

Urban Poverty in India: Tools, Treatment and Politics at the Neo-liberal Turn

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# Urban Poverty in India

## Tools, Treatment and Politics at the Neo-liberal Turn

KAREN COELHO, ANANT MARINGANTI

What kinds of subjects-in-the-making are the urban poor? The authors in this issue of the Review of Urban Affairs offer neither conclusive arguments nor radically new paradigms. They, however, nudge us to rethink poverty, not as an objective condition that can be addressed through policymaking at a distance or by targeted development schemes, but as constituted through contentious engagements of disadvantaged individuals and communities with neo-liberal policy discourses and agendas.

Poverty is as old a subject for Indian thinkers as the idea of India itself. At the turn of the 19th century, it was anti-colonial nationalism that inspired Dadabhai Naoroji's treatise *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901). Post-Independence thinking on poverty was shaped by Nehruvian developmentalism, inflected with precepts from modernisation theory emanating from the Bretton Woods institutions. Understandings of poverty have always been shaped by the dominant ideological currents of the day. Contemporary debates on targeted versus universal delivery of services, and on the mechanics of "pro-poor" approaches within "inclusive" frameworks take place in the broader context of post-Washington Consensus neo-liberal globalisation. This is a context in which cities and towns are emerging as sites of both hope and despair for millions of people. We contend here that understanding and intervening in these debates requires us to engage with the rapidly changing meanings and materialities of poverty in these new urban sites.

Two interlocked trajectories might be pursued to apprehend the current moment: one, changes in the dynamics and determinants of urban poverty, and two, shifts in understandings, analyses, and treatments of urban poverty in scholarly and/or policy domains. Three themes weave through the papers in this special themed issue of the Review of Urban Affairs (RUA). The first is "counting the poor", involving issues in definition and measurement. The second is "placing the poor", i.e., apprehending the spatial dynamics and determinants of urban poverty. The third, "governing the poor", incorporates the above two, but explores framings of urban poverty in policy discourses and in the institutional architectures installed to deal with it. In what follows, we underscore these themes, outline a framework for staging a conversation among the authors, and push this conversation towards new pathways for critical scholarship.

### Counting the Poor

Provisional figures from the 2011 Census suggest that there has been a higher than projected growth in urban population, indicating an acceleration of urbanisation in India. Scholars like Davis (2006) and others have argued that third world urbanisation is marked not only by its extremely rapid pace, but is typically propelled by distress migration from collapsed agrarian economies, and manifests itself as "urbanisation without industrialisation". In other words, third world cities, despite rising unemployment, falling real wages, soaring

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prices, overcrowding and poor infrastructure, continue to attract ever-increasing numbers of rural migrants, resulting in a planetary spread of slums and a growing urbanisation of poverty.

The Indian story, however, appears to be more complex. Rates of urbanisation have been relatively slow, rural-urban migration accounts for a rather small part of urban population growth, and migration trends appear to have further slowed in recent years. Kundu (2011) indeed suggests that the exclusionary policy climate prevalent in India's metropolitan cities has actively discouraged the entry of prospective migrants and poor people.

What does all this suggest about the extent of poverty in Indian cities? Have the proportions of urban poor increased or decreased? Answers to these questions have been subject to vehement controversies, with the Planning Commission claiming a decline in the urban poverty headcount ratio over the past 30 years, and critics disputing the measures used to make this claim. These controversies highlight the all-too-common problem of undercounting the poor in cities. Classic difficulties in defining and measuring poverty are further compounded in urban contexts by issues of the legality, legitimacy, visibility and mobility of the urban poor. The increasingly restrictive conditions of access and entitlement to urban space and resources in India create tensions and trade-offs between the advantages of being seen, counted and served as urban residents and the threats of being exposed to the regulatory eye of the urban state. Measuring urban poverty thus calls for methods that are sensitive to these tensions and to the erasures that they produce.

