
INVISIBLE COMMUNITIES: A SOCIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF UNPLANNED SETTLEMENTS IN NEW DELHI

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ABSTRACT

Slums have been in existence since the time of cities and their presence has long been documented in the literature (Booth, 1903). The word 'slum' has mainly been used to describe people living under substandard conditions and squalor. Indian cities, metropolitan hubs like Delhi in particular have some of the largest number of people living in slums. As Delhi grew into a modern capital city after Independence, with its irresistible economic, social, cultural and political opportunities, it became the chief centre of migrants, which led to the rise of unplanned settlements. This paper will provide a brief history of the rise of these settlements in Delhi, a sociology of its inhabitants, primary infrastructure issues, the role of administrative authorities and political agents, and will end with policy recommendations for governmental agencies and nonprofit organisations.

Keywords: Invisible communities, Slums, Settlements in Delhi, Primary infrastructure issues

INTRODUCTION

Slums have been in existence since the time of cities and their presence has long been documented in the literature (Booth, 1903). The word 'slum' has mainly been used to describe people living under substandard conditions and squalor. Indian cities, metropolitan hubs like Delhi in particular have some of the largest number of people living in slums. As Delhi grew into a modern capital city after Independence, with its irresistible economic, social, cultural and political opportunities, it became the chief centre of migrants. The surrounding inadequacy of employment in rural areas and their dire poverty have pushed them to the city. Further, the acute shortage of housing in the city and perpetual poverty coupled with complete ignorance of the migrants about the urban way of life are understood as the principal causes underlying the growth of these clusters. In 1951, there were 199 Jhuggi Jhompari Clusters comprising of 12,749 households. In 1973, the number of clusters increased to 1373, about six times more than in

1951, having 1,41,755 huts. In 1951, a cluster on an average comprised of a group of 64 Jhuggies whereas in 1973, it comprised of 103 Jhuggies. (Singh, Renuka)

The attitude of the Delhi Government had been indifferent to the level of the state machinery not making any active effort to improve the quality of life in these slums. As problematic as it was, it was nothing close to Indira Gandhi's policies during the Emergency era. The Government ordered the demolition of all slums especially those which were dominantly occupied by Muslims. Slums around the Turkman Gate and Jama Masjid were ordered to be demolished. This has been of the most authoritarian policies executed by any elected Government post independence in India. To make things worse, this highlighted the communal agenda of the Government. The residents of these slums were to be relocated to distant settlements outside Delhi. This would imply all individuals losing their source of employment and more than 150,000 households being uprooted from their homes of more than 3 decades (Singh, Renuka). This move was met by protest and resistance from the residents who refused to move as they would have to commute every day paying heavy bus fares to reach the city to earn their living. The government decided to use violence as a mode of dealing with this resistance. On April 18, 1976, the police opened fire on protesters killing several of them. The government who had earlier imposed censorship ordered the newspapers not to report the massacre. Indian public came to know about killings through foreign media like BBC. (The Wire). It was later reported that protesting people were ran over by Bulldozers, resulting in several deaths. The Shah Commission was constituted post the Emergency era to inquire into the human rights atrocities committed during that era including slum demolitions in Delhi. It estimated that 20 people were killed whilst hundreds were severely injured (Shah Commission).

However, post-Emergency, the population of people living in slums rocketed again. The number of households living in slums drastically increased from 20,000 post 1976 to 1,13,386 in 1983 (Arora, R.K.). The growth in 1980-83 seems to be the result of large scale migration owing to the expanded construction activity in the capital during the Asian Games (1981-82). This growth happened in areas such as Laxmi Bai Nagar, Sarojini Nagar and INA.

