
Understanding the Socio-Economic Deprivation and Livelihood of Urban Slums: A Study in Jorhat Municipality, Assam

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of urbanization has brought several significant challenges in managing urban infrastructure, basically in addressing the needs of disadvantaged group of people, for instance, those living in slum pockets. India, being one of the rapidly growing developing countries with its focus on urban development as engine of economic development witness huge population explosion and increasing the numbers of slum areas in urban centres. Most of the developing countries are facing an alarming issue of slum growth. This pressing and complex issue needs prime focus from urban planner and policy makers to academia, and also to the members of civic society. To fulfil the objectives of sustainable development and millennium development goals, welfare and growth of backward and disadvantaged groups are very crucial as they also contribute to the nation building process. Therefore, the study aims to explore the socio-economic problems and their living condition in urban areas. In this regard, it is important to find out the root causes associated with their socio-economic deprivation which makes their survival tough. The study was conducted in Jorhat town of Assam, also known as the cultural capital of Assam. The paper concludes with an examination that poverty and illiteracy are the root causes associated with all the challenges and

struggle the slum people have going through.

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Introduction

Slums can be defined as a place of congested settlement of people having insufficient and very lower standard of basic services. Slums are those who are densely populated in informal urban residential areas where mostly proper housing condition with ventilation, clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, and the overall healthy lifestyle are found to be inadequate. (Das and Sarma, 2025) They suffer from different hazardous environmental conditions, for which they are considered as vulnerable population and population at risk. Slum areas are acts as a barrier in the way of sustainable urban development across the country.

India is one of the major developing countries in the world having a huge slum population in most of the urban centres. Urban slum dwellers struggle for their daily survival due to their poor socio-economic condition, where their challenges are mainly concerned with poor housing condition, lack of available space, poor sanitation, health problems, lack of clean drinking water, lack of electricity, lack of education, low income, poor garbage disposal facilities etc. (Zaman et al., 2018) To fulfil the dreams of living a healthy and happy life full of new opportunities and life chances in urban areas motivates people to migrate from rural to urban areas. Migration of people from rural and sub-urban areas to urban areas increases the urban slum people on a regular basis, that limits the basic necessities and services like clean drinking water, sanitation, education, proper housing and so on. As a result, their livelihood has been affected a lot and deteriorating to a large extent. Many studies reflected that, slum dwellers are having insufficient air, light, sanitation, family privacy which are directly subject to safety hazards. (Zaman and Dutta, 2018) Therefore, qualities of life and socio- economic deprivation of slum dwellers became an interest area of research in the field of urban studies.

Methodology:

The approach of the study is qualitative. The study took place in Jorhat town which is the administrative headquarters of Jorhat district in Assam. Six slum areas that are Harijan Colony, Puja Dubi Area, Bishnupur Banchbari Area, Raja Maidam New Colony, Fancy Ali Area, Tarajan Smashan Area under Jorhat municipal Board area has been selected for the study. Head of the household were



considered as respondents for the present study recruited through Purposive Sampling method. Both primary and secondary data has been collected to prepare this research paper. To collect primary data, semi-structured interview schedule and observation method has been used as a method of data collection, in which interviews were conducted with sixty respondents, ten from each slum area. Moreover, secondary data has been accumulated from published research article and journals.

Discussion and Findings:

Slum areas are basically understood as a heavily populated informal and disintegrated residential area in the urban centres which are primarily characterised by substandard living condition and lack of basic amenities of life. (Nath and Bhattacharjee, 2023) It is fact that most of the developing countries did not attain remarkable advancement in the field of urbanization but the developed countries attain it to a great extent. Developed nations experienced great wave of urbanization due to some factors like technological advancement in the field of manufacturing industry and provide a well settled economic condition to the urban people through the creation of numerous job opportunities in the industrial sector which are very stable and well-paid. But in terms of underdeveloped and developing countries people migrated from rural areas to urban areas without having proper employment opportunities and other basic amenities. Therefore, these people have to live with having lack of job security and have to engaged in different informal sector with low wages. As a consequence, the process of urbanization creates slum pockets and slum dwellers are forced to go into the informal settlement within the urban area. The poor urban people are not able to afford a good accommodation for them. It causes informal settlement in the form of squatters, or slums with the urban centres. (ibid, 2023)

Jorhat is one of the leading urban centres of Assam. The city has a very good connectivity with rest of the India through railway and airport. But Jorhat was not a major urban centre in the beginning. Originally the centre was developed for the purpose of British administration. Later on, Jorhat had developed into an important commercial hub of Assam. Gradually, significant numbers of small and medium range industries had been developed in Jorhat. Different activities and communication as well as transport sectors are gradually increased and improved in the city. As a result, all these sectors provided opportunities to the people migrated from rural to urban areas easily. In the present study, most of the slum dwellers are coming from rural areas and basically, they are very poor in terms of economic condition, unskilled and illiterate. Among them, male people are dominantly engaged in informal sectors work such as street vendors, wage labourer, domestic worker, rickshaw puller, salesman, rag-picker,



sweeper etc. It can easily imagine that, according to their daily income level which is very low to survive in urban areas, they are not able anymore to dwell in high rented house with having proper housing facility. Thus, housing is the foremost and biggest problem to them. Most of the migrants coming from rural areas to urban, prefer to go for vacant government land to settle down themselves and it is gradually increased their turn into slum areas.

