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URBANSCAPE

Tale of two cities

As slums in Delhi are being bulldozed to yield ground to parks, river-front promenades, and other `prestigious' projects, AMITA BAVISKAR looks at what it means to the people who actually suffer — poor workers.



There is insufficient legal housing for those affected.

MOHAMMAD FAIM broke down. "Nineteen years in this city," said the white-haired native of Siwan, Bihar, "and I have to return empty-handed. How will I show my face in my village?" Until a few weeks ago, Faim was known to everyone in his neighbourhood as "Prem Hotelwala", the owner of a successful *dhaba* in Sanjay Amar Colony, a *basti* (settlement) in north Delhi. Rickshaw pullers, small vendors and artisans, who lived in the *basti* and plied their trades and wares nearby in the bustling heart of Old Delhi, patronised the *dhaba*. It also supported Faim's family of five until last month when a massive demolition campaign saw "Prem Hotel" and its customers' homes razed to the ground. In the ensuing fire, Faim lost everything but a few stainless steel plates and plastic jars. "At my age, what am I to do? Where will I go?" he asks.

"Where will we go? What will we do?" The same questions dog the steps of thousands of people in Sanjay Amar Colony as they sift through the rubble, trying to salvage their belongings. Their *basti* was no fly-by-night agglomeration of ramshackle huts. Hundreds of brick and cement dwellings have lined these streets for at least 20 years. Sanjay Amar Colony was one of a series of working class settlements that range along the Yamuna Pushta, the embankment along the western side of the river. The Pushta has been home to 3,50,000 people, of which an estimated 1,50,000 have already been displaced, with the rest to follow. This process is being repeated all over Delhi as slums are bulldozed to yield ground to parks and river-front promenades, the Metro rail, and other prestigious projects. Yamuna Pushta now resembles a bombed-out site. Homeless families camp out under the blazing sun, wondering where to go, warily avoiding the police posted here to pre-empt any protest.

An estimated 8,00,000 people have been displaced in the Capital in the last four years. The scale and style of these forced evictions recalls the Emergency, when an estimated 7,00,000 poor people were forced out of their homes, their protests violently suppressed, in a campaign led by Sanjay Gandhi and Jagmohan, then Lieutenant-Governor of Delhi. As anthropologist Emma Tarlo details in her book **Unsettling Memories**, many of the displaced could only get resettlement plots on the edge of the city if they got themselves sterilised. The state's desire to discipline poor people's lives in urban spaces extended to an invasion of their bodies as well.

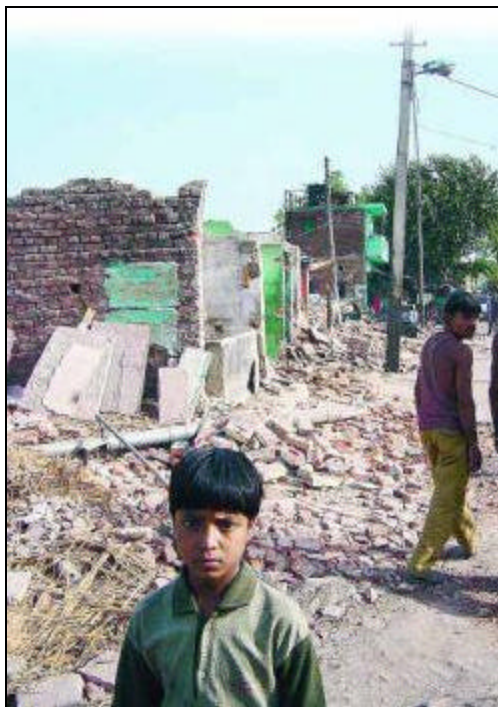
Although sterilisation isn't an "incentive" this time around, in some ways, the present situation outstrips the dark days of the Emergency. For one, far fewer people are being resettled. The Delhi Government has a policy of offering land compensation to those who can offer proof of residence. Those who settled in the city before 1990 are eligible to receive, upon payment of Rs. 7,000, a plot of 18 sq. metres in Bhalaswa or Holambi Kalan or other resettlement colonies. Those who settled between 1990 and 1998 are eligible to receive a plot of 12.5 sq. metres. Entire families are squeezed into plots smaller than a three-tier railway compartment. As visits to the resettlement sites show, the "colony" is little more than a wasteland, with no amenities, 20-30 km from people's place of work. But despite the difficulties of relocating to such inhospitable places — losing employment, withdrawing children from school — people still grab at the chance to secure a legitimate home in the city.

