Of Slums or Poverty
Notes of Caution from Census 2011

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The slum data in Census 2011 needs to be interpreted with caution on three counts: the correlation between the definition of "slum" and urban poverty; the dimension of quality when estimating access to basic services; and the question of why so few cities and towns report any slums.

"Slum residents have better access to drinking water and electricity than their counterparts in the urban non-slum areas", reads one of a swathe of reports on the release of a summary of slum data from the Census 2011.[1] Other reports suggest significant increase in both amenities and assets, suggesting either implicitly or explicitly that the gap between "slum" and "non-slum" is narrowing and therefore the conditions in which the urban poor live are improving. The numbers are indeed striking. They suggest not only far fewer slum households within cities than predicted,[2] but also document fewer towns and cities that report having any slums at all. Of a total of 4,041 cities and towns (whether census or statutory), only 2,542 report having any slums at all. One state – Manipur – in fact reports that no single town or city has any slums.

How do we read this data and what are its implications? This commentary sounds three notes of caution in interpretation and analysis: (a) questioning the correlation between the "slum" as defined by the census and the poor especially in the context of increased displacement of the urban poor within our cities; (b) adding dimensions of quality and kind to estimations of access to services like water, sanitation and electricity; and (c) assessing the surprisingly low number of towns and cities that report any slums at all. In doing so, we draw upon more detailed house listing data tables for slum and non-slum households recently published by the census office (Registrar General 2011b).

Census-Defined 'Slum'

First, let us make explicit an implicit assumption in the media reportage of the data: the slum is the appropriate spatial expression of urban poverty. If slums are doing better, therefore, so are the poor. A set of questions then arise: do the poor live only in "slums" as defined by the census? If not, then how does the census data capture marginalisation faced by the urban poor not counted as slum households? What does this mean for what the census data allows us to say about urban marginalisation with respect to access to housing and services, as opposed to slums?

This issue is especially important because of the way the Census 2011 has defined "slums". In a welcome move, slums are counted regardless of legal status or notification. Therefore, the Census 2011 enumerates:

- *Notified Slums* declared as such under any statute including Slum Acts.
- *Recognised Slums* that may not be notified under statutes but are acknowledged and categorised as slums by state or local authorities.
- *Identified Slums* "of at least 300 residents or about 60-70 households of poorly built congested tenements, in unhygienic environment usually with inadequate infrastructure and lacking in

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proper sanitary and drinking water facilities" that are identified by the charge officer and inspected by a nominated officer by the Directorate of Census Operations (Registrar General 2011b).

The Census 2011 breaks all counted slums thus: 34% were notified, 29% recognised and 37% identified. The largest category, therefore, are identified slums. It is here where we must question the census enumeration of the "slum". The National Sample Survey 65th round (2008-09) defined the slum as cluster of 20 or more households, nearly a third of the "60-70 household" cut-off the Census 2011 uses.[3] How significant is this shift in cut-off for the enumeration and possible undercounting of slums?

First, even a quick glance at city development plans (CDPs) that enumerate the size of slums show that a cut-off of 60-70 households could exclude many. In Chennai, 2001 data indicates that 48% of slums in the Chennai Metropolitan Area were below 50 households. A further 24% were between 50 and 100 households.[4] A large majority of slums in Chennai as per the 2001 measure may have grown in size to meet the 2011 Census definition, but it is also possible that at least a proportion of them has not grown and will therefore be excluded from the current census. Similarly, in Delhi, the 2001 CDP indicated that 31% of all slums had less than 100 households.[5] If even half of these were under 60, they would be excluded from Census 2011. To illustrate the wide presence of small slum clusters across classes of cities and towns, it is worth noting that Gangtok measures slums as clusters of as few as five or more households.[6]

The Planning Commission has also endorsed the 20 household cut-off. In a recent media interview, the Registrar General of India, C Chandramouli, agreed that such a shift in that threshold "is likely to increase the number of slum households across the country"[7] and by definition the number of towns and cities reporting the presence of slums. An important addition to his words is that the increase will also most likely be of the most vulnerable slums thereby significantly challenging the improvement trends being surmised from the current data.

Why could undercounted slums that are smaller clusters also represent an increased vulnerability? Indian cities, especially the metros, have seen a tremendous increase in cycles of eviction and displacement in the last decade (Bhan and Shivanand 2013; Dupont 2008; Patel et al 2002), among many others). Scholars have argued that cycles of eviction have broken erstwhile large slum clusters. Contemporary evictions have seen particularly low rates of resettlement. After an eviction, three kinds of households often find themselves most vulnerable: (a) those that do not qualify for resettlement or are unable to, for multiple reasons, find themselves on the official list of plot allocations and are thus rendered effectively homeless; (b) those who lack the immediate resources such as the required down payment for the licence or transport costs; or (c) those who are unable to survive economically in peripheral resettlement colonies and return to live in the city centre near employment sites.

