

Demolitions in Delhi: Whose City Is It Anyway

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The last four months have seen two types of demolitions in Delhi - demolitions of jhuggis on the one hand and unauthorised and illegal structures in middle and upper income areas on the other.

Both types of demolitions were ordered by the Delhi high court and the directions were so strong that the government had to act. In the eyes of law, the nature of violations in both cases is virtually the same.

But the reaction of politicians has been very different in the two situations; it reveals a particularly ugly face of the current state of politics.

Cutting across party lines, politicians are strongly opposing demolitions in middle and upper income areas in the capital. They have done all that they could to stop the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) from carrying them out.

The Delhi assembly went to the extent of declaring a war against the high court. It passed a resolution unanimously directing the MCD to stop demolitions immediately. Top state leaders are confabulating with central leaders to find solutions.

Why do politicians lose sleep over demolitions in middle-class areas? On the face of it, they are worried about the public outcry and its adverse impact on their political fortunes in next elections. But appearances can be deceptive.

About 150 jhuggis in Mayur Vihar and almost double that number in Patparganj - both east Delhi colonies - were razed to the ground in September.

More than 400 families were suddenly rendered homeless. Barring a few token visits and crocodile tears, politicians did not bother to do anything.

Jhuggi residents are electorally important for politicians because, unlike the middle class, they do go out and vote.

One should have expected a stronger reaction from political parties when jhuggis were demolished. However, what one witnessed was utter indifference; electoral considerations did not seem to matter.

Jhuggis were broken in Mayur Vihar on September 30. Each family was given a demand notice to deposit Rs 7,000 within 10 days as lease fee for the alternative plot of land that the government would provide them.

But when people went to the Delhi Development Authority office to deposit the money, no one accepted it. The officials refused to divulge the information as to when and where they would be resettled. The very poor among them live on footpaths in this bitter cold.

Now, property dealers approach them, offering Rs 30,000-40,000 to each family for ration card and other papers that are important to claim an alternative plot for resettlement. Obviously, the families have been allotted land at some place and the property dealers know about it.

They want to grab that land. Information is being denied systematically to prevent them from claiming their land. Being out on the streets, these people have little staying power; they would soon succumb to pressures from land sharks.

This game plan has already started yielding results. Twenty families have already sold their papers. Would it be wrong to presume that this would be impossible without the active connivance of the officials and the politicians?

Huge funds are spent for developing an area after people are evicted from it. It is another matter that the alternative site is often in appalling condition, without even the rudimentary civic amenities.

The alternative plot size allotted to a family of slum-dwellers has fallen over the years. It fails to measure up to the most rudimentary parameters for a decent existence.

To cut a long story short, there is huge money to be made for politicians, in connivance with contractors, in jhuggi demolition.

In contrast, in the case of upper and middle income areas, there is money in perpetuating unauthorised and illegal constructions. There is money to be paid to construct illegal structures.

Money has to be paid on a regular basis for continuing those illegalities. Politicians themselves own unauthorised structures, often in the form of huge commercial establishments, in violation of all norms and laws.

Shopkeepers, who are affected by recent demolitions, are those who regularly and generously contribute to the coffers of political parties. It is to protect these financial interests that the politicians are up in arms.

Our democracy has degenerated into a play for money, ignoring the voice of the majority. The name of the game is clear: Money is to be made everywhere in the name of politics by rendering the poor homeless on the one hand and milking the cow of illegal constructions on the other.

Citizens should make use of the recently-enacted Right to Information Act, in order to put the following information in public domain.

Who were issued plots after jhuggi demolitions in the last few years?

Among them, how many were politically promoted land sharks and not the displaced people? Which are the illegal and unauthorised structures in middle-class Delhi and in how many of them do the politicians have direct or indirect financial interests?

Such information would expose the ugly politics of demolitions.

P.S.

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