
Stories of Survival During and After Covid-19: A Study of a Slum in North 24 Parganas, West Bengal, India¹

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Urbanization often becomes problematic in the underdeveloped and developing nations with a huge population burden, like India. It produces shanty areas, both in the urban centres and in the periphery, which are marked by slums, squatters and extremities of poverty and uncertainty. In the case of Kolkata in Eastern India, the urban expansion is linear, mostly towards the northern Nadia district, through North 24 Parganas. This process is simultaneous to the haphazard growth of slum areas, especially adjacent to the railway lines. The railway stretch along Barrackpore via Barasat includes significant connections between the city's central business district and the suburbs. Kolkata, once the most populous Indian city with commercial, industrial and intellectual importance, experiences growing areas of urban activity and continues to have a strong influence on eastern India. North 24 Parganas, one of the densest districts of West Bengal, is linked to the Kolkata metropolitan area through the slums that continue to grow along the routes of transport networks. This article examines the findings of an empirical study carried out in one such slum area in the North Dum Dum municipality in order to understand local people's livelihood and the effects of the pandemic that jeopardised people's very existence.

Keywords: Slum, urbanization, wellbeing, Covid-19, unemployment.

“What matters most to the ordinary man and woman is their own well-being and the well-being of the people they love. In ethnographically varied settings, we find that the mismanagement of healthcare and public health is the ultimate litmus test for the legitimacy of the authority to rule” (Pardo and Prato 2022: 4).

Introduction

Whitehand (1992: 619) argues that “The suburb has been the focus of much physical change during the twentieth century — firstly in the development of new forms of extensive low density urban landscapes. Also, changes have been either at the small scale of personalization or the intermediate scale of housebuilding in the back garden”. In developed countries like the UK, the suburban landscape has been a subject of exclusive protection and management through legal restrictions on land use, building specifications and prescription on architectural style. In developing countries, suburbs became central to the city planners' decentralization efforts, paving the way for slums and illegal settlements.

A good administration is meant to manage efficiently land distribution and demarcation, be it in Delhi National Capital Region, in a city in California or anywhere else in the urban world. The management of Calcutta's urban activities, especially land use, has been used several times as an example since 1961.² At that time, small entrepreneurs were forced to locate

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² In 2001 the name Calcutta was changed to Kolkata. In the text, the name “Calcutta” is used when referring to the pre-2001 situation, and the name “Kolkata” is used for the post-2001 city.

their businesses in lower cost margins areas, as they could not afford the better central locations that offered the cumulative advantages of transport, power infrastructures and access to the largest wholesale market in the country. However, in 1961, suburban Calcutta had some of the highest productive areas benefiting from expanding good roads, railway lines, electricity connections and good labour supply (Dasgupta 1981). Therefore, these areas became primary locations for the rapid growth of suburbs, leading to the unplanned spread of slum areas.

The word “slum” was used for the first time in the early-19th century to describe certain locations of London that were known for their poorest quality housing and unhygienic conditions, and as breeding grounds for criminal activities and drug abuse (UN Report 2018). Slums may have been unwanted parts of the urban set up, but they soon became integral parts of cities worldwide, leading to the co-existence of rich and poor settlements. Slums soon became the focus of research; in particular, the concentration of urban poverty in these areas and the consequent deprivations, which are often associated with residential crowding, exposure to environmental hazards like fire outbreaks and water logging, and a proneness to social fragmentation and exclusion (Wratten 1995). Globally, access to safe drinking water, shelter, sanitation, proper sewage, education and space for children to play are some of the many unfulfilled needs in the urban slums (Dube 2015). As it is also powerfully exemplified by the case of contemporary China (Shin and Chen 2015), in Asian cities, slum areas are always marked by haphazard and rapid urbanization. In sharp contrast with other growing city areas, they lack the social amenities and physical infrastructures that are generally considered to be basic requirements for human wellbeing.

