

## **Restless Cities: How are we to understand the meaning of slums in Mumbai?**

Over the last twenty years slums have experienced something of a revival in the popular imagination. A series of UN-Habitat reports specifically on the issue of slums, media images of sprawling and heaving settlements, and a host of scholarly interventions - most infamously Mike Davies' polemic work *Planet of Slums* - have all served to sharpen attention on the size and growth of slums across the globe. Slums have been associated with chaos, a crisis of modernity and an uncertain urban future. Mumbai is a valid case study for the way in which it epitomises many of the global processes associated with the understanding of slums: population increase, rural-urban migration on an 'epochal' scale (Davis 2004), globalised and liberalised economies amongst the developing world, megacities, global cities (Sassen 1991), and heightened global inequality. Amidst this process occurring in many major cities across the globe, Mumbai is a particularly notable case study: its urban space features a striking concentration of population in proportion to land space and highly concentrated power in relation to land ownership. Questioning the 'meaning' of slums in Mumbai is particularly relevant because their existence has increasingly come under interrogation from a variety of quarters in the form of slum demolitions that have displaced and economically disorientated many of Mumbai's most vulnerable.

In articulating our research question in such a way we are in a sense reaffirming one of the key problems of this seemingly straightforward endeavour. We use the term 'slum' only on account of it being the primary way in which these socio-spatial areas are denoted within the literature and contend that it is in fact deeply problematic for the purpose of our study.

Firstly, it is not a term that quantifies the parameters, population concentration or spatial orientation of the areas it denotes. Secondly, it is highly malleable, as an area can be described as a slum on the basis of a variety of factors: lack of basic services, economic status, socio-spatial segregation, insecurity of land tenure, and cultural and ethnic

marginality. Thirdly, while its etymological origins are culturally and historically specific, it is today used to describe a plethora of similar phenomena across the globe. For example, despite being a specifically western term, having its origins in 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial England (Gilbert, 2007) it takes the place of the culturally and linguistically specific ways already existent to describe these areas. The effect of this has been the homogenisation and globalisation of the subject in question. Finally, it is value-laden, and brings with it the baggage of associated images, connotations and stereotypes.

I here contend that 'slum' should be considered as a concept rather than an analytical category, and employ a variety of theories in order to deal with its slippery character. On account of the fact that 'slum' is not a naturalised term and is highly malleable we can observe the relationship between describing an area as a slum and the meaning it is then ascribed. The relationship between discourse<sup>1</sup> and power is thus an important theoretical backdrop. What makes the term 'slum' particularly interesting, and problematic too, is that it not only releases images and connotations to the reader but embodies a certain spatial logic. When one speaks of a slum there are certain assumptions of spatial segregation and the meaning of this space; as for example being 'unplanned', 'ephemeral', and 'outside' or 'beneath' mainstream society even if is oriented towards the centre of a city. Thus to our backdrop of discourse and power we must add 'space'. I here draw inspiration from Lefebvre's insight '*space is political. It is a product literally filled with ideologies*' (1976: 31) and pursue the task of decoding Mumbai's built environment in order to highlight the forces shaping this particular urban landscape. This literature will however act as a guide rather than constitute a rigid explanatory framework.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Discourse' is here defined as communication (written, spoken and we here include the process of mapping) that follows a certain formation of thought and linguistic features specific to its topic (i.e. legal discourse, environmental discourse). It may define social boundaries and present itself as synonymous with truth.

This work will posit the following two theses: *firstly, that the term 'slum' only ever partially describes the lived reality of that to which it refers; secondly, that at the same time, and partly for this reason, this term serves a performative<sup>2</sup> function in shaping this reality.*

'Slum', as used within global literature such as UN-Habitat reports and that of 'global cities' (Sassen 1991), theorises the entity in relation to patterns of similarity across the globe: as symptoms of increasingly interconnected and liberalised economies, and the visions of modernity that these processes have spawned. In the first section we therefore observe the way in which these processes have inscribed themselves into the built environment of Mumbai. Viewed from this perspective the demolition of Mumbai's slums is the product of a heightened need to control urban space and can be directly linked to the spatial and aesthetic capabilities demanded by global capitalism.

In the second section we observe the way in which the shortcomings of this approach lie in its failure to understand 'slums' within their historical and cultural context. We shall illustrate this assertion by observing the various ways in which the characteristics of the concept 'slum' contorts our understanding of the particularities of the Mumbai context into reductive frameworks. For example, the use of 'slum' suggests that there is something unifying about the socio-spatial area it denotes: this has the effect of at once homogenising Mumbai's slum inhabitants and triggering the *a priori* assumption that they are in some way synonymous with slum inhabitants across the globe. Furthermore, in writing 'slums' into a global narrative the forces shaping the inhabitants reality are also homogenised and thus disembodied: the creation and demolition of slums becomes the symptom of global structures rather than agents within the Mumbai context. Several anthropological studies (Lynch 1974; Khandare 2008) observe Mumbai's slums not as units within a system (be it city, national or global) but

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<sup>2</sup> 'Performative' is an interdisciplinary term derived from J. L. Austin's notion of 'performative utterances'. It describes the situation wherein saying something does not merely constitute documentation or reporting but is actually doing something, changing the reality it describes.

as containers for social, economic and cultural processes that are so nuanced they render the unity presupposed by the term 'slum' highly questionable.

While this Indian-specific literature allows us to build nuance and context into our analytical framework it too is reductive. Whereas the global literature seeks paradigmatic models and patterns at the expense of the texture of their context, the Indian literature fails to explain how far the meaning of Mumbai's slums is global. Consequently, we are only ever able to gain a one-dimensional theorisation at any one moment. This thesis argues that these two distinct literatures can be connected through an analysis of the way in which 'slum' functions as a concept. In the third section, rather than dismiss it as an inadequate analytical category, we argue that for this reason it has become central to the reality and future of the subject that it so poorly captures. I argue that power is exerted over space through the medium of discourse and that 'slum' can be used in various ways as a justification for the neglect of slums and their demolition. In other words we see a process in which the discursive framing of the subject is shaping the reality of its existence. In arguing that 'slum' is a problematic concept that only ever partially describes the reality it addresses, we are not merely illustrating an inadequate epistemology of the subject, but arguing that this itself is a process and has agency in changing the subject that it describes. Thus, our second thesis: the meaning of Mumbai's slums can be understood through the performative function of the term 'slum'.

