

# Governing the Urban Poor: Riverfront Development, Slum Resettlement and the Politics of Inclusion in Ahmedabad

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The politics of inclusion in the Sabarmati Riverfront Development project, an urban mega-project in Ahmedabad, has been predicated on a “flexible governing” of the residents of the riverfront informal settlements. Such flexible governing has allowed state authorities to negotiate grass-roots opposition and mobilisation, modify the project to gentrify the riverfront further, and even officially represent the project as inclusive although questions of social justice have been profoundly disregarded over the past decade and continue to be insufficiently addressed. This paper examines the politics of slum resettlement and inclusion by analysing the project from planning in the late 1990s to the initial stages of official resettlement a decade later.

In 2009, over 200 families were relocated under the Sabarmati Riverfront Development (SRD) project, from informal settlements on Ahmedabad’s riverfront to four-storey flats several kilometres away. For these families, the relocation was the culmination of years of uncertainty about how this ambitious urban waterfront project would affect their lives. It had been just over a decade since a planning proposal was prepared for the project; almost a decade since a slum survey was carried out on the riverfront; six years since project construction had begun; and four years since a grass-roots organisation had filed a public interest litigation (PIL) to appeal for the rights of riverfront slum-dwellers.

This was also only the first group of families to be relocated, and more than 14,000 families still remained in informal settlements on various stretches of the riverfront, many of them still waiting to find out whether they would be displaced by the project in the first place and whether they would then be eligible for relocation. While many more families have since been relocated, this has involved – and continues to involve – intense negotiations for inclusion in resettlement. It is in this context that this paper casts an eye over the project, from its planning to the initial stages of official resettlement a decade later, and interrogates its politics of slum resettlement and inclusion.

The Rs 1,200 crore SRD project is one of the many urban projects that have emerged around the world over the past two decades, with the articulation of new urban imaginaries. They powerfully link particular projects and landscapes of urban infrastructure, beautification and real estate development to expectations that these will enhance city competitiveness and attract investors, stimulate urban economic growth, and/or improve quality of life. In Indian cities, realising such projects has often been contingent on governing the urban poor and the spaces they inhabit in ways that make possible the redevelopment of these spaces. This paper argues that in the case of the SRD project, the redevelopment of the riverfront has been predicated on a “flexible governing” of the residents of riverfront informal settlements. This flexible governing has articulated a particular politics of inclusion.

It is important to note here that the initial project proposal sought to include residents in the project in certain well-defined ways. I argue that this politics of inclusion and mode of governing involved an “inclusion by co-optation”. However, the implementation process articulated a very different politics of inclusion, which took shape through a flexible governing of residents. By flexible governing, I refer to the ways in which state authorities took an

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ambivalent and shifting approach vis-à-vis the urban poor as they pursued their primary agenda of beautifying and maximising gentrification of the riverfront. Rather than committing to or pursuing a particular well-thought-out strategy (violent or benevolent) vis-à-vis the urban poor, the approach of these state authorities fluctuated, and ultimately evolved, in response to changing calculations and pressures. These included financial, political and/or other kinds of calculations (such as the desire to quicken the pace of the project); the pressures came from the grass roots and the judiciary.

Over the past decade, these state authorities have thus engaged in ambiguous, shifting and competing practices of inclusion. I discuss three distinct practices in this context: multiple and shifting terrains of compensation, fragmentary evictions and piecemeal resettlement. Significantly, this flexible governing has allowed state authorities to negotiate grass-roots opposition and mobilisation, as well as modify the project to gentrify the riverfront further relative to what was originally proposed. It has also allowed for official representation of the project as inclusive, although questions of social justice were profoundly disregarded over the past decade and continue to be insufficiently addressed.

This analysis is based on 18 months of ethnographic research between 2004 and 2006, and short phases of follow-up research over 2009-11. The paper is organised as follows: first, it discusses the implications that contemporary forms of urban development and governance have had for the urban poor in Indian cities. This discussion focuses particularly on the politics of dispossession and inclusion to locate subsequent discussions on the SRD case. Next, I briefly describe the SRD project. Following this, I examine the initial project proposal from 1998 to interrogate its co-optation by inclusion. I then analyse the practices that have constituted the flexible governing of the riverfront informal settlements and their residents over the project's implementation between 2000 and 2010. In the concluding section, I discuss the politics of inclusion implied by this flexible governing and its implications for equitable urban development in Ahmedabad.

