, the highest court in the land held that one was more important. In the last fifteen years the same line of “environmental” reasoning has been used by various vested interest groups who have urged the courts to demolish the livelihoods of many millions of ordinary working people. “Violations” of the “Master” Plans have been used as the pretext for penalising the poor in almost all the urban conglomerates. Since 1995, when the first “green” judgements were handed down, the judges have led the charge against the urban working class.

The attack on urban shelter began much earlier, sometimes even in the 1960s when large scale evictions took place as the first Master Plans came into being. The climax was reached during the late 1970s when the declaration of a National Emergency suspended all human rights and the administration had a free hand to demolish and recast as they pleased. It is also important to note that the era of “public interest” litigation followed the Emergency, as the Court genuflected towards mass discontent and restored many of the civil liberties, particularly of the poor. But the wheel has come full circle. There are at least two dozen judicial orders that have

now ordained that slum dwellers have limited rights to what is being euphemistically called “free” shelter. Administrative concern can be assessed by the fact that, on Independence Day in 2001, the then Prime Minister announced his Government’s intention to provide every urban poor family with a house to live in by 2010. Six weeks later, on World Habitat Day, the Union Cabinet cleared the Valmiki Ambedkar Awas Yojana with a munificent grant of Rs 20 billion for the period of the next Five-Year Plan. Next, the Union Minister for Urban Development declared that 400,000 houses would be built every year by public sector institutions for the urban poor. However, spread over 5161 towns and cities, and at the rate of Rs50,000 per house, the number of houses built would average out to 15.5 per urban centre! So the Group of Ministers arbitrarily revised the target to 2 million houses per year. Real estate developers, on the other hand, estimate that for a family to acquire a one-room kitchen tenement, situated in the distant suburbs of metro cities, would cost a minimum of Rs200,000. The monthly instalment for a 15-year loan would be Rs1860, or roughly 75% of the average monthly income of a slum dweller!

Civil Response to Uncivil Times

There appear to be three paths that are emerging from the rising dust of destruction. Firstly, there are those well-meaning souls who feel that the working poor can be housed in “resettlement” colonies far away in the periphery of the city. However, they tend to forget that neither livelihoods nor services are created in the periphery, particularly for those without any security or tenure. Hence, these people will eventually return to those places where work and water are available, even if it is at the cost of being “illegal”. Then, there are those who demand a “legal” place for the informal sector families within the city in accordance with provisions in urban plans. So they either ask for the poor to be housed in multi-storied complexes, or they haggle over the land has been officially reserved for the “weaker sections”. But, eventually, they have to face the harsh truth liberally dished out by globalisation: that all land and shelter is subject to the “free play” of market forces and the wealthy will dominate in the competition to acquire and maintain property. Those who cling on to life in one-room tenements today, will be bought out tomorrow by those who can afford three-room apartments. Thus, step by inexorable step, the sheer logic of urban change forces the political activist to acknowledge that there is little choice other than to challenge the changing order being promoted by global forces. But this requires a larger federation of organisations of the working people. It is no longer possible to preserve little islands of resistance in the face of the demonic slaughter being carried out under the banner of “reforms”. The questions of unity and political alliances stare us in the face.

Within this context, the experience of some organisation building in the capital city of Delhi is instructive of the dilemmas that are emerging. In 1996, when the first court orders were passed by the Courts to close down ‘polluting’ industry and many hundreds of thousands of workers were being rendered jobless, a coalition of small trade unions and civil rights groups came together under the banner of Delhi Janwadi Adhikar Manch (Democratic Rights Platform). But within two years, as the industries were ruthlessly closed down, the small unions lost their base and the alliance disintegrated. In 1998, yet another group of eight community based organisations and support groups came together under the banner of the Sajha Manch (Partnership Platform) to combat the impending demolition of what were known as ‘unauthorised colonies’. This was a consequence of yet another “public interest” litigation filed by a wealthy NGO arguing that if basic services were to be provided by regularising these colonies, then the infrastructure of the city would begin to crumble, hence the colonies should be demolished and the people moved out of the city. As the attack on work and shelter intensified, other organisations from the informal sector, domestic workers, street vendors, rickshaw drivers, slum dwellers, construction labour, shelterless, wastepickers, women’s groups, child rights activities and others began to congregate around the Sajha Manch, where a forum for discussion and mass action on policy began to evolve.

