Reflections on Urbanization, Displacement and Urban Poverty in India

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Introduction

By 2030, according to the projections of the United Nations Population Division, more people in the developing world will live in urban than rural areas; by 2050, two-thirds of population is likely to be urban. The world’s population as a whole is expected to grow by 2.5 billion from 2007 to 2050, with the cities and towns of developing countries absorbing almost all of these additional people (UNPD, 2008). Indian cities have seen a massive increase in its urban population in the past few decades. People have come into the city looking for better livelihood opportunities owing to decreasing employment opportunities in agriculture and its related sectors. There is clear evidence from the in-migrating pattern that the population residing in slums is increasing. This population will increase, if the current rate of urbanization remains the same or increases, and very little is happening by way of provision of low-cost housing for migrating populations which have no recourse except slums given their income levels. While, income opportunities themselves may be higher in urban areas, this does not necessarily improve the status of the migrating population who constitute a major proportion of the urban poor in cities.

The distinct characteristic of urbanization in India is the process of urbanization which is proceeding apace without commensurate growth in industrialization and the rise in the level of overall economic development. Urbanization in India has following features-lopsided urbanization induces growth of large cities; non-industry based urbanization and weak economic base; urbanization is mainly a product of demographic explosion and poverty induced rural-urban migration; accelerated urbanization leads to haphazard growth of slums and cumulative poverty in the cities; lacking minimum urban infrastructure and facilities in the cities; poor quality of rural-urban migration leads to poor quality of urbanization; and natural increase of population is higher than migration led increase. Large cities have not been able to absorb labour and increase investments within the formal sector of economy leading to problems of slums and the informal economy. In India, large cities have shown rapid growth as compared to small and medium towns and cities. Rapid population growth, high densities, poverty and high differentials in access to housing, public services and infrastructure have led to an increase in vulnerability over the last few decades or so. Certain factors in such rapid growth are that since Independence, many more iron and steel, electrochemical, electronics industrial units have flourished in the urban centres. (Wolpert, 1991). It is stated that New Delhi has more than tripled its population in the last twenty years, with over six million now living on the sprawling plain around that modern capital magnet, whose shabbier sister-city, Old Delhi, reflects all the poverty, congestion, and pluralism of ancient India with as many as people crammed inside its narrow precincts. The reality is that, India has been experiencing urban revolution and its urban centres are growing at accelerated growth rate.

In both ways, urbanization is integral and inevitable to take place, growth and emergence of slums is one the major characteristics of modern urbanization. So far urban growth is concerned, the urbanization processes and level of urbanization is not equal across the states in India. Big urban agglomerations are serving as focal points of a mechanism for generating economic surplus. Indian cities which absorb huge chunk of urban poor lives particularly in spatially vulnerable areas i.e. physically deteriorated areas. Generally, growth of slums is a manifestation of the urban poverty as the majority of urban poor live in the slums. In cities, the formal economy is unsuitable and unaffordable to attract all the migrants and provide livelihood opportunities. In contrast, the informal ways of livelihood and earning better suits non-skilled labour in cities. Squatter and slums settlements have formed mainly because of
the inability of city governments to plan and provide affordable housing for the low income segments of the urban population. The top-down bureaucratic ideology had excluded the socio-economically weak and politically unconscious urban poor. Reality about the Indian urbanization is that, large million and metropolitan cities growing at a rapid rate than others. Overall, driving urban growth is the diversity and concentration of economic activity in cities, ensures that they are the leading sector of macro-economic development. The changing demands of the economic factors directly affect the overall pattern of city life and infrastructure base of the city. Neo-liberalization following the structural changes in India has swelled the existing urban challenges and has accelerated the spatial and economic transformation of cities and land use patterns to adapt to scale of growth. Not all quarters of population are affected equally and the processes benefit only parts of the society and therefore, parts of the city space. There has been marginalization of the urban poor households in terms of access to facilities and affordability of vital urban commodities such as housing, land and water supply, basic amenities. The most urgent need is to acknowledge the social and economic diversity of urban populations, which include large groups of the poor.