### **Urban Development, Governance and the Politics of Inclusion**

Dispossession of the poor and deepening forms of inequality have been a central feature of the contemporary re-envisioning of urban landscapes across the world. The redevelopment and gentrification of spaces inhabited by the poor and working classes has, in fact, become a crucial urban strategy of accumulation (Smith 2002). Research on Indian cities such as Mumbai and Delhi has shown how these processes have been put into motion by evicting poorer and less enfranchised inhabitants such as pavement dwellers, slum-dwellers and street vendors (Banerjee-Guha 2009; Baviskar 2006; Bhan 2009; Bhowmik 2003; Kumar 2005) through systematically labelling them "encroachers" and "illegal" (Ramanathan 2006) as well as through legal discourses of "nuisance" (Ghertner 2008). These overt dispossession have often been enabled then by the increasing centrality of the judiciary in urban planning and government (Bhan 2009) and its regressive stance vis-à-vis the urban poor since the 1990s. In these cases, resettlement for evicted slum-dwellers, if any, has

been on the outskirts of cities, usually devoid of security of tenure, basic infrastructure and a socio-economic livelihood base.

However, parallel to these overt processes of dispossession and the urban visions and forms of governance that enable them, India has also been witnessing the emergence of certain inclusive forms of urban development and governance. Here, our understanding of these processes and their outcomes stems mainly from research on urban projects in Mumbai. For instance, various studies have looked at participatory slum resettlement under the World Bank-funded Mumbai Urban Transport Project (MUTP). While initial analyses were very positive, arguing that this embodied an approach "beyond evictions" (Patel et al 2002) and involved "deep democracy" (Appadurai 2001), recent analyses have been more critical and cautious. Roy (2009a), for instance, theorises the mediation of slum resettlement by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOS) in MUTP as a regime of "civic governmentality" which involves populist mediation, technologies of governing such as grass-roots knowledge production and norms of self-rule such as concepts of civility. She argues that these regimes of government both resist and comply with what may be perceived as top-down forms of rule, producing a particular "politics of inclusion" in which "the urban subject is simultaneously empowered and self-disciplined, civil and mobilised, displaced and compensated" (Roy 2009a: 161), and through which urban renewal is facilitated.

Through a fine-grained ethnography of participatory slum resettlement under MUTP, Doshi (2011) moreover analyses the particular kinds of gendered subjectivities that are shaped and harnessed to manage resettlement. She shows how, on the one hand, this results in empowered roles for certain groups of women residents in what are otherwise elite-driven projects and, on the other, result in a reinforcement of socio-economic inequalities amongst resettled inhabitants. In other words, as Doshi explains, gendered mobilisations amongst women residents enable market-oriented projects of urban transformation, even as they produce deeply uneven and contradictory experiences and outcomes amongst residents.

In the case of the Dharavi Redevelopment Project in Mumbai, Weinstein's (2011) research shows how attempts to smoothen this high-profile project's implementation and rein in opposition to it led the state and architect-planners to engage Dharavi's residents in the planning process. She argues that this facilitated democracy through co-optation, but also that only some marginalised groups were able to make effective claims in these processes. Focusing on a different sector of urban policy in Mumbai, Zerah (2009) argues that although participatory governance in the management of urban services has opened up space for NGOs and CBOS to become a bridge with poor communities, in reality this has empowered only influential community members, middlemen and small private entrepreneurs, while contributing to labour informalisation. Zerah thus argues that such "governing beyond the State" does not translate into a "governing from below" that would widen participation.

The research discussed above analyses some of the forms of urban development and governance that constitute contemporary politics of inclusion, and its paradoxes and contradictions. This paper seeks to contribute to these analyses and debates by examining the SRD project in Ahmedabad. Unlike many of the projects

mentioned above, a key element of the SRD project is the primary role of state authorities in initiating, financing, developing and implementing all components of the project in a top-down fashion. Thus, the urban poor living and working on the riverfront were not incorporated through a participatory approach, and NGOs and CBOs were not invited to be mediators with poor communities. Indeed, from the existing literature on Indian cities, it is unclear to what extent participatory processes of any kind have been pursued outside of the largest metropolitan cities. It is therefore important to pay attention to other practices – such as the flexible governing in the SRD project – which articulate a politics of inclusion and enable neo-liberal projects of urban development.

As mentioned earlier, flexible governing refers to the ways in which state authorities took an ambivalent and shifting approach vis-à-vis the urban poor as they pursued their agenda of beautifying the riverfront. During the project's initial years, they held out an ambiguous promise of inclusion. Later, they also began to pursue competing and shifting practices, sometimes evicting groups and sometimes resettling them, in response to changing (financial, political, etc) calculations and pressures. Some of these practices were also informal. As Ananya Roy (2009b) argues, informality must not be equated with the urban poor and their spaces, but rather with the idiom of urbanisation and planning in India and with the state's own practices in this context. State authorities, moreover, had to contend with grass-roots mobilisation which also took questions of displacement and resettlement to the courts. Their practices of flexible governing thus also evolved out of their attempts to deal with the court's relatively sympathetic stance towards slum-dwellers. The SRD project thus also reveals the potentials and limitations of the role played by the judiciary in this context.