Unfortunately, many who qualify to receive resettlement plots will not get them. Only 16 per cent of those displaced from Yamuna Pushta have got plots. The rest find their names missing from municipal lists. Thrusting forward his documents — ration card, voter card, government token issued in 1990 — Ram Kumar Sah expresses the anger and despair of the crowd,

"The whole week I've been queuing outside this office and that, hoping some official will listen to me. But it's hopeless. I've lived here for 25 years. I pushed my *thela* (cart) for miles, bringing bricks and mud to make this place liveable. I built my house with my own hands. All that hard work, and I get nothing at all? The Government should just strangle us. At least that's quick."

Why are the excesses of the Emergency being repeated in these democratic times? Why are the displaced not being heard? Why is the resettlement policy, problematic though it is, not being implemented? The Yamuna Pushta demolitions have the backing of the Delhi High Court, which has adopted a more hard-line position against slum-dwellers. One judge has remarked that resettling evicted people is like rewarding a pickpocket. But while the "encroachers" on Yamuna Pushta may be criminals in the eyes of the law, they are forced into that role. As Ramadevi pointed out, "I sell vegetables, barely making enough to feed my four children. But I save every paisa so that they can go to school and make something of their lives. I can't afford to pay a high rent for a place to stay. Nor can I spend Rs. 20-30 on travel every day. That's why I live here. *Gareeb aadmi aur kahan jayega* (Where else would a poor person go)?"

The economics of everyday life in the city, of surviving when wages are low, dictate that people live close to their workplace. But this need goes unmet in Delhi's real estate market that offers scant legal housing for poor workers. In the last decade, the Delhi Development Authority promised to build 16.2 lakh dwellings but built only 5,60,000. None of these were homes that the poor could afford. No wonder then that more than 23 per cent of Delhi's population lives in *bastis* like Yamuna Pushta. Abdul Barik gestures at the squalor around, "You think we want to live like this? We are also human. We also want to live decently, without fear of being harassed and uprooted. But there is no other option."



Under the circumstances, encroachment is not a choice but a compulsion for poor workers, their hope of securing a foothold in the urban economy.

To the charges of encroachment on which the poor are being prosecuted even as powerful actors operate with impunity throughout Delhi, have now been added new environmental accusations. According to the High Court, the Yamuna Pushta *bastis* should be removed because they pollute the river. Analysis by the Hazards Centre, an organisation researching urban issues, shows that the Pushta contributes only 2.96 mld out of the total 3,296 mld of wastewater released into the Yamuna in Delhi. The bulk of the sewage comes from the sewers of *pucca* colonies.

The most recent "environmental" targeting of the Pushta has again come from Jagmohan, in his capacity as Minister for Tourism and Culture. The Yamuna bank is now the proposed site of a multi-crore beautification project, its poor residents forced from their homes to make way for promenades and parking lots, plazas and arcades, places of recreation and consumption. This bourgeois utopia, the dream of urban beauty, is to be realised at the cost of great cruelty towards the most vulnerable sections of the city. Delhi, a city that has embraced generations of migrants, and where penniless refugees have prospered, is now splitting into two. One half is a Singapore-clone, sanitised and policed, where the affluent can entertain themselves with round-the-clock eating and shopping. And curled around it is its ugly twin: the invisible yet sprawling mega-

slum that circles the enclaves of the rich and powerful, providing them with goods and services.

Jagmohan's projects, the High Courts orders, their selective implementation by city officials, and the virtual silence in the media about the on-going devastation in the lives of Delhi's workers — all signal the consolidation of a bourgeois consensus that the poor don't matter. This consensus is all the more insidious because it is not confined to a repressive state but is supported by so-called public opinion. Are we prepared to give up the most fundamental principle of our nation — equal citizenship?

All people have the right to work and shelter, and to basic livelihood. Respecting the presence of poor workers in the city and promoting their concerns, instead of persecuting them, requires that affordable housing be made a priority. Displacement and resettlement is a costly and traumatic process. It is preferable to adapt existing *bastis* where residents have already expended considerable labour and thought to make habitable places. Improving these by "upgrading" drainage and street layout, and providing better services, is an option that residents welcome.

But this can only be achieved if planners, politicians, judges and middle-class citizens recognise the constraints under which poor workers struggle to survive and help them overcome these. A secure home, a house with a toilet and a tap, in a vibrant *basti*, has a beauty all its own.

The writer, a sociologist, is currently a Ciriacy-Wantrup Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley.

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