This approach affords us both theoretical insights and a methodology. By focusing on the concept of the slum we not only rectify gaps in the literature but ground a topic that on account of its multidisciplinary and holistic nature, threatens to fracture into pieces that cannot readily be theorised. It is worth noting that while we focus on the issue of slums, we cannot isolate our subject and must understand it as embedded in various systems, both institutional and conceptual. We thus observe the way in which slums can be defined in opposition to notions of modernity, public space and citizenship.

In deconstructing the concept of 'slum' we navigate between structures and agents, global models and local idiosyncrasies, and emic and etic sources of meaning. It is on the basis of this approach that I will highlight three new perspectives on the meaning of Mumbai's slums; an inverted form of governmentality, the anonymization of inequality and the existence of modernized untouchables.

## **1. The Global Level Analysis**

### Cities without slums/ Planet of slums

'The cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay' (Davis, 2006: 19)

'Let's take a journey to 2020 and let's look at what Mumbai can be. Let's imagine that we have landed at Sahar (Chatrapati Shivaji International) Airport and from there an absolutely clean, modern, six-lane highway takes us right to the freeway system which connects the airport to all parts of Mumbai whether it is south Mumbai or north Mumbai or east or west. The slums which greet us today will, by a miracle of science and technology, be cleaned up, rehabilitated. An uninterrupted highway takes us to Bandra and from there the sea-link takes us to Worli and onward to downtown South

Mumbai, which has miraculously been freed of the polluting cars that today greet us’.

(Narayanan and Mahadevia 2008: 188)

We begin with two quotes that capture the most non-specific and non-empirical aspect of our analysis: images of the city and visions of its future. The global literature is an apt starting point in our enquiry into the meaning of slums because the subjects in question have been closely implicated in new conceptions of modernity and urbanity. The juxtaposition of these quotes highlights two key tropes of this literature; the prevalence of dichotomy and the use of hyperbolic imagery. These have the effect of closely aligning slums to our understandings of ‘the city’ which is articulated through the metaphors of chaos and order. Davis’ quote demonstrates viscerally his prophecy of a ‘planet of slums’. His work weaves slums into a global and historical narrative that observes explosive population growth and an ‘epochal’ rural-urban migration that has taken place simultaneously to the delinking of industrialisation from urbanisation. However, Davis is just one voice in a chorus that has delineated a global trend of heightened urban inequality and spatial segregation as a result of the hegemony of neoliberal policy, promoted in the developing world by the IMF and the World Bank through Structural Adjustment Plans (Chang 2002; Pogge 2001). Mumbai has become a key example in the collection of ‘megacities’, such as Kolkata, Dhaka, and Lagos, experiencing the growth of their already sprawling slums. This phenomenon, although couched in hyperbole, has a solid empirical basis. The UN-Habitat (2003: 15) report stated that 72% of urban dwellers in sub-Saharan Africa live in slums and 58% of their South Asian counterparts. This suggests that Mumbai’s slums must be understood in relation to a crisis of modernity and, interestingly, the notion that slums are not an aberration of the urban experience but fast becoming the norm.

The second quote, a statement from Indian Merchants’ Chamber in a document titled ‘Development of Mumbai City: Mumbai Past, Present and Future’ (1995), illustrates the way

in which slums have been understood in relation to a very different vision of the city and modernity. In contrast to Davis' image of urban dystopia we find a utopian vision of Mumbai's transformation that is in a sense defined by its absence of slums. Mumbai's future is articulated in US style visions of modernity, of fluid movement, of invisible poverty and prevalent efficiency. Urban transformation is depicted in almost Whiggish terms; defined by development, progress and modernity. This vision clearly relates to a wider nationalist project of 'Shining India that, perhaps paradoxically, frames nationalist aspirations in terms of the global. It is clear that post-liberalisation urban planning marked an increasing emphasis on how the meaning of Mumbai's urban transformation was perceived externally rather than from within: note the way in which the reverie above begins from the perspective of someone, presumably international, arriving in an airport. Mumbai is therefore viewed literally from the perspective of this embodied global spectator. In this vision, Mumbai's slums are no longer slums. In stark contrast to Davis, slums are the antithesis of modern Mumbai; they represent decay and must be cleansed if the vision of a sanitized city is to be achieved. One can observe a similar conception of modern cities in UN-Habitat's initiative *Cities without slums*. Although this vision is intentionally rhetorical, when one considers the Western experience the issue of whether it is ever possible to rid a city of slum areas, its utopian quality is clear.

In both of these quotes we can observe the slum functioning as a symbol against which the city and modernity can define themselves. For Davis, slums are the definition of modernity, for these Mumbai merchants, they are the antithesis. For the former they are the norm, for the latter they are an aberration. For both, the highly potent and highly visual concept of 'slum' functions as a means in which attitudes towards global processes such as urbanisation, population growth and liberalisation can be pinned down and projected onto a space that is both literal and metaphorical.

## Global processes and Mumbai's economy

However, the relationship between Mumbai's slums and global processes is not purely conceptual. The changing nature of India's economy and its relationship to the global economy is of central importance to the persistence and growth of slums. Indeed, one may even argue that slums' primary meaning lies in its economic context. The 1991 liberalisation policies, although arguably not the definitive moment for India's economy and growth, certainly triggered economic and spatial changes. Mumbai is now the undisputed financial capital of India, housing the headquarters of almost all the leading banks, insurance companies, financial institutions and mutual funds (Falzon 2008). In contributing to the shift from a manufacturing based economy to a service based economy, liberalisation can be linked to the deindustrialisation of Mumbai. This led to a growth in unemployment in Mumbai during the 1990s; a trend of jobless growth that has been seen generally in India as a product of neoliberal policy (Mahedevia and Narayanan 2008). In Mumbai the manufacturing sector was increasingly informalized and deindustrialisation led to a heightened casualization and vulnerability of employment (Mahedevia and Narayanan 2008). When one considers the degree to which slum dwellers are involved in the informal economy, the link between the global and the local is clear. The meaning of Mumbai's slum can thus be read as a symptom of India's liberalisation and the particular nature of its economy.

