

RANG DE BASTI

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About two weeks ago, a terse notice appeared on a few walls in Sanjay Basti, a squatter settlement in Timarpur, North Delhi. Posted by the Central Public Works Department (CPWD), it directs the residents to vacate by 27th April, or face demolition soon after that. The notice does not explain the purpose of this forcible removal, or specify the area to which the order applies, or mention any relocation plan. Nor does it provide a contact number where further details might be sought - so much for the right to information.

Most of the houses in Sanjay Basti are small, single-room dwellings, with thin brick or mud walls and corrugated sheets on the top. The residents belong to the “informal sector” of the urban economy: they work as vegetable vendors, domestic helpers, casual labourers, street hawkers, rickshaw pullers, mechanics, painters, among other occupations. They survive and live, without much comfort but protected at least from the deprivations and indignities many of them had endured in the villages, before they migrated to Delhi. For the outsider, a basti may seem drab, dirty and degenerate, a virtual colony of crime and filth. For insiders, trials and tribulations there may well be, but the basti also throbs with a vibrant social life.

In common parlance, Sanjay Basti is a “slum” or “encroachment”, but these pejorative terms fail to convey the real nature of this settlement. Most of the residents have been there for twenty years or more, and they have had time to transform their humble dwellings into real “homes”. Without much help or subsidies, they have made thoughtful use of every inch of space to improve their environment, often by recycling middle-class “waste”. Their houses are tidy and functional, and what is more, they have character. In this respect, this “slum” compares favourably with the somewhat dull lower-middle-class quarters across the road, built at considerable public expense. As a form of low-cost urban housing, Sanjay Basti is not doing badly.

Ever since the eviction notice came up, people have been worried, fearful and confused even though their everyday life continues much as before. The notice did not come as a surprise – they have always known that it was only a matter of time. There have been many occasions when rumour was rife that the basti was about to be demolished. Yet it survived each time, and even seemed to take root: election cards were made, ration cards were distributed, children were immunized and admitted in local schools. But now, part of Sanjay Basti is already rubble: as a “starter” towards full demolition, a row of shops and houses (on the edge of the road) was razed to the ground on 6 March 2007. This swift and ruthless operation made it clear that the eviction notice has to be taken seriously.

In principle, Sanjay Basti is well protected from arbitrary demolition under existing policies and laws. The Delhi Laws (Special Provisions) Act 2006 prohibits any slum demolition for

the time being unless the land is required for a “specific public project”, which is conspicuous by its absence in this case. Indeed, persistent enquiries from countless offices failed to uncover any specific reason for the demolition of Sanjay Basti.

Further, the Delhi Master Plan 2021, which has statutory force, declares and mandates a policy of *in situ* upgradation or relocation as per strict specifications (provided for in the Plan itself) of all slums and “jhuggi-jopri clusters”, and a continuance of these settlements in the interim. The impending demolition of Sanjay Basti violates this Master Plan as well as the Delhi Laws (Special Provisions) Act 2006. For good measure, it is also contrary to the slum policy of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD).

These laws and policies, unfortunately, are being overridden by reckless High Court orders aimed at “cleansing” the city from settlements of this kind. Indeed, Sanjay Basti is only the latest target in a long series of slum demolitions carried out under pressure from the Delhi High Court and its offshoots – notably the Commissioners and Monitoring Committees appointed to oversee the progress of demolition orders.

These orders are based on the notion that slums are parasitical settlements that tarnish the urban environment. They overlook the fact that slums serve an essential economic purpose: they provide low-cost housing to masses of workers who “service” the city, and for whom no provision has been made in urban development planning. For many of them, it would be impractical or expensive to commute long distances from the outskirts of the city. For instance, street vendors and roadside workers (barbers, tea-stall owners, cycle mechanics, and so on) need equipment that would be difficult to carry back and forth. Similarly, it is the short distance between work and home that enables many women to work as part-time domestic helpers in the neighbourhood even as they continue to handle child care and other household tasks.

Slum demolition drives also overlook another important fact about squatter settlements in Delhi: they occupy very little space. Indeed, squatter settlements in Delhi cover barely one per cent of the total land area in the city. This point can also be appreciated by examining Google Earth’s high-resolution maps of Delhi (see www.googleearth.com). It is a striking fact that slums are virtually invisible on these maps. The reason is that squatter settlements are tucked away in the nooks and crannies of the city, too small to be visible on aerial maps - even detailed maps where single trees can be spotted.

On this one per cent of the total Delhi area live some 3 million people who keep the informal economy going and for whom no shelter provisions have been made. When the situation is seen in this light, the case for removal looks much weaker than when slums are regarded as an eyesore and a nuisance. Would it really be unwise to allocate one per cent of the land for *in situ* improvement of existing slums, and spare the trauma of forced eviction to millions of people, except possibly when essential public purposes are at stake?

It is interesting to contrast the harsh treatment meted out to “slums” with current policies towards another category of squatters – motorised vehicles. Delhi’s private cars alone (there are more than 12 lakh) occupy a larger area, for parking purposes, than all the city’s slums. In many neighbourhoods, it has become difficult to move around as public spaces are jammed with private cars. Cars also cause endless noise, pollution, accidents, traffic jams, among other nuisances – rapidly turning the whole city into a living hell. Yet, little is done to stem the runaway growth of vehicular traffic.

This contrast is one symptom, among others, of the class character of urban development in Delhi. The housing needs of the working class are brushed aside, while the city is redesigned to suit the aspirations of the privileged classes. As the Master Plan puts it, the top priority is to convert Delhi into a “world-class city”. Here as in Sanjay Basti, the writing is on the wall.