Mahadevia (2011) has pointed out that the metropolitan story in reform-era India has been one of parallel and conflicting policies, with one set of policies focused on large-scale urban infrastructure projects to make cities into engines of economic growth and the other focused on poverty alleviation. While the former excludes the urban poor, the latter includes them. This, she argues, constitutes a "paradigm of deliberate confusion" and allows policy to swing in the direction from which there is pressure. In the SRD case, we see this paradigm operating within a single project. Here, the implementing state authorities have often sought to represent the project as inclusive of the urban poor, but since they have privileged the beautification of the riverfront, this has created contradictions in the way in which questions of the urban poor have been addressed. In other words, the practices of the authorities vis-à-vis the urban poor have swung depending on changing calculations and pressures. I analyse this approach as constituting a flexible governing of the urban poor. In the next section, I briefly describe the project.

### Sabarmati Project

The SRD project emerged in 1997 when the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) established a special purpose vehicle, the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Corporation (SRDC), to develop the city's riverfront. In 1998, a project proposal was prepared for SRDC by the Environmental Planning Collaborative (EPC), an Ahmedabad-based not-for-profit urban planning firm. This

proposal envisaged extensive land reclamation along a nine kilometre stretch of the river, the creation of open green spaces, residential and commercial real estate development, the development of cultural facilities, the construction of infrastructure such as roads and service networks, the allocation of space for existing and new informal markets, and resettlement and rehabilitation of riverfront slum households (EPC 1998). A central aspect of the proposal was that the project should be self-financing. The allocation of 21% of the total reclaimed land for residential and commercial development was calculated on this basis. The 1998 proposal has guided the project since this time, although significant modifications have also been made over the years. Project construction began in 2003 and is gradually edging towards completion.

It is important to note that the idea of riverfront development has its roots in proposals put forward from the 1960s through the 1980s. The most well known is the first of the proposals, prepared in the early 1960s by Bernard Kohn, a French-American architect-planner living in Ahmedabad at the time. Another proposal was prepared in the mid-1970s by a group of architects and planners known as the Riverfront Development Group (RDG). The economic and ideological context of the late 1990s in the city and beyond created a more conducive atmosphere than ever before for pursuing riverfront development; it also crucially transformed the vision for the riverfront. The 1998 proposal covered a longer stretch of the riverfront (9 km as compared to 3.5 km under the Kohn proposal and six km under the RDG proposal) and proposed a greater area of land reclamation (162 hectares as compared to 30 hectares under the Kohn proposal and no land reclamation under the RDG proposal).

Although the Kohn proposal had recommended that some land be privatised to make the project self-financing, its emphasis had been on creating easy pedestrian access to the new public spaces along the river; minimal roads were proposed. The 1998 proposal, on the other hand, while lining the river's edge with public open spaces and promenades, also proposed an almost continuous four-lane or six-lane road parallel to the river, allocating almost 29% of the total reclaimed land to roads. In fact, while earlier proposals were relatively modest in their scale and scope, the 1998 proposal put forth a vision in which the entire face of this central urban area along the river would be transformed through large-scale land reclamation, followed by an extensive reorganisation of existing riverfront activities, the insertion of new activities and infrastructures, and the introduction of urban design guidelines to create an ordered, regulated and efficient urban space.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, although the rhetoric of the 1998 proposal echoed earlier proposals in emphasising the improvement of the quality of environment and life in Ahmedabad (EPC 1998: 1), the project was profoundly different in that it leveraged the market for urban restructuring and seductively reimagined the area straddling the river in ways similar to urban mega-projects elsewhere in the world. Like other mega-projects, it has of course been inevitably shaped by local political and institutional regimes. Thus, while the SRD project involves "urban entrepreneurialism" (Harvey 1989), this is not in the form of a public-private partnership as is often the case in mega-projects, but rather in the form of a municipal government that has taken on the role of developer (through SRDC)

and that will also take on the marketing of the project and selling a portion of the reclaimed land to investors and developers.

Politically, the project has been supported by both parties: while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) revived the project in 1997 when it was in power in the AMC, project construction began in 2003 when the Congress Party was in power. It is now being completed under the BJP's tenure. In fact, both the city's mayor, who belongs to the ruling party in the AMC and the leader of the opposition party are on SRDC's Board of Directors. But SRDC's Board also comprises high-level bureaucrats from both the AMC and the Government of Gujarat.<sup>2</sup> Since Narendra Modi, Gujarat's chief minister, holds power over the appointment of these bureaucrats, he has been able to play a central role in the shaping of the SRD project, regardless of which party has been in power in the AMC. In this way, the entrepreneurial role of the AMC through SRDC has also linked up to the entrepreneurial strategies of the Gujarat government (Desai 2011).

An important outcome of EPC's involvement as planning consultant was that the 1998 proposal not only sought to ambitiously redevelop the riverfront, but also brought the relocation and rehabilitation of the riverfront urban poor within the ambit of the project. The proposal articulated this aspect of the project as bringing about a positive transformation in the lives of poor communities, eliminating the risk of flooding and providing them with elevated and serviced land on the developed riverfront. This set the stage for official representations of the project as being inclusive. However, with the beginning of the project's implementation, the proposal was refracted through the political and institutional regimes described above, transforming the project in significant ways. Let us first examine the 1998 proposal and its politics of inclusion vis-à-vis the residents of the riverfront's informal settlements.

