Social Marginalisation in Urban India and the Role of the State

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ABSTRACT Urban inequality is a blight experienced by many cities, even in the developed world. In developing countries like India, these social and economic inequalities become even more pronounced, with living conditions in certain populations crossing the line to the abysmal. In these cities, agencies responsible for addressing welfare concerns are unable to do so, as they themselves grapple with a host of challenges. This paper argues that any positive transformation addressing urban inequities requires innovative governance. Using case studies of low-income communities in three Indian cities, this paper offers suggestions for key areas of governance reform. These imperatives begin with institutional strengthening, and include a recommendation for local institutions to engage non-State actors in the reform process.

INTRODUCTION

Cities anywhere in the world show tremendous diversity: in architecture, heritage, economic activities, transportation modes, languages, and a variety of social, cultural and religious customs and practices. Such diversity makes a city an interesting place to live in. And more than villages and small towns, a city provides its citizens with opportunity—not only in employment, but in their overall pursuit to rise above what they had been born into and achieve progress. Unfortunately, many city residents are unable to relish the full benefits of the diversity and opportunities that cities offer as, to begin with, they earn little income. Government support is also insufficient, leaving these significant populations to constantly grapple with difficulties in their daily living.

In urban India, social inequalities of various kinds are prominently visible. Villagers are relocating to cities in large numbers[1] primarily because rural areas are unable to sustain them. As rural economies continue to lag behind, and because, unlike in China, there are no legal restrictions[2] on change of residence in India, it is not only individuals but in many cases, entire families are migrating to more prosperous towns and cities. But such increasing concentration of populations in and around existing urban settlements—and inefficiencies in urban management and governance—is leading to poor quality of life.

People who migrate from villages are generally poor, illiterate and unskilled. Though they manage to find places to reside in their new city and land a job as well, their living and working conditions are extremely tough and their grievances are manifold: they live in unsafe houses situated in environmentally degraded areas; many fear forced

eviction from their homes; basic amenities are lacking; and those engaged in informal economic activities often face harassment and interference at the time of work. This, despite official policies and programmes in place designed for the welfare of the urban poor.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE PAPER

This paper argues that extreme social and economic problems observed among low-income communities in cities are due to deficiencies in governance. As such, any positive transformation in the lives of the marginalised, requires that the quality of governance be improved by adopting innovative approaches. This paper attempts to help build a better understanding of not only existing urban social inequalities but of the necessary corrective actions as well. Lessons learned in the conduct of this study should assist governments in formulating sustainable and pragmatic solutions for achieving development goals.

The following sections describe the various problems pertaining to the living conditions and livelihoods of low-income communities in three Indian cities, and the important lessons learned in the course of the investigations. An attempt is made at the end to suggest crucial reform areas for governments to reduce, if not eliminate, urban inequalities.

A case study approach has been adopted with field visits undertaken to three Indian cities, namely, Ahmedabad, Pune and Varanasi, between February and July 2014. These cities have been chosen for study under an ongoing project on 'Urbanising India' initiated by the Observer Research Foundation and the Peace Research Institute Oslo; this Issue Brief addresses the project sub-theme on urban governance. All three cities are situated in the economically rich states of India (Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat), as shown by their Gross State Domestic Product share in India's total GDP in 2014-15.[3] Each selected city presents a unique problem faced by the low-income groups that has attracted considerable national attention.[4] It is highly ironic that despite the good economic health of the states where they belong, significant populations are not benefiting by way of improved quality of life. Based on an understanding of the ground realities gained through field visits

and group discussions, attention is drawn to the fact that the life of deprived communities could be improved if the State and local entities play a more proactive role in financial management and in ensuring improved urban governance.

The description of problems is based on views collected from the communities through focused group discussions, as well as interactions with city-level government officials, academics, and non-government organisations. In the selection of localities from each city, consideration has been given to the following three aspects where problems have been observed, and localities prominently displaying such problems have been selected on the basis of site visits and in consultation with local experts (See Table 1).

