

## **Unit 23**

### **Slums**

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#### **Learning Objective**

After studying this unit you will be able to:

- describe the nature of slums
- give a brief history of slums
- outline the characteristics of the slums
- discuss the functions of slums
- describe the Indian context of slums and their socio-economic profile, and
- discuss the approaches towards solving the problem of slums in India.

#### **23.1 Introduction**

It is a fact that slum is basically an area of the worst form of struggle for the basic needs of life. The slum is the complex product of many products as it is true of many other social phenomena but poverty is the foremost one. It is interplay of objective economic facts and subjective group standards. Low-income forces people to live in slums. This paper presents a sociological analysis of the urban problems called slums, especially focusing on the various aspects such as nature and characteristic of the slum. In the first section this paper tries to examine the basic nature of the slum, which is not just an area of substandard housing condition, but it refers to the actual living conditions of the people in an urban area.

The characteristics of the slum has been presented under various subheadings like housing condition, overcrowding and congestion, poor sanitation and health, apathy and social isolation, deviant behaviour and the culture of the slum, that is, a way of life. In brief, this paper also tries to understand various functions of the slum, which met various needs and had served several useful functions for certain social groups like poor and migrant workers etc. under the section 'A brief historical perspective on the slum,' this paper traces the socio-historical analysis of slums starting from the slums of ancient Roman cities, the Jewish ghetto, British slums of 19<sup>th</sup> century to the slums of U.S before the World War-II. This paper also undertakes a systematic study of the socio-economic profile of Indian slums and also illustrates with a case study like Dharavi of Mumbai. The final section deals with various theoretical approaches related to the solution of slum problems. The most prominent ones discussed here are the traditional welfarist approach, the developmental approach, the Marxist or socialist approach and humanitarian approach.

The slums constitute the most important and persistent problem of urban life. They are the chief sources of crime and delinquency, of illness and death from diseases. Slums are of all shapes, types and forms. Mumbai has its packed multistoried chawls, New York- its Harlem and its East side, Chicago- its black belt, London- its east end. Families in Bangkok crowd together in 'Pile villages' composed of poorly constructed wooden shacks, bamboo huts and straw hovels along the small lanes of Kolkata, Dacca and Lagos, which stream with the high humidity and stink from open drains. Impoverished shantytown or squatter shacks constructed from junks cover the hillside of Rio de Janeiro, Lima, Hong Kong and other Asian, African and South American cities. Even the most affluent nation in the world have slums. At least one fifth of urban population of U.S lives in poor or sub standard housing. Like U.S, other capitalist nations of the world have slums. These nations have progressed on other fronts but the shelter problems have eluded solutions. Even in socialist countries where massive urban renewal programs have taken place and where private ownership of land does not exist, slums do exist. The developing countries or the underdeveloped countries, which have chosen the capitalist path of development, are often referred to as the Third World, where the trends of

urbanization since the Second World War have been interesting, instructive and alarming. Steaks of contrasts in all spheres of life characterize Third World. Some of these contrasts assume the form of contradictions. For instances, in Mumbai where perhaps some of the worst slums in the world can be found the skyline is getting changed by an eruption of skyscrapers of the most modern dimension, accommodating airline companies, five star hotels, officers of multinationals and the affluent few of the metropolis. The slum offends the eyes, nose and conscience but it exists all the same. We somehow learnt to live complacently with such contradictions, which eloquently proclaim our distorted sense of priorities. It would not be too sweeping to say that the slum has become an inevitable and expanding feature of cities in developing countries. Shelterless people grab every patch of vacant spot to pitch a makeshift shack. In Mumbai besides a few lakh who lives in slums and sleeps. In the streets, one can see tiny, shaky dwellings made of tin sheets, mud, wood, and rags even under the trees.

