From the 1956 Slum Areas Act to the 2001 Census of India: Identifying and counting slums in Indian cities, with a focus on Delhi and Chennai

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This paper offers insights and thoughts on the genealogy of “slums” as a category in India since the 20th century up to date. It shows how the identification of slums has a strong colonial legacy from the British administration, and how several approaches to identify and count slums and slum dwellers have been simultaneously in use after the Independence (1947) until today.

The “slum” has been constructed first as an administrative and legal category, with the 1956 Slum Areas Act as the benchmark in independent India; and only much later as a statistical category with a national definition: in 1976-77 by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO); and in 2001 by Registrar General of India for the purpose of the Census of India.

Several authorities, at different governance levels and in different regions/states of the Federation, have devised their own definitions.

Identification and official recognition of an area as a slum, and its administrative and legal categorisation, is an important issue, with crucial consequence for its residents: in some cases, it provides the recognition of some rights; in others, when the “slum” is designated as a squatter settlement or encroachment, categorised as “untenable slum” or “objectionable slum”, it entails a threat of demolition – eventually, with rights to resettlement.

Methods of identifying and counting slums also differ according to the administrations in charge of producing national statistics, namely: the Registrar General of India (under the Ministry of Home Affairs), in charge of the Census of India; and the National Statistical Organisation (NSO under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation), in charge of the National Sample Surveys (NSS).

The census enumerating method raises several issues: comparability, ambiguous criteria of identification, coverage, undercounting, ….

Various actors have been involved in the counting and mapping operations launched at the city level. Since the last two decades, we observed an increasing trend of the state to subcontract slum surveys to parastatal agencies, private consultants and/or non-governmental organisations (NGO).

The multiplicity of approaches, administrations in charge, actors in the field, is detrimental to more transparency and adequate recognition of slums. While experts have long recognised the necessity to have a reliable and comprehensive slum database for the formulation of an effective policy for improving the condition of slum dwellers, at the end, we are still faced with several definitions and categories, and hence unclear assessment of the extent of slums in Indian cities.

The paper is organised in four sections. Section 1 reflects upon the emergence of the slum as a settlement category during the colonial period and the attempts to assess; Section 2 traces
the colonial legacy in the construction of the slum as an administrative and legal category, showing what is at stake behind being listed as a slum; Section 3 moves to the construction of the slums as a statistical category in national surveys and censuses; and Section 4 reveals who are the actors involved in slum counting, survey and mapping operations. To support our arguments, we focus on two contrasting cases of metropolises: Delhi, the capital of the British Empire in India from 1911 to 1947, and after the Independence of the Union of India and thus the showcase of state power; and Madras (renamed Chennai in 1996), the core of the Dravidian movement from which emerged regional governments characterised since the Independence by their redistributive pro-poor policies.