

Regularisation of Non-conforming Industries Virtual Reality?

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Resurrecting terror to unleash more violence is clearly not limited to Al Qaida or the United States Government. Just as the President of the USA continuously harped on the presence of mythical Weapons of Mass Destruction to justify his wholly illegal invasion of Iraq, so fear is created in the minds of Delhi's reading public about the Warehouses of Mass Dirt. A telephone poll, conducted by a 'national' newspaper, claims that 51% of the "citizens" want the industrial units in the residential areas to be closed down. An editorial declaims that this is not a case of "an insensitive Court seeking to reduce pollution, but administration turning a blind eye to illegality". A lead article states that "no urban planning system can give its residents economic opportunities as well as a liveable environment". And a headline screams about "political powder kegs".

This hysteria unleashed by the media underlines the real threats being faced by the working class population of Delhi. There is the steady erosion of working opportunities as industries and transport modes are closed down in the name of 'clean environment'. Entire neighbourhoods become forbidden territory for vendors, hawkers, labourers, and producers in the informal sector, as 'law and order' becomes paramount. All this is actively pursued by sundry self-declared citizens, columnists, environmentalists, judges, architects, planners, administrators, associations, and eminent persons. Clearly, society is being 'structurally adjusted' to meet the needs of the 'global market'. What exactly is the nature of this 'adjustment', and what lies behind the environmental mask?

Is there, for instance, a "surplus" migrant working population threatening to tear the city apart at the seams? The projected work force, according to the Delhi Master Plan, was to be 13.3 lakhs in Manufacturing in 2001. In 1998, the Statistical Directorate of the Delhi Government reported that there were 1,26,175 Manufacturing and Repair units employing 14.2 lakh workers. Of these, 12.4 lakh workers were working in the 47% enterprises that employed 6 or more workers, while the remaining tiny and household 53% units provided work to only 1.8 lakh workers. Can the workforce then really be said to have exceeded the anticipations of the planners? And if the planned "liveable environment" does not materialise to match the "economic opportunities", then at whose door does accountability lie?

Even the reportedly wild growth of industry does not stand up to scrutiny. In 1962, there were 8,000 units in 'non-conforming' areas, increasing to 13,000 in 1971, and 1,12,000 in 1999. But the 1962 Master Plan did provide for 23 new industrial areas, later modified to accommodate 16 more light industrial areas and 2 for extensive industries, specifically for this kind of growth. These 41 areas were supposed to accommodate _____ units on 4138 hectares. But, in the last 40 years, only 9 sites have actually been developed. In fact, a huge swath of land in the southern part of East Delhi, clearly demarcated in the Land Use Plan for industrial purposes, is now home to high-rise towers for housing the upwardly mobile middle class.

Interestingly enough, the Plan supported “mixed land use” to “enable small entrepreneurs, professionals, artisans, mechanics etc. to carry on their vocations in their homes without having to compete in the commercial land market”, as also to “cut down unnecessary commuting to work centres”. To make this mixed use possible, the Plan also stipulated that household and light industries, with less than 6 workers and using less than 1 kilowatt of power, could be permitted in residential areas or in shopping, community, and district centres respectively. According to the Government’s own Economic Survey, at least 33,000 tiny family owned units would fall into this category, if not all the 67,000 units with less than 6 workers.

The present Delhi administration has thus been given the almost impossible task of having to make up for 40 years of criminal neglect in not providing appropriate industrial areas on one hand, and of encouraging entrepreneurship on the other. When, under Court orders, the Delhi Government began developing a new site at Bawana, it had provision for less than 15,000 units. Thus, its claim that 6,000 hectares are being acquired to relocate 90,000 units, rests on somewhat shaky grounds. The 51,846 relocation applications it has received are comparable to those 59,000 establishments identified with 6 or more workers. But 86% of these applicant industries fell into non-hazardous categories, while 79% said they did not want industrial power, indicative of their essentially small and household nature.

- Evidently, most of this industry is legally entitled to remain in non-industrial areas. Yet, when it is dodgily proposed that 15 of the 37 non-conforming areas will be ‘regularised’, there is a concerted uproar in the media. Why is everyone crying ‘wolf’? Perhaps it may be instructive to recall the land rates specified by the Master Plan. The prices per square meter were Rs 140 for residential areas (for the weaker sections), Rs 3,000 for industrial plots, and Rs 6,000 for commercial zones. But many current projects have hiked the first to Rs 30,000n (for the affluent) and the last to Rs 16,000. Hence, when changes of land use are contemplated, is it any wonder that the ‘law’ turns a blind eye to one kind of illegality? Whether it is oil in the Middle East, or real estate in Delhi, the art of creating virtual demons to conceal real wealth is robustly alive.