

Abandon the *Slum*? Toward an Alternative Recognition of Urban Informal Dwelling

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journals.sagepub.com/home/juh**Paroj Banerjee¹**

Abstract

The focus on urban poverty in the Global South has centered on slum-centric discussions of urban marginality to explain the supposed crisis of Third World cities. Evidently, ideological and material eradication of slums is symptomatic of the erasure of urban poverty and is regarded as a developmental panacea to address all urban problems. Notwithstanding the political significance of this term to understand and respond to subaltern urbanism, the Eurocentric gaze of urban scholars and practitioners in using *slum*, as an analytical and developmental category, has impeded the recognition of varied forms of dwelling practices. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with footpath-dwelling communities in Mumbai, I argue that to understand the diversity of dwelling in the city, attention needs to be extended to what could be called *non-slums*, spaces that embody a set of practices and negotiations that are spatially distinct from those characterizing places officially labeled as slums and expand beyond *density* politics. Unlike residents of so-called slums, these groups are often dispersed and numerically weak. It is this spatial organization (or the lack of it) that shapes their everyday politics in making their place within the city. The exposed nature of their habitation makes their everyday living transient and sets forth a form of spatiality that is distinct from dense neighborhoods labeled slums. While slums are being peripheralized through various policy and state interventions, these groups continue to hold on to the urban core and in doing so produce new spatializations of poverty and varied subaltern subjectivities of dispossession and belonging.

Keywords

slum, non-slum, footpath dwelling, slum-recognition, housing politics, Mumbai

Introduction

One mundane fieldwork afternoon in sultry Mumbai, as I sat on the footpath near the domestic spaces of respondents, traffic hustled past me, and pedestrians walked by. Respondents were busy getting on with their everyday activities, alternating between domestic errands and daily wage work. I watched children playing dodging the moving vehicles, people drying clothes on police barricades, and two young girls painting on the wall—a structure that divides the western railway tracks from the major transport route along which they live and the only concrete structure of their dwellings that are otherwise in constant material flux (see Figure 1). At a distance, I

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Figure 1. Depiction of the nature of spaces where respondents live.

saw a group of foreign tourists, with backpacks and packaged water bottles in their hands, approach the spot where I was sitting. The tour operator who was leading the tourists warned his clients not to indulge the “beggars” and not to “waste time” there, emphasizing that “real” poverty was elsewhere. He insisted that his group up the pace if they wanted to “see” everything that comprised their day’s package. I had observed tourists walk by this stretch of the road many times before, but apart from a few occasional halts to take photos of respondents, these tourists never stopped. Rather, they were discouraged from stopping. When I asked Rani (name changed), why she thinks tourists go to Dharavi, Mumbai’s most famous slum area, she said that these tourists go to see how people live and work in Dharavi. Both in the words of the tour operator and Rani, Dharavi appears as an exceptional urban space. The only difference is that for the tour operator, the poverty experienced by footpath dwellers like Rani is not worthy of showcasing. Rather it is something to be cautious of. Contrarily, for Rani, Dharavi appears as an aspiration.

I present the vignette not to uphold the tour operator’s gaze as an authentic representation and do not suggest that if the footpath dwellers were watched as residents of Dharavi are, their poverty would be authentically represented. Instead, I intend here to highlight informal living practices that often get overlooked or bypassed yet present distinctive spatial and survival politics that needs to be recognized to make cities more inclusive. These are spaces of habitation that do not conform to either the “bourgeois order” of the city or the spaces where the urban poor dwell, that is, the representative *slum*.¹ In Anjaria’s words, these urban dwellers live at the



Figure 2. Depiction of everyday domestic practices of footpath dwellers in Mumbai.

margins of these margins . . . communities living on the edges of established jhopadpattis . . . [these are] people who inhabit the extreme end of Mumbai's spectrum of graduated illegalities . . . in small clusters of tents made of black plastic, without access to water or electricity.²

These spaces are people's lifeworlds (Figure 2) as they challenge the binaries of home–work, private–public, domestic–civic, reproduction–production, tradition–modernity, stasis–change, and so forth.³ Following Bhan and Jana, I prefer to use the term *non-slum* to refer to informal living spaces that are spatially clustered, “semi-permanent, temporary and non-serviceable” and constitute households that have “not been captured with the category and definition of the ‘slum.’”⁴

Born and raised along a busy street in Mumbai, Rani has internalized a distinction that has emerged from her spatial condition. To her, the slums appear as a place of inhabitation where people have a greater economic capacity than her community. To her, Dharavi, and slums in general, appear as a place of more permanence, shielded from the everyday risks of living next to a busy road.⁵ To her, the slums are an aspiration. Rani's comment is incisive as it reveals that groups like hers inhabit the lowest domains of an urban poverty hierarchy. Thus, this slum-centric representation 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.”⁶ In doing so, attention is turned away from groups like Rani's, who are not only fighting hard to claim space in the city but focus on slums as developmental geographies that lead to significant exclusions.⁷ It obscures understanding of these varied spatial practices and the role of these urban dwellers in producing the city.⁸ The tour operator's insistence on finding enterprise, work, community, and multi-culturalism in so-called slums, and not on the footpath, pointed toward the stereotypical frames through which cities in the Global South are recognized. This example urges

us to recognize forms of urbanism that include a range of contexts, relations, geographies, and histories, politics that go beyond the familiar frames. Despite being so starkly visible, why are groups like the footpath dwellers constantly overlooked?

In this article, I highlight the way that the focus on urban poverty in the Global South has centered on slum-centric discussions of urban marginality to explain what is framed as the crisis of Third World cities. Evidently, the physical and ideological eradication of slums is symptomatic of the erasure of urban poverty and is regarded as a developmental panacea to address all urban problems.⁹ Notwithstanding the political significance of this term to understand and respond to subaltern urbanism, the Eurocentric gaze of urban scholars and practitioners in using *slum* as an analytical and developmental category has impeded the recognition of varied forms of dwelling practices.¹⁰ In the section “Slums as the Icons of Urban Poverty: From “Bad Densities” to Good Densities” of this essay, I discuss how in scholarship, perceptions around slums have evolved. I highlight that the pejorative association with the word *slum* was adopted in the Global South from the Global North after former colonies became independent nations.¹¹ Yet, in vernacular references, people’s housing encompassed a wide range of housing experiences and practices. I argue that as *slum* became the iconic representation of poverty, two specific shifts in its perception were palpable. One, slums were rendered as developmental projects that needed to be managed. Two, in popular media and scholarship, slums came to be celebrated as models of entrepreneurialism, innovation, and urban resilience. Thus, densities that were earlier seen as impediments to urban growth were now considered potent spaces of politics and reorganization. In “The Politics of (Slum) Recognition” section, I elaborate on the politics of officially recognizing (and excluding) and categorizing settlements under the rubric of *slum*. I ask what forms of dispossession are produced by these definitional exclusions? The “Dwelling in Non-Slums” section transitions to reflect how slum-centric cognition of urban marginality often homogenizes an understanding of poverty and ignores those variants that do not fit with the concept of *slum*. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with footpath dwellers in Mumbai, I argue that to understand interstitial living in the city, attention needs to be extended to spaces beyond those classed as slums, to incorporate spaces that embody a set of practices and negotiations within the city that are spatially distinct from those of slums. Unlike residents of places classed as slums, these groups are often dispersed and numerically weak. It is this spatial organization (or the lack of it) that shapes their everyday politics in making their place within the city.¹² The exposed nature of their habitation makes their everyday living transient and sets forth a form of spatiality that is distinct from dense neighborhoods such as those classed as slums. While so-called slums are being peripheralized through various policy and state interventions, these groups continue to hold on to the urban core and in doing so, produce new spatializations of poverty and varied subaltern subjectivities of dispossession and belonging.

Slums as the Icons of Urban Poverty: From “Bad Densities” to Good Densities

Emerging from a Victorian context, slums were associated with what McFarlane terms “bad densities,” with roots in Engels’s England and having an impact on urban thinking and the inequalities that it created.¹³ With its ontological and topological origins in the West, the concept of *slum*, then, came to be associated with congested living that arose out of poor economic conditions. Associated with underdevelopment, the slum is now located in the “megacities,” a metonym of the Third World urbanism.¹⁴ Roy stresses that the iconic geography of the slum is a familiar frame “through which the cities of the Global South are perceived and understood, their difference mapped and located.”¹⁵ Although the “geographical locus” of slums has shifted from the Global North to the Global South, slums continue to be theorized and understood in terms of congestion and a strain on urban infrastructure that needs to be remedied.¹⁶ It was with the

movement of “slum stereotypes” from the West to the newly independent post-colonial nations that the term was incorporated into their

developmental programmes, [while they] forged partnerships with international aid agencies and explained their social policies and modernization strategies in international networks and forums, “slum” became a familiar and credible term throughout the world in non-English speaking as well as English speaking nations.¹⁷

In a historical account of informal housing in Mumbai, Anjaria argues that the use of the word *slum* only appeared in the late-nineteenth century and that earlier a more diverse lexicon was used to refer to poor people’s housing.¹⁸ Referring to vernacular practices, Bhan stresses that in local languages, the terms used to denote to poor people’s housing were much more encompassing.¹⁹ For instance, in Hindi and Bengali, terms like *Basti* or *Bosoti*, respectively, which literally means to settle, are used to refer to what in English have come to be called 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 *slum* does. In other words, informality has been symptomatic of the urban trajectory, “a necessary strategy and eventuality of city life,” and Mumbai has historically been produced through improvisation, mobility, and gradual encroachment. Encroachment and informality, therefore, formed a “constitutive genealogy” of the city and improvisational living has been intrinsic to the lifelong struggles of the poor and vulnerable to not just survive but acquire the “urban worldliness” that enables them to get by.²⁰

In recent years, more specifically over a span of the past three decades, a parallel shift in the perception of urban marginal living has been palpable in urban poverty scholarship. While the pejorative framing around slums has changed, *they* came to be represented as icons of urban poverty. In the popular media, informality and eclectic spaces within the city are seen as instances of urban entrepreneurialism, resourcefulness, and innovation. Often categorized as “new urbanism,” urban practitioners have stressed the need to shift attention away from the negative framing of informal settlements toward more mundane use of spaces and affective experiences.²¹ Anjaria calls this an “improvisational city perspective” whereby the focus is on

the diverse ways people use mundane city spaces such as walls, bridges, and the side of the road to build homes and establish communities and livelihoods and reads these as a rejoinder to political-economic approaches that focus solely on structural inequality and deprivation.²²

Therefore, densities associated with supposedly informal living are not seen as dystopias but celebrated as radical subaltern urbanism wherein the ubiquitous slum is a “terrain of habitation, livelihood, self-organization and politics.”²³ Writing about the political agency of slum-dwelling populations, in Delhi and Mumbai, Weinstein argues that slum residents often use density to their advantage as an organizing strategy to prevent slum demolitions.²⁴ These densities, while on McFarlane’s terms “bad” ones, are therefore entangled in the politics and agency of occupation and resistance.²⁵

With the emergence of scholarship that, within the framework of structural inequalities, is attuned to questions of agency, slums have been rebranded as instances of “makeshift” or “tactical” urbanism.²⁶ Therefore, unlike thirty years ago when Mumbai’s landscape of slums and squatters was an embarrassment, “now these characteristics are often celebrated in exhibits, blogs, films, as signs of innovation, ingenuity, and small scale entrepreneurialism.”²⁷ Within the theoretical realm, slums have acquired a renewed interest in recent years to fit within what Arabindoo calls “the spatialities of historical processes exemplified by contemporary cities.”²⁸ In other words, the analysis of slums advances beyond the “population terrain” to a realm of “theory,” which could be used to explain “certain histories and the landscapes of politics and action that they imply.”²⁹ For Roy, this resurrection of the “subaltern space of slum” is not only attentive

to the newer forms of politics by urban poor residents, but acts as a distinct “itinerary of recognition” for the Third World city. The favelas of Rio de Janeiro, the dense townships of Lagos or Kibera, the settlements of el-Arafa in Cairo, and as pointed out in the beginning of the article, the iconic Dharavi, are alike widely recognized and, I contend, over-represented markers of the Third World city.³⁰

Confronting the worlding of the megacity through the iconic concept of *slum*, Roy cautions that there is much more at stake than just the dangerous stereotyping of slums.³¹ For instance, within Mumbai, Dharavi has become the established representative for all slums that exist within the city. Its position as such hides the stories of other settlements classified as slums that are scouring for basic service provision, such as Shivaji-Nagar Bainganwadi or Mumbra, and it also prohibits “more complex readings of the Dharavi economy, political contest, ethnic co-habitation, environmental conditions or subjectivities”³² or even more brutal accounts of displacement and dispossession. Representation, therefore, trudges on a tricky slope of “capitalising on the unfamiliar,” “exceptionalising the mundane,” and, as I stress further on, homogenizing understandings of inequality and poverty.³³ 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 marginality. Moreover, it also places the concept of *slum* in a very distinct physical space and the groups of footpath dwellers outside of this world.

In a native critique of the blockbuster, *Slumdog Millionaire*, published in the *New York Times*, Echanove and Srivastava begin the discussion over the use of the words “slum” and “dog.”³⁴ Agreeing unequivocally with a resident of Dharavi, Manju Keny, the authors stress the putatively contaminated depiction of the slum. While the article makes an important point about the economic centrality of Dharavi, evident in its language is a moral foregrounding of those living in Dharavi as industrious and hardworking. I feel particularly unsettled with their use of the terms “beggars” or “hopeless people,” by which the authors attempt to disassociate the Dharavi slum dwellers from those who are not part of the “active and lively part of an incredibly industrious city.” In other words, slums like Dharavi are to be celebrated as “paragons or models for future living,” while more precarious forms of marginality either get associated with negative stereotypes or get left out of the discussion. In this normative framing of the residents of Dharavi, the authors reinforce the existing pejorative framings that urban poor groups who do not conform to the spatial conditions of slum dwellers, such as footpath communities, street dwellers, and other urban dwellers, are subjected to.³⁵

As I reflect further on the opening vignette, I allude to the ethnographic moment of observing the tour operator’s warnings as the tourists walked past the community of footpath dwellers. Highlighting how the Third World city is constituted as spectacle through application of the *slum* concept, 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 to which spatially disparate groups living in the interstices of the city are subjected. I ask how “authentic” then is the “experience of poverty and development” when presented through carefully curated slum tours of Dharavi?³⁶ Designed under what I see as a garb of improvisations, agency, and enterprise, these spectacles often act as voyeuristic pronouncements of a homogeneous understanding of real poverty. 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.³⁷ What therefore gets eroded in these representations are the variants of marginality where groups dwelling in urban spaces, outside the “territoriality of the slum,” devise distinct spatial and political strategies in their everyday lives.³⁸ If living in dense conditions is a form of protection from the brutal city and a key organizing principle, then how does exposed living on the street make groups more vulnerable to the precarities of the city? How can this difference then be understood and mapped to make sense of the spatial strategies of urban marginal who are not located in the districts categorized in Mumbai as slums?

The Politics of (Slum) Recognition

In the Indian context, although places labeled slums are equated with congestion and insanitary living conditions, the term's formal definitions do not directly imply a lack of legality.³⁹ For instance, in Mumbai, the 1971 Maharashtra Slum Areas (Improvement, Clearance, and Redevelopment) Act (also known as the Slum Act) provisioned for "any area" to be declared a *slum*

that may be a source of danger to health, safety or convenience of the public of that area or of its neighborhood, by reason of the area having inadequate or no basic amenities, or being insanitary, squalid, overcrowded or otherwise.⁴⁰

However, the emergence in recent years of a new judicial discourse in India has shaped the legitimacy of an individual's claim to urban space based on inhabitation in the city.⁴¹ For instance, in Delhi, while the various areas classified as slums had been rendered illegal, shopping malls and gated private housing estates proliferated despite violating several building codes and planning laws.⁴² Reference to slums as "illegal" and as "encroachments" became widespread in judicial discourse after the equation of slums with nuisance.⁴³ Thus, slum dwellers and other informal settlers became objects that were to be "managed" through legal actions.⁴⁴ As per Ramanathan, although encroachment has been a constitutive form of the urban, it is the poor who have been legally incarcerated, a move by which claims to citizenship have been weakened.⁴⁵ Thus, legal discourse circulated a rhetoric whereby the poor were classified as unscrupulous while property-owning citizens would be able to enjoy the shift "from an ethic of state patrimony to one that increasingly emphasized self-government" facilitated by neoliberal dictates.⁴⁶

