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Slums and Urbanization of Poverty in Postcolonial India



Democracy · Social assets · Creative destruction · Necropolitics · Planet of slums

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Abstract

This chapter examines the ontological conditions of urban life in postcolonial India. By looking at some of the post-millennial Indian novels in English, it attempts to theorize urbanism and its consequences for the poor and slum-dwellers. The chapter makes a claim that the story of modernity and the concomitant progress of humanity has also been a story of mass exclusion, a chasm in the social division, denial of human rights, and, hence, a crisis of our moral imagination. This stems from the fact that urban life is essentially consumerist and hence divisive in nature. The scale and degree of one's consumption, therefore, become qualifying parameters of who can find healthy breathing space in urban life. The chapter concludes by making a case for strong and engaging frameworks of social assets to ensure a democratic life in cities.

Keywords

Slums · Urban India · Globalization · Neoliberalism · Deep state · Bombay · Delhi · Chennai · Democracy · Heterotopias ·

Introduction

The wall was covered with cockroaches, which had come to feed. . . . Some of these cockroaches landed on top of the net; from inside, I could see their dark bodies against its white weave. I folded in the fibre of the net and crushed one of them. The other roaches took no notice of this; they kept on landing on the net—and getting crushed. Maybe everyone who lives in the city gets to be slow and stupid like this, I thought, and smiled, and went to sleep (Adiga 2008: 110).

This passage from Adiga's *The White Tiger* powerfully captures the slow violence embedded deeply within the structures of urban India. Rob Nixon defines "slow violence" as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight; a delayed destruction often dispersed across time and space" (2011: 1). If one sees the metaphor of "wall" signifying the gated communities and towering apartments of cities, then one can easily relate cockroaches as a metaphor for the poor, oppressed, and slum dwellers who are considered threatening and unmoralizing, deemed unfit for citizenship. No wonder, then, that Balram sees postcolonial India as "two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness." Whereas consumers and glossy architecture of the city can be seen emanating light, the poor and slum dwellers are left to feed on the "river

of Death, whose banks are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it” (12).

This acute problem of urban life in India has led to a situation where it can be claimed with some degree of conviction that democratization has resulted in the decimation of India’s social infrastructure, widening the gap between the rich and poor. With the rise of industrialization, there has been an unprecedented urbanization in India, which has come at the cost of neglecting and pushing the rural areas, migrant laborers, and workers in cities to a state of precarity. Reflecting on India’s rapid urbanization after independence, Sinha and Shekhar remark that its “urban population witnessed a 15-fold increase between 1901 and 2001, i.e., it increased from 25.5 million (10.84%) to 377.1 million (31.16%)” (2017, 700). They also highlight a twist in the data, which repeatedly claims a decline in “the percentage of population living in slum. . . from 23.5% in 2001 to 22.4 % in 2011,” but “in absolute terms population living in slums increased from 52.37 million in 2001 to 65.49 millions in 2011 due to high rate of migration” (701), that easily surpasses “the entire population of countries like Colombia, Italy, and South Africa” (Auerbach 2020, 3). One can thus establish a link between the development of urbanization with structuration and proliferation of slums. It can be claimed that the story of modernity and the concomitant progress of humanity has also been a story of mass exclusion, a chasm in the social division, denial of human rights and, hence, a crisis of our moral imagination. What is more important in the rhetoric of modernity, underpinned with a deepened sense of profit and greed, are narratives of progress and growth. This is evident, particularly, in the ways in which our lives are (re)shaped by forces of neoliberalism accompanied as it is, with a heightened focus on speed and forward movement, oblivion of the very fact that life ecologies require a coordination of both the horizontals and the verticals, and most importantly, the ability to churn out connecting sociology, which can bridge

the widening gap. Fundamentally exclusive and socially divisive, this notion of modern growth can be best understood with the help of the metaphor of a car without a reverse gear, which points to its resolute failure to pause, retract, and engage fellow travelers living on the margins, the sites of slums that demarcate the unsocial and violent cartography of postcolonial India. Like the reverse gears in cars, which can take us back to witness what has been left behind, urban life also needs to have a reversal mechanism to reach out to those left behind in the grand narratives of progress and development. Increasingly vital, they help us to *relook* at and *recognize* our imaginative and optic illusion and in so doing, initiate a renewed process of *seeing* and engaged *interaction*.

