



Confronting Community: The Complexities of Slum Life in Mumbai

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I walk down the narrow pathway. My knees wobble. I use a hand to steady myself against a brick wall and I find my footing on long, exposed pipes. The children walk ahead, their feet steady on the uneven ground. They move quickly and assuredly, leading me down the walkway single file towards the school. Turning and twisting around corners, they deftly avoid various animals and barefoot toddlers wandering along the road. I follow their bright backsides, the girls' *kurtas*¹ a mixture of patterns – flowers and stripes and other shapes in orange and pink and blue and brown. Polyester fabric blends with the other sights and sounds of the slum, melding into a cacophonous symphony.

We are traversing the Sangam Nagar slum on Antop Hill, Wadala, Mumbai. This huge community is practically invisible in the urban structure that is Mumbai/Bombay, a metropolis with an estimated population of 20 million people as of 2010.² As much as half of the total population of this city live in slum communities.³ I am in Mumbai working with a non-profit organization called Parivartan Shikshan Sanstha,⁴ a school that works to serve the needs of this community of over 200,000 people. I am more than 8,000 miles away from the quiet tree-lined streets of my home on the coast of Maine. It feels like an entirely different world. I am used to blending in with the friendly faces on my small college campus and to hearing the sounds of whispering leaves on the walkway. Here, my eyes are met with stares of all sorts, from the fascinated to the friendly to the leering glare. I can only speculate as to their true meaning; my English language-speaking self is not of much use in the land of Hindi. The sound is a steady foreign buzz of men and women and children and cows flicking flies with their tails. Everything mixes on the street, where even the trash gloms together, moving from separate pieces of plastic to a solid mass. The monsoon rains in the summer season act as

a sort of glue, cementing the refuse in piles throughout the neighborhood.

Yet there is impermanence to this slum neighborhood, and others like it throughout Mumbai. Slums are at constant risk of displacement in this giant metropolis. One of the largest megacities⁵ in the world, Mumbai is also beginning to compete on a global scale as one of the financial capitals of the world. The city is constantly making plans to redevelop and improve its infrastructure. Yet India, the world's largest democracy, must contend with its poor before it can move onto the world stage in full force.

I spent this past summer working with school children in Wadala, Mumbai. I learned much about the nature of slum communities and was left with many questions. I wish to explore the geography of this community, and the economy it functions within. I will investigate its ability to foster positive community action through partnerships with NGOs like Parivartan. I will also examine the social problems that occur in communities like this one, and how the low status of slums in the larger culture perpetuates these problems by keeping them largely invisible.

1. Indian loose fitting long shirt, worn by men and women, traditional dress
2. *U.N World Urbanization Prospects*, Huffington Post (2010): 1.
3. Slums are defined by the Slum Area (Improvement and Clearance) Act of 1956 as "areas where buildings are unfit for human habitation; or are by reason of dilapidation, overcrowding, design of buildings, narrowness of streets, lack of ventilation...or any combination of these factors, are detrimental to health, safety, morals"
Karn, Kumar Sunil et al. "Living Environment and Health of Urban Poor: A Study in Mumbai." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 34 (2003): 3576
4. Translated as "Transformation Teaching Institution"

5. A "megacity" is defined as an urban agglomeration of more than 10 million people. Today there are 22 megacities – the majority in the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America – and by 2025 there will probably be 30 or more. Bruinius, Harry. "Megacities of the world: a glimpse of how we'll live tomorrow." *Christian Science Monitor*. May 05, 2010, 1.

Structuring Community: The Slum as Home

The little girls in front of me are an integral part of the slum landscape. The oldest is 12, leading the youngest by the hand as the third skips along. Their slight bodies are at ease as they walk hand-in-hand through their neighborhood. They pass doorways with fabric serving as doors. The fabric provides

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privacy, however flimsy, but its permeability allows me to peek into one-room homes. TV sets glare.

Women scrub clothes, babies stand in doorways, eyes large as saucers.

Homes in the slums are made of any variety of materials, and are generally formed by two different kinds of structures. A *kuccha* structure is a house made of various materials including gunny bags, plastic, tin sheets, bricks. A *pucca* structure is one that utilizes permanent construction materials for floor, wall, and roof.⁶ The community I am walking through has both, though many structures seem more permanent, suggesting that this community was established quite some time ago.

