

COMMENTS ON NIJMAN'S 'A STUDY OF SPACE IN MUMBAI'S SLUMS'

KAVITA PANDIT

Department of Geography, University of Georgia, 210 Field St, Athens GA 30602, USA.

E-mail: Pandit@uga.edu

Received: August 2009; revised October 2009

ABSTRACT

This commentary on Nijman's presentation at the 100th anniversary celebration of *TESG* underlines how his study of the Mumbai slum reconciles the multiple dualisms that lie at the core of the study of economic and social geography. The dualisms that are identified are located in the personal impressions of the urban landscape, the supposed homogeneity of the informal settlements, and the assumed barriers between the informal and the formal economy. The paper argues the importance of adding a personal reflection on doing research in a slum environment.

Key words: Slum, dualism, informal settlements, economic activity, Mumbai, Dharavi

As a child, growing up in Mumbai in the 1960s, my impressions of Dharavi came only from the window of a car as we drove past the slum on our way to the gated office complex of the company where my father worked. I remember the odour of garbage and human waste that permeated the safe bubble of the car long before the slum came into view. As we came close, the ramshackle shanties and their residents were visible only through a smoky and dusty haze. To a child raised in more affluent parts of South Mumbai, the narrow, winding lanes leading to the interior of the slum represented mystery and even danger, entryways to a world that was in stark contrast to my own. Yet, even as a child, I could see that the picture was more complex: many of the tin and thatched roofs of the dwellings had TV antennae mounted on top, many of the laughing children walking along the alleys were neatly groomed and wearing school uniforms, and the hustle and bustle of daily life suggested vibrant economic activity. With these conflicting images, I struggled to imagine what daily life in the Dharavi slum must be like.

It was therefore with considerable personal interest that I read this most thoughtful and nuanced paper which paints a detailed picture of Dharavi's many communities (Nijman 2010). What was most remarkable to me was the extraordinary access Nijman was able to obtain into this 'city within a city'. Residents of slums and squatter settlements tend to be deeply suspicious of 'outsiders' and it is a testament to the relationships he built with the residents that he was given such a wide-ranging access into the heart of the slum. The description of Dharavi's neighbourhoods and the daily life of the residents is by itself an enormous contribution to our understanding of the nature and functioning of slums in Third World cities.

Nijman's paper succeeds in bridging many of the dualisms that tend to be associated with urbanisation in developing countries. One such dualism is that between the 'planned' and 'unplanned' city, namely, the idealised landscape mapped out by city planners and the shanty towns, slums and spontaneous settlements growing up in and around the planned city. Yet, as Nijman's paper shows, the two do

not exist in isolation to one another. In doing this he provides a concrete example of what [Appadurai \(2000\)](#) refers to as Mumbai's spectral housing situation: a housing shortage so severe that it is at the forefront of the consciousness of all Mumbai residents, from those living in penthouses to those sleeping on its streets. Nijman's paper further shatters the notion of the homogeneity inherent in prevailing conceptualisations of unplanned or informal settlements. The existence of multiple communities or neighbourhoods within the slum, some highly exclusive and even 'gated', points to the need to build more refined models of urban settlements in developing countries.

A second and closely related duality is that, between formal and informal sectors which became the subject of serious discussion in the 1970s (see [Hart 1973](#); [Bromley 1978](#)). The formal ('modern') sector was defined as comprising of large capital-intensive firms, with a high degree of regulation and significant barriers to entry while the informal ('traditional') sector comprised of less regulated, and more labour intensive enterprises characterised by greater ease of entry and the use of family labour. Early literature viewed the informal sector as an aberration to the 'normal' stages-of-growth model of economic development ([Chenery & Syrquin, 1975](#)) and one that exerted a drag on a country's economic growth. Much evidence has now accumulated to show that the informal economy is extremely vibrant and vertically integrated with the formal economy through supplier, subcontracting, and outsourcing arrangements (see for example, [Portes *et al.* 1989](#)). The case of Dharavi reinforces the deep connections between the informal economic activities taking place in Dharavi and the formal activities taking place in Mumbai's broader economy.