### Co-optation by Inclusion

The politics of inclusion during the initial project planning hinged on spatial techniques such as the mapping of informality and "project-affected slums" and the preparation of a land-use plan as well as on institutional and financial mechanisms. I argue that through these techniques and strategies, which rendered the riverfront's informal settlements and their residents governable and included them in well-defined ways, the 1998 proposal sought to achieve co-optation by inclusion.<sup>3</sup>

**Mapping Informality and 'Project-Affected Slums':** The 1998 proposal mapped out all existing land-uses, including informal settlements, along the river. All the informal settlements were mapped under the broad category of slums, although there were differences in land and housing ownership patterns, tenure arrangements, levels of housing consolidation and infrastructure provision, and neighbourhood histories. For instance, the chawls on the riverfront were different from squatter settlements, the former having their genesis in one-room houses constructed and rented out by private landowners. Some squatter settlements were, in fact, the result of earlier demolitions in the city, with the AMC relocating the evicted to these sites without secure tenure. There were also differences between households in size, occupation, income and so forth. The category of the "slum" and its mapping by orange colouring in the 1998 proposal thus

homogenised these neighbourhoods and households, bringing thousands of families under the proposal's one-size-fits-all resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R) measures.

This mapping, along with data from a 1991 Census and a reconnaissance survey of new settlements, also led the 1998 proposal to estimate that 10,000 households lived in riverfront slums. It then demarcated a "project-affected area" (PAA), defining this as the area in which land reclamation would be carried out (EPC 1998: 42). This PAA was then superimposed on a map of existing slums to arrive at the "project-affected slums" and the figure of "project-affected households". What this meant was that if a slum extended beyond the PAA boundary, then the households that lay outside the PAA would be presumed unaffected by the project since they would not be removed for land reclamation. A further criterion was introduced here and the proposal stated that if more than 75% of households of a slum lived within the PAA, then all the households of that slum (even those outside the PAA) would be considered project affected and would be resettled. The figure of 75% was arbitrary, but like the epistemological category of the "slum" and the demarcation of a PAA, it tried to make the complex realities on the ground manageable for R&R. It is thus that the figure of 4,400 project-affected households was arrived at, and the land-use plan prepared on this basis.

**The Land-Use Plan:** The 1998 proposal recommended relocating residents of riverfront slums on the developed riverfront. Its mapping of slums thus fed into the proposed land-use plan for the riverfront. Three slum relocation sites, totalling an area of 15.48 hectares or 9.5% of the reclaimed land, were allocated for the 4,400 project-affected households. Their location was based on the mapping, along with a number of considerations regarding design of resettlement units and the idea that "relocation of low-income communities at distant locations, by disrupting the close relationship between the place of work and residence, has a very negative impact on their economic and social well being" (EPC 1998: 44). Relocation was thus to take place within two to three km from people's present sites of residence. At this stage, the project therefore rejected the gentrification of the riverfront in the way that other urban projects have gentrified urban spaces in recent years in India, that is, by forcibly displacing the urban poor to other areas. Although gentrification can take place over time depending on how projects structure mechanisms of inclusion, the 1998 proposal's land-use plan was nonetheless unique. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that it was based on the particular mapping of informality discussed earlier.

**Institutional and Financial Mechanisms of Inclusion:** The 1998 proposal recommended that a Technical Support Organisation (TSO) be set up for implementing the project's R&R component. It suggested that the TSO should be independent of SRDC, and structured as a not-for-profit company to be held by representatives of various voluntary organisations, CBOs and professionals in Ahmedabad. The objective of setting up such an organisation was to "ensure a higher degree of transparency and acceptability amongst the affected households" (EPC 1998: 45). The TSO would interact with affected households to design the housing, look after legal aspects of providing ownership and arrange for long-term

financing so that they could pay around two-thirds the cost of constructing the resettlement units (EPC 1998: 45). The TSO was also to organise Residents' Committees, which would organise R&R. Thus, inclusion was structured through financial contributions, property ownership, some voice in the housing design and organisation of the relocation process by people's committees. This mode of inclusion was likely to have differential effects on residents depending on their social and economic circumstances.

This inclusion of the riverfront urban poor – through the mapping, land-use plan and various institutional and financial mechanisms – was designed by EPC in collaboration with VIKAS, a development NGO in Ahmedabad, and through the interaction that Bimal Patel, EPC's managing director, had with the general secretary of Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), the NGO and trade union that organises and works with poor, self-employed women.<sup>4</sup> After the proposal was prepared, Patel also explained the project to at least one group of NGOs and activists to try and convince them of the benefits the project would bring to the urban poor.<sup>5</sup> The proposal was thus meant to satisfy both the urban poor and their advocates and thus co-opt them into the project's larger remaking of the riverfront. Indeed, Patel also took it upon himself to convince economic and political elites that the urban poor should be relocated on the riverfront.

