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Prospects for India's Urban Poor; Livelihoods and Mobility in Conditions of Informality and Middle Class Competition

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1. Introduction

There has been a very fast growth of cities worldwide in the past decades, and, along with this, the number of urban poor. This also applies to India where, even while not very fast, the urban population has increased steadily over the years, especially in the larger mega-cities. As per the 2001 census there are 285 million people in the Indian cities; typically in any city one quarter to half the population lives in slums, mostly inhabited by the urban poor – even while, for example in Mumbai also the non-poor are forced to live in slums (Ruet and Tawa Lama-Rewal, 2010). However, such data and trends on urban poverty and slum growth are not quite reliable and very useful as they are mostly based on fixed poverty lines, while one should question the official, formal data on people whose lives are informal in all respects. The questions must be asked as to what such generalised information actually means in terms of the nature and quality of life at the level of a slum or of the men, women and children in a slum household, and what their prospects are in an India that is changing so fast- and again especially its cities.

This article aims to discuss the present as well as possible future of the urban poor by considering both macro-level developments especially in terms of multi-stakeholder governance, considered in relation to their micro-level realities of informality and survival. Debates on the governance of large Indian cities have been addressing multiple governance shifts, resulting from national and global developments, such as the liberalisation of the Indian economy, a related exposure to the forces of globalisation and neo-liberalism, and the increasing presence of vocal middle classes (Baud and de Wit, 2008). One can discern an increasing number of

stakeholders in governance – not just the state or the municipality, but also private sector firms, NGOs as well as multilateral (donor) agencies and global companies. Many such stakeholders are strong and assertive, which has given rise to a concern that the urban poor and their (weak) organisations may loose out in the increasingly competitive arenas of governance. This, in turn has led to forecasts of a future of Indian cities marked by segregation and an increasing divide between the urban rich and urban poor.

Let us first consider the increasing concern that processes of segregation and polarisation are emerging where well-to-do middle class and elite groups are growing apart — both in terms of incomes as well as urban spaces — from large populations of urban poor (Tawa Lama-Rewal, 2007). These trends are seen to be exacerbated by the dominance of the neo-liberal polity that India experiences with a strong role of the private sector, indications of which may be found in the land markets which are increasingly liberalised and opened up for industry and large scale development, and in several Vision Documents and plans for city beautification (Noor and Baud, 2010) as well as in the massive JNNURM (Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission) program (Banarjee-Guha, 2009). Within urban democracy, power shifts appear under way benefiting the urban middle-class, leading to gated communities and an urban elite-driven development manifested in an increased role for so called Resident Welfare Associations (RWA). The role of such RWAs is seen as positive by the authorities, and in New Delhi the Government promotes their role under the 'Bhagidari Program' (Government of Delhi, 2006). Banarjee-Guha (2009: 98) is concerned about the impacts of neo-liberal type policies: "the sweeping

transformation of urban governance is meant to create a functional impotence of democratically elected bodies..." Likewise, John (2007:3993) refers to: "Initiatives by middle class residents, especially women and retired people, to improve their neighbourhoods in the face of 'the failures of local governance'; initiatives that seek to bypass or supplant both the electoral process and popular local politics". The link is made here to a perceived failure of local governance as experienced by the urban middle classes, who turn away from municipal politics, and more concretely the Municipal Councillors in Indian mega-cities. So indications are of a drifting apart of the urban rich and poor, both spatially, in terms of services, as well as in terms of representation and democracy.

