

India: How Housing Policies to Help the Urban Poor in UP Are Actually Doing Them Harm

Tuesday 17 December 2019, by [CHAKRABARTTY Partha P.](#) (Date first published: 13 October 2019).

In conversation with urban planner and architect Sadiq Zafar on the housing provided under the Kanshiram Shahri Garib Awas Yojana in Gonda.

[Sadiq Zafar](#), an urban planner and architect, was horrified when he visited houses built under the Rs 28 crore (Rs 1.75 lakh for each housing unit including infrastructure services as per the government order) Kanshiram Shahri Garib Awas Yojana, a free housing programme for the urban poor in Gonda, the headquarters of the Devipatan division of Uttar Pradesh. Three other districts in this division are counted among the 20 most backward districts of India, according to the NITI Aayog.

This free housing programme was offered to the urban poor, who were identified based on various need-based categories, with 23% of the housing reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, 27% allotted to the Other Backward Castes, and 50% kept for the unreserved urban poor, determined by the below poverty line status, an income level of Rs 483.26 per month per person, making it Rs 29,000 per annum for a family of five. This limit was increased in 2009-10 and 2011-12.

On paper, the scheme promised 323 sq ft of living space divided into two rooms, a kitchen, a latrine and a bathroom. In the first phase, 1.01 lakh units were to be constructed in UP, with the 60 most populous cities allotted 1,500 housing units each on an area of 10 acres, and another 11 districts given 1,000 housing units each on an area of seven acres of land (in parts or parcels). In the three-phased scheme, a total of around 1,600 housing units were built under this programme in Gonda. Later, in 2012-13 the scheme was renamed as Aasra Awas Yojana and additional 600 housing units with a cost of Rs. 26.36 Cr were built in Gonda which are still waiting to be allotted in 2019.

The colonies were supposed to have recreational spaces for the residents, a local shopping centre with rations provided at government-subsidised rates, a healthcare centre, and a school. Further, the policy mandated that the local municipality would provide and maintain all essential infrastructure, like roads, street lights, drinking water, sanitation, and waste management.

The reality on the ground, however, was very different. In this interview, The Wire speaks to Zafar about what he witnessed, the causes and forces behind this nightmarish situation, and possible solutions.

Can you give us a brief history of housing built for the urban poor in Gonda?

Under the Kanshiram Shahri Garib Awas Yojana in Gonda, 1,600 housing units were constructed during the Mayawati government between 2008-12, whereas after renaming this programme, the Samajwadi Party government in 2012-13 sanctioned construction of an additional 600 housing units with a plinth area of 270 sq ft with a cost of Rs 26.36 crore in Gonda. Five years after their construction, Aasra Awas Yojana housing units are still awaiting allotment to beneficiaries. 1,000

more such units are to be built by 2022, out of which a project looking to build 480 units is ready for implementation under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana.

Despite having a vast amount of fertile land, Gonda finds itself unfortunate in being an economically stagnant district, affected by a series of communal clashes and riots. This is a district where public institutions like schools, colleges and hospitals are in a crumbling state. The only thriving class is of the politicians, political pedlars and touts who run their own private institutions.

As a result, Gonda has been in the news for various scams as well. Food grain scam, NRHM scam, ration scam, MGNREGA scam are just some of the scams which made Gonda feature in national headlines. In 2017, a scam was unearthed in Gonda in the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana in which the sanctioned amount was transferred to the beneficiary's account after fake verification and fake identification of beneficiaries with the involvement of politicians, public representatives and administrative officers. Apart from this, a National Green Tribunal committee found Gonda associated with illegal sand mining.

What did you see when you visited this settlement in Gonda?

The first thing I found was that in the Kanshiram colony, there's a sizeable population of those who are living on rent. This suggests a failure in truly helping the targeted beneficiaries. I met a few tenants who said that it is because of their economic condition that they're left with no other option but to live in this dilapidated condition.

These tenants want authorities to allot them the space they're dwelling in because those who have their names in the list of beneficiaries have rented out their spaces, and this suggests that they don't need this space. If they needed it, they would've been living in these colonies. And, as per media reports, the same is the case in the identification of beneficiaries in the Aasra Awas Yojana. This is why the allotment process is pending even after five years.

Ever since these tenants or actual beneficiaries moved into their houses, the condition of the settlement has deteriorated. I think it is now at the point of crisis, where an epidemic can break out at any time. These people are vulnerable to various infectious diseases, including the deadly encephalitis.

To even get to the buildings, one has to cross overflowing drains and piles of solid waste that is not being collected by the municipality. Plaster is peeling from the walls, brickwork is falling apart, and the staircases are accidents waiting to happen. There are also awnings from the façade of the building (louvers) and staircase balustrades in imminent danger of collapse.

Railings are gone, brickwork is missing from the boundary wall, and the enclosed space is full of pits which turn into breeding grounds for mosquitoes during rainfall. The grass is so sparse that the complex has become a concrete jungle, and the recreational spaces are in such a terrible state that women and the elderly don't even want to step out of their flats. Animals including dogs, goats, cows and bulls roam freely.

What about the promised amenities, like the shopping centre, health clinic and school?

