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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

Slum Futures - Transcript

COMMENTATOR (COMM): Yeh heh Bombay meri jaan. . .

This is Bombay my friend, the city of dreams and silver screens. Bombay --now known as Mumbai --is also India's city of gold, its financial capital. Like a magnet, it draws in people from all over the country. But behind the glitz, glamour and the hype lurks a different reality --a city landscape dominated by massive, sprawling slums --some of the biggest in the world. According to the city housing authority, eight million out of the twelve million people in Mumbai live in the slums. And Mumbai is not alone. Slums are a global problem. They are home to one billion people. UN Habitat predicts that by 2030, one in every three people in the world could be living in a slum. The impact of slums in the future is going to be hard to ignore.

Early morning in south Mumbai and Sagira, who came to the city 32 years ago, is already at work making quilts. Her sons wash carpets, her nephew works in a clothing factory, her niece is a domestic servant. This hut on the pavement is her home, it's less than fifty square feet. Sixteen members of her family live in this space.

SAGIRA: People come to Bombay only when they have problems in their village. When I came here, there were no huts on the pavements. Everyone had their beddings spread around and they'd live on the streets. That's what I did too.

COMM: Migration and slums are not new to Mumbai. When India gained independence in 1947 only five per cent of Mumbai's population lived in slums. Today it's sixty per cent. They settled where they could. On land owned by the government, Mumbai municipality, the railways and on private land. The authority responsible for Mumbai's slums is the Maharashtra state housing authority. Their attempts to get rid of the slums have failed and the infrastructure is almost at breaking point. But one of Bollywood's biggest stars, who's been involved with the slums for years, says the city simply wouldn't function without the slum dwellers.

SHABANA AZMI, Actress and activist: Are we talking about 60% of the population that provide all the services in the city; from the boy who brings in your milk, to your newspaper vendor, to the maid who works in your house to the driver who takes you to work to the people who works in your factories, to the clerk in the

bank, to the municipal corporations, schools, colleges, these people live in the slums. They are the working people in Bombay, if they said Halt, Bombay would come to a grinding halt.

COMM: Sagira's stretch of pavement has almost no amenities. Her water comes from an illegal connection, she has no electricity and it costs her two cents to use the municipal toilets. Mumbai's efforts to provide more than a million homes has made the city an important experiment in slum rehabilitation and up-grading. But it could take years to solve. In the meantime the key issue is still to establish basic rights.

SHEELA PATEL, Director, SPARC: The issue of land tenure is very important because it represents the security of having an address. Unless there is some understanding of secure tenure, municipalities don't make any investments in terms of providing water, sanitation, drainage and sewage.

ANNA TIBAIJUKA, Executive Director, UN-Habitat: Security of tenure is so central because you see, security is the basis for everything else. When people feel insecure, definitely it becomes very difficult to have a very productive or a peaceful person who does not know what tomorrow will bring. It brings uncertainty, irritation and as I said before, sometimes, social tension and conflicts.

COMM: Just half an hour's train ride from Sagira's home is Gondhawali. Residents here have water and electricity but share communal toilets. This is where Mahadev, a newly qualified lawyer, lives with his family.

MAHADEV: When I moved into this hut, it was a single room made of wood. It was not exactly liveable but I slowly worked on it and made it to what it is today. When I started living here, I decided to develop my career further. I thought, if people from states like UP, who are uneducated, end up studying and become lawyers, why not me? So I decided to study further.

P K DAS, Architect and Town Planner: Slum is not some object, slum is a make up of people and Bombay slums has a people of whole variety. I know examples where professionals including architects who live in slums, there are engineers who live in slums, there are police who live in slums, municipal officials who live in slums. So it's not a single sort anonymous hole and that must be clarified.

COMM: Mumbai is one of the twenty most expensive cities in the world for property. Only a handful can afford the prices. The poor --and even the middle classes --have no choice but to move to slums. Even though most slums are illegal, the slum dwellers buy, sell and rent their homes just like on the open market. Sixteen years ago Mahadev bought his slum home for around \$4000 --today it would cost six times as much.

Dharavi, one of Asia's largest slums, covers less than two square kilometres. Now it's home to more than half a million people. It's a slum built on sweat and struggle against a lawless background.

