

## Event, Metaphor, Memory

### - An Inquiry into the 1986 Sanjay Gandhi Nagar Struggle

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#### Why *this* history?

I had visited the city of Mumbai on a couple of unmemorable occasions in the past. But my first extended visit to this city was to get admission into a post-graduate course here. Its brigade of known defenders had sworn by 'the spirit of the city'. I was excited by the prospect of living at a guest house at Cuffe Parade in south Mumbai. My Victorian sensibilities had me in awe of the colossal colonial structures. Even the neighbouring cafes and street shops of Colaba were a sheer delight. A close friend of my mother's was to take us out for dinner in what was to be yet another evening of indulgence in fine dining.

On our way from her house to the restaurant I noticed some small boats parked opposite her housing complex, surrounded by dilapidated housing. As every annoying tourist has to, I asked my family friend what that place was, and she informed me that it was a slum called Machhimar Nagar where members of the fishing community lived. She added that if it weren't for Shabana Azmi sitting on a hunger strike there, those slums would have been cleared out of sight.<sup>1</sup>

That comment stayed with me and the external contradictions between Machhimar Nagar and Bhagwat Park came to define the city of Mumbai in very many ways. Urban space had become synonymous with the space shared by those two neighbouring complexes. I had no idea about the hunger strike that my family friend had spoken of, and an inquiry into that hunger strike constituted an entry point into my interest surrounding the protest that followed the abolition of the Sanjay Gandhi Nagar slum in Colaba in 1986. As an event in itself, it is not very well documented, but vague recollections by other family friends and relatives in the city makes me believe that it lives on in popular memory, in many undocumented and perhaps distorted ways. Taking a cue from historian Shahid Amin's reconstruction of the 1922 Chauri Chaura incident, my aim is to examine the hunger strike as 'an event fixed in time' in 1986, 'and also as a metaphor gathering significances outside this time frame'.

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1 From a 1985 article in the Economic and Political Weekly authored by Gurbir Singh, I later learnt that the Machhimar Nagar struggle had nothing to do with Shabana Azmi. It was a struggle fought before the Sanjay Gandhi Nagar Movement snowballed, and was led by the Kohlis' local leader Bhai Bandarkar.

### **A basic overview of the protest:**

In March, 1986,<sup>2</sup> the Bombay Municipal Corporation demolished 400 hutments at Sanjay Gandhi Nagar located on Jagannath Bhosale Marg in Mumbai. Unwarned of the oncoming demolition, the slum dwellers were caught unawares. They lost several of their belongings and all construction



material they owned was taken away by the police and BMC in order to prevent them from reconstructing their homes at the same site. Left without a choice, approximately 350 families comprising 2000 people<sup>3</sup> were forced to reside on the footpath across the road. They received support in their ordeal from the Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti(NHSS). The NHSS was an umbrella

organization of nearly 26 mass organizations that had come together in 1982 to oppose the policy of slum demolition that had been adopted by the Mumbai government in 1981. The situation was a desperate one and widespread protest in the form of marches and rallies were launched in the months of March and April. The conditions grew worse and the danger of living on the footpath manifested itself in the death of two children, who had been run over by traffic. Their deaths along with the fear of the onslaught of the monsoon aggravated the situation, till it was decided at a meeting of the Samiti that three slum dwellers along with documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan would go on a hunger strike. The strike began at 10 am on 12th May, 1986. The next day, the fasters were unexpectedly joined by Shabana Azmi, who had been moved to action after watching Patwardhan's 1985 documentary film, 'Hamara Shahar'(Bombay Our City). After considerable struggle and deliberation, on 16th May, the strike was successfully ended, with the Chief Minister agreeing to the protestors' demand of allotting land to the slum dwellers for their rehabilitation.

2 According to Ruth Vanita's interview with Patwardhan in the 35th issue of the Manushi journal(1986) and an article published in the New Internationalist Magazine in Issue 240( May 5, 1997), the date of the demolition is 12th March, while according to official documents released by the Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti(NHSS) on its website, the date for the demolition is 13th March.

3 According to NHSS estimates

### **Locating the protest historically:**

I wish to locate this protest within the paradigm of slum demolitions and consequent housing struggles in India. The problem of housing for the urban poor in cities, particularly in Mumbai is not a new problem. Behram Mehta wrote about the issue of housing for the working classes in Bombay in 1940 itself, when he saw the solution lying in a two-pronged approach of more adequate economic return for labour, along with state intervention in housing schemes through the provision of capital, subsidies and loans.

