

Housing Traumas

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On Independence Day this year, the Prime Minister announced his Government's intention to provide every urban poor family with a house to live in by 2010. Six weeks later, on World Habitat Day, the Union Cabinet cleared the Valmiki Ambedkar Awas Yojana with a munificent grant of Rs2000 crores for the period of the next Five-Year Plan. The Union Minister for Urban Development declared that 4 lakh houses would be built every year by public sector institutions for the urban poor. How unrealistic all this was can be gauged by the fact that, spread over 5161 towns and cities, and at the rate of Rs50,000 per house (which is about what is allocated for only *relocation* by the Municipal Corporation in Delhi today), the number of houses built per urban centre would average out to 15.5! At that pace it would take the next 39,000 years to resettle the present 6 lakh slum dwellers in the capital alone.

Perhaps aware of this potent fact, the Group of Ministers appointed by the Prime Minister revised the target to 20 lakh houses per year if the goal set for 2010 was to be met. However, in a recent advertisement, the Confederation of Real Estate Developers' Associations of India (CREDAI) illustrated that for a small family to acquire a one room kitchen tenement of 40 sq.m., situated in the distant suburbs of metro cities, would cost about Rs2 lakhs. Even if a housing loan of 75% were to be provided, the monthly instalment for a 15-year loan would be Rs1860. This would be roughly 75% of the average monthly income of a slum dweller! The solution according to the private developers, of course, is for the Government to encourage Public-Private-Partnerships and give free rein to private developers.

None of these brave votaries even bothers to explain the record of either the public or the private sectors in housing activities in the last fifty years. For instance, in Delhi, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) mandated itself in 1981, through its own Master Plan, to construct 16.2 lakh domestic units (DUs) in the next 20 years. As of 1998, the DDA reported that it had built just 2.6 lakh units, while owners who had been allotted plots by

DDA had constructed another 2.5 lakh houses. What is curious is that nobody wants to shed light on what happened to the balance 11.1 lakh units, or where did the 8,500 hectares of land go on which these were proposed (not to mention the additional 20,000 hectares that were acquired after 1985)? On the other hand, private developers have definitely built complexes in the capital but there is no evidence of their having built a single house for the urban poor.

DDA, though, does claim the dubious distinction of having “resettled” over 2.4 lakh families (even though it’s own Master Plan had made provision for only 50,000). Of late the rate of eviction has been dramatically picking up with almost 25,000 jhuggies demolished last year and 80,000 targeted for this year. The ex-Union Minister for Urban Development had even grandiosely claimed that these are ‘model’ resettlements. The truth, as usual, lies far from these imperial dreams. A study done in March this year by the Habitat International Coalition of ten such resettlement colonies, laid out over the years from 1976 to 2001, reveals that not one of them satisfies the stipulations laid down in a dozen international Conventions and Treaties that the Indian Government has been a signatory to. Requirements of access, affordability, security, and transparency have been routinely and deliberately violated. But even such a study cannot do justice to the actual experience of “resettlement”.

For that, the curious might want to refer to a recent interview of 100 households in the resettlement colony of Bhalsawa in north Delhi, conducted by the field activists of the NGO Ankur. 98% of the respondents underlined the grim tragedy of having lost out on employment because they have been moved to a site, which is 20 km from their original location. The distance has critically increased the costs and time of transportation because walking or cycling has been necessarily replaced by bussing. The eviction process was accompanied by the loss of valuable documents such as ration cards, and the theft of domestic goods. Children and elders were hurt because they could not move quickly enough out of the way of the bulldozers, and walls and roofs caved in on them. And every one of the households has had to take loans at 5-10% monthly interest rates in order to pay the Rs7000 required by the government for the supposed ‘benefits’ of relocation

on to 18-25 sq.m. of land (which itself is an inexcusable violation of the norms set out in the Master Plan).

The direct economic losses have been compounded by the total lack of civic services at the new site. Family after family bitterly pointed to the absence of potable water and electricity. The tanker, when it came, would not stop long enough at convenient spots for the residents to fill their buckets. Darkness had to be dispelled by candles otherwise the children would not be able to study and the atmosphere would become heavy with fear and uncertainty. There were no ration shops in the colony and the ones in neighbouring settlements would not honour their cards. The absence of government dispensaries meant that they had to perforce go to the private doctors with their higher fees. No toilets, no sanitation, no refuse bins, no drainage, no cleanliness, none of the everyday amenities that administrators take so much for granted in their own built-up colonies.

Worst was the added measure of insecurity in daily life. Neighbours were no longer familiar with each other and so wondered whether to trust each other. Without kerosene and gas, cooking had to be done with firewood and cowdung cakes, with the constant threat of their temporary shelters catching fire at any moment. Even those rickety shelters offered little protection from the elements, and from the omnipresent mosquitoes who made sleep impossible. As tensions rose in such unfriendly environs, food supplies diminished rapidly, and what food remained had to be consumed with care in case it was contaminated by the heavy layer of dust enveloping the settlement. And the future was made doubly bleak by the fact that the children could no longer get an education because there were no nearby schools and the old school was too far off.

It is difficult for anyone who has never been displaced in his or her life to ever imagine what it means to a family to move from a 'dirty' (but safe) slum to a 'new' (but barren) colony. It is not just a change in geographical co-ordinates, it is a total traumatic uprooting of life. How poor people struggle with making such a change endurable can hardly be 'explained' to someone whose familiarity with any kind of struggling ends at choosing career options. Which is why it remains beyond the comprehension of all those

planners and bureaucrats, those administrators and civic leaders, those judges and ‘eminent’ citizens who envision and rule the city from the comfort of Lutyen’s grand design – and who condemn all other ‘citizens’ who are not able to conform to their notion of ‘citizenship’.