### **23.2 Nature of the Slum**

Slums may be characterized as areas of substandard housing conditions within a city. A slum is always an area. The term housing conditions refers to actual living conditions rather than mere physical appearance of the area. The substandard is to be taken not in an objective or technological but rather in a relative social sense i.e. compared with the recognized standard at a given time in a specific country. The cave dwelling of prehistoric people, the dugouts etc. of pioneers are all substandard according to our notion, but they do not create slum conditions. Slum word has a long and a negative connotation. It has been almost an epithet, implying evil, strange and something to be shunned and avoided. It is being apparently derived from “slumber” as slum were once thought by majority to be unknown, back streets presumed to be sleepy and quite. (The oxford universal dictionary.1995. New York, Oxford University Press)

There is a disagreement over whether people make slums or slums make people. Are substandard housing conditions due to social standards behavior of certain groups or vice- versa? The slum is a complex product of many products as it is true of many other social phenomena. But poverty is the foremost one, interplay of objective economic facts

and subjective group standard. Low-incomes forces people to live in slums. Slum residents are negligent and do not mind dirt. They have neither money nor time to their area clean or clean if themselves. Lack of basic infrastructure, like drains, drinking water, electricity and location gives the slums a very ungainly picture.

There are three main types of slums – (i) The first type is original slum. It is an area which from the very beginning, consisted of unsuitable buildings, these sections are beyond recovery and need to be razed. The example of this type is the Mexican slum in Wichita. (ii) The second type of slums consists of slums created by the departure of the middle class families to other sections and subsequent deterioration of the area. The example of this type is South End slum in Boston. (iii) The third type is the most unpleasant type of slum. It is mainly a phenomenon of transition. Once the area around a main business district has become blighted, physical and social deterioration spreads rapidly. This kind of slum teams with accommodation for the destitute, home of prostitution, beggars, homeless men, habitual criminals, chronic alcoholics etc. This type of slum clearly requires defines rehabilitation.

### **23.3 Brief Historical Perspectives on the Slum**

A study of ancient Roman ruins indicates the presence of slums in ancient times. In medieval times cities were so crowded that destitute people though small in number were kept out of the city. The Jewish ghetto was a unique type of medieval urban slum. Its uniqueness stems from an interesting and complex set of social, religious, political and economic factors that created a unified homogenous group which often lived for centuries, isolated from the rest of the society in slum like conditions. This situation deteriorated with increasing urbanization in Europe and U.S. The origin of the British slums during the nineteenth century as explained by Lewis Mumford (1990) is related to the industrial modern city and the factory system. Frederick Engels (1990) in his study of slum conditions in Manchester in 1844, the first manufacturing city of the world stated that the recent origin of slums belong to the industrial epoch.

So, after the industrial revolution, the poor were needed to work in urban factories. It was then the modern slum began to grow. The low wages permitted no decent quarters. And rapidly increasing industry multiplied the number of urban masses. Housing has to be provided and the tenements of the working class were made of poor material, rooms were small and low, baths were omitted, toilet facilities and water outlets had to be shared by several people. In U.S, the process of urbanization was quicker than in Europe, and low paid workers immigrated in masses. Big slums were essential phenomena of a few large cities. The invention of automobile the subsequent exodus from more centrally located residences, added to the deterioration of once satisfactory areas. Two World Wars, during which building activities were sharply curtailed, added to the slum problem.

### **23.4 Characteristics of the Slums**

Slums vary from one type to another, but certain general patterns of slums are universal. Although, the slum is generally characterized by inadequate housing, deficient facilities, overcrowding and congestions involve much more than these elements. Sociologically, it is a way of life, a sub culture with a set of norms and values, which is reflected in poor sanitation and health practices, deviant behavior and attributes of apathy and social isolations. People who live in slums are isolated from the general power structure and are regarded as inferiors. Slum dwellers in turn harbor, suspicions of the outside world.

Some of the features of slums are:

1. Housing conditions

In terms of the physical conditions and housing standards it is important to keep in mind the comparative nature of the definitions. A slum should be judged physically according to the general living standards of a country. Slums have commonly been defined as those portions of cities in which housing is crowded, neglected deteriorated and often obsolete. Many of the inadequate housing conditions can be attributed to poorly arranged structures, inadequate lighting and circulation, lack of sanitary facility, overcrowding and inadequate maintenance.