Against the background of these views, this article focuses on the realities of poor where it is argued that the urban world in which they live is mostly an informal one, and that they themselves can often only get access to the formal worlds of municipalities, formal jobs in the formal employment sector and the better hospitals by relying on brokers and patrons. The article then proceeds to examine the political implications of such informal relations between the urban poor - who are seen as easily targetable 'vote banks' - and local leaders, municipal councillors and state agencies. Subsequently there is attention for the changing configurations of power in urban India, with firstly a very important role for the private sector, which includes large national and international business firms as well as city level firms notably developers and contractors. The state seems very ready to provide them a role for example under public-private partnerships, even while there may be questions about the regulatory powers of the state. A second power shift, as indicated, concerns a larger role of (organised) middle class organisations. The text concludes with the tentative assumption that the relative powers and voice of the fragmented and excluded urban poor is decreasing vis-à-vis the above powerful and well linked stakeholders. However, much more research is needed - particularly by Indian urban researchers - into the actual realities of changing cities, including the micro socio-political dynamics of the urban poor, their relations with state agencies,

officials, against the background of multi-stakeholder urban governance.

The informal World of the Urban Poor

There is a close association between urban poverty and insecurity of tenure; an urban poor household typically lives in an 'illegal' or unrecognised or non-registered slum area, staying 'temporarily' (even if for many years) on a plot of land owned by a private or public land owner. It may settle on land where no-one else wants to live: on or near a garbage dump, on or near a pavement, or on the banks of a river that overflows every monsoon season. And even there they are likely to be 'tenants' rather than 'owners', if one starts from the informal and opaque 'land ownership' or land right definitions in slums. To be able or rather to be allowed to live here means influencing or bribing others: a landowner, the police and in addition often an agent: someone who was there first, who acts on the behalf of another party (de Wit, 1996). Like anything else, it has a political dimension: one needs the approval or protection of a local leader or slum don, and/or the consent of a politician (Jha et. all, 2007). The urban poor are almost invariably working in the informal sector - if they would have a stable job they are no longer poor: in that case they might take a low interest long term loan, open a bank account, and build up reserves. Work in the informal sector is harsh, exploitative and unpredictable: exploitation and very problematic working conditions of building workers and female domestic servants constitute an enormous problem, which is hardly given attention - also perhaps as it mostly concerns low caste, and especially the Dalit (formerly 'outcaste') people. Having no access to banks and formal credit institutions the urban poor rely on money lenders who charge exorbitant interest rates - which rates increase in ratio to deeper poverty or the urgency of a household crisis - and on informal (rotating) savings schemes. Income-wise the poor are faced with fluctuating incomes as well as exploitative credit systems which sustain their poverty and vulnerability. Poor children are mostly in the poor quality public corporation schools; it is normally beyond the paying capacity of the poor to enrol their children in the

better but more costly private schools; and the same applies to public versus private hospitals, as documented by Mooij and Tawa Lawa-Rewal (2010) who underline the very vulnerable position of the poor. Finally, their very informality - also in terms of identity as typified by 'a lack of papers' - makes the poor - and especially women - vulnerable in many other respects, not least as regards the police which may harass or arrest the poor for any reason - if only hawking illegally or having drunk too much. The remedy will be a bribe, or sometimes a lock-up in the police station.

In their efforts to obtain access to the essentials of survival and livelihood and to make ends meet the urban poor have only two options: access to land, housing and schools through paying up - and always more than 'formal' rates as bribes are included, and/ or by using informal agents or brokers. This practice of using such intermediaries is nothing new in India: bridges between rich and poor, low and high caste were always built through patronage relations, and these now persist in competitive conditions of scarcity and survival urgency as faced by the rural and urban poor. However, more stable and reciprocal patronage relations which centre around a patron, for example a landlord, that may still exist in rural India have given way to the dominance of intermediaries and less steady brokers in cities, who are contacted if and when needed for more specific purposes (Kumar and Landy, 2011; de Wit, 1996). This is not to deny that permanence in brokerage may exist or develop: it hinges on trust, on 'trusted' or 'known' people, who hold the promise of being reliable, even while they may be exploitative. After all, the poor may not have that much choice and in reality the broker is normally a well connected local (strong) man or local leader (women appear largely absent here) who may help meet multiple needs: he may mediate as regards settling in the slum, sell building materials, lend money, and organise entrance into a municipal office for a permit, a loan scheme, or simply information on a possibly imminent eviction (cf. Hayami et. al. 2006). So dependency of the poor on brokers can be a factor, especially in conditions of insecurity, need and crisis. Even while this may not always be the case, such

brokers are most effective if linked to a political party: in the democracy that India is, the political channel is invariably more effective than the administrative. For all the talk of India as a democracy, it needs to be recognised that the Indian state is a mediated state, which benefits are not provided uniformly to all, but critically depend on who one is and whom one knows (Berenschot, 2010).