As it is obvious that housing is one of the fundamental needs of a human being along with food and shelter. An individual's all kind of growth including mental, physical, cultural and socio-economic aspects depends on a proper and safe housing condition. In that case, slum dwellers deserve special attention. Slum dwellers cannot afford a piece of land as their own due to its high cost in urban areas. Basically, slum dwellers are found in the open space of railway tracks, roadside areas, river bank site etc., which are not fit for inhabitations. (Barbhuiya,2021) Lack of space in the household boundary of slum area is another problem to identify. For children, it becomes difficult to play, spent leisure time or spent time on recreational activities. Actually, in slum areas, due to lack of space three to four family stay in a home which is very congested and uncomfortable. There is no separate kitchen facility within their houses.

Slum areas are subjected to several hazard and very crowded land where there is no living space for recreational use. Slum dwellers often lack primary knowledge about basic health care concerns such as boiling or proper filtration of water for drinking, hand washing before meals, hand washing with soap after defecation and so on. Although the practice of hand washing after defecation is prevalent among them, but not all slum dwellers used soap, some people washed their hands with ash and soil. Most importantly, hand washing practice before taking food is very less. (Zaman and Dutta, 2018) In terms of clean drinking water or proper filtration of water, they do not even afford to buy equipment for boiling water, sometime due to lack of electricity and individual meter connectivity at house, they could not use electronic equipment. On the other hand, in town area fire wood is also not primarily available like rural areas; consequently, their poor economic condition is the responsible factor for all the challenges related to their survival. Moreover, among slum dwellers, people use drinking water from shared tap, from river Bhogdoi (one of the major Tributary of the mighty Brahmaputra), from urban water supply etc, of which number of households that takes the service of urban water supply are significantly very less. Due to the poor economic condition and low earning most of the household are not able to pay fees for urban water supply services and they are barely interested to take the service.



In terms of challenges related to health, tobacco chewing, smoking, alcoholism etc. are also responsible which are increasing day by day, basically among youths of slum. Study reveals that in terms of nutritional status of children of 1-5 years old in slum areas are found that there are many children facing the deficiency of under nutrition. There is very less antenatal health check-up reported among slum women. Hence, prevalence of Anaemia during pregnancy is easily found, of which a few of the children not yet immunised in a good way. Moreover, slum areas pose several challenges to the health of the dwellers because of poor sanitary conditions in the areas coupled with inadequate and unscientific waste disposal practices. (ibid,2018) Slum dwellers are lives in a very unhygienic and un-sanitised environment on a daily basis. During Monsoon, artificial flood in the urban areas especially in the slum areas makes them vulnerable in terms of sanitation practices basically where toilets are submerged in the flood water and spread various infectious diseases. Diseases that have been reported within slum areas are Cholera, HIV/AIDS, Malaria, Dengue, Japanese Encephalitis, Typhoid, Tuberculosis and other water borne pandemics.

Women's health is also a very neglected aspect among urban slum dwellers where infant mortality rate is quite common. ASHA workers and Nurses from the wards of slum areas said that, due to ignorance, lack of care and awareness, the incident of infant mortality is still prevalent among slum dwellers. Apart from that, malnutrition, lack of menstrual hygiene among women and adolescent girls are also visible.

In different aspect of the society such as polity, education, economy etc., the participation of the slum community is comparatively very less and this rare participation in the societal activities could not help to support or motivate them to become aware and to access the health care facilities. It is very few in numbers of civil society and NGOs that raised objections to the government to improve the living conditions of slum dwellers. (ibid, 2018)

Another aspect of problem in slum areas is sanitation and personal hygiene. It is due to poverty, lack of proper health education and awareness among slum dwellers. There is no healthy environment for good education among slum people. Most of the people are illiterate and unaware about the importance of sanitation and hygiene and its inherent link with their health. Primarily, they are guided by traditional thoughts, beliefs, and superstition. A high rate of youth unrest is visible among most of the slum areas. In the studied area, urban slum dwellers do not have sanitary toilets due to lack of adequate place for its construction and the existing community shared toilets are not regularly cleaned. The



effective use of community toilets could not be ensured due to lack of proper cleaning, availability of water, lighting facility and mainly due to privacy issues. People are forced to defecate in open basically during night time in absence of lighting in the community shared toilets. As a result, the poor slum people bear the worst consequences of inadequate water supply, sanitary toilet, drainage system and improper waste management. Moreover, aged, handicapped person and children too at night time often defecate openly within the compound of the house and drains. These faeces are later disposed of outside. Generally, small children are allowed to defecate almost everywhere as their faeces is considered as not something impure or dirty. But the fact is that child faeces are more polluted and spread infectious diseases than adults. (Nagla,2020) Residents who have toilets are made of bamboo and polythene but very uncomfortable for defecation, therefore people often rely upon the open sites at the bank of river Bhogdoi for defecation and becomes another reason of water pollution. Therefore, community toilets are very unsafe for women. Common toilets are over-crowded and male dominated where women are basically facing the health problems like vaginal infection, urinary tract infection, stomach pain, kidney stone and many more.

