

## Jockin Arputham: from slum dweller to Nobel Peace Prize nominee

'Jockin-sir', as Mumbai's slum dwellers call him, is an inspirational figure helping India's dispossessed stand up for their rights, find new homes, and plot a way out of urban poverty

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Srinath Perur in Mumbai

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Jockin Arputham chats with children about school in the Madanpura slum in central Mumbai. Photograph: Reuters

Parveen Shaikh was born in a pavement dwelling of sacks and plastic sheets in Sewri, on the eastern edge of Mumbai. She married another pavement dweller from across the road. “Born on east side footpath, married on west side,” she jokes. When her first son was a little over a month old, the city’s bulldozers came to raze her home. The road was to be widened. “I was taking down the bamboo supports when Jockin-sir’s people came with a stay order,” she says.

“Jockin-sir” is what thousands of former and present slum and pavement dwellers in Mumbai call Jockin Arputham, the founder of the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) and president of Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI). In Mumbai and across the world, Arputham has long been an inspirational figure within an alliance of

organisations helping slum and shack residents to stand up for their rights, find new homes, and plot a way out of urban poverty.

A woman named Kanta from the alliance – which also comprises Mahila Milan (Women Together in Hindi) and SPARC (Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres) – came to meet Parveen and her neighbours soon after the demolition was deferred. She wanted the women to participate in a savings scheme by contributing small amounts daily. Kanta was chased away with abuse, but she persisted in coming back and convinced the women to meet Arputham. They softened after meeting him a few times: “We wouldn’t bathe for days together, we’d smell, our hair would be wild. No one would come near us, but Jockin-sir would sit with us and eat.”

Previously the women, who mostly worked at construction sites or as household help, hadn’t been able to save because opening a bank account required proof of address and a guarantor. Squirrelling money away didn’t work, Parveen says, because many of the men around were alcoholics who’d “beat it out of us”. With the alliance’s savings scheme, the women were able to accumulate amounts that would help their families transition into replacement housing, with its bills and maintenance costs.

Six years ago, Parveen and her family moved into a room measuring 225 square feet with a toilet and a bathroom, obtained at no cost through the alliance. Now she works for the organisation, like Kanta, reaching out to women living in slums and on pavements. Her two sons are in middle school; the older wants to be an IAS (Indian Administrative Service) officer, the younger an automobile engineer, and they wish they had a larger house with rooms of their own. “I remind them every day that we came here from the footpath,” Parveen says.



Jockin Arputham holds court. Photograph: Srinath Perur

Normally garrulous, she quietens as we walk down a street in Byculla, south Mumbai. The street is dense with pedestrians, scooters, cars and push-carts. The pavements are occupied by people selling clothes under once-colourful parasols. They used to have people living on them, but this stretch has now been cleared and its inhabitants resettled.

Further on, the pavements are packed with shacks built with plywood or sometimes bricks, divided into warrens by pieces of cloth and flimsy partitions. Their fronts are dominated by drums and buckets used to store water and clothes hanging on lines. Some shacks are double-storied, with a ladder leading upwards. On the corner where road meets pavement is a shared open drain with grey sludge, likely the source of the odour in the air. Parveen says it reminds her of how she used to live.

Why do people migrate to cities to live like this? Parveen – whose parents came from a village in rural Bihar before she was born – says if the government provided people with means of sustenance in their villages, they would happily live there. But they're forced to move to cities where there is work, if not housing. Around [65 million Indians live in slums](#). And in Mumbai, India's most populous city, [around 60% of its 12 million people live in slums](#) – defined by the Census of India as being “unfit for human habitation” for a multitude of reasons.

“I am a proud slum-dweller,” says Jockin Arputham, 67, sitting in his office on the ground floor of an eight-storey building in a redeveloped portion of the Dharavi slum. He has lived in slums for most of his adult life, working, first in Mumbai and then across the world, to organise slum residents and improve the quality of their lives. His work has won him the Magsaysay award in 2000 and, earlier this year, a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize, put forward by the Swedish minister for public administration and housing, Stefan Attefall, and supported by ministers from Norway and South Africa.

“There is a war between the urban rich and the urban poor,” Arputham says. “And I'm trying to make peace between them.” According to him, the upper classes think of slum residents as lazy, criminal elements out to swindle the resources of the city. “It's the opposite,” he says. “We are not impinging on resources. We don't take much water, electricity, public transport. We *are* the human resource of the city.”

Sometimes, he says, an expensive car, its occupants rendered helpless by truant domestic help, will drive into a slum looking for them. “Their clothes aren't being washed, their food isn't being cooked. City life for the upper middle-class can't survive without domestic help – and where do they come from?” There is no affordable accommodation for them in the city, he points out, causing them to live in slums. The land officially set aside for the homeless in Mumbai, Arputham says, is less than 6%, while the requirement, going by their number, should be closer to 60%. “And you blame slum dwellers for your poor planning.”