Slums first appeared in this city in the 1930s, when the number of people migrating to the city from the village exceeded the available housing. The population of the city expanded exponentially over the course of the 20th century, as did the slums. Currently Mumbai has the highest percentage of

the population living in slums in all of India. According to government statistics, the slum population of Mumbai in 1991 was 4.32 million, or 34 percent of the total population.⁷ Today there are an estimated 6.5 million people living in slums, which is over 50 percent of the population of Mumbai. In less than 20 years, the slums have grown exponentially.

Dirty, crowded, and ignored by the elite busy building high rises, the “invisibility of slums and slum-dwellers to the ‘official’ eye perpetuates the vulnerability of slum-dwellers to multiple forms of displacement,” according to Amita Bhide. The fact that they are largely ignored means that they are

inconsequential in plans to develop the city. Simon Robinson writes that government of the state of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is the capital, would like to decimate slums to redevelop them as part of a “multibillion-dollar plan to turn the city into a world-class financial center by 2015.” But this goal of redevelopment could possibly displace up to half of the close to 20 million people living in Mumbai. Displacing slum dwellers challenges the idea that the poor and rich can live side-by-side in this democracy.⁸

People who live in slums constitute the lowest classes of Indian society and experience their lives in constant motion. Many slum inhabitants are migrants who have moved from the village to the city in order to find work that is not available in their rural hometowns. Once they reach Mumbai they continue a transient existence, their homes often not legitimized by the government and thus subject to instantaneous removal.

Journeying through the streets, my pale white skin appears in stark contrast to the ocean of brown surrounding me. I feel my middle class, white American privilege weighing down the North Face backpack that is slung over my shoulders. It is as though I am on an obstacle course, partaking in some sort of contest where not falling in a crevice or slipping in a puddle is an achievement, and avoiding the open sewer a major accomplishment.

Bhide states that slum dwellers are “perpetuated as second rate, unwanted people who live off the city’s resources and can therefore be removed or wished away at will.” Shubhani Parkar writes that by characterizing a community as a slum, it may become identified with words such as “chaos” and “squalor.” People who reside there are then marked as dirty and chaotic, confusing their status, and making their identity become one with their home, a “mark of stigma and a source of shame.”⁹

I try to imagine what it would be like to live in a place considered shameful. My home is a source of comfort to me, and I have always taken pride in the communities I have grown up in. For those whose community is the slum, the sentiment is similar. Even when offered “better” places to live, many slum dwellers will refuse to leave. Suketu Mehta states that while people think of slum life as miserable, they forget that “...out of inhospitable surroundings, they form a community, and they are...attached to its spatial geography, the social networks they have built for themselves, the village

6. Bhide, Amita. “Shifting terrains of communities and community organization: reflections on organizing for housing rights in Mumbai” *Community Development Journal*, (2009): 367-380.

7. Karn, Kumar Sunil et al. “Living Environment,” 3576.

8. Robinson, Simon. “Remaking Mumbai,” *Time* Feb. 18, 2008: Global 1. *Expanded Academic ASAP*.

9. Parkar, Shubhangi et al. “Contextualizing mental health: gendered experience in a Mumbai slum.” *Anthropology and Medicine*. Vol. 10, No. 3, (2003): 292.

they have recreated in the midst of the city....”¹⁰ While the urban developers want to move people into high rises with better amenities, many in the slums have purposefully chosen to stay home and live in a place that is close knit.

When I walk through the slum I understand this feeling. Far from being overwhelmed by the dirtiness or sensing some sort of wretched atmosphere, I am fascinated by the animated inhabitants of the community as they go about their daily routines. Like anywhere, there are people going to and from work, running errands, cooking, and cleaning. Women whiz by carrying bundles, a man pulling a banana stand saunters along. A barefoot child zigzags across the street, chasing after the older children. Jandhyala writes that when examining children in slum areas many were joyful and seemed to be communicating and playing in a healthy and free fashion.¹¹ This is attributed to community interaction: “It is heartening that children are in constant interaction with older siblings and other neighboring children and families. These experiences provide the children with a rich repertoire of communicative and social stimulation.” The children I see wandering the streets do not have mothers trailing after them, but they are not completely without supervision. Here, everyone is interconnected and close by, unlike my isolated life growing up in the U.S., where the closest relatives entrusted to look after me lived two states away.

Interconnected: Economics of the Slum

As the girls and I walk through the slum, I am at first overwhelmed and then desensitized. Over time it becomes easier to let the stench of garbage and of human and animal waste fade into the background. These smells combine in the air with the intense aroma of spices spewing from oiled pans frying food on the street, the pungent scent coating the neighborhood. The girls are still walking. They giggle and look back at me every once in a while to ensure that I am indeed following them. The littlest one runs ahead, eager to reach school. The older one catches up to her, resting her hand on the top of her head, a cautionary and caring gesture wrapped into one.