India is experiencing a remarkable urban moment and the country faces dramatic changes with global economic integration and the emergence of new political coalitions around aspirations for an urban transformation. The period after the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 has seen the emergence of audacious schemes-plans for privately built new towns and special economic zones (SEZs), massive infrastructure projects and the empowerment of corporate actors in urban governance accompanied by concerted attempts to evict squatters and cleanse the streets of hawkers. The result is tension between the modernist vision of a globally connected class, and the daily incursions on the planned order of the city by the poor. The urban development paradigm in India in the last two decades has been accused of being rooted in the neo-liberal development paradigm (Banerjee - Guha, 2009). At the centre of these arguments are the observed processes of exclusion, marginalization, reduced rates of absolute poverty reduction and slow progress towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Studies have shown that the infrastructure-based urban development approaches have created vulnerabilities because economic growth though the former has in many instances resulted in displacements of traditional livelihoods and shelter options of the poor (Mahadevia and Naryanan, 2008). In Delhi, for example, government and developers were quite successful in utilizing the 2010 Commonwealth Games as justification for large-scale evictions and relocations, and the realization of major infrastructure and real estate projects. According to Bhan (2009), 45,000 homes were demolished between 2004 and 2007 in the run-up to the event. The coexistence of progression and subversion of state and developer efforts to transform Indian cities is indicative of the indeterminate nature of change.

This lacuna is particularly surprising given that India's urban population is projected to grow faster than that of any other country, more than doubling between 2010 and 2040 to reach 734 million (United Nations Population Division, 2007). This massive urbanization will almost certainly continue to be profoundly shaped by processes of integration into international networks of production, trade and investment, and the liberalization of city-building processes. Large cities will continue to be a major site of change-cities of 5 million inhabitants or more currently represent about a quarter of the country's urban population and their total combined population will soon exceed 100 million (United Nations Population Division, 2007). The explosion of economic opportunity around land markets has brought new forms of economic power to bear in urban politics. Urban space is increasingly shaped by corporate actors undertaking large-scale real estate development projects.
Urbanization, Informal Economy and Poverty

As in most countries, the Indian urban population has increased steadily over the years, initially leading to a large increase in urban poverty, but which according to official data is currently going down. Although, urban growth is still prevalent-particularly in the million plus cities like Mumbai, Delhi and state capitals-this is more due to natural growth than rural to urban migration. However, urban economic growth has brought less tolerance to those new or recent migrants and ‘illegal’ settlers as these cities aim more at global integration and city beautification. A key determinant of urban poverty is insecurity of tenure. An urban poor household exists either in an ‘illegal’, unrecognized and unregistered slum. The most urgent need is to acknowledge the social and economic diversity of urban populations, which includes large groups of the poor. Since the early 1980s, poverty has been viewed as having multiple dimensions or manifestations, each of which warrants consideration. The theory underlying this approach is generally credited to Amartya Sen, who put forward the core ideas in his framework of capabilities and well-being. Sen’s framework unifies elements of the familiar basic-needs approach to poverty, extending that approach to incorporate the concepts of relative deprivation, inequality, and social exclusion. (Amartya Sen, 1993). Urban poverty is now accepted as independent phenomenon and not just spill over of rural poverty (UNFPA, 2007). Over time, urban employment has informalized due to pursuit of flexible labour markets in the context of globalization, leading to increase in vulnerability. In absence of comprehensive social protection measures, a large population is vulnerable to falling in poverty. Countries continue to remain hostile to the new migrants (UNFPA, 2007) and thus the poor among the new migrants face innumerable road blocks in getting urban citizenship. The jobs accessible to the urban poor are almost invariably in the informal sector where work is harsh, exploitative and unpredictable, and where incomes fluctuate. This informal lifestyle makes women and children especially vulnerable in many respects, such as in acquiring food, shelter, health and safety. Veronique Dupont (2011) notes that the main difference between post-liberalization cities in India and cities in the west is the large number of people working in the informal sector, leading to high levels of financial insecurity and social vulnerability. Workers engaged in the urban informal work form the bulk of urban poor and they face lack of housing and shelter, water, sanitation, health, education, social security and livelihood. These poor invariably live in slums, squatters and pavements in most squalid conditions. Therefore, insecurity becomes the defining characteristics of their everyday existence.