Vakulabharanam and Motiram's article in this issue, while discussing the inconclusive outcome of current debates in establishing poverty trends, highlights the clear statistical findings of a rising trend in urban inequality over the past two decades of India's liberalised growth. This inequality is manifested as predominantly class-based but, on closer examination, reveals itself as structured along caste and community lines. The enclave pattern of urban development that these figures suggest has strong implications for the social and spatial contours of poverty in contemporary Indian cities. These authors also highlight difficulties in interdisciplinary work on poverty, and call upon researchers to integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches at the inception of research, when questions are framed and sites chosen, rather than attempt to wed insights from disparate methods at later stages. This call is reinforced by the manner in which Coelho et al, Kamath and Mathur, in this issue, outline the shifting contours of urban poverty through accounts of intra-urban dislocations, segmentation in housing and basic services, and urban renewal projects respectively.

### Placing the Poor

What, if anything, makes urban poverty different from poverty in general or rural poverty in particular? A widely discussed aspect of urban poverty is its distinctive spatiality. A common approach in studies of urban poverty is to focus on

slums as sites where poverty is assumed to be concentrated (e.g. Schenk 2001; Davis 2006). However, other authors have pointed out that the category of "slums" is overly compressed, hiding a diversity of economic, political, institutional and infrastructural relations; it is also a deceptively static signifier, concealing the processes of formation and the struggles over land, services and social organisation that come to constitute a slum at a given moment. Where one lives and works, and how one navigates the city, then, are both determinants and outcomes of one's poverty status.

It is only recently that scholars have begun to map the complex and interlocked spatialities of poverty in expanding cities in terms of the dynamic links between squatter settlements (or pavement dwellings), resettlement colonies and slums, that constitute what Roy (2002: 48) points to as the "spatial circuits of housing as a commodity". These studies have also highlighted the volatile and constantly shifting landscapes of Indian cities, in which eviction, demolition, gentrification, settlement and resettlement create a process of "unmapping". The geographies of urban poverty, as this scholarship reveals, defy official boundary lines of wards, zones and districts, and instead are indexed by lines of relative land value, with riverbanks and canal edges, burial grounds and railway bridges as their coordinates. How, then, can the spatialities of urban poverty be fruitfully mapped to explicate its links with the production of urban space as commodity? A number of potential themes suggest themselves. Roy (2002: 32) calls for attention not only to the "intricate connections and flows between spaces and places", but also to relations of gender and caste. There is an urgent need for more careful and sensitive work, both empirical and theoretical, that explores urban poverty as shaped by struggles over resources and meanings, and by city-specific political constellations defined by infrastructure projects, party and patronage networks, and urban renewal processes.

Another under-researched theme is the relationship between urban hierarchy and poverty. Evidence from the report of the High-Powered Expert Committee (HPEC) for Estimating the Investment Requirements for Urban Infrastructure Services suggests that the incidence of poverty is higher in smaller towns and cities than in metros (HPEC 2011). What, then, are the implications of the proliferation of small and medium "new towns" on the one hand, and metropolitan expansionism, the absorption of numerous smaller towns and municipalities into vast conurbations governed by "greater municipal corporations" on the other? What are the opportunities and threats for the poor when urban centres and peripheries remain in constant flux, or when diffuse-centred urban sprawl emerges as the dominant pattern of urbanisation across some regions?

Movements and migrations of various kinds – rural-urban, intra-urban and inter-urban, short-term, long-term and circular – also need to be understood in much finer grain than before in terms of the pathways they offer for economic mobility in contemporary urban centres. Recent findings by Kundu (2012), Srivastava (2011), and others assert that migrants are, in aggregate, better-off than non-migrants; in other words,

that “internal migration is possibly increasingly selective towards those with high skills, education or other resource endowments” (Srivastava 2011:4). This aggregate finding, however, elides the continuing – perhaps deepening – vulnerability of categories such as long-term circular migrants, seasonal/short-duration migrants, or forced migrants of different kinds. It is generally acknowledged that the phenomena of seasonal and circular migration (comprising to a large extent casual workers in sectors like construction, brick-manufacturing and quarrying) are significantly underestimated in migration statistics, owing to difficulties in locating and identifying these workers. However, Srivastava (2011) estimates, on the basis of micro-studies, that the incidence of such migration has increased at a national level. It is highly probable, given the current construction boom in cities across the country, that much of this increase is swelling the ranks of poor and insecure urban workers.

