The Role of Local Government in Slum Communities in India

Examining the political history of the urban populations in India who have the lowest socioeconomic standing post-independence

by

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Abstract

Economic disparity coupled with political disjuncture poses serious political, social, and health risks to a growing population of India, especially in dense, urban areas like Mumbai, Delhi, and Surat. In an evaluation of the political history regarding oppression of the poor, few governmental programs have been successfully implemented to alleviate the burdens of the urban poor. As a result, there are many complications surrounding government responsibility in welfare, especially housing. In order to compensate for lack of efficient government intervention, non-governmental organizations, such as Society For the Promotion of Area Resource Centers (SPARC) are left struggling to help provide financial support to these unrepresented communities. Although many of the resources provided only put a band-aid on the wound, some distribution programs have proven to be useful in rural areas. However, little research has been conducted on the policies focused on urban areas, as a result of the political tensions between government and slum communities. Furthermore, education proves to be a primary deterrent in preventing slum communities from unifying and demanding government action. Along with education, adverse health effects have plagued slum communities residing near sewer systems. The needs of slum communities reflect the broader infrastructural problems associated with India’s rapidly growing economy. Lack of equal government representation will only increase political tensions between the “untouchables” and members of higher socioeconomic classes and will result in inadequate government action in alleviating the problems associated with rapid industrialization. Political disunity, both internally and externally, is detrimental to breaking the current cycle of poverty of slum dwellers. We conclude that while NGOs provide helpful solutions, their work is not enough to fix the problem, and further government legislation creating more stable sanitary and legal infrastructure is critical to break the poverty cycle.
Introduction

India is a country that is rapidly urbanizing as more people move from rural areas to cities such as Delhi, Surat, and Mumbai. This movement of people has caused a great demand for housing. As a result, the poor must create their own homes wherever land is available. There is a lack of affordable housing for the urban poor in India, caused by the fact that urban developers often disregard lower income families. During the development process, slum dwellers and the poor are seen as an impediment to the growth of the city, and not as members of the community. They are given few rights in the legislation process, and because of years of systematic oppression, they have very little platform for their voices to be heard. Through our research, we learned about a few non-governmental organizations that are seeking to alleviate poverty in urban India. The Society for the Promotion of Area Centers (SPARC) is one of these organizations. Formed in 1984, SPARC India is one of the largest non-governmental organizations dealing with the disparity in urban housing. Together with two other organizations, SPARC India reaches over 65 cities within India. Their work includes giving out individual loans for sanitation as well as individual house improvement loans. Along with giving out individual loans, SPARC India actively collects data throughout the communities, which is used during negotiations with local government. This data is imperative to the process of community mobilization. Oftentimes, local governments are unaware of the conditions in which the urban poor live, and this lack of knowledge becomes the reason for dismissing the problems at hand. With the rapid urbanization taking place in India today, it is vital that local governments take action to alleviate poverty in these urban slums. Using the information that the surveys supply, slum communities have been given valuable information that they can use when negotiating with the government. As stated on the SPARC India website, “Through these information-gathering
tools, communities assert knowledge about themselves and the conditions in which they live, and leverage this knowledge into tangible outcomes.” Through the use of this data, SPARC India is able to identify effective solutions and give the urban poor a foundation for negotiating with the authorities. Unfortunately, this is quite a burden for slum dwellers and those working to help them, as the government does not directly take any action. Because of this, we argue that the government must create legislation and infrastructure that empowers the urban poor in order to alleviate the longstanding history of oppression. Only in this way can the urban poor directly and quickly receive help.

**Literature Review**

In order to assess the current situation involving slum dwellers in urban India, we turn to Sundar Burra’s analysis of slums in Mumbai. Burra defines slums as “illegal occupation of land and the absence or shortage of water, sanitation, and electricity” (69). Burra, who is an advisor to SPARC India, discusses mechanisms for financing slum redevelopment. One way to do this is to provide apartments for the slum dwellers to reside. In order to provide housing for the poor, developers needed to make enough money during apartment sales to cover costs for both apartments and housing arrangements for the underprivileged. This plan was implemented in Mumbai following the development of a general formula to limit the amount of property a family could own, thus creating land for slum dwellers to relocate. The slum dwellers are relocated to one specific area in order to prevent more congestion in the southern areas of Mumbai. Although this article gives us valuable information on the finances helping the urban poor, it is vague in its description of the formulas used to allocate land. Burra also discussed the tension between the government and the slum dwellers who are occupying the land that the government is currently trying to redevelop. The source of this contention is the fact that it is not feasible to destroy the
homes of these slum dwellers, yet the government who owns this land refuses to provide basic services to the tenants. Burra focuses primarily on the role of central government, but not other levels of government in regards to these issues.