Indian cities include some of the world’s largest slums. Like Mumbai, which has its Dharavi, contemporary Kolkata has its Belgachia. As cities expand, local neighbourhoods come under the direct influence of urban plans that in many cases result in the development of pockets of slum areas in the suburbs. In other words, slums seem to be the unavoidable consequence of the failure of urban development to address the needs of those who move to the city during rural to urban migration peaks. Moreover, suburban expansion often promises better urban facilities at subsidized price to these dwellers but fails to address the greater distance these people have to travel. Most important, slums grow as informal settlements and, as they keep mushrooming, the word “shelter” acquires a special meaning in connection with “slum” and “squatter”. These informal settlements with temporary houses and little or no access to the basic necessities of everyday life are highly compromised in terms of durability, security, hygiene and aesthetics. The slum shelters are cubicles usually built with temporary materials like plastic sheets, old banners, sheets of old advertisements, etc. There, the unhealthy living conditions are distressing.

It is important to mention here that the UN 17 Sustainable Development Goals (2023) include urbanization and its management. Urban centres are growth engines, but it is important to strike a regional balance that takes into account those at the margins alongside the management of land use and building planning (Hanson 2014). Notably, the aforementioned problems in the Indian slums extend to women’s security and access to medical facilities during

medical crises. For instance, in the slums, the situation deteriorated during the Covid-19 epidemic and in its aftermath, as the precarious lives of those living there worsened significantly.

The Rationale of the Study

Kolkata is one of the most significant cities in West Bengal, given its cultural background, historical political standing and administrative expertise. West Bengal occupies 2.7% of the total land area of India and is the fourth most populous state in the country, with a population of 91.3 million, a fifth of which are still poor. By 2021, West Bengal's population recorded an additional 10 million, making it a "100 million" state. This high population density raises numerous challenges in terms of access to and quality of services.

In the post-colonial period, Indian cities witnessed the relocation of administrative functions from the centre to the periphery and the annexation of counties and areas of growth potentiality, leading to unplanned human settlements in industrial and commercial sites. West Bengal has experienced waves of migration since 1947 — initially, following India's independence and the emergence of East Pakistan; then, when the then East Pakistan gained independence and a newly formed country called Bangladesh was formed. The influx of migrants and the consequent settlements continues today, though the process is now gradual. This takes place in a situation marked by spatial inadequacies in the urban centres and in the peripheries and by the uneven growth of slums with poor basic services. There is an urgent need to address such pockets of disparity and ensure quality services for the slum dwellers and, importantly, for the wellbeing and development of women and children. The UN argues that, by the year 2030, 60% of the global population will be living in cities, and that in the coming decades 90% of urban growth will take place in the middle-income countries. It is reported that 95% of such growth will take place in urban areas, where more than four billion people will have to find accommodation, thus making shelter the most demanding issue (UN Report 2020).

Especially in highly populated states or regions, slums usually develop in areas with potential adequate access to public transport and well-designed urban facilities, including walkable (and bike-able) streets. In order to be effective, I argue, urban planning measures need to be inclusive. From this perspective, I studied with a team of researchers a slum area named Sharda Para, ward number 18, in the jurisdiction of Uttar Dum Dum municipality of North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal with specific reference to two major issues. First, we wanted to understand the socio-economic conditions of the local dwellers. Second, we wanted to understand how they had coped during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This kind of empirical study is important also in view of worldwide interest among researchers in understanding how the marginal population is coping in the post pandemic phase. It might be objected that several studies have been conducted and the question may be raised as to whether there is any requirement for further research. In my view, however, it is important

to focus on the conditions experienced by economically challenged communities during medical emergencies.³

Indian slums are always a topic of discussion when looking at failed urban planning and at the social initiatives undertaken by the government. Notably, although the suburban land area of Kolkata city enjoys road and railway networks, the haphazard urban growth remains untamed. Slums are often considered the products of failed policies, bad governance, corruption, inappropriate regulations, growing population and, of course, of economic imbalances with multi-level disparities. In the case of Kolkata city, there are around nineteen wards marked as “no-slum areas” plus, concerningly, fringe areas dotted with slums and haphazard squatter settlements. It could be argued that a micro level study like that conducted on the livelihood of slum dwellers in Shardar Para may help to draft comprehensive measures that would help to address the problems on the ground.

