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SLUMS – A VISIBLE MANIFESTATION OF URBAN POVERTY

– N. Ashok Kumar*

ABSTRACT

With the growth of urbanization and industrialization emergence of slums in the country is increasing. Absence of holistic planning level apathy, poor governance and failing equitable distribution of economic development are the major factors responsible for mushrooming of slums. The modern day urban life is dependent on the slum dwellers and they have become inseparable from city life. It is now being felt necessary to extend the basic services to slum areas.

Background

The Indian demographic scenario, particularly the urban scenario exhibits two interesting features: multiplication of population and increasing urban growth rate. However, the size of Indian urban population as such is not matching in any manner to that of the sizes registered in the developed countries. The level of urbanization in India is below 30% and projections for the coming decades even are not that high. It is estimated that, about 40% of the total population will live in urban

settlements by the turn of 2030 as against to the present level of 29%. This means a little over 1/4th of the total population are urbanites. The interesting feature is that, to meet the necessary needs of this fraction of population, the governments at different levels have been grappling with multifaceted constraints, especially financial crunch and poor availability of skilled/professional human resources. The latter, i.e. poor access to technical expertise coupled with slow pace in acquiring latest machines, transport and tools for executing various types of municipal works is the major

reason why the urban local bodies are unable to provide the basic services and infrastructure to the people as per the standards.

About 27% of the total urban populations are registered as people living below poverty line. Unemployment is rampant amongst this section of population. They live in vulnerable, substandard, helplessness, hopelessness and filthy living environment. The places where they live are attributed with overcrowding, deterioration, in sanitary conditions, inadequate access to basic amenities,

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substandard housing, etc. The dwellings are mostly huts with roofs made of scraps of wood, gunny sacks, metal or other waste material. These neighborhoods are christened 'slums' - the word derived from 'slumber' which means in urban ecology unknown people living in alleys marked by high density and wretched living conditions. In local parlance, slums are being referred differently like katras, chawals, bastes, ahats, cherries, keris, petas in different regions of the country.

SLUM – ITS ORIGIN

Formation of a slum is linked with the growth pattern of a city. Slums are vividly visible in cities that grow in a more haphazard way. As urbanization and industrialization are interlinked slum proliferation is also linked with industrialization. The process of industrialization was witnessed with crowded conditions and the living conditions of the masses alarmed the people in power. Charles Dickens has beautifully illustrated the

dehumanizing living conditions of the urban poor in his novel, "Hard Times" in 1854. UN-HABITAT estimated about 946 million people living in slums in cities of the third world countries. In India, the total slum population is estimated to about 4, 06,05,418 and amongst all the states in the country Maharashtra registered with highest number of slum population (1.06 crore). This is followed by Uttar Pradesh state with 4.1 million. The rate at which urbanization process occurs is directly proportional to concentration of industries and factories. This inter linkage again influences proliferation of congested neighborhoods colored with deteriorated living environment. These neighborhoods are referred to as 'blighted areas'. Most of the people living in these grey areas are migrants. We look at them as illegal occupants. They are not aliens since they too are part of the society as we and are equally eligible to claim right of decent living. Unfortunately, they are not allowed to avail the

opportunities and share the resources on an equal basis. Treating them as aliens they are being segregated from the main stream of society and are forced to lead a vulnerable life. Because of this they are not able to scale up social, economic and cultural strata of the social system unlike the other group of people who are blessed with the required capacities to scale up and identified as 'haves'. The size of 'haves' has been remained small in comparison to the size of 'have-nots'.

Multiple factors are responsible for slum proliferation. They include: absence of holistic thinking on the part of policy makers about the spirit of the slum dwellers in building the nation in all respects; adoption of weak strategies in planning, implementation and monitoring the welfare schemes; absence of unwavering commitment; unwilling attitude amongst the middle and upper class in sharing concern; underestimation of the capabilities of the slum dwellers; apathy among the

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urban local functionaries in transforming slums into culturally and economically active neighborhoods; prevalence of poverty both in rural and urban settlements with poor access to different kinds of opportunities for their better living; prevalence of disparities in spite of economic boom which helped more middle and higher sections of the society; weak governance at the grass root level; poor institutionalization of self governance at the slum level and poor extension of the benefits of all the schemes to them. Among all, economic growth of our cities failed to bring in prosperity for all.