A third 'bridge' provided by Nijman's paper is that between the geography of informal settlements and that of informal economic activities. Unlike the Western 'ghetto' which is typically conceptualised as an area from which jobs have fled but residents cannot ([Marcuse 1997](#)) the Third World slum is built around the synergy between residential and economic functions. This realisation of connectedness between the economic and the social dimensions is also highlighted in [Druiven's \(2010\)](#)

call to highlight the livelihood strategy in the approach to the study of the slum. That brings into view how geographically distinct neighbourhoods within the slum are closely aligned with caste identities which, in turn, are defined by the source of economic livelihoods: the Kumbars are potters, the Charmakars are leather workers, the Kolis are fishermen, and so on. Nijman's paper reminds us that viewing informal housing apart from informal economic activity prevents us from seeing the rich intersections between the two.

As I contemplated the possible next steps for this research project, a few questions came to mind. Nijman has begun a provocative theoretical inquiry by applying Marcuse's typologies of segregation to the case of Dharavi. Clearly Dharavi does not fit neatly into Marcuse's conceptualisations. Might it be possible then to build an alternate framework for developing country contexts that captures the range of housing conditions such as those that [Appadurai \(2000\)](#) outlines? Such an alternate typology would need to draw from many of the nuanced understandings of economic and social interactions that Nijman has highlighted.

What would be the policy implications of such a framework or theorisation? Slum dwellers tend to be suspicious of externally-driven development efforts which historically have been focused on slum eradication. Yet if we begin to view the slum as a deeply interconnected part of the urban landscape might it lead to more innovative and inclusive processes to improve the quality of life of slum residents? And how can we best begin to assemble longitudinal data to assess changes in the quality of life of slum residents? Much of the prevailing scholarly literature on slums engages policy issues, particularly the tensions between state efforts at slum redevelopment/resettlement and grassroots opposition (see for example, [Patel & Arputham 2008](#)). By connecting his theoretical insights with the political and policy realities, Nijman would be making a valuable contribution to the literature.

Finally, I would urge Nijman to write a more personal reflection on his journey into the heart of Dharavi. It is rare for an outsider to be allowed such wide-ranging access and it would be fascinating to read about the relationships that permitted this. Further, visiting a slum can

be an intensely emotional experience – the sights, sounds and smells evoking a range of responses from pity and fear to admiration and a sense of upliftment. How did these responses influence Nijman's observations and the account in this paper? Such a self-reflective piece would be another important addition to the literature and another valuable glimpse into the complex place of contrasts and contradictions that is Dharavi.

REFERENCES

- APPADURAI, A. (2000), Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai. *Public Culture* 12, pp. 627–651.
- BROMLEY, R. (1978), Introduction – The Urban Informal Sector: Why is it Worth Discussing? *World Development* 6, pp. 1033–1039.
- CHENERY, H. & M. SYRQUIN (1975), *Patterns of Development, 1950–1970*. London: Oxford University Press.
- DRUIJVEN, P. (2010), From Slumdog to Mumbaikar: A Space Odyssey? Comments on Nijman's 'A Study of Space in Mumbai's Slums'. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 101, pp. 21–25.
- HART, K. (1973), Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 11, pp. 61–69.
- MARCUSE, P. (1997), The Enclave, the Citadel, and the Ghetto: What has Changed in the Post-Fordist US City. *Urban Affairs Review* 33, pp. 228–264.
- NIJMAN, J. (2010), A Study of Space in Mumbai's Slums. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 101, pp. 4–17.
- PATEL, S. & J. ARPUTHAM (2008), Plans for Dharavi: Negotiating a Reconciliation between a State-driven Market Redevelopment and Residents' Aspirations. *Environment and Urbanization* 20, pp. 255–273.
- PORTES, A., M. CASTELLS & L. BENTON, eds. (1989), *The Informal Economy: Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press.

Copyright of Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie (Journal of Economic & Social Geography) is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.