KALPANA SHARMA, Author of 'Rediscovering Dharavi': Corruption has been very central to the growth of slums in different ways, slums come up on a vacant piece of land and not spontaneously because some enterprising individual, a dada manages to actually seize a vacant land, mark out plots and then more or less sell them to the slum dwellers, in the sense that he extracts money from poor people so that they can park themselves on this vacant piece of land and they have to continue to pay their protector so that they will not be evicted and to ensure that they are not evicted this dada in turn either has to pay the local corporator or the ward officer or somebody higher up.

COMM: The authority in charge of rehabilitating Mumbai's slums admits that in the past the city's housing policy has failed to provide for those most in need.

UJJWAL UKE, Chief Executive of the Slum Rehabilitation Authority:

The income levels being what they are the city has failed to provide adequate and affordable housing for these people and slums have emerged as an innovative solution. People have themselves constructed their house because affordable housing was not available while the city has been beckoning people, it requires these people, the city has been paying them the wages from which he has to make ends meet.

COMM: The state government also accepts that over the years promises to rehabilitate the city's slums have not been kept.

SANJAY UBALE, Secretary, Special Projects, Government of Maharashtra:

I think when the promises were made if you remember the property markets were extremely buoyant in the sense that the property prices were extremely high so the developers felt that they will be able to not only meet the cost but that they will be able to raise sufficient money to develop the areas. Thereafter there has been a slump in the property markets, so therefore it's not as lucrative as it was from the time the promise was made.

COMM: Businessman Vijay didn't wait to be re-housed. Two years ago, he moved out of the slum. His is a rags to riches story. Thirty years ago his family arrived with almost nothing --now they run two shops, a telephone booth and also supply his old slum with cable TV.

VIJAY: Since I had spent my entire childhood in the slum I knew about everyone's struggle so I wanted to ensure that nobody's home gets snatched away from them, so it is because of this that I got involved.

COMM: Along with Mahadev, Vijay is now on a committee to get his old slum re-developed.

Coming up in Part 2 we look at the families who've been stranded in a slum development where the builder has failed to finish the job.

PART 2

COMM: Mumbai has some of the biggest slums in the world. It's where 8 million of the city's 12 million people live. One champion of slum dwellers is Jokin Arputham. Back in the 1960s he was one of the first to get slum dwellers organised.

JOKIN ARPUTHAM, President, Slum Dwellers International: Who built the city? Is anyone middle classes come and say I built the building? Any middle class come and say I built the sewerage system of Bombay? No, complete sewer system, roads, buildings, and your apartment where you live this all built by whom?

COMM: But the slum dwellers do have some power. They are the largest block of votes in Mumbai and their biggest success came four years ago. In 2001 the state government passed a law saying slum dwellers who registered before 1995 would not be evicted and would have free housing. The scheme is financed through deals with the builders.

SANJAY UBHALE: The slum dwellers are given free houses in the same area and in order to finance that there is a certain element of 'free sale' component that means you can sell a part of the tenements that you construct over there to anybody at a market price and thereby cross subsidize the cost of construction for the slum dwellers.

COMM: For Safiya being moved to free housing was a mixed blessing. She moved from the railway tracks to a new block. But she didn't know she would be living on the seventh floor. The residents can't afford to keep the lift going and at the moment they have no water supply. Safiya has to carry water up seven flights and to make matters worse, she has just had a stomach operation.

SAFIYA: I have only one thing to tell the government --either start the lift or at least solve our water problem. I am helpless. I cannot bring water. Or else at least start the lift. I will be able to use the lift to bring water. The government should do at least one of the two jobs.

COMM: These flats might be free but maintaining them is costly. Many residents simply can't afford it.

SANJAY UBHALE: If you look at the labor markets, where the wages that most people earn are so low that even when they move into formal settlements their

wages are not sufficient to maintain their formal settlements so there is a sort of a mismatch over there. In order to transform the city, the incomes of individuals and poverty issues will have to be tackled.

COMM: With more than eight hundred thousand people waiting for free housing -- there's an urgent need to find new ways of paying for it. One expert says working with the private sector is not always the ideal solution.

P K DAS, Architect, Housing Activist: The government has not been successful in administering, in implementing schemes that are of social interests. It has failed because of its own bureaucratic failures, of corruptions, of various other issues - of lack of will to actually provide and promote schemes of social interests. But that's on one side. But on the other side there is a continuous pressure of the market of this policy of privatization, under the guise of privatization the government is shirking its own responsibility. It's not that it does not have the will, the government's will is misplaced will, its will is to promote the market, its will is to push the privatization policy at the cost of social development.

COMM: But the state housing authority claim they do have the political will to find solutions, what they lack is the finance.