Seventy six years later, the problem of housing for the urban poor in Mumbai and in the country at large continues, and has only worsened since. R.N. Sharma (2010) argues that rural-urban migration increased considerably in the 1970s, and this led to a proliferation of slums in the cities. The situation worsened in the 1980s, as the urban population grew considerably. The story of the beginning and growth of slum demolitions follows a timeline similar to that of proliferation. Neelima Risbud (2003) argues that the Bombay Municipal Corporation was empowered to clear slums by law as early as 1954. She points out that there was no significant clearance of slums until 1967, when the plan for developing Bombay was launched. From then on, while the policy of slum demolition was followed sincerely, that of rehabilitation and resettlement of slum dwellers was not. Consequently, struggles against these slum demolitions became more pronounced with the involvement of NGOs from '70s onwards. Amita Bhide (1998) argues that while fewer NGOs were involved in the early 70s; in the late 70s, many more NGOs got involved as housing became an important concern for them. It is keeping this larger prehistory in mind that I will analyze the 1986 demolition and protest.

## The lens through which I view the protest

Kaifi Azmi's 'Makan' <sup>4</sup>	Vilas Ghogre's 'Ek Katha Suno Re Logon' <sup>5</sup>
<p>'Aaj ki raat bahut garam hava chalti hai Aaj ki raat na footpath pe niind aayegi sab utho, main bhi uthon, tum bhi uthon, tum bhi uthon koi khidki isi divar men khul jaegi'</p>	<p>'Jab apna shaashan hoga Sab ko ghar ration hoga Duniya mazdoori ke bal par Mazdoor ka kaanoon hoga Nara lagao inquilab ka Tab hee mittegi burai <i>Yeh kab hoga bhai?</i> Kab hoga? Arre! Jab mazdoor ka raj hoga...'</p>
<p>'Tonight a searingly hot breeze is blowing, Tonight on this footpath there will be no sleep Come let us arise, you and I, and you too, and you A window in this wall will surely find an opening.'<sup>6</sup></p>	<p>'When the rule will be ours, There will be ration in every household. The world runs on the strength of labour, The law will be the labourers'. Shout slogans of revolution!</p>
	<p>Only then will evil end! <i>And when will this happen?</i>(another voice interjects) When? Arre! When the workers will rule...'<sup>7</sup></p>

4 Kaifi Azmi was a renowned Indian Urdu poet, who was a part of the Progressive Writers' Movement and a member of the Communist Party of India.

5 Vilas Ghogre was a Dalit poet-singer and activist. He killed himself to protest against the injustice of the Ramabai Dalit Massacre of 1997.

6 This extract from the English translation has been taken from Kaifi Azmi's official site-<http://www.azmikaifi.com/>

7 Due to lack of the availability of a translation, this portion of the song has been self translated. The song appears in the documentary film 'Humara Shahar'(Bombay, Our City) and is available on <https://soundcloud.com/kranti-conference/katha-suno-re-logon-vilas>.

Both Ghogre's revolutionary song and Kaifi's poem speak of a similar solution to a similar problem, although in different ways-Ghogre's narrative is experiential, while Kaifi's empathetic narrative is a call for revolution, wherein he seeks to identify with the cause of the worker who builds homes for the wealthy, while residing on the footpath himself. In my view, the narrative of experience is more important than the narrative of empathetic identification. But that in itself does not negate the importance of the latter. It is a very important narrative, for in it lies the ability to be able to surpass selfish concerns and fight for social justice. In it also lie the conflicting complications of locating one's power and privilege to fight for social justice in an unequal system that works in one's favour.

My college life entailed an initiation into the social sciences and student politics. Both required me to think of the unequal way in which the society around me is structured. As a student participating in student politics, I began by considering my own freedom to be my fundamental inalienable right that my college administration unabashedly curtailed. I would question those students who did not participate in protesting against the unfair measures of the authorities, but none the less grumbled about problems on a regular basis. As I dug deeper, I became acutely aware of my privilege to protest. I grew up immensely privileged, but in an environment that naturalised and invisibilized that privilege. It was in college that I began to question that privilege, and continually began to ask myself the same question in different ways-how could I accommodate that privilege with the need to fight for social justice?