## Spatial Reconfiguration

The changing nature of Mumbai's economy has led to a reconfiguration of urban space that has global parallels and reflects new priorities. Mumbai's mid-1990s decision to transform the city from an industrial and manufacturing hub to a centre for finance has been heavily inscribed onto the urban landscape of Mumbai. Changes in economic, industrial and land-use policy in Mumbai during the 1990s led to a process of industrial closure and retrenchment.

The central Mumbai mill district is a particularly striking example of this process: the majority of its mill sites were redeveloped into multi-storied residential, commercial and modern-sector office complexes. Elsewhere workers chawls were replaced by real-estate's new fixations: IT parks, business centres, luxury hotels, gated communities and in particular, US style covered malls. The introduction across India of Special Economic Zones (SEZ's) are perhaps the epitome of this process of claiming space in the name of finance and capital. Swapna Banerjee-Guha's (2002) theorisation of this spatial reconfiguration encompasses the use of space in terms of economic space within the global structure. In other words, there is an increasing desire to place cities within the hierarchy of access to transnational economic space. In order to achieve this, Mumbai has engaged in 'postmodern urban planning' (Banerjee-Guha 2002): it has moved away from urban development that sought to create a balance of basic service distribution and towards mega projects like IT parks and shopping malls. The fact that slums in Mumbai such as Dharavi occupy highly lucrative and well-positioned real estate posits them as an obstacle to this transformation, hence the spate of demolitions they have experienced. Against this heightened need for control over public space, the slums are 'unplanned', uncontained and thus symbolise irrationality in contrast with these new planned and stream lined areas.

In reconfiguring itself spatially Mumbai is mirroring similar processes occurring in other 'global cities'. SEZ's for example are a global phenomenon and an imported rather than native idea. Slums must then be understood as part of a wider project of spatial reconfiguration in Mumbai that reproduce those occurring in other 'global cities'. Slum demolitions form one component of a larger urban project that demonstrates a connection between liberalisation and particular urban formations.

## 2. The particularities of Mumbai's slums

We can thus see that globalisation and global aspirations play a central role in choreographing Mumbai's urban transformation and dictating the use of space. Space is reconfigured to be more functional for global capital and also for symbolic purposes (partly to attract global capital and thus to perpetuate the process of transformation). However, the way in which this literature theorises urban transformation can be critiqued on a number of levels: it seeks patterns of similarity at the expense of case studies that illuminate nuance and differentiation; it concentrates on global processes and particularly economic processes at the expense of factoring in political actors and historical and cultural context; and it takes 'global cities' as an objectified and essentialised reality (Banerjee-Guha 2002). I argue that while global processes are an essential factor in explaining urban transformation they do not constitute a satisfactory explanatory model, particularly for the individual slums of any particular city.

### Genealogies of the City

The growth and demolition of Mumbai's slums can to some degree be understood in relation to global processes. However, to understand them only in conjunction with liberalisation is a historical misreading (Shaw 2007). While the problem of Mumbai's slums may have been sharpened with the onset of liberalisation and the spatial reconfiguration it triggered, they have much deeper historical roots in the city. This approach is succinctly articulated in Chatterjee's concept of the 'genealogies of cities': a revisionist methodology that captures the need for an approach that highlights difference rather than similarity. For example, the slum area in Mumbai known as Dharavi is the result of decades of migration mostly from Maharashtra and Gujarat (Sharma 2000; Gavaskar 2003), reaching back to pre-Independence.

Post-independence Mumbai was pushed as the manufacturing heart of India and thus slum growth was partly tied to the need of these industries for cheap labour; Mumbai's host of textile mills (pre-liberalisation) are a testament to this. Furthermore, on account of Mumbai being a central manufacturing hub within India, the impact of liberalisation, which triggered deindustrialisation and a shift to the service economy, was particularly felt in Mumbai. The concept used at the global level clearly presents Mumbai's slums as dislocated from the history of their growth.

The concept of 'slum' is impregnated with a particular understanding of urban spatiality; namely that the slum is segregated from the rest of the city. However, the suggestion that this segregation is a modern phenomenon is questionable. Falzon's (2008) work reveals the way in which Mumbai has a history of spatial segregation in the form of 'colonies' or '*molhalla*' that existed not only amongst slum dwellers but the wider city, dating back to pre-independence. Chatterjee (2006) argues that India's colonial past makes her relationship with urban spatiality distinct. In his analysis of Calcutta he argues that colonial modes of governance were inscribed onto the urban landscape, creating a distinct foundation of spatial segregation upon which liberalisation could interact. Shaw (2007) similarly argues that the fragmenting forces of globalisation are more pronounced on post-colonial nations as their urban spatiality already embodies the logic of segregation. Indeed, Mehrotra states 'A century ago, Bombay was two separate cities, Western and Indian' (2008). Mumbai's slums must be differentiated from those of other global cities on account of their colonial context and particular history of spatial segregation, the nuances of which the term slum does not capture.

It is thus clear that on account of growth, spatiality, and demolition, Mumbai's slums must be understood not only in relation to modernity but in terms of historical continuity. The universal applicability of the term slum does not permit for this degree of historical contextualisation.