A seemingly endless path, the slum twists and turns in a non-linear manner that has its own order. We walk by Vodaphone stores, their red signs ubiquitous for excellent Indian cell phone service. The stores are a constant presence in the city, and ensure a way to make connections in this hectic land, even in the slum neighborhoods. Other stores sell candy and soft drinks, another buttons and fabrics, next to that, rubber

tubes and brand name toiletries on haphazard shelving. A group of men stand on the corner idling by a chai stand.

While considered almost inconsequential in relation to the larger economic structure of the city, the slums are full of booming businesses. Mumbai’s largest slum, Dharavai, (with a population close to 600,000) maintains a thriving recycling business. People “shred plastic, mend clothes, strip computers, sort and bundle paper, fix machinery, flatten cardboard and clean and crush glass.”¹² In this manner, the old goods can be reworked and sold for profit. These enterprises are a perfect fit for the cramped surface area of the slums, which does not allow for large factories.

I continue walking. On a sign, a picture of a woman in a fashionable sari advertises a tailor shop. As I pass, my eye catches bright colors of various scraps of fabric on the ground. They are scattered on the walkway in front of the shop in oblong triangles and distorted squares. Perhaps these are the discarded corners of hastily sewn garments, the forgotten bits of clothing production. They are the leftovers of new enterprise. I watch the fabrics turn brown in the muck of the street as they are quickly trampled and blend into the larger landscape.

Of the migrants who come to the slums, more than 75 percent primarily come to Mumbai for employment.¹³ The vast number of people in the slums ensures cheap labor. The city relies on the residents of these communities to work in factories, drive rickshaws and taxis, and work as servants for more well off families.¹⁴ A family does not have to be wealthy to have help. In the middle class apartment complex where I stay in Mumbai, my neighbors are a young married couple, working for technology companies. They have both a female cook and a woman to do their cleaning. This is in contrast to the United States, where there are exorbitant fees for delivery and a middle class sense of self-sufficiency in doing one’s own household work. For many in this city, someone

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10. Mehta, Suketu. *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*. (New Delhi: Penguin, 2004): 59.

11. Jandhyala et al. “Through the Life Cycle of Children: Factors that Facilitate/Impede Successful Primary School Completion”: 4996.

12. Robinson, “Remaking Mumbai,” 1.

13. Karn, Kumar Sunil et al. “Living Environment,” 3577.

14. Parkar, Shubhangi et al. “Contextualizing mental health,” 292, 297.

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else labors over each and every task, from the laundry to the cooking to the shopping. Like my neighbors' help, most who labor in this line of work are women.

According to the survey on the gendered experience of mental health in a Mumbai slum, women constitute 60 percent of the workforce in the slum of Malavani, an area in the north of Mumbai. Women tend to comprise a larger percentage of the work force in slum areas. Parkar states that this is often because jobs available to women are typically menial, and can include positions as "domestic servants...or as laborers at construction sites. Some sell fruits, vegetables, or cooked snacks, either circulating on foot or sitting in a market."

In the Sangam Nagar slum where I am working, children also engage in the work of the community. The children here perform household chores, as well as work on export garments. They labor in hotels and tea stalls or assist in tailor shops. Some are garage workers; others are involved in car washing as well as sewage cleaning.¹⁵ The three girls in front of me do not hold regular

jobs, yet their daily duties are undoubtedly more strenuous than the tasks of making the bed and clearing the table that constituted my childhood chore list.

These statistics about the proportion of female and child employment in the slum could help explain why on my many walks throughout this neighborhood and others in the city, I see many more men than women. As I continue following the girls to the school, this journey is no different. I pass men who are short and tall and skinny and squat. They wear mostly western clothes, though some seem to be entirely from another era. Hair gel and bell bottoms are a popular choice amongst the men in the Sangam Nagar slum. Everyone's skin glistens in this heat. The light, the dark, and the in-between – every shade of brown imaginable shines and bobs up and down as the men make their way in this bustling neighborhood. The children in front

¹⁵. Parivartan literature.

of me blend into this crowded landscape, but I keep my eyes trained on them as they lead me to the door of the Parivartan classroom.

