

The Unknown Citizens of Indian Cities

For the last two decades, the economic power of the rich in India has grown many times faster than in the past. However, despite this quick economic growth, India has made hardly any progress in eradicating poverty since the government began liberalizing its economy in 1991. Instead, the gap between the incomes of the rich and poor has increased. So while the top 10 percent of Indians earn much more than before — a large percent of the country's 1.21 billion people survive on much less than 50 rupees a day. According to 2010 data from the United Nations Development Programme, "37.2% of Indians live below the country's national poverty line". (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty_in_India)

Even as the boom has made it easier for the country's rich and middle class people to afford fancy cars, refrigerators, televisions and smart phones, the widening gulf between those at the top and those at the bottom is steadily increasing. The fruit of the economic boom India has enjoyed since the 1990s has not improved the lives of a vast majority of its population as was expected.

India has the largest number of small farmers in the World, approximately 600 million. The small farmer lives precariously and any unexpected incident, either natural or man-made, can cause the failure of a small farm and between 1995 and 2012, more than 200,000 farmers committed suicide in India. The immediate cause of these suicides is indebtedness to loan sharks and banks but the real reason behind the farmers' debts is twenty years of market liberalization by the government that has not provided proper support to the small farmers. Unfortunately, if a farmer commits suicide his debts do not end with him, as the loans have to be returned by the families. One can hardly imagine the extent of the suffering caused by this crisis.

Small farmers (if they have not committed suicide) and their families who are ruined by debt often become landless labourers in rural areas and eventually migrants to urban areas. Even much before the last two decades, such migrations from rural to urban areas have taken place and this is the reason for the constant presence of urban poor. However, during the last 20 years, massive migrations from rural to urban areas have resulted from the current agrarian crisis. The recent growth rate of the urban population is due to this large-scale migration of rural population to urban areas. Approximately about 100,000 rural people migrate every day to urban areas all over India. They move from one level of poverty from the villages to another level of poverty in the big cities, where they are gradually stripped of the dignity and identity and the self worth that they had in their place of origin.

Many of the migrants end up either as rag pickers or unskilled construction workers. Most of these people are homeless or live in slums in dilapidated huts in extremely deprived conditions on sidewalks, beside railway tracks, under foot bridges and in any other space available to them; without proper physical amenities like toilets, safe water supply, sanitation and other services or resources for basics such as health care, nutrition, and education for their children. From the time of their entry to the city, these people become a part of the informal sector as they possess neither the skills nor the educational qualifications to enter secure jobs. They have to compete among themselves and also with those who have arrived earlier for these informal unskilled jobs. Only if they find a job on a daily basis can they feed themselves and their families

Even after these urban poor reconstruct their lives in the cities in such conditions, they continue to live an extremely fragile existence, as their make-shift houses or huts are constructed on government property and are constantly at risk of being evicted and forced to migrate by officials when urban development takes place in their areas. They once again suffer all the misery that accompanies displacement. They are utterly helpless and cannot offer resistance because the officials are supported by the power and laws of the land. Since 1991, modernization and development has accelerated and this development-induced displacement has been taking place in India ever since the government began liberalizing its economy policy and the state began acting on behalf of the corporate world and the elite and middle-class against the rural and urban poor.

These different types of forced migration of the poor from rural villages to urban slums and from urban slums to an even more miserable existence can be seen happening all over India every day. In his article "All the Perfumes of Arabia" in the newspaper "The Hindu", Chennai, 15th February 2013, page 13, Markandey Katju, a former judge of the Supreme Court and Chairman of the Press Council of India, says: "To my mind development can have only one meaning, and that is raising the standard of living of the masses. Giving concessions to big industrial houses, and offering them cheap land and cheap electricity can hardly be called development if it does not raise the standard of living of the masses."

To show how urban displacement and development takes place, a suburb of Chennai has selected as an illustration. Tambaram is 30 km south of the city of Chennai. The railway line from Chennai Egmore to Kanyakumari divides the town into East and West Tambaram. The suburb is served by two railway stations of the Chennai Suburban Railway. During the last few years, two flyovers have been constructed in Tambaram, one between West and East Tambaram near the Tambaram Railway Station and another at Tambaram Sanatorium between the GST Road and East Tambaram. Below are a few photographs of a small selection of the urban poor who lived in the space below these flyovers before the flyovers were constructed and they were displaced. This was not their first displacement.

As can be seen from the photographs, their huts are made of waste materials such as plastic, cloth, corrugated iron sheets, cardboard, wood, and thatch.

These people lived along the wall of the Railway Property, adjacent to the Railway line that runs between West and East Tambaram, before they were displaced by the construction of the flyover.



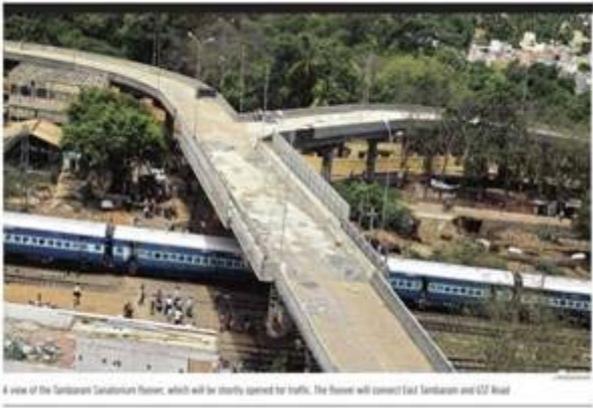
The Tambaram Flyover



These people lived along the wall of the Railway Property, adjacent to the Tambaran Sanatorium Railway line that runs between GST Road and East Tambaram, before they were displaced by the construction of the flyover.



The Tambaram Sanatorium Flyover



A view of the Tambaran Sanatorium Flyover, which will be steadily opened for traffic. The Flyover will connect East Tambaram and GST Road