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People's Voices in Democratizing Cities: A Case of Mumbai

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An Abstract

This paper critically analyzes people's empowerment, civil society groups, and urbanization process in a city like Mumbai. It explores the impact of varied layers of civil society groups on housing rights for local communities. This paper has critically examined the issues of empowerment in India's context and empowerment through democratic participation development in urbanization process. The framework of the paper classified into various sections to answer questions like what are the issues of urban disadvantaged communities living in urban areas? What are the interventions by civil society? How effective is the space for Dalits and other minorities to communicate with various stakeholders? The civil society groups are engaged in representing the voices of people living in slums. In this context, paper highlights the process of empowering this important section that represents more than half of city's population that is slum dwellers. And further this paper attempts to answer the question about who are getting empowered and for what?

Keywords: *People's voice, Non Profits, Dalits, Scheduled Caste, Caste, Urbanization, Slums, Housing, participation, decentralization*

Introduction

It has been said that one of the greatest challenge in the 21st century will be of slums. UN-Habitat (2003) report warns about devastating impacts of “urbanization of poverty” and it must be squarely dealt to maintain balance of cities. Urbanization led by the industrialization in third world country might be relatively a new phenomenon, though India has experienced trade and urbanization during Harappa and Buddhist period before fifth century B.C (Mears, 2001). There were several marked differences in the urbanization process of advanced industrial nations and third world countries (Kasarda and Crenshaw, 1991). In India, in order to attract global capital, cities are being upgraded at the cost of sidelining the countryside and urban poor. The new income and job opportunities are located in cities. Thus, in developing countries where cities are largely perceived as engines of growth, are the destinations not only for the rich but also the poor have been heavily migrating to cities.

India has much to learn from its own historical past and western experiences to ascertain the democratic principles in the city civic life. Alexis de Tocqueville had warned that racial inequality as the most formidable evil threatening the future of the democracies like United States and racial disparities would bring disaster in societies (Polikoff, 2006). Unlike India, countries like USA took proactive actions to promote racial sensitive policies especially after the Gautreaux case to implement the racially inclusion housing neighborhoods in order to eradicate the ghettos. The governments’ section VIII programs provide equal housing opportunities to African Americans and other minorities. Advocacy and demands for inclusive housing put forth by National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) were recognized by

the mainstream civil society groups and US government. Besides this examples like Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) marked a seminal work which attracted international attention through their model of developing minority leadership and promoting racially inclusive participation in American communities (Warren, 2001).

In India though the level of urbanization is positively correlated to the levels of development, India's urbanization story is marked by inequalities. There are highly urbanized areas and highly backward areas in India. Thus, the process of urbanization, therefore, has not been healthy and has failed to promote balanced regional development in the country (Kundu, Bagchi, and Kundu 1999). Similarly the caste based hierarchy, communal divides, and political interests also acts as important factors in characterizing urban settlements and regional disparities (Chandhoke, 1993). Appadurai (2001) highlights the politics of xenophobic party Shivsena playing a communal religious card to evict Muslim slum dwellers. It is important to note that most of the urban poor in India are from the lower castes and the untouchable communities of Indian society (Deshpande, 2003). Around 3000 years old Hindu caste system(see *Appendix Table 1*) and untouchability practices still reflects staggering rate of atrocities against Dalits(untouchables)¹ in rural and urban India (Deshpande, 2000; National Crime Record Bureau, 2005). Chief Architect of Indian Constitution Dr. Ambedkar envisioned greater