2. Overcrowding and congestion

A slum may be an area which is overcrowded with buildings or a building overcrowded with people or both. Density does not always result in unfortunate social consequence, the issue is primarily one of overcrowding. Congestion is again a judgment

about the physical condition of the building in terms of high density per block, acre or square mile. William. F. Whyte (1943) in his well known sociological study, Street Corner Society situated in Boston's north end, stressed upon the importance of overcrowding as a criterion for measuring slum conditions. Some slum areas like in Delhi, have 40, 00,000 people per square mile.

### 3. Neighborhood facilities

A poor slum is invariably associated with poor facilities and community services. Along with shabbiness and dilapidation, schools are of poor quality and other public facilities are often insufficient. Streets and sidewalks often go unrepaired and rubbish and garbage are infrequently collected adding to the undesirable environment. Shortage of water, electricity and sanitary facility are common in most of the slums.

### 4. Poor Sanitation and Health

Slums are generally been dirty and unclean places which is defined largely in terms of the physical deterioration, stressing particularly unsanitary conditions and lack of sufficient facilities like water and latrines. These factors have resulted in high rates death and disease. These factors have always been typical of slum areas where overcrowding and presence of rats and other pest complicate the problem of health and sanitation. In slum areas of developing countries, the rate of disease, chronic illness and infant mortality are exceptionally high.

### 5. Deviant Behavior

A high incidence of deviant behavior- crime, juvenile delinquency, prostitution, drunkenness, drug usage, mental disorder, suicide, ill legitimacy and family maladjustments have long been associated with slum living. It is a fact that vice may be found in slums but is by no means confined only to the slums. Due to the lack of money and power often slum dwellers are prove to be pressurized by the goons of upper classes to commit crime. It is a vicious cycle for the sum dwellers.

### 6. The Culture of the Slum- a way of life

Slums differ widely with respect to the social organization of there Inhabitants. They range from the slums in which the inhabitants are strangers to one another, to the family slums in which there is a wide acquaintance between the inhabitants.

Slums inhabited by immigrant groups may have a firm social organization. Culture might be defined as system of symbols or meanings for the normative conduct of standards, having three distinct properties. It is transmittable, it is learned and it is shared. The slum has a culture of its own and this culture is the way of life. This way of life is passed from generation to generation with its own rationale, structure and defense mechanism, which provides the means to continue in spite of difficulties and deprivation. It is the habits, customs and behavior pattern people have learned and which they hold that move them to act in a particular way. Although, these cultural patterns are typical of the slum, form ethnic groups to ethnic groups, from own society to society to another.

#### 7. Apathy and Social Isolation

Every residential area within the modern city tends to be socially isolated from others, partly by choice and partly by location. The slum is especially so, as it is inhabited by the people of the lowest status. The chief link with rest of the community is their identification with labour market, but there may be an additional link through politics. A slum also has an image in the eyes of the larger community. There is a societal reaction to slum dwellers. The non-slum dweller often associates the physical appearance and difficult living conditions of the slums with belief in the “Natural inferiority” of those who live in slums. This reaction has important consequences in the social isolation of slum dwellers and their exclusion, from power and participation in urban society. The slum dwellers often lack an effective means of communication with the outside world. Because of apathy, lack of experience in communicating with outsiders and their own powerlessness to make their voice heard. William. F. Whyte (1943) stated that although the north end slum studied in his work on street corner society was a mysterious, dangerous and depressing place to an outsider, it provided an organized and familiar environment for those who lived in it.

### **23.5 Functions of the Slums**

The slums have met various needs and have served several useful functions for the slum residents. The most common functions of the slums have been to provide housing for the

lowest income groups and migrants in the city. The slums also serve as places where group living and association on the basis of villages, regions, tribes or ethnic or racial groups may develop. Whyte (1943) found an organized way of life in slums, which offered satisfaction to its residents. The slums also perform a function as a type of “School” to educate newcomers to the city. It gives them a place to become oriented upon arrival, to find first jobs and to learn the ways of city life. Another important function of the slum is that of offering a place of residence to those who prefer to live an anonymous life. Which includes migratory workers, criminals, chronic alcoholic and workers in illegal enterprises.