Millennium Development Goals 2000

Freeing the cities from the problem of slums has now become an agenda for action in the Ministry of Urban Development. It may not be out of place to mention here that, like India other developing countries, namely, Pakistan, Sri Lanka too are grappling with similar situation. These countries underscored an unswerving

commitment on the part of every citizen, non government agencies, corporate sector, financial institutions, construction agencies and such other stakeholders for the prosperity of all the people in cities. On priority they considered addressing the poorness of the slum dwellers as number one since both poverty and germination of slum are intertwined and unless poverty is reduced addressing the problem of slums is impossible. It is in this direction, the Indian government has taken up various kinds of initiatives emphasizing its commitment in the form of vision 2020 to alleviate poverty and freeing the cities from the problem of slum which is similar to that of commitment made by many other countries across the world as part of Millennium Development Goals. It may be recalled that, generation of interest in reducing poverty levels across the globe, especially in the developing countries was visibly seen in the UN Summit in September 2000 attended by about 150 countries. In this summit the

heads of state having sensitized slums are the visible manifestation of urban poverty talked about Millennium Development Goals underscoring a global agenda for reducing poverty by 2015 apart from committing to improve the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020. Another attempt in the same direction was made in 2002 at the Monterrey Conference. In this conference all the rich countries pledged to increase their development assistance having accepted the fact that, freeing cities from slum proliferation could be possible through investments on provision of basic infrastructure in slums, sensitive, imaginative accountable governance and attitudinal change and culture of the citizens. But, unfortunately, not much was achieved in this direction in these four years.

Incorporation in Five Year Plans

Indian government has taken up varied kinds of initiatives for the wellbeing of the slum dwellers. This could

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be seen in the five year plans. Though there was no direct reference to slum in the First Five Year Plan the planners and policy makers recognized haphazard growth of cities and towns and underpinned the need for master plan for each city. But, from the Third Five Year Plan onwards financial allocations were made for undertaking various welfare programs exclusively for the slum dwellers. In spite of the best efforts initiated by the government, urban India is not freed from the problem of slum proliferation.

The Way Forward Solutions to Freeing the Cities from Slums

Identification of the poor

Hands on experiences revealed that, all the benefits of the schemes launched by the governments at various points of time failed to reach the genuine poor. This is because the people who are entrusted with the responsibility of implementing the schemes are lackadaisical in their approach in identifying the

'true poor' and in providing benefits, concessions or any other exemptions and thereby raining on governments plans. Because of this the real poor are sidelined while pseudo poor cornered the opportunities. Different countries have adopted different yardsticks for identification of poor and therefore there is no single universally accepted method for identifying the poor. In the absence of rational method distribution of gains was not found fair in spite of huge allocations are made and multiple opportunities were created as part of the national economic growth policy. 'Repeated enquiry' - more or less a replica of reputational technique could be considered to identify the poor. This technique involves verification of revenue documents and eliciting opinion from cross section of people about the social and economic condition of the prospective beneficiary including neighbors, community leaders, ward councilors and other knowledgeable people who reside in the same area where

the prospective beneficiaries live.