Björkman argues, however, that although formally unrelated, "the history of planning in Mumbai is intimately related to that of slums—or more specifically [operates] through slum clearance."⁴⁷ Envisioned in the national policies on urbanization, such as the Rajiv Awas Yojana, "slum-free cities" were to be achieved through displacement and rehousing. The outcomes of these policies have been counterproductive, as the policies have not only instituted a process of exclusion and indefinite wait in transition, but for those who have been rehoused in neatly stacked tenement-style buildings have resulted in another process of displacement.⁴⁸ For example, the process of beneficiary identification for these housing schemes is executed through a tenuous claim of establishing one's domicile prior to the cut-off date of 1995. For those who are able to graduate as eligible beneficiaries, rehousing has meant either waiting in transit camps for more than fifteen years or being packed into structures of 225 square feet, severing all ties of sociality and economic possibilities.⁴⁹ In a process describable as graded subalternism, settlements that were able to acquire legal tenure and political patronage graduated upward in the hierarchy of poverty while others continued to negotiate terrains of contested citizenship.⁵⁰

Declarations of urban areas' identity as slums therefore became a tool that through legislation regularized "illegal" or "encroached" settlements as well as becoming instruments to gain populist votes.⁵¹ While some forms of slum clearance have been accomplished through brutal mechanisms of displacement, some other forms have been more tactical and ideological. Take, for example, the evolving definition of *slum* in varying official discourse. The National Sample Survey of the 56th round (2008-2009) considered twenty or more clusters of households to be classifiable as slums.⁵² However, the census definition of a slum in 2011 identified sixty to seventy households or 300 residents living in "poorly built congested tenements, in the unhygienic environment usually with inadequate infrastructure and lacking in proper sanitary and drinking water facilities."⁵³ Condemning the deliberate undercounting of informal settlements, Bhan and Jana characterize three kinds of non-slum households that have been rendered the "most vulnerable."⁵⁴ These households are (1) those that do not qualify for resettlement or are unable to find themselves on the official list of plot allocations, (2) those made up of people lacking immediate resources such as a down payment for a license or are unable to afford the increased

cost, and (3) those made up of people unable to survive economically in peripheral resettlement colonies and return to live in the city center near employment sites. Thus, it is erroneous to conclude that the reduction of the slum / non-slum gap indicates a reduction of urban poverty. Rather, definitional exclusions have led to new spatializations of poverty and exclusions from delivery of urban services, social security benefits, and secure forms of shelter. Recognizing the exclusions that this politics of slum classification sets forth, my research reveals that contrary to the belief that all urban poor are passive recipients of welfarism, marginal urban dwellers sometimes actively refuse such governmentality. In other words, some urban poor groups make spatial claims by deliberately remaining invisible. In the sections which follow in this article, I highlight this tension drawing on in-depth interviews with respondents.

The spatial histories of respondents greatly resonate with the history of housing activism in Mumbai, where footpath dwellers were once an important category of mobilization.⁵⁵ The inclusion of footpath dwellers under the purview of the Slum Act is considered as one of the historical victories of the housing struggle in Mumbai. However, what seems like a victory to housing rights activists can be interpreted as the creation of further crevices dividing people in the city. Following several pieces of judicial activism in the 1980s, footpath dwellers in Mumbai emerged as a strongly mobilized group and a distinct category of the urban poor who had gained legal rights to stay put and eventually became beneficiaries of resettlement schemes.⁵⁶ In the *Olga Tellis v. BMC* case, a group of activists advocating for a group of street dwellers who faced evictions influenced a court to challenge the municipal laws that evicted footpath dwellers. The court pointed out that the existing laws, survivals from the colonial era, violated not only people's constitutional rights but were also in contravention of regulations established by the welfare committee of the state.

