

Every urban conglomeration in our country has interspersed slums and shantytowns. These are areas where people, usually migrants, have constructed their shanties and small communities have developed. Of course, the occupation is 'illegal' and hence the basic municipal services are for the most part missing. Plus, there is always the fear of demolition not to speak of slum lords who construct the shanties and "own" them.

Sometimes during my evening walk, I walk through one such shanty habitation. The habitation is on a vacant piece of land owned by the Urban Authority. This particular one has a peculiar structure- there are shacks which are made of the wonder materials of our times- plastic wrappers of FMCGs stitched together, bits of fiber glass, plywood from Maruti CKD boxes etc. Interspersed between these are these hostel-like structures with a row of rooms and common bathrooms on one end.

The place is mostly inhabited by migrants from Bihar. As is common, the migrant community likes to be together, not the least because the initial migrants are joined by their kinfolk and village folk and so a community builds up on shared memories, language and habits. Of course not all is civil in terms of the interaction as is obvious from the huge brawls I witness at the municipal water main which runs close to the shantytown and which, by means of creative tapping of common resources, the inhabitants use for their water requirements.

What is remarkable about the place is not the abysmal living conditions- these are by now something which one has gotten inured to. What one notices is the vibrancy of commerce in these habitations. Of course there are no permanent shops except a few which are usually run by the slum lord or his cronies. These shops are essentially of two or three kinds-a provision store for dry ration, a quack's clinic and lately, a mobile repair store.

The provision store has an interesting business model. The customers are well known to the shopkeeper. And the customers are usually always having cashflow problems. So business survives on credit-credit which is totally safe since the customers are well known. Plus, the provisions are available in small quantities-thus, for instance, one doesn't need to buy a kilogram of daal and could buy 100 gms, enough for one or two meals. This convenience obviously comes at a price and the shopkeeper charges a premium over normal rates for these services!

Every shanty town has at least one medical clinic which is typically referred to as the “Bangali doctor”. For some reason, most of the medical practitioners in these places are indeed from Bengal, or at least they have Bengali sounding names! These doctors, who clearly have no qualifications dispense cures at affordable prices- never prescribing expensive medicines, giving cheap medicines and not charging much. No wonder the faith that their patients have in their efficacy is huge. He is the one who provides affordable health care in the neighbourhood. He is the one who understands them. And most importantly, he is one of them!

The mobile repair store, which also offers “China” mobiles, download song MP3, SIM cards and refills, DTH refill cards, apart from repairing broken mobiles, is a flourishing business. The mobile, for the migrant is the lifeline-much like the PCO in the earlier days. Plus, it is his (yes, I didn’t see that many women carrying mobiles) source of entertainment while he is away from home. Listening to it while walking or cycling to work, at the construction site or factory wherever he is working- the downloaded MP3 is to him what a “Murphy” transistor, hung on the shoulder was to an earlier migrant.

However, the real vibrancy one notices is in the hawkers which swarm the place. There are literally tens of them scattered all over the shanty town. Chow mien, Masala pasta (yes, pasta has become a part of the vocabulary much like noodles, momos etc), boiled eggs, paranthas and vegetables, trinkets, toys, fashion accessories, plastic items and of course the all pervasive gutka seller- in short, there is almost nothing which the shanty dweller might need, which is not available here.

Once again, the ubiquity of the hawkers is evidence of a unique business model. The hawker “knows” what the inhabitants want-thus, the boiled eggs seller does roaring business near the local hooch shop since the two go together! And he has diversified into selling plastic soft drink glasses too! The lipstick and nail polish seller makes his rounds usually in the early evening when the women are sitting around gossiping before they get going with their evening chores. Or the hawker who sells a typically Bihari delicacy litti during the winter months and switches to selling ice lollies during the summers. The list could go on and on. Plus, unlike the shopkeepers who are resident, these itinerant business folk believe in strictly cash transactions for obvious reasons.

What struck me while observing this flowering of commerce one day was the fascinating thought- How will future historians think about these shanty towns

and the daily life in these? What artifacts if any, would the hawkers leave which would allow the future archaeologists to reconstruct the vibrancy of this mode of commerce? I don't think there would be much visual or print record of this phenomenon. The residents and the settled shopkeepers would, I guess leave some artifacts. Or maybe some oral history of migrants will be written. Or an autobiography by one of them who happens to have the opportunity to get a formal education. But these itinerant hawkers-what would be their evidence? What would tell the future generations about how these people saw their new environment- what were their reactions, feelings and emotions?

One of the ways in which historians reconstruct migrant communities has been through their correspondence with their kin back home. But given that almost all communication is verbal now courtesy the mobile phone revolution, there wont be any letters with which to imagine the life of this hawker. There wont be any Asha Parkeh dancing and singing, "Khat likh de saanwariya ke naam babu, kore kagaz pe likh de salaam babu...." Since there wont be any letters anymore! Maybe I need to talk to some historian about it!