Some current policies discussed by Burra include the Slum Rehabilitation Authority, which was granted permission to alter the city’s development plan, and given building permissions. Although he provides useful information on current policies affecting slum dwellers, Burra does a fairly poor job of explaining the specifics of these policies. Nakamura’s research complements Burra’s because it provides graphs and tables that is the foundation of policies related to slum dwellers. Some of these graphs include information on how many households currently reside in slums, as well as access to basic needs such as water and sanitation. Other information includes access to ration cards and passports. This is a valuable article because it gives information on the current state of slum dwellers, while Burra gives the current state of policies surrounding slum dwellers. Although Nakamura is more effective than Burra in the use of tables and graphs to support the claim, the graphic representations are difficult to understand for those with limited knowledge of statistics.

Equally as important as assessing the current situation involving slum dwellers is finding solutions that have worked in the past. Besley and Burgess discuss different states in India that have followed the land redistribution model also discussed by Burra, which takes land away from wealthy citizens and gives it to the underprivileged. This model has increased the per capita income by ten percent, which is equivalent to five years of economic growth. This article is valuable in understanding the redistribution model that appears to be a prominent policy towards alleviating poverty throughout India. Unfortunately, Besley and Burgess only discuss rural poverty, meaning that it is not possible to use this study to make conclusions about urban
poverty. Another caveat to using this source is that this trend in land redistribution and poverty reduction has not been studied previously, and a lot of the legislation for land reform may not have been fully or properly implemented, if at all, so the data and trends may not be precise.

Echeverri-Gent discusses another policy that appeared to have brought forth prosperity in the area in which it was implemented. This policy included the creation of small local governmental councils that involved the people in policy making and gave the poor access to the government. This policy sought to combat what Echeverri-Gent called the “paradox of participation”, which means people who are less fortunate are less able to participate in the government, leading to their needs being ignored by the authorities. This article appears to be more useful than the previous one by Besley and Burgess, as it discusses in more length the experiences of urban slum-dwellers as opposed to the rural poor. Whereas Burra’s and Nakamura’s articles give an overview of current policies, this article focuses specifically on policies that have been successful. This article provides a detailed analysis that gives a lot of insight into the relationship between slum-dwellers and its political system in both a current and historical context.

Qualitatively exploring the tensions between the slum dwellers and meaningful government intervention, Indian Supreme Court Justice M.P. Thakkar writes a letter to the Prime Minister, calling on the provision of basic amenities to slum dwellers in commercial areas. Explicit information on current political and cultural perspectives on the living conditions of the slum dwellers are thoroughly evaluated, highlighting tensions existing between slum communities and governmental provisions. Contradicting conventional stereotypical social tensions, it is important to acknowledge this admirable effort by Thakkar to intervene on behalf of the politically voiceless slum dwellers. Traditionally, however, it seems government promises to provide amenities to these people rarely come to fruition. If this trend of political inaction
continues, the slum communities will be forced to continue to organize economically in order to develop a cohesive political voice to be properly represented. Thus, for any progress to be made, local government and slum communities need to establish some form of effective communication, in efforts to close the widening economic gap.

Comparing Neha Sami’s dissertation to the other sources opens up a lot of discussion about how unequal the opportunities are for people living in India and the obvious gap of lifestyle. For instance, compared to 19th and 20th century India, it is harder to prosper now during current times than any other time in history due to differential economic times and rapid technological changes. While the other literature discussed places the blame on one possible problem or source, Sami takes a step back and considers the changing times as a possible factor of the huge economic and lifestyle gap. Sami also looks at all of the possible factors of the modern day urban population. She raises questions such as, “[w]hy are these factors present in India but not as much in other places? Who are the people in power now compared to those who were in power during the 19th and 20th century?” and “What makes this generation of urban dwellers majorly different than past urban dwellers?” An analysis of these questions encompasses examining the wage and lifestyle gap that continues to overpower the urban population and also the steps that could possibly help with uplifting the community and pushing them to strive for a better economic system.