Effective local/slum level brokers mostly have good relations with municipal councillors - who are again linked to higher level politicians, while a broker may himself be the local leader of a political party. A broker is critical for the poor to link them upward into the complex and opaque wider city and its institutions, but he also links a politician downwards into the slums so that the latter understands slum issues and dynamics, and can cater to slum needs and opportunities. This is critical as slum people vote much more than the middle classes and the urban rich, so (re-) election starts with the urban poor - that is those who are registered. And the poor have good reason to be registered as it helps building up proof for having been in a city for a long(er) time, and that may again help the legalisation of a plot or being entitled to other facilities.

Urban politicians hence have an undue interest in the slums - which in India, appropriately, are seen as 'vote banks'. This is shown rather clearly at election time. Then there may be abundant pre-election attention for the slums and their urban poor voters. More 'public' activity by municipal agencies may be executed here in a few weeks than in years otherwise - in terms of sudden road repairs and new toilet blocks and water taps - but after the election frenzy, slums are again left to slumber and people left to their own informal realities (de Wit and Berner, 2009). Brokers and politicians are more critical than for slums than bureaucrats and the officials in municipal offices; the latter maybe side lined when trying to affect proper slum policy implementation. Many a potentially useful slum program runs into problems when councillors and local leaders and brokers manipulate program components and funds to their own personal advantage. One such case includes the Slum Adoption Program of the Mumbai Corporation which

was more or less hijacked by local councillors who helped provide lucrative contracts to their allies in the slums (de Wit, 2010). Similarly, the interplay of political interference and the nexus of corruption between Delhi politicians and officials caused a complete neglect of the city's planning and building regulations. Then the courts stepped in and ordered the Delhi Authorities to enforce its own regulations - and this only became a hot issue with riots when middle class villas and shops were targeted - not when slums had been routinely relocated over the past few years.

CBOs and NGOs in the Slums: Dynamics of (non) Participation

Brokers are not the only links between the urban poor and city institutions; especially in the larger cities there are numerous community based organisations and non governmental organisations (NGOs), and, depending on their nature and objective, they may play an important role as regards services and the general welfare of slum dwellers. In any slum there are many CBOs, in varying degrees of organisation and permanence - women groups, self-help groups, youth clubs, saving and credit groups, factions of political parties. In fact, in terms of slum organisations these are perhaps the most important ones as they have evolved and function 'naturally', starting from a felt need by people, while mobilising or uniting those people who feel comfortable to work together - be it in terms of income, caste, religion, gender or political affiliation. However, precisely their informal, loosely organised and often temporary character makes it hard to incorporate them into more stable networks for what may be termed participatory approaches or poverty alleviation programmes and for these reasons they are also not always easy partners either for NGOs or for state organisations like Municipal Corporations working in the slums, as documented in de Wit and Berner (2009).

