The City as a Place of Comparisons: Aspirations, Difference and Evictions in postcolonial Mumbai

Gayatri A. Menon

Azim Premji University, Bangalore, India. gayatri.menon@apu.edu.in

The slums of Mumbai are teeming with evidence of the losing end of the comparisons that animated the development project in postcolonial India. The difference that has been produced by the incessant, compulsive comparisons animating the development and globalization projects has created extremely fraught political and physical conditions for the urban poor. Early attempts to establish the newly independent country as one among equals, via modernization initiatives like the Green Revolution and dam projects, rendered surplus sections of the rural poor who then found their way to cities like Mumbai and to their slums in order to survive. In Mumbai the fault-lines between citizen and squatter appeared as the city's elite compared itself first to Bangkok and then subsequently to Shanghai. To the elite, these aspirations to become Bangkok or Shanghai were stymied by the transgressive presence of slum-dwellers. To the urban poor, these elite comparisons and the aspirations they evoked to be some place else, entailed violent evictions and the destruction of their dwellings.

In this paper, drawing on fieldwork-based research, I propose to investigate comparison both as a spectral condition in which the urban poor dwell as well as a theoretical tool to understand the changing space and subject of the urban in postcolonial Mumbai. Frequent invocations of the terms 'citizen' and 'squatter' to distinguish the residents of the city and determine the rightful claimants of the space and subject of the public reveal the hard edge of difference-making, for these invocations are accompanied by demolition squads and eviction crews. For the urban poor, to live in a city where such comparisons - between citizen and squatter, between Hindu and Muslim, between Mumbai and Shanghai - animate its spatial politics is to live in 'anticipation of violence, ' to employ the term Jeganathan uses to describe Tamil subjectivity in strife-torn Sri Lanka. The increasingly exclusionary city in which they struggle to live, is a far cry from Young's (1990) normative ideal city life and of the city as a place that is accommodative of difference.

Far from abating the conflicts over the access to public space between the urban poor and the middle-class consumer citizen, the Indian state, like its counterparts elsewhere, has been a willing ally in the latter's efforts to re-make post-industrial Mumbai into an attractive destination for global finance and a fitting home for themselves, i.e the primary agents of the country's ascent as a globally recognized powerhouse, both parties driven by an eagerness to shed the image of India as the world's poorhouse. 'Beautifying' and 'cleaning' the city have provided the discursive framework for reconfiguring conceptualisation of 'the public,' and have entailed the eviction of the urban poor from the social and physical spaces of the city. It is a framework employed

by public officials and private entrepreneurs alike in order to craft a space and subject that could be a competitive player in the global economy, unsullied by its detritus. If emulating Bangkok provided the pretext for the demolitions of pavement dwellings in the 1980a, by 2000, emulating Shanghai fuelled middle-class revanchist ire against the urban poor and against any construction of 'the public' that grouped them, the face of 'Shining India,' with the impoverished bodies of the poor found squatting on the pavements and in the slums of the city.

In this paper I draw on a range of theoretical interventions of how we might account for difference, ranging from Ferguson's (1999) analysis of disconnection and the production of abjectivity in urban Zambia to McMichael's (1990) world-historically informed method of incorporated comparison that both emphasizes the relations that conjoin the phenomena being compared and focuses attention on how these relations might be productive of the differences being investigated. In doing so this paper will explore Mumbai as a place produced by, and generative of, the comparisons through which what it means to be urban gets imagined. By drawing both the spatial and temporal dimensions of comparison together in my investigation of how the urban poor are produced and of their changing fortunes, I hope to bring into focus what the postcolonial urban condition has to offer to our understanding of the politics and promise of comparison.