

# Mumbai 2006

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By Tom Wiperman



The Mumbai elite still refer to the city by its old, colonial name of Bombay, looking back with severely rose-tinted glasses on the height of the British Raj and the order and rationality that period brought to this energetic, sprawling town. They forget, of course, that had they lived at that time they would have been second class citizens in their own land, excluded from the exclusive parts of the city from which they themselves now exclude others. Yet this sums up Mumbai, a city of contradiction, cacophony and chaos. From top to bottom and across the whole landscape, inequality, disadvantage and exclusion reigns.

Without being dropped into the middle of the Fort Area, or pushed out of Leopold's air conditioned calm into Colaba, it is impossible to fully appreciate the force with which Mumbai hits a newcomer. The noise is unbelievable – taxis honking, street hawkers hollering, little children crying – it overtakes all the other senses, shutting eyes to the sights and noses to the smells as decibel after decibel pounds into the mind and shakes the body awake. Only when one has recovered from the aural assault can they really appreciate the dusty, bright landscape of Mumbai in May. Immediately, the endless lines of slum houses crammed into every conceivable space (and some into inconceivable spaces) is thrust into sight, images familiar to many outsiders yet experienced by so few. The smells hit next – a mixture of turmeric and cardamom, diesel oil and stagnant water, a child's shit following out of a bag flung on the road side and marigolds slung together as garlands. Mumbai grabs you, flings you the air and then fails to catch you as it throws its hidden secrets around your mind. It is a collision of everything, and the aspiring development practitioner is added to this manic circulation before taking five breathes of the petrol stained air.

The calm of the SPARC offices was a welcome respite following this lightening introduction. SPARC (the Society for the Protection of Area Resource Centres) is tucked away in a small corner of Muslim Mumbai, surrounded by mosques, rubbish tips and an undertakers with the welcoming sign 'coffins will be issued free of charge to any people any caste indeed no relation'. They have developed over the last couple of decades into an influential and innovative organisation running a wide development portfolio. They work to re-house pavement and railway dwellers, and demystify the realities of these people's lives to policy makers, and also work on women's saving groups and sanitation provision for the slums. Mumbai is a city of slums: 60% of the population live in informal settlements, and Dharavi, with a population of 1 million people, is the largest slum in Asia.

With cups of sweet, cinnamon cha, we were introduced to SPARC staff and the work that they do, and some of the major issues facing the urban poor in the city. Some things were striking. For example, Mumbai still has a rent act left over from World War Two that fixes rents at their WWII

level, with new builds until recently having to fix rents and not being able to change them at all, even with inflation! Alternatively, the city – with a population of some 12–15 million (about the same as Sweden) has not an independent level of governance, and is instead managed by the State of Maharashtra. Some of the problems it faces can be understood a little better in this light.

SPARC's work began with women's savings groups, a method of building networks and communities of women that served to bring people together and so create the social capital for further development work: this is a long process, and the first pavement dwellers to move into permanent housing had been connected to SPARC for some twenty years. The commitment that the staff as well as the people themselves have had can be breathtaking. Such determination to bring change, and the perseverance to see it to its end is a rare quality.

On the sanitation side, SPARC has completed ambitious plans to build toilet blocks for some of the city's poorest people. These may not meet the luxurious standards that most students are used to, but the difference between these 'pay and go' blocks and that which the city did provide is enormous. The addition of a caretaker, a teaching room or meeting room, privacy for people and separate male and female areas has made a major difference to many people's lives. It has also enabled communities untouched by either SPARC or the National Slum Dwellers Federation, with whom they have relationship, to be incorporated into the movements for change. With dialogue, action comes and already there is major momentum for expanding toilet block provision in the slums with an upscaled roll out.

Visitors can only be left with a mixed sense of respect, admiration, anger and despair. The achievements that SPARC have made are big, and their dedication to the task is awe inspiring. At the same time, the vastness of the challenge is awful: four-fifths of slum dwellers still require sanitation provision. That this is tolerated and so overlooked brings this anger and left most participants with a sense of outrage and sense of purpose. Combined, these can bring further change.