

PEOPLE'S UNION FOR DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS; NEW DELHI

PUDR Report on the Demolition of 499 Jhuggis in New Seemapuri
on August 25, 1981.

It was high noon on Tuesday, August 25, 1981. Almost all the men-folk and some of the adult women were out at work, and the rest of the women and the children had no reason to be apprehensive. A few days ago, a DDA survey team had come and promised proper plots to the 499 families who lived in the unauthorised jhuggis adjacent to Block F of the New Seemapuri resettlement colony. Nobody had ever told them about an impending demolition. They were thus caught totally unprepared when two police vans, three CRP trucks and two DDA vehicles entered the area and started pulling down their hovels. (it costs in the very least Rs.200 to put up the meanest of these dwellings).

Mrs. Shivananda, a young woman who came here along with her husband some two years ago from Bihar, was actually giving birth to a child when the squad descended on her shack. The couple kept a hen, and the eggs supplemented the family earning. The fowl died when a wall of their jhuggi was pulled down by the DDA people, and it was buried under the debris. A South Indian woman who protested was beaten up, so was Mr. Luthfur who, along with Mr. K. Neogi, Dr. Osiar Rahman and Mr. Bimal Haldar, tried to argue with the DDA men. One official said that they were demolishing the jhuggis under the Central Government's orders, and anybody resisting would have to face lathi-charge and arrest.

The next day, the residents hired three buses and want to meet the Lt-Governor, Mr. S.L. Khurana, in a group. They reached his house at 10 a.m., but were made to wait for two hours. Finally, when the LG did meet them, he became very angry upon being reminded that he had earlier promised plots to those who didn't have any. He said that the unauthorised jhuggi-dwellers must leave the area immediately, as that was the Central Government's order. The residents left a protest note with the LG and told him that, since they had nowhere else to go, they would stay right there, and he could shoot them down, if he liked, to clear the area.

A PUDR team, comprising Mr. Harsh Kapur, Mr. Kanchan Kumar and Mrs. Modhumita Mojundar found out this and much more during their investigation. Despite several efforts, they could not obtain a coherent statement from the DDA about this episode, but they did uncover certain unsavoury details about what had happened earlier. For instance the mysterious fires that have burnt down jhuggis time and again.

In 1976, the very year when these people had been moved from Sukanta Colony (near the electric crematorium) to New Seemapuri, a fire burnt down 16 jhuggis in F Block and two in E Block. On June 1, 1978, entire F Block, with 610 jhuggis was gutted, rendering about 4,000 people homeless. The fire broke out at 4 p.m. The nearest fire station, which a bicyclerider can reach within 10 minutes, was informed. But the fire-tenders did not reach the colony till about 6 p.m. When they did, they said they had no water to put out the fire. The mystery of the delay was never solved, but all the jhuggis were reduced to ashes. In any case, most of them have thatched roofs and walls made of mud and matting, and it does not take long for them to be reduced to cinders.

On June 14, 1981, all the unauthorised jhuggis adjacent to D Block were totally gutted in a devastating fire. Lt. Governor Khurana paid a visit the next day and promised to provide plots in Nand Nagri to those who had suffered losses. While the LG forgot all about his promise, Mr. Mahesh Sharma and Mr. J.S. Raina, both of whom claim to be the 'President' of the local Congress (I) committee, and have the blessings of metropolitan council member, Mr. Radheshyam Khanna and the local MP, Mr. H. K. L. Bhagat, did their best to prevent them from rebuilding the jhuggis. It is said that they started setting their goondas on people from these unauthorised jhuggis when they went to fetch water from the hand-pumps in D Block.

On July 9, 25 days after the fire, at around 9 p.m., all the street lights went off. Then a gang of 70 or 75 men attacked the residents of the unauthorised jhuggis near D Block.

The local residents say that Messrs. Sharma and Raina had a hand in it. A 24-year-old mother of two children, Sakina Khatun, was raped, with four men holding her down and after having gagged her. She was later examined by a woman doctor at the General Hospital in Dilshad Garden. Two other women, Kohinoor (25) and Marjina, were molested and their clothes torn. Salina (20), the wife of Noor Mohammad is missing since that night. While this brutal attack was going on, despite repeated visits to the Seemapuri police station, the officer in charge refused to register the case, saying: "You Bengalis always create trouble. I will not register the case. Get lost"

The police did come to the area, however, but that was at the dead of night. Instead of apprehending the anti-social elements, they started dragging out the victims of the attack from their shacks and beating them up. They arrested 25 persons, including Noor Mohammad, the husband of the missing girl. Since many of the residents are Muslims who sport beards, they said that they would beard them and not allow a single Bengali to live in that area.

