

In January 2004, the Government of Delhi announced its plan of developing Yamuna Pushta, a strip of land on the banks of the Jamuna, into a riverside promenade with parks and fountains which would be marketed as a major tourist attraction. At the time this plan was unveiled, Pushta was home to over 30,000 working-class families. The development scheme thus involved 'relocating' 75,000 people who had been occupying this land for over three decades and, in the almost total absence of public services, had invested considerable resources in making the colony livable.

Despite determined efforts by the residents, campaigns by NGOs and community groups and appeals to the courts, the so-called Voluntary Relocation Scheme went ahead. In February and April 2004, homes and community buildings along the banks of the Yamuna were razed to the ground in round-the-clock operations. The courts, which had refused to recognise the rights of the residents, turned a blind eye to the violence that followed.

The claim that families had volunteered to relocate is not borne out by the facts. Residents, many of whom could not believe that a forced eviction could take place in the face of such widespread public protests, were taken unawares. They had not even removed their belongings and possessions from their homes when the demolition started. In many cases, children and old people were still inside when the houses were demolished. Fatima, now living in the Bawana Resettlement Colony, told us how her one-year-old child was sleeping in her house when it was being demolished. Fatima nearly lost her life in trying to save her child. The police cordoned off the area and men who rushed back from work when they heard that the demolitions had started were not allowed in to save their families. Those who resisted were

Dreams Die First for Girls Fallouts of Eviction Operation in Yamuna Pushta

○ Jagori Research Team

mercilessly beaten and chased away by the police. Women and children were not spared and many were seriously injured. The ruined colony was then set on fire as residents tried to save their belongings. The violence continued long after the demolitions, with police attacks on people as they tried to retrieve their belongings or scavenge for building materials in the ruins of their homes. There were at least five deaths.

Resettlement plots were assigned only to those who could provide proof of residence in the form of a ration card or a voter identity card. Those who had documentary proof that they had been living in Pushta before 1990 were eligible for an 18 square metre plot in the resettlement area, while those who had been living there since

1990 and before 1998 were eligible for a plot of 12.5 square metres.

A survey conducted by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) before the evictions recorded only 16,000 'genuine claimants' for plots, while newspapers reported around 35,000 families in residence, indicating that less than 50 per cent of the people living in Pushta were considered eligible for relocation.

Many people had lost their documents in the fires that regularly broke out in Pushta in the period immediately before the eviction, some of which were deliberately caused in attempts to force people to move out. Those who wanted to try and get duplicate documents did not get enough time to do so. Kaleemun Nisha, now living in Sherpur, told



The evictions destroyed people's lives

researchers that her ration card had been burned in an earlier fire. Her new ration card was dated 1999 and made her ineligible for resettlement. Based on census, DDA, newspaper, and anecdotal figures, the Hazards Centre estimates that 27,000 families (1,35,000 people) were evicted, of which only 6000 families were resettled. The rest—over 1 lakh people—were left to fend for themselves.¹

Plots allotted through the so-called Voluntary Relocation Scheme were priced at Rs.5,000-7,000 in Bawana, Holambi Kalan, Madanpur Khadar, and other resettlement colonies in Delhi. These rates were beyond the capacity of many old-time residents of Pushta who were thus left out of the resettlement scheme. Many others were excluded on the grounds of being Bangladeshi who had managed to get false documents. Rafiya, who now lives in Bawana Resettlement Colony, was charged with being a Bangladeshi and was denied a plot. Ironically, her mother was allotted a plot in Bawana where Rafiya stays with her husband and children.

The evictions and forced relocations destroyed people's lives by removing them from their areas of work, cutting off their social networks and destroying the housing and infrastructure they had invested their life's savings in.

The impact on livelihoods is the most visible outcome of the evictions. The Bawana Industrial area has no industries to speak of. Most people travel to Delhi in search of uncertain work opportunities as casual daily wagers. What they earn is barely sufficient for a meal and their travel to and from Bawana, which is about 75 kilometres from their earlier location in Pushta. Many of the men



The board of the school stuck in an empty field after the demolition campaign

stay back in Delhi to save on transport, sleeping on pavements and coming back only on weekends. What they earn is barely enough for survival—saving is impossible.

There has been a visible deterioration in their standard of living. Those who owned *pakka* houses in Pushta are now living in shacks of mud and matting. Even basic requirements like water cannot be taken for granted, since the provision is much less than the need. There are only ten municipal water points in the whole colony of nearly 8,000 families and water supply is limited to less than an hour each day, that too in short bursts. There are six public lavatory complexes constructed by the MCD and run by contractors. These have a water supply, but are ill-maintained and unaffordable for many. Each visit to the toilet costs a rupee, while a bath costs twice as much. If clothes are washed in the bathroom, the contractor charges Rs.5/-. The average family that uses the facility would thus spend Rs.10/- to 15/- a day on visits to the toilet complex. Apart from the expense, women are reluctant to visit the public lavatory because of harassment and misbehaviour by the

attendants who have broken off the latches on the cubicle doors and barge in when women are bathing, ostensibly to check if they are washing clothes on the sly. There are occasional reports of girls being sexually abused by the toilet attendants.