Historical Facts

Calcutta (now Kolkata) was a commercial city with flourishing trading activities, where both Europeans and Bengalis (specifically, Indians) made their fortunes in the late-18th and early-19th Centuries. With the expansion of the textile trade, the East India Company identified Bengal and Calcutta as areas with great investment potentialities. The major items of trade were granaries, muslins, silk yarns and saltpetre. Back in 1698, the city evolved with the transfer of zamindari rights (land revenue rights) of the villages of Sutanuti, Gobindapur and Kalikata to the British. Sutanuti was predominantly a small market centre for trading cotton and yarns (Suta means yarn). Gobindapur was a small village named after the temple of Gobinda or Vishnu. Kalikata was a place of trade and pilgrimage linked to the goddess Kali, a black-skinned deity (Roy 2019). Since then, the city has witnessed an urbanization evolved out of villages, hamlets, estates, gardens, and sites near rivers. The dominant, abrupt waves of urbanization that swept the “not-urban” areas were more prevalent during British colonization of Asian cities (De Meulder et al. 2014). For most of the 18th Century, the rural economy in India was uneven and substantially marked by political disorders. This was prominent in the Bengal region, which witnessed the dominance of the Mughal empire and was the place of trade for the English East India Company. Murshid Quli Khan, a Mughal officer, established the autonomy of Mughal power, increasing the revenues collected at the provincial level. Later, the urban development efforts made by the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization included pioneering ventures like the Bustee Improvement Scheme in some specific wards (Alavi 2007). Similar plans for slum areas exist today to provide water taps, sanitary toilets, drainage, street electricity, bank loans for small non-institutional producers and special nutrition programmes.

Kundu (2003) classified the Indian slums into three groups. First, the older slums, which were established around 150 years ago and are mostly located in the central part of the city. Second, the slums that arose as a result of the rural to urban migration in 1940s and 1950s, soon

³ Channa (2020 and 2022) points to significant urban inequalities that emerged in Delhi during the Covid-19 lockdown.

after the partition of eastern segment of India, and that were located close to the industrial sites and transport networks. Third, the slums that emerged after 1947 in empty areas along roads and canals. This third category is the concern of the city planners.