- Rehabilitation of slum dwellers in Ahmedabad
- Quality of life in Pune slums
- Livelihood of handloom weavers in Varanasi

Table 1: Selected Localities for Focused Group Discussions

State	City	Locality	Local Area Characteristics
Gujarat	Ahmedabad	Odhav	Planned housing complex built at city periphery for slum dwellers displaced from city centre
		Ganeshnagar	Transition camp set up at city periphery for slum dwellers displaced from city centre
Maharashtra	Pune	Aannabhau Sathe	Slum situated at city periphery
		Indira Audyogik Vasahat	Slum situated in city centre
		Shivaji Nagar	Slum situated on government land along railway line
Uttar Pradesh	Varanasi	Bazardiha	Concentration of handloom weavers belonging to minority community living in unplanned area

For the focused group discussions, a representative group of about 30 persons was selected from each locality with the help of both local leaders and NGOs. Thus a total of 180 persons were interviewed.

Ahmedabad: Poor communities residing in, and engaged in informal economic activities for years along the Sabarmati riverbank have been relocated to other areas of the city to make way for a river front development project. This study examines the undesirable impacts of these government projects on the housing and livelihood of those uprooted.

Pune: The city has often ranked high on liveability indicators. However, the economically weaker sections remain excluded from these achievements. The quality of life of the city's slum dwellers is examined on the basis of selected liveability indicators.

Varanasi: Besides tourism, silk weaving is the other major industry in the city which employs a large proportion of the working population. The livelihood of many handloom weavers dependent on this industry is adversely affected by growth of power looms and exploitation by middlemen, and an attempt has been made to examine their situation more closely.

REHABILITATION OF SLUM DWELLERS IN AHMEDABAD

When a proposal to implement the Sabarmati river front development project[5] was announced by the municipality in 1997, it led to restlessness among the poor communities who had been residing along the riverbank in squatter settlements for years. Under the initiative—considered necessary by the government for improving environmental conditions along the river as well as the slum dwellers' quality of life—it was assured that alternative shelter and work spaces would be provided to the displaced population.

After initial delays caused by protests from civil society who were concerned of the project's impact, the riverfront work began in 2005. The area was gradually cleared of human habitation (about 120,000 hutments on both sides of the river) and by 2012, some parts of the promenade were opened for public use.

A study of this planned measure has shown that the concerned government agencies have failed in their promises towards the resettlement and rehabilitation of the affected economically weaker sections (EWS). Discussed in the following sections are insights obtained during visits and interactions with the affected populations living at two different places in the city, namely Odhav and Ganeshnagar.

Odhav lies at the eastern periphery of the city. Here, a four-storey flat complex has been built for the EWS. Some families previously living in slums along the Sabarmati river were relocated here in 2010. The housing complex is well planned with a boundary wall and entry gate. There are over 300 flats (each having two rooms, a kitchen, a toilet, and a balcony) which are connected by piped water supply, sewer and drainage lines, and power supply. Open spaces have been created for recreation.

A priority problem is transportation: public transport bus service is available at a long distance of more than two km. on a major road. This limits the movement of residents and creates other problems such as accessing basic services like health and education. Poor connectivity has also disturbed the livelihood of residents. Many people engaged in informal economic activities (such as sale of flowers) have reported a considerable drop in their daily earnings after being relocated from their original homes, which were more centrally located in the city. A second issue is the presence of an industrial estate in the neighbourhood. Residents complain that these factories, numerous and operating round-the-clock, are causing air and water pollution and emitting foul smells that make them worry. There is also a security problem, with reported misbehaviour by factory workers.

Inside the housing complex, poor environmental conditions are visible due to perennial waterlogging caused by chocked sewer and drainage lines and improper disposal of solid waste. Residents say that they are unaware of how such problems can be addressed as they have not even seen government officials visit the housing complex. These prevalent living conditions have made many other eligible families unwilling to relocate to the housing complex; many flats remain vacant. And those who have relocated, feeling cut off from their social circles and livelihoods, express a desire to go back to where they were uprooted.

Ganeshnagar is another area situated at the southern periphery of the city where the poor have been relocated. This is a case of temporary relocation for those who were not eligible and hence were not immediately provided a house under the EWS scheme. Here, a vacant patch of land was given to the people who have set up makeshift houses. During the author's field visit, it was observed that the inhabitants have used a variety of building materials, such as bamboos, bricks, plastic sheets and thatch. Many structures are connected with piped water and electricity supply. Besides the dwelling units, a community latrine and a community hall (both provided by the government) exist in the area. However, many basic facilities and services are lacking, including education and health services, sewer and drainage lines, and paved lanes.

