# 8. Revisiting the Housing Question

The breeding places of disease, the infamous holes and cellars in which the capitalist mode of production confines our workers night after night, are not abolished; they are merely shifted elsewhere! The same economic necessity that produced them in the first place, produces them in the next place. - F. Engels in The Housing Question, 1872.

I was told about contractual jobs at BSES to take meter readings, and I was assured a position by the cousin sister who also works. I thought, I am going for an interview, I should dress up, and I did! I got matching suit and nail polish, and washed my hair, and put on makeup. However, when the official saw me looking so stunning and realised where I was from, he said in front of everyone, you are from the Jhuggi Jhopdi colony and want a job, you think you will be selected if you are looking so ‘hi-fi’. I felt very humiliated. - Bharti, long-time resident of the Ghevra JJ Resettlement Colony

We like living here, we have made this settlement what it is, this is our home. It has been for the last 30 years, we all have been part of turning this [spreading her hands around to suggest the settlement at large] into what it is now. We are proud of living here, just don’t call us the bloody jhuggi-walahs, slum-dwellers. - Praveen Bhaaji, long-time resident of Navjeevan Camp, Govindpuri.

I often wonder, these apartment-people keep saying move us, they complain about us, call us dirty and drunks, and treat us so badly...but if we are not there, who is going to wash their dishes, take care of their babies, do all the bloody menial work for them… - Nagma, long-time resident of Navjeevan Camp, Govindpuri.

We do not want to have a city with slums […] We’re working toward this goal, which is something that has to be achieved both on humanitarian grounds and in terms of beautification of the city. First, slum-dwellers have no place in a modern city and must often be moved so that new infrastructure can be built; second, destroying slums is a humane act. - Sheila Dixit, former Chief Minister of Delhi, 2002.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Reading these evocations in conjunction, it becomes evident that there is an obvious need for new concepts, methodologies and frameworks to capture the complexities of the newer forms of selves, inscriptions of marginalisation and its disenfranchising impact the newer forms of urbanites are producing. The Housing Question in the cities raised by Engels in 1872, at the turn of the century, is still as relevant and urgent, if not more, to ensure that both the idea of the city and the reality of its experience continue to be sites of transformative resilience and perhaps even propel towards the actualisation of the ‘right to the city’, as called out by Lefebvre, at the cornerstone of which is a highly-evolved sense of participatory and emancipated sense of ‘self’ of the urban citizens, including the urban margins.

In The Housing Question, Engels further insists that the significant improvement in the working-class tenements in the 19th century industrial towns was not on account of making living conditions for this class better, but in fact to allow them just adequate sustenance levels so as to assure their continued contribution to the exploitative processes:

Capitalist rule cannot allow itself the pleasure of creating epidemic diseases among the working class with impunity; the consequences fall back on it and the angel of death rages in its ranks as ruthlessly as in the ranks of the workers […] As soon as this fact had been scientifically established the philanthropic bourgeois began to compete with one another in noble efforts on behalf of the health of their workers.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Sheila Dixit, who reigned Delhi’s ‘Clean Delhi, Green Delhi’ campaign to put the city on the world map as a ‘world-class city’, particularly towards hosting the Commonwealth Games, 2010, was Delhi’s Chief Minister between 1998-2013. It was during her tenure that the city witnessed the highest number of slum demolitions in the city particularly towards the cleaning drive. Her justification of these demolitions on ‘humanitarian’ grounds resounds with the *‘philanthropic bourgeois’* attempts that Engels insists on; furthermore, the grander agenda of the ‘beautification of the city’ which justified these demolitions are in alignment of the tendencies highlighted by Engels in 1871 instead of being an aberration. The ‘politics of aesthetics’, invisibilizing the undesired bodies and spaces and the disciplining agendas that were subsequently instituted were not a particularity of the Indian neo-liberal urban spaces, post 1991 when the Indian economy was opened, but in fact characteristic of the very mode of production of capitalism.