It is this question that helps form the lens through which I will be reconstructing this incident. The voice of the slum dwellers is the most important one, and I must admit that those voices are inadequately represented in my reconstruction, for my entry point into this event and ways of analyzing it are shaped by the way activists who participated in this struggle look at this struggle and its larger ramifications. It is not the most important viewpoint, but it is the viewpoint that I identify most with.

Moreover, the power structures our society is embedded in makes the role of the middle class activist and a partnership between NGOs and slum dwellers considerably important in understanding the ways in which housing struggles in particular, and struggles for social justice at large operate.

## II-RECONSTRUCTING THE EVENT

### The cause of the protest

On 13th July, 1981, the Maharashtra Chief Minister C.R. Antulay, in a widely publicised announcement, declared that all pavement dwellers in Bombay would be forcibly evicted from the city and deported to their places of origin or to places outside the city. Ironically, the C.M.'s justification for this policy announcement was-“It is a very inhuman existence. These structures are flimsy and open to the elements. During the monsoon there is no way these people can live comfortably.”<sup>8</sup>



Consequently, on 21st July, 1981, the execution of the 'Operation Demolition' program was carried out, wherein thousands of pavement slum dwellers residing on Tulsi Pipe Road and other areas were forcibly put into trucks and dumped outside the city limits. From then onwards, the demolition of slums was adopted as a policy by the state government. It was as part of this drive

that the residents of Sanjay Gandhi Nagar had received demolition notices in November, 1985 and January, 1986. As a result, they approached the Housing Minister Dr. V. Subramaniam directly. They communicated their wish to form a cooperative society, and asked the minister for permission to either construct buildings on the land they occupied, or to be allocated alternate land for the construction of such buildings. Following this meeting, a survey was planned by the NHSS, but without any further communication, the government launched a surprise demolition of the slums in March. The demolition took place whilst many slum dwellers were away at work. While the strength of the slum was 2000, the demolition squad consisted of 500 uniformed men, who were protected by at a minimum of 8 trucks full of police personnel. Gurbir Singh recalls the suddenness and brutality of the demolition, wherein the demolition of a school in the slum started while children were in the school.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> As quoted by Ajith S. in his 2015 article in LiveLaw.in-<http://www.livelaw.in/re-reading-olga-tellis-and-ors-v-bombay-municipal-corporation-as-petitioner-completes-50-years-in-journalism/>

<sup>9</sup> This section has been constructed through corresponding narratives from the NHSS website, my telephonic interview with Gurbir Singh, Patwardhan's 1986 interview with Ruth Vanita for Manushi and a 1997 New Internationalist Magazine Article

### Examining the demolition of the Sanjay Gandhi Nagar slum in particular:

Gurbir Singh(1985) traces the history of the Sanjay Gandhi Nagar slum. It came up in 1976 on wasteland that was leased by the construction company, Engineering Construction Corporation, that was later to become a subsidiary of Larsen and Toubro. The land was leased to house construction workers from Karnataka who were building the Maharashtra Vidhan Bhavan and numerous other huge structures on Nariman Point. Though the lease expired in 1979, the workers stayed on. They got involved in other construction projects in the area. Soon, more immigrants from U.P. And Kerala began living in the slums. They mostly worked as hawkers and roadside sellers in the neighbourhood. Though a number of women worked as construction labourers, most of them worked as domestic workers in the economically well-off households of Colaba. The slum expanded and soon covered more than one hectare of land.

The slum had become conspicuous by its presence, and was proving to be an eyesore for many neighbouring residents of posh buildings. Gurbir Singh<sup>10</sup> argues that the many bureaucrats who resided in these buildings did not mind availing the services of maids, drivers and other help that came from these slums, but they wanted the slums themselves out of their sight. The hypocrisy and elitism of the privileged residents of these

buildings had been captured in Patwardhan's 1985 documentary film 'Hamara Shahar'. The juxtaposition of petty concerns raised at residential association meetings with the daily struggles of the slum dwellers to survive exposes the navel-gazing of the residents of these buildings. Consequently, Patwardhan in a 1986 interview with Manushi stated that the slums had been demolished 46 times since 1976, according to the government's own records. Gurbir Singh mentions how the Housing Minister C.V. Subramaniam, who lived in the neighbouring



building Sarang, had an especially important role to play in that particular surprise demolition. The problem of 'the bourgeois living across the road'<sup>11</sup> was accompanied by the lobbying of the builders. The builders had definite interests in acquiring that land, and Singh argues that the NHSS suspected that the burning of the slum in an earlier fire<sup>12</sup> was not a natural occurrence, but was deliberately orchestrated by builders. While Singh named the Bajaj Group of Builders, Patwardhan argued for a possible motivation coming from the Taj Group of Hotels that was building a hotel in the neighbourhood. Additionally, fire was being