UJJWAL UKE, CEO of the Slum Rehabilitation Authority: You see before the SRA started the projections were political, they were promises. While working you realize the greatest hurdle you have is the availability of finance, you will have projects coming up only in the place where an investor knows that he is going to double or make one and half times the money he is going to put in, because it's a private sector driven scheme. What now with the availability of finance coming up through the National Housing Bank, I am trying to make it away from the developer towards the slum dweller and toward the NGO, where instead of the focus is on the most profitable area, the focus shifts dramatically all over the city, so wherever your slum is you can build up your house, that is the kind of concept I am now trying to put in.

COMM: But the Slum Rehabilitation Authority faces problems. They have to deal with cases like Chitra who is not sure if she has the paperwork to prove she is eligible for free housing. Chitra is stranded in a re-development where the builder failed to finish the job. All the slum housings around her have been demolished. She - and thirty other families --are trying to find out what's going to happen to them.

CHITRA: I went to get the list of people who are going to get flats in the building. If we get the list, at least we will know that we are going to get re-housed.

UMA, Chitra's neighbour: If we are eligible, they should tell us or at least our lawyer. The collector tells us to move since the developer already has agreement from 70% of the residents.

COMM: This is a transit camp, where slum dwellers are moved before they get better homes. They've been here for over a year. And there's still no sign of their homes being constructed. Chitra and her neighbours could go to the camp but they're even worse than the slums.

AARUN RENUKE, another neighbour: The entire transit camp has only one electric meter and the bill is now eleven thousand dollars. The bill has not been paid. Now, the power will be cut.

COMM: The authorities accept it's not always straightforward when private companies are allowed to develop the slums.

SANJAY UBHALE: In one sense there is a little bit of risk involved where you have to give the private sector a free hand in doing that, there could be some mismanagement of this programme or some people would probably like to engineer it to their own benefits. So that extent the Slum Rehabilitation Authority has to play a much more active role in being vigilant to see that nobody takes advantage of this. Fortunately we also have the media which is extremely vigilant, we have the NGOs which in Mumbai are extremely dominant in their presence so it's not very easy for anyone to just get away by manipulating the system, though of course I won't totally rule out the possibility of such things happening.

COMM: The most successful rehabilitation schemes are those where the communities themselves have been involved in the design and building. Another important initiative has been the saving schemes, set up by women slum dwellers. According to Jokin Arputham, this is a first step to a better future.

JOKIN ARPUTHAM: Saving is very important, this is because the minute people know they should take control of their money then they will know how to take control of political decisions how to control on their social decision-making. So once people know how to manage their money they can manage everything.

COMM: The state government wants to put Mumbai on the international stage and can even see a day when slums go completely.

SANJAY UBHALE: If we are looking at Mumbai to be a world-class city and a world class city cannot really have slums, if you try and define it. Then we are looking at 13 years or so. I would say by another 10-12 years' time is what we should look at.

COMM: The Mumbai experiment is being watched closely by other international cities. Sikhule Nkhoma, from the slum communities of Malawi's capital, Lilongwe is in Mumbai along with Seymour Bedderson, a government official from South Africa.

SIKHUILE NKHOMA, Lilongwe Slum Communities: The major difference is just that you in India, or maybe in Malawi, the basic issue is that the poor are being denied their rights of basic services by both governments whether in South Africa in Malawi or India. So it's so similar. The scale is different; we are talking of thousands in Lilongwe and millions in Mumbai.

COMM: There is a long way to go before the one billion who live in the slums all get better housing. UN-Habitat has, however, set itself an international agenda. One of the Millennium Development Goals is to significantly improve the lives of a hundred million slum dwellers by the year 2020.

ANNA TIBAIJUKA, UN-Habitat: Actually, the problem is not the money, the problem is the political will to do something, awareness because there is a lot of money in the world that is sitting idle and as I have already said, we are not basically talking about hand outs or charity. It is a question of changing our mind sets, believing in these people, seeing them differently and knowing that if the situations of slum dwellers improve, we shall all be better off. So even self-interest if nothing else.

COMM: After thirty-two years of living on the pavements, Sagira's Mumbai dream is finally taking shape.

SAGIRA: Where do you want to sleep? Over here? Up there, your parents are going to sleep!

COMM: This will be her new world -- a water supply, a toilet and more space. This four-story building will house her and all the people who lived on her stretch of pavement. For some the future is, at last, a move away from the slums.

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