¹An "untouchable" are called by various names, such as "untouchables or ex-untouchables", "Depressed Classes" (used by British officials)", "Harijan" (which means children of God, popularized by Mahatma Gandhi. This term is pejorative and insulting and hence rejected), "Chandala" (Used in Manusmriti, a Hindu religious law on untouchability and patriarchy), "Avarna" (i.e., outside the four varna/castes system. Four major castes are also called as Savarna). Constitution of India has listed specified certain castes, race, and tribes as "Scheduled Castes" (Michael, 1999, pp.2). "Brokenmen" was used by Dr. Ambedkar in explaining the genesis of untouchability. The term "Dalit" gained popularity during the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra during 1970s. Dalit means broken people. It is largely been popularized by the academicians and Indian media. Scheduled Castes themselves are also contesting against this identity and prefer to be called as "Buddhist" (those who have embarrassed Buddhism), other religious identity if they have left the Hindu religious identity. They also prefer to be called as "Ambedkarite" or "Mulnivasi"(indigenous)to show their faith in the humanist teaching of Dr.Ambedkar.

democratic vision in the urbanization process and eradication of social inequalities. Unlike Mohandas Gandhi, Dr. Ambedkar advocated for greater urbanization and said “ What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow- mindedness and communalism? I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as a unit” (Hay, 1988).

Empowerment through Civil Society: A Case of Mumbai

Mumbai is known to be a magnet city that attracts both rich and poor across castes and religion. It is a landmass of only 271.53 square miles with the population of Mumbai 11.90 million (Census of India, 2001). As more than fifty five per cent most disadvantaged section of society lives as residents of Slums² in Mumbai, mostly in one room abode without any appropriate access to basic infrastructure; this region comprises only less than seven percentage of Mumbai land area (YUVA, 1999).

India is already undergoing varied challenges of governance for equity in housing, planned industrial growth, adequate infrastructure growth, and most importantly active engagement of democratic civil society groups in the governance process. In fact in most of the cities in India there are hardly any NGOs (Non Governmental Organizations)³ or nonprofits or civil society groups that are involved with the urbanization process (Mehta, 2007).

² The slum population figures vary according to different agency surveys. Tata Institute of Social Sciences in 1977-78 estimated around 40 per cent of slum households had incomes below the official poverty line of Rs. 89 per capita per month (at 1977-78 prices). An ORG (Operation Research Group) survey found around 45 per cent of slum households had incomes below the poverty line of Rs. 1,290 for 1989 (at 1991 prices). According to 1991 Census data, 15 per cent of the total population lives in unrecognized slums and 40 per cent lives in recognized slums, i.e., those declared under the Maharashtra Slum Areas Improvement Board Act of 1971.

³ NGOs is alternatively used for nonprofits or civil society groups

India's 74th⁴ constitutional amendments was aimed at enhancing the Municipal decentralization through development, affirmative action, and social justice, however Municipal reforms are not given serious attention by government and civil society (Mehta, 2007; Jain 2005). As a result of these the ability of state to improve city governance has been neglected and efficiency has been reduced to a large extent.

Reflections on Peoples Empowerment through Civil Society Organizations

Participatory development has become buzzword for nonprofits globally. The other side of decentralization is largely ignored. There is very little literature on the conflicts due to decentralization in development planning. Mitlin and Thompson (1995) discussed the challenges of participatory approaches in countries like India, Sri Lanka, South African, and UK. This part of the paper analyses the decentralization and empowerment of grassroots by understanding the case of Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers (SPARC), a developmental NGO based in India working focusing on slums.

In access to decent housing due to exorbitant real estate prices in the city and as a consequence a proliferation of slums, displacement, and redevelopment large number of slum dwellers have given rise to the NGOs to intervene in the development process by responding to the situation. SPARC was considered as one of the pioneering NGOs representing people's voice which have received national and international attention from the government and the policy makers. It has a global alliance of SPARC at grassroots level, Mahila Milan as women's organization, National Slum Development Forum (NSDF), and Slum Dwellers International

⁴ 73rd and 74th amendment of Constitution of India made it mandatory to establish strong, decentralized, democratically elected local bodies in rural and urban areas to achieve the twin objectives of "economic development and social justice". While one-third of the total number of seats has been reserved for women, Dalits' representation will be in proportion to their share in the population.

