'Mumbai is on the verge of imploding'

Residents of this overburdened and polluted megacity descent into urban hell

**Bachi Karkaria in Mumbai**

Monday 24 November 2014

**One in six** of Mumbai’s 12.7 million residents **lives in a slum.**

It used to be India’s urban showpiece. Today, its crown has fallen down, Mumbai has become a metaphor for urban blight.

Consider these statistics. Some 7,000 metric tonnes of refuse (**rubbish**) is spewed out each day. Dumping grounds are choked, yet there is no government-mandated separation or recycling.

Its two biggest headaches: housing and traffic.

**Getting from A to B**

Around 7.5 million **commuters** cram themselves into local **trains** every day and the fledgling metro and monorail are unlikely to make a significant difference in the near future.

There are 700,000 **cars** on the road and the authorities indirectly encourage private vehicle ownership by adding flyovers and expressways, instead of building or speeding up mass rapid transit systems. Private vehicle numbers have grown by 57% in the past eight years, compared with a 23% increase in public buses. This causes untold congestion, **air** and **noise pollution**. Their number has grown by 57% over the past eight years. Toxic nitric oxide and nitrogen oxide levels stand at 252 microgrammes per cubic metre (mcg/m3) more than three times the safe limit of 80 mcg/m3. Protests against sound pollution fall on deaf ears.

**A roof over your head**

**There are 12.7 million people jammed into the 480 sq km that comprise today’s Greater Mumbai, that’s 20,680 people per sq km.** We are the world’s eighth most-populated city – and dying to prove it.

As a consequence, **every sixth Mumbaikar lives in a slum**. The premium on land was exacerbated by the Rent Control Act of 1947, which wasn’t amended till 1999. Too little, too late. Real estate prices are unreal. It’s cheaper to buy a flat in Manhattan than in Malabar Hill, and you can be sure that shoddy materials will short change you in Mumbai.

Considering that **housing is the city’s biggest shortfall**, it’s ironic that poor construction is indisputably its biggest problem. Many villains have been blamed for Mumbai’s descent into urban hell, from mafia gangs to impoverished migrants, but for the past three decades the main culprit is the “politician-builder” community.

In 2005, the entire city was held hostage for three days. On 26 July, suburban Mumbai was lashed by 668 mm of rain in just 12 hours. Unwarned commuters and children in school buses were left high, but not dry, as roads and railway tracks disappeared. Slums and BMWs went under the deluge. It may have been the country’s financial capital, but in the photographs that followed, swaggering Mumbai didn’t look much different from a monsoon-marooned village.

For this humbling disaster, the finger pointed at that same culprit: the developer and his facilitator, the politician. There was nowhere for the rainwater to go (due to poor planning control). For decades the concrete army had been allowed to commandeer all open spaces, and illegal encroachments had done the rest. Public parks, verdant hills, salt-pans, school compounds, private garden plots, beaches, mangroves – nothing was spared and nowhere for the water to go!

The built environment in Mumbai had increased fourfold since 1925 – and at its fastest rate over the past 30 years – all at the cost of green cover and wetlands.

The 2005 deluge brought to light the little-known fact that Mumbai had a river. The Mithi had been reduced to little more than a turgid drain, bubbling with the putrefactions of one of Asia’s largest slums, Dharavi. Why blame its desperate inhabitants when the authorities had built an airport runway and much of the swanky new business district of the Bandra Kurla complex over it?

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