The Study Area

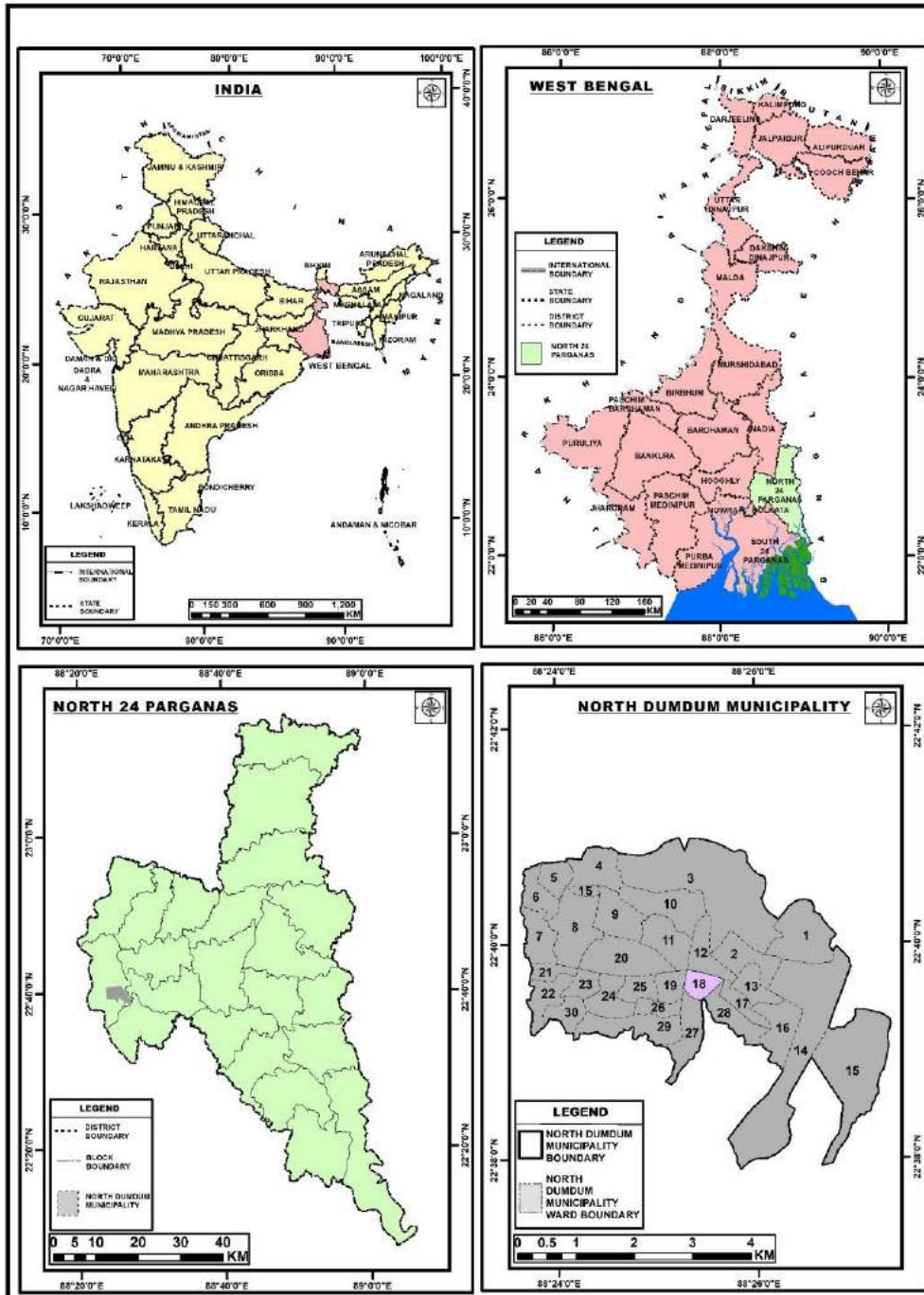


Figure 1. Location of the Study Area

As mentioned earlier, the slum where this study was conducted is located in the North 24 Parganas Municipality; that is, the ward 18 adjacent to the railway tracks off the Barasat segment. The district of North 24 Parganas stretches between latitude 22° 11' north and 23° 15'

north, and between longitude 88° 20' east and 89° 05' east (Figure 1). Barasat is the district headquarters and the most prominent urban centre in West Bengal. North 24 Parganas is the most populous and the tenth-largest district in West Bengal, and is the second-most populated district in the country, after the Thane district of Maharashtra (Census of India 2011, Paul and Chatterjee 2012). When India achieved its independence in 1947, the Calcutta metropolitan area had a large number of slum areas, due to a large migration of people from Bangladesh. At that time, Calcutta sheltered a large number of manly male migrant labourers (including white collar employees) from the western and eastern hinterland (Ramaswamy 2023).

Methodology

The present study included three phases. During the first phase, the area of study was chosen. This was a challenging task. The plan was to survey an area where marginalized people would be the primary respondents, with special reference to how they adapted to the challenges of the pandemic. This would form an integral part of the study. The chosen slum area is adjacent to the railway tract situated in the North Dum Dum municipality jurisdiction. Once the study area was chosen, some secondary level data were gathered, including the latest census reports — that is, the Census of India of 2011. Then, the forthcoming research was organised and scheduled, and the structure of the in-depth study of the slum dwellers was drafted and explained to the team. These two phases marked the pre-fieldwork study. The next stage was conducted in the field. We collected the answers to an array of questions alongside opinions and discussion of key issues with the local dwellers, which threw light on many concern areas, including the problems that they faced during the pandemic. Explorations were also conducted in order to understand from within the land use in the slum area and the living conditions in relation to basic parameters of hygiene, safety, security and gender related privacy.