Therefore, while on one hand, the classification of footpath communities as slums was a victory for a group of housing rights activists, on the other, it entailed administering this beneficiary scheme through a host of governmental dictates that excluded all those who did not fit into the eligibility criteria. This form of governmentality internalized by NGOs entailed in an immediate sense rehousing people classed as slum-dwellers into packed tenement-style housing far from the city's central districts.⁵⁷ However, unlike scholars who have theorized this as "deep democracy," I consider that these moves exemplify a politics of partial inclusion, wherein redevelopment rules create fragmented subjectivities of belonging and dispossession. Classifications of densities and bodies as belonging to the category of *slum* are thus highly political acts predicated on practices of discriminatory governmentality.⁵⁸ After all, many groups belonging to the urban poor, including my respondents, were unable to acquire slum status and eventual housing welfare through redevelopment. Over the years, as homelessness activism gained momentum in India, these spatially scattered groups came to be perceived and treated as homeless.⁵⁹ I do not have space here to expand on the politics of homelessness activism in India, but I would like to stress that welfare programs are not only insensitive to people's spatial practices but often undermine the agency of people in rejecting them.

Dwelling in Non-Slums

The ethnography presented here spans fourteen months of fieldwork spent engaging with footpath dwellers in a busy Mumbai location. As a former development practitioner who intervened previously to address these people's conditions of homelessness, deeper engagement through sustained observations, in-depth interviews, and interactions with their acquaintances.⁶⁰ Revealed that the footpath dwellers not only disassociated from the tag *homelessness*, but that their spatial practices were also distinct from those of slum dwellers. Bhan and Jana highlight the fact that non-slums are spatially clustered in the city and are located in deeply vulnerable accommodations such as along transport routes, in crevices of ongoing constructions, or in the interstices of any open spaces.⁶¹



Figure 3. Materialities of footpath dwelling.

Spatially scattered and unable to mobilize their claims politically and socially, non-slum-dwellers' ability to gain any kind of patronage or services in the city is further reduced. Writing about pavement dwellers in Mumbai, Menon argues that they are the most abject urban groups, devoid of any political subjectivity and resort to precarious housing by living in sidewalks, street corners, outside open spaces, or similar interstices of the city as they "cannot live in slum settlements."⁶² The fact that slums are unaffordable came up consistently in my interactions with respondents. Non-slum-dwellers claim that their living conditions are different from those of the slum, highlighting two specific spatial trends in informal living. First, density (or the lack of it) helps build people's claim that they have the right to stay put.⁶³ As McFarlane puts it, densities possess a political, social, economic, and physical force in the way that they display a "determined show of power [and] give rise to new ways of being together."⁶⁴ Benjamin articulates that this terrain of occupancy is enabled by "vote bank politics" wherein squatters use density to their advantage to negotiate and expand spatial claims.⁶⁵ I stress that in the political-economic contexts of Indian cities, therefore, densities play a deciding role in limiting residents' capability to make spatial claims over their environment of non-dense informal living. Second, the very nature of the built environment in which footpath dwellers live precludes a kind of status that is often possible in dense informal settlements.

Exposed to a street, non-slum-dwellers' lives are characterized by risks from moving traffic, extreme weather conditions, periodic demolition drives from the municipality, the threat of disease, vulnerability to crime, and overall social stigmatization (Figure 3). They have built their homes along a street and with materials that either perish easily or may be taken away by municipal officials. Although the public character of the footpath impedes an overt politics of "occupancy," it enables domestic functions and social relations to thrive around it.⁶⁶ Respondents would share with me how they painstakingly rebuilt their dwellings after every torrential

downpour. Their everyday lives along a railway track, open sewage lines, and a busy traffic route make them susceptible to numerous health risks. They constantly negotiate the threat of being attacked by animals, such as stray dogs and rats. During fieldwork, I regularly heard accounts of how someone got attacked by stray dogs or bitten by the rats that abound along the railway tracks in Mumbai. Thus, respondents navigated not only police, municipal officials, and harsh weather conditions, but also physical vulnerabilities that were intrinsic to living in an exposed condition on a street. In fact, it was due to the fear of attracting rats that people on the footpath never stored food items or raw ingredients in bulk. This often meant that instead of being able to economize on the costs of everyday living, respondents spent time and effort buying food items in small quantities on a daily basis. Living alongside a busy transport route made them vulnerable to frequent accidents. Physical suffering that was specific to living on the street was so normalized that people would often refer to them as usual occurrences of their everyday living.