However, in the absence of a recognised traditional form of ‘leadership’ and a loose and flexible organisation structure, the Sajha Manch could not respond to crisis situations very well

nor could it score high profile victories. Hence, when a massive attack was launched by the state on the slums along the river bank in 2003, yet another coalition was formed called the Visthapan Virodhi Abhiyan (Campaign Against Evictions). But by 2004, when the entire river bank had been cleared through the use of a dominating armed force, the Abhiyan disintegrated. In the meantime, a national coalition called the National Forum for Housing Rights began renewing the call for Right to Shelter that had been enunciated a couple of decades earlier by the National Campaign for Housing Rights. This too generated enthusiasm for a few months in several cities, including Delhi, but dissipated after the national elections that brought the present Government to power. This Government was also a coalition government and had, therefore, developed a Common Minimum Programme, which also promised housing and work to the poor, as also a more participatory form of governance..

However, the evictions, from both work and shelter, continued across the city and a consensus gradually began building up within the various community groups that the judicial activism that provided the legitimacy for such evictions had to be confronted. So another coalition began developing in 2006 to hold mass demonstrations against the Courts. As more groups began joining the loose federation, yet another coalition called the Stop Evictions Campaign stepped in to once again raise the issue of evictions and demolitions of slums. This Campaign could not go much beyond an e-network that would occasionally turn up to show solidarity with struggling communities and the original issue of judicial activism was sidelined. The vacuum thus created was filled by two other formations. One was the Campaign for Judicial Accountability that, interestingly enough, could not attract a community organisation base, but brought together many concerned lawyers, judges, analysts, and eminent citizens. The other was the People's Candidate Campaign that tried to intervene in the Municipal elections by putting forward "people's" candidates from a few areas where the slum dwellers and the Resident Welfare Associations from the built-up colonies were willing to cooperate with each other. None of these candidates could win and the Campaign sank without a trace after that.

In 2007 also, two national alliances came together on the slogans of Action 2007 and Campaign for Right to Life with Dignity. They separately attempted to bring together all the organisations struggling for democratic space within the country. These ranged from indigenous people striving to protect their native lands and forests from large dams, farmers unsuccessfully struggling to survive in the modern agricultural economy, informal sector workers, construction labour, fishermen, women, and the urban poor. In particular, Action 2007 strove to bring large numbers of people from all over the country to the capital city, in effect to paralyse the life of the city and build up pressure on Ministers, administrators, legislators, and political parties to reject the structural reforms and anti-poor and anti-labour policies being imposed by transnational institutions and followed by successive national and state governments. The Campaign for Right to Life with Dignity also pursued a course to bring a Bill for Shelter Rights before Parliament. Both these alliances also sought support from other National Campaigns on Right to Food, Right to Information, and Social Security for the Unorganised Sector, which are currently ongoing. However, the synergy which is required to bring all these alliances and issues together to forge a truly democratic mass movement is not yet visible.

There are, thus, many questions that are woven into a complex web of structures and purposes. Where do such alliances begin? How can they be built and sustained? How do they expand to bind more organisations into a loose federation? Can they encourage new organisations to come up where none existed before? Do they require critical political support from larger working class parties and trade unions? What will be the politics and structure of such a federation? Can it mobilise support from a middle class audience, including the media, the professionals, and the judiciary? How can the theory of such an organisation grow in step with its practice? Will it be dependent on the charisma and energy of the "revolutionary" individual or is there a possibility of a "solidary", physically and intellectually charged commune? In other words, can praxis emerge from the working people themselves? Can they claim the city for themselves? Why just the city, can they be the vibrant core of a new society? The heart silently affirms, yes;

the mind remains dishevelled. We stand, as it were, on a cusp of history. Which way will the wheels roll?

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