

Depiction of Indian Slum Life in Vikas Swarup's Q & A

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Abstract

The major part of Vikas Swarup's novel Q & A is associated with the slum area of Dharavi, Mumbai. Slums of Dharavi exist as a social and economic expression of urban insecurity and intercity disparity. Slum-dwellers also lack legitimate possession or other forms of stable tenure. The slums of India are less focused or mostly excluded part of Indian society. Exclusion is caused by dynamic players such as the state and civil society based on poverty, religion, or caste status. Both passive and active exclusion must be diagnosed and rehabilitated.

Keywords: Dharavi, slum-dwellers, subaltern, marginalised, class, poverty, crime

Vikas Swarup is an Indian diplomat and a notable writer. Vikas Swarup was born in the historic Indian city, Allahabad in a family of lawyers on 23 June 1961. He did his schooling at Boys' High School & College, Allahabad and pursued further studies at Allahabad University in Psychology, History and Philosophy. He is a member of the Indian Foreign Service. He is the current Secretary (CPV) at the Ministry of External Affairs, India and has previously served as High Commissioner of India in Canada and has been the official spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs of India. He presently serves as a Secretary to the Government of India for Consular, Passport, Visa and Overseas Indian Affairs. He is best known as the author of the novel Q & A, adapted in the film as Slumdog Millionaire, the winner of Best Film for the year 2009 at the Academy Awards, Golden Globe Awards and BAFTA Awards. Swarup joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1986 and served in Turkey, the United States, Ethiopia, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Japan in various Indian diplomatic missions. His other novels are Six Suspects and The Accidental Apprentice.

The story of Ram Mohammad Thomas, an orphan child, is told in Vikas Swarup's Q & A. His life's trajectory, struggles, and encounters since childhood have all contributed to him winning the most prestigious quiz show, Who Would Win A Billion? He meets a variety of characters and incidents as an orphan child. Every moment he was reminded of his poor social standing and

negligence. He served in a variety of settings where he was subjected to a barrage of slurs. In their lives, Ram and other characters have seen class strife. The major part of the story is associated with the slum area Dharavi, Mumbai. He has never stayed in Mumbai for more than a few days, and he has never visited Dharavi. However, India is a world where no one lives on an island. Every day, the fortunes of the wealthy and the poor, the high and the low, collide. And if one listens and knows, one can project as well. While one has not seen Dharavi, one hasn't seen slums. To imagine the situation in Dharavi, simply magnify the slums you've seen ten times, if not a hundred times. Vikas Swarup has never visited Dharavi but the depiction of slum lives in the novel is quite lively and realistic. All types of fair and foul characters are portrayed artistically.

Slums exist as a social and economic expression of urban insecurity and intercity disparity. Slum-dwellers also lack legitimate possession or other forms of stable tenure. Furthermore, government authorities often ignore slums as a vital part of the capital. One of the reasons many nations, including India, lack sufficient data on slum settlements is because of this. As slum and non-slum households on Mumbai's island are contrasted. Suburbs denotes that the majority of households lack adequate accommodation.

The present paper is an attempt to through light on the slums, their life, work, housing and their social environment in Indian metropolitan cities. The aim is to understand how they are articulated in their respective national contexts. In a wider context, questioning various aspects of exclusion, such as demographic, economic, regional, political, and cultural exclusion, are not just to describe exclusion, but also to illustrate exclusion processes. Exclusion is caused by dynamic players such as the state, civil society on the basis poverty, religion, or caste status. Both passive and active exclusion must be diagnosed and rehabilitated.

In India, the definition of slums is brought out by the Census and the NSSO and also every State in India has unique definition of slums in keeping with the distinctive

socio-economic characteristics of the region, its terrain and slum housing conditions.

(Govt. of India 5)

The expert group defines slums as follows: "A slum is an area that combines the characteristics, of a) inadequate access to safe water; b) inadequate access to sanitation and other infrastructure; c) poor structural quality of housing; d) overcrowding; and e) insecure residential status" (Un-Habitat 2003).

Dharavi is said to have been Asia's largest slum, with an estimated population of 800,000 people living in over 2,000 huts. (Yuva 2001)

Arrests in Dharavi are as common as pickpockets on the local train. (Swarup 11)

The novel opens with the arrest of the protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas. He was arrested for cheating in the quiz show. The above comment expresses that the arrests in Dharavi are normal event. It suggests that the slum area of Dharavi, Mumbai, Asia's biggest slum is full of criminal people who are workless, jobless or associated with criminal groups. For the livelihood, they have to engage in such criminal activities that's why they are arrested by the police. Because of its lower economic status and alien community, the slum is seen as a hotbed of brutality, crime, and drug trafficking. This is why the slum-dweller is often referred to as a "slumdog," as in the Indian-set film of the same name.