People living in Ganeshnagar report numerous problems, priority of which, like in Odhav, is poor connectivity given insufficient public transport

services. The location of the settlement is also inappropriate due to the presence of a major open waste dumping site situated at a distance of only 1.5 km. Other issues include: lack of lighting along the main road; a community latrine in a sorry state; and overall poor maintenance of the settlement, leaving the area with, for example, untrimmed wild bushes.

QUALITY OF LIFE IN PUNE SLUMS

In Pune city, about 20.7 percent of the households are categorised as slum, which is home to some 690,545 people.[6] Slum statistics for Pune provided by the Census office are generally impressive, if compared to the average slum community (Figure 1). The data show the following: as many as 88.4 percent of the total slum households (HHs) are built of permanent materials; 77.3 percent of HHs are owned by the dwellers themselves; tap water is available in 98.8 percent, and latrine facility within premises in 35.8 percent HHs; and 96.2 percent of the HHs have electricity connections.

Figure 1: Condition of Slum Households in Pune
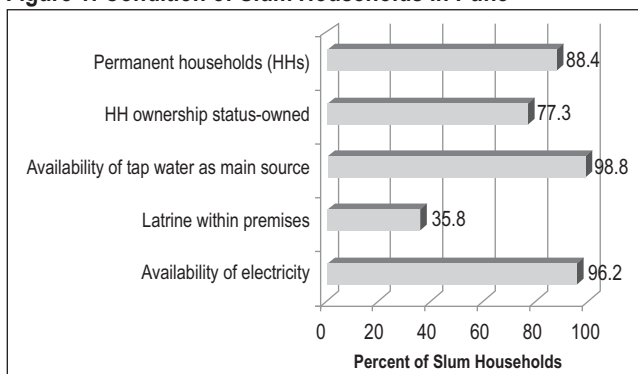
Source: Census of India, 2011.

The living conditions of slum dwellers were studied by visiting three slum settlements situated at various places in the city, namely, Aannabhau Sathe, Indira Audyogik Vasahat, and Shivaji Nagar. Interactions held with a representative group of residents in each locality led to certain observations.

While piped drinking water is available to the residents, water shortages are commonly experienced, along with low supply and contamination. In Aannabhau Sathe, the municipality meets the demand by arranging for deliveries by water tankers. For sewage disposal, underground lines exist but due to irregularities in

cleaning, blockages occur, leading to overflowing; conditions worsen during monsoon. Next, carelessness in the removal of solid waste by authorities was observed from the unhygienic environment near open dumping spots at the periphery of settlements. Toilets within houses are rare, and public toilets with water facility are provided.

Generally, these are in poor condition and not easy to use. Low number of seats in toilets for males and females is also a matter of concern. Internal roads and lanes are paved, but at some places the width is so narrow that it is difficult for two persons to cross at a time. Majority of the households receive electricity supply but at times the supply is erratic. At some places, street lights do not exist, leading to insecurity. Opinions sought on the quality of education offered in government schools and school infrastructure reveal that many parents are dissatisfied and thus prefer to send their children to private schools. According to some respondents, non-possession of identity documents creates difficulties in admitting children in government schools. People are also unable to receive quality care from government health institutions and often, patients are referred to private institutions, which are expensive. It is further learnt that because of unhygienic conditions, overcrowding, and poor ventilation, the incidence of respiratory illnesses has increased.

Another problem faced by the people is that commodities being sold in supposedly fair-price shops are much less than their entitlement and poor in quality as well. These include wheat, rice, pulses, sugar and kerosene. Many expressed willingness to pay more for better services from the ration shop. There is also a fear of eviction among residents of Shivaji Nagar slum situated near the railway station, if the government proceeds with its reported plan to build a shopping mall in the area.