### **23.6 The Indian Context: Socio-Economic Profile of the Indian Slums**

The predominantly rural and agricultural nature of Indian society can no longer be called “A nation of villages”. Four fifths of India’s population presently resides in its half million villages. Today several cities of India are huge metropolitan areas and these cities have become centers of modern technology and the hope of future progress. Among the nations of the world, India is being increasingly judged by the stature and condition of its great cities, where lie the core of its commercial and industrial power and the strength of its transportation, distribution and communication system. The cities of India have played an important role in breaking away from tradition-bound social practices and from the cities most of the modernization processes in the country radiate. Political and social reform movements have largely originated in the cities and have then spread out.

A concomitant of urbanization in India has been in the continuous growth of slum population, as most internal migration has been concentrated in the slums. Slums have long history in India. The physical and social conditions of today in India slums are generally considered the worst. Although India is a large heterogeneous country who’s diversity often makes generalization difficult. Slum conditions can still be characterized in general terms. The streets, lanes and open drains in typical slum areas are filthy. The Indian slum, however, is far more complex than the mere aggregate of these appalling physical condition; it is a way of life. Rates of diseases, chronic illness and infant mortality remain high and there is little knowledge of health and sanitation, nutrition or



childcare. Illiteracy is exceedingly high and cultural and recreation activities are almost entirely lacking except those provided by such commercial enterprises as the cinema and gambling. Most slum dwellers are apathetic and suffer a great sense of futility. They have little community pride or even consensus, and they often blame the local authorities for their plight. They have become antagonistic towards them, seldom co-operating with municipal personnel in efforts to improve their immediate areas or the city as a whole.

A. R. Desai and S. Devadas Pillai (1990), in their work "Slums and urbanization" draw their attention to another significant feature of development postulates adopted by state, which has vitally affected the pattern of urbanization and type of urban living that is being created in the country. Our Constitution has laid down the right to property, which is basic and fundamental, but not the right to work or right to adequate housing, education and employment. The Constitution also proclaims certain freedom and rights to citizens viz. right to move throughout the country, right to life and security and freedom to search for earning and prerequisites needed for that search within legal limits but at the same time Constitution does not ensure the right to have resources for securing livelihood, source of earning, of adequate facilities for stay and other things essential, for mobile jobs for citizens to ensure a better purchasing power to live adequately.

The peculiar dilemma created by contradictory prescription by the Constitution, as well as the path of development, persuaded by rulers legally sanctified by the Constitution, have generated economic development. A small class of property owners is developing at the top, while at the lower levels vast growing section of property less citizens fending for their income for selling their skills and labour is emerging at an exponential rate. This pattern of class differentiation, income and asset concentration on the one hand and pauperization of a considerable section of the population driven to unemployment and under-employed state forced to resort to begging, garbage gathering and various types of legally non permitted are means of petty trades.

This class configuration, emerging as a direct result of government policies is creating a weird strange pattern of urbanization and urban living. On the one hand, there exists an

urban sector of rich with posh localities, residential areas glittering shopping malls, luxurious hotels, high style recreation centers as well as sophisticated educational and official complexes for a small minority of wealthy citizens. And on the other hand, urban areas it generates a majority of urban poor living in slums and involves a constant job hunting and income finding activities lacking adequate purchasing power. They cannot afford to secure shelter, amenities, facilities and services even for basic decent existence.

### **23.7 Approaches to the Slum Problems**

Some experts advocates the policy of slum clearance while others believe proving welfare services to slum dwellers. Still others stress providing greater economic opportunity for slum dwellers. All however have serious limitations as solutions either alone or together to the slum dwellers.

