Challenges and Dilemmas in Strategic Action Planning through a case study of Dharavi, Maharashtra.

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Introduction

This essay focuses on the Dharavi Slum in Mumbai, Maharashtra, India in context of the ongoing Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP) in which the State government, with private sector involvement, employs a top down, tabula rasa redevelopment strategy to absorb Dharavi into its paradigmatic vision of a global city.

The essay discusses practical challenges and theoretical dilemmas of Strategic Action Planning with regards to grassroots alliances which contest the state's homogenising and modernist vision of DRP and clamour for a socially just urban vision, which comprises of distributive and recognitive justice for the inhabitants of Dharavi as well as an inclusive, participatory reimagining of the DRP.

Despite the unwavering commitment and the dogged persistence of civil society alliances for the pursuit of social justice, both the institutional positionality of the state, as well as the intensity with which cities are being integrated into the global economy has taken an alarming turn over the last decade against the interests of the dispossessed and marginalised in contemporary Mumbai (Patel, 2010) – this is a pertinent observation given the victories such alliances have achieved in previous projects such as the MUTP.

The essay queries the effectiveness with which the alliances for social justice can weather and prevail these tumultuous changes and persevere through the pendulous, inconsistent treatment of the slum by the neoliberal developmental state.

The essay experiments with dependency theory to characterise the relationship between the slum and the paradigmatic city, and questions with reference to Dharavi, if a slum is a subordinate peripheral economy which facilitates the growth of the core economy, only to be forcibly disposed of when the use value of the peripheral economy is exceeded by the speculative exchange value of the space that it occupies. The injustice, or the unfairness therein, is captured as part of universal injustices perpetuated unto the labour classes, the poor and the marginalised. Based on this, the essay posits that proponents of Strategic Action Planning must aim to foster an environment where the discourse about the slum is elevated from its spatial boundaries, and represented as a pathology of the general dispossession of the commons in a world of increasing socioeconomic cleavages.

The nature of injustice, and ambitions for Social Justice within DRP

Dharavi is a quintessential testament to innate human adaptability. Its diverse population over 700,000 to one million residents live within an area just over 2.1 square kilometres conditioned by decades of accumulated

distributive neglect (Sharma, 2000). The effects of poor sanitation, paucity of clean water, both quantitatively and qualitatively inadequate access to healthcare and education is amplified by the sheer density of the population (Kaur G, Kaur S, 2014). Dharavi, with a population density of 277,136/km2, is in fact is one of the most densely populated areas in the world (Kaur G, Kaur S, 2014)

This essay frames the relationship between Dharavi and greater Mumbai in two ways. Firstly, it proposes that capitalist accumulation within Mumbai proper, is partly owed to the sustained dispossession of Dharavi's peripheral economy. (Harvey, 2004) DRP too, is seen as an amplified instance of the said phenomenon.

Secondly, the essay proposes that Mumbai proper, whilst absorbing the socioeconomic exergies of Dharavi, exports to the slum its waste, disorder and entropy. (Biel, 2011) The climax of said entropy as well as dispossession is captured at the point where Dharavi is commodified for the benefit of greater Mumbai, at a debilitating, irreversible distributive cost to Dharavi's occupants.

Here, Social Justice is framed beyond simply identifying and remedying the recognitive and distributive injuries of said exploitative core-periphery linkages, but rather, attempting to fundamentally disrupt these linkages to emancipate Dharavikars [1] from the burdensome spatial containers of their dispossession. SAPs viability as a disruptive, bottom up force is assessed in the sections that follow.

Framing the challenges to Strategic Action Planning for Social Justice in DRP.

Strategic Action Planning relies on planned, collective action led by civil society groups of the urban poor working to redress the social injustices they face. (Levy, 2000)

An assessment of whether an intervention qualifies as 'strategic' relies upon three indicators, primarily - it must build on and create **synergies** between actors in civil society,

the public and the private sectors; Secondly, it must have a **multiplier** effect in changing the material and institutional conditions of the poor, and thirdly, it must expand the **room for manoeuvre** for socially just actions led by civil society, also in association with the public and the private sectors. (Levy, 2000)

Dharavi Redevelopment Plan takes place in a city with a rich and vibrant history of Spatial and Social Justice Movements based on the virtues of Strategic Action Planning employed in projects such as the MUTP (Levy, 2007)

The persistent duress of rational comprehensive planning exerted by the city on the marginalised has tempered an ambitious and persevering synergy of institutions poised to combat institutional injustice with capacities refined by experience, legitimacy strengthened by previous victories as well as room for manoeuvre expanded by previously achieved pro-poor legal precedents.