LIVELIHOOD OF HANDLOOM WEAVERS IN VARANASI

For years, Varanasi's handloom silk industry has served millions of people: the industry has given livelihood to a large proportion of the local and regional population, and it has provided for the

needs of consumers from all over the world for silk fabric. Recently, however, a number of problems have emerged which have led to a decline in the industry and, consequently, the lives of the handloom workers. These challenges facing the community engaged in making handloom silk fabrics include the huge influx of cheap Chinese silk material, the threat from the Surat silk market, the changing tastes of the younger generation, and inappropriate trade policies.[7]

Discussions with handloom weavers living in Bazardiha locality of Varanasi revealed their concerns. A major threat to their livelihood is the growth in the number of power (electric) looms. Due to their weak economic condition, many weavers are unable to shift from handloom to power loom and thus fall behind in silk weaving and, thus, their daily earnings. Those using power loom earn, on average, up to 10 times more in a day.

The second problem relates to the price at which design cards are sold in the market. Weavers use computer-generated design cards to print innovative designs on the silk fabric. Each card normally costs INR300 (US$ 4.73) and lasts for two to three years. Many users say that the cards are being sold at a prohibitive price of INR900 (US$ 14.18). The weavers maintain that these cards should be made available at subsidised prices.

Weaving by handloom workers is done within the house. The weavers work continuously for long hours and are highly dependent on stable supply of electricity. Often, though, power supply is erratic, leaving the work at a standstill. A visit to some houses showed the weavers' harsh working conditions, including poorly built and serviced structures situated in unplanned areas.

Dissatisfaction was also expressed over the progress of government welfare schemes meant for handloom weavers. A handloom scheme was announced by the government as far back as in 2008 but the benefits did not reach the target groups. Again in 2014, an announcement was made for establishment of a trade facilitation centre and crafts museum to revitalise the traditional textile industry; this has yet to come to fruition. The workers suggest that social audit practices be used to ensure that such government schemes are implemented effectively.

DISCUSSION: LESSONS LEARNED

The study of living and livelihood conditions of low-income communities in Ahmedabad, Pune, and Varanasi has helped in creating a better understanding of the problems faced in these cities.

To provide for formal housing to slum dwellers in Ahmedabad, the Gujarat State government began the process of implementing the slum rehabilitation policy in 2013. However, the work relating to relocation and rehabilitation has not been carried out properly. For example, the planned EWS housing complex (Odhav) established at the eastern periphery of the city as well as the temporary relocation area (Ganeshnagar) at the southern periphery are both poorly connected by public transport with different parts of the city. Thus the mobility of persons of all ages for various purposes is severely impaired. Further, suitable employment activities and social facilities have not been created for the relocated population. Such conditions have made their living extremely difficult.

Various local institutions have previously described the difficult plight of relocated slum dwellers in Ahmedabad, such as the Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT) University, the Centre for Social Justice, the Indian Institute of Management, Saath, Unnati, and the Urban Management Centre. These groups have been closely monitoring the issues and working for the communities' welfare. Scholars interviewed by the author argue that the dislocation of the population from the riverbank was not required, to begin with—the people were deeply connected with the area in various ways, and the social and environmental reform initiative has disturbed their eco-system.

In Pune, the life of slum dwellers has been made complicated by ignoring many of their requirements for basic infrastructure and services. At one place (Shivaji Nagar), there is also the risk of slum eviction. The high extent of vulnerability of the city's poor in various social sectors (i.e., access to health, education, subsidised food, and housing) has also been discussed by the Pune-based Centre for Communication and Development Studies (CCDS) in their study of urban poverty and governance,[8] and by professionals of local institutions such as Mashal, Parisar, Pune University, and Shelter Associates.

In Varanasi, government schemes aimed at the upliftment of the lives of handloom weavers have largely failed. Despite these initiatives—such as granting identity cards, credit cards, and health insurance—many workers are struggling to make a living. First of all, weavers are often unaware of the government schemes due to insufficient publicity. The city-based People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights (PVCHR) has expressed concern over the decline of the silk industry due to a variety of reasons, including unbearable input costs and exploitation by middlemen. A situation analysis of the life led by handloom weavers by PVCHR reveals presence of abject poverty, chronic malnutrition, changes in profession, and incidence of suicides. It has also been projected that if timely interventions are not made, the handloom silk industry faces more hardships in the coming years.[9]