The concluding phase of the research was post-fieldwork, involving the categorisation and in-depth analysis of the empirical material. This phase was challenging for two reasons. First, the data gathered in the field demanded a proper assessment of the findings and the identification of the most appropriate analytic tools. Second, different from the quantitative gathering of data, during the interviews that marked the qualitative part of the fieldwork several problems faced by the respondents came to light. This suggested that a better understanding of the findings in this slum area would require careful consideration in combination with the analysis of the statistical data.

Results and Discussion

Sir Brian Berry (1964) developed his view of urban activities with the assumption that there is a close association between the level of economic development of a country and the degree of urbanization in that country. This association is mirrored by the growth of haphazard slum areas and squatter settlements as evidence of ineffective urbanization.

During the first part of our study, when we mapped the demographic conditions of the area, we found that 6000 people resided in the Ward 18 of Uttar Dum Dum Municipality

(Census of India 2011). We also found that, according to this source, those living in slums account for almost 29% of the total population of North Dum Dum municipality. Following this, it may be inferred that around 1700 residents in this Ward are slum dwellers out of which around 8% slum population are surveyed (Plate 1).



Plate 1. Households in Shardar Para Slums

We carried out a detailed study as we believed that it was important to grasp the composition of the slum population before going into the field. As statistics on the slum population were not readily available, we surveyed around thirty households and studied over 100 local people. The surveyed population included a more or less equal proportion of male and female individuals. Also, there has been reportedly equal distribution of general population and of those belonging to Scheduled Castes. Most of the families under study belonged to the Hindu religion. A few were Muslims. The majority of male and female residents fall in two age groups: 15-30 years and 30- 45 years; there are few male and female dependants younger than 15 years and older than 60 years. Those younger than 15 years were predominantly female.

We also recorded people's occupation, education level, access to education during the pandemic, access to internet and possession of a mobile phone, a television, fans, etc. The majority of slum dwellers live in small semi-permanent houses with single to double rooms, and they use both LPG and wood as their source of fuel for cooking and heating. Wood is indeed frequently used here, including during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is very important to note, because using firewood may increase the risk of fire-outbreaks. The study area included 130 respondents residing in 27 households, meaning that around five family members would reside in less than two rooms in clear breach of the norms of social distancing imposed during the pandemic.

As we moved to the second phase of our research, focusing on the situation during and after the pandemic, we found that each respondent had much in common with fellow slum dwellers. Each had a story to tell, each experienced utter distress, many lost their jobs and lost people close to them. Many local people are toto (E-rickshaws) and rickshaw pullers, who complain about having little or no passengers during lockdown. Rakhi Mondal, who is 22 years old, says that

“[her] husband was a daily paid worker in a roadside small restaurant. He lost his job during lockdown [...] then, he occasionally pulled the rickshaws of one of his friends [...] However, losing his job made him depressed, alcoholic and disturbed.”

Rakhi, though, was too shy to admit that she was also brutally tortured by him both mentally and physically. She is now pregnant with her first child and fears that she would not know what to do if such a situation should happen again. The family hardly used gas as fuel; instead, they used cheap wooden logs for cooking and other purposes.

During lockdown, many local dwellers who worked as domestic helpers faced loss of jobs and salary cuts. This worsened their situation because, as they are mostly educated at primary or secondary levels, they found it hard to find alternative employment opportunities. While women generally work as domestic helpers, men are engaged in activities like rickshaw pulling and selling goods in rented shops or small garages. Many are employed as occasional workers by seasonal vendors.

