

The Slum as Archive: revisiting the social city of the 1950s

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Today the 1950s has retreated in most debates as a lost decade, joining historical citations on economic policy and nation building. If in politics we have the making of linguistic states, in foreign policy we have the Bandung moment, itself produced as an unraveling that obtained in the India China conflict of 1962. National Planning dominated public debate, seemingly drowning out other strands. What about the city? Almost overwhelmingly Chandigarh stands in for what dominates the public and international references to India from the urban 1950s.

Alternatively, I want to suggest that there is a significant and useful urban archive from the 1950s, broadly referencing what can be called the 'social city.' Here the problem of home, urban identity, and a public sphere met concerns about sovereignty, and social justice in the city.

At the core of this debate is the citation of the slum, both as colonial legacy as well as an addressee of the demands for urban justice. As the quintessential urban archive, the slum produced new knowledges of survey and management, narratives of authenticity and despair, and the interface of the country and the city. There was also an important emerging public consensus against speculation and private control. This was also an international debate, where US urban planners and modernization theorists worked in Delhi and Calcutta funded by the Ford Foundation, producing massive projects of urban planning.

I will be moving through the discussion of slum as historical archive through three foci

- The diagnostic intervention: state knowledge and the public report
- Urban- Rural and the designation of the slum
- The aporias of the social city of the 1950s

A good part of the material comes from Delhi, a city that I am familiar with in research terms, I also address interface between culture and the city, my area of work.

Utopian prequels: Planning and Dreaming

From the 1940s, intellectual debates sought to intimate the urban future of the republic to be. The housing sub committee of the national Planning committee established in 1939 had already highlighted the depth of the urban crisis due to the presence of slum tenements, arguing strongly that public control of housing was the best way of dealing with slums, (p118, 1948), private builders could not adequately address the issue of a just urban order due to tendencies towards speculation. It was however, in the journal MARG that images of a new urban order, best found an early articulation through a

cosmopolitan lens. MARG's editor Mulk Raj Anand was at the forefront of pioneering these discussions, notably Anand was in conversation and dialogue with Bombay's intellectuals. Cosmopolitan at the outset MARG included in its first editorial board architects and art critics like Otto Koenigsberger (The German exile who was later involved in the design of Bhubaneswar) as well as Herman Goetz (also a German émigré, director of the Baroda Art Museum). India's cities have become "running sores," said MARG's opening editorial "Planning and Dreaming" what was needed was new vision to articulate an image of the urban future, through the signature of the Plan the quintessential model for a sovereign urban future.(Marg1946, p2) Anand suggested that there was little time to wait, "We have to be up and doing. As architects of the new India, this beautiful and glorious country of our dreams, we have to see for it that there are no loopholes in our plans for the future if we can possibly help it." (Marg,1946, p.5) At one level, MARG clearly saw itself as transmitting international modernism through a local lens for a new post-colonial modernity, and shaping the emerging sensibility of urban cosmopolitan bourgeois elites. But more important MARG provided an important argument for urban expertise – through planners, architects – through whose eyes the social would be seen and rearticulated.

The report: Sovereignty and the post independence shift

Among the great challenges of the early 1950s was to stake out a path that would break from the colonial pathologies of congestion, while at the same making the argument that a changed sovereignty would address the problem of urban inequality and the legacy of the slum. Delhi's case is particularly interesting both as colonial and postcolonial capital, the legacy of a crisis-ridden Old City, and the problem posed by Partition Migration. The Government commissioned Hume report of 1930 identified acute 'congestion' as a significant problem in the transformation of Delhi into a modern planned city. The metaphor of congested space with its catalogue of disease and fallen colonial subjects suggested a regulatory regime of planning and urban re-development. The Delhi Improvement Trust (DIT) was a result of this report.¹ The DIT tried various city expansion schemes, but was compromised by land speculation and little access of the new areas to the city's poor. The DIT's role came under massive criticism after Independence. A comprehensive critique of the DIT was undertaken by the post-independence G.D Birla Committee, that had been appointed to investigate the DIT's working and social mandate in 1950, and whose report was

released in 1951. The Birla report foregrounded the DIT's failure to provide a healthy civic environment in the city, and the unplanned growth of the city without effective zoning or a comprehensive Masterplan. Hindered by financial limits, speculative land transactions ('selling lands to the highest bidder without regard for its anti-social repercussions'), the Trust failed completely in housing the poor.²