Coelho et al (this issue) point to a particular form of mobility found within cities – mass intra-urban relocations of urban workers, typically from demolished inner-city slums to peripheral resettlement sites. The complex dynamics of poverty and economic mobility engendered by such displacements and relocations make a case for detailed comparative studies across different spatial, economic and sociopolitical contexts. The articles by Vakulabharanam and Motiram and Coelho et al point to difficulties that informal workers face in gaining or retaining a foothold in the urban economy. For working class urban households, then, stability of tenure, fixity in space and continuity over time may well constitute assets more valuable than the celebrated attribute of “mobility”.

Ironically, even as such stability remains under constant threat, state apparatuses designed to serve populations designated as poor are equipped to deal only with fixity. From ration cards to caste certificates, most welfare entitlements are tied to places of permanent residence. Anti-poverty programmes target spatial units designated as notified slums, while relocation initiatives are directed at provisionally fixed settlements such as non-notified slums. Meanwhile, the heightened mobility of poor people, voluntary or forced, is targeted by surveillance technologies like biometrics-based identity cards that attempt to fix the individual in his/her body.

All the contributing authors in this issue agree that slums are neither homogeneously poor, nor are the poor exclusively located in slums. Social scientists have just begun to explore these complexities by demonstrating the inconsistencies and inaccuracies of this regime of poverty management through the use of GIS-based mapping technologies (see Vakulabharanam and Motiram, this issue, for details). However, the ends to which such mapping tools and technologies will be used is a matter of politics and governance, which is the third theme running through the articles.

### Governing the Poor

The success of neo-liberalism rests on a reconstitution of the citizen as a viable market subject. This, like all ideological projects, is necessarily a contested and unstable process.

Thus, while a segment of the population designated as poor, namely, women, can become active members of self-help groups and be amenable to training as consumers of financial services through microfinance, they can also become politically active campaigners against government-supported liquor sales, as they did in Andhra Pradesh in the early 1990s. They have also demonstrated that they can achieve policy reform by objecting to microfinance lending and recovery practices when their debt burden reaches a threshold value. Further, demands from those excluded from self-help groups and from targeted welfare programmes can be articulated as protests against the government of the day. In other words, neo-liberalisation is a contentious process involving constant experimentation and learning, both by the government and by those designated as poor.

If transnational policy networks generate best practices and circulate them through bureaucracies at all scales, networks of social movements too generate bodies of knowledge and circulate them in a process that Appadurai aptly described as “grass-roots globalisation” (Appadurai 2000). Is there an overarching theme in the current iteration of this battle over governance in Indian cities today? If so, what are its subthemes, and how can they be interrogated by critical social scientists?

It is important to note a change in the national policy discourse indexed by the term “inclusion”, a term firmly inscribed in official texts by the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2007-12), the first volume of which was titled “Inclusive Growth”.<sup>1</sup> Inclusion and exclusion, in semantic terms, imply a singular, overarching, normative inside, in other words, a powerful mainstream. The language of inclusion has replaced earlier concerns with (and terms like) “distributive justice” and “equity”, clearly signalling the shift from dirigiste to market-enabling modes of policy intervention. Inclusion, thus, can be seen as part of a project of governmentality seeking to create market subjects out of the poor. The notion of inclusion is not in itself anti-theoretical to egalitarianism and distributive justice,<sup>2</sup> particularly when it explicitly adopts a “pro-poor” bias. However, in practice, the term is most often employed in an expansionistic, incorporative way, e.g., “ensuring access to all including the poor” (HPEC 2011: xxii).