Unfortunately, the goal of collaboration between local government and slum dwellers can at times be idealistic, as local authorities can often be corrupt. Appadurai’s discussion of this dynamic is valuable because it specifically discusses our organization, SPARC India, and the other two organizations that make up The Alliance. Appadurai states, “urban infrastructure… is entangled in an immensely complicated web of slum rehabilitation projects, financing
procedures, legislative precedents and administrative codes which are interpreted differently, enforced unevenly and whose actual delivery is almost always attended by an element of corruption” (29). SPARC India and The Alliance seek to combat this problem by running projects based off the perspective of the poor. Instead of seeing the poor as people who need to be helped, SPARC India and The Alliance see these slum dwellers as their partners in creating better communities. Appadurai provides valuable information on the problems facing slum dwellers, but does not supplement his claims with data. Because he does not provide data, his writing could also be seen as biased towards The Alliance, and not a completely non-partisan resource. In contrast, Banerjee et al. are seemingly less biased in their discussion of how limited access to quality infrastructure and political resources oppresses slum dwellers’ political voice. Banerjee et al. use survey statistics from an unbiased NGO to propose a similar view of politician corruption as Appadurai: that by not actively helping slum dwellers, politicians are oppressing them. This article should be used as a jumping-off point for research because it does not have the level of thoroughness or nuanced analysis as many of our other sources, but does offer an easy-to-read overview. Where many of our sources focus on the harmful effects of not having strong infrastructure, Banerjee et al. provide a new perspective through a political lens, suggesting that lack of cohesive outreach to these communities by politicians oppresses slum dwellers’ political voice. It shows how the lack of policies mentioned by other scholars can influence lack of democratic participation, leading to a downward spiral that exacerbates original problems.

A major aspect of improving government-slum relations is ensuring that the slum population is relatively healthy. This is important because of the social implications surrounding how people perceive slum-dwellers. Unfortunately, the living conditions of the majority of slum-
dwellers is less than ideal. Emmel and D’Souza discuss the health problems that come from people being forced to live in or very near swamplands and sewage. Their research is helpful because it gives a lot of background into the health aspects of slum dwelling. If slum-dwellers are not healthy enough, they are not in a position to have a strong relationship with their local government. However, the article does not give legitimate solutions to these problems, but rather raises awareness that the problems exist. Therefore, it does not give any practical solutions to the health problems nor government relations.

Bergman et al. provide a more political view of Indian Health System. They recognize the positive impact that the Indian Health Service has had on slum communities and acknowledge the health issues, while still remaining positive and recognize that there has been some progress. More importantly, the authors indicate how this improvement in health services in slums affects the political aspects of their lives, specifically with the local government. Bergman et al.’s research is more helpful than that of Emmel and D’Souza because of its direct comparison of good health to the political system. It shows how good health can only better political relations, and goes beyond simply stating that slum health is in danger and action needs to be taken to improve it.

In conclusion, it seems necessary that for there to be significant progress in changing the conditions of slums, local governments need to get involved. Historically, this is the most successful way to improve slum life. In the face of already tense relationships with the government, and severe health issues, it is difficult to get this assistance. SPARC is one of a few organizations that supports slum life and works towards bettering it. In order to perpetuate this work and increase it exponentially, SPARC, along with the slum-dwellers, needs the help of the government.
Analysis and Discussion of Findings

There are several policies in place to aid slum dwellers in their integration into society in India. Burra discusses mechanisms for financing slum redevelopment, such as providing apartments for slum dwellers to live in, which was implemented in Mumbai. Likewise, Burra explained a policy that allowed building permissions to be granted and alteration of the city’s development plan, called the Slum Rehabilitation Authority. Although there are policies in place that help alleviate the financial burden and accessibility of housing for slum dwellers, there is a lot of tension between the slum dwellers and the government. Furthermore, it is critical to analyze which policies are successful. According to Besley and Burgess, the redistribution of land in rural areas has increased per capita income by 10%. Even though the success of the model was in alleviating rural poverty, it can be a useful starting point to implement policies geared towards urban poverty as well. However, there are still numerous policies that are not successful in fulfilling their intent. Thakkar examines how governments rarely follow through with promises made to provide amenities to the slum dwellers. Although NGOs can provide a strong voice for slum dwellers, the lack of representation in government is still detrimental.