Ultimately, however, this politics of inclusion was predicated on a top-down process. It predetermined and fixed the role and the space that the riverfront urban poor would be given in the project. It was still predicated on the notion of informal settlements as illegal and their residents as populations to be managed rather than citizens with legitimate claims (Chatterjee 2004). It is, of course, impossible to tell in what way this co-optation by inclusion would have unfolded had some of the recommendations of the 1998 proposal been followed more closely, but it should be clear from the analysis above that it would not have benefited all and would have exacerbated and produced particular inequalities. However, over the next decade, the proposal was refracted through the institutional and political regimes shaping the project's implementation, leading to a flexible governing of the urban poor and inducing Patel's for-profit architectural firm HCP, which took over the urban design of the project, to make significant modifications to the EPC project plans.

### Flexible Governing

Although the 1998 proposal included the residents of the riverfront informal settlements in well-defined ways, over the next several years, the AMC and SRDC engaged in flexible governing involving three distinct practices: multiple and shifting terrains of compensation, fragmentary evictions and piecemeal resettlement. These are discussed below.

**Multiple and Shifting Terrains of Compensation:** Between 2000 and 2002, a slum survey was carried out for the project on the riverfront. Neither was systematic information about the survey or the project given to residents at the time, nor was the survey ever shared with them. Interviews with NGOs and residents revealed that the survey was also carried out unevenly. Unsurprisingly, the number of households living on the riverfront

became a contentious issue. While the survey enumerated approximately 14,500 households, NGOs and community organisations argued that 30,000-40,000 households lived in these settlements. Nonetheless, since a survey had been done, there was a vague promise of inclusion.

In subsequent years, state authorities put out competing and shifting information on compensation. Project brochures available from SRDC in 2004 stated that there were 4,400 project-affected households.<sup>6</sup> The following year, the AMC's 2005 Annual Diary (p 90) stated that 14,500 households would be resettled while at the same time, a new project brochure stated that 7,000 households would be resettled. As a result, speculation abounded amongst residents, with some confident that they would be compensated, others unsure about who would be compensated, and everyone uncertain about what compensation would entail. In other words, while there existed uncertainty and confusion about the terms and nature of compensation, there also existed an ambiguous promise of compensation for many.

In this context, information garnered from Gujarati newspapers and political leaders inevitably became a source of information, often adding to this situation of uncertainty and confusion on the one hand and the promise of inclusion on the other. For instance, organisations formed in 2004, first by a Congress Party worker (the *Sabarmati Riverfront Jhupdawasi Sangharsh Samiti*) and then by a highly placed leader in the Congress Party (the *Amdavad Shehr ane Riverfront Jhupda Samiti*) held grass-roots meetings and rallies on the question of resettlement under the project. They focused mainly on extending the cut-off date for eligibility for resettlement – from 1976 (the AMC's cut-off date for the entire city at the time) to 2000.<sup>7</sup> Although the cut-off date for the project remained unresolved for many years, as political parties and leaders debated it, state authorities put out competing and shifting bits of information. Newspapers reported on the project frequently, residents formed differing ideas about the project and its implications. During my fieldwork in the riverfront settlements in 2005, there was a very wide range of responses from residents regarding what they knew of the project and how they thought the project would affect them.

It is worth noting that internal project documents show that there were even more multiplicities and shifting decisions than in public view. Thus, 8,464 households were to be resettled according to one document, authored by the Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT) and Gujarat Ecology Commission (GEC) (2002) and 6,483 were to be resettled according to another (Vivro 2006). A third document simply stated that the 1976 list of riverfront slum residents was "irrelevant" and "it would be relevant and proper to include urban poor as per the list of 1995" (SRDC 2004). This would suggest that the multiple and shifting terrains of compensation in the public domain were the result not of a conscious strategy to engender confusion amongst residents, but the result of multiple and changing rationalities at work within these implementing authorities. However, this lack of decisive commitment certainly created confusion amongst slum-dwellers and also enabled other competing and shifting practices by the authorities. Before I turn to these, let us consider the grass-roots mobilisation that took questions of resettlement to the courts in 2005.

Over 2004 and 2005, a grass-roots movement emerged under the banner of *Sabarmati Nagrik Adhikar Manch* (SNAM) in response to concerns about the project's implications for the riverfront informal settlements. SNAM had first formed in a small stretch of riverfront settlements, growing out of efforts by the St Xavier's Social Service Society (sxsss), a local NGO, to promote communal harmony after the 2002 Gujarat riots and bring together Hindu and Muslim residents around shared concerns.<sup>8</sup> Unable to get information about resettlement, SNAM leaders decided that a broader grass-roots mobilisation was needed to be effective. They initiated contact with community leaders in other settlements on the river, organised open meetings with residents, spread awareness about the project, and garnered support for a wider housing rights struggle.