Generally, NGOs have to come to terms with a complex institutional, social and political reality in the slums. As has been shown as lessons of experience in many efforts aimed at 'community participation', also in the slums it is often the more assertive, literate

and vocal people who benefit from outside efforts aimed at improving them, in processes commonly referred to as 'elite capture'. It is very hard - and always very tedious and laborious - to target the poor in the slums, if only as they typically live in the most inaccessible places, as they are quite transient (shifting home frequently) and as they are typically busy surviving. This may apply to a single mother who is a domestic servant cleaning four or so middle class houses daily, or the daily labourer who is dropped by lorry at the slum after a long hot day of work at the building site (and may first have a few drinks). Organising slum communities as part of participatory approaches often runs into severe problems, if only as slums never have a homogeneous population. Most slums and especially those in massive global cities such as Mumbai harbour an extreme variety of groups, divisions and fragmented or opposing interests, if only in terms of caste, religion and differences of income, while tenants and 'owners' have quite different interests. Men and women may live in rather separate life worlds, and what seems like a harmonious slum on one day may change before elections in a community of antagonistic factions, each belonging to a political party keen to emphasise the divisions - and not what binds a community (slum projects may have similar impacts, as a community may become divided by positioning for the diverse impacts and benefits, cf. de Wit, 2001).

The reflex of the urban poor in their search for services and livelihoods is most likely an individualistic one where they personally and covetously search and nurture a personal and vertical contact - not sharing these with others. They are skilful managers of scarce resources, avoiding risks but at the same time searching for opportunities and benefits. Hence, any municipal agency or NGO working with the poor may sooner or later face pressures to perform like patrons or brokers. Such pressures may work on an NGO - even while they are aware of this and attempt to avoid it. Hence it may occur that NGO slum workers are less engaged in organising or 'empowering' the poor but rather link people to relevant agencies 'help' them with contacts (de Wit and Berner, 2009). This is what happened in a donor funded intervention where the Program

Support Unit of an urban poverty alleviation programme that aimed at participation, empowerment and building partnerships, gradually came to focus more and more on service delivery and mediation between slum dwellers, NGOs and municipal agencies (de Wit, 2001). All this is not to deny that many NGOs do manage to achieve their objectives, and advocacy type NGOs are for example instrumental in highlighting evictions, the problems of street children or slum women. Yet, any activist or NGO worker who has a vision of 'empowerment' needs to be very aware not to conform to the dominant logic of vertical patronage/brokerage relations amongst the urban poor- a legacy both of more feudal past as well as of dependency relations also nurtured by local leaders and politicians in a mediated state. They are also a function of politics, of politicians who see the numerous urban poor as a relatively easily accessible and malleable 'vote bank' where both personalized benefits or inducements (cash, clothes, alcohol) as well as collective benefits (a slum water pump, road improvement) are allocated just before elections (de Wit, 1996).

Changing Cities: the Growing Middle Class versus the Poor

The municipality or city government considers the urban poor with an ambivalent attitude: it is quite clear that they cannot be missed; cities are growing fast and there is plenty building, cleaning and informal sector services activity for a huge labour class. For example, contractors keep on bringing labourer into cities from far flung rural areas and the temporary labourer hutment areas often remain and evolve into new slums. On the other hand the large Indian cities such as Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore are under pressure to develop into clean and comfortable places, with sufficient roads, flyovers and shopping malls to satisfy a fast growing middle class and a growing number of global firms and their expatriate staff. To that effect 'city beautification' has been undertaken in many cities which often meant the eviction (without relocation) or relocation of slums and 'encroachments' (Noor and Baud, 2010). In all cities there are indications of a growing self-

awareness and assertiveness of the middle classes and this translates into the adoption of documents such as 'Vision Mumbai' promoted by powerful city stakeholders in industry and the building sector, which envisions a future Mumbai which looks like Shanghai or Singapore. In New Delhi many slums have already been shifted quietly to the fringe areas of the city so that few slums seem visible there; in Mumbai there was a massive spate of slum evictions where as many as 400,000 to 450,000 slum people were evicted from their slums in a period of two months in 2004-5. One observer notes: 'there is an elite closure of the city in terms of employment, housing and commercial developments, transport options, governance systems and above all, the policy rhetoric- the idea of development itself' (Mahadevia, 2008). Such developments seem to point to a shifting power balance in urban India, away from the poor who always could rely on their votes - towards the money power of the growing middle classes, which are actively asserting their powers - but are these for the common good, and do these show signs of inclusive development?