### Complex Visions of Modernity

In addition to the questionable correlation of slums with liberalisation, the association of slums with modernity is also problematic. In section one we discussed the way in which slums featured as a key reference point against which conceptions of modernity could either be aligned, as in the work of Davis (2004) and Lieberherr-Gardiol (2006), or defined against, as in the example of the Mumbai merchants. However, on closer inspection it is clear that we cannot define modernity in purely binary terms of chaos and order. The example of Mumbai, particularly in the 1990s, demonstrates the way in which understandings of the city's - and the nation's - identity can have a complex, and indeed antagonistic, relationship with modernity. Thomas Blom Hansen articulates the key shift in Mumbai's history not in terms of liberalisation but in its symbolic renaming (2001). In 1995 the regional Shiv Sena party and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party argued that renaming highlighted that the local origins of the city's name lay in Mumbadevi, a local goddess of Koli fisherman (Hansen 2001). Occurring four years after liberalisation, this renaming suggests a retrenchment to a specifically local and Indian identity and almost anti-global vision of modernity. Hansen (2001) situates this cultural shift alongside the Mumbai riots of December 1992 and January 1993 and the existence of strands of both anti-globalisation and Hindu chauvinism within Mumbai's political culture. The former appeared to bring the darker side of the city to the surface, generating a culture of fear and a strong sense of an underworld of violence. The latter provided a variety of exclusionary discourses and ways in which a social 'other' of

Mumbai could be constituted. The mythical native Marathi speakers were defined against a shifting host of outsiders: south Indians, Gujaratis, Muslims, the central government, and the cosmopolitan elite in the city (Hansen 2001). Mumbai's slums must therefore be understood in relation to a vision of the city's identity that is more layered than the 'global cities' literature suggests. Subsequently, they cannot be understood merely as aberrations to a sanitized vision of modernity, but as one of the city's many 'others' defined in relation to a complex and often contradictory self-identity.

### Power and Space

*Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power' (Foucault 1984: 252)*

The connection between material reality and power can be traced back to Karl Marx's assertion that ideology is embedded in material and social relations. Space and geography have since the 1960s experienced something of an academic renaissance. Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey and Michel Foucault have been the influential proponents of the belief that space, geography and the built environment are key materials for analysis and should be elevated at least to the status of 'history' within our conceptual arsenal. For Harvey, the urban landscape reveals the forces shaping it – namely 'historical-geographical materialism' (2000) – and the city can be considered as a canvas for the articulation of social injustice. For Foucault, space is the material that is used to physically crystallise and communicate dynamics of power.

The term 'slum' on account of the way it is used transhistorically and transnationally to describe socio-spatial subjects, implies that slums in different contexts fill a similar space in a similar, or even unified, structure such as global capitalism. Global level analysis (Davis

2004; Milbert 2006; Lieberr-Gardiol 2006) and Foucauldian understandings of space both tend to disembody and decontextualize the existence of power within urban landscapes. For example, in Davis' analysis in *Planet of Slums*, we get a sense that the problem of slums is on such a scale that causation lies in structures rather than agents. However, the striking concentration of power in Mumbai and its particular politicisation demand that we illuminate the nexus of agents contributing to the existence of slums. Although estimates vary, Falzon's calculation that 60% of Mumbai's citizens occupy 8% of the city's land gives us an impression of the spatial imbalance. Despite various land redistribution acts it was estimated in 1984 that 27 landowners owned 70% of the fully exploitable lands in Greater Bombay (Sundaram 1989: 85). Narayanan points out that despite various half-baked and apathetically-enacted government attempts to free up land for low-cost housing, even today a group of 17 large private trusts and individual landowners hold almost 3400 ha of land. The concentration of power over space was exacerbated during the 1990s when the majority of land management in Mumbai shifted to the private sector. Although the Transfer of Development Rights introduced by the Shiv Sena-BJP government in Maharashtra in 1997 was an attempt to incentivise private developers to rebuild slum housing (and secure slum votes), in reality builders were only interested in redeveloping slums on prime locations where the profits could be maximised. Developers in Mumbai have instead overwhelmingly catered to the consumption needs of the wealthy and the growing middle class in the form of shopping malls and luxury hotels. Indeed a government appointed Tinaikar Committee Report into the success of the SRS described it as a fraudulent scheme: 'of the builders, by the builders and for the builders' (Narayanan 2008:123).

Our understanding of Mumbai's slums must therefore be situated in the nexus of power, articulated by particular agents, in which they exist; it is this axis of private developers,

governmental neglect, slum lords and middle class lobby groups that both preserve the conditions of slums through a failure to rehabilitate, and destroy them through demolitions aiming to free up land for development. This however, only goes part of the way in illuminating the constellation of power surrounding slums in Mumbai. Indeed to conceptualise the power dynamics as purely ‘top down’ would be misleading; slum activism and international organisations acting on their behalf have constituted a resistance to the process of state neglect and legitimised demolitions (Roychowdhury 2008). Dharavi has since the 1970s had a number of chawl committees and in 1979 PROUD was set up with the aim of representing the land rights of slum dwellers and identifying themselves in opposition to the state (Chatterji and Mehta 2007). One can thus not conceptualise Mumbai’s slums as depoliticised areas: far from it, India’s slums play a key role in what has been described as India’s ‘democratic upsurge’

However, despite various interventions from NGOs, international organisations and political organisations generated from within the slums, slum activism has failed to carve a significant presence in the political and popular imagination (Roychowdhury 2008). Although it is not within the remit of this essay to present a full discussion, the co-existence of democratization and the persistence of great inequality is one of the curious features of India’s democracy. This power constellation is further complicated by the reoriented relationship between the state and the market and the introduction of a neoliberal style of governance within India. James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2002) show how one can conceive of power in terms of an imaginary sphere of space that delineates a hierarchy of power. For our purposes this is helpful in theorising the complex networks of power in Mumbai: while the state is traditionally considered as being ‘above’ society, this relationship has been disrupted and reconfigured in the era of neoliberal governance where private, international and civil society

actors assume functions previously covered by the state and lines of accountability are blurred. Thus while it would be too simplistic to conceptualise Mumbai's slums as victims of a one way power dynamic from 'above', the articulation of their resistance must negotiate through an increasingly fragmented and complex power nexus that can perhaps best be visualised as existing on a more horizontal plane.

The way in which 'slum' is used in global level analysis presupposes that they exist within a power framework that is monolithic, depersonalised and rooted in global structures rather than national or local agents. The demolition and neglect of Mumbai's slums must be understood in relation to these particularly concentrated and complicated apparatus of power. This not only does justice to the idiosyncrasies of the context but makes the problem more tangible, and perhaps thus more manageable, in highlighting the particular forces and agents constituting the existence of slums.