It is this category of vulnerable households that, anecdotal evidence suggests, are now spatially clustered in the city as either homeless residents or in deeply vulnerable, scattered accommodations such as clusters of households along a railway line, behind a new stadium, or in an open space between buildings. Now in smaller, less organised clusters, their ability to mobilise political or other patronage to gain access to services is also further reduced. The implications of increased cycles of displacement thus could imply a change in the form of the "slum" itself from larger aggregated, clusters to small, fragmented and more mobile urban poor households. Recent evictions in Ejipura in Bangalore or Golibar in Mumbai are testament to the creation of such fragmented, smaller clusters of poor households post-eviction.

Looking at the "non-slum" category, therefore, becomes critical precisely to see if it captures poor households living in clusters housing fewer than 60-70 households or 300 residents. The presence of "semi-permanent", "temporary", "non-serviceable" households in the "non-slum" category testifies to the presence of such poor households that are not being captured within the category and definition of the "slum". For all of India, households in the non-slum category identified as "semi-permanent", "temporary", "serviceable", "non-serviceable" or "any other" comprise no less than 17.1% of total households. In absolute numbers, that is over 11 million households or nearly as many as the 13 million households counted as slum households.

In many states, access to amenities bear out the presence of many poor households in the "non-slum" category. For example, in Bihar (which reports slums in a surprisingly low 36% of all its towns and cities), 24.7% of non-slum households live in semi-permanent, temporary or non-serviceable housing; 27.4% defecate in the open, 27.3% have no access to drainage, and 46% do not have a separate kitchen – all factors that one associates with urban poverty and vulnerability. A quick survey of data from the states on a single point associated with slum households and urban poverty – open defecation and the use of public latrines – underscores the porousness of the definitional separation of slum and non-slum households. The all-India percentage of households using public latrines and defecating in the open totals up to 34% in slums, and 15% in non-slum areas, in particular, in the case of states like Bihar (46% and 29%), Odisha (52% and 30%) and Tamil Nadu (39% and 22%).[8]

It would be a mistake, therefore, to too easily conclude that a narrowing "slum" and "non-slum" gap indicates a reduction of urban vulnerability or poverty. Possible definitional exclusions as well as the reality of increased displacements leading to possible new spatialisations of poverty in Indian cities together imply that we must take care to separate the "slum" from the "poor" and consider what this separation means for the delivery of urban services, social security benefits and shelter.

Manipur Slum-Free?

Shifting the threshold for definitions and the similarity especially in poorer states like Bihar and Odisha in conditions of marginality between slum and non-slum populations also then puts into question the large number of cities

and towns that report "no slums". Only 14.4% of all towns and cities in Jharkhand report having any slums at all. The figure is 34% for Odisha, 28% for Uttar Pradesh, 14% for Assam, and Manipur, at the extreme, reports not a single town or city with a slum.

Amitabh Kundu recently paraphrased the opinions of the Registrar General's office as arguing that the "entire population in many of the smaller towns below 50,000 can be considered to be living in slums due to their poor living conditions".[9] Kundu argues that in a generalised condition of marginalisation, the slum/non-slum distinction is not only tenuous but the possibility of under-counting, particularly in the "identified slums" category becomes even more significant.

It is impossible to ascertain the extent of this bias and undercounting (if it exists at all) other than to suggest, as we did above using Bihar's non-slum household data, that marginality associated with slums seems to be vastly prevalent in non-slum households in states that report surprisingly low numbers of slum households. The danger in the possibility of undercounting entire towns and cities as having no slums is particularly worth noting if census data, as it is logically supposed to, becomes the basis for directing funding aimed at urban poverty and entitlements. While schemes like the Rajiv Awas Yojana (RAY) do not distinguish between notified and non-notified slums, they do rely on identification of slum settlements as the mechanism to identify and target beneficiaries. Will towns and cities that report no slums in the census still be able to access provisions under schemes like RAY?

Access and Quality

The other strong emphasis in media reports is in improvements in access to amenities and services in slums. The all-India figures for access to drinking water, latrines and electricity suggest a closing gap or, in one case, even better service access between slum households and their non-slum counterparts: (a) 65% of slum households have access to treated tapwater as compared to 61% in other non-slum households; (b) 66% of slum households have access to latrines within premises as compared to 85% of other urban households; (c) 67% of slum households have bathrooms with 37% of them having closed drainage and sewerage facilities as compared to 80% and 40% respectively in non-slum urban households; and (d) 91% of slum households have access to electricity as main source of electricity as compared to 93% of urban households. However, if our interest is in the impact of these services on vulnerability faced by the urban poor, we must both nuance the category of "access" as well as insist on considerations of quality of service delivery.