The inclusive framework, as deployed in contemporary urban governance in India, also reveals an inbuilt structure: a firmly entrenched class-based dualism in the design of infrastructure and services. The neo-liberal governance paradigm, which has spawned the language of inclusion, has also designed a range of two-tier systems, which seek to segregate

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services designed for full-cost paying urban citizens from those provided to the subsidised poor. This is most clearly evidenced in the two-track structure of the JNNURM, where the privileged component of Urban Infrastructure and Governance (UIG) funding large infrastructure schemes with arrangements for private participation and user fees is firmly separated from the much more poorly funded component of Basic Services to the Urban Poor (BSUP). The two components are even housed in two separate ministries.

Another example is the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act passed in 2008, which outlined social security provisions to be made by state governments for unorganised workers. The Act draws a critical distinction between workers below the poverty line (BPL) and those above it (non-BPL), targeting its list of scheduled schemes primarily at BPL households as poverty alleviation efforts rather than as social security entitlements for workers. This segmenting trend is also discernible in reform endeavours across a range of public services and utilities. The public distribution system is pushed to sharpen its targeting efforts (Suryanarayana and Silva 2007); municipal water boards are urged to cordon off their mainstream services to individual metered customers from the non-revenue-generating public taps installed in slums and poorer neighbourhoods (Coelho 2010). Enhanced technologies of targeting, including biometrics and the unique identification (UID), are all thus part of a larger framework of segmented "inclusion" of the poor into a market-friendly order of development.

### Paradigms of 'Inclusion'?

The new framework of inclusion apparently builds on ideas about urban poverty from earlier regimes and perhaps even from other frameworks. Official definitions of poverty reveal two, almost contradictory, trends. On the one hand, definitional lines and contours are drawn through an expanded use of individuating technologies such as poverty line measurements and headcount ratios, UID systems and biometrics, all of which apprehend poverty as an objective, empirical attribute of discrete subjects. On the other hand, there is a broadening of the definitional scope of poverty to encompass conditions of poor infrastructure and services, suggesting a collective, experiential, spatial phenomenon. The discussion of urban poverty in the HPEC report is a good example of this. It begins with Planning Commission statistics that present a decline in the incidence of urban poverty in headcount ratio terms, and goes on to argue that "individual poverty can be overcome more easily, but an environment of poor access to basic services, public health, and other inputs into human development is harder to change. The latter perpetuates individual poverty." (HPEC 2011: 17).

To some extent, this latter – let us call it environmental – definition of poverty appears to borrow from Amartya Sen's articulation of poverty as a condition of deprivation in the realms of functionings and capabilities. Yet, it is a particular interpretation of Sen's ideas, adapted to fit a market-oriented approach to poverty; an approach that discursively transforms

the idea of poverty and produces a new common sense about how to deal with it.

The reframing of urban poverty as a function of housing and basic services is, thus, part of what scholars (Ranganathan forthcoming; Young forthcoming) refer to as the "financialisation" of cities. This term refers to the overarching determinism of financial disciplines over the tools and technologies of everyday urban policymaking and governance. All elements of the urban thereby become part of the problematic of a radically enhanced demand for infrastructure, bringing governments to comply with the ratings protocols of global capital markets, and inscribing new forms of order – legalised, formalised, and commodified – onto the urban social. Financialisation, in this sense, refers not so much to volumes of market finance or scales of investment, but to new governmentalities, and thus, to a new politics of urban governance. Within this paradigm, the problem of urban poverty is more or less entirely subsumed into the problem of slums – spatial units of concentrated poverty, the targets of urban community development in post-Independence India. Provision of housing and basic services, in pursuit of the goal of slum-free cities, is then framed as the touchstone of "inclusive" urban development, signalling at once continuity and rupture with past regimes of development.