This chapter argues that the rapid process of urbanization has led to the creation and proliferation of slums across postcolonial India, which, in turn, emanates from a crisis of a “deep state” (Ghosh 2016: 76). Amitav Ghosh argues that “deep state” is a constitution of state-corporation nexus, which leads to the urbanization of poverty and a concomitant deflection of our collective responsibility. Ghosh holds that “deep state” is aided and abetted by divisive and racial ideologies of globalization, and has been exacerbated in the neoliberal age. This chapter underscores the argument that the urban system is primarily based on the idea of transaction, not interaction. The transactional nature of these spaces makes it aggressively calculative to the extent that lives are categorized into gated and garbage communities. The scale and degree of one’s consumption, therefore, become qualifying parameters of who can find healthy breathing space in urban life. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the vitality of Martha Albertson Fineman’s conceptualization of social infrastructure as “assets” for regaining grounds of equity and social justice in urban life (2008). Fineman advocates the formulation and application of “social assets” and robust networks of care to “provide individuals with ‘resilience’” (13) to overcome vulnerability.

Urban India and Slums

We gave everything . . . to make a dwelling out of it.'

'Not just our earnings, we have out the labor of our bodies to make this

Place. (Tabassum 2009: 146)

Urbanization is not new to human civilization. If we talk of the history of urban city, "in India [it] is as old as Indian civilization" (Lal 2013: xvi-xvii). However, its form and speed had intensified ever since the industrial revolution, which gets manifested in the fact that in 1900, the world's total urban population was just 9%, which then increased to 30% in 1950, and subsequently to 47% by the turn of the millennium. In fact, Sinha and Shekhar highlight that "in 2008 A.D. the world's urban population surpassed rural population and by 2030 the urban population in every region in the world will be more than its rural" (2017: 700). In his Foreword to *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements* (2003), Kofi Anan wrote, "[a]lmost 1 billion people, or 32 percent of the world's urban population, live in slums, the majority of them in the developing world." Moreover, the locus of global poverty is moving to the cities, a process now recognized as the "urbanization of poverty." Juxtapose this figure with the latest data on slums in India, which suggests that the "[p]opulation living in slums (% of urban population) in India was reported at 35.2 % in 2018, according to the World Bank collection of development indicators" (tradingeconomics.com: n.p.). Further, the data according to the World Population Review holds that "[t]he number of people residing in slums throughout the entire country is estimated to be 104 million, or 9% of the total population of India" (2021: n.p.). Increasingly alarming and deeply horrifying, the figure reveals to us that the rise in the slums is inevitably linked to the urbanization of the world. In fact, the United Nations registered 2007 as "the year when, for the first time, more people in the world lived in urban than in rural areas" (Ritchie and Roser 2018: n.p.).

Pointing to the use of the term "slum" in the nineteenth century, Eduardo López Moreno says that "the word 'slum' was first used in London" to refer to a "room of low repute" or "low, unfrequented parts of the town" (2003: 7). Likewise, *The Global Report on Human Settlements* (2003) puts it that "[s]ince its first appearance during the 1820s as part of the London cant," the use of the term was done to imagine the "poorest quality housing and the most unsanitary conditions; a refuge for marginal activities including crime, 'vice' and drug abuse; and a likely source for many epidemics that ravaged urban areas – a place apart from all that was decent and wholesome" (2003: 9).

Slum life or shanty towns have grown in number ever since. Consequently, urban stories are rendered more horrific and abject in developing nations such as India. Part of the problem stems from the fact that labor has always remained central in any rhetoric of growth. Their bodies and work are needed for material purposes of the capitalists. This phenomenon has magnified post-1990s, which we also know as the neoliberal period, during which rise in urban cities has simultaneously led to a widespread slum-life. Since neoliberalism exists not only at the level of economic theory but also at the level of industrial and social relations, therefore nation-states need to take steps towards protecting the vulnerability and life of the poor and slum dwellers. Privatization and socialism do not go hand in hand unless there is provision for the intervention of the state in meaningful ways that can keep a watchful eye on the pulse of the nation. As Giroux cuttingly observes, "[p]ublic and private policies of investing in the public good are dismissed as bad business, just as the notion of protecting people from the dire misfortunes of poverty, sickness, or the random blows of fate is viewed as an act of bad faith" (2006: 28–29). The consequences of this structural imbalance ultimately weaken the notion of social justice. In the escalated business model of neoliberalism, redistribution, and social justice give way to consumerism and market efficiency.