#### Homogenisation: how far does the slum exist?

The two primary ways in which the concept of a slum fails to capture the nuance of our subject here in question derives from its Western etymological origins of the term and its etic nature. The word 'slum' has its origins in the industrial England of Charles Dickens. We must question the applicability of such a term to a different culture and period. Indeed analyses of capitalism and space-society relations have a marked tendency to avoid non-western contexts (Das 2001). The problems of transplanting this term are here evident. Not only does the term conjure a transhistorical parallel between the contemporary developing world and industrial Britain that suggests an economic 'backwardness' of the former, but it presupposes a certain spatial logic. Namely, that slums are to some degree spatially

segregated from the rest of the city, be it in terms of location or fortified boundaries. This situation in industrial Britain generally derived from the correlation between residence and occupation; for example, those working in particular factories would reside together in a nearby area. However, the striking economic co-dependence between the rich and the poor in India has widely been observed. Although Dharavi is as much a commercial area as it is a residential, this does not mean to say that one finds in the slum the correlation of housing and functionality. The growing middle class of Mumbai depends to a striking degree on the involvement of slum labour, often leading to the transcendence of spatial segregation. The most poignant example of this can be found in Mumbai's increasing number of gated communities, wherein the residents depend on the labour of the very citizens they have sought to shut out. In order to maintain their lifestyles they depend on domestic servants and, ironically, security personnel drawn from the lower castes (Falzon 2008). Appadurai pithily summarises this complex relationship of spatial segregation and economic integration in India with the following "one wants the poor near at hand as servants but far away as humans" (2000: 637).

Not only does the Western concept of a slum presuppose a spatial segregation that fails to capture the uniquely co-dependent relationship of the rich and poor, it also problematically posits that there is something unifying about the socio-spatial area that 'slum' denotes. Anthropological studies (Maheswaran 2001; Bijulal 2004) have gone a certain way in shedding light on this issue and adding nuance to literature that uses 'slum' as a homogenising category. As noted in section one, Mumbai's slums are composed of migrants from a variety of regions and the riots of 1992-3 are testament to the existence of communal tensions. Indeed the idea of slum vs city that the concept suggests is broken down by studies that illuminate the degree of segregation *within* the slum. Studies on Dharavi show that the

slum experiences segregation within its boundaries on many different axes, including religion, caste, ethnicity and language (Yatzimirsky 2010). Harris-White's et al (2003) work on Chennai highlights the fact that slum dwellers are engaged in a variety of sectors (by no means only manufacturing) and often experience fairly different wages and levels of economic security. Indeed, slums in Mumbai, similarly to those in Chennai do not occupy solely one location but are fragmented and spread across the city. Harris-White et al (2003) note the existence of 1230 in Chennai alone.

The city/slum binary is further complicated by the hovering links between the urban and the rural. Studies of Dharavi have shown that strong cultural continuities with the rural context persist (Yatzimirsky 2010). Indeed, Sharma (2000: 115) has noted the way in which cultural characteristics from the rural setting are often transplanted into Dharavi: 'if you visit a particular part of Dharavi you will forget you are in Mumbai, it is a skilful recreation of a village in Tamil Nadu'. Dharavi appears culturally and spatially fragmented, with pockets of areas that appear not to exist in the city at all. This suggests that a walk through the slum would provoke questions of what unified it other than location.

That the slum is an etic rather than emic concept is demonstrated by the fact that Indian slum dwellers do not historically have a unified way of referring to the space; names are generally specific to particular Indian languages and tend to reference community rather than 'slum' space. Indeed this appears to be a more general feature of how space is understood and navigated within Mumbai: Falzon (2008) describes the way in which Mumbai's locals have a mental map of the city that uses communities rather than slum/city as its reference points.

Indeed this links back to the pre-independence *molhalla* apartment blocks discussed in

section one, which were occupied on various indicators of cultural and social similarity. How far a female Muslim weaver identifies with fellow slum inhabitants rather than her female Muslim weavers outside the slum is questionable.

### **3. The slum as a performative concept**

In the following section I shall illustrate the second thesis posited: that the meaning of Mumbai's slums can be understood through the performative function of the concept of 'slum'. In the second section we explored the way in which the various characteristics of the concept either distorted or reduced the subject in question. Here we observe the way in which these etic understandings, or rather misunderstandings, are actively reshaping both the spatial reality of the slums (in the form of demolitions) and the implications they have for its citizens (in the form of identity and citizenship). We illustrate this with the following, fairly loose, conceptual framework: that discourse is a means of communicating power and inscribing it onto the urban landscape. We will here analyse legal discourse, environmental discourse, surveys and mapping, and government policy. It will become evident that they have used 'slum' to create social constructs of slum dwellers that amount to a differentiated type of citizenship and an anonymization of modern untouchability.

#### Legal 'Othering'<sup>3</sup>

Since the mid-1990s slums in Mumbai have increasingly been understood in terms of illegality. The literature regarding the notable increase in slum demolitions in both Delhi and

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<sup>3</sup> 'Othering' is a term used widely in the social sciences and derived from Western philosophy. It describes the processes by which individuals, groups and societies subordinate those who do not fit into their society, by defining themselves in opposition.

Mumbai towards the end of the 1990s consensually delineates a shift in the position of the judiciary towards the urban poor. This focus on legal discourse is warranted: it provides an aperture through which one can understand attitudes regarding the relationship between society and spatiality. The power of the courts had in the early 1990s been augmented by its PIL portfolio and procedure (Ramanathan 2006). However, by the late 1990s the definition of 'public interest' was destabilised and it was no longer clear that the original constituency of the PIL, the poor and the vulnerable, still had the courts on their side. A key watershed was the 2000 Almitra Patel Vs Union of India case, wherein it became clear that the court had reoriented its understanding of the relationship of the urban poor to slum land, through redefining the boundaries of legality. Slum dwellers were defined by their illegality and it was argued that providing resettlement programmes was 'like giving a reward to a pick-pocket' (Ramanathan 2006). This attitude constituted a discursive reframing of the problem of urban poverty: the shortage of low-cost housing was no longer the problem; rather the slums themselves were problematized. Justice was conceptualised not in terms of the provision of basic services such as adequate housing, but in terms of legal land occupation. Slum dwellers were not victims of developmental neglect, but criminals.

