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URBAN SUITABILITY FOR STREET CHILDREN.

WHERE DO THE STREET CHILDREN REALLY BELONG?

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Abstract: There are some conversations one never forgets, and one such conversation we had with a child while undergoing our study made us realise that even though we are at a peak of global economic boom, we have failed to consider these children belonging to the streets in every aspect. Be it education or basic healthcare, the street children are often being neglected. Seldom do we hear from our authorities, any major work being undertaken for these kids.

Over the course of time spent studying these street Children, one can effectively agree that children are the first victims of the urbanisation that is being forced upon the world. There are several studies supporting my claim, that around 38000 kids live on the streets of Mumbai who are deprived of the basic facilities of food, clothing, and shelter that is required for their bare survival (according to a report published by TISS and Action Aid India, 2013). Their vulnerability is captured by the fact that two out of five of them have had to face physical, verbal, or sexual abuse and forced starvation at some point of time in their lives. Government protection like the Right to Education Act seems to bypass them, with nearly one out of four in the school-going age remaining homeless and illiterate.

Hence, we believe incorporating these kids in the planning of towns and considering them at urban level is of prime importance, to ensure the primary right of all children: the right to their childhood, for which, we need to focus on the plight of the homeless children by creating some momentum to the existing Urban planning policy to ensure that no more children are delivered up to the harshness of life on the streets by introducing temporary and modular shelters. The first step in all of this is to provide shelter to them where they can live, learn, and work without pressurising the already crowded town of Mumbai.

1. INTRODUCTION

India has witnessed a rising trend in urbanisation in the last few decades due to which there has been a sharp rise of the urban population within the country. Also, a major share of the country's GDP now comes from Mumbai, the commercial capital of the country. Since this maximum city is the breeding ground of economic development, there is a need to realise that for the economy to operate with higher productivity and opportunities for employment, the infrastructure needs to improve to attain an increased economic development. The urban governance system is majorly responsible for the economic development of cities in India.

There are a large number of migrants coming to Mumbai from almost all parts of the country which has led to a steep rise in the homeless population. Now, elaborating about 'Children' in this context, they hold a special place in the society as they symbolise innocence, virtue, and the future. In spite of this, they are a vulnerable population group especially in Mumbai, because their ability to defend their rights, protect themselves against violence and fight critical situations in life is much less (almost non-existent), unlike adults. While it is difficult to identify all children in vulnerable circumstances, whether street children, abused children, destitute and trafficked children, victims of disasters and warfare, victims of child labour, etc., these children can also be classified into three broad categories –namely children in need of care and protection, children in conflict with the law and children in contact with the law, the most vulnerable of them all, being the homeless - the children that live on the streets that actually fall in all the above mentioned categories. It is therefore necessary that these children need to be provided with

opportunities for their physical, mental and emotional development. This will also encourage them to realise their full potential as human being.

The basic purpose of the research is to establish caring systems in collaboration with the state and civil society through democratic spaces for marginalised communities; in particular, children on the streets, homeless communities, and *safai karmacharis* engaged in manual scavenging.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 WHY SHOULD WE INVEST?

Children in poor neighbourhoods of Mumbai, like the slums of *Dharavi*, *Kherwadi* and *Mankhurd* to name a few, are isolated from urban services of the other parts of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) and experience daily exposure to urban violence, leading to many health and social problems. Limited or lack of access to public amenities such as schools, community centres and libraries reflects the indifference or absence of public investment in these sectors of the BMC, the governing body of the city. It, therefore, fosters disillusion and discontent, giving children the impression that there is no alternative to violence, often confronted with the choice to become a member of a gang or to never leave home. Finally, with rapid urbanisation and the magnitude of the refugee crises with people coming from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and other states of India as well as some backward part of Maharashtra, the city is stressed to deliver public services. There are limited accurate population counts, and the current service delivery system is already under pressure. This has resulted into tensions and xenophobia between the local population and newcomers.

2.2 WHAT SHOULD WE PLAN?

Plan safe spaces for children – Both in crisis and post-crisis situations, children need educational institutions (be it on smaller or larger scale) equipment and materials for learning, social and recreational activities. Some organisations like UNICEF and other child focused NGOs like Salaam Baalak Trust provide safe spaces sometimes in combination with psychosocial support for children who are emotionally distressed after conflict experience or tragedy.

Support social urbanism – Popularly known as ‘Urban Acupuncture’, this type of participatory urban planning has been implemented in existing informal areas and impoverished neighbourhoods in some parts of Europe and Latin-America, using spatial design and community involvement to provide answers to physical and social pressures. This basically focuses on small-scale social infrastructures that are placed at strategically chosen locations. It addresses varied urban challenges like violence, education and severed social connectivity faced by these children.

2.3 HOW SHOULD WE PLAN?

2.3.1 Infrastructure regulations – building scale

Norms and standards to be considered for public amenities, ensuring child-focused accessibility and safety amenities for children:

- **Technical security:** to ensure protection and stability as well as the evacuation of children in case of an emergency (e.g., safe, and solid pathway and handrails on balconies, external fire-exits and stairs), use of building materials and construction methods that are structurally sound and protect users in the case of a disaster.
- **Accessibility:** minimum number of steps, availability of elevators for higher floor spaces, wide stairs, unlocked stairwells, doorways, and passages clear of obstructions, wide enough for the movement of strollers and wheelchairs.
- **Safety and health:** focusing on the quality of flooring by using materials that prevent growth of moulds and infections; safe access to drinking water, electricity, sanitation; natural ventilation and screening; adequate natural light for all public rooms; visible and attractive stairs to promote interaction and active use for vertical travelling of three floors or less.
- **Design guidelines for public amenities, improving the use by street children**
 - **Comfort:** Clarity in reading of spaces and lay-out of the building; and direct access to views of the outdoors and green spaces if possible or proximity to safe public outdoor space.
 - **Multi-functionality:** The most important issue of the current times is that of scarcity of spaces, therefore, efforts should be made to make multi-use of the available space. Hence, modularity and flexibility of the building to allow easy and affordable modifications; multi-generational programmes to foster interaction and shared benefits for different age groups, and hybrid programmes to increase public accessibility 24/7; should be taken into consideration.
 - **Stimulation and Physical activity:** Proving defined space for physical activity and play is a must for children. It can be introduced at various places like having a spacious lobby entrance to promote social interaction, designated space for playgrounds or playful space with collective amenities; secured space for parking bicycles and other such transportation; community-oriented amenities that enable gatherings and social interaction indoors and in the public space outdoors like courtyards, compounds, terraces, rooftops, etc.

2.3.2 Urban design and community planning – neighbourhood scale

A neighbourhood social infrastructure plan: To determine what innovation to the amenities can be incorporated as per the context in the existing infrastructure of public services such as health facilities, schools, etc. This fixed infrastructure can further be integrated with mobile centres to additionally increase coverage in the short term. Examples:

- Homogenous, one-stop urban centres where children can play and study, cultural and social events can be conducted, the community can come together for information and sharing opinions on issues such as health and nutrition.
- Childcare centres combined with multi-generation programmes that allow people of all ages to participate in the wellbeing of the society as a whole.
- Learning and co-working spaces for children and youth that encourage skill development along with education, to foster knowledge exchange and boost the idea of collaboration.
- Small scale industries, recycle centres and repair-cafes for promotion of handicrafts where people can learn to make, recycle, and repair products and optimise the use of resources.
- Child-led workshops on optimal usage of public amenities to co-define programmes; influence design; and enhance security, accessibility, safety, and comfort.

2.4 SCOPES AND LIMITATIONS

The life of the homeless children in Mumbai is so pathetic that with the little money they make by street-based jobs, such as rag picking, begging, porting, flower selling, newspaper selling, street vending, and shoe shining, they cannot afford one full meal a day, and most of the time they are left without food. It is this starvation that forces them into indulging in criminal activities, and the ultimate reward they get as a result is mob beatings or a jail term. Neglected children are a common sight here, where they are found in large numbers begging, hawking, playing, fighting, or just wandering.

Many children belonging to this stratum of the urban population struggle for survival out on the streets, sleeping on makeshift cardboard mattresses in areas like, CST, Bandra, Vikhroli, Kanjurmarg, Bhandup and Andheri. According to research conducted by TISS in 2013, there were about 38000 children living on the streets of the maximum city. Out of the people interviewed, one can rightly understand that these kids find it extremely difficult to make ends meet so they beg: shine shoes and steal, among other activities. These children find shelter mostly in areas around cinemas, bus stops, railway stations, bridges, etc. These children are further subjected to exploitation, abuse, and violence. They are trafficked into unfathomable prostitution rings, forced into ceaseless violence, and are often recruited into many other forms of modern slavery.

The consequences of the negligence of the plight of these children who are homeless are immeasurably devastating to the society as these children are virtually denied all the necessities of life as are needed for a child's physical and psychological growth. Without adequate training and education, street children suffer irreparable consequences of childhood experiences of bitterness, humiliation, hostility, and hatred.

To survive, every homeless kid must work very hard, in spite of which, they are threatened with various forms of violence. Many a times these children develop physical complications due to their hazardous nature of work and unhygienic living conditions. As a result, they become indifferent to the social norms and values. On top of that street children are at risk from HIV/AIDS because they are vulnerable to sexual abuse, early sexual initiation, and injecting drugs. To be effective on a larger front, smaller issues like HIV prevention must be targeted as an understanding of their psychosocial situation is directly related to the contexts in which these children live their lives.

Getting rid of the social stigma associated with these homeless children is necessary for the development of the society on the larger front. In the current times, several local and international humanitarian organizations are getting involved, and it has been recommended that establishment of workshop/literacy centers for these underprivileged children are necessary. At present, the city does not bear a single efficient centre for the street children that address the above-mentioned problems. Street children are a specialized group and hence it is needed for them to be treated with patience targeting many aspects like the psycho-social, mental, physical, economic, and cultural parameters. Such accommodations are very hard to find in the existing urban landscape and obviously are not given much thought about. It is therefore essential that this specific class of the society be considered by planners and designers at urban level. The target should be towards these unwanted and indifferently looked groups of the society.

2.5 CONCLUSION

The homeless population in the study area are seemingly economically poor and socially backward. Their life can be upgraded and changed for good if the following recommendations are undertaken by the policy makers:

1. As most of them are children of the migrants through 'rural push', their influx can be checked by creating various employment opportunities in rural areas where they come from.
2. The government should make provisions for night shelters, sanitation and housing facilities by incorporating them in the planning at the urban level.
3. Measures should be adopted to provide basic facilities to the slums where the street children are found in majority to make it more habitable.
4. Slums located in areas which are unhygienic and congested and where proportionate distribution of space is not feasible and where adequate monitoring of the kids becomes impossible, they should be rehabilitated and resettled.
5. There should be a study done of spaces in the city where, existing spaces like vacant land, areas under bridges and terraces above public toilets which can be used for providing temporary shelters to the homeless kids should be mapped. Further, through government schemes shelters should be built at these spots where these kids would stay and any miscreants could be checked for any illegal activity leading to the abuse of these kids.

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