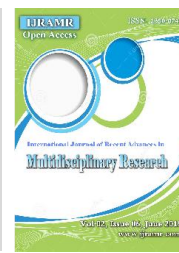


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Review Article

THE URBAN“INVISIBLES”: A SOCIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

The process of urbanization, as a necessity for societal change, is always thought as a prerequisite for increasing the levels of national production and per capita GDP. But the recurring fact remains that in developing and least developed nations, poverty in terms of income, living conditions and the ever-growing demands to house these immigrants are not being met and is still a persistent feature in this 21st century (Kundu, 2003). The two main objectives of the study are to analyze/ ascertain the socio-economic conditions of pavement dwellers living in squatter settlements, focusing on their education, occupation, income, hygiene and sanitation issues; secondly, and studying the status of women pavement dwellers living in squatter settlements regarding their decision-making power, financial security and how they cope with the constraints they face during bearing and rearing children in their mundane lives. A study was conducted on a sample of 30 pavement dwellers (both men and women) living in squatter settlements in Kamarhati municipality area of Kolkata. The collected data and the available secondary literature were used for analysis. The data revealed that majority of the pavement dwellers, living in squatter settlements, have primary education, temporary labour work with average monthly income of Rs.1500 for men and job of maid servants with average monthly income of Rs.2000 for women. For drinking, bathing and washing clothes and utensils, they utilize road-side taps and/or nearby ponds; and for sanitary usage temporary make-shift toilets on top of high-drains were used. Moreover data highlighted that, most working females who work, contributed to the family, although most of the family decisions were taken by male members. Daily constraints which women face during pregnancy and socialization of children are helped out by other nearby women pavement dwellers living in squatter settlements and this was considered as normal condition for them.

INTRODUCTION

The neo-liberal globalized economy has definitely facilitated the process of urbanization, with the increase in cost and standard of living in least developed and developing countries. But in spite of the economic growth and advancement of towns and cities, we also see the mushrooming of slum areas including ‘bustees’ and pavement dwellers in squatter settlements. According to Slum Area (Improvement and Clearance) Act of 1956 enacted by the Government of India, slums are those areas where buildings are unfit for human habitation. They are closely built unhygienic housing, traditionally originating from within the formal housing sector but deteriorating due to neglect, with high population density and extremely poor living conditions. The term ‘bustee’ is a distortion of the Bengali word ‘basati’ which means habitation or residence. Bustees are legally recognized settlements, having housing rights and cannot be evicted, and are predominant type of housing for the urban poor in West Bengal.

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Municipal Corporation provides basic amenities such as water, toilets and occasional electricity. But there is immense rise in illegal squatter settlements i.e. occupying private property which is not legally theirs and making impermanent shelter, along canals, railroad tracks, under flyovers or on pavements are very much visible amidst city life. According to Encyclopedia of the City (2005), these are “autonomous self-help housing developments unplanned and not adhering to legal regulations regarding land use and building codes, created by low and very low-income individuals and families”. The Municipality does not supply basic services and so they seek water and other resources available from their surrounding areas or from nearby bustees. They “live in anticipation, though of different degrees depending on settlement location and political affiliation, of their potential evictions” (Schenk, 2010). The reasons behind sprouting of pavement dwellers in squatter settlements within the center of cities in West Bengal are mainly 1) influx of refugees during formation of East Pakistan and later on to some extent during the formation of Bangladesh 2) migration from rural areas due to push factors to urban areas due to pull factors, attraction for new employment opportunities

and urban way of living their lives. 3) Growth of factories and industries and the need for cheap labour. According to Census 2011, India has a total slum population of 6, 54, 94, 604 out of which West Bengal has total slum population of 64, 18, 594. Total houseless population of India is 1773040 out of which 938348 is houseless urban population. In West Bengal total houseless population is 134040 out of which 1, 04,967 is urban houseless population. In Kamarhati municipality area the total slum population being 1, 16, 628 and in North 24 Parganas district where Kamarhati is included among others, the total houseless population is 9122 out of which 6659 is urban houseless population. UNDP report shows the progress in India's Human Development Index value from 0.583 in 2012 to 0.586 in 2013, with a rank of 135 among world countries, thus falling within the category of medium human development countries. But the problem of proper implementation of urban poverty alleviation programs still remains, which generally bypass the squatter settlement dwellers living on pavements. Thus it is a paradox that though they are highly visible amidst city-life, they are "invisibles" from two angles, firstly invisible as human beings, with their own history to tell like others and secondly treated as invisibles by the well-to-do urban people and the government, thinking them as "festering sores ruining the appearance of the city" (SPARC, 1985).

Objectives of the study

- 1) To analyze/ ascertain the socio-economic conditions of pavement dwellers living in squatter settlements, focusing on their education, occupation, income, hygiene and sanitation issues.
- 2) To study the status of women pavement dwellers living in squatter settlements regarding their decision-making power, financial security and how they cope with the constraints they face during bearing and rearing children in their mundane lives.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted on a sample of 30 pavement dwellers (both men and women) living in squatter settlements in Kamarhati municipality area of Kolkata, West Bengal. The collected data and the available secondary literature were used for analysis.

