

Of Pots and Pumps: Attempting to Re-center Slum Struggles

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Note: The images that follow were all captured during fieldwork for my dissertation, which focuses on activists' struggles to secure water and sanitation in Mumbai's slums. The explanations beneath each image combine information gleaned from many interviews with activists, humanitarians and government official with insights from my ethnographic observation. My PhD research is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). I am grateful for the numerous activists, particularly those affiliated with the Ghar Bachao Ghar Banao Andolan (GBGBA) and Slum Community Action Foundation (SCAF), that helped me understand their work.

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Humanitarians and mainstream media have been criticized for photographing the poor as passive observers or pathetic spectacles of suffering (Torchin, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2006). These representations encourage distant spectators to feel as if they are responsible for saving victims from their exploitative circumstances (Sliwinski, 2011; Sontag, 2003; Boltanski, 1999). War, disaster, and poverty photography is geared toward distant spectators. The images chosen are those that appeal to (usually Western) audiences, rather than those that express what is happening on the ground. Victims are portrayed as threatening, passive, or desperate. Portrayals of slums in Mumbai, as of tragedies in other parts of India, have fallen prey to these tendencies.

Inadequate access to water and sanitation are defining of slums (UN Habitat, 2003). Battles between slum residents and law enforcement center on the various objects used to extract and transport water: booster pumps and plastic jugs being chief among them (Graham et.al., 2013). Latour (2004) and many others have argued for the centrality of objects in the formation of publics and politics. Appadurai (2013) notes that “things could usefully be regarded as having... intentionalities, projects and motives independent of their human handlers” (p. 257). These insights have much to offer development discourses, which often overlook the importance of objects in shaping majority-world contexts.

Drawing inspiration from this insight, the photographs in this essay focus on the objects that animate fights over water and sanitation in Mumbai’s slums. They depart from stereotypical photography of the poor centered on humans as subjects to foreground the quotidian, inanimate objects around which these struggles take place. This approach aims to tell the story of slums from a new perspective, beyond portrayals of abject helplessness and desperate victimhood. The goal is to re-center representation of the slums’ lack of basic amenities around what are usually considered the accoutrements of resource acquisition: pots, pumps, and toilet blocs. The hope is to inspire fresh insights and perspectives for development theorists and practitioners while challenging how “beneficiaries” are often portrayed.

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In many slums, water comes out of communal taps for only a couple of hours each day. These men are getting ready to fill containers to maximize efficiency when the water comes on. Slum families buy into a complex network of water brokers, who are the middlemen between the municipality and the slum's citizens.



In the street next to a parked car, containers wait to be filled with water. Their owners live in a South Mumbai slum nestled between high-rise apartment buildings in one of the wealthiest areas of the city. Families in the slum live in self-made housing, with a square footage roughly equal to that of the car standing next to their water receptacles.



A communal hose is used to fill metal and plastic containers with water for household use.



A bicycle is used to transport water to a local home.



A booster pump has been attached to this municipal water supply in the hopes of increasing flow. This is a common (illegal) practice in Mumbai that prompts authorities to crack down and periodically seize and destroy such devices. While this might disrupt water provision in the short-term, informal devices are invariably re-introduced.



Bore wells with hand pumps supplement the city's water supply. In many places the water is salty or brackish, and can't be used for consumption. People use it to bathe and wash their clothes. A shortage of consumable water means high levels of dehydration and likelihood of illness.



Water tankers, ubiquitous throughout the city, are expensive stopgap solutions for water shortages. Politicians sometimes sponsor their use in the hopes of swaying the powerful voting blocs comprised of the urban poor.



This communal toilet block sits outside a slum housing around 60,000 people. It was built 15 years ago and is the largest of three toilet blocks for the whole area to share. In total the area has around 30 communal toilets (a ratio of roughly 2000 people to a toilet). Many people resort to open defecation as a result of this shortage.



Another toilet block in the area has just a few stalls. In collaboration with friends and activists, local resident Vithal Chavan recently established a new NGO, Slum Community Action Foundation (SCAF), inspired by the need to raise funds and exert political pressure for more toilets. Women are disproportionately vulnerable to assault while urinating and defecating openly, and while using toilets at night. There are reports of women refusing food (especially during monsoons, when conditions are more treacherous) so as to avoid needing to use the facilities.



In this slum in Mumbai's suburbs, successful lobbying and community action supported by the *Ghar Bachao Ghar Banao Andolan (Save Homes, Build Homes Movement)* led to the construction of a network of individual water taps to supply dwellings.



Water flows out of a tap, one of many in a network which slum dwellers maintain on their own, independent of municipal support.



Neatly stacked metal water pots stand on a clean counter in a new building built under Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA)'s controversial housing scheme. The scheme is charged with facilitating corruption and strengthening the builder-politician nexus, further displacing Mumbai's poor. The owner of these pots represents a tiny percentage of Mumbai's slum dwellers that have been successfully re-housed through the SRA.

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