

Citizens and City Governance

Decline in Mumbai's Political Space

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Those who read Mumbai's Dailies would certainly get an impression that there is a tremendous growth in the State - Civil society interaction thus, a greater peoples participation in decisions and development programmes for Mumbai. But what is tragic is the fact that all this euphoria and participation is developing in a state of continuously decreasing political space in the city. Bombay as was then known was a zone of liberation. It was the nurturing ground for Dalit Movement in the 1930's. Trade unions and workers movement flourished influencing the city's culture. Sense of liberation, mobility and freedom were the hallmark of this city. But the unequal ways the city is now growing including in its administration is counter-productive. The poor are living and functioning in a more opposed way. There is a serious collapse in governance of the city. Inequity in space and housing in particular including land control is alarming.

Two examples are what I would like to cite to explain and expose this tragedy. These are not the only examples but are easy for me to explain since I am directly involved with them. Also through these two examples I will be able to exemplify the various issues that cause this decline. One, the ongoing 'citizens' movement that is gathering momentum in influencing decisions and developments and two, the much applauded environmental action group in dictating terms for environmental cause, are matters for public debate. Even though both these examples are ridden with anti - democratic whims that are clearly against the interest of the larger common good, they are important for discussion since they both have greatly influenced changes in various social, environmental and political conditions of this city thereby, affecting our lives. As I said earlier, the media too glorifies them. Moreover, the media consciously uses these thin stories to cover-up the glaring failure and insecurity of the ruling elite in their attempt to capture the city's resources and force large-scale displacements.

An emerging new trend in the city of a close alliance between the 'citizens' and the environmental agents is disturbing too. New outfits of 'citizen' groups (representing small and exclusive groups of middle and upper classes) are constantly opposing the policies that the government is announcing or is desiring to formulate for the common good of our citizens at large. These exclusive groups and individuals continuously campaign in the press against the interests of the majority of our people, the working class and the poor. They even threaten the government when necessary for this reason by filing public interest litigation's in the Court of law. Courts too have in most instances upheld the demands of these exclusive elite groups as public opinion and in public interest. 'Citizens oppose slum-dwellers' is common media slang these days. This means that these groups possess exclusive right of citizenry while the majority people are subject to questions to their very right of existence, let alone their right to citizenship. Not surprisingly therefore most of the government policies and plans for the poor and the working class express a tone of pity and sympathy, particularly in matters relating to the housing question. Thus the very right to housing itself for the poor is questioned. These elite groups even question the elected representatives of their credibility when they truly represent the interests of the poor thus, sharpening the class conflict. What is particularly disturbing is that these groups given the slightest opportunity or chance tend to support fascist ideas and actions and propose anti-democratic means for implementing development programs. In the recent past many of such groups through a sustained campaign in the press opposed the policy of the government for the recognition of the resident poor in the city and for their right to rehabilitation in the event of their eviction from their present locations. 'The contemporary urban restructuring process of many cities in different countries is replete with such tensions reflecting the predicament of class struggles over control of space and built environment'. (Swapna Banerjee-Guha - 2002)

Today's popular environmental movements led by exclusive environmentalist agents are also blatantly against the interest of the majority people. Environmental concerns do not consider the issues of housing of the poor and the working class as an integral subject. These pseudo environmental movements have alienated the poor. The recent case of the brutal attack on over 400,000 slum dwellers residing for several years in the buffer zone of the Borivali

National Park and the demolition of their houses without consideration for rehabilitation first has exposed not only the upper class interest of the environmental movement but has also made the environmental movement unsustainable. How else can our forests be protected without involving people? Deployment of armed constabulary is counterproductive. Infact the poor and the working class are seen to be the principal cause of environmental destruction. The environmental movement fails to contribute to major debates on development policy and implementation programs. What is needed instead is that the environmental concern must be seen as an integral part of housing and development programmes, particularly in the urban context. The housing question would have to be at the core of environmental discussion thus, closely relating the environmental concerns to the needs of people and in the process forging an effective socio-environmental movement.

It is in vogue for these 'citizens' to cry for cutting down of employment and reducing expenditure in salaries. They are demanding a complete takeover of the government by private agencies. Thus, undermining the very process of democratic structures of elected governments. " City governance ought to be carried out by them and without the government " is their buzz word.

Also worrying is the growing nexus between the ' citizens' with the bureaucracy and even the judiciary. New weapons for forcible displacement are being manufactured. *Unlimited FSI, Transfer of Development Rights, Slum Redevelopment Schemes, scrapping of the Urban Land Ceiling Act* etc are just a few of the many examples. Under the guise of beautification the city is being further divided between the rich and the poor.

Co-existence of the poor and rich in the city is glossed over often by these groups as an outstanding example of the city's strength and success. The ghetozation in the 'City Within ' is seen as a positive state of co-existence of the two diverse and conflicting interests. That the poor are denied space and access to resources for their survival is being denied and that the ghetozation as a result of this extreme marginalisation is ignored, rather covered-up by the idea of "peaceful co-existence". Tolerance and hard realities of the poor is mis-interpreted as being an example for the energy and dynamism, that they possess. These are designs to blackout the extreme conditions and stresses that city's 80% and over people constantly live in without their choice.

City governance has always reflected this sensibility, thus, supporting programmes that seldom address, let alone benefit the larger interest. *Participation of the encroachers in even programs for them is for-out. The tragedy is that, most of these short-term demolition drives and violent attacks on the poor by the state is a cover-up of the utter failure in planning for the city, in all aspects of development. City governance has to first address the issues concerning planning and development of the city. 'It is consistently seen that ideology, armed with power, goes on to create patterns of domination and repression in cities that get articulated in the city space depending on the respective socio- economic and political set-ups. In many such cities power gets expressed largely through its economic parameters and used repressively to support and intensify class divisions and thereby appropriate space'.* (Cuthbert 1991)