A SOCIOLOGY OF UNORGANISED SETTLEMENT INHABITANTS

The Government of Delhi-NCR defines slums as a compact settlement of at least 20 households with a collection of poorly built tenements, mostly of temporary nature, crowded together usually with inadequate sanitary and drinking water facilities in unhygienic conditions. Specifically, Slum Designated Areas (SDAs) represent the only settlements in Delhi that are technically 'slums'. In order to be considered an SDA, a settlement must be registered under the 1956 Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act. There are about 100,000 properties housing 1,000,000 families in these slums of out which 97 percent are privately owned. Once notified, an

SDA is guaranteed basic services and its residents are entitled to due procedure and notice prior to eviction. No settlement in Delhi has been identified as an SDA since 1994. While no slum has been officially designated in more than two decades, slum-like settlements have continued to grow and expand across Delhi. These non-notified slums are categorised as jhuggi jhopri clusters (JICs). These are defined as “squatter settlements” located on “public land”—land owned by an agency such as the DDA, the Railways, the Central Public Works Department (CPWD), one of the Municipal Corporations of Delhi—which has been occupied and built on without permission. As a result, these settlements are often referred to as “encroachments” in official discourse (cprindia.org). The residents are most prone to demolition and eviction by state authorities. They accommodate 2.5 million people across Delhi.

In totality, about 90% of slums were built on public land, owned mostly by local bodies (46%), railways (28%) and state government (16%), etc. According to a survey conducted by Bharat Sewa Samaj, the percentage of females in slums is 46% which is more than the national average of 42% Children of both sexes account for 25% as against the national average of 22% The male working group (15-54 years) constitute only 28% as against 31% of national average. There is not much difference in literacy rates of slum dwellers compared to the average for the city. The slums have a literacy rate of 32% whereas the literacy rate in the cities is 33%. However, this figure does not adequately reflect the levels of education in slums. The education is mostly confined to them being trained in hereditary occupations.

During the last three decades, economic and industrial development in Delhi has resulted in urbanising large segments of population. A great majority of the rural migrants have moved to the city to seek better income and employment opportunities, giving rise to large number of squatter settlements and slums. These slums are largely classified as JICs and occupy publicly owned land.

PRIMARY INFRASTRUCTURAL ISSUES

Slums suffer from the dearth of adequate amenities such as housing, electricity and water. Even where they are available their quality remains poor. According to the Government of Delhi-NCR, 54.91% of slums are composed of permanent construction structure, 29.47% of semi permanent construction structure and only 15.62% of slums were having unserviceable and temporary construction structures. 86.4% of households don't have direct to clean water. Only 30% of households have adequate sanitation and sewage facilities and on the other extreme, as many as 22% don't have access to any forms of sanitation. About 16.76% of slums had access to street lights along with having access to electricity for household purposes, 23.90% of slums had electricity for household use only, 58.96% for street lights only, while in 0.38% of slums there was no electricity. About 10% of the slums also suffer from water-logging during monsoons.

With respect to other amenities that are normally sponsored by the state for the lowest strata of the society, such as education and healthcare, conditions of slums continue to be inaccessible and sub-standard. Primary schools are plentiful, however their maintenance is questionable. Education beyond the primary level has been shrugged off as burden of the state machinery. 16% of the households don't have a publicly funded hospital within the range of 5 kilometers, which is the set government standard across the state.

As reported by Wateraid India, all key policies, most legislations and almost all institutions have seemingly favoured the marginalisation of the urban poor in Indian cities. A rather disturbing trend of the exclusion of the poor has been observed in all metropolises, irrespective of the political ideology of the ruling party. The poor are being pushed out of the city to areas where services are poor, investment is low and livelihoods opportunities are few and far. Reduced state expenditure on welfare schemes and subsidies, along with cut backs in employment and privatisation of basic services has further increased the vulnerability of the urban poor. These policies have led to the increase in the basic expenditure that every household can generate, without a similar increase in the purchasing power. These basic services have not kept pace with the rapid growth in population of people living in informal settlements. The iniquitous distribution of resources, including land for housing, civic services and economic opportunities, have widened the gaps between the "planned city" and the "informal city".

The problem however, is not restricted to the unavailability of resources. It also extends to there being a lack of representation of those problems in front of the government agencies. Only 4% of the slums in Delhi have formal or informal associations comprising of the slum dwellers themselves to solve problems centered around their living conditions. The absence of a voice also gives the government an avenue to shrug off its burden and justify its ignorance.

