

## **The City and its Margins: Making and Re-imagining of Slums and Work from Bombay to Third Mumbai**

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The phenomenon of underdevelopment, unplanned urban growth, mushrooming of slum settlements and in numerous situations the political economy of crime facilitating the presence and sustainability of the underworld defines the southern question both in the global north and south. With the population in the millions and density higher than desirable urban planning and development, these cities are sites of enormous diversity and complexity. These southern cities provide livelihood opportunities for a cross-section of people in numerous sectors and allow people to escape from the caste and other traditional discrimination and prejudices prevalent in the semi-feudal rural system. As the centre of power and wealth concentration, some of the southern cities are referred to as political capital, financial capital, cultural capital and so forth. Sometimes the capacity of these cities is celebrated for inclusiveness, opportunity, wealth generation, etc. and yet these are also criticised for “expulsions” of large populations from urban wealth and protection measures and increasing “brutalisation” of the subaltern life, indeed brutalisation of urban life as a whole (Sassen 2014)<sup>1</sup>. These cities are also sites of contention and contestation around place and space, land use, urban development and planning leading to graded rights to the city for different segments of its inhabitants.

To comprehend the nuanced intricacies of one of the most important southern cities in the global south, we are engaging with Mumbai (erstwhile Bombay). Known as the financial capital of India, the city of Mumbai has also been the site of epidemic and pandemic, underworld and gang wars, several incidents of terrorist attacks and massive communal violence which kept pushing the city on the verge of ‘social disintegration’ and at its breaking point intermittently. Amidst the chaos, crime, proneness to disease and contagion, poverty, inequality and squalid habitat conditions, Mumbai continued to hold ground for its vitality, inclusiveness, prospects and possibilities for the masses. Here, the Southern question presents extreme contradictions, possibilities, and prospects, generating enormous interest among academics, planners, scriptwriters, novelists, film directors, and others. Historically referred to as the epidemic epicentre of India, the city encountered frequent outbreaks of cholera (1820), plague (1896–98), influenza (1918–20) and also the endemic spread of smallpox, malaria, and tuberculosis, resulting in large-scale fatalities. More recently, the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic in India was most severely experienced in Mumbai. Apart from numerous other causalities for disease spread, the density and squalid livid conditions contribute to such a situation. The population density in several slums is over

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<sup>1</sup> Sassen, Saskia. *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*. Harvard University Press, 2014.

300,000 per square kilometre, almost ten times the city's average. Mumbai has a sizeable slum-dwelling population, constituting 42 per cent of the total population and occupying eight per cent of the liveable land area (Ashar 2016); however, the unofficial estimate of the slum population is much higher. In general terms, UN-Habitat data suggests that Mumbai has 31,700 residents per square kilometre (Brodie 2017).

Apart from the question of housing, its lack and associated concerns, there are other faultlines the city has encountered in the past. While the city has a robust history of mobilisation and resistance including freedom struggle, labour mobilisation and trade union movement, it has also been one of the major sites of communal violence since colonial times. B.R. Ambedkar (1941:180)<sup>2</sup> chronicled that “from February 1929 to April 1938 nine years there were no less than 10 communal riots... during which period 550 were killed and 4,500 were wounded” and the city was engulfed with large scale arson and property damage. Kidambi (2024) underscores that it was the intra-class tension in the mill area that led to the Hindu-Muslim riot in twentieth-century Bombay. The area with cotton mills and factories became the centre for industrial workers for whose habitation, chawls were built. This ‘native town’ referred to as Girangaon saw the emergence of a distinctive working-class culture.<sup>3</sup> Over the years the city witnessed the evolution of civil society and social activism that gave shape to numerous associations, unions and political groups. By the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it emerged as the foremost commercial and financial hub of India which was on the one hand well integrated into the “capitalist world economy, (and) on the other, it was closely integrated with a vast regional hinterland” (Kidambi 2007:23)<sup>4</sup>. Due to the available opportunities and nature of work available, the city's population exponentially increased; with large migrants and multi-ethnic populations. Bombay became “central to capital as a space to coordinate ambitions that centered upon its port, industrial neighborhoods, labor colonies, and administrative offices” (Chhabria 2019:4)<sup>5</sup>.

