

The Unsustainability of Gentrification in India: The Need for Sustainable Urbanization for
People, not for Profit

Mary McGaffey

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Dr. S.G. Vombatkere

Introduction to Gentrification in India

Every country is seeing a rapid rate of urbanization, including India. Cities and large urban centers are experiencing a process of urban renewal and development which is forcing many cities to expand beyond their capacity. Through this process, every city is experiencing various forms of gentrification forcing middle to lower working class people outside these areas as they become financially out of reach. Dr. Anupama Sharma explains in her article about the impacts of gentrification on urbanizing India that “Gentrification is happening on a more massive scale in Shanghai or Mumbai than in the older post-industrial cities of Europe, North American and Oceanian” [1]. Gentrification studies were almost entirely Western centric, but within the past decade there has been an increase in gentrification research across city landscapes in the Global South [2]. Gentrification in India is unsustainable on an environmental, social, cultural, political and economic level. Gentrification is a controversial topic because of the number of both positive and negative impacts. However, many outline the positive impacts of gentrification that benefit the upper middle class while ignoring the devastating impacts to people and the environment. With such a rapid rate of urbanization and gentrification occurring in India, there is no time to waste in exploring sustainable urbanization strategies to prepare for the future of India and man-kind.

It is important to distinguish the difference between gentrification, urban renewal and urbanization. Although very similar and sometimes used interchangeably, they are different concepts with different impacts. Gentrification is defined as the arrival of wealthier people in an existing urban area which increases property value and rent, and often changes the district character and culture [3]. This process includes re-development and suggests the displacement of the working lower class. Urban renewal, on the other hand, is the process of improvements and redevelopment of urban areas. With no relation to the upper class, urban renewal is the reconstruction of dilapidated buildings and does not usually include changing the function of the building. Urbanization, refers to the increasing number of people that live in urban areas [4]. As urbanization occurs and cities attempt to accommodate the mass amounts of people in urban areas, these patterns become intertwined and tend to go hand in hand. Urbanization can be followed by urban renewal, then by gentrification, and different areas see this play out in different orders. Gentrification is said to be a ‘global urban strategy’ which illustrates today’s interconnectedness of urbanization, urban renewal and gentrification [5]. This paper will focus on the unsustainability of gentrification, a concept that is linked to and encompasses certain aspects of urban renewal and urbanization, but with different motivations and impacts.

Environmental Unsustainability

With the World Bank’s estimation of over 56% of the India’s population residing in urban centers in 2016 [6], India’s cities are faced with many challenges to provide basic amenities like living spaces, water, electricity and many more to a continuously growing population. The increasing demand of amenities is forcing many of India’s major cities to expand beyond

capacity, and thus increasing their ecological footprint. The term ecological footprint is the “area of wilderness of north land and sea needed to supply resources to a human population and needed to assimilate human waste” [7]. On a global scale when gentrification occurs, the individuals have the financial freedom and ability to pay for access to clean running water, electricity, proper garbage and waste disposal. On the other end, there is a focus needed on the environmental impacts of the displaced people who don’t have the means implement and maintain sustainable ways of living. This is another layer to the environmental unsustainability of gentrification where many have little choice but to move into slums and they don’t always have the money to access clean water, electricity and proper waste disposal [8]. This results in garbage and improper disposal of human waste and garbage into the streets, nearby water bodies and land which negatively contributes to the environment. Gentrification forces many Indian people into slums which ultimately grows their environmental impact. For example, Mumbai lost 871 hectares of land to the growth of slums in the city [9]. Not only does street and slum population contribute to the wellbeing of the environment, the quality of air, improper waste disposal and overflowing amounts of garbage, they have serious impacts on the health of this population. Rishi Arawal, a Mumbai-based urban planner, explains that the Mumbai’s development is crushing the poorest citizens because the city pushes the most underprivileged citizens to the outskirts in order to create housing for more affluent residents. He explains that urbanizing Indian cities like Mumbai, gentrification is contribution to the slum population and further continues “It is part of the larger gentrification, which is rapidly progressing in Mumbai” [10]. Gentrification forcing many habitants to overcrowded slums that have a big impact on the environment, demonstrating one of the several ways gentrification is unsustainable.