In a letter of protest, Mrs. Rita Karat, secretary of the Janwadi Mahila Samiti, has alleged collaboration between the anti-social elements and the police. She has mentioned half a dozen culprits by name to the officer in charge of the local police station, but no action has been taken against them because they are said to have Congress (I) backing. It was after this episode that Imam Abdullah Bokhari of Jama Masjid came to the area and tried to establish peace.

Now and then, the police come and arrest children and adults engaged in rag-picking, saying that they are thieves. They snatch their miserable earnings. The police also take liberties with the women and make obscene gestures at them. Some anti-social elements in the colony, with Congress (I) connections, are their agents and try to implicate innocent people so that they may be persuaded to part with money.

Mohammad Sali, who came to Delhi as an 8/9-year-old orphan and is now married to a young Bengali woman from Midnapore, runs a kabadi shop. The police recently 'fined' him Rs.300/- because he had given a blow or two to a self-confessed thief.

Three months ago, Mahesh Sharma, along with a police Havildar, went to Pyarelal who owns a small tea-stall and demanded Rs.150/-. When he refused, both of them beat him, broke his hand and dragged him to the police station. Ram Singh, another shopkeeper, went to protest. He was also beaten up and his wrist-watch and bicycle seized. He was implicated in a false case and produced at the Shahdara court as an anti-social element.

Last month, a policeman named Ramesh caught hold of a rickshaw-puller, Mr. Mazid Mirza, and beat him up. After a hard day's work, Mirza had bought a handful of puffed rice and was eating it inside the shop when he was dragged outside and beaten. When members of the Young Federation Club intervened, the policeman said that Hazra Begum, who heads the Congress (I) women's wing, had told him that Mirza was involved in the flesh trade. About a hundred people from the colony went to the police station to protest. At that point, SHO Uday Singh and SI Tyagi turned around and charged one of the respected leaders of the colony, Dr. Osia Rahman, with having had a woman in his room late at night. Mirza, they said, had been standing guard at the door. The woman's husband personally went and testified that his wife had had cholera and had to be given saline till 1 p.m. that night. SHO Uday Singh then apologised.

Uday Singh was bad enough. But he has retired. The new SHO is worse. Under his rule, the police have been openly taking bribes. People playing carrom are being charged with gambling. The police are also threatening to demolish the mud-walled club premises.

On August 31, some drunks came to the shop of Amiruddin and started making a nuisance of themselves. Amiruddin therefore refused to serve them tea. The hoodlums then tried to

attack him, but others prevented them from doing any harm. One of the drunkards, however, had a friend in the police and got Amiruddin implicated in a false case. Finally, the police extracted Rs.60/- from him and asked him to keep his mouth shut about the whole episode.

Of course, the police are not the only exploiters. Mohammad Saidul Islam has a small tailoring shop in the dilapidated vegetable market popularly known as Bengali Market. He originally hails from Khulna (Bangladesh) and has been in New Seemapuri for four years. He supports a family of eight. A DDA official has threatened to demolish his shop unless he forks out Rs.50/-. This was a little over a fortnight ago.

The PUDDR demands that the demolition of jhuggis in New Seemapuri and throughout the Union Territory should stop immediately and the residents of unauthorised colonies allowed to live in their jhuggis till alternative sites can be provided to all of them. The Delhi Administration should provide adequate drinking water facilities for the residents of both authorised and unauthorised colonies. The police should be pulled up immediately and strict instructions given preventing them from harassing the residents of resettlement colonies as well as unauthorised slums. They should also be told to protect these people from harassment and extortion in the hands of local goondas and others.

The Background

When the Haldia port was built in West Bengal, people over an area of 2,000 bighas were displaced. They all went to live with relations and friends, till they had nearly exhausted the money that they had received in the way of compensation.

One of them, Bashir Ahmed, came to Delhi, surveyed the terrain, and went back to tell his uprooted people that employment opportunities could be found in the capital city. So started the influx of men, women and children, trying to strike new roots, disillusioned by the life of bonded labour which was

all they could aspire to get at home under the circumstances. In 1970, some of them settled down near the Jamuna Bridge, near the electric crematorium. By 1974, there were about 1,600 jhuggis at Sukanta Colony; Jamuna Bazar, most of them belonging to Bengali Muslims from Midnapore District, though people from other parts of Bengal, some of them Hindus, had started joining them. Most of the men were head-load carriers who worked in Chandni Chowk, Fatehpuri, Khari Bauli and Lal Kuan. The women worked as part-time maids in the same areas and Daryaganj. A large number of men, particularly old men, women and children also took to rag-picking as their only means of livelihood.