This was more than an urban report, the stakes were higher. In its language, the Birla report was a diagnostic of the colonial city and its postcolonial shame – the slum. The slum imaged urban underdevelopment, - it constituted the crucial obstacle to a new independent urban order. While it acknowledged the demand for social justice, yet it was an anxious urbanism:

Bad environments affects us all alike; we are choked, each one of us, whether we realize it or not, by the meanness and squalor which stretches their tentacles upwards from the lives of our less fortunate citizens. The slums hold us back; while they exist, the roots of our civilization are rotten and our corporate existence as a people is diseased.³

The Birla committee composed of a leading industrialist and MPs, was to recommend a masterplan, private participation in social housing, and new urban body which became the DDA. The

The post independence urban report was both carefully diagnostic and programmatic, it had to address the white-hot debate on slums that was raging in the city. Almost as a counter to the official report, the civic organization Bharat Sevak Samaj issued a widely publicized report on Delhi's slums that influenced national debate. In that survey published in 1958, the Samaj showed a vastly higher estimate of Delhi's slum population, than that acknowledged by state reports. Criticising eviction and ad hoc removal, the report argued that slums were to be address in a humane manner – that included immediate measures addressing sanitation, removal of animals, and "regeneration of slum life." The survey painted a picture where congestion was less of an issue among slumdweller; the Samaj's argument was that slum justice would prepare the resident for proper citizenship. In a memorandum submitted to Nehru, the Samaj attacked the legacies of the DIT citing Geddes with approval, calling for a humane approach to the urban poor.⁴ The consensus for the capital at least, was towards state supported interventions, the mood was hostile towards speculation by private builders and colonial era DIT. The Birla report had already attacked the colonial urban body's link with private builders, in Parliament, MPs were remarkably articulate and responsive towards the urban poor, criticising demolitions and calling for social intervention.⁵

The consensus in reports and in Parliament slowly evolved towards urban planning, specifically a Masterplan. In the case of Delhi this process was dominated from 1956 by the Ford Foundation led team of US urbanists that collaborated with local planners to produce the 1962 masterplan for the city.

Slum as village community?

My colleague Ashis Nandy has famously argued that the relationship between village and city has been framed as a mythic journey in Indian culture: articulating the anxieties of modernity, its sense of loss and psychic injury. If the village once stood in for a critical repository of the past, it is the decline in the ability to imagine the village where Nandy argues the crisis of our postcolonial self is best articulated.⁶ In this mythic journey the slum, with its intimacies images the village-in-the city, a rural secret that has survived the heartlessness of the city, a “compassionate village.”

In the 1950s slum discourse moved otherwise. Combining modernization theory and planning taxonomies, the writers began to discover “rural” and un-urban traits in slum habitus, the battle against the slum became a battle against the village, and the making of a genuine urban citizen. Albert Mayer, the leader of the Ford planning team wrote in an unpublished note that the situation in Delhi’s slums was desperate. Along with overcrowding and congestion, Mayer added another, “village-like habits of in-migrants.”⁷ Un-urban practices included low-sanitation literacy, animal rearing and continuation of “noxious” industries and practices. Planning’s solution was surgical, the removal of persons practising village-like trades to “urban villages” *outside* the city. For the 1962 Masterplan village industries had no place in the city as they “cast an unhealthy influence on the urban setting.” The range was wide ranging – apart from diaries, tanneries, wood seasoning, and further expanded to artisan trades like pottery, zari and artistic metal ware in the Masterplan’s workstudies.⁸