Although non-governmental organizations attempt to solve many problems, there are many factors that prevent them from being the most effective solutions to these problems. Dnyar Godrej looks at the effectiveness of NGOs and attempts to reason their findings. He states that one of the reasons that non-governmental organizations aren’t always effective is that they aren’t held accountable for their actions the same way local governments are. Moreover, the NGOs seek to appease the donors by fulfilling more, but less effective, simple tasks rather than giving comprehensive aid that would more effectively solve the problems. As stated by Peter Nunnenkamp, “our findings point to non-governmental organizations aid not being a panacea for
providing better-targeted aid and boosting aid effectiveness”. Because of these factors and others, such as corruption, non-governmental organizations are not always the most productive solutions to the problems Indian slum dwellers face. This creates a vicious downward cycle that makes it almost impossible for this group to overcome the history of oppression. The only way to do so is for the government to intervene and actively funnel resources into developing solid infrastructure. As we discovered in our research, slum dwellers are often viewed by the government as an obstacle to urban development, and not members of the community. Because of this, slum dwellers are often forced out of their homes and required to find new living spaces.

Currently, the government makes promises to help, but rarely channels significant resources to actually implementing solutions. Part of this is because many politicians do not consider the slum community an important stakeholder group to satisfy. Due to their low socioeconomic status, slum dwellers offer neither financial backing nor social clout to candidates that must be repaid once in office. Another problem is that the slum dwellers themselves are not properly educated about the legal and political resources that are available or could be available if concerns were voiced. Politicians do not seem to be making attempts to educate the members of these communities because of the historic perception as “untouchables,” which is the main reason for such gross oversight of infrastructure in those areas. However, this is an oppressive viewpoint based on false stereotypes of income hierarchy, making it incredibly difficult to legislate the necessary major infrastructure installation necessary to propel slum dwellers out of the downward poverty cycle. Therefore, sufficient government legislation to improve infrastructure in these communities is a critical turning point in the fight against poverty that unfortunately is not being addressed at present.
Looking through the researched information, it is assumed that not only are the policies not in good judgment for the majority but also the lack of push for the betterment of all citizens in India has a huge factor in the living standards of the people there. Also, because of the constant misuse of resources throughout the government, what resources could be used for those in the slums are being redirected towards those who already have a hierarchy in the society. However, because of this ongoing issue of overlooking the poor and struggling people, there have been many efforts by non-government organizations to make sure that those either living in the slums and those who are at a disadvantage have the resources that they need to live a substantially stable life. Outside of the help of non-government organizations, there is still a lot of corruption going on within the government, communities and individuals that continue to destroy the economic and social standards of India.

The corruption that goes on within the Indian government not only separates the socioeconomic of their society, but it also disproportionately tips the scale in favor of those who have been in power the longest or has been born into a wealth of economic status, leaving those who strive to prosper in the dark and no longer thought of as a contributing member of their respective society. There is corruption within the spending of money and where it is disbursed to and corruption within those who oversee certain areas of India and the communities that rely on those people in power to use their resources in the right way. Unfortunately, it has gotten to a point where those who are at a disadvantage are solely dependent on non-government organizations.

Though non-governmental organizations like SPARC try to implement sustainable solutions that involve the urban poor community, it is difficult to make considerable change without government assistance. With the lack of funding and resources from the government, it
is up to only non-government organizations to pick up where they left off. These organizations can only do so much and help so many people before they are overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues and require bigger powers to step in. Foreign allies have helped in many ways but ultimately it is not their responsibility and with no help from their own government, the citizens have become lost in a never-ending cycle of abuse from the system and have no way out from it permanently. Though it is known throughout outside countries that India struggles with its people in power and the laws and policies put into place, if it weren’t for the help of non-government organizations such as SPARC, the people would continue to despair and not prosper in their society.

Though non-governmental organizations by themselves are not always effective, by working in conjunction with the government, non-governmental organizations can provide much better aid. One such instance of this was when the Supreme Court had a directive calling for the construction of homeless shelters, but there were no any means to enforce it, nor was there any census data to show how many needed to be built. The Vigyan Foundation and Action Aid India were able to identify almost 20,000 slum dwellers in 600 locations, and estimated that there were roughly 30,000 laborers in those locations. This data was critical for the implementation of the Supreme Court directive. In addition, Vigyan Foundation tries to organize the slum societies so that the laborers benefit from social programs that are created to support them and they mobilize youth and women’s groups to voice their needs.