Choosing Right Areas for Investments

We have seen the member countries making a statement committing to halve the urban poor and slum population by 2000. But, no major improvement was occurred during the last eight years. On the other side people's expectations have been increasing. True, public spending on poverty alleviation was huge. The way allocations or spending on different key sectors like agricultural improvements including irrigation, health, education, housing, infrastructure both in rural as well as in urban areas, subsidies on food items, etc. though made contribution to poverty reduction but it was not a total positive impact on poverty reduction. Economists and scholars in public policy have been emphasizing linkage between right investment and poverty reduction. Till date policy makers were assuming poor housing was prime indicator of poverty and hence housing

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sector was given much importance. Experiences compelled the government to understand the link between public spending and its impact on growth and poverty alleviation. It should also be noted that, each area of investment has differential impact on poverty reduction and the quantum of impact will differ between countries/region or provinces within the same state or type of settlement whether rural or urban. In one region allocations on agricultural improvements may have maximum impact on poverty reduction and in other region it may be public health or non farm employment or rural infrastructure like rural electrification may provide sound results. Therefore, the most significant factor is to make good exercise on areas for public investments.

Small Enterprises –training

Total development will not be possible as long as prosperity is seen as patches here and there and persistence of inequality in the society. Exactly the opposite situation prevails to day.

Imbalance from the point of development could be seen between different groups of people, between countries and regions. Across the world very few nations have been prospered and within the nations a few segments of people have been prospered but not total. The reason is over the past centuries developmental process failed to provide access to all the people on an equal basis to avail the growth opportunities and this facilitated very few to reap the fruits of development. This kind of development divides the society into different categories and therefore such kind of developmental process should be discouraged. Proper planning and adoption of right strategies are the only ways and means. Any action plan for undertaking developmental schemes in urban settlements must focus on the needs of the urban poor since this have positive impact on poverty reduction. Since poverty is main reason for some people to live in blighted areas and if the poverty is eliminated definitely dehumanizing and

crowded living conditions in the cluster of huts centered around the cities could be drastically curtailed.

A small enterprise is a gateway for the poor to get themselves out of poorness. It is an important instrument to provide employment opportunities for the unemployed youth. Gaining hands on experiences revealed investments in this sector will have maximum impact on poverty reduction. However, means of support for the urban poor to make investments in this category of livelihood is very bleak. Well publicized studies by well known scholars unfurled the fact that, public and private sector banks and other financial institutions have a tremendous role to play in this respect. It is here importance of micro finances figures. Since small enterprises require small investments financial institutions can extend small loans to the poor with little doubt of consequences as they normally encounter with black monies sharks. This kind of help will help the urban poor not only to improve their

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economic conditions but even allow them to help other poor by providing employment opportunities in their units. In recent past one could see participation of private sector banking along with the government in providing financial assistance to the urban poor is gaining momentum. As of now, there are 3133 micro finance institutions in the country extending micro loans to the poor to undertake various kinds of commercial and small scale industrial activities and have become entrepreneurs. ICICI, HDFC, CITI GROUP, UNITUS, SHARE, SKS, SPANDANA, Vikram Akula are a few to quote here in this context which have been contributing its mite by providing micro loans to the urban unemployed youth. However, for effective functioning of microfinance system support from the government in the form of necessary infrastructure such as land is essential.

Smart Governance

People's expectations are increasing and to scale

up to their expectations there needs smart government machinery. Eradication of poverty and promotion of smart cities involves multidimensional activities and strategies, upright actions, effective inter agency coordination, positive thinking in policy makers and administrators, investments, capabilities and awareness and unswerving commitment on the part of different stakeholders and actors, etc. If any government possesses these characteristics such a government is considered smart government. Promoting such a type of government though is an Herculean task, it itself is a panacea for poverty reduction. In the past, administrators have been treating slum dwellers from their own view point. Having realized that such presumptions will not work any more in the changing scenario administrators restrained from dumping their ideas and implementing schemes as they feel fit. Instances of poor practices are visible due to poor managerial and marketing skills amongst the public

administrators. There is, therefore, essential to focus on this aspect since government is investing huge finances on eradication of poverty, slum up gradation and beautification of cities.