The traditional welfarist approaches advocate the policy of destroying the slums, tearing it down physically and redevelopment with subsidized housing. It is believed that providing welfare services to slum dwellers is the best way to bring about changes in slum areas and to solve the slum problems. This traditional approach to slum problems through clearance and redevelopment with subsidized housing has been criticized in its application to the developing countries. As the cities in underdeveloped nations raise their standard the poor people from rural areas flock to the city slums. The subsidized housing project will make cities more attractive and the number of poor rural people arriving in cities will become difficult to handle. So the only way to reduce urban slum areas is to raise rural living standard to those of a city. Slum clearance however is not exclusively a matter of replacing standardizing housing with new planned slums. In fact proper orientation of residents to a better and organized way of life and to the maintenance of the entire neighborhood it is essential, and this orientation requires the system of education and motivation of all the people, men and women, and children to the fundamental of personal hygiene, home management and environment sanitation. There is no question that measures to bring about improvements in economic conditions will be of great value to slum people. These includes more adequate wages, guaranteed minimum income, in- discriminatory employment policies, accessible and inexpensive

credit, programme to train and retain youths and adults, more effective training for certain occupation and improve social security and public assistance.

But there is another aspect of this welfarist approach to slum problems. Gita Dewan Verma (2000) has highlighted this issue in her work “slumming India”. She argues that the real problem is not the pervasive urban squalor that offends us all, but rather the moral and intellectual bankruptcy that sustains it. She states that for the urban poor minimal ‘landless’ options- outreach services instead of Hospitals, street education instead of proper schools, slum upgrading in the place of housing-all have become very fashionable. They are also one-way streets. Once all urban land is lost to less essential, more glamorous uses there will be no turning the slumming clock back. After all it is impossible that an IIM built on an excessive 200 acres of land or a new fangled cyber park or any of the plush farmhouses larger than the ceiling limits will be dynamited to make room for T.B. sanatorium or a municipal school or a low income housing project and if and when our welfare state happens to change its mind about what is needed for urban welfare and to stop urban slumming. According to her even competing interests in urban resources the state should make planned development a fundamental need of urbanites, calling for a high degree of responsibility on the part of those in charge of urban governance. In such a setup solution like clearing a few slums or building a few tenements for the poor will touch only the fringe of the problem, and it will take the existing social setup for granted. Urban renewal programmes based on this assumption are far from the real answer.

Urban community development offers a new developmental approach to some of the problems of urban areas in general and of the slums in particular. It involves two fundamental ideas:- the development of effective community feeling within an urban context and the development of self-help and citizens participation, of individual initiative in seeking community integration and change. In other words this approach relies directly on the slum dwellers themselves. If their apathy and dependence can be overcome and replaced by pride and a sense of initiative, the slum dwellers can make good use of solving their manifold problems. The approach to the problems of the city slums through urban community development involves the following elements:-

- (1) Creation of a sense of social cohesion on a neighborhood basis and strengthening of group interrelationship.
- (2) Encouragement and stimulation of self-help, through the initiative of the individuals in the community.
- (3) Stimulation by outside agencies where initiative for self-help is lacking.
- (4) Reliance upon persuasion rather than upon compulsion to produce change through the efforts of people.
- (5) Identification and development of local leadership.
- (6) Development of civic consciousness and acceptance of civic responsibilities.
- (7) Use of professional and technical assistance to support the efforts of the people involved.
- (8) Coordination of city services to meet neighborhood needs and problems.
- (9) Provisions of training in democratic procedures that may result in decentralization of some govt. functions.

There are four main objectives of urban community development programme applicable to the slums are- (i) development of community feeling, (ii) self-help improvement of a person or a group by its own contributions and efforts and largely for its own benefits; indigenous leadership and cooperation between govt. and the people in the use of services. In 1958 Delhi pilot project in urban community development was launched with grants totaling \$170,539 from Ford foundation to the Delhi municipal corporation. (M.B.Clinard,1966) The Delhi pilot project represented both in philosophy and planning, a unique attempt to produce change in urban areas. In its overall objective of developing a programme, organizing communities, enlisting self-help, identifying and training local leadership and working out techniques of change, the Delhi pilot project appears to have been reasonably successful. Apart from some administrative problems, another major problem in such urban community development project is to devise ways of keeping the original momentum of citizen's self- help organizations.