Those who live on the pavements have it even worse than slum dwellers, says Arputham. “You're lying down with your wife on the footpath and car lights fall on you. What kind of society lives like this? We need to give dignity to human beings.”

Only a couple of decades ago, slum and pavement dwellers could be evicted summarily because they were seen as encroachers. Now, owing in large part to his efforts, policy recognises slum residents as valid inhabitants of the city, entitled to compensation and alternative housing.



Some shacks in Dharavi slum have two storeys with a ladder to reach the top floor. Photograph: Image Broker/Rex

Arputham was born in Kolar Gold Fields, near Bangalore, in the south of India. He moved to Mumbai when he was 18 to work as a carpenter. Having no place to live in, he began sleeping outside people's houses in Janata Colony, a slum of around 70,000 people in Mankhurd. There was daily wage work to be had at the nearby Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), where a new reactor was being constructed.

For two days, he worked as a sweeper, offering himself to contractors. Then, seeing that the contractors themselves didn't need any credentials, he started a company called Lift and Shift and began hiring labour to clear garbage, clean the grounds and move machines. This made him relatively well off in the slum. He'd buy sweets and snacks for the children of the colony and ask them to sing for him, which turned into regular musical gatherings. At some of the parents' urging, he began to run an informal night school where, since he hadn't finished school himself, he got the older children to teach the younger ones.

The colony had no garbage collection, which led to a mosquito menace. The municipality had chosen to ignore the settlement, and Arputham took this on. He announced a picnic for which 3,000 children from the community turned up. Each of them was to bring along a bundle of garbage wrapped in a newspaper sheet. The picnic began early in the morning, and the long procession of children was led to the as-yet-unopened municipality office to dispose of their loads. He laughs and claps his hands at the memory: "In half an hour the whole compound was full of garbage."

Later in the day, incensed officials and police came to the colony, and this ultimately led to the municipality beginning regular garbage collection. "That is the first day I tasted the power of community," Arputham says. He went on to construct toilets, build paths, organise work camps, and soon found that he was a leader. Yet he never had a home of his own in the colony – he was taken care of by the community.

In 1970, when the colony received a notice that the land would be cleared for use by BARC, it was natural for Arputham to lead the opposition. "No eviction without alternative" became the slogan, and the movement for the first time united all 1,200 slums in Mumbai. He took the struggle to Delhi in 1975, met political leaders and sat in protest outside Parliament for 18 days before the prime minister Indira Gandhi granted him an audience. He mimics

her looking at him from above her glasses like a stern headmistress: “What is your problem? Why are you doing this?”

Arputham told her, and returned to Mumbai with a written assurance that the colony would not be cleared. But the prime minister didn't keep her promise. On 17 May 1976, Arputham was arrested. A force of 12,000 policemen stormed the colony and evacuated the 70,000 residents overnight to a swampy area four kilometres away (that turned into another, still extant, slum called Cheetah Camp). BARC would use the cleared land to house 3,000 employees.

Arputham had developed a brand of urban guerilla tactics that he recounts with impish glee: obtaining stay orders that would be shown to the police only at the last minute to cause them maximum inconvenience; dealing with delaying tactics of officials by sending groups of unwashed women whom they'd try to get rid of as quickly as possible; amassing crowds of thousands to paralyse the city; hiding from the police among crowds of women since he's a small-built man, on some occasions even under their sarees.

“I used to stop Bombay city. I never used violence, but I taught people how to be a nuisance.” Records say Arputham was arrested more than 60 times. But this was mostly on paper, the police trying to obey instructions from above without risking another protest on the streets.

The struggle for Janata Colony united slum dwellers across India, and brought attention to their summary displacement as cities developed. In 1975, Arputham started the NSDF to protect the rights of slum and pavement dwellers. Over the next decade, court rulings and campaigns changed government policy so that India's cities began to look at providing sanitation, power and water to slums, and replacement housing when slums had to be torn down. Organisations such as SPARC conducted surveys to come up with a cartography of urban poverty – how many people lived in slums, on pavements, by the railway tracks, how long they'd been living there, what basic amenities they had or lacked – that would be the first step towards rehabilitation.



Daily life in Dharavi. Photograph: Divyakant Solanki/EPA

It's mid-morning and Arputham is sitting outside an administrative office in a replacement housing unit called Natvar Parikh Compound in the eastern Mumbai suburb of Govandi. Around 7,000 families, including Parveen's, live here in 56 eight-storey buildings. "From 1974 to 1990, the government said there was no land to house the poor," he says. "We developed and demonstrated how non-government land could be used."

The key was to identify land that had been allotted to institutions or to industries in less crowded times, but remained unused. This land in the city could be exchanged for a valuable commodity: the right to develop real estate towards the less-crowded north of the city. An acre of land given to the government for housing would earn the right to develop one acre of built-up area, an instrument that could then be traded in the open market. The compound we're in is an example: 2.3 hectares of land allotted decades ago for industrial use, then traded for TDR (Transferable Development Rights) and converted into housing for the poor.