Main findings

- 1) The data revealed that majority of the pavement dwellers, living in squatter settlements are Bengali Muslims, have primary education, temporary labour work with average monthly income of Rs.1500 for men and job of maid servants with average monthly income of Rs.2000 for women. For drinking, bathing and washing clothes and utensils, they utilize road-side taps and/or nearby ponds; and for sanitary usage temporary make-shift toilets on top of high-drains were used.
- 2) Moreover data highlighted that, most working females who work, contributed to the family, although most of the family decisions were taken by male members. Daily constraints which women face during pregnancy and socialization of children are helped out by other nearby women pavement dwellers living in squatter settlements and this was considered as normal condition for them.

Theoretical perspectives

Robert Park, Ernest Burgess and Louis Wirth developed theories on Urban Sociology in Chicago School during the 1920s to 1940s. Park through his 'ecological approach' and Wirth through his 'urbanism as a way of life', thought that urbanism is an autonomous process (Giddens, 2001). As Park and Burgess (1921) in their urban ecology approach stated the process of 'invasion' and 'succession' of urban population in terms of their class status, to advantageous features of the environment, similarly squatter dwellers try to build their illegal shelter in advantageous areas of the cities, where their basic amenities can be easily available. And if their settlements are demolished or they are evicted from a locality, they tend to 'invade' other advantageous areas of the urban city (Giddens, 2001). Wirth (1938) stated on his thesis 'urbanism as a way of life' that how urban cities exert influence on the social life of man by controlling economic, political and cultural life of individuals living in urban cities, thus attracting people from rural areas and acting as a pull factor in the process of migration and gradually tries to get absorbed into the wider patterns of city life by mixing with large number of people with different cultural characteristics (Giddens, 2001).

Recent theories by David Harvey and Manuel Castells, both influenced by Marx, stress that urbanism should be analysed in relation to major patterns of political and economic change (Giddens, 2001). Harvey (1985) states that urbanism is a 'created environment', due to the spread of industrial capitalism. Industry blurs the division between city and countryside, since agriculture has also become mechanized and depends on price and profit like industrial work. This process helps in reducing the differences in modes of social life between urban and rural people. In modern urban cities, space is continuously restructured according to formation of large firms, factories and industries with proper research and development centers, control of government over land and industrial production and the activities of private investors, buying and selling houses and lands depending on financial climate changes (Giddens, 2001).

Castells (2010) also like Harvey said that cities can be understood if we analyze how spatial forms are created and transformed. The lay-out and architectural features of cities and neighbourhood show struggles and conflicts among different groups in society. He also states that people living in cities collectively consume all the products of modern industry with the help of schools, transport service and other leisure amenities. Taxation system influences and controls us like who can buy land where and who can build where etc. large corporations, banks and insurance companies provide capital for building projects, also have power and government agencies affecting many aspects of our city life by building roads, public housing etc. So he states that physical shape of a city is a product of both market forces and the power of the government. He also stresses the importance of underprivileged groups who continuously go through struggles to modify and adapt to urban living conditions and it has stimulated lot of urban social movements like improving housing conditions, protesting against air pollution, creating and securing parks and greenery and combating building developments that changes the nature of an area (Giddens, 2001).

Conclusion

The perennial growth of urban poor living in squatters on pavements will persist unless the huge difference in earning opportunities between cities and rural areas are bridged through proper rural development, only then urban poverty can be eradicated. Otherwise “the rural poor will continue to migrate and prick the conscience of the urban elite...and stake their claims on foot-paths, garbage vats and public parks”. It affects the pavement dwellers own physical quality of life and also the urban environment due to open defecation and littering of garbage (Jagannathan and Halder, 1989: 318). Thus according to Encyclopedia of Urban Planning (1974), though, the main task of urban planning is to clear and replace them with modern hygienic housing, but it is not always possible to rehouse the existing high density population of squatter dwellers in the same areas while also maintaining acceptable living conditions so clearance to some extent often involves policy of decentralization or dispersal. According to Encyclopedia of the City (2005), when conditions in slum areas degenerated to extreme levels that public and political opinions demanded immediate action, then many cities demolished slums.

But it was not a proper solution, as new slum areas would be formed in some other parts of the city; secondly, demolitions displaces families and restrict the availability and price of low skilled labour, essential for the labour-intensive economy of the third-world cities. It is also difficult to relocate the displaced families due to scarcity of cheap land and government’s budgetary constraints. So in recent times, rather than demolishing, government should join hands with private voluntary agencies in sustainable slum improvement, as a desirable intervention policy in the third-world cities, by taking financial aid from local, state, national and international sources like World Bank, UN Children’s Education Fund etc. Finally, a complex social issue such as the “invisibility” of the very much visible pavement dwellers living in squatter settlements, representing the urban poor, should be dealt with more in-depth empirical studies on large scale.

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