There are those who will say that I brought this upon myself. By dabbling in that quiz show. They will wag a finger at me and remind me of what the elders in Dharavi say about never crossing the dividing line that separates the rich from the poor. After all, what business did a penniless waiter have to be participating in a brain quiz? The brain is not an organ we are authorized to use. We are supposed to use only our hands and legs. (Swarup 12) When Ram was arrested people of the area may think he himself was responsible for his arrest and like other slum dwellers, he might have committed any crime. For slum dwellers crossing the dividing line between the rich and the poor is a crime. It would be foolish to pass from one distortion - that the slums are places of crime, disease and despair - to the opposite: that they can be safely left to look after themselves.

-Jeremy Seabrook

As a slum dweller and a waiter, he doesn't deserve to participate in a quiz show. The world of the rich doesn't permit him to cross the dividing line. Slums are supposed to live the marginalised life in independent and democratic

India. Equality and the right of opportunity are denied in contemporary Indian society. They are treated as brainless and useless citizens of India. They are allowed to use their hands and legs like slaves. It is quite unacceptable and unbearable for the producers of the quiz show to accept his winning the quiz show *Who Will Win A Billion?*

Do you know Albert Fernandes?' I ask her. No. Who is he?'

'He has an illegal factory in Dharavi which makes watch-strap buckles. (Swarup 28)

Ram interrogates Advocate Smita Shah who came to the police station for his bail. He accepts that he doesn't have knowledge of the surrounding world but he knows who runs the illegal factory in Dharavi. It shows the slums have their different world and they have good knowledge of their world. Dharavi is in Mumbai but a different kind of Mumbai is settled in the form of a slum which has no connection with the world of the rich. Slum is like microcosm in macrocosm.

'Well, Madam, we poor can also ask questions and demand answers. And I bet you, if the poor conducted a quiz, the rich wouldn't be able to answer a single question. I don't know the currency of France, but I can tell you how much money Shalini Tai owes our neighbourhood moneylender. I don't know who was the first man on the moon, but I can tell you who was the first man to produce illegal DVDs in Dharavi. Could you answer these questions in my quiz?' (Swarup 29)

As a poor slum, Ram expresses his identity, existence and the knowledge he bears about Dharavi. He is unable to tell the currency of France or the first man on the moon but he knows his slum-dwellers. The poor, in India, are termed as subaltern. This is the answer to the question of Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak *Can Subaltern Speak?* Yes, a subaltern can speak and ask a question and if they ask a question the rich would fail to answer.

After the time I spent with the actress Neelima Kumari, living in her flat, I had almost forgotten life in a chawl. A bundle of one-room tenements occupied by the lower-middle classes, chawls are the smelly armpit of Mumbai. Those who live here are only marginally better off than those who live in slums like Dharavi. As Mr Barve told me once, the rich people, those who live in their marble and granite four-bedroom flats, they enjoy. The slum people, who live in squalid, tattered huts, they suffer. And we, who reside in the overcrowded chawls, we simply live. (Swarup 70)

Slums and chawls are both products of Mumbai's housing scarcity and colonial rule, but chawls are legally developed, permanent structures, while slum dwellings are characterised by their legal ambiguity. Both of these forms of accommodation, however, are constantly threatened by redevelopment.

The perspectives of life changes with the social and economic milieu. Society is divided into the upper class, lower class and the poor. There are various divisions as per the social and economic conditions. These divisions have no connections or relations with each other. The margins of the status do not allow them to congregate. The rich enjoy their life while the slum people suffer and the people in the chawls simply live the life of the lower middle class.

I live in a corner of Mumbai called Dharavi, in a cramped hundred-square foot shack which has no natural light or ventilation, with a corrugated Metal sheet serving as the roof over my head. It vibrates violently whenever a train passes overhead. There is no running water and no sanitation. This is all I can afford. But I am not alone in Dharavi. There are a million people like me, packed in a two-hundred-hectare triangle of swampy urban wasteland, where we live like animals and die like insects. Destitute migrants from all over the country jostle with each other for their own handful of sky in Asia's biggest slum. There are daily squabbles - over inches of space, over a bucket of water - which at times turn deadly. Dharavi's residents come from the dusty backwaters of Bihar and UP and Tamil Nadu and Gujarat. They came to Mumbai, the city of gold, with dreams in their hearts of striking it rich and living upper-middle-class lives. But that gold turned to lead a long time ago, leaving behind rusted hearts and gangrenous minds. Like my own. (Swarup 156)

There are three main manifestations of exclusion in Indian metropolises. The first and most evident phenomenon that has influenced the modern urban pattern of the metropolises under study is spatial separation, or where territory displays a distinct trend reflecting social hierarchy, race, caste, or community-based segregation. Economic isolation from employment, means of livelihood, and other forms of exclusion are related to poverty and injustice. Political exclusion is the third kind, which requires denial of citizenship and rights, as well as a reduction in "capabilities."

Ram goes on describing the slum life. The people live in a small and weak hut without natural light and ventilation. There is no water supply and proper sanitation. Slum people are like an orphan and neglected child of the Indian

government. The slum is like an urban wasteland. They live like animals and die like insects. We live in the age of the city. The city is everything to us - it consumes us, and for that reason we glorify it.