Even before the emergency of 1975, there was great pressure on the people to get themselves sterilised. Inducements were offered. Once the emergency was declared, 95 per cent. of the men, including old men and those without any children, were forcibly sterilised. In 1976, the authorities are said to have opened a lock gate to let the turbulent waters of the river sweep away the jhuggis. The police and the CRP were deployed in full strength to prevent the people from climbing on to the bund to save themselves. This happened at 1 a.m. at night. Some 20-25 small children are said to have been washed away in the swirling waters. This was during the monsoon of 1976. The same season, all those who had undergone sterilisation operations were allotted plots of 22½ sq yards in Seemapuri, across the Jamuna, and in Jahangirpuri near Azadpur (initially they had been promised 25 sq yds. by the DDA). About half the families moved to Seemapuri, the other half went to Jahangirpuri.

The Seemapuri resettlement colony houses about 22,000 families in six blocks. Bengalis comprise 75 per cent of the population in Blocks E and F which have 444 and 442 plots respectively. Those who refused to be sterilised and others who came later built some 425 unauthorised jhuggis adjoining D Block, 399 near E Block and 430 next to F Block. About 25 of the

unauthorised jhuggis adjacent to F Block belong to non-Bengalis. A few Bengali Hindus also live amicably with their Muslim brothers in all these pockets. Most of the people who live in these unauthorised jhuggis have been refused ration cards which not only make life easier and less expensive but are also the basic document without which one cannot expect to be allotted a plot of land in the Union Territory of Delhi.

While the unauthorised jhuggis near F Block surround a stinking cess pool, the sanitary condition even in the authorised sections is little better. The open drains on either side of the lanes are full of sullage and are rarely cleaned. Flies swarm all over the place. There are queues from 2 a.m. at the water taps. There are only 24 lavatories for Blocks E and D where 12,000 people live. The children naturally use the open drains adjacent to their jhuggis to relieve themselves.

A spanking new vegetable market is coming up right next to the existing one housed in shacks. But the authorities are charging Rs.580/- in advance for each stall there. The local shop-keepers cannot afford to pay this amount, and their existing jhuggi-shops will be demolished when the proper market comes up--throwing hundreds out of business.

Action India used to work in this locality, in fact they had started working among these people since 1973 when they were still living near the Jamuna Bridge. Ever since they left two years ago, the school for children and the clinic have stopped functioning. About 10 children attend the Hindi-medium municipal school some distance away from the colony. Another 25-30 study at the madarsa run by the Imam of the mosque set up by the community on the plot of land that once housed the children's school.

At Jamuna Bridge, the community had to also cope with the pressures of a flourishing trade in buying and selling women. This trade has ostensibly stopped, thanks to the efforts of the community. The people have set up the Young Federation Club,

and when we visited the area the organisers were busy making arrangements for a football match. Some are active in the Jana Sangathan Ekta Manch which is making efforts to raise the consciousness of people in several resettlement colonies, irrespective of caste, creed and language.

The men and women still do the same kind of work that they used to, except that they now have to travel long distances by bus to reach their places of work. The vegetable and fruit vendors among them earn between Rs.5 and Rs.7 per day. Some pull rickshaws in the city. After paying the owner Rs.8 per day as hiring charges, they are left with Rs.5 or so. The rag-pickers earn about Rs.8 a day, while the maids make Rs.150 or Rs.200 a month. We met 11-year-old Hasina, who with an even younger friend, Saidra, was going to Shakarpur to collect rotten and wilted vegetables thrown away by the shop-keepers. They said they would return only in the evening, and the vegetables were not for their own use but would be sold in the market.

The police and the local Congress activists, both of whom make a habit of demanding money in return for not molesting and harassing the jhuggi-dwellers, have been trying their best to play off the Hindus against Muslims and the non-Bengalis against Bengalis. The unauthorised jhuggi dwellers have to part with Rs.20 or Rs.30 a month in the way of 'protection money'. This rate goes up every time one lot is evicted and another lot allowed to set up their unauthorised jhuggis on the vacant land. It is, therefore, in the interests of the local politicians and the police to remove the jhuggi-wallahs from the land-if need be, by force. The authorised plot-holders in the resettlement colony must also pay bribes, but it is not so easy to remove them.