And yet, the idea of neoliberalism continues to be glorified by a large number of scholars and

policymakers. Neoliberalism is often taken for granted as a concept that equates freedom and democracy with the market. Milton Friedman, an architect of neoliberalism in the USA and UK, succinctly encapsulates the link between politics and economics in a doctrinaire manner, “there is an intimate connection between economics and politics, that only certain combinations of political and economic arrangements are possible, and that in particular, a society which is socialist cannot also be democratic, in the sense of guaranteeing individual freedom” (1997: 15). For Friedman, the market is a direct component of freedom, but this also explains the reason why the economies are prioritized over bios. Since, urban spaces thrive in their magnanimous structures and consumption, hence, the ideology of market control shapes these spaces. This equation, however, leads to a jettisoning of a carementality, for example, Friedman argues against public housing, calling it “paternalism” (35), complaining that it would be better to just give poor people money. Friedman’s views problematize the notion of social, but that is the core idea of the neoliberal mind, delegitimizing frameworks that render support to the marginalized and the slum dwellers. Arundhati Roy powerfully captures the grammar and methodology of neoliberalism and the attendant rhetoric of growth and development in urban cities thus:

Her new masters wanted to hide her knobby, varicose veins under imported fishnet stockings, cram her withered tits into saucy padded bras and jam her aching feet into pointed high-heeled shoes. They wanted her to swing her stiff old hips and re-route the edges of her grimace upwards into a frozen, empty smile. It was the summer Grandma became a whore. (2017: 96)

The passage reflects on how the ugliness of urban life is hidden by rhetoric and flashy symbols of consumption. It also posits that urban spaces have created polarized gradations and thrives on consumerism, rendering those unfit who cannot contribute to its accelerated process of development and consumption. Seen from the uneven ground of urban spaces, it can be argued that the motor of neoliberal capitalism energized by the state laws have led to a kind of “radical politics of

contestation [over] whom the cities and their spaces are meant for” (Banerjee-Guha 2009: 106).

From this vantage point, the emergence and spread of slums can be directly related to the acceleration of urbanism in postcolonial India. Of course, the situation is largely a result of the business model approach towards social life in India, which has intensified since the 1990s. This was the moment that provided a ground for unchecked play of “incubators of neoliberal strategies in the global South” (Banerjee-Guha: 96). Consequently, the period witnessed a sprawling movement of migrants from rural India to build these cities through their labor. While the passage to the city for menial jobs was made open for the poor migrants, the claims to rights or even a decent shelter space were denied. One can witness such accounts in the way the urban slum life has been depicted in recent Indian writing in English. For example, Vikas Swarup’s *Q&A* (2008) reflects on the grim landscape of the Dharavi slum in Mumbai. While its “urban squalor deadens and debases” the “slum dwellers,” the “open drains” attract mosquitoes. Not to forget about “its stinking, excrement-lined communal latrines,” which are “full of rats. . . . Mounds of filthy garbage lie on every corner, from which ragpickers still manage to find something useful. . . . For the starving residents of Dharavi, this is home” (133–34).

Such accounts allow us to see the other side of the eulogized notion of urban life and expose its utopian claims. Since the overall outlook of urban life is strongly locked within the circulatory capitalist system, it has eventually produced a kind of consumerist life, which remains detached and alienated from the slum life. Imagine the dreams of big industries, multinational corporations, towering buildings, gated communities, and the physical infrastructure that is reflected in the smooth supply of electricity, water, hospitals, and educational institutions, being sold to city dwellers. These keywords – progressive and advanced – as they apparently sound, make the urban life look increasingly utopian. As Ash Amin asserts, the smartness of urban life, “is about systems integration and coordination, and in service of distributed protections and capabilities, but without pretensions of total oversight and control, and

not about preparedness based on perfect computational intelligence” (2016: 779). On a similar note, Anthony Townsend puts it that smart urban sites are the ones “where information technology is combined with infrastructure, architecture, everyday objects, and our own bodies to address social, economic and environmental problems” (2013: 15). However, even a cursory look at the ground-level application of the urban cities planning exposes their dystopic and unsocial force. Commenting upon the unsocial settings of the urban life, Rashmi Varma argues that “[w]hat was hidden from view in these seductive arrangements of commodities was the real world of gritty and often unseemly human labour, and nasty relations of social and economic exploitation” (2012: 3). Therefore, it can be argued that the poor and their slums are pushed to the margins by the uneven processes of capitalist development that drive urban planning.

