

Pushing People Out of the City
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The city of Delhi shows many trends, which should be of great concern for working people everywhere. On the one hand, it has the highest per capita income in the country of almost Rs 39,000 per annum. On the other hand, mainly attracted by the employment opportunities that such a high income level indicates, it also has the highest migration rate of over 2.5 lakh persons per year. Over the last 40 years, the working population has ranged between 30-33% of the total population – in other words, every third person is a working person. From 1951 to 1981, there was a steady growth from 17% to 35% in the number of workers employed in the manufacturing sector, but after the phase of economic reforms began in 1990, it has shrunk to 29%. During the same period, the workers in the services sector increased sharply from 61% to 70%. The biggest growth has been in trade, hotels, restaurants, and banking. But this growth has also increased the insecurity of the work-force as 82% of them have been pushed into the unorganised sector. This gives some indication of how the economy of the city is changing in the era of globalisation.

Insecurity in employment is accompanied by denial of rights in other areas also. For instance, for the last forty years, the Delhi Master Plan has provided for land and shelter, and some simple calculations show that those provisions are enough for housing all the working population in Delhi. There has, however, been no effort by the authorities and concerned agencies to actually acquire and develop the land as well as provide it for housing. Hence, the working population has been forced to “encroach” on vacant private and public land and somehow construct its own shelter. The denial of housing rights to this population appears to be a deliberate effort on the part of the state, so that by keeping them in an “illegal” state, the land can at any time be acquired for another more profitable purpose. Hence, the interpretation of “public” purpose itself is anti-people.

This interpretation has been strengthened by various judicial orders which are progressively denying the working people their fundamental rights under the guise of “clean environment”. This crisis is accompanied by a weakening of social ties and solidarity amongst the individualised working families. Furthermore, there is no imperative for the Political Parties to intervene on behalf of the people because they are under severe pressure from the forces of international capital. This is accompanied by a growing political assertion by the middle class for its own “rights” and the rising tide of consumerism being promoted by globalisation. Globalisation also encourages the privatisation of public goods, thus increasingly denying the working people access to all civic services. Thus, working people are not only being evicted from their homes, they are also being evicted from their work, their space, their routes of travel, their access to civic services, and their identity as citizens.

The recent drive to clear the Yamuna Pushta of slum encroachments and to convert the area into a national tourism-cum-cultural complex clearly illustrates these multiple processes of eviction. It was in November 2002 that a Bench of the Delhi High Court,

hearing two petitions praying for the removal of slum encroachments in industrial areas (mainly inhabited by the labour force catering to those industrial areas), unilaterally delivered a judgement quashing the resettlement policy “which requires alternative sites to be provided to slum dwellers”. This led to a public uproar, and the Union Government was forced to file a Special Leave Petition in the Supreme Court, which granted a stay in February 2003. So, at a subsequent hearing in the High Court in March 2003, the Bench arbitrarily turned its attention to the pollution of the Yamuna and directed all authorities concerned, “to forthwith remove all the unauthorised structures, jhuggies, places of worship and/or any other structure which are unauthorisedly put in Yamuna Bed and its embankment, within two months from today”.

The above order has now been selectively and arbitrarily interpreted by the Union Ministry for Culture and Tourism, the Delhi Development Authority, and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. Ignoring encroachments by places of worship such as the Akshardham Temple, and unauthorised structures such as the Metro Headquarters, they have initiated the forcible eviction of over 20,000 working class families living on the Yamuna Pushta between the ITO Bridge and the Old Railway Bridge. Up to April 7, 2004, as per various newspaper reports and local information, over 13,000 jhuggies have been demolished in the presence of a heavily armed police force. While the number of families surveyed by the MCD for eligibility is less than 7,000, those who have been actually found to be eligible for relocation and allotment of an alternative plot of land are only about 1500. In other words, 75% to 85% of the displaced population have been rendered completely shelterless by those very agencies who have been mandated by the Constitution to provide shelter to the people.

Even those who are “fortunate” enough to get a new plot at a resettlement colony find that their degradation continues. There are supposed to be 18,705 plots available at Bawana, Holambi Kalan, Narela, Madanpur Khadar, Molar Bund, Tikri Khurd, Holambi Khurd, and Rohini. These colonies are at distances of 18 to 35 km from their old places of work, thus making earning a livelihood a triple burden. At most sites, the plots have still not been demarcated, roads are under construction, electric poles may have been installed but there is no electric supply, potable water supply is largely absent, and provision of toilet complexes is hopelessly below the norm. Sewers, schools, dispensaries, and community centres are marked by their total absence. Much of this under-development may be because of the fact that, although the relocated families are required to pay “share money” of Rs 7,000 per plot before getting possession, the Ministry of Tourism has deposited only Rs 25 crores out of the Rs 55 crores it is supposed to contribute for the relocation.

There is also the issue of how slum settlements are related to river pollution. The Yamuna Action Plan does mention that resettlement of the jhuggies from the river/drain banks is part of the approach to cleaning the Yamuna, but the facts that the report presents are contradictory. If one were to assume that all the water supplied to all the slums along the river (at the norm of 40 litres per person per day) eventually pollutes the river, the total would still not be more than 0.33% of the total of 3600 mld generated by the whole city. An actual measurement of the flow in February 2004 in the 29 nalis in the Pushta area,

where the present demolition is taking place, showed that the real discharge is less than 0.08%. Thus, theoretically, even if all the jhuggies were removed from the river embankment, it would still not affect 99.92% of the pollution in the river. Thus, the assumed connection between a 'dirty' river and 'dirty' people is born out of prejudice and not out of facts.

Cleaning up the river is actually part of a much larger project. The Union Minister of Culture has proposed a 220-acre national tourism-cum-cultural complex which "would become one of the greatest hubs of cultural tourism and attract lakhs of domestic and foreign tourists", something "like the South Bank of the Thames" in London. The cultural complex itself is a small part of a massive channelisation project in which DDA has submitted a development plan for 9,700 hectares of the riverbed. This Plan provides for an investment of Rs 1,800 crores (at 1994 prices), of which 40% would come from government while 60% would be available from joint ventures, and the 'benefits' would be shared in the same proportion. These benefits would presumably come from the difference between the cost of development of the land (Rs 800 per sqm) and the average sale price (Rs 2,660 per sqm – with a ceiling of Rs 15,960 per sqm for commercial property) for 'remunerative use' of the land. Thus people are being evicted to make way for property.

The principles of natural justice require that every person affected by a decision has the right to be heard, and that the authority deciding the matter should be free of bias. As the above paragraphs indicate, in matters concerning the Yamuna and its pollution, both these principles have been systematically violated for the last four years. The people most drastically affected, the slum dwellers and informal sector workers, living out of sheer necessity on the banks of the polluted Yamuna, have been consistently denied a hearing by administrative, legislative, and judicial authorities. At the same time, these authorities have allowed their prejudices to prevail over law, evidence, and reason while taking decisions that favour the wealthy and the powerful. Hence, the need emerges of a larger federation of organisations of the working people, which not only addresses the issue of eviction, but develops a challenge to the changing order being promoted by global forces.