Guided by some NGOs, SNAM also filed a PIL in the Gujarat High Court through Girish Patel, an Ahmedabad-based human rights lawyer. The PIL laid out the concerns of slum-dwellers living on the riverfront and appealed to the court for information on resettlement, and just and fair R&R. In April 2005, the court issued a stay order, prohibiting various state authorities including AMC and SRDC from evicting any resident until the courts had seen the rehabilitation plans.<sup>9</sup> Since the courts did not insist on a particular deadline for submitting the plans, and the stay order was not on the project as a whole, AMC and SRDC did not submit any plans to the courts until mid-2008. In the intervening three years, the multiple and shifting terrains of compensation continued, and AMC also attempted to evict smaller groups of residents.

**Fragmentary Evictions:** In September 2005, the AMC issued eviction notices to 177 families in Merianagar, an informal neighbourhood on the riverfront. They were to be resettled under what is known in Ahmedabad as *vaikalpik vyavastha* (alternative arrangement). SNAM leaders and some residents attempted to stop eviction and negotiate better resettlement under the SRD project, but this was a short unsuccessful struggle. According to some of my interviews, local elected representatives had threatened that if the families did not accept this arrangement immediately, they would not get any resettlement later. Many began to dismantle their houses out of fear and the families were thus evicted. The *vaikalpik vyavastha* comprised land outside the city's municipal limits, which was divided by chalk into 10 feet by 15 feet plots. The only services provided before people moved were a borewell, some community taps and a non-functional prefabricated toilet block. No legal tenure was given.

Let us consider what this eviction reveals about flexible governing. AMC argued that the evictions were for the building of a new bridge across the river and the families were therefore resettled according to the policy in the rest of the city. But the fact was that there was still no concrete R&R plan under the SRD project. The confusion about who would or would not be displaced under the project is partly what made such an argument viable. In other words, the absence of a clear plan for R&R under the SRD project allowed the possibility of evicting groups of riverfront residents under other projects. It is worthwhile to also note that while bridge construction was not funded under the SRD project, both were contiguous projects, and the construction of a number of bridges was important for realising the SRD plan, whose land-use, road networks, and so forth had all been planned accordingly.

The boundaries between riverfront development and other projects of urban development such as bridge construction were constructed then through the demarcation of city-space into discrete projects, thus creating uneven entitlements through urban planning and allowing for a flexible governing of the urban poor.

The fact that more evictions like this did not take place was not because they were not attempted by AMC, but because grass-roots mobilisation got smarter at countering eviction. Legally speaking, the stay order applied to all residents on the riverfront until rehabilitation plans were submitted to the court. The AMC's eviction attempts were thus in contempt of the court's order, and after the Merianagar incident, residents and SNAM leaders – who had initially been left confused by AMC's argument that the eviction was for a bridge and not the SRD project – realised this. The AMC made a few other attempts in late 2005 as well as 2006 to similarly demolish houses for the construction of new bridges. It even tried to demolish some houses to create a wider entrance for the Gujarat government's 2007 Vibrant Gujarat Global Investor Summit organised on the project's reclaimed land. In all these cases, it was only because some residents and community leaders confidently insisted that they were covered by the court's stay order and came under the SRD project that these attempts were thwarted.

If the court's stay order had not been in place or had not been mobilised in these cases by residents, the absence of a clear R&R plan and the unfolding of flexible governing would have led to more dispossession than it did. This also shows that the practices of AMC and SRDC unfolded depending on the nature of grass-roots mobilisation as well as their own calculations at the time. (These calculations changed later, and as I will briefly discuss in the concluding section, the AMC again carried out evictions on the riverfront in May 2011, this time without issuing eviction notices and despite the insistence of residents that they were protected by the court's stay order.)

### Ambivalent and Shifting

This ambivalent and shifting approach vis-à-vis the urban poor moreover allowed for flexibility in the larger project as well. While project construction began in 2003 on the basis of the 1998 proposal, the project seemed to be continually under pressure – from within the state and without – to make the riverfront more attractive to the middle- and upper-middle classes and investors. In 2007, a new plan was exhibited by AMC and SRDC at the Gujarat government's Vibrant Gujarat Global Investor Summit. This showed a modified land-use plan for an 11 km stretch of the river. While slum relocation sites were still allocated on the developed riverfront, the largest of the sites had been moved to the added stretch further north, away from its earlier central location, which was instead allocated for commercial facilities and a convention centre. Development was also proposed in a few more riverfront slum pockets than in the 1998 proposal.

