

“The Audacity of Hope”

By Sachin D. Shah

Mumbai is the epitome of an overpopulated city. It continues to push the constraints of its geography, yet manages somehow to always find room for more people. The slums are the smoke and mirrors with which a finite area--its capacity long since exhausted--is made to accommodate still more. People are crammed beside each other and stacked upon each other in what precious little space there is. While population density estimates are often wildly disparate, simply dividing population (~18,000,000 by a 2005 estimate) by land area (437 sq km) puts Mumbai's density at ~40,000/sq km. many of the slums have a much higher density, though I won't hazard a guess to try to quantify exactly how



“A view of the slum where Sachin worked”

much more. I also personally think the population is greater than the official estimate given the difficulty in accurately counting the number of slum residents, a demographic that makes up ~40% of Mumbai's population. Manhattan, by comparison, has a population density of ~25,000/sq km. finding consistent figures for population density of other populous cities of the world is very difficult, but they are almost without exception

significantly less than Mumbai's. In any case, superlatives aren't necessary to make my basic point: there are a lot of people here in a small amount of space.

I've come here to work with a Non Profit Organization (NPO) called AVSAR(www.avsarindia.org), which stands for the alliance of volunteers for service, action, and reform. This organization was started about two years ago by a current medical-pediatrics resident in Chicago, and works to improve healthcare for underprivileged populations in India. I was placed with another Non Profit Organisation (NPO) called Akanksha (www.akanksha.org) that works with slum children in Bombay. Akanksha runs programs after school at spaces near each of the slums in which the children reside. Often they take them by buses from their slums everyday before or after school to the nearby spaces and then spend ~3 hours on additional educational and extracurricular activities.

There are lots of problems, as you might imagine, that come with living in the slums. Sanitation, hygiene, clean water, for example. Access to health care is also a big problem. I was here to modestly assist on that front, as I did medical checkups on the kids

in each of as many centers as I got to in the time that I was there. I usually took the kids to the corner of the classroom and talked to them for a while and then did a basic physical exam. For the girls, I usually took them to a stairwell landing upstairs, and had them lie on a mat on the ground to complete my exam on them -- it's as much of a private space as we had. I saw a lot of dermatological problems like Impetigo and Pyodermas, Malaria, Ascariasis (worms), Anemia, Lice, Ringworm, Vision problems, Diarrheal diseases, the occasional TB, and a host of others.

In reality, the slum dwellers make the city run. They are the rickshaw drivers, the vegetable vendors, and the servants. They collect the trash, sweep the floors, and deliver the Tiffin's at lunch time. Without them, the city would be brought to its knees. They deserve a place to live and a certain standard of living, both of which they are mostly denied. Many of the adults have given up; they have been defeated by a life of suffering and hopelessness. Yet the children persevere. If only you could meet them, believe me, your heart would be buoyed by their spirit. They are young, and they have known no other life than that of the slums, but with the help of Akanksha, they believe in themselves. They desperately want an opportunity, and they dare to dream big, of improving their lives, of achieving and advancing themselves through education. How they personify the audacity of hope. They are beautiful, they are curious, and there are many that are incredibly gifted.



“Sachin during check up’s at an Akanksha Centre”



“Sachin with a Group of Kids at one of the Akanksha centers”

As I’ve said before, these children gave me extraordinary access into their lives. They trusted in me. They showed me their homes and communities, introduced me to their parents, and shared their dreams with me. They showed a fondness for me that I can’t help feeling that I don’t deserve--not so soon. But in truth, I reciprocated their adulation and became attached to them quite quickly myself.

It’s easy to be overwhelmed by the immensity of the problems of a city like Mumbai. We usually look at slums and slum dwellers with a macroscopic lens and aggregate their problems. We discuss them as a population—they need education, sanitation, hygiene, vaccinations, and health care. This is all true, but

they are also individuals with distinctive personalities, stories, and nuances. Some have dimples; some are afraid of the dark; some are angry; some are confused. They are all human beings, however, and their lives, if they are to be changed, must be changed one at a time.

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