

“But we are here to see the slum”: counter-conceptualising ‘slums’ in Mumbai and beyond



*In the Indian context the use of the word ‘slum’ only appeared in the late 19th century and in vernacular practices the terms used to denote poor people’s housing is much more encompassing. Furthermore, slum centric representations of urban marginality, both celebratory and derogatory, fail to capture the vibrancy and variety in Mumbai’s urban community, writes **Paroj Banerjee**.*

One sultry afternoon in Mumbai as I was chatting with the community of footpath dwellers with whom I conducted my PhD fieldwork, I saw a group of foreigners with backpacks and water bottles in their hands approach the spot where I was sitting. As they curiously walked past the family of basket weavers, they looked at me as inquisitively as I looked at them wondering “are they going to stop here?” As two tourists stopped to photograph (Figure 1) the two girls who were drawing on the wall, the tour operator, a local, warned his clients to not “waste time” here and move on. He insisted his group to up the pace if they wanted to “see” everything that comprised their day’s package. The tourists left hurriedly soon after. I had observed tourists walk by this stretch of the road many times before, but never read it the way my respondents explained it to me. I asked Rani (name changed), a member of the basket weaving family, where the tourists go, to which she responded saying they go to Dharavi to see the buildings and how people live and work there.

There are various ways to interpret the opening scene and my conversation with Rani. What appears in R’s words, is not an account of Dharavi (popularly known as Asia’s biggest slum), located in Mumbai, as an impoverished place, as often reflected in [policy documents of international organisations](#). But as scholar and activist, [Gautam Bhan](#) stresses in an [evocative talk](#) on the *Basti*, it is represented as a dynamic space, with a potential to transform into several uses. Thus it is not just a place where (poor) people live, but also work, challenging some of the binaries of home/work, private/public, domestic/civic, reproduction/production, tradition/modernity and so forth. These spaces are people’s lifeworlds. The presence of the tourists making their way towards Dharavi, is an instance of voyeuristic pleasures, derived out of seeing people inhabit conditions of precarity. Another viewer, attuned to questions of agency might see the “slum tours” as an alternative representation of the “[improvisional](#)” city in the Third World. This representation holds the slum, not as a space of squalor, but one that is responsive to the marginalisation of the city.

Through the vignette mentioned in the beginning I argue that the improvisational city lens is another way by which the discourse on the industriousness of the poor overlooks elite driven urban governance and questions of structural violence. What therefore gets eroded in these representations are the variants of marginality where groups outside the “territoriality of the slum” devise distinct spatial and political strategies in their everyday lives.



Figure 1: Tourists making their way towards the ‘real’ slum, Dharavi. Photo credit: Paroj Banerjee.

In the Indian context the use of the word ‘slum’ only appeared in late 19th century and in vernacular practices the terms used to denote poor people’s housing is much more encompassing. For instance in Hindi and Bengali, terms like *Basti* or *Bosoti* respectively, which literally means to settle, is used to refer to slums. Although they have come to be associated negatively with squalor, the literal translation of the vernacular terms does not imply a monolithic category as that of slums. Within Mumbai, the iconic slum of Dharavi has become the established representative for all slums that exist within the city. Narrating a [slum tour experience](#) in Dharavi, in Professor Gareth Jones and Dr Romola Sanyal, stress that while the tour operators emphasised on a scripted enunciation of the enterprise and creativity of the workers in Dharavi, more critical questions on working conditions, issues of wage, labour and working hours were eluded. The warning of the tour operator, in the opening vignette, to the tourists who expressed interest in the lives of footpath dwellers while passing by, is symptomatic of this manicured depiction of the

marginality.

There is another dimension to the way R views Dharavi. Born and raised on a busy street in Mumbai, she has internalised a distinction that has emerged from her spatial condition. To her the slums appear as a place of "buildings" where people inhabiting the space have a greater economic capacity than her community. To her, life in slums is a life of "more permanence and safety" where at least the everyday is not determined by whether the municipal trucks will come to clear off spaces, or whether someone in her family will be hit by a moving car. To her the slums are an aspiration!