10 In his telephonic interview with me

11 Quoting Gurbir Singh from my telephonic interview with him

12 I am unsure of whether the fire occurred in November 1985 or February, 1986, or on both these occasions. While official NHSS documents state that a fire took place in November, 1985, Patwardhan in a 1986 interview with Ruth Vanita in the Manushi journal, and a 1997 New Internationalist article on the Sanjay Gandhi Nagar debacle state that fire took place in February, 1986.

used as an easy method by the government to get rid of slums. The NHSS produced a paper, 'Why Are Slums Burning'<sup>13</sup> that Singh says was widely circulated in the media at the time, and was even taken up by the Legislative Assembly, which analyzed instances of the burning of 6-7 slums that took place around the same time. In this context, Singh argued that the demolition of Sanjay Gandhi Nagar was an effort by the government to get rid of an embarrassing situation-by carrying out a sudden demolition in a rather harsh way.

**The immediate events leading to the hunger strike:** Post the demolition, the slum dwellers began



residing on the footpath on the road opposite the site of their erstwhile slum. A journalist of the New Internationalist magazine recalls how the people carried painted placards in Hindi, Marathi and English on the footpath that summed up the 'epic story of urban development in India'-"No Jobs in Villages. No Shelter in Cities. Where Shall We Go?"<sup>14</sup> The slum dwellers did not limit their protest

to carrying placards. Regular protest marches, negotiations, and *gheraos* of public officers, from the collector to the housing minister, were carried out. They failed to produce the desired effect. On 1st April, it was decided that the slum dwellers would break through the barbed wire that now surrounded the site of their slum, and would try and build a symbolic hut there. Knowing that there would be police resistance, Patwardhan recalls that NHSS had called several eminent citizens like Om Puri, Vijay Tendulkar and Govind Nihalani to participate in the act of protest. At about 9 am, roughly 150 slum dwellers and their supporters stormed through the gate of the site of their former home. The police were armed with guns and *lathis*. The police threatened the people to vacate the site, but the protestors refused to negotiate till the gun-wielding policemen were withdrawn. This demand was met, but the threat of arrest on failure to vacate the site immediately loomed large. The protestors decided to court arrest without violence.

This was a significant event that received considerable media coverage. A minor concession was won-the Municipality announced that those who could prove that they had been living in the slum from 1980 onwards would be legible for re-housing. This was an empty concession though, because the proof of residence in the form of ration cards and other documents had been destroyed in the previous fires or demolition.<sup>15</sup>

13 Date of publication of the paper not found

14 The author of the news article 'The Fire, A Death And The Cooking Pots' is not identified in the online version of this article that was printed on 5th May, 1997 in Issue 204. (<https://newint.org/features/1997/05/05/fire/>)

15 As argued in the news article 'The Fire, A Death And The Cooking Pots' that was published on 5th May, 1997 in Issue



The people continued to live on the pavement. The situation worsened as the fear of the onset of the monsoon combined with the death of two children of Sanjay Gandhi Nagar, who were run over by traffic in early May. At a Samiti meeting, Patwardhan recalls that it was decided that three slum dwellers and he would go on a hunger strike. The three volunteers were Gurubai Koli, a domestic worker who was employed at Housing Secretary Afzalpulkar's house,

Hamza Alavi, the stepfather of one of the children killed, and K. Bhaskaran, a worker at the Sanjay Gandhi Nagar school that had been demolished. Patwardhan recalls that he had been selected because he had worked on his film in Sanjay Gandhi Nagar before its demolition, and it was hoped that his presence might help attract the necessary media attention. Gurbir Singh recalls that it was a desperate situation and the decision to go on strike was more spontaneous, rather than being a well deliberated one.