The most visible institution involving in the improvement of the living conditions of the slum dwellers is local bodies. Though slum improvement is the function of various other departments we see seldom their involvement as much as the local bodies. It is a well known fact that, local bodies are already grappling with multifaceted issues. Alone it can not succeed in transforming the cities into healthy. They need a helping hand from other agencies too such as public health, public works, health, housing, town planning, urban infrastructure corporations and urban development authorities. This apart, banks and police too. Pune police department conducted a best practice in this regard. The then police commissioner established a 'Tana' (police station) in each slum and entrusted the

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responsibility to conduct the police station to the slum dwellers only. Similarly banks can also undertake such kind of innovative jobs particularly on economic lines. They can do by adopting a few slums. Improvement of slums and thereby reducing the poorness requires technical and financial support which is not possible from a single agency. Therefore, coordination between the urban local bodies and the other parastatals is important.

Hitherto, policy makers were focusing on rehabilitation and/or up gradation of slums and therefore, much priority was given to schemes like economically weaker section housing and low cost sanitation. Though housing was an important need for the urban poor it is not the only reason either for urbanization of poverty or growth of slums but there are other issues too for coexistence of wealth and poverty in close proximity which need to be focused upon. Prosperity through multiple activities gained

momentum and of which access to micro finances was recognized as a tool for poverty reduction and other activities like health services such as primary health centers and women and children welfare centers within the slums, parks and play grounds as part of improvement of environmental conditions, provision of vocational training programs with a view to build technical skills amongst the youth, allowing private investments in and around the slums to create employment opportunities for the unemployed slum youth. However, private investments will be possible only if there is support from the government in the form of concessions. The best case which could be cited in this context is private investments that are made in Dharavi slum in Mumbai city.

Building Better Leadership

Collective efforts of receivers and providers always reap best results. To measure how much a city is harmonious it is necessary to

judge its capacity in preserving its cultural identity and its capabilities to meet the social needs and relations of the individual. We are aware that, urban poor/slum dwellers represent poverty. They are also the primary vulnerable community to urban crime and violence. The Indian government has taken up lot of initiatives but in the absence of effective leadership at the ground level its impact on poverty reduction was not encouraging. Most of the benefits have gone to 'proxy poor'. This was possible because of a few self centered people. A better leadership at the ground level will be able to address this scourge.

It is but a common practice in a slum one or two individuals becoming more influential by virtue of certain qualities and leading the rest of the people in the slum in order to meet their needs. No sooner they become strong politically their aspirations are entirely different. Sustainable support from this kind of leaders can not be anticipated

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by their fellow poor people. Instances of 'basi leaders' becoming ministers at the state and central level are not rare. Out of ignorance basi people still repose confidence in these self centered people who lucked with the national state politics keeping aside the cultural lag between them. More often it is seen these leaders not exhibiting any kind of resistance and remaining mute when the funds earmarked for provision of services in slums are siphoned off and are being invested on other city beautification works. This is a bad leadership example. It will increase disparities in the distribution of opportunities and resources overlooking real needs of the poor. True leadership will be possible if only people acquire the characteristics of 'people's leader' with a feeling of concern about others who are in distress.

Tab On Greedy

Within the urban poor there are some greedy people. They will not remain happy with the benefits what

they received from the government. They continue to aspire for some more benefits. They don't mind even if it is at the cost of those who are yet to be taken care of. For example in the case of weaker section housing program. Renting out the dwelling units given to them by the government slum dwellers living in the same old hutments and claiming for similar benefit under scheme by declaring that they are homeless are repeatedly occurring. They are able to mangle this with connivance of local leaders for whom the slum dwellers are vote banks (in that particular locality). Similarly, misusing of financial benefits by the urban poor for the purposes other than the ones for which they received the monies from the government is also a kind of greedy. Either to meet their family commitments or to meet their own urge and wants. More often they are seen selling the economic benefits that they got from the government in the form of kind like cycle rickshaw, autos for immediate financial returns in

order to meet their emergencies. These kinds of practices are needed to be checked if at all government is keen in reducing the poverty levels or slum proliferation in cities. This is because slum proliferation and greediness of the urban poor on one hand and slum proliferation and political leaders' dependence on slum vote bank are intertwined. In nutshell, It should be made mandatory that those who received benefits should not be considered for another time until all the urban poor are covered in the first round. This will have maximum impact on poverty reduction and in turn on living conditions of the poor.

