



Marginal Suburbs, 2002



Due to specific migration patterns out of Central Delhi, segregated urban and peripheral urban zones emerged.

# Migrants, Squatters, and Evictions

Research >  
South Asia

Delhi's phenomenal growth rate of around 50 per cent per decade since India's independence (1947) is indicative of its lasting appeal to new migrants. The city has become one of the most populous cities in Asia, its urban agglomeration counting almost 13 million inhabitants in 2001. It is striking that up until 1980 the largest growth spurts occurred in the central parts of the city, while from then onwards a substantially greater population increase has been recorded in the fringe areas. Which internal population movements have taken place; which policies have been pursued in this respect; and which new socio-spatial order has emerged?

By Hans Schenk

The first wave of immigration to Delhi followed Partition when no less than 500,000 Sikh and Hindu refugees fled to Delhi, then home to one million inhabitants. The refugee camps that were then set up in the city's centre and on its periphery gradually developed into housing colonies. From the 1950s onwards an increasing number of rural migrants followed, mostly from the densely populated and poor states of North India. Most of them sought jobs in small industrial and service enterprises in central parts of the city, and naturally tried to find shelter in squatter settlements close to their places of work. By the late 1950s, almost 300,000 people lived in such settlements.

Against the background of the large refugee population and the swelling stream of impoverished migrants, a 20-year master plan for Delhi's future land use and development was initiated and implemented from 1962 onwards. This master plan included

the resettlement of central city squatters in arranged colonies, not very far from the city core and places of work. The aim was to relieve the centre and provide better infrastructural amenities. Lack of funds, due to the cost of land, amenities, and housing, led to the scheme's failure, and the number of squatter settlements rose from about 300 in 1961 to over 1,100 in 1973. During the Emergency (1975-1977), when democratic and legal rights were suspended in India, over 700,000 central city squatters were forcibly evicted from the centre and removed from the city to the urban periphery. Few of the evicted squatters were actually resettled; many were simply dumped outside the urban limits.

At the end of the Emergency, the number of squatter settlements had significantly decreased to 70 in 1977. The subsequent long period of inactivity regarding city squatters led to a gradual increase of the number of illegal dwelling complexes: by the early 1990s there were, again, over 1,000 of them, in which 20 to 25 per cent of the urban

population lived. This increase was mainly due to the reluctance to enforce the reckless Emergency-style evictions, which had caused massive unrest; vague and inconsistent policy had encouraged the urban squatters to settle back in the centre of Delhi.

## Squatters and the New Economic Policy

From the 1990s onwards a new wave of evictions took place, marking a change of policy that can be explained by the macro changes in the political economy of India. In the face of international pressure, India was forced to reduce its budget deficits and structurally adjust its economy. Many existing protective measures, favouring Indian industries but discouraging foreign investors, were partially or completely withdrawn. India's New Economic Policy included invitations to foreign companies to invest in the Indian economy, either alone or under a joint venture with an Indian entrepreneur.

Foreign investors were attracted to India's major cities, initially in particu-

lar to Mumbai (Bombay) and then shifting to Delhi. Company headquarters and expatriate staff established themselves in (central) Delhi, as proximity to various ministries proved useful when dealing with lengthy bureaucratic procedures. The factories proper were often opened in new industrial estates in neighbouring states, thus trading off cheap land and poor infrastructure. Local authorities in Delhi decided that foreign investors would prefer a 'clean and orderly' environment, at least in the relevant parts of the centre of the city.

This explains the renewed focus on the eviction of squatters. The wish to clean up and beautify the central city was based on the perception that squatter settlements were an unhealthy eyesore and a nuisance, as were the many thousands of workshops, informal small-scale industrial and service units, and pavement encroachments.

## A growing rift

The resettlement activities of the 1960s-1970s and those of the 1990s show some similarities. In both periods squatters were forced to leave the central parts of the city and settle on the periphery, away from work sites. Differences prevail, however. In the 1960s-1970s, Delhi was a rather small city: its periphery at a modest distance from workplaces. In the 1990s, some resettlement colonies could only be reached after a two-to-three-hour bus ride at the cost of half-a-day's urban earnings. Thus, the impact of the more recent forced resettlement to the urban periphery was much more severe.

In many of the new colonies jobs cannot be found at a reasonable distance. In some others, local jobs, for example in the factories of foreign companies, are mostly for skilled workers and not for the urban poor who had previously survived in informal sector jobs. For women, employment is even harder to get; many were employed in the households of the city's middle and upper class, and can no longer reach their workplace. Whereas the geographical scale of segregation in the 1960s-1970s allowed the urban poor to earn a living in the city centre and remain connected with it, life on the

modern-day periphery paints a cruel picture of the realities of geographical segregation.

Spatial segregation is enforced by another process. Between the 1960s and the 1990s, the city's middle and upper class tended to move out of the centre to the south and south-west. Resettlement colonies were almost all located to the south-east, east, and north-west. Attempts to house the middle classes north of the city have completely failed. Today it is said that any developer intending to develop a housing estate for the urban affluent in the west, north, and east is committing commercial suicide, and that any non-governmental organization or other concerned agency wanting to protect the few remaining squatter settlements in the south will be silenced by brutal force: the south is for the elites, the other areas for the poor. (see map).

In spite of plans and intentions, the level of services in resettlement colonies is poor, even poorer than in the remaining inner-city squatter settlements. The water and electricity supply, and the provision of communal toilets, are limited, and improvements can hardly be expected under the structural adjustment regime of the New Economic Policy. Social provisions relating to health and education are lacking for the same reasons, while even security of tenure is not guaranteed. Hence, one can specifically speak of a north-western, eastern, and south-eastern degenerated periphery in Delhi. Those landless labourers and marginal farmers from northern India, who could no longer survive in their villages and fled to Delhi, have ultimately become trapped there. The urban authorities dumped them once more, into a no-man's land between the city and the countryside. Evidently, they are neither wanted nor needed in either part of India. ◀

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Street scene, 2002