Accordingly, on 12th May, the four volunteers went on hunger strike. The next day they were unexpectedly joined by Shabana Azmi, who had been moved by the whole event, especially after watching Patwardhan's film, 'Humara Shahar'. Gurbir Singh recalls, "...And then, the movement kind of snowballed and became bigger and bigger, and the government had to come in and negotiate some kind of a rehabilitation package for these people."<sup>16</sup>

**Examining the course of the strike:** The hunger strike lasted for 6 days. The kind of public support that those on strike received was essential for enhancing the magnitude of the movement. Patwardhan recalled that during the strike they received support from many women's groups, civil liberties' organizations, slum dwellers' organizations and cultural groups. For instance, Chhinamul in Kolkata collected thumb impressions of 1,000 slum dwellers in a letter of support that they sent to the Maharashtra Chief Minister and Prime Minister. Additionally, Gurbir Singh argues that the mainstream media reportage was in their favour. As a result, there was tremendous pressure on the government.

On 15th May, the Housing Secretary Afzalpulkar met representatives of the strikers, and indicated that there was private trust owned land that was available for resettlement. However, the government wanted it to be a private deal between the trusts and the slum dwellers, and did not want to publicly

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204 of New Internationalist Magazine. (<https://newint.org/features/1997/05/05/fire/>)

16 Other than where cited otherwise, this section has been primarily reconstructed through my telephonic interview with Gurbir Singh and Patwardhan's 1986 interview with Ruth Vanita for Manushi.

appear to be playing a negotiating role. Patwardhan recalls that they refused to accept this settlement, which the government was keen on, so that no precedent of government mediation was set for other slum dwellers. Hence, a deadlock was reached and the strike continued into the fifth day, by which time the health of the strikers was deteriorating. A huge rally took place on the evening of 16th May, and a NHSS delegation along with film star Shashi Kapoor met the Chief Minister. The Chief Minister had changed his mind. He agreed to the condition that required the government to play a facilitating role in the negotiation of private land for rehabilitation. Patwardhan recalls that the hunger strike ended on that day, and the protest march turned into a victory parade. <sup>17</sup>

**The result of the hunger strike:** The immediate victory lay in the government promising to hand over private trust owned land for rehabilitation of the slum dwellers. Afzalpulkar negotiated the transfer of 3.5 acres of land in Dhindoshi, near Goregaon. Of this land, while 3 acres were to be transferred to the Sanjay Gandhi Rehavasi Sanghatna (the association of the Sanjay Gandhi Nagar residents that had been registered in April, 1982) for rehabilitation of the slum dwellers, 0.5 acres of land was to be transferred to the NHSS to develop facilities and 'a centre of advocacy for slum dwellers and housing rights'. The land was finally handed over in the year 1990-91. <sup>18</sup>

**The aftermath of the strike** Though the basic demand for land had been met, the process of making that land liveable was not an easy one. For about 4 years, the Dhindoshi plot remained vacant. Clearing the land was not an easy process. Gurbir Singh recalls, "...There were *daaru ka bhattis* (liquor stores) and all sorts of stuff that had to be cleared before the people could move. There were a lot of problems involved in the transfer of the people to that plot. There were *gundas* (goons) infesting it and people had grabbed portions of that plot also...cases of which are still going on by the way." Before the people could shift to the land plots, they had made the footpaths their home, and there was a massive demolition drive in December 1990, which negatively impacted them yet again. <sup>19</sup> Singh recalls that when they finally managed to shift to the plot, initially, they resided in their own ground plus one and ground plus mezzanine structures. In 2005, they negotiated a deal with a local builder, J.P. Infrastructure, promoted by Vijai Jain. In accordance with that deal, Singh confirms that a Slum Rehabilitation Authority project has been initiated. Three 20 storey buildings are still in the process of

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17 This section has been reconstructed from Patwardhan's interview with Manushi and my telephonic interview with Simpreet Singh.

18 This section draws from my telephonic interview with Gurbir Singh.

19 As per the [NHSS website](#)

getting constructed, of which 2 are rehabilitation towers, while one is a sale tower. Interestingly, the process of construction seems to have gone on over a considerably long period of time. A quick conversation with a senior Larsen and Toubro accountant<sup>20</sup> revealed that LnT completes its housing projects at an average of roughly two and a half to three years.