Urban Planning and Creative Destruction

Demonstrating the flaw in the planning methodology that tends to operate on the selective process of inclusion/exclusion, access/denial, and necessity/refusal central as they are to neoliberal ideology, David Harvey uses the term “creative destruction” (2007) to assert how rampantly unsocial forces of globalization, accelerating the urbanization of poverty are promoted. Harvey’s concept of “creative destruction” arises out of the “corporatization, commodification, and privatization of hitherto public assets and have been signal features of the neoliberal project” (2007: 35). Urban cities are constitutive of such “creative destructions” since they are sites of an ever-widening social inequality. No wonder, then, those slums are perpetuated and needed to sustain and nourish the lives of privileged ones, those who can pay and play to the tunes of commodified urban life. Hence, Alan Mayne uses the adjective “deceitful” as a fundamental feature for the creation of slums. Mayne contends that “‘slum’ is a fundamentally deceitful construct” (2017: 8) found in the way control and dominance is

assigned to select groups, concurrently disguising “how private capital accumulation benefits a few at the expense of many others, and how the redevelopment of urban ‘badlands’ into desirable real estate can generate still more profits for the few and yet more misery for others” (2017: 9). Extending Mayne’s conceptualization of slums, Brenner et al. note that slums are the result of, “geographies of land ownership, dispossession, deprivation, and struggle generated and entrenched in the unequal distribution of resources and the precarious life conditions” (2011: 234). The increasingly precaritized conditions are embedded within the everyday life of slums. No wonder then, that urban city can be seen projecting new “wretched of the earth,” with little or no provision for social engagements or equity measures.

Following a similar view, Mike Davis argues that the role of the British empire in relocating the idea of slums is highly culpable. Davis argues that amidst the various crimes committed by British colonialism, the structuration, proliferation, and legitimization of slums in the Third World is one that has given rise to present-day urbanization of poverty. It is for this reason that Davis calls the British empire “the greatest slum-builders of all time” (2006: 52), citing examples from the horrendous public policies in Africa that coerced the African laborers to “live in precarious shantytowns on the fringes of segregated and restricted cities” (52). The role of the British empire has subsequently been replaced with state-corporation nexus, underpinning neoliberal ideology. Davis suggests that ever since the 1970s “more than 200000 slums on earth, ranging in population from a few hundred to more than a million people” (37), came to existence in various corners of the world, reflecting the unsocial nature of our policymaking buttressed by the network of “deep state.” In this context, Arundhati Roy points out that “globalization” is that “light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness, wiped out. They simply can’t be seen. Once you get used to not seeing something, then, slowly, it’s no longer possible to see it” (quoted in Rob Nixon 2011: 1).

The ensuing “darkness” emanating out of the racialized globalization and “deep state” casts slum life as unfit for socialization. To use Zygmunt Bauman term, the slums can be also considered as “waste lives” (2003). The Othering methodology of the “deep state” and the impervious pedagogy of urbanism have eventually rendered slum sites with a diverse range of names such as “shanty towns,” “jacales” in Mexico, “bustee,” or “*jhopad patti*” in India, “kachhi abadi” in Pakistan, “*imijondolo*” in South Africa, “*khoshash*” in the Middle East, to name a few, thus contributing to the development of the “planet of slums” (Davis 2006). These diverse names also suggest a continuity in the acceleration of slums in developing nations, apparently locked in what Jameson sees as “a life-and-death struggle” (1986: 68). Consequently, they render slums sites as spaces of heterotopias – to use Michael Foucault’s term. Foucault views heterotopias as spaces that breed and proliferate binaries and hence circumscribe our notion of urban utopianism. For Foucault, there are “places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society, which are something like counter-sites” to utopian ones:

[...] in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (1984: 3)

Arguably, the concept of heterotopia is useful since it provides us a framework to record the varying degrees of fluctuations in urban life and the concomitant violence of slum life. To highlight the violence of slum life, Aravind Adiga uses the image of the “rooster coop” in *The White Tiger* (2008). On his entry to a slum in Delhi, the protagonist, Balram records thus:

The greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop. Go to Old Delhi . . . and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly in wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as

worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench—the stench of terrified, feathered flesh. . . . The very same thing is done with human beings in this country. (141)

This literary representation of the breakdown of the notion of dwelling in slum areas is nastily disturbing. And yet scenes such as the above-mentioned mark the routine life of the urban slum. Appadurai is very critical of such a divisive role in urban life and goes on to suggest that it obfuscates and distorts the meaning of citizenship and democracy. Appadurai, therefore, invests in a discourse of citizenship “on the basis of rights to different treatment with equal opportunity” (1996: 195). Pointing to the everyday struggle of urban life, Appadurai sees the city life as a “special war zone, a space in which these processes find expression in collective violence” (200). While looking at the configurations of urban life, one can easily connect these “war zones” with Foucault’s idea of “heterotopia,” both being essentially central to necropolitics, that undergirds the modern planet of slums.

Planet of Slums: Necropolitics

Understandably, an observant view of the “planet of slums” exposes our faulty approach towards such people occupying these sites. Slum people appear as a ghost in the urban spaces, “a presence that is not of this world” (2016: 39). Achille Mbembe terms this practice constituting the core of “necropolitics,” inevitably linked to the notion of modern-day sovereignty. He argues that “the idea that modernity was at the origin of multiple concepts of sovereignty – and therefore of the biopolitical. . . .” has positioned “those figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized *instrumentalization of human existence and material destruction of human bodies and population.*” According to Mbembe, “necropolitics” refers to “the manners of living and risking death that . . . are situated beyond the political” (2003: 39), but permeates the everyday life in a silenced way. “These are,” Mbembe writes, “essentially,

extreme forms of human life, deathworlds, forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life that confer upon them the status of the living dead (ghosts)” (1).

Mbembe’s necropolitics is echoed by Nambisan Kavery in her novel, *The Story That Must Not Be Told* (2010). In one of the passages, Baqua, who knows the Sitara slum in Chennai, very well informs the tourist, Simon, about the meaning of living in a slum. He tells Simon that these poor will continue to demarcate the city because it has:

[...] too many of them. Looking for work, for food, for a place to live, a place to shit. And what do people like you, the Vaibhav people say? Stop dirtying our neighbourhood. You will soon ask the government to throw us out of here. (138)

Bakua sheds light on the controlling mechanism of the city, which Mbembe sees as the configurations of necropolitics, deprived of emotions or empathy. It is the structuration and evidently the legitimization of this dark underbelly of urban cities that makes one question the democratic spirit of the deep state. For example, urban slums, undoubtedly question and puncture our notion of progress and welfare that remain central to the narrativization of democracy. For Mbembe, the livability itself becomes a daily existential crisis since it is not just the slums that expose our moral failure but the way these bodies are treated suitable for consumption, exploitation, and made to bear the burden of the urban spirit that one finds immensely disturbing and designedly barbaric. Arguably for these reasons, Saskia Sassen views the urban spaces as “command points” (Sassen 1991: 2) from which racialized and hegemonic structures of sociopolitical and economic transactions take place. These transactions, a part of necropolitics, position the slums as sites through which the future of urban cities can be nourished and developed. The question then follows, not from an Asian context, but the Global South’s positionality: “How can we account for the lavish beachfront houses, security fences, electric gates, closed-circuit television cameras, and the ubiquitous satellite dishes in Les Almadies in Dakar, Senegal; in Nairobi, Kenya; in Luanda, Angola; and in so many other African

cities?” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008: 194). From this point, the urban spaces “are not simply made up of social black holes” but they are also spaces “of cash—if not quartz” (194).