Urbanization and Slums

Urban migration leads to creation or expansion of slums, followed by poverty, anomy and lawlessness. The key feature of slums is not a culture of poverty, anomie and extremism, but rather the ‘informal life’, characterized by pragmatism, negotiation and flexibility, as well as an intense struggle for survival and self-development. The urban and especially informal sector expansion is often directly associated with an increase in poverty, misery and religious extremism. But there is however another side to slum life that creates familial and cultural ties, generates initiatives and hopes, and by its sustainable productivity actually supports the expansion of the formal economy that it exists parallel to. In India, big proportion of population coming to urban areas are forced to live in slums and pavements in the most unhygienic and filthy conditions. Mostly pavement dwellers are single male migrants living in footpaths close to their place of occupation. Due to constant harassment and continuous fear of eviction, the condition of pavement dwellers is much more squalid than slum dwellers. In Mumbai more than half of the city’s population lives in slums which is characterized by the illegal occupation of land and absence or shortage of basic civic amenities such as water, sanitation and electricity Burra (2005). It is important to note that greater portions of the lands on which slums are located today were previously uninhabitable and it is through the efforts of the slum
dwellers that these lands were reclaimed and rendered habitable. The slums, where the working poor (engaged both in formal/informal organized/unorganized) reside, are considered the causes of most of the problems faced by the city i.e. they generate filth, they breed criminals, and they usurp facilities that should have rightfully gone to the taxpaying citizens. Whether, slum dwellers are really responsible for such problems is never investigated but these vies become a convenient handle for demolishing slums to make way for cleaner and better housing for the better-off (Bhowmik, 2010). As cities grow and develop, plenty of building, cleaning and informal sector service is provided to employ the huge labour class. On the other hand, the large Indian cities such as Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore are under pressure to develop into clean and comfortable living places. Quality roads, flyovers and shopping malls are demanded by a quickly expanding middle class and a growing number of global firms together with their expatriate staff. Practically all Indian cities are typified by a growing self-awareness and assertiveness of the middle classes. But city beautification has often meant eviction and relocation of slums and so-called encroachments. In New Delhi, many slums have already been quietly shifted over the years to the fringe areas of the city, so that few are visible in the more central districts today. Such developments point to a shifting power balance in urban India, away from the poor. There are cases where such new associations mitigate against the interest of the poor; for example where a middle class neighbourhood works for the relocation of a nearby slum or for the erection of protective security walls, which helps create so-called gated communities. The developments, such as demolition of slums and resettlement under the pretext of urban renewal, are testimonies of the fact that large numbers of people are excluded from the ambit of dialogue and deliberations on issues that impact their everyday existence. In a demolition drive that began on December 8, 2004, the Maharashtra Government and the Brihan Mumbai Corporation demolished 70,000 shanties they claimed were illegal, clearing in the process as many as 306 acres of land, dislocating over 3 lakh people and affecting thousands of others (Kumar, 2005). During Commonwealth games 2010, the urban poor suffered the most, as issues of illegality and encroachment came to the forefront of the city makeover process. Alongside the elimination of “unsightly” jobs, over 200,000 people in Delhi experienced forcible eviction between 2004 and the start of the Games through similar beautification measures (HIC-HLRN, 2011). The communities living on the River Yamuna banks were especially, targeted for clearance due to their proximity to the Commonwealth Games Village. In 2010, residents from 1,000 homes were expelled for security reasons (HIC-HLRN, 2010).