In a publicity note on the promulgation of the Delhi Masterplan the newspaper Hindustan Times wrote “if Delhi is to be planned into a well integrated city, and to be maintained as such, it *needs inhabitants with a primarily urban psychology.*”⁹ The slum as deficient urbanism became the focus of a fairly ambitious drive by US modernization theorists in Delhi to set up community projects to produce secular neighborhoods uncontaminated by caste and community differences. The model moved towards behavior modification, and ‘face-to-face contact.’ This was liberalism’s modernizing model for the slum, free of colonial pathology and rural difference. A total of six Vikas Mandals (citizen

development councils) were initiated in six 'socially distinct' areas of the city ranging from refugee squatter settlement, slum settlements of respective Hindu and Muslim concentrations, settled working class areas, a low population refugee colony, and a mixed slum areas.¹⁰ These were scattered all over the city. Three vikas mandals evolved into larger neighborhood Vikas Parishads in Paharganj, Shora Kothi (Subzi Mandi) and Sadar Idgah. The organizers worked in group interview situations, with detailed question-answer sessions using 'change agent' technologies generated by consultants. Campaigns of sanitation, general cleanliness self-help, problem solving and 'civic action' were launched. In line with liberal egalitarian principles, women and lower castes were encouraged to join.¹¹

The modernization model sought to exorcise the slum-as-village: secular territory ranged against local politics and traditionalism would modernize colonial difference. Its failure, and the persistence of features adduced to the urban, is a pointer to our urban future.

The aporias of the social city

Revisiting the 1950s urban archive seeks to place post independence elite consensus in a larger force field when considering current radical shifts to neoliberal housing and 'slum-free' cities. The idea of justice mandated by the state was a core driver of the emerging urban consensus in the 1950s. Equally, this was an urbanism shot through with all the anxieties of postcolonial culture- the persistence of the rural in the slum/mohalla, or the inability to radically break with colonial slum pathologies of the earlier decade. At any rate, the wager on the state as the main guarantor of public housing was to fall through - significantly.

The core question that the 1950s raised remains unanswered, i.e how can we articulate a just city, with low cost public housing for the poor, unencumbered by speculation and developer capitalism?

¹ *Report on the Relief of Congestion in Delhi* Vols I and II, Government of India Press, Simla, 1936. For detailed discussions on the Delhi Improvement Trust. Also see Hosagrahar (2005), and Legg, (2007) and Sohan Lal,, "Improving the Delhi City, " Delhi Archives(DA) DA/CC/Home/1930/29B.

² See the *Report of the Delhi Improvement Trust Enquiry Committee*, Government of India, Delhi 1951.

³ Ibid p 15.

⁴ *Slums of Old Delhi, A Survey* by the Bharat Sevak Samaj, Atma Ram and Sons, Delhi 1958,

⁵ See *Lok Sabha Debates*, Vol VII, Part II, 24 August 1956, 4270-74

⁶ Nandy, A. (2001) *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: The Village and other odd ruins of self in the Indian imagination*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Albert Mayer, "Ch. 8 Slums and Congestion Rehabilitation Development (Urban Renewal) Preservation, Destruction, Re-creation," Albery Mayer Papers, University of Chicago, 21/11.

⁸ Masterplan of Delhi, 85, Workstudies, Volume 1, p 375.

⁹ 'Why a Master Plan for Delhi', *The Hindustan Times*, Sunday Magazine, Aug. 21, 1960, pp. 1-6, emphasis mine.

¹⁰ See the accounts in *Evaluation Study of the Formation and Working of Vikas Mandals*, Department of Urban Community Development, Municipal Corporation of Delhi, 1962; and Marshall Clinard, *Slums and Community Development*, The Free Press, New York, 1966.

¹¹ See Matthew Hull "Communities of Place, Not Kind: American Technologies of Neighborhood in Post-Colonial Delhi," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2011, 53(4): 757–790.

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