Women are prominent in tailoring activities, working in tailor shops during festivals and doing stitching and embroidery work. Women also occasional work as cooks in several roadside hotels. Such irregular employment became worse during the pandemic, leading to further deprivation and poverty. Fatima Biwi, a 32-year-old woman who worked in a small tailor shop near Birati railway station, has received little or no stitching orders for the last two consecutive years, even during festivals. She, a mother of two, works also as a vegetable seller. In her own words,

“Every morning, I woke up at 4:00 AM [...] collected water in two big drums from the tap for domestic uses, then cooked rice for my children [...] and left to get vegetables from the trucks and vans near Birati station. I carried the vegetables to the moving van and sold them in neighbourhood. However, I constantly worried about my two daughters, Rihana (who is 16) and Munni (who is 11), who were left behind.”

We found that the local sanitation facilities are mostly privately owned, few are public. However, only 63% are well built and permanently structured while quite a few are poorly built with roofs made of plastic sheets tied together with plastic ropes (Table 1 and Plate 2). Such plastic covers are suffocating.

Sanitation Facilities	Kutcha (Poor-built)	Pacca (Well-built)
	10(37 %)	17(63%)
Ownership	Private	Pubic
	18(67%)	9(33%)

Table 1. Sanitation Facilities and Ownership of Toilets



Plate 2. Public Toilets

Each family in the slum had mobile phones and the majority of households had internet connections. Further studies were conducted to correlate by age groups the ownership of mobile phones with access to internet connection. This was an important indicator of the local situation about education. We found that 30-45% of local children (between 0-15 years) had access to mobile phones and almost 50-60% accessed internet connections using the phones of their parents or guardians. This helped them to gain access, and get used to, the online education provided by the schools that they used to attend before the pandemic. However, it should be remembered that the online classes did not take place regularly. The schools gave weekly assignments through chat messages; the assignments were then submitted for assessment at regular intervals. One family confirmed that their children made irregular visits to the school to collect homework and books. The children of another family took the online assignments and also visited their school. However, three families mentioned that they did not use any of these facilities and seldom pursued education for their children. Today, although schools have gone back to normal, many children do not attend regularly due to their families' financial crisis (Table 2). It should be noted that the findings of this study not only highlight the cases of children who were unable to continue their education during pandemic, but also bring out situations like that of those three families that could not afford their children's education due to financial crisis or lack of commitment. This problem at the micro-level often remains unattended.

Social Amenities	Phones	Internet Connections	Television	Fans
Families	25	21	19	27
Slum Children availing education during Covid-19				
Students	On-Line	Weekly visit to School	Hybrid	Did not Attend
Families	22	1	1	3

Table 2. Amenities and More

There is, among some respondents, a mildly positive correlation between monthly income and expenditure, pointing to an increase in expenditure corresponding to an increase in the income. However, it should also be noted that an increase in monthly income does not always lead to an increase in expenditure and that the most respondents belong to the low-income expenditure group. In spite of local people's generally low income, they managed to survive during the pandemic thanks to the aid provided by the government at municipality level.

When social distancing was imposed, it was almost impossible for local people to follow the rules. There is a single water tap located in the slum's central area. The Poisson distribution of the round the clock single day data reveals a large number of dwellers gathering near the tap to collect water. Of course, water tap maintained by the municipality are life savers for the slum dwellers and access should be available both during and after the pandemic. Clearly, however, during the pandemic it was impossible to maintain social distancing. The distribution also shows day-long queues, with an average 18 people visiting the water point each hour. Similar stories were common in the Asian slums; Sharda Para is no exception (Plate 3). During the pandemic, all the slum areas of Kolkata were particularly vulnerable and were declared zones at high risk of virus transmission, especially in light of the fact that social distancing was unlikely to be maintained. Regular checks of body temperature and sanitation were among the few preventive measures undertaken (MIT Report 2020, TOI Report 2020).