The socio-spatialities of these thirty families living on a footpath are deeply entrenched with urban form. While these thirty families are permanent fixtures, living in very neatly delineated spaces, family units increase or decrease in number periodically. From the various accounts people gave, I gathered that early settlers had arrived here at the beginning of the 1980s when it was a wooded area. They were here much before the adjoining slum settlements, high-rises, apartment complexes, offices, roads, and even the footpath on which they currently live had been built. In other words, they arrived before the current form of the city arrived. However, over time, as real estate values escalated in Mumbai, infrastructure projects were laid out and the area began to transform. From living in much more spread out spaces in hut-like structures, they got pushed to one side of the road as more people moved into the area. Eventually, as this part became an important transport route of the city, the government along with a prominent NGO undertook a demolition and resettlement drive. While many families with the status of slum-dwellers had been rehoused in tenements in a distant suburb of Mumbai, some footpath dwellers were rendered ineligible for the resettlement as they did not have adequate documents to prove their domicile prior to the cut-off date of 1995. Interviews with respondents revealed that for many of these families, relocation to far-flung places would mean severing their economic and social ties. The lack of possession of documentation for the purpose of resettlement was therefore not merely an inability to organize to secure housing but, to some extent, an active refusal of the welfare measures of the state.⁶⁷ This contradicts scholarship on urban dispossession in India which has abundantly documented discriminatory housing policy but throws little light on rejections of state-organized housing welfare by marginalized groups.⁶⁸

While the slums and informal living are generally perceived to be an urban nuisance, certain kinds of urban dwelling practices have punitive labels attached to them. The experience of accompanying some of the young respondents to their school underscored the discrimination they faced based on their living conditions.⁶⁹ I noticed that the class was divided into two sections according to the physical appearance of the pupils. Students in one group, to whom the class teacher seemed to be more attentive, looked prosperous compared with my young respondents. Later that afternoon, I had an opportunity to speak with the class teacher and ask her about this division. She informed me that the separation was based on the learning capacity and performance of the students. Students on the right side of the classroom, she gestured, were more intelligent and quick learners than those on the left (those I accompanied), who showed less interest in studying and were, according to her, “disruptive.”⁷⁰ According to the teacher, the presence of footpath-dwelling children in the class, which for her was a compulsion to accommodate, had not only slowed down the progress of the class but also had a polluting effect on other children. She attributed the “home” environment and parental care as reasons for this kind of behavior in class.

According to the teacher, the students who perform better in her class have a better home environment, as compared with those who live on the streets and “loiter.” Her justification for segregating the class spatially was couched in sympathy toward the conditions of hardships that

the slum children endured and their potential contamination owing to the physical proximity with street children. She viewed the slum as “home,” as a place of nurture. In contrast, she presented the street as a morally and physically polluted realm where childhood is not nurtured responsibly.⁷¹ Her assertions of why, or as she says the “real reasons” (Hindi *aslee baat*), the children in her class are sent to school confirmed her perceptions. She stressed that the footpath-dwelling children are sent to school to evade detection by the police or official agencies that criminalize begging. She mentioned that as per official procedures, a child cannot be detained and her or his parents cannot be arrested if the child is enrolled in school. This assumption (or conviction) that the street families do not send their children to school to learn reinforced her view that footpath dwelling is coterminous with a lack of care for children.

Picking up from the teacher’s assertion that these groups are associated with “begging” (Hindi *mangna*), it is worthwhile to reflect on the *beggar* tag that I encountered frequently in reference to the respondents. This reference frequently came up during conversations with the upper-class residents of the area who have been trying for several years to evict the footpath dwellers. The chairperson of the Area Locality Management (ALM), a citizen’s collective, informed me during an interview, conducted in English, of the sustained “battle” they have been fighting to remove the “beggars” who have “encroached” on the pavement. He used the term “nuisance” and explicitly held the footpath dwellers responsible for the aesthetic degradation and traffic congestion of the area. Disregarding their economic activities, he accused them of being lazy and resorting to begging. The perceptions of the chairperson are a familiar trope attached to poor people, a label that is easily associated with groups who inhabit the streets. His emphasis on presenting the footpath dwellers as beggars goes beyond the issue of poor people seeking alms and is symptomatic of the urban tensions that emerge out of occupations of space with contested claims.