The quandary is that the legitimacy thus gained, and the precedents set – tend to be forgotten by the state, and the room for manoeuvre erodes as India integrates herself further into the global economy. Previous pro-poor legal precedents are undermined by new, market and 'national security' oriented rulings of the Supreme Court (Patel, 2010). Responsibilities of Institutions that the poor could once interact with are being delegated to an increasingly callous and technocratic private sector as the state shrinks under conditions of structural adjustment (Safier, 2002). Furthermore, the more powerful among these private sector actors are situated often in the global north, away from the reach of public scrutiny, as well as accountability and transparency mechanisms of both civil society and even Federal or National states.

DRP was originally introduced as an Integrated Special Urban Planning Area in 2004 (ISUPA). The Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA), with the involvement of the private sector and under the vision of architect Mukesh Mehta, aimed to split

(or, in this case, aggregate) the entire territory of Dharavi which consists of 34 clusters, into five sectors to be handed out to five developers.

An ISUPA enables the authorities to covertly modify development regulations pertaining to a specific area, decisions are taken unanimously without public scrutiny or participation. A homogenising, modernist technique of state power such as an ISUPA, goes beyond passive exclusion of Dharavikars from participation – but reveals a persistent desire on the part of the Maharashtra state to actively thwart participation and maintain an asymmetry of knowledge.

An alliance of actors including SPARC, Mahila Milan, National Slum Dwellers Association and Concerned Citizens of Dharavi find themselves in an increasingly hostile environment, as they fight an uphill battle for the right to the city in a context of rapid globalisation, de-democratisation and discover that their room for manoeuvre is increasingly restricted by a persistent and seemingly impenetrable, globalised urban vision of Mumbai that is far less conducive to community involvement and participation than in the beginning of the millennium.

The discourse of participation too, seems to have been both co-opted and rendered meaningless by the Maharashra state, which makes claims such as "*Dharavi's residents will be treated as partners in the project*" and "*people will be involved in decision making*" at the same time, maintaining that "*whilst the input of the alliances will be considered, the project will continue as planned*" (Boano, Hunter, Newton 2012). This seemingly illogical contradiction contains a subtle, yet powerful logic - If discourse and participation must occur, it must occur in a space and a form predetermined by the State's techniques of power, and if civil society alliances wish to build synergies with the public sector, those synergies must abide by a predetermined hierarchy of institutions and priorities.

Applying dependency theory to the Slum

Dharavi was built on waste, in the literal sense – it was a swampland slowly constructed by its occupants through an infill of waste and debris. Today, waste collection and recycling is one of the key economic activities of the slum which contributes to its £350 million economy (Boano, Hunter, Newton 2012). There is a metaphorical analogy on dependency theory to be drawn there; The core maintains its order, by exporting to the periphery its waste and disorder. (Biel, 2011)

The structuralist view of the informal economy, (presented by Moser, 1978 and Portes et al 1989) posit that informal and formal economies are intrinsically linked; capitalist firms in the formal economy are seen to reduce their input costs, including labour costs, by promoting informal production and employment relationships with subordinated economic units and workers. According to structuralists, both informal enterprises and informal wage workers are subordinated to the interests of capitalist development, providing cheap goods and services. (Chen et al. 2004).

Dharavi can be characterised as a peripheral, informal economy that is both directly and indirectly integrated into the formal economy and by extension, the global economy, and it simulates many of the dependency relationships between a core economy and a peripheral one. Dharavi's economic viability is also premised upon its metabolising of the material, social and economic entropy of Mumbai.

Firstly, it recreates inexpensive labour required for capitalist accumulation at the core,It provides inexpensive, albeit substandard housing. It provides nourishment, most of all, it has a power to attract and retain the rural migrant labour in a city which lacks both the institutional and infrastructural capacity to address the distributive needs of labour inflows.

Secondly, the diverse economic commodities of the slum from leather, plastics, to recycled material and fabrics is exported from the

periphery to the core, where these commodities are repackaged for the formal local well as global export economy and a market value is added. The core exploits its formal ties to the global economy to retain a significant share of the mark-up, whilst the periphery is thrown a pittance. The core also captures the dividends of land value appreciation driven by economic growth, to which the periphery's industriousness and metabolic capacity is instrumental.