The body of the slum dweller, or any identified urban marginal group, in the city is considered to inhabit illegal spaces. The notions of a ‘sacrilege centre’ inscribes on the bodies of and from the ‘vulgar margins’. These, in turn, systematically produces an anxiety about the ‘peripheral bodies’ in the urban imaginations thus impacting and effecting the entries of these bodies in otherwise reckoned democratic and open spaces. By employing overt, subtle, and insidious strategies, the imagined ‘peripheral bodies’ is subjected to civilizing and disciplining agendas. This violence [on these bodies]at an everyday level not only limits their agency to negotiate with the urban systems, but also lend to perpetuating and sustaining *similar* body politic of control and surveillance within their own contexts. And thus *spatial agency* as a basic right towards equitable urban futures to calibrate *space in the city remains un-actualized* when *space of the body* – as a fundamental assertion of one’s identity in the city – itself becomes ‘heterotopias of deviation’.

And here, the testimonies of Bharti, Praveen Bhaaji and Nagma, and similar accounts, which inform my position, further complicates the methodological approaches and interventions in addressing the housing concerns for the urban margins. The predicament of those on the urban margins - the slum dwellers, the residents of the resettlement colonies, the migrants, the homeless - is caught in the cul-de-sac of their bodies’ labour desired for the task that goes into the ‘beautification of the city’, and in fact in running the meticulous, exploitative machinery of the city, however the presence of these bodies evokes disgust. Thus: the space of the body of those on the urban margins and the body of the space (by the way of the sight of the slums, the homeless squatters and similar spaces) both are haunted by the spectre of precarity, vulnerability and illegality. Without taking into cognizance the lived experience and realities of the urban poor, the methodologies and approaches informing the housing policies and plans for the same will continually and cyclically endure the fate of Engel’s prediction of being ‘merely shifted elsewhere’. Bharti’s testimony from a resettlement colony is but an affirmation of this finding fruition.

Housing is not merely a matter of infrastructural concern. Particularly for the urban poor who are amongst the most marginalised and precarious constituent groups in the cities, the ease, access and availability of adequate housing is determinant in not only shaping their present but also securing their future and long-term aspirations. The existing approach is limited by the very *limited* manner in which it engages with the ‘real housing conditions’ for the in the cities. The future research design and focus needs to consider the capacities existing and needed to ensure sustainable, livable futures (with focus on housing demands/needs/conditions) in the city among the urban poor. And the manner in which housing issues impact not only the present but also actualisation of future aspirations for the informal sector in the workers. One of the key ways in which these research can contribute to policy discussions is by generating data sets, insights and understandings to inform and define parameters for what ‘livable and inclusive’ cities for this constituent section of the population in the city means. A key lacunae in understanding the ‘livability’ for the urban poor is the lack of, or very limited, insights available to capture the overall ‘well-being’ - social, cultural, psychological - encountered by the urban poor as articulated by themselves.

The lived experiences of the urban poor, more often than not, fail to find way into policy framing and considerations. The fault line lies not so much in the ‘intentions’ but the methodological and conceptual approaches which inform these studies. In my doctoral thesis, drawing on a five-year long ethnographic research in the Govindpuri slums, I proposed *listening* as a methodological intervention to engage with the everyday negotiations of its residents. It recounts the experiences and encounters of the slum-dwellers in relation to the space they inhabit. The fulcrum to engage with these narratives was the practice of *listening*, privileging what, how, when and why the slum-dwellers listen in and into. The matter of agreeing upon *listening(s)* as a trope of engagement with the slum-dwellers about their everyday was not intentional and strategic; instead whilst 'hanging around' the slums the intent, urgency and anxiety amongst the residents to articulate their sense of selves employing their own referential vocabulary was realised in their listening practices.

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In that sense: in my research I was not only keen on what the residents of the slums were *listening into,* but also – both as a methodological and political position – to privilege the ‘ears’ of the slum-dwellers.