How is critical scholarship responding to these reframings? Insecurity has long been identified as a crucial characteristic of poverty in cities, in employment and livelihoods as well as in settlement and access to essential infrastructure. But new drivers of insecurity are being identified in globalising cities. While earlier analyses of poverty focused on workers and low-wage casual employment (e.g., Gooptu 2005; Joshi 2003), recent work has tended to focus on housing and the politics of shelter, tenure and land rights. This is partly in response to recent state policies that have set out to address the latter at the expense of the former. A recent official report on Indian cities, for example, declared that "shelter poverty" was much larger in scale than income poverty (HPEC 2011). Security of tenure in housing is being increasingly deployed as a key policy instrument to alleviate urban poverty, often at the cost of livelihood security, as when it involves relocating the urban poor from city slums to peripheral resettlement camps. The article by Coelho et al in this issue makes a bid to bring issues of work and livelihoods, and the phenomenon of "working poverty" back to the centre of the poverty problematic, by focusing on the quality and conditions of work available to poor people, even in advanced sectors of metropolitan economies, and particularly in contexts of mass resettlement.

Kamath's article highlights some of the implications of the segmentation of urban services and amenities described here, by exposing the devalued conditions of work in Karnataka's BSUP machinery, the disempowerment and dejection of its officials, and the apathetic implementation of the project. Further, the notion of secure tenure, itself, as Kamath's article in this issue points out, is shaped around specific governmentalities that frame poverty and the urban poor. The state's

attempt to create stakeholders out of the urban poor is based on the deployment of participatory technologies and the creation of community associations; yet, beneficiaries' attempts to consolidate their financial stakes in housing assets through rent or sale are disallowed and/or criminalised.

Mathur's article imports a familiar feminist writing strategy into a policy studies paradigm to deliver insights into an urban renewal project in Ahmedabad, a city whose urban governance has acquired something akin to brand value in recent years. Mathur situates himself as a participant in a deliberative dialogue along with civil society groups to engage the advocates of a riverfront development project. This situatedness allows him to examine the role of powerful individuals in developing experimental models in urban governance, marketing them and bringing them legitimacy, even as narratives of exclusion and dislocation of the poor as communities are erased.

### Urban Poverty as Struggle and Subjectivity

The authors in this issue of the RUA offer neither conclusive arguments nor radically new paradigms. They, however, nudge us to rethink poverty, not as an objective condition that can be addressed through policymaking at a distance or by targeted development schemes, but as constituted through contentious engagements of disadvantaged individuals and communities with the policy discourses and agendas outlined in this introduction. Vakulabharanam and Motiram explore the difficult and yet necessary engagement between qualitative and quantitative approaches; Kamath's paper explores aspects of how

the urban poor shape their agency as political actors, and the cultures of collectivity, mobilisation and leadership through which such agency is expressed; Coelho et al highlight how resettled slum-dwellers and working class households negotiate precarious job markets, the physical and spatial challenges of mass peripheral resettlement, and the stigma of ghetto residence as they attempt to work their way out of poverty; and Mathur recounts how a paradigm of exclusionary urban management is established through a series of highly contentious encounters. In each of these accounts, urban poverty is framed as a dynamic and complex condition, constituted by structural determinants, struggles, ceilings, lacks and disabilities that hinder economic mobility, but also by subjective decisions. These decisions balance a range of considerations – healthcare and education of children, working conditions, familiarities and networks – against that of income.

What kinds of subjects-in-the-making do these accounts suggest? The possessors of fortune at the bottom of the pyramid, who collectively have more purchasing power than the middle classes, therefore constituting appropriate targets of corporate marketing strategy in the 21st century?<sup>3</sup> Or subalterns who survive through navigating local economies and who seek to remain selectively visible to the prying eye of state surveillance? Or modern political subjects who can be trained to become proper citizens and respectable members of civil society, material inequalities notwithstanding? The conversations in this issue do not explicitly address these questions, but they open up the terrain of urban poverty towards such enquiry.

### NOTES

- 1 The Approach Paper to the Twelfth Five-Year Plan, in the spirit of exhortation to more and better, is titled "Faster, Sustainable and More Inclusive Growth".
- 2 In fact, Subramanian (2011) suggests that measuring money-metric poverty using the quintile income statistic (the average income of the poorest 20% of the population), and setting targets for its growth, would not only constitute a practical way of operationalising the goal of "inclusive growth", but would bring a distributive dimension into the notion of inclusion.
- 3 This is the radical reframing of poverty proposed by the late management guru C K Prahalad (2010).

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### EPW Index

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