As poor and marginalized communities are pushed to the periphery of society, they become increasingly vulnerable on many levels. With the growing threat of global climate change causing more severe weather disasters; the poor, marginalized and displaced communities do not have many options when hit with natural disasters. This is when social justice and inequality collides with environmental changes, as the poor and overcrowded areas are low priority for rescue and rehabilitation. This is made increasingly worse with the reality of the financial difficulty for them to relocate and recover from these disasters on their own. Many major cities across India have been experiencing unpredictable and changing patterns of rainfall in this time of climate change. With greater population density, cities population and infrastructure face economic, health and social risks [11]. Daniel Strains explains the reality of wealthier people being able to recover from natural disasters much faster and easier in his article *Responding to disaster: How poverty and vulnerability are linked in Mumbai*. He explains “Wealth can help people to bounce forward from floods or other hazards. But the capacity that residents have for responding to causes can be just as important” [12]. The article highlights the reality of the rich and poor being able to recover differently from disasters like flooding. Many suggest that most cities in India are not prepared for future disasters where the poor and displaced populations are the most vulnerable. As cities rebuild after natural disasters, the

rehabilitation process is flooded with corruption. As a vice article explains “Climate change is about to make gentrification even worse”[13] due to the prioritization of the rich rehabilitation over the poor and how the cities use this opportunity to upgrade areas without building proper affordable housing for the working and lower class people who can no longer afford to live in their original neighbourhoods.

The new term ‘environmental gentrification’ is a new term which refers to the reality of people being forced out of their home as cities focus on creating sustainable neighbourhoods. Many desire clean streets and less polluted air so cities are pushing to create a more sustainable process of urbanization but this is only for those who can afford it [14]. Many areas that have been gentrified have worked to increase sustainability through different environmental strategies. Many of these strategies are expensive so wouldn’t be implemented without the presence of upper class and without the push for sustainable development of so called ‘neglected’ neighbourhoods. As cities ‘clean their streets’ and implemented green initiatives, the properties become more attractive and ultimately more expensive. Cities across the globe are proud of their ‘sustainable urbanization’ and environmental gentrification as it attempts to minimize their carbon footprint. However, there is a lot of literature explaining the negative reality of green gentrification as it leaves so many ordinary citizens behind. In the article *Environmental Gentrification* published by Critical Sustainabilities explains the motivations of environmental gentrification. The article explains “While it appears as politically neutral, consensus-based planning that is both ecologically and socially sensitive, in practice, environmental gentrification subordinates equity to profit-minded development” [15]. This article explains the reality that environmental gentrification is motivated by profit, not the environment or the good of the people. With increase demand for environmentally sustainable neighbourhoods, gentrification increases property value which has many social, economic, cultural and political impacts. Realities of this process is seen throughout India when cities clear slums. Now slum clearing has many motivations, and ‘cleaning up’ the area to create more profitable properties is a huge factor. Due to gentrification many are forced into slums, the areas where slums are located need to be ‘cleaned up’ for environmental reasons, generate more profit and the area becomes gentrified.

Economic Unsustainability

Today India is being praised because it is the fastest growing economy in the world. Many economic migrants moving to bustling and developing city centers to pursue careers and find opportunities. As India’s growing economy continues to boom, there is a realization that the wealth is not being shared, and never has been [16]. In Delhi, for example, there is small pockets of absurd gentrification and wealth with craft beer and high end shopping right beside large slums cities which demonstrates the divide between the upper, wealthier class and lower, working population. Gentrification has created a visual divide between modern condominiums and slum cities which as the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, said in the World Summit

on Sustainable development when speaking about urbanization, gentrification and sustainability. When talking about gentrification, he says “ A global human society based on poverty for many and prosperity for a few characterized by islands of wealth, surrounded by a sea of poverty, is unsuitable” [17]. Now gentrification is of course not at all entirely to blame for the wealth gap in India, but it does provide a visual of its’ impacts. It contributes to the wealth gap through the displacement of the lower working class which physically increases the space between the rich and poor.