PURA and Healthy Cities

Provision of urban infrastructure in rural areas as suggested by the former President of India, Abdul Kalam will definitely arrest migration of rural poor to towns and cities. Interestingly, most of the urban poor living in slums and in public places and on road side pavements are the same poor people who moved out

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of the villages after failing to secure the necessary means to support themselves in the rural areas. Therefore, creation of better employment opportunities coupled with provision of necessary services in rural areas will definitely pay dividends to the cities for its healthy growth. Failure to do so the problem of poverty will sustain in rural areas and the pressure of poverty in rural areas will be reflected in urban areas since urban poverty is nothing but overflow of rural poverty.

Data Bank on Slums

Generating and keeping good record of information about slums city wise ranging from its location, population, caste and community composition, nature of origin, economic levels, services that are available, livelihood coupled with nature of occupational activities, type of dwellings, assets possessed by them, ownership of land, developmental activities, number and details of beneficiaries and the benefits they received, educational and cultural background,

security, needs and necessities, illegal activities, if any, being carried and if so, reasons and conditions under which such activities are being carried out and its impact on the growth and the neighborhoods, capabilities, scope for participation of private sector and cross sector partnerships, etc. Mapping of slums, therefore, will help the administrators in planning for city development and for the growth of urban poor.

False Promises By the politicians

As has been mentioned, dependence of political parties on slums for their own survival has negatively contributed for the healthy growth of cities. As long political parties view slums as vote banks and pamper them showering false promises so long poverty, haphazard growth of cities, urban violence, unsafe, poorness and among all waste public expenditure will continue to exist leading to proliferation of dumb habitats instead smart habitats in cities. Adoption of slums by the political parties and

politicians attending the needs, sharing happiness and sorrows of the poor are also responsible for the presence of slums in cities in spite of all kinds of efforts are being taken. By doing so politicians who are the policy makers are doing damage to the sound growth of urban settlements. Unless these acts are controlled any attempt to make cities free from slums would be like a pipe dream. During the elections time we most often witness politicians making lollapaloozas in order to win the hearts of the urban poor. Apart from politicians there are other groups of people too who thrive at the behest of the sufferings of the urban poor always protest evacuation and resettlement of slums. People belonging to this category try to cherish their dreams shedding crocodile tears for the cause of urban poor. These sections are the major contributors to slum proliferation. The public leaders should realize that urban poor are also part of the society. Wellbeing of the poor is nothing but reflection of the growth of the nation. They cannot be neglected. They do

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have all the rights as any other enjoys under the Constitution and they are equally eligible to share prosperity of the nation on an equal basis. To transform this into reality requires wholehearted support from the politicians and the public administrators and the people who commands influence in the society. We, the citizens of India lead many a movement and some of which were oriented towards sharing opportunities and to transform the life of those who are at the bottom of the social, economic, political and cultural strata of the society. We still are seeing how the down trodden communities particularly the socially underprivileged both in the rural and urban areas are encountering with various problems, particularly access to basic services, clean living environment, housing and livelihood. As long as imbalance in sharing resources and opportunities exists between people slums will continue to exist as a manifested form of poor.

Self Initiatives

Everything is in the hands of slum dwellers. If they wish that their neighborhoods should be clean and healthy they have potential to make it into reality. Firstly, they need to find avenues to overcome their economic condition. This could be done in different ways as is evident from the best practices that have been identified by different agencies across the world. The best exercise in this regard was done by the UN-HABITAT in African and South East Asian nations like Kenya, Namibia, Philippines, etc. In fact, the focus of World habitat day 2007 is to make cities safer, greener, inclusive, and secure and called for better cooperation between different spheres of government and civil society. Secondly, their own participation in transforming the quality of their life. This could be done by creating awareness amongst the urban poor about how effective participation will improve their lives and increase the level of access to better services in the community. Their participation could also be in

association with banks, NGOs or by themselves forming into associates and federations such as the one seen in the town of Gobabis in Namibia known as Shack Dwellers Federation which bagged best practice award on the eve of World Habitat Day 2007.