**Locating the protest in the 1980s:** Both Gurbir Singh and Patwardhan spoke of the era of the '80s as a period of increased social consciousness and social movements. In fact, Patwardhan even made a distinction between India of the '80s and India today-

"Middle class elite society, if anything, if you compare what the attitudes were in the '80s to what the attitudes are in 2016, I would say that the elite has become far more callous than it used to be. In the 80s, you could embarrass people. 'Humara Shahar' did embarrass people who saw the elite speaking in the film and they sounded funny and callous, so people could see that. But today, I think that callousness has gone several degrees higher so that it's not embarrassing anymore. In fact, today's ideology is that if you're rich, you deserve it, and you should get richer. There is no feeling of guilt amongst the elite class today."

Sanjay Sanghvi(2007) argues that the 1980s was the time when the nature of social movements in India changed considerably. He asserts that it was during this period of time that a majority of the presumptions of the prevalent development model were being questioned, as the people's experiences of that development were presented both through systematic studies and increased political activity. In this context, I believe that the 1986 struggle constitutes what Sanghvi terms a 'micro-movement'<sup>21</sup>, that is related to the larger realm of social movements, for it integrates questions of inequality, human rights and justice with the broader concept of development. Perhaps both the kind of support and positive media coverage that the struggle received and the kind of impact that it had in shaping public opinion was in some way related to its location in the '80s. It was not limited by its aims, and this sentiment was articulated by Azmi in her 1986 interview with Patwardhan for Manushi-

"Even during the hunger strike, people who came to support us were not only those who work with slumdweller, but also people connected with civil liberties issues or women's organisations or against

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20 Jayanthi Shivraman is the Head of Accounting of Eastern India for LnT.

21 A localised struggle dealing with a specific issue.

police atrocities. They were all united in the search for justice. So one didn't feel limited to one small issue. Don't you feel like that? ”

**Looking back at the struggle:** How does one look back at this struggle 30 years later? Patwardhan argues that in terms of ensuring that the slum dwellers did not become homeless and were given an alternate piece of land, the movement was definitely successful. But on the other hand, in terms of a model of redevelopment or housing, the internal quid pro quo of the process was flawed, because it entailed the transfer of private land from a trust to the slum dwellers, in which though the slum dwellers gained, the trust and the government had internal dealings through which the trust gained too. Whether it constitutes a model for social welfare and development that should be followed is doubtful. He argues that the larger system is such that it is 'a no-win situation'.

Gurbir Singh, on the other hand, examines the success of the struggle from the point of view of the S.G. Nagar community and the NHSS when he says-”It was a success story. And now as it turns out, out of the 350, about 220-250 families would still have benefitted and gotten a *pakka* roof over their heads, and they still are. Otherwise, they would have never been able to afford this kind of real estate paying out of their own pockets. So, for that community itself, it was a success story, and for Nivara Hakk, it consolidated as a group and an agitation body which then went on to take up a lot of other such issues over the years.” He additionally argues that it was an important struggle for it was one of the early government negotiated settlements where land was actually allotted to slum dwellers for rehabilitation. In recent times, he argues that the Sanjay Gandhi National Park struggle has been similarly successful, where the scale of rehabilitation has been much larger, wherein about 12,000 families have already been rehabilitated. Simpreet Singh, as a contemporary housing rights activist, sees it as an important struggle because land was the rallying point in this struggle, that was successfully gained. Moreover, he felt that the struggle was important because of the alliance between those directly affected and other members of civil society. He feels that ” that sort of an alliance takes the issue to a different level and changes the contour of the struggle”.

### III-THE EVENT AS METAPHOR

"...in a sense, we are all illegal, whether we live in apartments or we live in slums. You know the kind of corruption that takes place when people buy apartments. So the argument that these slums are illegal and those who live in buildings are not illegal, that doesn't hold water."

- Anand Patwardhan

"...Annawadi boys broadly accepted the basic truths: that in a modernizing, increasingly prosperous city, their lives were embarrassments best confined to small spaces, and their deaths would matter not at all."

- Katherine Boo, 'Behind the Beautiful Nevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity'(252)

This protest is immensely significant as a local event in itself, in terms of the impact that it had on the community involved, but when one places it in context of the time that has passed since, it almost seems to get lost in the multiple narratives of slum demolitions and subsequent battles that have been fought to protest those demolitions, wherein slum dwellers, activists, NGOs, builders, the urban bourgeois and the government get involved in a similar manner. 'Humara Shahar'(1985) and 'Do Andolan'(2010) are documentary films are films centred around housing struggles in Mumbai. They are shot decades apart, and yet the similarity of the struggles and the linear, only slightly changing historical narrative of housing struggle that they seem to fit into made me cringe.