As more and more people continue to move to urban centers, property close to downtown, transportation, good shopping and restaurants become more desirable. As a result, property value continues to increase through the combination of huge amounts of people moving to city centers and gentrification. Notting Hills Properties describes the economic advantages and disadvantages of gentrification and says that the speculative property price increase of gentrification is unsustainable [18]. In India, there is a belief that economic growth will be the solution to man of India’s issues related to poverty, environmental degradation and social exclusion [19]. However, during this current economic growth happening in India, gentrification is happening more than ever which increases the social divide in addition to many other negative impacts. On an economic level, gentrification is unsustainable because of the ever increasing property value which creates a physical divide between the rich and urban poor due to the fact that property value becomes financially out of reach. In reality, the continuous increase in property value and taxes due to gentrification is unsustainable.

Social Unsustainability

Gentrification creates social tension and conflict when people who have long lived in these neighbourhoods are forced out. Many families have roots and their livelihoods depend on their living location with their work and businesses nearby. When displaced, people have trouble getting to their job and many are forced to find a new one. Gentrification results in the formation of gated communities in and around existing neighbourhoods which undoubtedly causes social tension, bitterness and conflict. When local working class are forced out, a lot of the social diversity is lost [20]. When comparing gentrification in developed and developing countries, Will Brown illustrates how social division differ. In the UK, houses prices aside, anyone in London could partake in community activities. In Delhi or Mumbai, he explains that young professionals in search of a bit of an edge to escape into another world, which a street cleaner outsider would never in their wildest dreams be able to enter [21]. He demonstrates the social divide that is increasing due to gentrification, and is increasing in a greater extent in India compared to other developed countries like the United Kingdom. With greater social divide between upper and lower working class, tensions mount which is a threat to social peace and it makes it harder to deal with a range of issues like wage gap.

Cultural Unsustainability

From a cultural standpoint, the concept of gentrification argues that it is able to preserve a neighbourhoods existing physical heritage and culture. When thinking of a cities heritage, two forms need to be considered. The cultural heritage which is comprised as literature, poetry, performing and visual arts, festivals and the physical heritage of an area which is the natural geographical and topographical features along with man-made buildings and precincts [22]. Although cultural and physical heritage often work together, they are protected in different ways with various impacts on a range of people. Many cities and local governments have sponsored and created initiatives in hopes of revitalizing decaying historic infrastructure. Through their attempt to preserve the physical heritage of areas, there was a prediction that it would upgrade affordable housing options for the working class but instead it attracted wealthy professionals who seek a rich and vibrant community. Although gentrification often brings in its' own forms of cultural heritage like new art stores and a different music scene to an area, the reality is the existing historic cultural diversity is loss behind a homogenous western gentrification process.

There is countless cases like this all over the world, and again throughout India. India's rich cultural diversity is often what attracts people to the country, but with today's homogenizing globalization and influence of western industrialization is a threat to India's cultural diversity in many ways. Mysuru is a popular tourist destination with its rich heritage, ideal climate, and beautiful natural environment with so many religious, cultural and historical sites. Many of these attractive features are now under threat due to development [23]. The economic means to forgo heritage protection is often out of reach for a lot of working Mysuru people, and for many it's not a priority. They focus on their next few meals and survival therefore the concept of heritage preservation is considered by many to be elitist. With this process there is an emphasis needed to keep traditions and culture alive for future generations so it doesn't get lost in this powerful process of globalization [24]. So as gentrification occurs and its' attempt to preserve physical and cultural heritage persists, it often forces out the existing inhabitants. This drives out so much of the local culture, and ultimately sees a loss in cultural heritage. Gentrification continues to be implemented without considering its' impact on local population and cultural heritage which leads to the inevitable loss and demolition of a regions cultural identity [25]. The lack of consideration through the process of gentrification is unsustainable as it leads to a loss of cultural heritage and threatens India's famous diversity.