Therefore, through self initiatives the urban poor can solve certain problems including security of tenure and secure places.

True leadership

With a passion to render service voluntarily some people emerge as leaders and leaders of leaders. There would be no room for suspicion about their commitment, honesty, vision and capabilities. But, the real problem is identification of such people in the communities and to entrust them with responsibilities. It is a God's gift if communities are bestowed with people possessing charismatic leadership qualities. National Federation of Slums in Mumbai was possible because of the efforts of one slum dweller who migrated to

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Mumbai from Tamilnadu. He was successful in drawing the attention of the policy makers and the administrators to take up measures to provide services and security to the poor living in slums in Mumbai city. If such leaders emerged in each slum in each city definitely densely packed, dilapidated mud and tin shacks will transform into healthy human habitat.

Role of Realtors and Builders

While choosing the places for making investments, builders and promoters should be vigilant about the problems that the cities are encountering with. Since the metros are already getting congested, polluted and are really getting capped out and space is becoming difficult to come by they can prefer smaller cities for their ventures. Smaller and satellite cities are more spacious with less congestion, affordable and making living easier for all sections of the people. If the builders could provide

dwellings with easy access to services at affordable prices that would be a bigger help to the urban poor and also ease pressure on larger cities. Since the builders are profit makers they may not prefer smaller cities for their ventures unless there are assured of support from the government in the form of concessions. This is again a matter of national policy.

Due to increasing construction activities and growing demand for cheap labour large number of poor are migrating to cities. These people are seen settling in shanties close to construction places causing a lot of hurdles to vehicular traffic resulting in accidents and creating unhygienic living environment. They use the private and public open places as public toilet places and for raising temporary shelters. Builders do not bother about all this. The government should make it mandatory on the part of the builders to provide shelter and services for their labor force in their own land. This will have maximum

impact on freeing the cities from the problem of overcrowding and environmental degradation.

Voluntary Organizations and Civic Societies

In comparison to government and public sector agencies, voluntary organizations and civic societies can extend better services to the urban poor. NGOs are formed with like minded, knowledgeable people, retired from the service and having interest to serve the communities without expecting any returns for their labor and from different social, economic, educational and occupational backgrounds. They are mostly service oriented. Their involvement will provide some avenues for stopping the poor teeming into cities and can influence the poor to strive for better life. Once the economic power of the poor is increased there will be definite change in their life style. Having gained economic strength once, the poor will be reluctant to live in the congested and dark

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ghettos. With the increased economical condition they voluntarily move to places where they can have better environment in all respects to live. Participation of civic societies in urban developmental activities in many cities proved successful in up lifting the living conditions of the urban poor. In Hyderabad city, for instance, handful of women voluntary organizations helped hundreds of poor women in improving their skills, in securing financial support from financial institutions and in getting legal aid and enabled them to

realize their potential to lead their life with confidence.

Conclusion

In cities, urban poor are given the status of illegal occupants. On the other hand no city dweller can lead a happy and a healthy life without their assistance. Therefore, the city considers the urban poor as essential part of 'city habitat'. Not only has this every sector including domestic, for that matter required services from this urban poor for its own sustenance and growth. Therefore to extend services the urban poor must be

accessible. By providing services poor get their livelihood. Therefore, it is a symbiotic way of life. Cities can not thrive without service sector. But, at the same time it must be realized that, they are also human beings and they too have needs and aspirations. Somewhere it is necessary to compromise. In the of beautification of cities the urban poor can not be asked to move to places which are not fit for human habitation. Before the poor demand the city should extend its hand signaling cooperation.



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