According to the Department of Housing and Urban Affairs, Assam, urban local bodies should ensure adequate provision of community toilet and bathing facilities separately for men, women and disabled person, basically for those who do not have sufficient space for construction of individual household latrine and for disabled, there should be proper ramp provision and braille signage. Norms for community toilets are like one toilet seat for 35 men, one seat for 25 men. (DOHUA. Assam.gov.in) But in real sense, the picture is totally different in slum area. In the Harijan colony area, there are only two community shared toilet for women and two toilets for men, where more than 500 women use the latrines daily consist of only two seat and in terms of male, more than 700 use their existing two latrine. Moreover, their children have also used these latrines and there is no such separate latrine with ramp provision and braille signage for disabled people. Additionally, bathing facilities are not provided to them from the authority although it should be as per rules under Swachh Bharat Mission. The condition of community toilets has been worsening day by day as the latrines are not cleaned regularly by the people who use daily, toilet tanks are almost full, even there is no any facility of door in latrines and resident living its nearby areas have been suffering the most due to its foul odours, hence those people can't even take breath comfortably inside their houses. In addition to that, due to this horrible situation, women and adolescent girls are suffering every day, especially during menstruation, as they risking their personal safety, hygiene and dignity. It is also come out that, from the studied respondent's household



with children, a very few of them disposed excreta of children in the toilet, basically people used to throw it into the municipal dustbin, public collection points and into drain.

There are some other obstacles also found among slum dwellers such as excessive male domination, higher female illiteracy than male, poor health condition of women that leads to the malnutrition of children on a high rate. (Barbhuiya,2021) It is seen that youths living in slum areas are more likely to drop out of school and college, experience violence, exploitation and abuse, sometimes child marriage and teenage pregnancy also. Slum areas do not have a healthy environment to socialise their child and organise community functions, meetings to facilitate their growth and development both mentally and socially. Extreme poverty, low living standard, illiteracy and many more reasons are there which forced them engaged in various activities of social evil like to acquire violence against women, practice of gambling, domestic violence, sexual harassment, criminal mindset, deviant behaviour and so on. Hence, youth unrest, rate of alcoholism and other substance abuse disorder are also increasing on a daily basis.

Lack of proper education is one of the major reasons of social disintegration and disorganization in a society. In terms of educational facilities at home in slum pockets also, most of the children are often unable to study and do their educational task, homework at their houses due to lack of available space, electricity and a healthy environment to concentrate. Consequently, the rates of drop-out are becoming much higher. Early marriage, child labour and language difficulty are found as highlighting factor of school and college drop-out, due to which most of the children are unable to continue their education. In case of boys, after getting married in the early ages, they have to work to look after their family responsibility. Therefore, instead of making them interested to go for educational institutions, it is more important to give them skilled based education and training so that they can find their way of earning both in formal and informal sector.

Gender gap is also prevalent among slum dwellers to a great extent. Women are normally considered and treated as servant in most of the household and the decision -making power is also enjoyed by the male person in most of the family.

Drainage system is very poor in the slum areas, which are found to be uncovered, blocked with plastic wastes and dirty. Cleaning and repairing of the drain by municipal authorities are rarely happen. Along with, poverty and ignorance of the authority are also can be called as a main factor of such problems. Besides, waste disposal system is also very unscientific among these slum areas. Due to lack



of proper dustbin facility, people used to burn their daily household waste and disposed it either on the street side and bank of the river Bhogdoi. Majority of the slum dwellers revealed that they used to disposed their household garbage in the Tocklai rivulet flows in to the Bhogdoi river, and the rivulet now consider as dirty drain to throwing away their all kind of wastes generated every day.

Conclusion

The study highlights the basic and specific issues faced by the urban slum dwellers in their socio-economic life that affects their livelihood very adversely, even such pathetic condition harms and effects the other urban dwellers of outside the slums. Moreover, the ecology of Jorhat town is being badly affected by the poor amenities of slum dwellers. The study has revealed that there is a huge gap between the level of development seen in the other urban areas of the city and the slum areas. Sometimes the slum dwellers become aggressive as they are optimistic that authorities will listen to their voices and solved their problems and grievances, because they are also the contributors to the nation building process and they are also provided their services to the society whether it is directly or indirectly. Moreover, in terms of urban development, government of India and government of Assam has taken up several policies and schemes. But, only for slum centric development, schemes are policies are found very rare. One of such schemes for slum development is Integrated Housing and Slum Development Programme which is seems to be rarely effective. Therefore, the present study will definitely help to the policy makers, urban planning department and community stakeholders to plan accordingly in the broader discourse on urban poverty, unemployment and unhealthy living condition of slums that can build an inclusive policy framework for making the city smart as well as sustainable. In this regard, Civil society organizations can play a leading role by donates charity and uses their funds for slum children's educational development. Government should focus on slum poverty and education of their child as slum population are increasing day by day and slum children will have a great role in the future nation building process.

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