In addition, some processes of gentrification don't even take into consideration the preservation of the countries heritage. This is a huge threat to both India's cultural and physical heritage. Dr. Amareswar Galla is an internationally renowned academic and executive director at the International Institute for the Inclusive Museum speaks to this issue in John Pauls about gentrification. He explains "The biggest threat to a world heritage city in a country like India is

gentrification” [26]. While India has so many world heritage cities and is known for its’ diversity in culture, the threat of gentrification is unsustainable as it lacks much consideration for the countries cultural and physical heritage. As a result, the country’s heritage is being lost in the ever changing and growing world of globalization through western influences seen in the process of globalization.

Political Impact

On a political level, there is a lot that can be done to limit gentrification to minimize the damage to several parts of India’s society. However, almost all states have accepted gentrification in their urban renewal policies. It is known that governmental policies have a lot of power and hold the potential for change, but in this case is a key player in the current gentrification that is taking place [27]. The newly forced government policies and schemes are aiming to give a western look to urban areas. Now the presence of a different social class moving in can have significant impact on the political parties voted into power for that particular area which ultimately changes the fate of that areas people. As a result, this poses a threat of change to an areas culture, heritage and ultimately future.

Sustainable Urbanization

With every positive aspect of gentrification, there seems to be at least one negative consequence as a result. There is no known seamless way to deal with India’s increasing rate of urbanization. But as this paper illustrates, gentrification is unsustainable in many ways which means it is not the answer.

On every level, there needs to be careful consideration and planning to maximize space, develop sustainably without prioritizing economic gains and the need to stop neglecting the common man who is impacted the most by gentrification. On a cultural level, there needs to be encouragement of ordinary people, the lower and working class, to participate in cultural activities [28]. Through schools and accessible social inclusion for local cultural activities, its can preserve the culture and encourage it for future generations. State governments need to move away from their adopted gentrification model, and towards an urbanization model that takes factors in the people’s livelihood, the city’s cultural preservation and the country’s sustainability, not simply profit. Profit and economic growth is unsustainable, especially when it is at the expense of ordinary people. There are affordable housing strategies that can be implemented through policies like rent property cap, in addition to careful planning by city governments to consider all factors of gentrification. These processes should aim to alleviate and eventually stop the large number of people that are being sent into the street and slum neighbourhoods to minimize that environmental impact. On a national and regional scale, India needs to plan for the inevitable future unpredictable and increased weather conditions. Proper evacuation procedures and rehabilitation plans need be created to limit damage and increase recovery speed for both the upper and lower class population. For flooding, the installation of technology can divert water and help cities deal with future weather events. Local inhabitants

need to be included in the areas planning and they should have the opportunity to participate in the conversation about the future of their neighbourhood, a process known as 'inclusive planning' [29]. There are many gentrification strategies that have been recently developed which focuses on the current issues that are arising from today's gentrification processes like Mukesh Mehtas 'Reverse-gentrification' which explains the process of mixing different social strata. Indian cities need to deal with the existing implications of gentrification and explore more sustainable ways of urbanization.

With such a large population and so many factors, India faces a huge challenge as the rate of urbanization and gentrification continues to increase. There is no known correct way to urbanize or develop sustainably. Dealing with the continuous increase of people moving to urban centers is a learning process. As cities implement policies, urbanize and gentrify, they need to be adaptive and listen to what is working and what is not. From there adjustments need to be made to deal with unforeseen impacts, and keep a focus on the wellbeing of the people and the environment. Cities need to change their priority of economic gain, as this current goal is proven to be unsustainable on so many levels across urbanizing India through the process of gentrification.

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