A redefinition of 'public interest' underpins this reconceptualization of the existence of slums; it was not in the public interest to seek a redistribution of basic services and to develop Mumbai in an inclusive way. Rather, it was in the public interest to 'clean up' the city and legally codify the relationship between citizens and urban land in a way that allowed it to exist more readily as a commodity. In other words, it was in the public interest to respond to land use in a way that adhered to the utopian vision of Mumbai's transformation. The judiciary has responded to petitioners representing the interests of industrialists, welfare residents associations or more generally upper and middle class citizens. When one considers

the way in which the attitude of the courts led to many demolitions in Mumbai, the power exercised in the arbitration over the definition of legal land use is evident.

This shift in legal discourse and redefinition of slums as 'illegal' can be directly linked to the well documented spate of slum demolitions in Mumbai, accelerating in the mid-1990s and reaching their peak in 2003-4. This is perhaps the clearest example of 'slum' functioning performatively; it illustrates the connection between the understanding of 'slum' and the fate of the subject in question. Ghertner (2008) supports this link in his observation of the production of a 'new nuisance discourse', used by the judiciary to support demolitions. This classification of slums as 'illegal' has implications not only for urban spatiality but for citizenship. In 2003 the campaign 'Mee Mumbaikar' (I, the resident of Mumbai) was launched by the Shiv Sena party. It put forward the idea that slum dwellers should be disenfranchised. It was followed by a filed PIL by prominent citizens of Mumbai that argued if slum dwellers were living illegally, they could not be considered legal citizens of the city and consequently should be disenfranchised. In these incidents we can see the coming together of understandings of space and notions of citizenship implicit in the legal discourse.

### Neoliberal Governance

While the concept of slum does not necessarily connote illegality, its associations with ephemerality and informality have been harnessed in Indian legal discourse to these ends. One may argue that this notion has been utilised specifically to avoid addressing the degree to which slums are not problems that can be addressed in isolation but symptoms of the structures in which they are embedded. Davies (2004) argues that while governments have depicted slums as 'transitory' spaces on the path to capitalist modernity, they are in fact structurally integral to the preservation of capitalism, so much so that rather than disappear they are likely to swell and bleed into the surrounding urban areas. This type of thinking has

been applied to the context of India's cities. Bavishkar's (2003) theorisation of Delhi notes the creation of the slums were a direct product of a building initiative by the urban plan. However, while development projects required labour they failed to provide adequate housing. Subsequently slums appeared beside new development projects and they are therefore, ironically, intrinsically linked. Planned development and 'unplanned' slums are as Bavishkar describes them 'siamese twins'.

Bhan (2009) and Ramanathan (2006), amongst others, note the way in which uses of urban spatiality are linked to neoliberal governance. Milbert (2006) describes the spatial slum unit as a 'mode of governance'. We can apply this insight in our case to highlight the way in which defining slums as 'unplanned', 'unstable' and thus 'illegal' creates an argument for the state to shirk its obligations to provide for the urban poor. The state can dislocate the problem of legal land use from that of providing services for the urban poor. The narrative of the illegal slum dwellers fits well with the neoliberal mode of governance that seeks to cede government functions to the private sector. We can observe neoliberal understandings of citizenship that supports this severing of accountability in the depictions of slum dwellers in industries such as tourism. The website of Reality Tours and Travel's Dharavi slum tour is an example of the way in which slum dwellers are being depicted as neoliberal citizens who through their own entrepreneurship rather than state support are lifting themselves out of poverty. These depictions of slum dwellers as self-regulating and self-correcting citizens support what Milbert would describe as the 'neoliberal agenda' and the demise of the developmental state. This example highlights a particular modern nuance to the concept of

slum; the idea of a 'good' slum, or rather, a 'slum of hope'. In either sense, whether a 'slum of despair' or a 'slum of hope', it is possible to see the ideological use of slum for the purpose of governance.

#### The delinking of habitat from inhabitants

*We will lose everything when they demolish our homes - our house, our belongings, our relationships, the future of our children ... our very survival is threatened (Das: 222)*

This quote taken from a public notice by the Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti (NHSS) concerning the displacement of dwellers from the Borivali National Park, although intentionally rhetorical and sentimental, illustrates the depth of connection between habitat and inhabitant and is a clear statement against the disposability of the slum. The delinking of the two however is a discernable discursive strategy in government slum policy. The UN-Habitat (2003) report notes the difficulty of producing an 'operational definition' of slum. Indeed it can be used to describe a multitude of 'slum-like' features. The versatility of this concept provides the opportunity for discursive manipulation; it is possible to see the way in which 'slum' has been used in policy in such a way as to denote purely habitat and ignore the social, cultural and economic processes that it contains. Milbert observes the way in which authorities often distinguish carefully between social programs for the poor and spatial measures targeting the slums. We can thus observe the process of rights and basic needs being separated from a spatial context. One can observe this delinking in the way in which slum demolitions in Mumbai and also slum upgradation, (as in the case of the verticalisation of Dharavi) fail to acknowledge the way in which slum dwellers are tied to their spatial context not only in terms of housing but livelihood (Mitra and Kaur 2007). One of the key oversights in the proposals to relocate Dharavi inhabitants has been its ignorance of the fact it

is both a residential and commercial area. Milbert (2006) discusses the way in which this policy approach pervades to the highest level: in the MDG's slums have been theorised reductively and subsequently the relevant targets are extremely modest and relate to 'improvement in slum dwellers lives' rather than the slums per se. Policy tends to see space either as a physical unit or as a container for social processes, but it does not link the two into a more 3D understanding of the way in which individuals relate to their habitat. Furthermore, slums are not theorised in terms of their structural relation to the city itself and going further, to national and international systems.

This discursive process is aided by an absence of documentation of Mumbai's slum areas. While one can observe sources that exhibit the discourses put forward by the judiciary and other public bodies, there is a distinct lack of documentation regarding the existence and character of urban slums. In 1986 the Correa Committee attempted to produce a comprehensive survey of the structures and settlement patterns in Dharavi, for which there existed none. It ordered an aerial survey of Dharavi. However, the boundaries were blurred and it failed to come up with a population estimate that was accurate. Slum policy to redevelop Dharavi has since gone ahead without knowledge of its scale or spatial configuration.