The Marxist and Socialist approach to the problem of slums clearly points out that

if only the land in urban areas is nationalized and removed from the orbit of market operation. (See A.R. Desai and S. Devidas, 1972). This single step, which does not require resources, but only breaking away from bourgeois norms of private property and legitimacy on remuneration to unearned income occurring to ownership, will remove half the problem of the urban areas by ending all activities that have developed around land as a marketable commodity. Abolition of private profit seeking agencies for constructional activities is another essential step for the solution of the urban problems especially slums. Only public assurance and provision of work to every able-bodied worker can provide the vast majority of non-propertied classes the purchasing power so necessary for survival. This assurance can be given only if employment in production, distribution and service is freed from market operation of capitalist competitive economy. An economy based on social ownership of the means of production and a social development that does not treat human beings as commodities.

### **Dharavi Slum: A Case Study**

The humanitarian approach to the problem of slums basically highlights the triumph of the human spirit over poverty. Kalpana Sharma (2000) in her famous case study “Re-discovering Dharavi-A Mumbai Slum” challenges the conventional notion of a slum. According to her Dharavi is much more than a cold statistic. What make it special are the extraordinary people who live there, many of whom have defied fate and an unhelpful state to prosper through a mix of back breaking work, some luck and a great deal of ingenuity. The story of Dharavi illustrates that the most important issue is security of tenure. If the poor people have that they will generate the funds and find ways to improve their own structure. Once the government launched programmes that guaranteed people security, they are willing to redevelop their areas or upgrade their dwellings. Even without aid from government, one can see how people have successfully replaced thatch and bamboo with brick and mortar. However they cannot do anything about the infrastructure that has to be provided by the state. The process and manner in which slums are reorganized or redeveloped have to be done in consultation with the people involved. NGO organization working with urban poor have long urged that women in particular must be involved in the planning and design to redevelop slum settlers. People

know what they need and they will be able to design something that is functional and can be maintained. There is enough evidence of dysfunctional “People housing” to suggest that a more often and consultative process is needed.

In Dharavi, there are already a few examples, like Rajiv Gandhi cooperative in Kalyan Wadi, which shows what is possible when a community is consulted on all aspects of slum redevelopment. The mainstream institutions of finance have rarely considered the needs of the poor. While Maharashtra government’s plan to provide free housing to slum dwellers is commendable because it recognizes the investments that most of them have already made in their housing. If financial institution can aid the poor in their housing needs, many slum dwellers would be prepared to part the way in financing their housing. This is particularly true of a growing segment of slum dwellers in Mumbai, who are making small regular saving. There are literally hundreds of saving groups in the city that have been putting aside a small amount each month for their future housing needs. Such a saving movement can be up-scaled if it is matched by the availability of formal housing finance. Places like Dharavi flourish because people find work. They attract people because they embody the spirit of enterprise and survival in the face of tremendous obstacles. Architect, Engineers and urban planners think of structures but do not address the life of people. As a result dream townships are planned which do not fulfill anyone’s dreams. Livelihood and shelter has to be seen as one rather than separate entities.

The economic determinant that culminated in the creation of existing slums are still at work however undesirable our slums may be, from a humanitarian viewpoint they do provide shelter to low-income families. If economic growth, full employment or lowering of discrimination towards job applicants should raise the real income of the majority of those living in the slums housing qualities would tend to improve.

### **23.8 Conclusion**

Slums in cities are the worst form of struggle for the teeming masses of people who cannot afford anything better. It is a remarkable, dilapidated, fragile structures which house a high density of population. Slums however, are not just physical housing colonies filled with dirt and disease but is; mentioned; a way of life. It is a distinct culture

where it is difficult to say whether people make slums or slums make people. In this unit you learnt about the characteristics of slums; the brief history of slums, different approaches to the study of slums. You studied about slums in India, different functions of slums and finally learnt about the famous slum in Mumbai city called Dharvi.

### **23.9 Further Reading**

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