

Social activism can thrive even amid Mumbai's wild growth

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ABSTRACT

The city's vibrant community of human rights workers, we believe, can teach the world something important about the potentials of social activism amid the most challenging of circumstances. [...] much of Mumbai's population is homeless.

FULL TEXT

Canadians see India as a rising economic superpower, candidate for permanent Security Council membership, and lucrative trading partner. These positive images are gradually supplanting older and more negative views of the subcontinent as bastion of poverty, overpopulation and human misery.

Our research in Mumbai, India's full-to-bursting financial capital, offers yet another perspective. The city's vibrant community of human rights workers, we believe, can teach the world something important about the potentials of social activism amid the most challenging of circumstances.

Consider Shalini Shinde, Mumbai slum resident and social activist. By day, she works as salaried employee in a non-governmental organization for youth and women whose goal is to boost gender awareness and women's self-confidence, two desperately needed ingredients in a society still dominated by men.

By night, Shalinee is Mumbai coordinator of a network of community-based organizations that helps poor people get government certificates entitling them to subsidized food, electricity, and water. In her own neighbourhood, moreover, Shalinee helps slum dwellers displaced by Mumbai's expanding and luxurious airport.

In Mumbai, our research project found some 60 registered human rights groups along with dozens of unregistered entities. These groups work on everything from trafficked women and sex workers to problems of HIV-AIDS, education, sexselective abortion, and displaced slum-dwellers.

The issues these activists face are daunting, but one of the greatest underlying problems is the city's sheer size. Mumbai now packs over 20 million people into some 440 square kilometres of gleaming highrises and sprawling slums, and the number of new residents is growing all the time. The Greater Toronto Area, by comparison, has a mere 5.5 million residents living comfortably in a generous expanse of 7,000 square kilometres.

As a result of over-crowding, Mumbai's traffic never stops, and even a short taxi ride takes hours. The trains are efficient but bursting with people, forcing commuters to hang out of open doors and climb train roofs. Everywhere, vast wealth lives alongside indescribable poverty. Although Mumbai's magnificent luxury hotels are scenes of spectacular opulence, makeshift hovels line many of the city's street. In fact, much of Mumbai's population is homeless.

Faced with such challenges, the efforts of local human rights activists seem like drops in the sea. Yet they are making a real difference, no matter how small, and in some cases, may even help make local government more accountable.

Why should ordinary Canadians care about Mumbai's travails?

They should care, we believe, because Canadian businesses and consumers -along with many others -contribute to Mumbai's staggering growth through investment and trade. The good news is that globalization is creating vast opportunities for many Mumbai residents, but the bad news is that it is also a tremendous source of inequality,

over-population, and dislocation. To counter globalization's negative effects, Canada and others must support the local activists struggling to humanize Mumbai's wild growth.

Foreign support for local social justice must be done wisely, however, lest it create an alienated cadre of externally supported activists. India's social movements have a long history of homegrown struggle, and many activists here are justifiably wary of foreign funds. Small, clever contributions from abroad will have healthier long-term impacts than larger and more hastily spent sums.

Mumbai's activists must also adjust their ways. In particular, they must try harder to collaborate with the city's faith-based organizations that are so deeply embedded in local society. Although India has a long tradition of secularism, its population is heavily religious. In many cases, Hindu, Muslim and Christian organizations have stronger connections to ordinary people in this city than the secular human rights activists themselves.

Although unscrupulous politicians in Mumbai have repeatedly abused religion and prompted wide-scale communal rioting, human rights activists must not abandon the terrain of faith to these dark forces. Instead, they must explore new ways of collaborating with progressive Hindu, Muslim and Christian leaders. Mumbai's Catholic Church, for one, has already taken steps in this direction, creating a human rights unit within its Peace and Justice Commission. More of this kind of thing is now desperately needed.

Mumbai's wildly successful business sector must also step up to the plate. Local corporations are sitting on piles of cash, much of it earned in the globalized financial, service, and telecommunications sector. Some corporations are reportedly willing to use their fortune for the public good, and interest in the possibilities for corporate social responsibility is growing.

This, too, is something foreign donors can help encourage. Rather than simply pumping foreign money into Mumbai's activist sector, Canada's aid agencies and non-governmental groups could support local efforts to develop and professionalize Mumbai's philanthropic sector.

For better or for worse, Mumbai is one of the world's leading examples of rapid, urban, and globalized economic growth. As a result, it is an exciting, crowded, and often deeply frustrating place to visit. If local human rights workers, corporations, and foreign donors can find common ground, it may become a bit more livable. And if this kind of progress is possible here, it is possible anywhere.

Archana Pandya, a graduate of Carleton's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, is researching human rights groups in Mumbai for a project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, led by James Ron, associate professor at the Paterson School.

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