For example, how do we interpret the much touted empiric that slum households appear to have better access to treated water than non-slum households? This appears to imply that the delivery mechanism for treated water works better for slums as compared to other households. Two important points to be noted here are the number of households sharing treated tapwater connections and the real burden of the cost of these services on households. For the former, the interpretation of what the census measures as "access to treated tap water" in slum areas comprises in significant part of communal and shared taps. "Access" thus must be qualified as being shared across a number of households as opposed to non-slum households where it is highly likely that a significant proportion of households have individual connections (Centre for Science and Environment 2011). Detailed data tables for slum households indicate that nearly 29% of access is not within the households but "near from premises" and a further 6% is "far" from the household. Therefore, at least 35% of the slum households access treated water from a shared source outside their household.[10] This has significant implications for the quantum of water available for use per household in slum areas than in non-slum areas.[11]

Second, scholars have long noted the "poverty premium" for services where poor households pay a significantly larger percentage of their monthly income for basic services even if they pay lower absolute quanta than richer households. Even if access to shared water sources may well represent a real and welcome increase in access to treated water for poor households, without data on the costs of these services, the impact on their vulnerability remains under-explored.

In case of access to latrines, a further quality consideration is worth mentioning. The data suggests that 58% of all slum households have a "flush/pour flush latrine" within the household.[12] Yet only 48% have either treated or untreated tapwater within the household. The possible gap (of nearly 10%, or 1.3 million households) indicates households where a physically built flush latrine may or may not have sufficient water to function effectively.

Questions of quality and access together, therefore, seem to be prevalent strongly in both slum and non-slum households. Such an interpretation of the data rather than one that sees the "narrowing of a gap" can aid policies and programmes to better target actually existing gaps in access and quality of services. What the data suggest, as argued above, is that a geographical focus on slum households for interventions such as Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan in the Twelfth Plan may result in significant exclusions.

Finally, electricity access appears to have reached 91% of slum households as compared to 93% of other non-slum urban households at the all-India level. This is an encouraging figure though the fact that the Registrar General of India does not differentiate between legal and illegal power connections (Registrar General 2011a) possibly underestimates the importance of regularity, frequency and quality of supply, particularly within households supplied with illegal connections. However, system-wide supply crises aside, both anecdotal and empirical evidence do seem to suggest an overall increase in access to electricity.

In Conclusion

We have suggested three notes of caution in interpreting the slum data of the Census 2011. Our intention is not to deny possible and real improvements in access to amenities and assets for urban residents across income classes but to place into context the limits of such narratives of development and improvement. If the census indeed makes possible an

analysis of how these findings change with a lowered threshold of 20 (rather than 60-70) households in defining a slum, then the extent to which our caution is justified could become clearer. The thresholds are, of course, a matter of concern not just for exclusions of households within cities but also of the exclusion of entire cities and towns that report having no slums.

The new threshold, ironically, does allow us to see the possible emergence of a new spatial form of urban poverty that is not limited to or bound by the "slum" as defined and measured in this census but is far more fragmented, mobile and temporary. Read within the context of increasing cycles of displacement across Indian cities, the possibility of such new spatial forms demand more analysis and research particularly if they could impact the processes of implementation for programmes of urban welfare ranging from housing to service provision to public distribution systems and employment guarantee. Put simply: targeting the slum may increasingly not allow one to target the urban poor. If poverty and vulnerability are the question and object of intervention, the slum is perhaps neither the only answer nor should it be the only site of action.

Such a finding must also effect current debates on universal versus targeted delivery systems for urban welfare programmes and services. One strand of that debate has argued that entitlements could be universal within a geographical area such as a slum as a close proxy to effective targeting of poor households. Yet if the slum is no longer a strong spatial proxy of the poor, our argument would caution against such an assumption and lend support to arguments that favour universalisation of entitlements to minimise exclusions particularly of a new category of urban poor living in smaller, more mobile and possibly uncounted clusters.

NOTES

1 Ramachandran (2013), "Slums Have Better Access to Drinking Water and Electricity, Says Report", *The Hindu*. See: http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/slums-have-better-access-to-drinking-water-and-electricity-says-report/article4534286.ece

2 The Pronab Sen Committee, for example, had estimated 93 million against the 2011 Census finding of 65 million. See: http://mhupa.gov.in/W_new/Slum_Report_NBO.pdf

3 See http://mospi.nic.in/Mospi_New/upload/nsso/534_highlights.pdf

4 See City Development Plan (Chennai), available here: http://www.scribd.com/doc/7331980/CDPCHENNAI

5 See City Development Plan (New Delhi), available here: http://jnnurm.nic.in/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/CDP_Delhi.pdf

6 See City Development Plan (Gangtok), available here: http://jnnurm.nic.in/cdp-of-gangtok.html.

7 Rahman (2013), "India's Slumdog Census Reveals Poor Conditions for One in Six Urban Dwellers", *The Guardian*. See: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/22/india-slumdog-census-poor-conditions

8 See Statement 10 of Registrar General (2011b).

9 Kundu (unpublished manuscript), "Declining Slum Non-Slum Gap: A Sign of Inclusive Urbanisation?".

10 See Statement 9 and HH-6 of Registrar General (2011b).

11 Data detailing access within or near home for non-slum households is currently unavailable.

12 See Statement 10 of Registrar General (2011b).

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