The way in which Dharavi is an unquantified and intangible space has important implications for its citizens (Mahedevia and Narayan 2008). The majority of Dharavi's citizens are without the documentation needed to prove their citizenship. This is the case particularly in regards to housing rights; wherein the majority of settlements were procured within the informal economy and thus without legal documentation. This failure appears to be a trend on the national level: Dupont argues that Delhi's slums are lacking in up to date and accurate data. The UN Habitat report notes this to be replicated globally. One may argue that maps are key to understanding the society one lives in and that identity documentation is a key in

forming a sense of citizenship. The failure to produce these types of discourse tells us that 'slum' is here used as a term that describes an undocumented space and that the outcome of this is the experience by slum dwellers of a type of semi-citizenship.

### Environmental discourse

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the term slum lies in its lack of neutrality. Gilbert argues that the origins of 'slum' lie in a correlation between disease and habitat (2007). In Indian legal discourse we can observe the use of this connotation through the application of environmental discourse to the process of spatial reconfiguration and slum demolition. However, in the discourse dealing with Mumbai and India's other cities, resources and the environment are also conceptualised as a battle ground for competing class interests and needs. Dupont (2008) argues that the couching of legal discourse in the language of environmentalism is not neutral; in fact it should be classified as 'bourgeois environmentalism'. Ghertner (2008) similarly notes the way in which a 'polluting poor discourse' has been reborn. The language of beautification and aestheticization are discursive mechanisms for justifying and implementing slum policy. Indeed this discursive mechanism is not specific to Mumbai; in 2006 Delhi High Court in its refusal to stop demolitions despite the fact most households had no alternative resettlement sites, used a language of epidemics and pathology (Bhan 2009). Within this process 'slum' becomes less a denotation of an area of space and more a description of its character and the problems this poses for the rest of the city. In other words, there has been a shift in semantics wherein slum is used less as a noun and more in a pejorative adjectival sense: the 'polluting poor discourse' helps to transform the poor from victims of poor development to active and contagious elements within the city, threatening to seep into and destroy the shining vision of modern Mumbai. Slum dwellers become synonymous with slum waste and, as embodiments of the city's pathologies of dirt and disorder, stand in opposition to the reconstituted meaning of public space: as the modern,

the middle class, the clean and the interface with global spectators. As the slum assumes an active and symbolic quality of pollution it is directly linked, as its antithesis, to the vision of shining Mumbai. This misreading of slum dwellers as illegal 'encroachers' and polluters of public space provides the ethical basis for the state and private sector's attack on slum space, and the elevation of the green agenda at the expense of the brown agenda.

The way in which slum dwellers are identified with their habitat is evident not only in the way slums are referred to directly in legal discourse and environmental lobby groups but indirectly through the creation of spaces of exclusion such as gated communities and modern 'public' areas. In Falzon's (2008) discussion of Mumbai's gated communities he observed the way in which advertising for these estates draws on, and combines, notions of the environment with a fear of violence. Advertisements draw on ecological discourse that juxtaposes clean, green areas in the gated community against the pollution and congestion of the rest of the city. Through interviews with residents at the Hiranandani Gardens complex in Mumbai he discovered that 'fear' was a prevalent reason for joining the gated community. One must contextualise this response to the city in the already prevalent exclusionary discourses existing in Mumbai's political culture that were particularly galvanised in the 1990s by the Shiv Sena. Hansen (2001) notes the way in which the riots of 1992-3 shifted popular perceptions of the nature of Mumbai; bringing its darker, violent underworld to the surface. Falzon (2008) correlates this shift with an increase in the number of gated communities in Mumbai. Indeed while they are partially global cultural imports, particularly from the US, they have to be understood in the context of Mumbai's particular landscape of social constructs. In the advertisements of the gated communities in Mumbai, ecological discourses align environmental purity with social purity: the communities are gated from pollution and from socially polluted individuals.

Thus we can observe an opposite process occurring to that in policy discourse: while slum inhabitants are delinked from their habitat in government slum policy, in advertising and popular imagination they are synonymised. Environmental discourse aids the alignment of 'cleaning *up*' the city with 'cleaning *out*' the poor. A powerful example of this can be found in Mumbai's Bandra promenade, a stretch of recreational land that has been 'beautified'. With this shift in appearance have come segregating measures; notices all bearing reference to cleanliness and civility have appeared, plaques stating that hawkers and other 'encroachers' are not allowed and even the introduction of security guards (Falzon 2008). This 'public' space is thus protecting from 'dirty' and undesirable social elements. This social construct of the 'other' represents the city's pathologies of violence, dirt and poverty and finds its symbolic grounding in the city's slums.

#### The anonymization of inequality and the modern day untouchables

Environmental discourse, alongside the spatiality of slums, can be seen as an echo of the existence of an untouchable caste within Indian society. It is in this respect, above all else, that 'slum' must be considered in relation to the historic and cultural specificities of Indian rather than global patterns of similarity. While understandings of ritual pollution have been de-legitimised, one can see their resonance in the environmental discourse discussed above. The preoccupation with 'beautification' and the sanitation of Mumbai, indirectly entails the demonization of dirt and pollution (in an ecological sense). In the examples of legal discourse, advertising for gated communities (and indeed the desire for them), and the sanitization of 'public', modern, areas we can see the creation of social constructs that serve the purpose of maintaining spatial segregation. Clarinda Still discusses the way in which in rural context prejudice, previously articulated in terms of caste and untouchability, are

reframed in terms of hygiene and alcoholism (Still, forthcoming). One can draw a parallel between the two discursive processes; both function to the effect of ‘othering’ the dirty and the antisocial.