Thirdly, it absorbs and metabolises the disorder exported by the local, as well as the global core. The more restrictive to capitalist accumulation the regulations on labour and environmental protection, toxic waste, and health and safety become, the more justified the argument from neoliberal efficiency becomes to seek under regulated and under protected peripheral economies onto which disorders can be dissipated, this disorder is handed down through logistical and production value chains from the northern core, to the southern formal core, and finally to the informal peripheries of the global south.

Role of SAP in emancipating the periphery.

The Alliance faces a conundrum here, should they advocate that Dharavi is recognised by the state for its economic efficiency and metabolic capacity? Therefore, making a case for its protection? Or should they advocate for Dharavi's rehabilitative upgrade to a safer, hygienic, and dignified vertical neighbourhood which will render paralysed its entrepreneurial vitality and metabolic capacity? And furthermore, risk structural unemployment for thousands of its occupants?

The former argument, internalises the distributive and recognitive injustices perpetuated by the neoliberal ambitions of the local and global core unto the inhabitants of the slum. It validates the idea that the economic competitiveness and metabolic efficiency of Dharavi is premised upon a certain degree of structural dispossession.

There is very little room for manoeuvre to formalise the work practices in Dharavi in accordance with progressive standards of safety, hygiene as well as labour and environmental regulations within these structures of dispossession, but the disruption of these structures will also disrupt the metabolic and economic efficiency that provides livelihoods for thousands of Dharavikars.

The latter, submits the life and the structure of the slum to what Foucault refers to as state's homogenising *techniques of power*. The state makes no official distinctions about the specific spatial, cultural, economic or social qualities of Dharavi and treats its diverse, multicultural community of variegated exergies and livelihoods as a two-dimensional collection of 'squatters' or 'slum dwellers' who require a paternalistic rehabilitating intervention dispensed from above.

The middle ground, where under a participatory enumeration process by SPARC, which captures the diversity of the slum, and the importance of multimodal housing which double as spaces of production might be the best compromise – but it contains elements of recognitive as well as distributive injuries *of* both previous approaches, among which is the tendency for a household to be defined by the occupation of its inhabitants, particularly in a culture of untouchability where one's caste is based on the perceived cleanliness of their occupation (Yatzimirsky 2013). Second is the sheer technical challenge of retaining the efficient horizontal logistics of Dharavi that relies on 'flatness' whilst restructuring the slum in vertical clusters.

The contention here is that any emergent bottom up push that is presented within the *recognitive bracket* of the 'slum' finds its operational capacity and room for manoeuvre immediately conditioned and restricted by both internal, and external prejudices attached to said identity.

To reiterate an earlier point, the synergies established by these alliances run the risk of being co-opted by the market and the state

(albeit with a human face), wherein the participatory process loses its emancipatory vitality, and becomes a depoliticized, amoral, tokenised process where the dispossessed, rather than being allowed to present a case for social justice, is forced to choose the terms of their own continued subordination – no meaningful expansion of room for manoeuvre or a sufficient multiplier effect is produced through this nature of participation.

Conclusion: Dismantling the Slum.

The spatial identity of the slum, becomes an all-consuming recognitive impediment which shapes and colours emergent struggles for emancipation, it creates a disconnect of empathy between those who reside in the city proper, and those who reside in Dharavi. It reduces the powerful emotive identity of a Citizen, or a Rights holder, to the largely state manufactured identity of a 'Slum Dweller'.

It is important to remind ourselves, particularly in rejection of the romanization of the slum – that no member of a slum dweller's organisation is driven by a desire to continue their existence as a slum dweller. These alliances and synergies form, always as adaptive responses to a life which originates from, and is punctuated by injustices. These are *received and internalised* identities, not enthusiastically embraced ones. These identities by nature, result in the exclusion of large masses of urban poor from the mainstream discourse of urban visioning and the right to the city. It defines individuals by the spatial characteristics of their dispossession.

The role of SAP in civic inquiry for justice and inclusion in uncertain and volatile times is not to reify and perpetuate these exclusionary identities in exchange for incremental distributive outcomes, but to dismantle these identities in order to elevate the public discourse on the *right to space* beyond an issue of the slum, to an issue of the commons.

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