Plate 3. Gathering near a Water Source

We put to the respondents a series of open-ended questions which highlighted the problems that they faced. It emerged that all the surveyed households experienced a combination of serious problems. We know that this slum, like others in Asian countries, lacks many basic amenities like access to potable water, good sanitation facilities, living areas, and long-term housing and security of tenure. The Covid-19 phase exacerbated these problems adding further uncertainties. People were forced to adapt to the distressful changes caused by the break out of Covid-19 in the country. To sum up, all respondents reported salary cuts and unemployment as a consequence of the pandemic. They also faced an inadequate supply of staple food, clothing and experienced medical and health emergencies. As they lost their jobs,

they switched their occupation and became temporary sellers and those who owned rickshaws and E-rickshaws used them to transport the goods. The slum area lay opposite multi-storied residential houses. Because of the implementation of pandemic-related safety measures, most female slum dwellers who previously worked there as domestic helpers lost their job; many shifted to work as vegetable sellers. As rightly stated by Prato, the “Pandemic Ruptures” are deeper than they actually appear and long healing period may be the only way out (Prato 2022).

Challenges and Limitations of the Study

During the study, we encountered several challenges. Initially, there was a low response from local people, who were reluctant to cooperate. It took time and effort to communicate the need and purpose of the study and gain local acceptance. The slum dwellers were also sceptical about the schedule of the interviews. Gradually, these challenges were sorted out but there remained a lack of response regarding certain aspects of the questionnaire; particularly, the income status of the surveyed families. However, we later managed to quantify this aspect using parameters like housing status, occupation types and ownership of amenities. We also re-disintegrated at data point level the income and expenditure-based data, which were grouped for the initial analysis in order to gauge local people’s economic situation. These difficulties complicated and lengthened the process of analysis.

Recommendations

For planning and especially social purposes, the micro-level approach offers a clear and in-depth picture of the area under study and its problems; the major drawback is that a micro-level study is time consuming and geographically limited. Yet, it must be considered that the slum that we studied houses a considerably large number of people who are classified as *marginal* and struggle daily for their existence. Of course, each slum area has a story to tell, but most share issues of low job guarantee, inadequate medical facilities and lack of access to online education during the pandemic. Problems like low school attendance both online and in person could be addressed directly by government officials, especially in view of some local families’ unwillingness to send their children to school. As we have seen, the major problem is access to water for drinking and other purposes, given the limited number of water taps provided by the municipality. In view of what happened during the pandemic, when it was impossible to keep social distance at the overcrowded water collection points, it is imperative that an increased number of water collection points should be put into place; especially, in order to avoid the risk of congestion in case of future medical crises. Also, during the summer, the water table hits rock bottom and tube wells become useless.

Biswakarma Das, who is 65 years old, has lived in this slum for the past 20 years. He used to be a construction worker, who came to Kolkata from Puruliya (an underdeveloped district in West Bengal) to earn money. He lives with his wife Niru (54). He said,

“during lockdown, it was too tough to wait in line for hours to collect water [...] my wife has severe knee pain (it may be osteoporosis), and queuing there was beyond her ability”.

Biswakarma Das lost to Covid-19 his only brother, who resided in a nearby slum area.

The interview extracts from this slum of suburban India resonate with the case of an Italian stall keeper who said, “Market’s shut. I can’t work. No one is helping. Savings are dwindling. My children and wife are barely coping. Nerves are frayed. The neighbourhood is dirtier than ever. Yeah, we’ll be all right indeed!” (Pardo 2022: 20). What an irony! The story is same: people suffered, they endured, they stood against all odds with the fear of falling apart.