If one looks at the term 'slum' itself, the continuity in historical narrative can be traced back even further. Mike Davis(2006) traces the origins of the word to find that in early 1800s England and late 1800s USA, the word slum was necessarily associated with poverty, 'dilapidated housing', and inevitably with crime/vice. This association of a slum with crime and vice is a phenomenon that Azmi, Gurbir Singh and Patwardhan had spoken of in light of the 1986 demolition and struggle. The associations seem to continue to prevail in the new millennium, and were criticised yet again by C.R. Sridhar(2006) and others in the light of the 2004-05 slum demolitions in Mumbai. Azmi had recalled how the attitudes of people she knew changed through the course of the strike, and how those very people who viewed the slum dwellers as unemployed/anti-social had come to see them as significant contributors to the economy. In light of the same issues resurfacing regularly, one is found doubting the possibility of long term change, and one wonders whether such changes in ways of seeing are achieved only in limited time frames by a limited number of people.

Has the situation improved since the time this struggle was fought? It is difficult to say. But as neoliberal principles strengthened their grip on Mumbai, especially in the new millennium, the drive towards the 'Shanghaization' of Mumbai seems to be getting stronger<sup>22</sup>, and produced the large scale demolitions of 2004-'05. Instead of trying to solve the larger problems that result in the birth and growth of slums, slums are seen as aesthetically unappealing eyesores that need to be demolished, despite the fact that that demolition also constitutes an immense waste of public money, for the helpless slum dwellers often rebuild their homes on those very sites.<sup>23</sup>

Slums are the very embodiment of the failure of India's growth model and its imbalanced development experience, that is characterized by inequality, urban poverty, rural unemployment and forced rural-urban migration. The problem is complicated further when one pays heed to Mike Davis' argument that overurbanization in the developing world is driven by the 'reproduction of poverty', and not by job supply in urban areas. He further asserts that "this is one of the unexpected tracks down which a neoliberal world order is shunting the future".

In light of the multi-faceted nature of the issue, how does the Indian government deal with the proliferation of slums? It advocates globally publicised policies to secure a 'Clean India', while ensuring that a large portion of the population of this country has no stake in ensuring that cleanliness. Patwardhan argues that slum demolitions deprive people of their rights to housing, and how can slum dwellers be expected to have a stake in improving conditions if their basic rights are denied? Elsewhere, he asserts that slum demolition, in fact, 'is a strategy to deny them the right to exist'.

In a country where over 65 million people live in slums<sup>24</sup>, can these small exceptionally successful struggles really constitute larger victories? Moreover, even the success that the protest achieved is attributed considerably to the presence of 'prominent citizens'. Though the agency of the slum dwellers in their struggle cannot be denied, one wonders whether the protest would have received the same kind of attention if it was only the slum dwellers who agitated? Patwardhan raised this question in his 1986 interview for Manushi, when he said- "A hunger strike cannot succeed unless there are enough people

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22 Darshini Mahadevia and Harini Narayanan study the phenomenon in some detail in their paper entitled 'Shanghaizing Mumbai-Politics of Evictions and Resistance in Slum Settlements'

23 As articulated by Gurbir Singh in my telephonic interview with him.

24 As per the 2011 census, as reported in The Hindu. (<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/65-million-people-live-in-slums-in-india-says-census-data/article5188234.ece>)

to make a noise about it. Also, unfortunately, the reality is that if a slum dweller goes on a hunger strike, he or she can easily be ignored.”

Azmi recalled how members of the media would often not even talk to the slum dwellers on strike, but would rush to take interviews of Patwardhan and herself. Simpreet Singh argues that the support for the struggle from the film industry was considerable. He feels that the involvement of the film fraternity was not limited to Azmi's involvement as an individual, but entailed the involvement of a larger community within the film industry, wherein stars like Shashi Kapoor also supported the struggle.

A corollary to questioning the success of the movement without the presence of prominent celebrities is to examine the relationship between celebrities and social movements. Ramachandra Guha(2000), in a public critique of Arundhati Roy's 'style' of advocating the Narmada Bachao Andolan in 1999, made a significant point about this relationship-”Celebrity endorsement of social movements is always fraught with hazard. In the beginning, it may attract media attention, and draw to the cause previously silent bystanders. However, the media will soon abandon the cause for the star, and the converts will soon return to their humdrum lives.”