I stress the prohibitive potential of the various labels—migrants, encroachers, vagrants, and so on—to which these groups are subjected. Although these groups arrived in the area long before the cut-off date set by the government for establishing residency, they continue to be labeled as encroachers or migrants. My point here is not to establish whether these groups arrived before the cut-off date or not. Doing so would align me with precisely the narratives of citizenship that have divided the city along with domicile status, which is deeply rooted in ethnic politics. My assertion here is that marginal urban dwellers exhibit a form of spatiality that is not tenable to the metonymic understanding of the marginal city via the *slum* trope. Moreover, in rejecting the governmentality that aims to fit the city within the visions of “world class[ness],” these groups demonstrate a politics of persistence which is enabled through learning the city and forging tactical alliances with forces that attempt to annihilate them from these spaces.⁷² Ideologically positioned, these tags not only reveal the various subject formations of these groups by the state, political representatives, elite residents, and so forth, but contain an outright denial of the recognition of their place in the city. This blanket and pejorative labeling has been translated at the level of policy into a homogenized understanding of the urban poor, who could be disciplined through myopic policy measures administered through extremely contested processes.

Conclusion: Abandon the Slum?

Although contemporary epistemologies of the Third World city have certainly challenged many of the pejorative framings of so-called slums by highlighting the resilience and enterprising spirit of the urban poor, they nonetheless continue to characterize slums outside the supposedly formal domain, instead classing them as informal ingenuities, extra-legal occupations of urban space, and acts of subversion to “reconfigure territorial forms of state control.”⁷³ My article argues that while a considerable amount of attention, both negative and positive, has been drawn toward marginal living in the cities of the Global South, there has been an excessive tendency to understand this sort of urban dwelling through the lens of *slums* as a concept. I argue that slum-centric

representation and understanding of marginality in the city not only remove attention from issues of poverty that are not within dense neighborhoods, but also conceal the distinct strategies that these groups devise to get on in their everyday. The vignette described at the beginning of this essay is revealing of differentiated subjectivities of urban dispossession. In other words, increased use of the *slum* concept as a way of understanding people's housing strategies has obscured focus from the "specific settlements, struggles and histories that have come to shape a whole swath of life in the Global South."⁷⁴

Through this article, I therefore stress that the city should be understood through the varied spatial practices that groups like these undertake and not within the binary opposing housed and homeless. I stress the need to re-evaluate understandings of encroachment, informality and illegality, migration, and so forth, to read the city not as a static vision where a singular development paradigm is permissible, but as a crucible of multiple existences with varied living practices. This article reveals how the labeling of urban zones as slums gets mediated through a highly contested terrain of political patronages and negotiations with the state, and that this labeling is almost irreversible. A key aspect that the article has explored is the distinction between two spatial statuses among the urban poor, something that evidently shapes experiences of the city. To further my argument that slum-centric representations of urban marginality are filled with "pitfalls," I question not only the lack of attention to more abject forms of poverty, but also the invisibility that these representations create politically and socially.⁷⁵

Precarity of dwelling, danger of resettlement, flimsiness of building material, health risks, evictions, squatting back after relocation, and so on are intrinsic to the informal nature of marginalized housing in urban India. In other words, slum-dwellers are subjected to various uncertainties in relation to housing. However, as my article shows, it is density and the compactness of the built environment that pushes the people I have called non-slum-dwellers to organize spatially, socially, economically, and politically to register various forms of urban claims. As Bhan states, in conditions of a lack of affordable housing, people will "home" wherever they find space in the city.⁷⁶ The case of the footpath dwellers that I present here is a story of *homing* albeit in conditions of extreme precarity. The panacea for this housing crisis cannot be and should not be solved through stacking people in structures of 225-meter squares but in securing people's already settled habitus and by stopping forms of spatial and social incarceration. Going beyond urban binaries, the article calls for a re-examination of the slum as analytical category and for a turn toward more vernacular expressions and practices of dwelling.

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