

# Divided in squatters, united in bias

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**Paroj Banerjee** recently conducted an ethnographic exploration into the discrimination against Muslims living in Mumbai's slums, as part of a wider research project by Centre for Peace Studies, India. Here she summarises her key findings.



It is commonly understood that slum dwelling automatically ascribes a status that is symptomatic of degraded form of housing, poor sanitary conditions, lack of civic infrastructure and basic amenities and an overall lower human development index. However the condition of Muslims, in comparison other socio-religious minorities is the worst. Qudsiya Contractor's (2012) study on water access in the slum of Shivaji Nagar in Mumbai reflects the extremely skewed distribution of water to its residents. Citing Appadurai (2000) and Hansen (2001) she states that public spaces are expansively being appropriated by the Hindu right to display violent rewriting of the mainstream city's landscape as a sacred, national and Hindu space.

Following the communal riots of 1992 many Muslim families fled their homes in the slums in Mumbai. While some left their homes forever, many others took refuge with their friends and families outside Mumbai, only to come back and discover that their homes had been usurped. Over the years many Muslim families have been relocating to the far end of Mumbai's suburbs (like Virar and Kalyan). The movement is in part propelled by sky rocketing land values in the centre of the city and the simultaneous availability of affordable housing in the suburbs. However, for most, the shift has been motivated by the desire to find security and to protect identities that are under immense threat.

I conducted an ethnographic exploration of the discrimination in amenities against Muslims. The study explored four different settlements located in two of the most significant slums of Mumbai: Dharavi (Rajiv Gandhi Nagar and Kumbharwada) and H East ward (Behrampada and Dhywaneshwar Nagar in Bandra). Participant observation and focus group discussion with women of the slum communities formed the major sources of data. The study revealed that amenities within slums are very skewed in their distribution, public spaces within slums of mixed communities always display Hindu markers and the local government predominantly neglects slums that have Muslim dominance.



Dhyaneswar Nagar. Image credit: Paroj Banerjee

The study was a part of a publication entitled *Broken Promises: A study of the socio-economic status of Muslims: Seven years post Sachar* by Centre for Peace Studies, India. The is a review of the implementation of the 15-point programme declared by the Government of India after the Sachar Committee report in 2005 highlighted the stark deprivation of the Muslims in India. The publication indicated indifference, sustained stereotyping and lackadaisical

governance for social welfare programmes are primary reasons for the heightened discrimination against Muslims. The current political scenario exacerbates the conditions of the Muslims further, not only in material terms but also in terms of attitudes that have intensified the 'minority complex' of Muslims.

The 2011 census indicates that close to 90 lakh people (62% of the population) live in the slums of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), occupying less than 8% of the city's land. Unlike other Indian cities, slums in Mumbai operate as spaces generating numerous economic activities, making them significant players in the city's economy. Furthermore, the spatial location of the slums within the city and their demographic strength has rendered them politically significant. The two slums discussed here occupy extremely important parts of Mumbai and consequently are under constant threat of eviction. While parts of Dharavi are now regularised, huge expanses of settlement in the H East ward, encircling the posh commercial zone of Bandra-Kurla complex, are not. This implies that the Muslim communities not only face discrimination in terms of services, but also in the redevelopment discourse.

In Mumbai life in slums is challenging, but for some it means multiple forms of deprivation. In slums with a mixed Hindu-Muslim population there is clear evidence of discrimination against Muslims. For instance within Rajiv Gandhi Nagar, Kumbharwada or Dhyaneswar Nagar one will not find a single red meat shop. Some women in the focus group discussions said that tenants are not allowed to cook meat in their houses. Such omissions seem unproblematic on the whole; however ideologically these become akin to a cultural apartheid that is normalised in everyday life. Second, public space within slums is often used for Hindu festivals, as we witnessed in Dhyaneswar Nagar, yet seldom sees the celebration of Muslim festivals. Discrimination is also visible in the celebration of festivals themselves: during any major Hindu festival monetary 'donations' are extracted from the community, including Muslim families. If Muslims refuse they face various forms of harassment ranging from verbal abuse to physical assault.

Rajiv Gandhi Nagar has a mosque located in an extremely precarious location. The respondents complained that many times children have been injured trying to reach the mosque amidst heaps of rubble, and during the monsoon the mosque becomes inaccessible. While temples or Hindu places of worship spring up at every visible corner, proposals for constructing a mosque create huge tension within the neighbourhood. The rights of tenants within slums are very limited, if not non-existent. Tenants often do not get services like legal gas connections, water connections and electricity. Therefore they are often left at the mercy of the house owners who charge them exorbitant rates for these services. As tenants are also almost invisible in the eyes of the state they get no support from the government when it comes to addressing their housing issues. Finally, in mixed slums one will not find Urdu medium schools and madrasas only operate within the houses of individuals. The subtle perpetuation of Hindu dominance is becoming more visible every day.

Dhyaneswar Nagar has many resident welfare societies that are meant to work for the well-being of those living in the slums. However, discussion with participants revealed that the welfare societies mainly cater to the Hindu residents. One of the Muslim residents who is a welfare committee member narrated an incident when she was denied a CFL lamp that she wanted to use to decorate the outside her house before Eid. She also reported that Muslim tenants paid more rent than rest of the tenants in the neighbourhood. Moreover it is mandatory for new Muslim tenants to be registered in the local police station before moving onto to their tenements. This is another classic case of negative profiling of the Muslims living in Mumbai's slums.

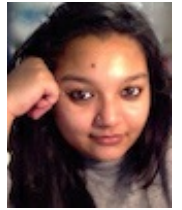
There is a stark contrast in slums like Behrampada where almost 90% of tenants are Muslim. Today Behrampada almost looks like a ghetto, completely neglected by the state. The municipal garbage cleaners are less frequent and there is an untreated sewer line that runs through the settlement, which results in sickness and disease among the community, particularly in the monsoon season. Despite years of appeals to the municipality nothing has been done about it. The layout and construction of houses are also extremely hazardous. This was highlighted in 2007, when a fire gutted close to 2000 hutments in Behrampada. Despite all of the problems people prefer to live here as it gives them a greater sense of security.

There is often an overt display of religion in Muslim-majority neighbourhoods like Behrampada. For example, numerous posters and pamphlets are visible in the community, preaching the need to join *Jamaats* (Muslim assemblies) which are gaining popularity. More than religious inclination this has been a way to retain and reinforce identities and cultural practices. In mixed neighbourhood, there is a tendency of living and practising culture in more subtle ways. Furthermore, while visiting some of the Muslim households I sensed that there was overt display of nationalism in their homes. It is as if they were trying to signal that they were virtuous, law-abiding Indian citizens. Perhaps this is a response to the challenges that Muslims (particularly in marginalised communities) constantly face, a bid to prove that they are ideal Indian citizens rather than “terrorist” threats to national security!

*This post is based on research conducted for the Centre for Peace Studies, India for their publication Broken Promises: A study of the socio-economic status of Muslims: Seven years post Sachar.*

### **About the Author**

**Paroj Banerjee** is an LSE PhD candidate in Regional and Urban planning. She has over 5 years of experience working in India's development sector, in organizations like the Planning Commission, Action Aid and Oxfam mainly on issues of urban poverty. In 2011 she received the Institute Gold Medal from Tata Institute of Social Sciences for the best student in her master's course. Her previous research has centered on issues of urban marginalisation, the influence of gender in accessing public spaces, housing crisis and various levels of invisibility within the city. Her doctoral research is on the spatial practices of homeless communities in Mumbai.



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