ROLE OF ADMINISTRATIVE AUTHORITIES AND POLITICAL AGENTS

The Municipal Corporation of Delhi is responsible for the development of slums with respect to improving the living conditions of households that reside there. It has taken the initiative of constructing community halls in areas with high levels of clusters of informal settlements. The Municipal Corporation has allocated a budget of Rs 30 million to construct 20 such community centres across Delhi. Another scheme envisages that the upgrade of existing dwelling units to an improved and modified layout by socialising the distribution of land and amenities amongst the squatter families. However, the particulars of this initiative have not been decided upon yet, and hence it is far from implementation. Even the government has subscribed only a token amount for this project. Similar programs to improve the quality of water, availability of electricity and provision of adequate drainage and sanitation have been initiated by the Municipal Corporation.

The implementation of these policies has been inadequate due to several reasons including corruption, red tape and most importantly, political interference.

In the Indian political scenario, it is common for the most oppressed communities to be the most sought after vote banks. Oppression related to not just class but also caste and religion usually motivates individuals to cause political change with the end goal of ending that oppression. However, in reality political parties hardly act in the way it is needed in order to make living conditions in slums better. It translates into a bitter blame game between the Central Government of India, the State Government of Delhi-NCR and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. Presently, the Government of Delhi is controlled by the Aam Aadmi Party while all of Delhi's Members of Parliament in the Lok Sabha (Lower House) belong to the Bharatiya Janata Party. This power dynamic makes the shifting of blame between both political parties very convenient. Because of this level of ambiguity with respect to responsibility it becomes difficult for voters to hold one party accountable for their problems. Provision of temporary, tokenistic and sub-standard benefits to slum dwellers keeps their attention distracted from tangible and permanent change. Politicians even try to consolidate their vote banks by reducing their mobility. The pattern of voting followed by slum dwellers are often consequential in determining who ultimately reaches the position of power in Delhi. The success of the Indian National Congress before the coming of the AAP government coincided with their party being popular amongst slum dwellers. The Economic Times in 2014 reported that voters living in slums started favouring the AAP over the INC due to its perception as the party of the poor. This shift in favour translated to AAP winning the Delhi Legislature with extraordinary margins in 2015. Thus, slums continue to be one of the most politicized issues in Delhi.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

It is imperative to go to the roots of every problem to find effective solutions. One of the main reasons for increase in the number of slums in Delhi is the lack of cheap and affordable housing which pushes low income families into slums. This problem traces its origin to the Delhi Rent Control Act, 1959. Rent control or rent ceiling is the practice of imposing a maximum amount of rent in certain housing markets which is below the market equilibrium rate. This maximum cap in rent reduces the profit margin on properties lent out. Because of lesser incentive to let out houses for rent the supply of affordable housing decreases. The rent control act is responsible for over 3 lakh vacant houses in Delhi, according to the India Today. The market for rental housing in Delhi must be deregulated to increase the quality and quantity of affordable housing available to residents, and more importantly immigrants.

Non-Governmental Organizations also play a major role in developing the quality of living in slums. They provide aid in the form of free primary and formal education, access to clean

drinking water and provision of free healthcare facilities. The Government itself recognizes the importance of NGOs in causing tangible change. Aasha is a Delhi based NGO founded by Dr Kiran Martin in 1988. It was started as a single clinic where Dr Martin helped slum residents deal with the Malaria Epidemic for free. Over the past thirty years it has expanded its horizon from healthcare to education, women empowerment and financial inclusion. It is funded by Tearfund and it is the first NGO in Delhi to collaborate with the government as well as the communities that it was aiming to help. 'The Path Makers' is a recently founded Non Governmental Organization that has similar aims in terms of increasing the standard of living of slum-dwellers. It provides free health check ups, awareness campaigns and most importantly classes that provide informal tuitions and lessons in English speaking to children living in slums. These skills help them access better forms of employment.

Most importantly, however, is the change that is needed in the working of the Government agencies in Delhi. There is an urgent need of inclusion of opinions of the slum dwellers in the discussion that leads to the framing of policies. An efficient checks and balances mechanism is imperative that analyses the execution and implementation of plans. This would reduce the systemic problem of corruption that Indian Government agencies suffer from. Some of these mechanisms have been successfully implemented by the present Government in Delhi led by the Aam Aadmi Party. However, long term tangible improvement is yet to be seen. Careful and non-politically motivated planning, a professional and inclusive executive and complete transparency in procedure is needed on part of Government agencies.

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