Such “social blackholes” are the very embodiment of slum life reinforcing Foucault’s notion of heterotopias. Talking about Mumbai, the financial capital of India, Florian Urban throws light on the problematics of the architectural and the ideological design that underpins it. Urban contends that “two types of collective dwellings were built that can be deemed the predecessors of modernist mass housing: the Western-style upscale apartment block and the chawl, a cheap form of dwelling for industrial workers” (Urban 2012: 141). On a similar note, Suketu Mehta avers that the Bombay Rent Act of 1979 “removed the right to property as a ‘fundamental right’ from the constitution along with the right to be compensated when the state expropriates property” (2005: 128–129), thus making the poor and slum dwellers extremely disposable and vulnerable. Ayona Datta echoes Mbembe’s ideas as she sees such amended rules as part of necropolitics “the increasing use of a rule of law by the state in order to maintain and authorize sovereign power over particular populations and territories” (2015: 5). Whereas one can always witness abruptive and exceptional rules to tighten control over social life, the same take a backseat when there is a demand of providing even basic amenities for survival and livability. For example, in the movement called the Right to Pee, which started in 2011, as a response to a humiliating figure of 1 toilet per 900 people in Dharavi, Asia’s largest slum area that houses more than “8.5 lakh people live in approx. 55,000 dwelling units” (Ramaswamy and Sundarajan 2020). Similarly, a lack of common sense and failure of lawmakers to render any kind of sustainable measures can be seen in the case of another slum area of *Jhuggi Jhopari* in Delhi, which has almost 48,000 *jhuggis* (huts). On August 31, 2020, an order was passed by the Supreme Court of India for the eviction of these *jhuggis* to give way to a railway project. Although there is nothing wrong with the eviction of illegal colonies and the slum areas, the fact is these people have been living here since 2006, and

hence, a proper rehabilitative measure could have been thought of before ordering such a mass removal. That, the order was delivered, without any prior notice, and amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, further exacerbated the life of the inhabitants of *Jhuggi Jhopri*. Likewise, if one observes the spirit of urban planning of Chennai, one of the biggest regions of South India, famous for its towering architecture, one can see that it also suffers from the same syndrome of unsocial urban planning. This urban city has more than 25% of the overall city's total population as slum dwellers. According to the Housing and Urban Development Department Report 2005–2006, almost 40% of Chennai's slum dwellers live along the rivers and canals while others have managed to find space on the city's pavements. Moving to the Western part of India, a 2003 report suggests that "[o]ver 40% of Kolkata's slum residents have lived in the slums for two generations or longer" (Kundu 2003, online). Similarly, another data suggests that "[t]here are 2011 registered & 3500 unregistered slums in Calcutta (Bose and Ghosh 2015, 135). In fact, if one looks at the overall figure of slums in urban India, then West Bengal ranks third with "a total of 33,520 slums" (137).

These disturbing figures highlight the precarious condition of slum-dwellers in urban India. Gyan Prakash exposes the contradictions that lay hidden in urban life. He argues that "the images of urban dystopia and utopia act together to suppress the appearance of porosity, contradictions, and the promise of urban life" (2008: 716). This interplay between urbanism and dystopia has subsequently led to a breakdown of civility, social justice, and nationality. Slum-dwellers are strategically, and at times, coercively excluded from the discourse of modern citizenship, which in turn, seems more like a profit-loss relationship that one witnesses in the present-day concept of democracy and national belonging, subsequently leading to an end or delimited account of social space. The abundant presence of slums and the dark urban life in postcolonial Indian fiction reinstates stark realities, allowing us to see their underbelly and

increasingly wide inequality to income and basic amenities. To read a city, then is also to read between its gaps and silences, which make us aware of the inherent epistemic violence and social injustices. Such is the ambiguous and diabolical nature of urban life. Hence, the story of urban life also happens to be a story of marginalization and weak democracy.

Conclusion

To do away with such dystopian life conditions that have become leitmotifs of urban imaginaries, democracy needs to be invested with more empathy. The community-building project in postcolonial India's urban spaces has largely been written with the idea of profit, rationality, capitalist exploitation, and hence, devoid of empathy or any degree of solidarity. How can one imagine to coalesce the gap in the absence of any sociological glue? Martha Albertson Fineman advocates a set of infrastructures for society, which she calls "social assets" (2008). According to Fineman, the existence of social assets constitutes an integral part of social justice and equity. To generate and structure such social assets in urban spaces would require elements of empathy, feelings, and a more engaging distributive system. "As urban India climbs past rural India in population, the manner in which the urban poor organize and interact with the state will increasingly shape the nature of democracy in the country" (Auerbach, 6). Hence, it is imperative to relook at the violent epistemology of urban spaces and widen the ambit of citizenship and belonging. This shift to interaction and empathic engagement as suggested by Fineman is averse to marketing ideology. It requires the state "to act as the principal monitor or guarantor of an equal society" (6), which lies at the core of democracy. Following such methodology of asset and community building, catering to "the right to housing, to a livelihood, or to decent physical and mental health care," can lead to a democratic "right to the city" (Mitchell 2003: 8–9).

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