These disadvantages are often causally linked to each other, so an economic disadvantage can lead to health problems, and vice versa. It is critical that slum dwellers receive adequate health care, as they are often living in areas that may contribute to illnesses and disease. As discussed by Emmel and D’Souza, various health concerns arise from being forced to live in a on
or near sewage and swamplands. In fact, every year, two million slum children have died in India due to the ineffective state run health system provided to the poor (Chamberlain). According to Chamberlain, a report by the charity “Save the Children” condemns the Indian state run healthcare system for not providing adequate help to slum dwellers.

Implications

The primary understanding gained through extensive research on this topic is that the Indian government, which is currently playing an inactive role on the issues surrounding their urban poor, needs to become more involved in order to begin solving these issues. The poverty level cannot decrease without government intervention and aid. The challenge is how to convince the government to become more involved. The government must come to the understanding that slum-dwellers at the very least deserve basic human rights, such as access to clean water and proper sanitation facilities. The only plausible way to convince the government to get involved is to have people represent the urban poor, those who have lived in slums, consistently lobby the government to take action on these issues. Because such a high percentage of India’s population live in slums, this wide scale issue can only truly be fixed with government collaboration. Another issue is that the majority of slum dwellers do not know their political rights and often live in such horrid conditions that, understandably, their primary focus is on their individual wellbeing and the well beings of their families. There are several non-governmental organizations that work toward educating the urban poor on their political rights and on important health issues they face, but no major change can occur without the government getting involved.

The key to breaking the poverty cycle in these communities lies in investing in sanitation infrastructure and establishing legal housing security for these areas. With their basic needs met,
then these slum dwellers can focus on creating healthy and safer communities. The basic health needs of the slum dwellers must take priority, meaning that these people must be given adequate healthcare. By doing so, this creates not only a safer environment for those living in the slums but it also provides a multitude of opportunities within the communities to prosper. If given the resources to have better housing and living areas, the communities will flourish and the people of India will, in the long run, live in better conditions and live healthier lives. Helping the urban poor will provide opportunities that will eventually benefit all of India and having sanitation in slums is essential to uplifting these communities.

It is necessary for the government to actively enact policies that help slum dwellers. However, if any significant progress is to be made, there are still ways non-governmental organizations and community activists can help. They should work to change negative perceptions about the slum communities in order to encourage the government to implement better infrastructure. The government must understand that these people deserve the same access to human rights as more affluent individuals, and create appropriate, necessary legislation. Slum dwellers need to be integrated into the community and seen as valid members, and not as pariahs illegally living in these cities. Additionally, non-governmental organizations should continue their work bringing communities together to form self-created economic and education-based solutions and providing short-term solutions to sanitation problems.

Conclusion

The inability of government to provide basic rights, like housing, to the urban poor symbolizes the most prominent contemporary issue plaguing industrialized nations: the political oppression of the economic poor. Without government support in providing the backbone of the labor, resources, and capital needed to revitalize infrastructure to alleviate the housing burdens of
the poor, non-governmental organizations are left to compensate for the lack of amenities needed to support the growing slum population. Although the Supreme Court has called for the construction of housing shelters for the urban poor, the government has yet to take an active approach in passing legislation needed to allocate much needed resources to slum communities. Many of these issues are reflective of the government corruption occurring in many urban areas, in which there is obvious favoritism in policy towards citizens of a higher socio-economic status. Lack of education for slum dwellers and their communities only further drives the vicious cycle of government inaction. Government intervention is vital to the improvement of slum dweller’s quality of life. However, slum communities are often denied channels to government officials needed to help motivate policy to provide basic rights. Also, many communities have many cultural and ideological differences, which can inhibit the political unity needed to demand government action. Health issues, associated with the poor living conditions of slum communities, also prove to be prominent issues. These health issues have greater implications for the general urban community, as a result of poor infrastructure and issues in sanitation. Thus, the rights and well-being of individuals in urban India are reliant on the provision of basic rights to slum dweller communities, highlighting the greater social and economic need to rebuild infrastructure and address the growing economic disparity between the rich and poor.
References


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