-Onookome Okome

The only attraction and acknowledgement for the government and the world are that Dharavi is known as Asia's biggest slum. The root cause of urban slumming seems to lie not in urban poverty but in urban wealth.

-Gita Verma

People from all over India come to Mumbai, the city of gold, with a dream to upgrade their status by amassing wealth but their dreams are shattered due to lack of resources and opportunities. Those who went to the metropolis have fallen into a desert.

-Pepe Kelle

Their starting point of the race lies in the slum and their journey ends in the same slum. It is like back to square one. Their efforts fail to achieve what they dreamt of. They fall far away from their dream and ramble through the city.

Dharavi is not a place for the squeamish. Delhi's Juvenile Home diminished us, but Dharavi's grim landscape of urban squalor deadens and debases us. Its open drains teem with mosquitoes. Its stinking, excrement-lined communal latrines are full of rats, which make you think less about the smell and more about protecting your backside. Mounds of filthy garbage lie on every corner, from which rag-pickers still manage to find something useful. And at times you have to suck in your breath to squeeze through its narrow, claustrophobic alleys. But for the starving residents of Dharavi, this is home. (Swarup 157)

Dharavi is a place of tolerance and patience. The slums can not survive without tolerance. The surrounding is full of mosquitoes due to open drains. They share communal latrines and wait for their turn. The latrines are full of rats make people aware and afraid to save their back. The dirty garbage lies in every corner of the slum. Fusty and musty smell makes the passers-by suffocated. The people call it home despite all types of odd means. It seems like terrestrial hell.

Amidst the modern skyscrapers and neon-lit shopping complexes of Mumbai, Dharavi sits like a cancerous lump in the heart of the city. And the city refuses to recognize it. So it has outlawed it. All the houses in Dharavi are 'illegal constructions', liable to be demolished at any time. But

when the residents are struggling simply to survive, they don't care. So they live in illegal houses and use illegal electricity, drink illegal water and watch illegal cable TV. They work in Dharavi's numerous illegal factories and illegal shops, and even travel illegally - without ticket - on the local trains which pass directly through the colony. The city may have chosen to ignore the ugly growth of Dharavi, but a cancer cannot be stopped simply by being declared illegal. It still kills with its slow poison. (Swarup 157)

About half of the population of Mumbai lives in slums, on roads, under bridges, or along railway lines. Many of them will not be legally entitled to live on the property they do. The lack of ownership over lands, where people can live and work, has elevated the right to land and physical space to a core issue, transforming city politics radically. Furthermore, simple programming has proven to be a serious challenge.

When government neglects or doesn't care about the slum and the slums, the people are forced to go against the law. Their citizenship, their existence and their needs are ignored that's why they follow the illegal ways to survive. The same city gives us the look of heaven and hell. At the one end, there is extreme poverty and at the other end, there is towering affluent. These two ends never meet. The ugly and dirty growth is like cancer of the city. This disease is being ignored declaring it illegal. One day it will kill the city with its slow poison.

After my traumatic experience with Shantaram, I thought I would never be able to tolerate a drunk. But Jimmy's was the only establishment that offered me a job. I console myself with the thought that the smell of whisky is less pungent than the stench from the communal latrine near my shack, and that listening to a drunkard is less painful than listening to the heartrending stories of rape, molestation, illness and death that emanate daily from the huts of Dharavi. (Swarup 158)

Ram doesn't like drunkards, but when he is offered the job as a waiter at the bar, he couldn't deny it. As it is said earlier tolerance, patience and consolation are the only ways of surviving in the slum. So, as a slum, he accepts the offer. He seems it is better to smell and listen to the drunkards than to listen to the heart-rendering stories of rapes, molestation, illness and death in Dharavi.

I am confused again. Who can I turn to for an answer to this question? Salim will be as clueless as me. The owner of Jimmy's Bar would have as much awareness of Shakespeare as a drunk has of direction. And literature is as far from the minds of the residents of Dharavi as honesty

is from the police. (Swarup 338)

Ram is asked question on William Shakespeare's play while contesting the quiz show. He was quite unaware of the world of literature. Very few people of Dharavi may be literate, there is no question of knowing literature. The world of education is far away from Dharavi.

After deep perusal and scrutiny of the novel, it is concluded that the slum dwellers are thrown into the valley of poverty and disease which leads to the criminal activities of the poor. Nor affluent nor authority is taking care of the slums. They are living the life of marginalised people in independent and democratic India. They are neglected, avoided and ignored by the system even in the 21st century. Slums are the indigenous part of Indian society. India is a land of social, religious, regional, cultural and language differences. We often speak about 'Unity in Diversity' but in reality, no unity is found. In republic India, liberty, equality, fraternity and justice are denied. In India, rich are growing richer and poor are growing poorer. In terms of social and economic divisions, the majority of social studies focus on economic disparity. There is no justice for the poor. Their existence is like animals roaming homelessly on the roads. They are deprived of all the basic needs of human beings. Vikas Swarup's through his novel Q & A tries to delineate the Indian slum life, their social and economic conditions, their problems and sufferings in the present era of developing India.

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