Parivartan: Transforming Community

The closeness of community is evident in the Parivartan classroom, an oasis from the slum's chaos. The walls are covered with drawings. A blackboard has many words in Hindi on it, as well as depictions of butterflies. Children's names and smiley faces line one wall (a way to keep track of attendance, I am told) and there are cupboards filled with old school supplies. The ceiling is decorated with colorful cutouts, and another bulletin board area showcases student artwork, depictions of people at various tasks made using marker and collaged torn paper. There is a lightness to the room that I find comforting, an inner sense of community within the larger interconnectedness of the slum. Yet the room is small, the floor cracked, and there are only two small windows high up on the walls. A single fan whirs overhead, collecting the dirt particles and spinning them in circles in front of my nostrils, causing my nose to wrinkle, as I wipe the beads of sweat from my forehead.

Parivartan works to provide non-formal education to children living here in Sangam Nagar. These children have little opportunity to become educated through formal government schools. What efforts they make to obtain education are often thwarted by difficult circumstances: sociopolitical, economic, or issues relating to gender, all stemming from their place in this slum community. Parivartan seeks to bridge the gap for children who live in the slum as laborers by helping them receive an education that enables them to transcend their circumstances.

Parivartan was founded in 1997 by Shakhil Ahmed, a human rights activist and lawyer who himself grew up in the slums. Ahmed started the school because of his feeling of responsibility towards providing others with basic rights. Ahmed told me, "Not anything inspired me. I myself am from this locality and I am also a resident of this locality. I found that I am the most literate person in the slum, so I have some responsibility towards other children. So I started teaching them in my house and like that we started slowly this organization."¹⁶ The fact that Parivartan is a grassroots organization has allowed it to be embraced by members of the community. Parivartan has since expanded and operates two classrooms in different locations within the slum, with plans to build a computer center. Two teachers run the centers. Non-formal education is provided in the mornings to younger children; the afternoon classes are filled with older students.

¹⁶. informal interview July 7, 2010.

In the classroom I tug at my *kurta*, gazing upward at the fan and urging the air to circulate around my body and allow me to be comfortable in this small space. Nothing in this classroom is new or even particularly clean, yet there is a sense of constant re-creation here. This is not the first incarnation of this classroom, nor will it be the last. Children enter the classroom in uneven numbers. Some little girls carry even smaller children on their hip. They take their shoes off in the corner and begin to whisper and stare. My presence in this room is unusual, yet so is the learning that goes on here.

Parivartan has undergone many changes in the 13 years it has been operating in Wadala. Until 2006, there was no formal government school in the area, with the closest municipal school a 45-minute commute. Ahmed and others worked tirelessly to change this, and after a seven year struggle, a BMC (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation) school was opened in Sangam Nagar. Now, Parivartan continues to provide non-formal education to help bridge the gap for children who have not been attending school and who instead have been laboring at home. It also helps enroll them in government schools.

Enrolling them in the government-run schools is not a simple process. Many children from the area have difficulty enrolling in BMC schools because they lack proper birth certificates. Though a law enacted in 2009 declares *all* children in India have the right to a free education, it is a slow process to ensure that actually happens, especially in the slums.¹⁷

It is a shock to learn just how many obstacles stand in the way for these children. When I was young, the sky seemed to be the limit for my future. In my economically privileged world of small town America, I was practically guaranteed a formal education, not to mention numerous extracurricular activities.

The path is not so clear for children in Sangam Nagar. Enrolling them in school is strenuous work that requires long hours of physically going to the schools with the parents and children as well as conducting ongoing community surveys to assess which children are currently enrolled. Each day I see the two teachers of the centers enter the office breathlessly, often with a folder of papers under their arms. One dressed in a *sari*¹⁸ and the other wearing a *hijab*,¹⁹ they have long conversations with the school administrator in rapid-fire Hindi, before walking around collecting the children for the next session. Although I do not even know the half of their conversations, I understand that they are facing difficulties

in enrolling students in the BMC school. Despite being overworked and often tired, they always greet me with a small smile. They return each day, creating change for these children by making education a reality for them.

Tangible Connections

As I stand in the Parivartan classroom, the reality of education in this community is evident in the dozen faces staring at me across the circle.

Their gazes are overwhelming and seductive; they suck me into this land of Hindi and innumerable mother tongues. I don't think I could have imagined I could come to a place so different from rural New England, so bold, so foreign and so full.