It is in the context of the 2000-01 Guha-Roy debate that Harsh Sethi(2001) examines the relationship between celebrities and social movements. He divides celebrity involvement into two basic categories of involvement that is unwanted, and involvement that is sought after and welcome. With reference to the former, he brings up several instances, such as that of the 1987 Roop Kanwar Incident, to highlight how outsider involvement often turns locals involved hostile, and impedes the progress of social welfare at the grassroots. The 1986 struggle is located in the latter category. With this category, he points out that the danger often lies in the celebrity activists' advocacy of issues becoming a 'politics of symbolism', wherein instead of detailed critiques and a questioning of larger problems, the 'event based, media centred approach' to the issue only distorts and misrepresents it.

Though Guha's critique of Roy received considerable backlash, I think that another point that Guha makes in his critique of Roy is especially relevant to an analysis of the role of celebrities in movements. He questions the validity of Roy's criticism of globalisation and the market, when she

herself is located 'in the heart of the market for global celebrityhood'.<sup>25</sup> In Partwardhan's interview of Azmi for Manushi in 1986, a conversation between the two brought up similar concerns with regard to the role of film stars in promoting social causes. Azmi argued how film stars were often shy of coming out in support for social causes, because of the heavy criticism that they were in the danger of facing.

Azmi argued that even if they were very rich, if they had some concern for the poor, for doing something for them, they should be lauded and not laughed at. Importantly, Patwardhan made the point that there was a definite link between the extreme richness of the very rich and the abject poverty of the slum dwellers, which made film stars prone to criticism. I think that this could be broadly true of any person privileged by an unequal system speaking in favour of the oppressed. Perhaps what exacerbates this in case of a popular celebrity, especially involved in the entertainment industry, is that to maintain their celebrity status, they often continuously engage in the process of a publicized show of their wealth and/or privilege.

It would be ideal if there would be no need for celebrity endorsement of causes, wherein the legitimate voices of the oppressed themselves would be heard. But in the age of the revolution of the internet and overbearing presence of the social media in our lives, the question of the impact of celebrities' involvement in social movements becomes even more pertinent. Perhaps a partial, though not holistic, solution lies in celebrities endorsing causes carefully by not being removed from the grassroots and giving complete agency to the local leaders and participants of a movement.

The flipside to looking at the role of celebrities in social movements is obviously to ask that by themselves, how far do the voices of the slum dwellers count? Where would one locate this struggle in the discourse on the subaltern and the elite? What about these slum dwellers who can and did raise their voice successfully, but whose voice perhaps would not have been heard as quickly and effectively or successfully at all, was it not accompanied by the voice of middle class activists and film stars who advocated their rights?

Moreover, even the resettlement of the slum dwellers that was achieved is ultimately in line with the project of what R.N. Sharma(2007) labels as 'enclave urbanism' in the city of Mumbai, wherein the right to the city is preserved for the privileged, while the poor are pushed to the outskirts.

Sharma

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25 Importantly, in her 2001 interview in published in the Frontline magazine, argued that her essay 'Power Politics', which Guha was criticising in this particular instance, was not about globalisation at all.

compares this 'neo-liberal apartheid' to the sort of settlement system that evolved with the evolution of the caste system in India, wherein while the privileged castes lived closer to the central city activities, the serving castes were located at the peripheries. In light of this, one needs to critically question the very lines along which battles for housing are being fought, and the achievements of housing struggles evaluated.

While it is most important to ask these questions, it is imperative to recognize the achievements of housing struggle movements within the rather unfavourable systems in which they are located. For me, looking at this struggle as a source of inspiration is essential. It stands tall as a symbol of the small victories against inequality and poverty that can be achieved through alliances that surpass selfish motivations and interests. Living in an unequal society, what we can continually do is to be aware of our various privileges, and fight for social justice in our limited capacities while being fully aware of the privileges of our location. As Patwardhan rightly put it:

" I think it's every citizen's duty to speak up for everyone else as well as themselves, not just wait for only when that injustice is done to yourself that you will speak. But you do it because you perceive it. You don't want to live in a society, which is full of this kind of injustice. "

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#### Interviews:

1. Gurbir Singh is a senior journalist and activist
2. Anand Patwardhan is a documentary filmmaker and activist
3. Simpreet Singh is a housing rights activist currently pursuing his PhD at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

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