Failure in ensuring proper access to entitlements by the concerned authorities creates a general feeling of distrust in government. Such distrust can lead to unrest. This has been observed in Ahmedabad, for example, where the situation became extremely tense at the time of the slum demolition along the Sabarmati river because many families were not given a place to go prior to eviction. Anticipating conflict, the authorities deployed a huge police force.[10] With respect to Pune, Cantú[11] has identified a number of factors that, if left ignored, could generate spatial civic conflict, such as failure of government in reserving and/or acquiring land for low cost housing, slum demolitions and relocation to provide space for road expansion and parking, and lack of social inclusion provisions in the city's development plan. And in Varanasi, human rights activists caution that fundamentalist groups could exploit the unrest among handloom silk weavers to foment ethnic conflict.[12]

CONCLUSION

A study of the living and livelihood conditions of low-income communities in the three Indian cities of Ahmedabad, Pune and Varanasi, has revealed that their lives are deplorable. They live in society's literal margins—unable to access basic services, lacking connectivity to better opportunities, and working in squalid conditions to earn measly incomes. Such poor quality of life has had negative consequences, leading not only to economic, health and other losses, but also to the incidence of stress and conflict. These findings are based on discussions held with citizens and civil society activists during the course of this research.

It is understandable that many problems have emerged and grown over time because State and local government capacities were inadequate in the past and, accordingly, the response was slow and limited. Gradually, attempts were made to improve their managerial and financial capabilities. Yet the quality of governance has always remained a matter of concern because little progress has been achieved in strengthening government capabilities. Further, the governance processes have been constantly influenced by numerous internal and external forces.[13] Over time, the problems have acquired enormous proportions and the numerous pro-poor efforts now being made are failing to produce favourable results. Such problems of governance are observed across India and thus the impact of most development schemes has been sub-optimal.

The country's political leadership purports to be following an 'inclusive approach' to ensure that the requirements of vulnerable sections of the population are met. In the urban context, the use of this approach is observed in a number of sectors. For example in housing projects, previously both public and private agencies were required to earmark a minimum of 20-25 percent of developed land for meeting the housing needs of the urban poor. This measure was emphasised because of a 25-percent increase in India's slum population during 2001-11 as well as the growing housing shortage. More recently in 2015, the central government launched a "Housing for All by 2022" mission, under which financial assistance would be provided to State governments or para-statal agencies for providing housing to slum dwellers. In the mobility sector, lanes on major road corridors have been reserved for the smooth movement of public transport bus services in a few cities. In view of the enormous growth in the number of private motor vehicles and the resultant traffic congestion, the Bus-Rapid-Transit (BRT) initiative aims to empower (give right-of-way to) those people who are completely dependent on public transport services. In the field of elementary education, the law (i.e., Right to

Education) mandates all schools (government and private) to "admit in class I, to the extent of at least 25 percent of the strength of that class, children belonging to weaker sections and disadvantaged groups in the neighbourhood and provide free and compulsory education till its completion".[14] Similarly, a financial inclusion scheme (namely Jan-Dhan Yojana) was launched in 2014 which aims to provide easy access to financial services, such as banking/savings and deposit accounts, remittance, credit, insurance, and pension. It is envisioned that large proportions of disadvantaged and low-income groups, who have historically been denied a bank account because they lacked citizenship or identity documents, would benefit from the scheme.

As discussed earlier, previous experience in implementing various pro-poor policies and reforms has not been very encouraging,[15] and many inequalities, which could otherwise have been easily overcome, continue to persist. Therefore, it may be said that further improvements in governance are needed to reduce, if not totally eliminate urban inequalities in India. Specific aspects which require urgent attention are described in the following sections.

Since urban issues relating to housing, service delivery and livelihood are local matters, the State governments must ensure that local government institutions and para-statal agencies operating at the local level possess the necessary powers for decision-making, planning, financing and implementation, as well as the resources, technologies and skills for attending to the requirements of citizens belonging to various social and economic classes. Numerous efforts have been made in the past to create capable and fully autonomous local government institutions by way of, among others: establishing representative local governments; administrative, financial and functional devolution; capacity building; and financial, legislative and technological reforms. Unfortunately, however, due to numerous political and administrative hurdles, these initiatives have not led to their significant transformation. Other reasons include States' unwillingness to withdraw from several activities that are local in nature, and a lack of coordination between local governments and numerous para-statal agencies.