The intensity of this community is reflected in Divya,²⁰ one of the youngest children who comes to the sessions at Parivartan. Day after day she careens into the room, her body arriving directly in front of mine. She jumps at me and demands that I swing her in circles, her legs tightening around my waist as she squeals and my head starts to spin. Her small body holds so much force, much more than I would have imagined in a person so little. Her being pulses with liveliness, with the entitlement that comes from being the youngest of a group. It reminds me of entering a room at a family gathering when I was younger. My little sibling status was cemented by the way people responded to me as I crawled into my big sister's lap, assuming my position of privilege in the warmth of the familial crowd. In my colored tights and party dress I would demand attention, and tug and pull until it was mine.

Divya does the same. Her charming demeanor wins her the attention of all in the class. Her nickname is "*choti bandera*" or "little monkey" for her ruthless approach of entwining herself around her fellow classmates and her teachers, refusing to let

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17. Ridge, Mian. "India's 'education for all' mandate poses big test." *Christian Science Monitor*. April, 06 2010, 1.

18. traditional dress for a Hindi woman

19. traditional head covering worn by Muslim women

20. name has been changed

go. She gravitates towards the old toys in the back of the classroom, their grime and dull color indicating they are not the latest trinkets being produced in this technologically advanced nation. These are the leftovers, someone else's children's forgotten treasures, donated to the school and now considered precious once again. Little boys push plastic trucks. Divya grabs at a troll-like doll, its white body turned a shade of grey. Her frenetic energy extends out to this stuffed toy, its limbs shaking as she runs around the room.

Children like Divya remind me that this school is doing something real, that "change" is not something outside. It comes from within, from providing opportunities for little girls like Divya to nurture their creative and rambunctious natures. Education can become a reality for her through programs like this, and with it, the ability to learn how to transcend her circumstances.

Yet Divya lives in a community that lacks more than education. Parivartan literature states that the community where she resides is without a postal service, and has no access to health care. When I am working in the slum it is also not easy to forget that there is a severe lack of hygienic toilet facilities. I recall that Divya is one of 80,000 - 120,000 children living in this slum. Last year, Parivartan enrolled approximately 160 children in government schools. Divya was not one of them, and there were close to 80,000 others who were also not allowed this privilege.

These numbers are difficult to wrap my head around. I do not know Divya's particular circumstances; in spite of all of her boundless energy and the sparkle in her eyes, we have never once held a true conversation. My inability to speak Hindi serves as a substantial handicap in my efforts to understand the true nature of the circumstances of girls in this community like Divya. I want nothing more than to sit down and have a conversation with her, to know if there is another life she dreams of, if my hopes for her education are anything more than the guilty wishes of a privileged westerner when there are many other things in her life that could be improved upon. She is just a little girl; maybe these thoughts do not enter her mind at all. What do I really know about her circumstances?

Hidden Atrocities

Despite the vibrant community in the slum, there are many issues that go unnoticed. The circumstances of many in the slums are largely ignored or forgotten. Beyond the lack of basic amenities, human rights are blatantly violated with little done to stop it.

An example can be seen in a slum near Reay Road in Mumbai. Shakhil Ahmed worked on the case of a *Dalit*²¹ woman who was severely beaten and abused by neighborhood women. The woman was "verbally abused, beaten with sticks, stripped of her clothes and dragged through the basti to the taunts, jeers and catcalls of whoever gathered to watch," all in response to the victim's brother having been arrested in a rape case.²²

This woman's story is not even told to the greater public of Mumbai. *Outlook*, whose audience is upper middle class, English-speaking Indians, is the first publication to take it up. Typically, those outside the slum do not even hear mention of these stories. The mother of the beaten young woman asks, "Someday the policemen will stop coming here, and then what happens to us?" The article states that "the answers are not easy" to problems like this – but it makes no further comment on the abominable nature of such a crime.

I rationalize that in America such a crime would receive considerable attention. But part of me questions how many stories go unreported, even in the land of the free. There are abominations in my country too; maybe we all close our eyes a little too often. My head spins with questions. What sort of community fosters this kind of behavior?

In "Policing from Within" Kalpana Sharma discusses the implications of policing in the slums of Mumbai. The article states that the police "were generally unresponsive to issues that concerned slum dwellers. They were particularly indifferent to women's concerns and often refused to entertain complaints brought to the police station by women." This information reportedly comes from Jockin Arputham, the president of the National Slum Dwellers Federation. For all they are lacking, slum residents are members of a democracy and historically have been very politically active. In 2004, Arputham and others developed slum *panchayats*²³ in Mumbai, giving community members

21. Dalit is a term used to define "untouchables." The term means "those who have been broken and ground down deliberately by those above them in the social hierarchy." Dalits live at risk of discrimination, dehumanization, violence, and enslavement through human trafficking every day. "Who are the Dalits?" *Dalit Freedom Network*, 2010.