These *listening(s)* of the slum-dwellers into their everyday practices also allowed insights into the wider social, cultural, spatial, emotional, sensorial and political cosmos of the slum. The importance is exaggerated as these insights about the slum-dwellers rarely find their way into the official *sarkari or* bureaucratic records. The *listening(s)* of the slum-dwellers then not only complements the readings of the official records but also complicates them. It does so by inserting and amplifying the *voice* of the marginalized, disenfranchised poor by considering and recognizing their position in the city, its broader urban planning policies and socio-cultural fabrics, as actualized, appropriated and critiqued by them. Insisting on these *listening(s)* also lends to a broader political mandate by extending a self-reflexive agency to the slum-dwellers, allowing them a platform to comment on what they make of *what* (by which I mean policies, popular middle-class imaginations, public discourse) is done to them. In short, whilst we know enough about what is done to the urban poor, these *listening(s)* **in fact** allow us to hear into what the urban poor do about what is done to them. The importance of these *listening(s)* is paramount in extending a ‘voice’ to the marginalized to identify and articulate their own demands depending on the lived experiences which continually expose their vulnerability of systemic, structural and immediate concerns.

The methodological framework of listening allows for these lived realities become a key focus on how poor communities organize and navigate precarity shape existing governance capacities and alter urban poverty as a way of life towards resilient, inclusive and sustainable futures. Towards truly achieving the mandate of ‘Right to the City’, it is essential to develop critical insights into whether spatial ‘access’ translates into the constituent population being able to accrue long-term material, social and cultural capital for a more consolidated ‘well-being’ in the city. The policy framing, actionable investments and future research needs to direct its efforts towards meeting the housing and living conditions for the urban poor in a holistic manner, such that this constituent group of city’s residents can also claim these spaces as their ‘homes’ with pride, dignity, self-respect and assurance.

The last two decades have witnessed the landscapes of the Indian cities undergoing significant transformations. For both the long-term residents and the newer-arrivals, these urban landscapes are at once sites allowing possibilities for realities and aspirations erstwhile unimaginable to be actualized and spaces where social, structural and systemic violence and discriminations are strategically reproduced and reinforced. The re-calibrating sites, processes and manifestations of violence, disenfranchisement and marginalization in the transforming urban landscapes also necessitate theoretical, methodological and political interventions towards the project of democratic, just and equitable futures for the city as spaces and sites of ethical cohabitation.

To end, perhaps at a polemical (and also pessimistic) tone, considering a disruption in the capitalist mode of production, which as Engels identified will only continue to reproduce the question of the housing for the urban poor, is not an imminent reality and which thus also limiting the actualization of the ‘Right to the City’ and thereby possibility resilient urban futures. After all, if there is an ongoing contestation of claims to spaces, identities and sense of ‘self’ for the urban poor in the manner in which they never really become ‘urban’, as identified by Lefebrve, in that, ‘they come to see participation not as speaking at a public hearing or serving on a citizens’ panel, but as the living struggle for a city that is controlled by its inhabitants’, how does one truly envisage extending the capacities to the urban poor to empower them into resilient futures?

And, here methodologically, I want to make a rather bold intervention: whilst it is of utmost significance to *listen into* the lived and experienced realities of the urban poor and to constantly employ innovative methodological tools to inform policy, there is also an urgent need to add another constituent group in the city in the endeavours of educating them: the middle-classes. Resounding through Nagma’s prescient question, *what will they do without us,* the middle-classes need to be made brutally cognizant of the fact that their modern, clean, sanitized, world-class claims and desires for the city will in fact remain a distant dream if the urban poor are not given dignified and equitable presence in their imagination, encounters and reality. It is only when everyone in the city is recognised as its *inhabitants* that urban resilient futures will be actualised.

Lastly, in revisiting the housing question which is yet to be realised, one cannot overlook the first, foremost and fundamental question: *for whom and towards what futures* are the Smart, World-Class, and Resilient cities being imagined?

The spectres that haunt the very livability of the urban poor are yet to be resolved, and which then compels the reckoning that instead of propelling towards smartness, beautification and resilience what is of urgency is to recognise across registers the complex and delicate manners in which conditions of precarity are intertwined such that the burden of resilient, ethical co-habitational spaces is a collective endeavour and responsibility.

1. Amelia Gentleman, ‘Poor Lose Homes as Delhi Clean up for Games’, International Herald Tribute, Paris, 2 January 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frederick Engels, *The Housing Question*, 1872. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)