

## **POVERTY AND PLENTY IN BANGALORE**

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The first thing that strikes you upon arrival at the Ejipura EWS colony is its openness. Nothing obstructs the line of sight for vast expanses. But this is no pleasant vista in an otherwise overbuilt city. Completely razed to the ground with merciless thoroughness, what was a packed slum now looks like a ravaged moonscape. An eerie calm hangs in the air as if a terrible premonition had come true. As I walked around, knots of families gathered up their meagre belongings and anything of value that could be salvaged before leaving. A boy and his father hacked away to get at an iron rod encased within the concrete rubble. Their manic frenzy belied the brutal fact that they were tearing apart the remnants of what was once their own home. Others had neither the energy nor the money to pick up their lives and flee. They moved into that ultimate refuge of the urban dispossessed - precast concrete pipes waiting to be laid as sewage lines. In this atmosphere suffused with a sense of resignation, I chanced upon a woman for whom the cup of woe was brimful. Arrested a few days earlier for the temerity to protest the ravaging of her home, she now stoically hugged a little girl. The exhausted child did not even whimper despite being in much pain. Living in the open, she had been bitten and mauled by a stray dog. Elsewhere, an old, faded couch lay abandoned, its stuffed innards spilling out. But soon enough one can buy a plump ottoman in the comfortable environs of a new mall to be erected on this very site.

This is a story of India in a microcosm. Buffeted by the greed and desires of the elite, the poor live in perennial fear of falling through the many fissures and cracks of life. Urban India thrives on the labour offered by its poor but cannot seem to stand the sight of them. For the residents of Ejipura, despite the goodwill, solidarity and valiant attempts of a meagre handful of activists, their worst nightmare has come true. Of course, they were no match to the power and cunning of those shielded by legal agreements and the muscle of the state. But if pleasure and prosperity for some is to be had by stripping others of their freedom and dignity, we may wish to ponder the truism offered by a sixteenth century English poet : "No man is an island, entire of itself ... Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee."