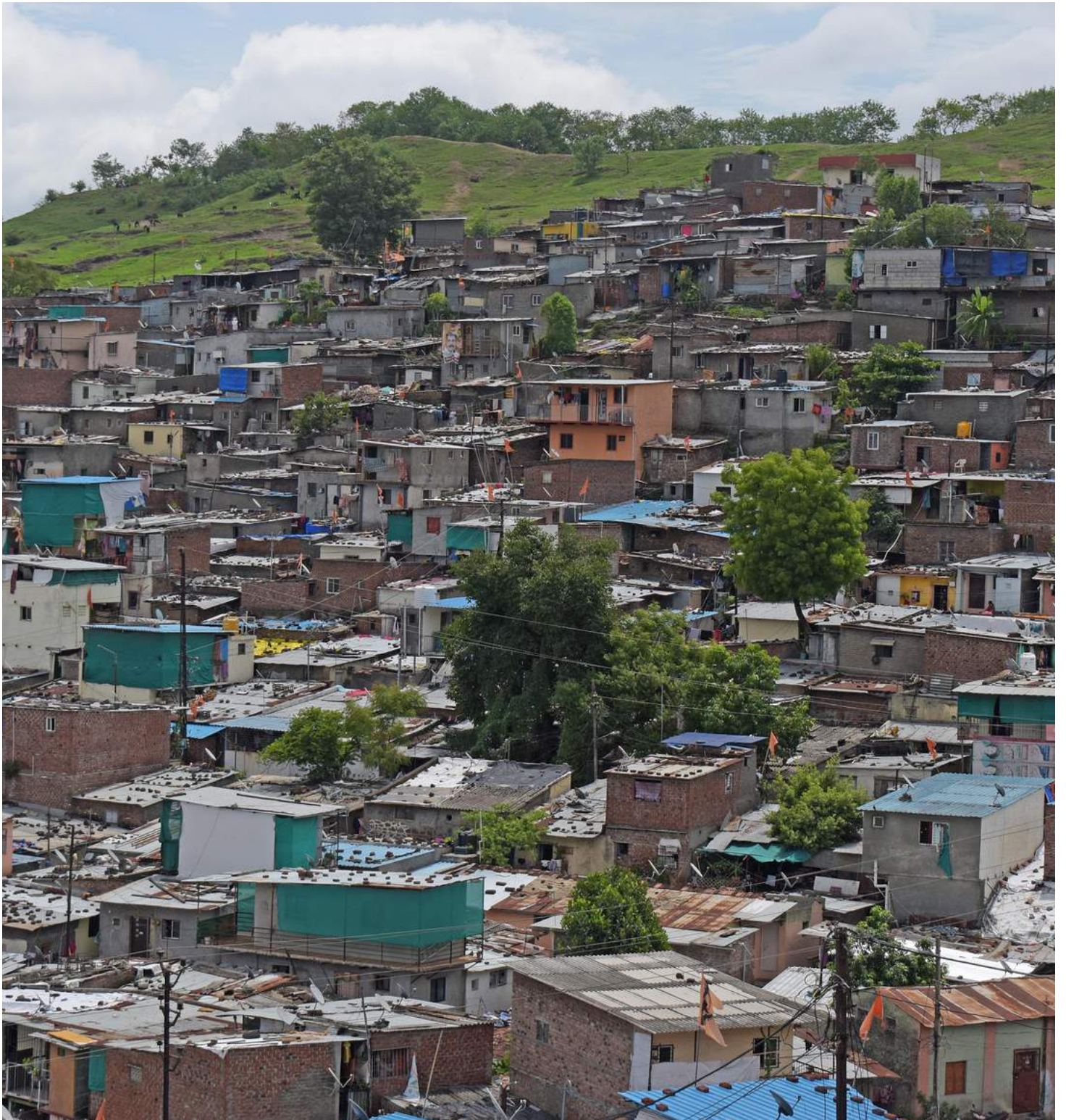


# ANCHORED

IN THE BARREN







## A SETTLEMENT THROUGH THE AGES

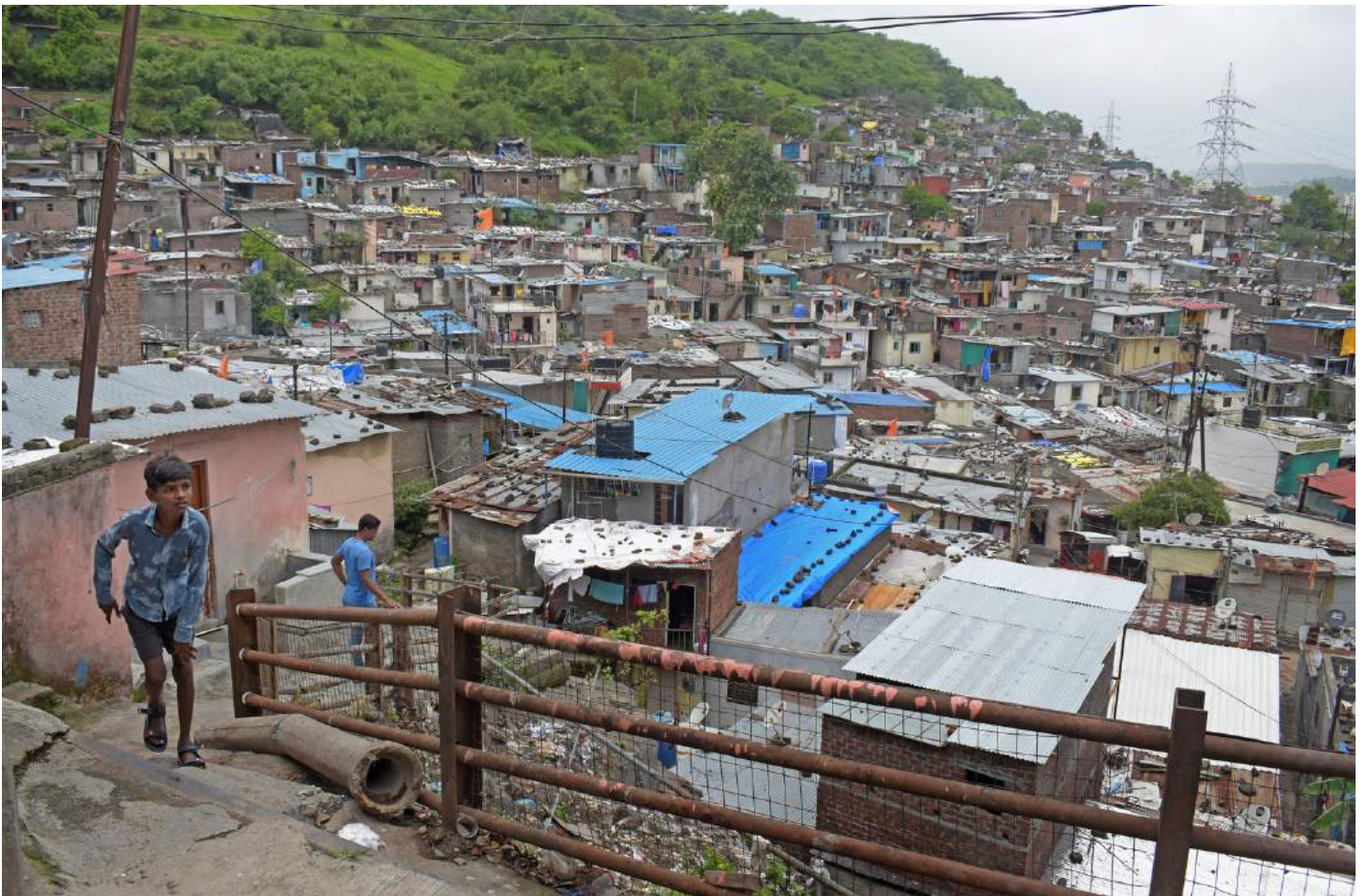
*"This Photo Essay is part of an exclusive photo essay series created by CNES' Visual Storyboard Team, covering different unorganised urban settlements across cities of Pune, Delhi and Lucknow, reflecting upon the spatial profile of their unique topography while discussing the life of migrant groups residing in such identified locations"*

Across anthropological history, settlements have grown, evolved, and even declined. Natural disasters, employment opportunities, lack of fertile land and various factors have caused humans to undertake migrations that have drastically altered the topography of any place. In that sense, the hills, lakes and other immovable physical features of any place have witnessed the multiple

transformations of human settlements. Parvati Hill of Pune is one of them.

A hillock 2100 feet above sea level, Parvati Hill is an essential part of Pune's aesthetic appeal. Once carpeted in trees, untouched by humans, the hillock now hosts the large slum-settlement of Janata Vasahat. The history of Parvati Hills and Janata Vasahat go back to the droughts of the 1970s.







Escaping the claws of the great drought, many families arrived near the Mutha Right Bank Canal. In search of refuge and hospitable environments, they occupied the land above the canal on the hill which was barren and unlikely to be profitable. These initial settlers became the founders of what would become the location of multiple slum pockets. Locals noticed the occupation of Parvati Hill by the migrants for over a year. Looking for affordable housing away from the densely populated city, they arrived at the scene. The increasing presence of locals on the hill led to rapid inhabitation and the birth of a settlement.



Encroaching the historic Parvati Hill that housed the pride of the Peshwa dynasty had political and legal consequences. In 1974, the Pune Municipal corporation attempted demolishing the settlement but was stalled after a political intervention.

Housing a population of about 60,000 people, Janta Vasahat has been an epicentre for a lot of political attention. In fact, Janta Vasahat was initially known as Mohan Nagar, named after a young politician during the ministry of Indira Gandhi, Mohan Dharia, primarily for publicity.



Slum settlements are often perceived as tainting the overall urban infrastructure and being a burden to already scarce resources. Hence, several efforts of rehabilitation have been made. In 1987, the Assistant municipal commissioner and Head of the Slum Removal Department planned to provide all the residents with land and water, evacuate Janta Vasahat and convert the area into a park.

The commissioner, under the urban land ceiling act, acquired surplus land at 1 rupees/sq feet and initiated the Upper Indira Nagar project where every household in Janta Vasahat was allocated a plot for free. Even after being allocated new housing land, residents invited relatives and refused to let go of their settlement in Janta Vasahat. The settlement kept expanding and while several attempts of reallocation were made, it was all in vain.



“ Every year we receive assurances on the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) schemes. Many of us have already submitted our details to the authorities. The wait has been endless..

ASHOKA SINDE, A RESIDENT OF JANTA VASAHAAT









The Janata Vasahat standing today is a vibrant settlement equipped with basic amenities of water and sanitation, local marketplaces and a park. The people who live there work as daily-wage workers, small businesspersons, police officers, IT workers and more.

It is, however, in essence, isolated from the rest of the city. This is because its geographical location is such that it restricts the movement of people from outside which makes intermingling with others difficult. On the inside, Janata Vasahat is considerably congested with almost no space to practice social distancing. Although restricted movement and safety from outsiders can be advantageous in times of Covid, at the same time it can pose risks if people within the settlement contract the virus.

But viruses like Covid are not the only risk. Historically, due to the unique positioning of the settlement between Parvati hills and a canal, Janata Vasahat has been prone to flooding, at times due to canal breaches and at other times due to environmental hazards. The biggest slum pocket in Pune has witnessed destruction of houses belonging to over 300 families to date. These environmental hazards have been exacerbated by the illegal construction taking place towards the upper hilly area. Unknown land owners have excavated the land of the hillock leading to a dangerous situation.







The hill ranges are particularly eco-sensitive. The construction activities coupled with the increasing excavation of hills and encroachment of water bodies are what primarily prompted environmental disasters in the first place. Unknown landowners have sold this land in the form of plots to purchasers who had already built make-shift homes there. The PMC and other authorities are trying to curb the menace of illegal trade and construction within Janata Vasahat. However, it is likely that the dispute (related to illegal construction in a no-construction area over the environmentally sensitive hills) will pose challenges for many residents for times to come.

Given the environmental risks and legal disputes, a representative of Mashal NGO who is an expert, states that the permanent solution to the housing problem would be to provide housing rights. He believes that if basic amenities such as water, drainage and electricity are provided, along with housing rights, the entire housing crisis will resolve on its own without any governmental help. However, all the political parties have affiliations with builders and traders and do not have the political courage to implement such land laws that can truly make a difference.







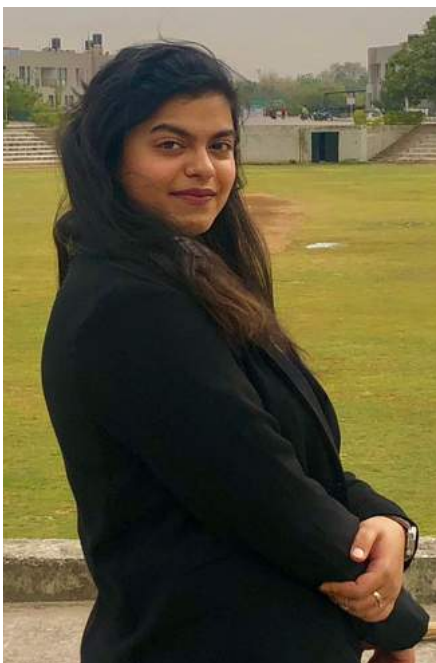


# THE TEAM

JIGNESH MISTRY is a Senior Research Analyst and the Visual Storyboard Team Lead with the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), Jindal School of Liberal Arts, O.P. Jindal Global University. He is a freelance photojournalist, who has been working in the field as a journalist for over 11 years. Jignesh started his career as a nightshift news photographer at a daily tabloid during his graduation. Since then, his work has been published at multiple magazines, wire agencies and national newspapers. He is also involved in undertaking photography workshops for students in academic institutions. He has been engaged with the PAIGAM network and is a regular contributor at The Wire, The Press Trust of India and other International Wire Agencies.



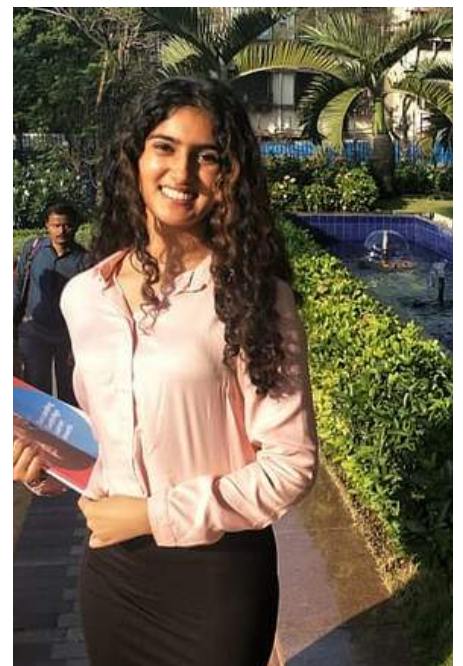
Jignesh Mistry  
Senior Research Analyst, CNES



Sarah Ayreen Mir  
Research Analyst, CNES



Vanshika Shah  
Senior Research Analyst, CNES



Advaita Singh  
Senior Research Analyst, CNES