

Environmental Justice Struggles and Neoliberal Intervention in Access to Sustainable Housing of Marginalised Communities: A Study of Mumbai's Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy

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1 Introduction

This study examines the impact of resettlement on Mumbai's marginalised communities, with a focus on Muslim communities and Dalits (Scheduled Caste). Each year, various infrastructure projects are undertaken to promote the city's development and beautification. However, during these projects, the homes of marginalised communities are demolished. This leads to displacement, with most affected communities resettling 30–40 km away from their original locations, which disrupts their daily lives, livelihoods, and other aspects (Bhan 2009, 2014, Sikka 2020).

Several studies have analysed the impact of slum rehabilitation and resettlement on communities. Still, the issue remains under-researched from the perspectives of gender and marginalised groups (Ayyar & Khandare 2007, Ayyar 2013, Contractor 2008, Doshi 2019, Jatkar 2024, Hazarika 2023, Parwez 2024).

Development-related displacement increasingly affects the urban poor. According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, approximately 400,000 slum dwellers in Mumbai have been displaced since November 2004 (Contractor 2008: p. 153).

There is no doubt that for urban development, city expansion, and economic growth, it is necessary to focus on roads, highways, shopping malls, cultural institutions, playgrounds, city beautification, and environmental conservation. However, it is equally important to develop this infrastructure while also considering the needs of slum residents and marginalised communities. Often, these families' homes are displaced and evicted during the construction of these projects (Ghosh 2017). The displaced settlers are primarily located approximately 25–30 km from the city centre and live in crowded housing with limited job opportunities, inadequate education, and a lack of amenities (Shaw & Saharan 2019).

Marginalised communities in India, mainly SCs (Scheduled Castes) and STs (Scheduled Tribes), are situated near heavy industry sites and major accident hazard zones. Prominent examples across the state include Ahmedabad in Gujarat, Mumbai in Maharashtra, Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, Bangalore in Karnataka, Chennai in Tamil Nadu, and Hyderabad in Telangana, among others (Ayyar 2013, Jonnalagadda 2023, Chu & Michael 2019, Chakraborty & Basu 2022, Konda 2020, Shaban & Aboli 2021, Bhimraj 2020, Vakulabharanam & Motiram 2023, Jha 2023).

Caste-based eviction and caste inequalities related to housing space and infrastructure in urban India are not new. Slum Rehabilitation and the challenges faced by the Dalit community are exemplified by their continued exclusion from access to sustainable housing and basic amenities, as well as by caste-based discrimination in cities (Waghmore & Contractor 2015, Ranganathan 2022b,a, Upadhyaya & Rao 2023).

The built environment is closely linked to human social and personal lives. Suitable and sustainable housing, along with open spaces for social interaction with family, friends, partners, and children, play a crucial role. In addition to women's social interactions, security and socio-cultural factors play significant roles (Mouratidis 2018, Vaid 2024). However, this aspect of the slum rehabilitation housing policy and its implementation remains under-researched. Research on Slum Rehabilitation Housing and its effects on the physical and mental health of re-housed communities remains limited (Vaid & Evans 2017). Additionally, health-related quality of life in slum dwellings within slum rehabilitation housing remains insufficiently researched (Evans 2003, Bardhan et al. 2015, Vaid & Evans 2017, Sarkar & Bardhan 2020, Pardeshi et al. 2020, Vaid 2021, 2023).

Extensive literature has examined the growth, risks, health impacts, and environmental hazards associated with the formation of informal settlements in cities and other urban areas. However, there are still gaps in understanding the daily environmental challenges faced by informal settlement communities and the environmental justice issues present in these habitats (Kekana et al. 2023: p. 3711). Poor housing conditions directly affect residents' mental and physical health, which further impacts their livelihoods, living conditions, and children's education, creating a vicious cycle. In these communities, the highest proportion of people belongs to marginalised groups. Tacoli & Satterthwaite (2013) and Sharma & Jothiprakash (2022) elucidated the challenges faced by women in urban resettlement colonies. These challenges include livelihood struggles, environmental hazards, climate change impacts, and poor access to water, sanitation, and other basic services, which severely affect the health of women slum dwellers.

2 Research Methodology

This study draws on secondary literature and qualitative ethnographic fieldwork conducted from January 2025 to June 2025, building on a pilot study carried out between September 2024 and December 2024. Through this, I gained an understanding of the impact of displacement and eviction on the daily struggles of Mumbai's slum dwellers and migrant labourers in resettlement colonies, with a focus on livelihoods, health, and infrastructure challenges—the study centres on marginalised communities in India, specifically Dalits (Scheduled Castes) and Muslim communities. I employed a case study approach to examine three different sites for my research. The data collection tools included:

1. in-depth interviews,
2. participant observation, and
3. a photographic field survey.

All participants were pre-categorised as state and non-state actors and were purposefully selected. Consequently, I employed purposive sampling in my study, yielding a total of 70 samples.

3 Results

Based on primary data collection and interviews with slum-rehabilitated communities from marginalised sections, it has been observed that after rehabilitation and resettlement, these communities face more crises due to relocation from the city's central periphery to the outskirts around chemical factories, industrial areas, and nearby dumping grounds, which are not suitable for human living. Furthermore, poor infrastructure, congested housing, compact building designs, and a lack of green space make the resettlement socially and environmentally unsustainable. Due to relocation and resettlement, 1) jobs/livelihoods, 2) health, and 3) education were most affected among the slum dwellers.

While interviewing NGOs, social activists, and planners, it has been observed that poor urban planning, lack of community participation, increased involvement of developers, and a focus on the quantity rather than the quality of rehabilitation housing have caused segregation of the rich on one side of the city and the poor on the other. This results in socio-spatial segregation and environmental injustice among marginalised communities during rehabilitation and resettlement.

On the other hand, during interviews with government officials, it has been observed that the government acts as a mediator between politicians and builders, serving as a planner. All decision-making authority for policy changes has been delegated to politicians. Builders are entirely responsible for the development of construction projects. As a result, this affects the policy's actual objectives, delays the project, and leads to poor construction quality. Hazardous sites were selected for resettlement. However, despite these shortcomings in decentralisation, hierarchy, and coordination among parastatal government bodies, politicians, builders, and the government, they are fully accountable for the poor implementation of slum rehabilitation housing.

4 Conclusion and Discussion

Sustainable housing for marginalised communities is one of the most urgent needs in this era of climate change and urbanisation. However, governments and politicians in cities such as Mumbai are expanding the real estate market and beautifying the city at the expense of land owned by informal settlers. In return, they provide congested, poor-quality slum rehabilitation housing to slum dwellers in the city's poorest areas. Additionally, forming social movements against the government's discriminatory housing policies and halting evictions

of marginalised communities for city beautification and infrastructural development are key to strengthening these communities.

Therefore, focusing on participatory planning, capacity-building workshops, and the involvement of marginalised communities is one of the most crucial aspects of urban housing and its development. Furthermore, emphasising sustainability in slum upgrade housing is very important, with a key focus on 1) Environmental Sustainability, 2) Social Sustainability, and 3) Financial Sustainability. Planning for sustainability should consider five dimensions: a) the preservation of physical benefits; b) the training and coaching of communities to promote durable social development; c) the economic growth of the locality, aiming for self-sufficiency; d) the enhancement of the budget; e) the environmental compatibility of all works and initiatives. This means that, for slum upgradation programs, it is necessary to focus on socio-cultural balance and sustainability. Infrastructure development and benefits, financial sustainability, accountability, and environmental sustainability are key considerations in the sustainability of slum upgradation (Fuentes 2019: p. 111).

In detail:

1. Integrating social sustainability—such as women's safety, ethnic and religious cultural aspects and community well-being—into housing design and evaluation.
2. Participatory planning involves ensuring that affected communities have decision-making power in site selection and project design.
3. Considering public health of the community as a priority, Environmental assessment and zoning, prohibiting relocation to polluted or industrial areas.
4. Enhancing connectivity between resettlement colonies and the urban core through transport, education, and health infrastructure.
5. To focus on the green built environment, open spaces, and surrounding areas while constructing public housing for Mumbai's slums.
6. To emphasise a self-governed, self-financed community housing model that can be established through community funding and a cooperative housing society. A self-governed and self-financed housing approach will help create socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable housing for Mumbai's marginalised groups. Self-governed housing model implemented between 1977 and 1997 under the sites and services scheme

funded by the World Bank in Mumbai, which has had a lasting impact on Mumbai's sustainable housing (Patel 2015, Owens et al. 2018, Nair & Lahoti 2019, Testi 2023).

7. Vary the Models of Rehabilitation and Funding. To promote the use of alternative models that go beyond Public-Private Partnership (PPP) models led solely by developers, support government-led projects in less profitable areas where private developers have little interest and endorse self-redevelopment by slum-dweller communities with government assistance. Advocate for incremental housing policies that enable slum areas to be improved gradually by residents investing in their homes after securing land tenure, instead of relying solely on extensive, top-down demolition and reconstruction. Utilise land pooling and readjustment mechanisms by adopting plans like Ahmedabad's Town Planning Scheme (TPS) to acquire strategically located public land within city limits for affordable housing, thereby reducing the need to relocate people from the outskirts away from their livelihoods.

By reconceptualising resettlement as an issue of justice rather than charity, Mumbai can align its housing policies with SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, ensuring that urban housing transformation benefits the most vulnerable populations. The experiences of marginalised Dalit and Muslim communities in Mumbai underscore that inclusive urbanism must commence with acknowledging their entitlement not only to shelter but to the city.

Finally, to adopt successful public housing model strategies from countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong, it is crucial to implement effective housing programs for Mumbai's urban informal settlers (Lin-Heng 2020). Furthermore, Lin-Heng (2020), Di Mauro (2018), and Hanapi et al. (2023) while discussing the Singapore housing model's success story, mentioned that the government's focus and transparency, along with its willingness to provide good-quality, affordable housing at a low price, have enabled it to cater to low-income families, youngsters, people of different ethnicities, elderly couples, young couples, single individuals, and families. Indeed, Singapore's successful housing program has served as a model for both developed and developing countries. Alongside affordable housing, the government also focused on sustainable housing management and related services, including green spaces, green commuting, environmental management, waste management, water conservation, and energy efficiency. These are the various aspects considered when implementing the housing program.

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