The community shopping centre has remained closed since it was constructed. There are locks hanging on shops that are supposed to provide subsidised rations. It seems to me that the government is working not for the citizens, but for agents looking to extort illegal commissions. As for the health clinic, I could not even locate it.

The school is the only thing that is functioning, but even its structural condition is very shaky.

What about the municipal infrastructure and facilities?

The water supply network is in a crumbling state, with no accounting for the amount of drinking water lost. Individual reservoirs are either broken or missing from the terraces of each building, so there isn't any way to store the municipal drinking water. Water seeps into apartments from broken pipelines, and can further deteriorate the structure, which is again a serious threat to the life of the building.

There is no proper mechanism for waste management. Solid waste is being dumped all over the complex, as you can see in the photographs. The worst of all is the treatment of waste water, which is being poured into open sewers that are overflowing and choked. It is this that is threatening to start an epidemic.

Isn't anything being done under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA)?

The situation reveals the real face of the SBA. It seems like this area has been deliberately excluded from the SBA, as if cleanliness is only for rich people. Waste is only cleared when an official wants to visit the locality for a Swachh Survekshan (Cleanliness Survey). It is all a matter of looking good on paper. All this even though Gonda was designated the 'dirtiest city in India' in 2017.

How did we end up in this situation?

The geographer Edward W. Soja has introduced the concept of 'spatial justice', to show how much the spaces people are put in define whether or not they get fair and equal treatment. He has identified geographical location as the fundamental factor that produces spatial *injustice*.

Simply placing the urban poor in a segregated neighbourhood on the fringes of the city is the fundamental mistake. Doing this means they are placed away from the mainstream, and their condition remains hidden from and invisible to the rest of the city. Moreover, the urban poor themselves lose sight of how badly they are being treated, with no signs of protest from these inhuman dwelling conditions.

Nizam, who is associated with a regional human rights organisation and a resident of Kanshiram colony, reveals some unexplored, ignored and overlooked ground conditions of the colony. "The way inhabitants have been treated by political representatives and administrative officers can be understood by the ground condition of the colony. They have left us in this excluded space where our voices reach out to no one and who will be answerable if our children die dwelling in this condition. This is a complete case of misgovernance," he said.

This can be understood in the light of history of human settlement. While studying the spatial arrangements in rural settlements, we got to know that there were areas in villages, which were demarcated for people with certain professions and castes. For example, Dalits have been constantly forced to choose certain menial professions, dwell in segregated neighbourhoods, placed on the outskirts of any rural settlement. So, pushing a certain gentrified population to dwell in an inhuman condition has been continuing since ages. Though included in state's bio-power, the assembly of urban poor has been treated on the same lines in the welfare state. This can be seconded by the geographical location of the Kanshiram Awas Yojana free housing programme in Gonda.

The second issue is that the most marginalised, on the basis of religion and caste, are removed from their communities and amalgamated into a single population. This collects the most underprivileged people into one community, the ones who most lack political representation and a voice to express their needs and to speak against the injustice they face.

As a result, we have all these people consigned to the fringes of not just the city, but also the government's beneficiary lists. We are seeing very similar subjugation in Mumbra near Mumbai, and in Okhla in Delhi. Both are particularly neglected as they are considered a Muslim locality, and are called 'ghettos'.

In our earlier communication, you spoke of how this becomes 'the architecture of precarity'. Can you elaborate?

Judith Butler's concept of precarity holds true for this community, as this spatially degraded, poverty-stricken human habitat makes the people living here vulnerable and exposed to threats outside their control. This precarity also allows the state and society to neglect, overlook and ignore these inhabitants. All these keep people from having a barely livable life.

Veena Das has also pointed out in the *Current Anthropology* journal's May 2015 special issue on the politics of the urban poor that we must not underestimate the ways in which poverty corrodes the capacity for collective or individual action to redress these wrongs. Instead of romanticising poverty, we desperately need to understand the ways in which it links up with failures of democracy, the erosion of infrastructure, and the destruction of livelihoods, forcing inhabitants to resort to crime or addiction.

Another way of understanding this space is through Foucault's concept of heterotopia, where a utopia is created in the city by pushing all 'unwanted' people into a heterotopia like this, a residence for the poor. In many ways, this complex is similar to a prison camp, where the poor have no way out. By collecting them in one single location, it is possible to more completely discriminate against them.

So the programme that is meant to help these people is actually actively harming them?

Yes, and this is an outcome of the way in which the programme is designed, without paying attention to the communities these groups come from, treating them as a homogeneous block of those 'dependent' on the state, and pushing them out of the city into their own restricted space.

The initiative was supposed to identify and help the urban homeless and urban poor, and much money was invested in it, but from its very origin it seemed to exclude the real issues the downtrodden face.

These issues include healthcare, schooling and access to basic resources, which the policy seemed to cover—but the real reason the poor do not have access to these things is because they lack political voice. By collecting the voiceless in one place, the government ensured that the clinics and shops the poor were promised would never reach them, because they did not have the power to demand what they are entitled to.

Instead of working on the capacity-building required at the level of the urban local body, the state government turned a blind eye to the real problem, and ended up making the situation of this vulnerable population worse. It is high time the failures of these policies was acknowledged by the government, and steps taken to undo the damage they have done.

"To change life, we must first change space."

~ Henri Lefebvre

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