(SDI) at International level. SPARC represented common people's voices on various committees set up by the government. They have been consulted in the past and presented their recommendations on rehabilitation policies.

The role of SPARC interestingly over the years has altered from being the voice of slum dwellers to being the voice of profit making agencies. Apart from its shift in attitude towards slum dwellers and their rehabilitation, SPARC conversely restricted the participation of slum dwellers. In a Markendiya housing project, where SPARC played a role of builder in Slum Redevelopment Scheme, but due to some conflict in the middle of the project residents from *Padmashali* caste (Other Backward Caste) members disassociated themselves from SPARC & Markadeya society (Mukhija, 2003). In the beginning the role of SPARC and its growth is interlinked with many aspects such as urbanization, rise of civil society groups in India, active insistence of the World Bank in advocating public participation through assistance of the NGOs and so on. But now the schemes like Slum Redevelopment have thrown open the doors for local cooperative societies of slum dwellers to participate in their own redevelopment and provided a financial mechanism (Mukhija, 2003). It was also observed that there have been several conflicts between SPARC and government, SPARC and private contractor and SPARC and local communities that have challenged SPARC for not representing the interests of urban poor (Mukhija, 2003). As a result the most disadvantaged groups like Dalits, backward castes, and minorities have undergone severe difficulties to live in city like Mumbai.

Most of the literature and research available on slums rehabilitation emphasize on decentralization and participation but paradoxically maintains silence on the Hindu caste based hierarchical segregation in urban slums in India. It will be pertinent to mention here the example

of 2001 Durban conference on “Race, Xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination” where Indian media, civil society and government joined together to resist the discussion of caste and untouchability at such forum. Guru(2001) observes such efforts by the civil society of the twice born (CSTB)⁵ perpetuates the caste discrimination defending patriarchal morality, suggesting caste difference is a family affairs so it would be sorted out within family(Hindu). Guru (2001) proposes if such civil society in India is a part of the problem than this recourse of civil society is not available to Dalit and hence they don’t have stake in equality question. These conflicts discussed above between local communities could be seen as politics of representation largely coming out of the fact who represents whom and for what? The politics of representation in India is not new.

Recasting Civil Society Associations

Mumbai city has varied level of organization working on the slum and urbanization issues. We can categorize the organization in three categories. First category of the organization is solely elite group, largely operating for profit represented by the real estate builders and developers. This group is supported by the elite citizens groups and neighborhood associations. ‘Bombay First’ - on amongst such elite citizens group from Mumbai city appointed McKinsey consultancy to survey and draft a report –on transforming Mumbai into Shanghai city. This controversial report underwent huge criticism by urban planners, environmentalists, academicians, urban researchers, and civic activists, due to its unbalanced growth plan (Katakam, 2003; Bombay first and McKinsey, 2003). This explains that such organization cannot be inclusive for urban voices in their plans for cities like Mumbai.

⁵ Prof. Gopal Guru defines civil society of the twice born (CSTB) as the nonprofit sector represented by the top three Hindu castes(Brahman, Khatriya and Vaishya) who undergoes Upanayana sacred thread ceremony which religiously honors them with their caste identity.

Second layer of organizations whom Appadurai (2007) refers as “deepening democracy” are like SPARC, Mahila Milan, NSDF which are more popular and visible. We can also club along with SPARC, organizations like Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti (NHSS), and Youth for Voluntary Action (YUVA). Interestingly one can observe that there is no strong horizontal alliance between SPARC and other organizations in Mumbai such as YUVA or NHSS, though all of them are working on the housing and slum redevelopment issues. Most of these organizations are well funded and they have strong network with international donor agencies. Although these organizations are working for the urban poor- largely Dalits and other backward classes (OBCs), but the leadership of these organizations has never been in the hands of these target groups. This has been in civil society practice though government formed Afzalpurkar research committee (para. 2, Slum Rehabilitation Authority, n.d.) recognized that majority of the urban slum dwellers are from Scheduled Caste (Dalit) and Schedule Tribe (Adivasi) communities. There has been vibrant debate about affirmative action policy for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes in private sector. With the rise of this debate government of India has introduced an affirmative action policy for NGOs to comply with reservation for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe community officers at various levels (Telegraph, 2006). But most of these nonprofits are silent on this law and hardly any positive steps are being witnessed in this direction to engage the participation of most deprived section in the policy making positions and other positions in these NonProfit organizations.

