

Demolish slums

But ensure good housing for all first



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In the past few months, the Brihan Mumbai Municipal Corporation has undertaken a massive demolition drive. Illegal encroachments, slums and — also for a change — well-established hotels and restaurants have been

to us all and has to be used for 'common' good. This is not for politicians to squander at will. However, year-after-year, and mostly around elections, politicians make generous promises to 'regularise' encroachments, without any constitutional mandate.

What social justice?

Then there are also those who argue against slum demolition by raising the slogan of social justice. But what notion of equity allows large parts of the urban population to live in sub-human conditions? Contrary to what many social activists believe, slums are not in the interests of the slum dwellers. They exist because of and for slumlords, municipal and police officials. They are the most blatant illustration of the nexus between organised crime and politics of corruption and power abuse by the adminis-

important production centres. In Mumbai for instance, much leather, rubber, plastic and fashion manufacturing takes place in large slums. These activities are enough to establish and sustain small towns elsewhere, under better conditions. This will create decentralised employment opportunities and address the root cause of city-bound migration. Formalising such production will also contribute large sums, presently out of bounds to the state exchequer.

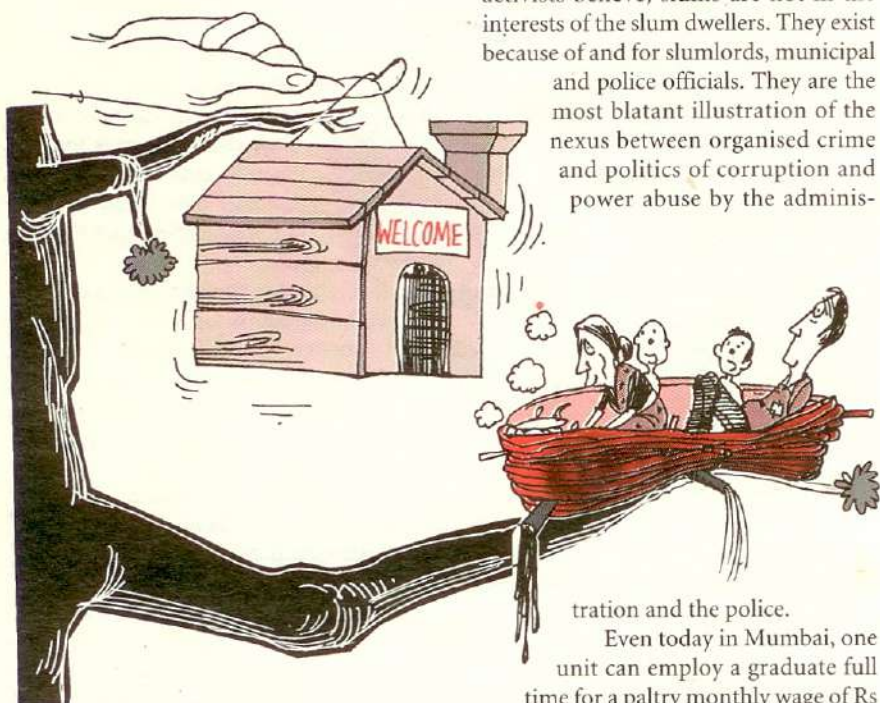
Abject failure

All this does not condone the act of demolition squads. One must not forget that encroachments also occur because state agencies for regional/urban planning and housing have failed their mandate. Housing has been left almost totally to private initiative. In Mumbai, the output of the state housing boards is actually a fraction of what is required. Even the much-advertised slum redevelopment authority scheme in Mumbai allows the state to evade a basic responsibility by linking slum rehabilitation to private initiative. This directly inflates the real estate market, thus further reducing the numbers of those who can access regular housing.

High time

New development mechanisms should be created to support housing for all sections of society. The availability of housing finance has drastically increased the middle-class' access to property. It is high time the poor are also regarded as clients. Slum dwellers do pay for accommodation and the amenities they get (water and electricity) — sometimes as high as Rs 3,000 per month. I am sure many will readily pay more for better and regular dwellings. Suitable housing finance schemes and land subsidies can provide housing to many. A lot of under-utilised public and private land can be put to good use. ■

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tration and the police.

Even today in Mumbai, one unit can employ a graduate full time for a paltry monthly wage of Rs two or three thousand. Slums make this possible. They ensure availability of cheap labour thus subverting the entire economic equation between remuneration and the cost of living. If these sub-human hovels weren't tolerated, employers would perform raise wages of their employees.

At the same time, the higher cost of living in the metros would encourage a lot of small- and medium-scale enterprise to move to other cities. Let us not forget that illegal settlements are also

targeted. It has been long since anything like this has actually taken place without the intervention of the usual suspects: non-governmental organisations and vote hunters.

Enough has been written on the right to housing being a fundamental one. But we shouldn't also ignore another basic axiom: one's rights shouldn't be secured by the violation of others. A very important fundamental right is the right to property — not just private possession but whatever belongs