Shifts of urban governance are taking place in all Indian cities (Baud and de Wit, 2008) where the municipality of Mumbai (Advanced Locality Management) and the city government of Delhi (Bhagidari scheme) are engaging middle class neighbourhood groups as partners in city governance, for example in terms of solid waste management, security and service delivery. Such groups obtain more power over the city administration at the neighbourhood level, and there are indications that this development is resented by elected politicians, who see their influence diminished (John, 2007). There are examples that this goes against the interest of the poor, for example where a middle class neighbourhood works for the relocation of a nearby slum or the erection of protection walls, helping the emergence of 'gated communities'. All in all, it appears as if there is a growing polarisation in urban India; the poor may not actually become poorer, but the middle and higher income groups are becoming richer fast. The rich-poor gap is widening, not only in terms of wealth, but also in terms of services and power. It is in this extremely competitive atmosphere that the

poor – and especially new city migrants - have to fend for themselves, while the social, political and physical/ habitat constraints have not become more helpful or inclusive: “The urban poor are being relocated in order to sanitise cities and find space for construction of flyovers, metro systems, business hubs, and residential accommodation for the entrepreneurial class and multinationals, and for meeting the demands of upcoming global cities. The fall in the percentage of poor in the large cities corroborates the argument” (D. Kundu, 2009: 283).

Conclusions

Even while the picture differs from city to city, the general pattern that appears to be emerging is that the urban poor are less a factor to be counted with than in the past, and that the power of their one asset — their vote — is affected by inflation. This is related to the increased weight and power of the urban middle class as well as the increased powers of the private sector, which disposes of ample money power. Hence, the arena of decision-making on urban planning and design is shifting further away from the poor, and their channels of accessing political power continue to be limited. This is well captured by Sivaramakrishnan (2004: 17): “Squatter and slum settlements have long been regarded as an opportunity and a platform both for politicians and the slum residents to acquire and exercise political power. However, this well-trodden path has suffered many diversions caused by fluctuating political loyalties, pressures of the real-estate market, land-grabbing mafia, rising costs of improvement or redevelopment works, and the inability of most governments to be consistent for any length of time”. It may be added that, especially where the mega cities are concerned, slums may be disappearing as commonplace city settlements; their inhabitants have either been rehabilitated *in situ* as under the Mumbai SRA programs, or relocated to the urban fringe as in Delhi and Chennai.

However, even while overall urban governance in India appears to move in a less pro-poor direction, we need to caution that there not that much micro-level evidence based on in-depth household level investigation over time that documents the ups and

downs of poor households, for example whether and how they move from the status of ‘migrant’ to ‘citizen’. Macro level evidence as regards evictions and relocations, more powerful middle classes, adverse court decisions and rising land prices needs to be corroborated by a careful micro level analysis of both short term and long term impacts on different groups amongst the urban poor. Hence, we need to be open to the possibility of people benefiting from general urban economic growth, even in terms of limited “trickle down” benefits, and there are instances that city governments can do a relatively decent job as regards unavoidable slum relocations as in Chennai. And, whereas this article has emphasized that key relations of power are personal as well as political, we cannot deny agency to individual poor men and women who cleverly use their resources and apply tailor-made informal strategies: they are certainly not only victims but also use any opportunity and niche they perceive (Kumar and Landy, 2010: 114). Such informal strategies are linked and mixed up with formal local relations of urban governance (Smitha, 2010: 77), which makes this a challenging topic of study, perhaps best suited for politically minded sociologists and anthropologists. Meanwhile, it is urgent for state and non-state actors and organisations alike to be aware of the undeniable trends of urban polarisation, a drifting apart of the dependent and by and large excluded poor in their informal worlds, and an increasingly well established but mostly self oriented urban middle class. A strong state indeed will be needed to mediate and regulate the multiple dislocations and threats which affect the urban poor.

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