Table 3 below shows some observations in a summary sheet. We see that amongst the 123 respondents the minimum monthly income is as low as 100 rupees and the maximum income is around 5000 rupees. The monthly expenditure is recorded from low to high. As I have mentioned, there is a positive correlation between the respondents’ income and expenditure. More than 50% of the respondents are rickshaw pullers. The mean age of the slum dwellers is 24, including people who could be brought under several government schemes of skill development and technical training, which would lead to well-paid jobs. Take the case of Bablu, a 23 years old man who before the pandemic worked at a nearby petrol pump. Then, he remarked, life was simple but, as Covid-19 hit, he lost his mother from the infection, lost his job and spent the whole day doing small chores like delivering oxygen cylinders from the clinics and pharmacies to the houses of the affected, risking his own life in the process. He is now working as a security guard in a nearby apartment block and plans to take part in governmental (or private) hands-on training courses as a hospital assistant.

Indicators	Count/Values	Description
No. of Observations	27 Households	Sample
	123 Persons	
Minimum (Monthly Income in INR)	<100 (Often Nil)	Variable
Maximum (Monthly Income in INR)	5000	
Minimum (Monthly Expenditure in INR)	300	Variable
Maximum (Monthly Expenditure in INR)	6000	
R (Correlation Co-efficient) between Monthly Income and Monthly Expenditure	0.50	Moderately Positive
Major Occupation Category	52.00%	Rickshaw Pullers
Maximum Respondents Count	22	(15-30) Years
Mean Age of all the Respondents	23.4(24)	Youth

Table 3. Some Observation Summary

In the aftermath of the pandemic, any kind of slum development project should take into account the importance of establishing good connections with the rest of the city and of creating opportunities through in-situ infrastructural provisions. Opportunities should be created for income generation by enhancing local employment, social security and the proper management

of land tenure. These would be some necessary measures that would help to transform these slums into viable, vibrant and peaceful neighbourhoods (UN Report 2021). As Prato (2020) has aptly observed, “the pandemic has not only revealed how disparities rendered some people more vulnerable than others, but has also aggravated existing inequalities and generated newer injustice.” (Prato 2020: 4; see also Pardo and Prato 2021).

Conclusion

When writing an article, the concluding section is often the toughest. As an author, I believe that, where appropriate, one should engage in suggesting ways to improve the situation under study. Thankfully, in this case, the situation has improved in the post-pandemic scenario and the local residents are regaining their confidence, though they worry about what will happen, should a similar medical emergency occur in the future. They know that they would be the first and worst hit and express their fear that a second period of intense suffering would be beyond their endurance. Such an occurrence would, however, be made less dramatic by government initiatives at central, municipality and ward level to bring, say, water facilities throughout the local settlement, provide training for jobs like para-medical care giving, etc. Such initiatives could have two objectives. First, to put local people in a position to switch seamlessly to employment compatible with lock-down regulations. Second, to implement training for such jobs before the occurrence of medical emergencies, when the demand would be higher.

Our empirical study has shed light on the daily struggle of the marginal population. It seems strange that architects, geographers and planners work separately, which ends up aggravating the problems faced in urban areas. It has been pointed out (Larkham 2006) that, as the demand for land in the peripheral part of Kolkata increased, so did the pressure on built-up areas, raising issues of infrastructure, water sewage, ground water, road networks and natural resource (Kanaujia 2015). This is further indication that slums, their growth, urban infrastructure, the provision of cheap housing and environment conservation cannot be bundled together. In Indian cities the utmost priorities are, on the one hand, engaging in sustainable efforts to bring about a balanced urban development that includes a minimum number of slums and, on the other hand, providing basic services to those who live in the existing slums.

A city's resilience is measured by how its people are protected from calamities; where the collective word ‘people’ includes not only the *rich* but also the marginals (Carbone 2022). Planning for sustainability, creating liveable, equitable and economically viable communities in a city structure is not an easy task (Wheeler 2013). The Shardar Para slum is not an exception; it exemplifies a story widespread in the Asian slums. The combination of excessive growth of population in already distressed megacities and inadequate planning has produced unsustainable conditions. As Caldararo (2020) has argued, Human society has been significantly affected by the social isolation regulations, the lockdowns imposed during the pandemic, the associated economic instability and by the inability of many nations to provide healthcare and effective response to the pandemics.

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