The buildings are seven storeys of housing plus a ground floor for shops and small businesses that provide employment to some of the people living here. Small units manufacture bangles, handkerchiefs, bags. One of the buildings' common areas has a pile of litter; a resident who's showing me around says, "People here have lived amidst garbage. It takes time to unlearn habits."

The replacement 'houses' are really single rooms with a small toilet and bathroom, 225 square feet in all, provided free of cost to slum and pavement dwellers. These cannot be sold or rented out for 10 years. Among those living here, some are better off than others. Mumtaz Ansari's room has eight people living in it, and has an air-cooler, fridge, TV, washing machine and two almirah cupboards. Another house in the same building has only a few utensils. In another, an old woman who can't see appeals to me to convince her family to get her cataracts operated upon. Her daughter-in-law tells me they just got her a prosthetic leg – her left leg was amputated due to complications of diabetes – and they're waiting till they can afford the cataract surgery, which after all is not essential.

Clearly, beating urban poverty is a precarious project which goes far beyond simply having a roof over one's head. Over the years, the alliance has developed a set of practices and interventions to make the transition easier – many of which revolve around women's leadership and participation. According to Arputham: "Women are smarter. They know everything about everyone in a settlement. And they are natural communicators."

The small savings scheme, run entirely by women, helps develop preparedness for maintaining an establishment. The rooms are usually allotted in the names of women so they are less vulnerable to domestic abuse and familial instability. Care is taken to relocate slum residents within a couple of kilometres of their previous address so that work is not affected. A committee interfaces between residents and the police so both sides aren't harassed. The alliance provides food rations, medicines and cash loans to residents when they have to tide over a difficult period.



Mumtaz Ansari in the room she shares with seven others. Photograph: Srinath Perur

Arputham and the alliance encourage communities to work from within – which is why so many of its employees are current or former slum residents themselves. Parveen says: “If someone tip-top comes and says, ‘I’ll give you a house,’ the first thought that comes to mind is he’s making a fool of you. He’ll take photographs, sell them to foreigners, make his money and vanish. But if I go and say, ‘I’m your sister, I used to live on the footpath,’ they listen.”

Arputham says about working on behalf of the poor: “You can’t become another rich grabber, another competitor.” I ask if he saw the film *Slumdog Millionaire*. “Oh, no,” he exclaims and turns away in disgust. He was invited to a screening but soon walked out. “I couldn’t take it. You are exploiting the slum dweller.” Later, at an event, Prince Charles happened to introduce him to the film’s director, Danny Boyle. “I kicked that fellow,” he says (not meaning it literally).

The alliance runs a not-for-profit construction company to undertake slum improvement or rehabilitation projects. One is from the city for construction of toilets in slums: these are paid for by the city, but their construction and maintenance is supervised by women from the community. Most slum and pavement residents in Mumbai use common toilets, and when these are insufficient, go in open areas or by railway tracks. This, in addition to issues of hygiene, leaves residents, especially women, vulnerable to assault.

At BMC Colony, in the northern suburb of Goregaon, Arputham holds a meeting, sitting on the floor at a low table, women in front on him on mats. A new block of toilets with 45 seats has just been constructed here. “Toilets have become a symbol,” he says. “Now, ministers come to inaugurate them.”

Two women from a slum in Aarey Colony are visiting because they currently go in the open and would like a toilet. Beyond the usual reasons for wanting a toilet, the colony faces an added threat, unusual for a city – leopards. As the city presses upon the neighbouring Sanjay Gandhi National Park, leopards have begun entering settlements and have

sometimes killed squatting humans, especially children, after mistaking them for prey. Arputham tells the two women how to petition the corporation, and asks them to stay in touch with the women here and learn from them.

“Unity and strength: that’s what my women are learning, that’s what they are teaching,” he says, with visible pride. So far, the alliance has relocated and rehabilitated around 37,000 families in Mumbai. Across India, their surveys have counted around 4 million families of the urban poor and made them visible to the system.

SDI was founded in 1995, with Arputham as its head, to link organisations dealing with urban poverty across Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. SDI today spans 33 countries where 90% of the world’s slum population of [800 million people](#) live. Earlier this year, it won the \$1.25m Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship. Now, he and SDI have been proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize.

“All these awards I accept on behalf of the slum dwellers who were my university, my teachers,” Arputham says. “The money goes to the organisations. If I can give all the poorest of the poor a house, that will be my biggest victory.” In recent times, his poor health has slowed him down a little. Still, Parveen says they have to force him to rest: “He never seems to sleep. He just dreams with his eyes open.”

Link: <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/jun/12/jockin-arputham-mumbai-slum-dweller-nobel-peace-prize-nominee>