22. Koplkar, Smurti. "A Metropolis is Shamed." *Outlook*, July 12, 2010, 26.

23. Literally, "assembly of five" – referring to wise men. Traditionally used in village communities.

opportunities to police themselves, with committees that resolve disputes that include women. He writes, “When resolving a dispute, the members summon both sides involved, listen to their points of view, and work out a compromise. The panchayats have the authority of law as well as moral authority in the community.”

This optimistic view on a civil judiciary system does not always seem to work. Dilip Waghmare states in the article that this case was a clear atrocity under the Scheduled Caste and Schedule Tribe (Prevention and Atrocities) Act. Yet in this case, the women were only provided security after the atrocity was committed. The gendered excuse that men cause these issues is also broken here, as the victimizers here were a group of 30 women. The interconnectedness of community obviously did not extend to this family of “untouchables.” Very few, in fact, would stand up for this woman and others like her. Between 2004 and 2008 the number of registered cases of crimes committed against scheduled castes has risen from 689 to 1,173.²⁴ Where does it end?

Looking Forward

I stand in front of the group of children at Parivartan; all are giggling ferociously. I run towards them, my hands beside my face like claws. I can feel the sweat dripping off my body, and my limbs ache, but I creep towards them in my tiger mode, roaring, and urging by example for them to do the same. The children laugh as I come into their space, and then tentatively put their hands up next to their faces making sounds back at me. Soon we are all crawling on the ground, exploring the space around us. We are all kinds of animals: I make the wings of a bird, an elephant’s trunk; I hop on the ground like a rabbit. We end up sprawled on the floor, the children piled on top of one another and myself. I watch them mimic my lead in expression: angry, happy, surprised, sad. They are giggled right out of their comfort zones.

Days like this give me a deep down feeling of hope. I can sense the potential for connections, for sharing and crossing boundaries. Yet the scene is not always so light and full of laughter. There are days when the children do not show up, when the numbers of children are fewer, my energy lower, their attention span minimal, and I find myself speaking to no one in particular as little bodies careen around the room, banging into walls and each other, shouting and tugging and baffling me.

24. Koppikar, “A Metropolis is Shamed,” 26.

I step outside the classroom and begin the long trek across the slum, back to my apartment. Small droplets of water land on my head as I walk down the narrow streets and then the wider roads. People are taking cover, knowing that the rains bring a havoc to the slum that is unparalleled by anything man-made.

Nature has its way, and I have never been to a place that is so unprepared for something that occurs so often. Monsoon season causes many health issues in the slums. The open sewers collect more water than ever and help spread the number of unmentionable items floating along the street. I put up my umbrella hurriedly as I turn and look at the children who are standing in the doorway of the classroom, shouting “*barish!*” (rain!) and twirling in circles, their faces surprised and delighted about the water pouring from the sky.

Slums do not descend or rise up. They spread. Ironically, their true enormity can only be seen from a high rise. The sheer amount of space they take up in a land full of contested earth is enough to think they should be the center point of every conversation involving urban India. Still, they continue to be pushed aside by those who deem the problems of the people living there as petty in comparison to the larger goals of becoming a global metropolis.

The slum, made up of so many people living in unhealthy conditions, is also an interconnected community of people seeking a successful life. Enterprise and jobs contribute to the overall economy, and the community fosters NGOs like Parivartan, which prove there is a way out of the circumstances into which many young people are born. Even within this intricate and involved community there are deep troubles. Too much goes unnoticed by those who refuse to give attention to the reason that Mumbai is considered the fourth largest megacity in the world: the slums that are an integral part of the city. While the financial sector of the city may be booming, so is its population, pushing the city past its limits.

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It has been several months since I returned from my trip to Mumbai. It has been difficult to describe what exactly the slum was like, a place about which people have such preconceived notions. Its complexities continue to elude me. Merely describing them doesn't seem to do them justice. I wonder what I really learned there, and whether it is possible to make sweeping changes in a community with so much adversity. At a university 8,000 miles away, where I am writing about this like it is some far-off world, I feel disconnected from my experience.

I remember Divya's sparkling eyes and the feeling of her warm body as it latched to mine, spinning in circles. It seems so far away. Just last week I received an email from Parivartan, telling me that several of the homes of the children who attend the school have been demolished. It all comes rushing back to me, and the knowledge of the children's uncertain futures tumbles and crushes my insides, forcing me to remember.

But what do I do now?