But around this time, AMC had also begun to finally formulate an R&R policy, and things then turned in a direction that allowed for even more significant modifications to the land-use plan. In 2005, the central government had formulated the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). Instead of using the SRD finances for R&R as earlier planned, AMC NOW

turned to JNNURM funds for financing this component. At the same time, slum relocation sites were shifted away from the riverfront, allowing for further gentrification of the proposed riverfront. The early formulation of a clear R&R plan and early construction of resettlement housing on the riverfront – for instance, through phasing the project such that the resettlement sites were built on the riverfront as other components of the project were implemented<sup>10</sup> – would not have made possible these later changes to the larger project. It is through this flexible governing approach that the state authorities kept open the possibilities for gentrifying the riverfront further than originally proposed.

**Piecemeal Resettlement:** Even after an R&R policy was submitted by AMC and SRDC to the courts in mid-2008, flexible governing continued, albeit in other ways. The R&R policy stated that (1) about 8,000 families had been found to be fully affected and 4,000 partly affected by the project; (2) fully affected families would be resettled under JNNURM; and (3) a December 2002 cut-off date would be used since the slum survey was completed then. Resettlement provisions, such as the amount of beneficiary contributions and resettlement unit size, were also outlined. The application to the courts went on to explain that AMC and SRDC were seeking the court's permission to resettle 416 families from nine different locations on the river "on a priority basis". It is instructive to pay attention to the language in the application: "Thickly populated slum pockets on the both sides of the river are at present *hampering* the ongoing work of construction". And further:<sup>11</sup>

The whole project has come to a *grinding halt* insofar as the locations where project affected people are living on the banks of Sabarmati. For this purpose, [we] have framed the Draft Resettlement and Rehabilitation Policy for the hutments/Project Affected Families ('PAFs') of Sabarmati River Front Development Project.

It is clear from the language that resettlement was perceived by the state authorities as necessary, not for attending to the well being of residents but for continuing project construction. Even after the court granted permission for this relocation, some AMC officials threatened many of these families and attempted to shift them to a site other than the one agreed upon and give them smaller houses, than mentioned in the civil application. SNAM leaders quickly approached their lawyer who wrote a letter to AMC and SRDC to remind them of the court's orders.<sup>12</sup>

More than a year later, in December 2009, AMC and SRDC submitted another civil application to the court, seeking permission to relocate another 4,000 families "so that cleaning work, construction of road, etc can be taken up".<sup>13</sup> In March 2010, as the process of the actual relocation of these 4,000 families was unfolding, the AMC and SRDC submitted a status report in response to a court order. The report outlined details for relocating another 1,600 households. Thus, resettlement has been articulated and carried out in a piecemeal way, informing and relocating residents as and when they became obstacles to continuing project construction.

## Conclusions

This paper has analysed the politics of inclusion in the context of the SRD by casting an eye over the project between 2000 and 2010. While the initial project proposal articulated a co-optation

by inclusion, over the next decade, the proposal was refracted through the institutional and political regimes shaping the project's implementation, leading to flexible governing of the riverfront urban poor by SRDC and AMC. This involved numerous practices such as multiple and shifting terrains of compensation, fragmentary evictions and piecemeal resettlement. In this manner, these state authorities pursued an ambivalent approach vis-à-vis the urban poor, engaging in multiple and competing practices as well as shifting practices according to their own changing calculations and in response to changing external pressures.

Here, the role of the judiciary emerged as crucial in exerting pressure on these authorities to provide resettlement to the affected families. However, while the judiciary's stay order provided much-needed protection against eviction and the courts became an important arena for negotiating compensation, the judicial process was far from a guarantor of justice for the riverfront slum residents. The stay order only applied to evictions and not the project as a whole, and the court did not mention any timeline for the submission of a R&R policy. This enabled AMC and SRDC's flexible governing to continue for years, as other components of the SRD project continued to be implemented on the riverfront without any clear commitments on R&R, while holding out a vague promise of inclusion. In this context, small evictions were also attempted on the riverfront, often in the name of other projects. Without strong grass-roots mobilisation, the stay order was unable to protect the residents against eviction. Where strong grass-roots opposition emerged, AMC shifted its practices to deal with this, appease the residents temporarily and continue project construction. Even when an R&R policy was finally submitted to the courts, the resettlement process began in a piecemeal fashion, with AMC and SRDC requesting – and being granted – the court's permission to displace and resettle residents as and when they became obstacles to the project's continued construction.

Under these processes of flexible governing over the past decade, the riverfront slum residents have thus been treated as beneficiaries and non-citizens whose lives can be placed in a protracted state of limbo, about whom decisions can be made suddenly, without warning, upsetting and unsettling lives and livelihoods without any thought to their presents or futures, rather than as citizens who have a right to know, to plan their presents and futures, and have a legitimate voice in decision-making. This flexible governing has also allowed for various changes to the larger project that might not otherwise have been easily possible. Thus, the use of JNNURM funds made possible the construction of larger resettlement units than originally proposed and the allocation of a lesser percentage of the reclaimed land for commercialisation, since the finances for R&R no longer needed to be raised by the sale of reclaimed land. The fact remains, however, that these funds have been used to facilitate the gentrification of this central urban space of Ahmedabad by moving resettlement housing away from the riverfront.