R's comment is incisive as it reveals that groups like hers inhabit the lowest domains of an urban poverty hierarchy. Normative framings of 'resilience', 'industriousness', 'hard work' for residents of Dharavi, reinforce the negative stereotypes towards urban poor groups who do not conform to the spatial conditions of slum dwellers. Footpath communities, street dwellers and other marginal bodies are often labelled as 'beggars', 'vagrants' and 'useless people'. As the spectacle of the third world city through slums capitalises "on the unfamiliar" and exceptionalises "the mundane" and homogenises the understandings of inequality and poverty, slum centric representations of urban marginality, both celebratory and derogatory, "fails to address the fact that the most extreme levels of poverty are not necessarily found in the slums", writes [Pushpa Arabindoo](#).

As the "geographical locus" of slums shifted from the Global North to the Global South, slums continue to be theorised and understood in terms of congestion in cities that needs to be remedied (UN Habitat 2003). Interestingly, as Lisa Bjorkman through her seminal research on [contestations over water access in Mumbai's slums](#) puts it, in the Indian context the formal definition of "slums" does not imply a lack of illegality. Instead she argues that, "the history of planning in Mumbai is intimately related to that of slums – or more specifically through slum clearance". For instance in Mumbai, the [1971 Maharashtra Slum Areas](#) made the process of declaration of 'slums' a highly political activity that gets mediated through the interstices of contested terrain of political patronages and negotiations with the state which once labelled is almost irreversible.

Based on the census definition of slum, I therefore ask despite fitting into the criteria why does this community of footpath dwellers not get labelled as inhabiting a 'slum'? In what I see as 'graded sub-alternism', settlements that were able to acquire legal tenure and political patronage, graduated upwards in the hierarchy of poverty, while others continued to negotiate terrains of contested citizenship.

As I reflect further on the opening vignette, and the ethnographic moment of observing tourists walking past the community of footpath dwellers and my subsequent conversation with R, I further stress on the 'spectacality' of the third world city solely through the purview of "slums". Based on the ethnography of 30 families living on a footpath adjoining a busy street in Mumbai, I term this group as "embedded bodies" and argue that their socio-spatialities are deeply entrenched within the urban form, and constitute a politics of *persistence*. I contend that the passing by of the tourists, is not just a casual omission in the itineraries of slum tour operators, but is suggestive of the larger invisibility, that spatially disparate groups like the footpath dwellers in my study are subjected to.

I ask how "authentic" then is the "experience of poverty and development" when presented through carefully curated slum tours of Dharavi? Or when attempted to be remedied through myopic policy measures? My case study reveals that marginal groups within the city, often recognised through their conditions of living were either categorised as "slum-dwellers" or as "homeless". However, these groups reveal very distinct spatial practices that are not only highly precarious and transient compared to those living in slums, but their relationship with their living spaces were deeply tied to the practice of *home*.



Figure 2: A young dweller helping her community by passing along her previously hidden belongings across the wall to avoid their confiscation. This is a regular scene after a municipal raid. Photo credit: Paroj Banerjee



Figure 3: Children of the community enjoy a moment with their family members while they work on weaving baskets. Photo credit: Dilip Banerjee.

Therefore, framing them around a language of homelessness disregards the affective ties established with the place as a rationale to subvert the adversities of everyday street living. Although these groups have arrived much before the "[cut off](#)" date, a governmentality through which the politics of housing in Mumbai has shaped, they continue to be labelled as encroachers or migrants. Similarly various other floating populations in the city face grave marginalisation through these labels. My point here is not to establish whether these groups arrived before the cut-off date or not. Doing so would align with the same narratives of citizenship that has divided the city along domicile status, which is deeply rooted in ethnic politics. My assertion here is that embedded bodies such as the footpath dwellers in my study, constitute a form of spatiality that is not tenable to the metonymic understanding of the marginal city, namely the 'slum' trope.

Note: This topic was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers (AAG) on 10 April 2018 at New Orleans. In this the author critically examines the 'slum' centric representations of the 3rd world marginality.

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Cover image: An aerial view of Dharavi, Mumbai. Photo credit: Madhav Pai, [Flickr](#), [CC BY 2.0](#).

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