Third type of organizations in Mumbai are the most invisible ones are the democratic and voiceless organizations that are led by Dalits and backward castes, the ones that live in grassroots and struggles to represent their issues. The voices of these organizations are not yet studied by any research institutes. Organizations like SPARC, YUVA, PUKAR, etc in their mission

statements claim to be working for social justice and equality for slum dwellers, but have not adequately highlighted organizational diversity and the caste based inequalities that lie in city like Mumbai. Dharavi largest slum in Asia manages 17 percent of Indian leather export revenue business, where tanning leather and handling meat were one of the major occupations of 'Untouchables' under Hinduism (The Economist, 2007; Krishna and Chakravarty, 2007). This region is developed by its residents on sea land by reclamation of several years. The developers and government agencies want to redevelop this land, under the pretext of protecting environment. This entire Dharavi industry and Dharavi community is now on the verge of collapse, as government is planning to relocate this industry to outskirts of Mumbai (in Bhivandi). This reflects the caste composition in this slum and emergence of caste based interest groups. Organizations like National Federation of Dalit Land Rights, Dharavi Bachao Andolan are augmenting their voices to represent their own issues. Similarly organizations like Manav Hakk Abhiyan lead by Adv.Eknath Awad and Manuski need much appreciations and boost who are serving the interests of people at grassroots. These local social organizations are struggling to represent their voice through weak nonprofits which lack strong funding and social network. The international agencies like UN, ILO, European Commission and countries like USA, UK have started recognizing caste and untouchability and started supporting the decentralized global development funding and international policies for engaging more Dalit organizations in the development process (European Commission,2006; US Resolutions,2007).But much needs to be achieved in this direction.

With the lack of any support mechanism, it is interesting to observe a case where Dalit leaderships is struggling to empower themselves by representing their issues in urban structures. In past they made an effort to represent their organizations (Dharavi Bachao Andolan and Lok

Rajniti Manch) in Mumbai civic polls, with a hope of equal participation in decision making. Social workers like Gajanan Khatu, Surekha Dalvi, and Lalit Babar have protested against the slum demolition and constantly struggling to put forth their housing demands. It is very significant development in Mumbai, where independent candidates from lower castes are contesting election to be representing their voice in decision making of the city administration (Kelkar, 2007). This is a small step toward democratizing their voice but has big meaning!

Concluding Remarks

Urbanization process in India has to confront caste, gender, and religion which remain more important issues than naked exhibition of wealth and GDP growth. Poverty, rising social inequality; and housing of the poor will be the issues, that will be the most decisive to address. This paper clearly indicates that the social inequalities that lie in cities in terms of ‘class of housing’, which could be understood as ‘who lives where? And why? Furthermore, the people empowerment project, representation through decentralization of civil society institutions need to be further researched to understand democratic participation of various social groups in realizing their own rights.

According to Forrest (2004) some of the western countries have evolved with the disadvantaged targeted urban housing policies. But similar comprehensive initiatives are not yet developed in India. Further the status of housing for urban poor has deteriorated over the years; this; and will continue due to the unplanned private-public pluralistic institutions (Karn, Shikura and Harada, 2003). There is need of judicious blend of institutional pluralism in slum redevelopment, with healthy stakeholder’s participation of democratic centralization government, strategically developed civil society participation, and socially responsible real estate.

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APPENDIX I

Figure 1: Population composition in India for Hindu castes (Ayyar and Khandare,2007)