A new land-use plan (not yet in the public domain) has recently been finalised on this basis. Research on the plan and how it unfolds in the coming years will reveal the extent to which the riverfront is ultimately gentrified. The politics of inclusion articulated through flexible governing has therefore involved little commitment to notions of participation, equity and social justice

even though it is currently leading to the resettlement of large numbers of riverfront slum residents in two-bedroom flats constructed under JNNURM within the city's municipal limits.

Although the resettlement process ongoing since 2009 and the implications of resettlement for people's lives have been beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to briefly take note of the processes, dispossessions and contestations that have been unfolding. In early 2010, on the court's orders, a six-member committee of project-affected households, which included SNAM leaders, was established to "assist" the AMC in the rehabilitation of the slum-dwellers. The AMC also appointed a committee headed by justice Buch, a retired high court judge, to look into slum-dwellers' grievances concerning R&R. The resettlement processes that have since unfolded have, however, been fraught with dispute. Over the past year, applications have been submitted to the Buch Committee by thousands of residents claiming that they have been denied resettlement. Despite the civil application and the status report asking for the court's permission to quickly resettle 4,000 and 1,600 households, respectively, only around 2,000 families had been resettled by June 2011.

Moreover, in early May 2011, the AMC carried out a number of forced demolitions on the riverfront. It was only after slum residents approached the court that the demolitions stopped. But approximately 2,000 houses had been bulldozed, forcing people to live

amidst the rubble through the monsoon season. Meanwhile, the AMC decided to extend the cut-off date to 31 December 2007, and SNAM submitted an additional list of approximately 4,000 households, noting that they were missing in the AMC's list. In July 2011, the court ordered the AMC to resettle all these households. It has since become clear that the SNAM's list did not include all residents. There are widespread allegations that some local leaders asked residents for money to be put onto the lists. However, since the court has become the primary arena of negotiating compensation and SNAM is the petitioner in the PIL case, the ongoing resettlement is being shaped primarily through the AMC's negotiation with this actor. The AMC, which is only interested in completing resettlement quickly in whatever way possible so as to clear the riverfront land, has been more than glad to go along with this process, instead of insisting to the court that it should carry out a more recent survey or establish residents' committees to ensure more inclusivity.

Flexible governing and its politics of inclusion analysed in this paper – as well as the resettlement processes unfolding over the past year – contradict official representations of the SRD project as "an inclusive project"<sup>14</sup> and as "shaping Ahmedabad's future as a city-oriented towards residents' needs and poised for responsible, inclusive growth".<sup>15</sup> They also reveal the play of inclusionary and exclusionary processes vis-à-vis the urban poor that are enabling grand visions of city making in contemporary Ahmedabad.

## NOTES

- 1 Despite an Environmental Impact Assessment and various consultants giving the project the green light for narrowing the river through large-scale land reclamation, there continue to be concerns about environmental implications.
- 2 The Board also includes two engineers and the Executive Director of Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO), which was the main financing agency during 2005-07.
- 3 These techniques and strategies are linked to Foucault's concept of governmentality and its analysis of the rationalities and mentalities of government, including the techniques, calculations, vocabularies and practices through which particular kinds of knowledge are produced and particular spaces and subjects are rendered governable (Dean 1999).
- 4 Interviews with Bimal Patel, 22 April 2005; Rajesh Shah (formerly with VIKAS), 23 April 2005; Mirai Chatterjee, SEWA, 6 July 2005.
- 5 Interview with Rini Sen Balasaria (formerly with the NGO Sanchetna), 16 March 2005.
- 6 2004 Brochure on Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project, prepared by SRDC.
- 7 The AMC's political wing under the Congress Party did, in fact, pass a resolution extending the cut-off date to 2000. However, the extension of the cut-off date had not been sanctioned by AMC's municipal commissioner, who was an appointee of the BJP-led Gujarat government.
- 8 Interview with Father Victor Moses, SXSSS, 19 April 2005.
- 9 Oral Order on 8 April 2005, in response to the PIL Special Civil Application 6280 of 2005 (Mohammadkhan Aliyarkhan Pathan and others versus State of Gujarat, SRDC, AMC and Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority), filed on 7 April 2005.
- 10 The 1998 proposal had mentioned the possibility of phasing the project such that building of resettlement sites and other aspects of project implementation proceeded concurrently (EPC 1998: 34).
- 11 Civil Application 6137 of 2008, p 6, my emphasis.
- 12 Letter by Girish Patel Associates to AMC and SRDC, 1 September 2008.

13 Civil Application 13334 of 2009, p 1.

14 Last accessed 30 August 2011: <http://www.sabarmatiriverfront.com/>

15 The description of the project has since been changed on this webpage. Last accessed 11 May 2011: <http://www.sabarmatiriverfront.com/2/project>

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