

The Hindustan Times, New Delhi, 08 Oct 2007

Widespread builder-babu nexus robs slum people of their legit rights

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THAT LIVING in a durable house improves one's access to happiness and health is an axiom backed up by plenty of research. A World Bank working paper of April 2007 shows, for example, the amazing impact of replacing dirt floors by cement floors in Mexico: adults reported 69 per cent higher satisfaction with their quality of life and children's cognitive development improved by up to 96 per cent!

But *apucca* room of one's own, that's a distant dream for most people in India. Even more so for the 158 million who live in its slums, not to mention the millions more who sleep under the sky.

Resettlement disasters

The Law Commission had recommended giving slum dwellers the right to resettlement preceding destruction of their homes back in 1990. Such a law was never enacted, so poor people's homes continue to be ruthlessly razed in a country burdened with a 24.71 million (and growing) housing shortage, with few of them being resettled.

Take the demolitions carried out in Delhi. In her paper titled, "Better to have died than to live like this," Kalyani Menon-Sen points that only 6,000 out of the 27,000 families evicted from the Yamuna Pushta area in 2004 were resettled. Over a lakh people were left to just



Source: Census of India 2001/Graphic: SANJAY KAPOOR

fend for themselves. Many of them had been bought to the city by contractors to build the Asian Games infrastructure. Most had become integral parts of the city's ecosystems as recyclers, domestic workers, rickshaw pullers and so on. Not only were plots allocated through so-called voluntary relocation priced beyond these people's pockets, their proofs of residence were also found largely inadequate.

To get a complete picture, consider the large number of fake ration cards and allotment letters seized during the capital's ongoing Ashok Malhotra scandal. They represent the stolen dreams of Hudson Lane slum evacuees, who were to be resettled by DDA in Dheerpur. Instead Malhotra sold off these plots to fictitious persons, a scam more ordi-

nary than otherwise. A widespread builder-administration nexus robs slum dwellers of their rights pretty regularly.

A goldmine called Dharavi

The UN special rapporteur on adequate housing has said that most slum evictions take place to create so-called world-class cities. Mumbai, which aims to shine like Shanghai by 2013 but also hosts one of the world's largest slums, has come up with an innovative public-private partnership model to simultaneously rehabilitate its poor and to meet its growing commercial estate requirements. And everyone from international giants like Emaar of Dubai to domestic biggies like DLF is hooked.

The winning bidders of the \$2.3 billion project will cross-subsidize free houses for all the 340,000 people who occupy the 535 acres stretch. And to meet the income needs of the affected people, there are initiatives like an agreement with the National Institute of Design for upgrading the skills of Dharavi's craftsmen or another with the Gems and Jewelry Export Promotion Council which is going to set up factories generating 75,000 jobs.

Time after time, policy after policy, promise-makers have let down the slum dwellers. But there is hope that Dharavi will rewrite history, and set a new benchmark for people friendly progress.

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