Due to inadequate capabilities, lack of clarity on the mechanisms to capture (shelter, service, and livelihood) vulnerabilities, and non-availability of reliable data, the local institutions are unable to plan and operate in a responsible manner. In this respect, it is observed that there is neither a realistic action plan, nor is sufficient attention paid to the problems reported by the citizens. During the author's field visits, many citizens reported that government officials and elected representatives do not even undertake visits to these areas. As a result, the needs of many communities (especially the underprivileged) remain neglected. Further, there is also the problem of local government employees not receiving their monthly salaries on time. Thus, before expecting the institutions to be accountable to the citizens, it is necessary to ensure that these are in a position to do the work that falls within their jurisdiction. Unless such matters are given greater priority by the higher levels of government, the ongoing sector-specific efforts will not lead to a desirable change in the quality of life especially of those living marginally.

Considering present institutional capacity and resource constraints, local government institutions in the country could also identify, involve and support committed non-State individuals and institutions so that these are able to successfully contribute to the government's reform process. There are many non-government and civil society organisations that are working for the welfare of poor communities living in cities. Their understanding of ground realities and their proximity to the communities can be extremely helpful in data collection, awareness generation, successful planning and implementation of development schemes.[16] In addition, training people (skill building) in a variety of fields (for example, food production and marketing, and micro enterprise) so that the needy persons are able to successfully set up income-generating activities would be a useful step in addressing the issue of poverty. In these endeavours, it would be ideal for the local government institutions to play the role of a regulator. ORF

organisations, academics, professionals, and government officials in Ahmedabad, Pune and Varanasi–the three cities selected for in-depth study under the project. Valuable comments have been received on the first draft of this article and the author is thankful to the anonymous reviewers. The article has been presented in part by the author during a roundtable discussion organised by ORF on 6 May 2015.)

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ENDNOTES:

1. The NSSO sample survey shows that nearly 57 % of urban migrant households migrated from rural areas (NSSO, Migration in India, 2007-08, NSS 64th Round, July 2007 to June 2008, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. New Delhi: Government of India, 2010).
2. As per Article 19 (1) (e) of the Constitution of India, "all citizens shall have the right to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India".
3. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.
4. The Wire, 'Ahmedabad is no city for the poor, says study', 12 June 2015; The Times of India, 'Slum rehab projects (in Pune) left the poor out: CAG', 13 February 2015; Rediff.com, 'No achche din for Varanasi's traditional handloom weavers', 9 June 2015.
5. The project aims to provide a promenade, parks and plazas, streets, sports facilities, amenities and development sites.
6. Census of India, Report on Housing Stock, Amenities and Assets in Slums. New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, 2011.
7. Promotion of free trade policies has been harmful for the weaving industry. This is observed from the freezing or declining of import tariffs, including tariffs imposed on textiles (Merinews, 'Banarasi sari weavers face poverty, hunger, 2 May 2013).
8. Infochange Agenda, Multidimensional Poverty in Pune, Excerpts from the CCDS Study, October 2014.
9. NDTV, 'Silk Weavers in Varanasi Hang on by Thread, Plead for Rescue', 4 May 2014.
10. Mathur, Navdeep, 'On the Sabarmati Riverfront – Urban Planning as Totalitarian Governance in Ahmedabad', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XLVII, Nos. 47 & 48. 1 December 2012.
11. Cantú, Liliana González, 'Spatial Civic Conflict in Globalizing Cities – The Case of Slum Rehabilitation, Pune, India', Master's Thesis, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands, 2010.
12. AsiaNews, 'Uttar Pradesh, Depression and Suicide among Silk Weavers because of Economic Crisis', 1 December 2009.
13. For example, under a JNNURM-supported slum rehabilitation project involving construction of low-cost flats for slum dwellers in Nigdi (a suburb of Pune), 141 applicants submitted false birth certificates and other documents to prove eligible for getting a flat. Learning about the incident from local residents, the Corporator asked the Municipal Commissioner to lodge a criminal complaint against civic officials for accepting fake applications (Times of India, 'Probe ordered into slum rehab project scam', 3 March 2013).
14. The Gazette of India, The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, No. 35 of 2009. New Delhi: Ministry of Law and Justice (Legislative Department), 2009.
15. Comptroller and Auditor General of India, Performance Audit of Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission. New Delhi: Government of India, 2012.
16. Observer Research Foundation, 'Social Marginalisation in Urban India and Role of the State', Report of Roundtable Discussion. 18 May 2015.