



REINVENTING SLUMS

NO HOME LEFT BEHIND

Repositories of the blue-collar workers who run our cities, slums are here to stay and grow. We must accommodate them, not treat them as a housing problem.

By Sanjeev Sanyal

Usually, chaotic and unhygienic, slums are seen as the bane of Indian cities. They are, however, an important part of the urbanisation process and cannot be wished away. The solution lies in recognising that they are rapidly evolving ecosystems that play an important role in naturalising rural migrants into the urban landscape. All developed countries have had to deal with slums at some stage. This means we should anticipate slums and design for them rather than dream about “slum-free” cities. Indian politicians, policymakers and intellectuals like to talk about “development”, uttering pious words about investment in agriculture. However, the process of development essentially requires the shifting of people from subsistence farming to other forms of livelihood. Urbanisation is the spatial mirror of this process. This is why every developed country is urbanised and they have all seen an urban explosion at some point in their past. London’s

population went from 0.8 million in 1800 to 6.5 million in 1900. The slums of New York and London were legendary in the 19th and early 20th century.

We can already see that changing job opportunities, aspirations and lifestyles are driving the rural youth to urban centres. The children of farmers no longer want to farm. No government scheme will hold them back. We need to prepare for this. In the next 30 years, 350 million people will have to be accommodated in our cities and towns as well as brand new urban spaces.

The problem is to match these hundreds of millions of migrants to jobs, housing and amenities while maintaining overall social cohesion. Slotting so many individuals into the urban fabric according to his/her skills, social needs and financial ability is a colossal task. In most countries, the slum is the “router” that plays this role. It provides the migrant a place to spend his/her first few years. It provides information about jobs and social networks. China used Draconian social control systems to manage the process over the last two decades but even here, “urban villages” have been an integral part of the migration process.

But there is a difference between urban decay and slums. Urban decay describes the condition of blight, hopelessness and abandonment that one sees today in New Jersey, northern England or in parts of

Africa and Latin America. Indian slums are far poorer but they are not places of hopelessness but of enterprise and energy. Whether it is Mumbai’s Dharavi or Delhi’s Lal Dora villages, most Indian slums have a variety of commercial activity, including shops, food vendors and mini-factories.

Indeed, slums like Dharavi are remarkable in how safe and cohesive they are. Most people will be able to walk through the average Indian slum even at night without fear of being harmed. This is more than one can ask of downtown Johannesburg or Camden or New Jersey. Contrary to popular wisdom, inequality of income and wealth appears to have little impact on crime and social envy. Mumbai has many social schisms: Hindus versus Muslims, Marathi-speakers versus Hindi-speakers and so on, yet the city suffers little conflict between the rich and the poor despite having the most extreme differences in wealth and income. Why?

The cohesion comes from the fact that migrants do not view slum life as a static state of deprivation but as a foothold into the modern, urban economy. Life may be hard, but in a rapidly growing economy, there is enough socio-economic mobility to give most slum dwellers hope and to keep them hardworking, enterprising and law-abiding. UN Habitat estimates that 60 million Indians have moved out of urban

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SLUM DUNK

UN Habitat estimates that 60 million Indians moved out of urban slums in the last decade.

In the next 30 years, an additional 350 million will have to be accommodated in our cities.

India's urban slum population is expected to touch 93.06 million by 2011.

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VILLAGES LIKE MAHIPALPUR IN DELHI HAVE BECOME A CLUSTER OF CHEAP HOTELS

slums in the last decade. This is precisely the reason that more migrants want to move into them.

Most people tend to narrowly focus on the poor living conditions in Indian slums. The usual reaction is to treat this as a housing problem. Over the decades, we have seen many well-meaning slum redevelopment projects that have attempted to resettle slum dwellers into concrete housing blocks, usually in the outskirts of the city. Yet, almost all these efforts have failed to rid our cities of slums. More often than not, former slum dwellers either sell, rent out or abandon the new housing blocks and move back into a slum. Why?

The problem is that these schemes take a static view of the urban poor whereas slums are really evolving ecosystems that include informal jobs, access to information, social networks, security and a continuous churn of people. They absorb poor migrants from the rural hinterland and naturalise them into the urban landscape. In doing so, they provide the urban economy with armies of blue-collar workers—domestics, drivers and factory workers, essential for the functioning of any vibrant city. Urban masterplans ignore this dynamic process and are thus unable to deal with it.

It's not that slums do not need help. Obviously, we need to provide the urban poor with better sanitation, public health and education. However, we need to rethink the framework of our interventions.

First, slums are about ease of entry, upward mobility and churn. This process should not be disturbed by indiscriminately regularising squatter rights or by handing out non-marketable property rights. Such interventions would freeze the churn. Instead, policy intervention should encourage a functioning real estate market. This can range from rental accommodation, including basic dormitories to flats that families can buy out over time. The poor do not need charity. They need a property ladder that they can climb. There are many ways to create this ladder. In Singapore, it was done by allowing citizens to buy into a mass public housing scheme. However, it can also be done by creating incentives for the private sector to invest in low-cost housing, for

instance by allowing greater density.

Second, when property rights are clear, slums can upgrade themselves. Delhi's Lal Dora villages are good examples. As the city has expanded, the farmers living in surrounding villages sold their land but continued to own their homes in the former villages. These were usually converted into slums for construction workers. When the construction activity drifted away, a new population of drivers, security guards and domestics moved in. Over time, this population too got absorbed into the general urban landscape and we saw yet another wave of new residents—students, salesmen and store clerks. Eventually, some villages became home to expensive boutiques, cafes and art galleries (as happened in Hauz Khas), clusters of cheap hotels (as in Mahipalpur) or a warren of small offices (Shahpur Jat). The point is that these “villages” have proved amazingly nimble and Delhi could not function without them. Since property rights were clear, the former farmers steadily invested in their property and became quite rich. Along the way, they routed thousands of migrants and created innumerable jobs.

Finally, the ecosystem of a slum depends heavily on the “commons”. These could range from public transport links and public toilets to elementary schools and designated spaces for food-vendors. Public investment in the commons is more important to the quality of life of a slum dweller than the size of their dwellings. Such investment directly improves the lives of the urban poor without interfering with private property rights or with the churn of residents.

We need to plan for slums. This will not only mitigate the worst side-effects of slums but will also assist the millions of migrants who want to join the urban economy. The government should not see its intervention as a subsidy scheme. Instead, it should invest in the commons even as it encourages a functioning real estate market for the poor. Marketable property rights are the key. This is what allows the poor to climb up the property pyramid and for owners to invest in their property.

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