One sees this echo of untouchability not only in terms of social constructs but economic position and spatial transgression. The existence of socio-spatial segregation at the rural level has widely observed the exclusion of Dalits to hamlet areas on the peripheries of villages (Still; Gorringer 2005). In the existence of the slum one finds a modern day urban parallel. While no comprehensive or focused exploration of this parallel yet exists, the high composition of Dalits in Indian slum areas has been acknowledged (Roychowdhury 2008). The typical rural spatial model saw the Dalits spatially located far away so as to not be ‘polluting’ the village but close enough to the village to perform their invaluable economic and ritual functions. The way in which the Dalits existed in an ambivalent state of inclusion and exclusion bears striking similarity to the modern day Mumbai slum dweller: he lives in a segregated area yet is connected to the city – either in terms of the relationship between the informal and the formal economy, or in terms of the spatial transgression they make to perform their jobs as domestic servants to middle class households or, as security guards for Mumbai’s gated communities. Indeed it is striking that despite the official delinking of caste from occupation, in the sanitation department of the Mumbai Municipal Corporation one finds predominantly untouchable labourers (Gavaskar 2003). Thus while ex-untouchables are given wages and a uniform they are still performing the same occupations associated with their ritual pollution. Gavaskar (2003) argues that Mumbai has developed a particularly caste based division of labour within its industrial economy. Thus in Mumbai’s slums one finds mostly ex-Dalits, who perform ‘dirty’ occupations, reside in a spatially segregated area and are the subject of exclusionary discourse, now framed in the language of ecology and security.

Ultimately, the slum functions as a concept both to preserve and confirm this reality (largely by way of) and to distort it. A critical look at what the various uses of 'slum' in discourse amounts to is here necessary. Political philosopher Thomas Pogge in a recent lecture on 'Globalisation and Inequality' delivered at Oxford University (2011) articulated the idea of an 'anonymization of inequality': while inequality is increasingly disconnected from 'natural' features (such as race, gender and sexuality), economic, social and political inequality is growing. One may here draw a parallel with the growing number of slum dwellers and the fact they are largely ex-Dalits. This process, Pogge argues, is however masked by an 'anonymization of inequality', which essentially describes the way in which the marginality of the marginal is masked on account of their heterogeneity and number. This insight may be fruitfully applied to the example of Mumbai's slums wherein we see government policy and legal discourse carrying out a dual process of delinking slum inhabitants from their spatiality and essentially dehumanising the slum as a spatial container for social, economic and cultural processes, and synonymising them by flattening them into their background, equating them with slum waste and irrationality. Focusing on the slum either in terms of its spatiality or for the social constructs it generates may be seen as a way of masking the structures in which it is embedded; in our case a fusion of caste and capitalism. It is possible that this anonymisation is aided by the fissiparous and highly graded nature of the caste system, wherein even the Dalits themselves are highly divided.

This process of anonymization of slum dwellers is aided by the curious lack of documentation of Mumbai's slums. This poses an interesting challenge to Foucault's concept of governmentality, which can in its simplest form be described as the 'conduct of conduct'. Governmentality makes frequent appearance in literature on India's cities and its slums. Foucault argues that in order to concretize the governmental form of political technology one has to gain knowledge of its population. Surveillance is thus a crucial aspect of

governmentality. In the case of Mumbai however the state appears decidedly apathetic about documentation and mapping of the slums spatiality and composition. It may be possible that the anonymization of the slum population, by cloaking them in invisibility and destabilising their experience with discourses of disposability and irrationality, is a unique mode of governance in itself.

### **Conclusion**

Given my criticisms of the term 'slum', our initial premise, namely that Mumbai's slums can best be understood through the concept of the slum, may at first appear counter-intuitive. We have devoted the greater part of this paper to demonstrating that the term 'slum' in fact fails to accurately describe the socio-spatial subject in question. It is on the basis of the term's epistemological instability across different cultural contexts that we have denied its legitimacy as a valid 'analytical' category, and have, therefore, redefined it as a concept. Its western origins render it loaded with culturally specific spatial logics of segregation that do not capture Mumbai's history of *molhalla*'s and the spatial transgression of lower caste labourers to middle class areas. The term 'slum' is inevitably value-laden in virtue of the correlation between disease and habitat, which lies at its heart. The term has also assumed a universalized meaning as a result of its being used to describe a global phenomenon, effectively resulting in both the homogenization of Mumbai's slum dwellers and the disembodiment of the localized power apparatus through which they are both created and destroyed. This nexus of *a priori* assumptions is joined by the recent alignment of the concept with a crisis of modernity; transforming the 'slum' into a symbol of urban dystopia. The meaning of Mumbai's slums must, therefore, be grounded in a more localised context. It is crucial that this localized context take into account not only the impact of global structures, but also that of local agents, such as Mumbai's builders. This context must, moreover, be sufficiently sensitive to the myriad ways in which history and culture shape the conceptual

contours we associate with a term, and, ultimately, determine the meaning we ascribe to a term itself.

However, it is in light of these problems that we arrive at our second thesis: that the 'slum' functions performatively. We have demonstrated that the meaning of slums can - to a certain degree - be described objectively. Liberalisation and the need to spatially reconfigure the city to accommodate financial capital, the needs of the middle class, as well as those who stand to profit from their consumption, have all interacted with the spatial and social foundations of the city. These discursive processes have played both explanatory and causal role leading to demolitions and the demonization of the slum. However, meaning is distinct from objective reality and in liberating the slum as concept we have observed how it's malleability and potency has been manipulated in various discourse to the purpose of actively changing the subject in question: it has led directly to demolitions through defining slums as illegal and environmentally antagonistic; it has homogenized and anonymized slum dwellers leading to their experience of a qualitatively differentiated type of citizenship. It has proven its versatility in allowing for the delinking of habitat from inhabitant in policy discourse, while facilitating their synonymisation in social constructs. We have delineated the way in which these discursive mechanisms are the processes by which power is inscribed onto the built environment. This has illuminated more subtle aspects of the slum's meaning; they are the subject of a unique type of governmentality that anonymizes inequality and masks the existence of modern day untouchables.

Perhaps the most curious example of the way in which 'slum' has functioned performatively lies in the way in which it has been responded to by Mumbai's slum dwellers. Despite their heterogeneity, the recent connection of Mumbai's slums to the Slum Dweller International transnational network suggests that the ill-fitting term of slum has been internalised by slum dwellers, in an act of strategic essentialism. This demonstrates an interesting discursive

dynamic; a global term has been internalised at the local level and fed back, in a kind of discursive feedback loop. It is a powerful example of the way in which discourse, in our case the concept of a slum, can shape meaning and 'the production of truth' (Foucault, 1991a, 79).

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