To comprehend how and where this burgeoning population was inhabited, the official history of 1901 describes, ‘the Tardeo, Parel, Byculla, Tarwadi, Nagpada, and Chinchpoghly quarters had expanded through the forward march of industrial enterprise into the populous dwelling place of an immigrant labour-population’<sup>6</sup>. Early on, the city was characterised by the contrast, ‘the one

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<sup>2</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, *Thoughts on Pakistan*. Bombay: Thacker & Co., 1941.

<sup>3</sup> Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan. *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Kidambi, Prashant. *The Making of an Indian Metropolis. Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890-1920*. Hampshire: Ashgate. 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Chhabria, Sheetal. 2019. *The Making of Indian Metropolis: The Power of Capital in Colonial Bombay*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

<sup>6</sup> Edwardes, *Rise of Bombay*, p. 326 in *The Making of Indian Metropolis*.

inhabited by a cosmopolitan elite that nestled in the fashionable western enclaves of the city, the other 'full of *chawls*, crowded, insanitary, ill-ventilated slums, and filthy lanes, stables and godowns, a city in which a vast proletariat was penned together and savaged together by disease'<sup>7</sup> (Klein 1986: 728-9). Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the density of the labour migrants' habitation was characterised by overcrowding in congested areas and degraded environmental conditions with a huge disease burden.

With the restructuring of the political economy that led to shifts away from the factory system into more dispersed forms of production, the nature of employment and the forms of organising and mobilisation also changed substantively. The city which was known for labour unions and workers' mobilisation had witnessed massive strikes such as the Indian Railways strike in 1974, textile workers strike in the 1980s; in the 1990s and 2000s, the city witnessed large-scale communal violence, bomb blasts, and gang wars. The communal violence, serial bomb blasts and subsequent terrorist attacks, etc. reshaped the configuration of space, work and inter-community solidarity. While scholars have focused on resilience and the spirit of people, and how 'society stayed civil' (Kumar, 2024) in trying times, such as through the Mumbai floods in 2005 and serial bomb blasts in suburban trains etc., the rupture in the society was too obvious to be ignored. The minority community had to shift themselves away from multi-religious localities, resulting in the spread of ghettos.

Alongside this socio-political turmoil, Mumbai became the prime site of the neoliberal transformation of the Indian economy that reconfigured sectoral shifts in work and employment. There has been accelerated privatisation of the urban economy. The shift from industrial production to a knowledge-based economy has its consequences. The city became the site of various programmes for urban reorganisation to attract large-scale foreign investment. The drives to clear urban space through slum demolition, clearance and resettlement fell most heavily on the subordinate sections of labour migrants as vendors, hawkers, construction workers, and those working in small workshops and artisanal units. The Southern question in such a situation is around the question of urban (in)justice through policies and practices. It is about the relationship between neoliberal accumulation and spatial (in)justice. It brings out the complex triad of work, space and (im)mobility. The paper therefore engages with restructuring the city's space with emphasis on livelihood and housing questions. In the process, the

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<sup>7</sup> Klein, Ira, 'Urban Development and Death: Bombay City, 1870-1914', *Modern Asian Studies*, 20 (1986): 725-54

contention around claims over space, and resources will be elaborated through the production of violence, agitations, and movements.

This paper aims to present the biography of the city through the changing relationship between capital, migrant labour, and city space. Housing for the labouring masses has always been problematised as illegal settlement, insufficiently 'urban', and detrimental to the 'health of the city' in Bombay/Mumbai. As the figure of migrants is crucial for the city; we shall trace the trajectory of the relationship between labour and urban space from colonial to neo-liberal times. Built by migrants engaged in a range of secure and insecure jobs, ideas of precarity and right to the city have taken on new dimensions. The changing contours of livelihoods and continued struggle for housing prompt us to engage with empirical configurations of urban arrangements influenced by land, infrastructure, economy, and governance. The political economy of making slums and reimagining the idea of slum development and relocation confirms that southern questions can be asked from the peripheries of the city. It also allows us to engage with migrants' lives and the struggles in the city that shed light on the biopolitics from below. Through the nature of work and housing questions, we will examine how the city is imagined, materialized, and governed from past to present; and what it tells us about the core of the southern question in Mumbai.