Urbanization and Displacement

During the last few years a very big proportion of population has been displaced due to development programme which is around 10 million people each year, or some 200 million people globally (Cermes, 2000). Mostly such displacements happen to facilitate the projects that include urban infrastructural development, urban renewal and housing schemes, transport systems, mining, construction of dams, etc. Through demolition of substandard slum settlement, a perceptible representation of poverty, the displacement of people for infrastructural development or other urban renewal programs claims to improve the living condition of poor. Unfortunately, such displacement has resulted in enormous adverse consequences for the impoverished population. Since most areas affected by such projects are inhabited by daily wage labourers engaged in construction, conservancy and other low paid jobs they are in a constant threat of losing their livelihood with displacement. In a relocated place they face a situation of unemployment, police repression, social breakdown, and loss of sense of belonging due to lack of collective identity. Most often than not, involuntary relocation increases people’s inability to access education facilities, health services, and livelihood opportunity and therefore their everyday life is marred with insecurity.
and struggle for survival. Relocated places are place of powerless, longer distance to workplace, fewer public amenities and increased financial liabilities due to payment of services charges in the building as also for electricity bills has heightened everyday struggle of the residents. There is complete lack of health facilities and educational institutions near the relocated sites. As a result, people have to commute to their old location or faraway places to seek medical help and they have to incur huge expenditure in travelling. As a result of these, liabilities have increased with people having to shell out more for house maintenance, transport, electricity and health. At the same time, displacement has led to loss of jobs like hawking or house help due to the lack of easy accessibility at the sites. The public transport system to the relocated site is only symbolic in nature and therefore people are forced to use auto rickshaw and taxi which is an additional burden on them. Increased financial liability has also resulted in increased indebtedness among the people. This has heightened the insecurity of already ‘vulnerable’ household. The vulnerability and marginalization of poor has clear linkages with the trajectory of disempowered life and circumstances. Individual and community’s life chances and their place in space have always been determined by their proximity or distance from the location of power. Vulnerability in the context of relocation is multi dimensional and it needs to be understood in relation with people’s experiences and struggle for restoration of livelihood. Though causes of vulnerability are mostly due to economic reasons, relocation has accentuated it in certain situations.

Urban planning, paradigm policies, tools and practices play a very dominant role in denial of urban citizenship to the poor and in particular the new migrants among them. Urban planning paradigm works through mélange of innumerable legal provisions and selective application of these legal provisions by the State (Roy 2009, Miraftab, 2009). The poor nonetheless, subvert these, like the non-poor do, to gain urban citizenship and negotiate the hostile urban environments Holston (2009). The poor in urban India exist in an increasingly ambivalent and vulnerable position as expanding cities lead to a type of urban development biased towards the growing middle class. While the urban poor continue to meet the demands of the city economy and the formal sector through low-paying and temporary positions, their status and rights are marginalized; administratively where they are forced to rely on informal and exploitative networks of support; physically as they are often evicted from urban spaces that are then gentrified; and politically where their votes do not translate into pro-poor policies or a real concern for their problems. This is not, however, to deny that over time cities can potentially offer chances to the poor to move out of poverty, provided they are ready for lots of initial hardship and misery. There is thus evidence of growing polarization in urban India. It is likely that the poor are becoming poorer as the prices for essential commodities rise much faster than their incomes, while it is certain that middle and higher income groups are becoming richer fast. The net result is that, the rich-poor gap is widening, not only in terms of wealth, but also in terms of access to services and control over the local state. It is in this extremely competitive atmosphere, that the poor and especially new urban migrants have to fend for themselves, with more complex social, political and habitat constraints.

Conclusion

The experiences of recurring and multiple marginalities and vulnerabilities of poor in cities expose how the state, its policies and agencies treat different classes of citizens differently. The ground realities of urban poor unambiguously demonstrate that the present day urban plans, policies and programmes are blatantly accelerating the process of segregation of gated communities from the urban poor. Exclusions as a consequence of urban planning and development processes has become ubiquitous in India as it had embarked on the project of globalizing its cities and making world Class Cities. In order to prevent marginalization, social exclusion, and urban poverty, there is need to develop inclusive policies and legislation at the
national and international levels. Good urban governance and consistent leadership at the local level, active engagement of citizens in planning and design of more liveable spaces and providing housing that is affordable for people with low incomes. Along with this, communities must acknowledge and accommodate a diverse people in order to take advantage of the complete wealth of energy and talent available to them. Everyone benefits from an accessible society leading to community cohesion. There is a need to build a more inclusive community and community space where activities and interaction occurs. This creation, ordering and maintenance of community space reflect a variety of decision-making processes. An inclusive city is one that provides opportunities for the optimal healthy development of all its residents. Inclusive processes promote the engagement of a community's diversity in civic dialogue. This inclusive participation leads to improved governance as needs are better identified and responsiveness and efficiency are enhanced in the design and delivery of services.

References


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