Health is another area of concern. There are some health centres run by NGOs but these only dispense medicines for common illnesses. There are no doctors in the colony—health needs are met by the numerous unregistered practitioners who deal with emergencies as best they can. Mobile Health Vans from the Directorate of Health Services make rare visits and are equipped to treat only minor diseases. For serious conditions and emergencies, people either go to the Maharishi Valmiki Hospital in Bawana village (approximately 3 kilometres from the colony) or to Loknayak Jai Prakash Hospital which is 35 kilometres from Bawana).

Rationale for Our Study

It was in May-June 2004 that we first came to Bawana in search of the women whom we had met in Pushta during the campaign against evictions, and who had been part of our research study on the condition

¹*The Yamuna Pushta Evictions. What happened to those who were not assigned plots?* Hazards Centre, December 2004

of migrant women workers in Delhi. Our first sight of Bawana was horrifying. The hundreds of people sitting on the bare ground amidst whatever possessions they had been able to salvage seemed too stunned to even grasp the extent of their dispossession. We ourselves were still dazed by the failure of the campaign to stop or even delay the evictions, and by the insensitivity of the Supreme Court to the rights of the residents of Pushta.

As the months passed and people's innate resilience began to assert itself, we began to hold small meetings with women and girls. One of the first things we were told at these meetings was that 300 children from the resettlement colony had been thrown out of the Government secondary school in Bawana village because they had failed their examinations. There was a demand that we do something to help.

We knew that the education of children in Bawana had been seriously affected by the evictions. Demolitions in Pushta were in full swing in March-April 2004 when children were preparing to appear for their annual exams. Over 500 children sat in a *dharna* before Rashtrapati Bhavan, pleading for the President to intervene and stop the demolitions until after their exams, but to no avail. Even those children who managed to write the exams in the chaos had to drop out for a year, as there were no schools in the resettlement colony. As things settled down and patterns started emerging, it became obvious that there were a large number of out-of-school girls in the colony.

We decided to conduct a quick study to expose the reality of the situation concerning education in Bawana. Our motivation to do this study also came from our own conviction that the way in which the community addressed this issue was something that could have a profound effect on the future of the



Resettlement colony in Bawana

ongoing struggle of this and many other communities against forced evictions, apart from its impact on the lives of these girls.

Our study sample included 35 girls in the age groups of 10-18 years from the five blocks of the Bawana Resettlement Colony. The girls included in the study were at different levels of education (Primary Complete, Primary Ongoing, Secondary Complete, Secondary Incomplete, Senior Secondary Incomplete, Graduation Ongoing). Only girls who were earlier going to school in Yamuna Pushta were included. Taking into consideration the fact that many responses could not be quantified, our questionnaire had an ethnographic section in addition to the demographic part. We have also drawn on our informal conversations with girls and their parents, discussions at community meetings and our own observations during our frequent visits to the community.

Life Out of School

We found that 15 out of our study sample of 35 girls have dropped out of school after coming to Bawana. It was the older girls who have been most affected—all eleven girls in the

10-12 year group are still in school, while 50 per cent of girls in the 13-15 year group and 80 of all the girls in the 16-18 year group have dropped out following the eviction.

The 16-year-old Nasreen says:

“Yahan padhai chhor kar ghar baith gaye hain, ab jaise jaise bade hongey to parivaarwale jaldi shaadi kar denge. Padhte rehte to shayed duswin tak padh lete aur jaldi shaadi nahi hoti. Isse to hamari puri zindagi par farq padh gaya.” (Now that we have left school and are sitting at home, the family will try and get us married off as soon as possible. If we had stayed in school, there was a chance that we could have studied up to Class 10. The eviction has changed my whole life.)

The age factor also came up repeatedly in our interviews with the girls, who are very aware that dropping out of school means an increased chance of an early marriage.

Nazra, a 16-year-old girl, expressed her predicament thus: *“School bahut door hain, aur school ki kitaben, dress aadi swayam lene padhte hain aur school ki fees bhi zyada hain. Lekin mere teen bhai padhte hain. Gharwalon ki bhi majboori hain aur woh hum nahi samjhenge to kaun*

samjhega.” (The school is very far off and the fees are high. Books and uniforms are expensive too. My three brothers all go to school. My parents have their compulsions—if I don’t show understanding for them, who will?)

Only one of the girls said that she was not interested in continuing her studies—all the others spoke wistfully of their desire to go back to school. Yet, most of the older girls we spoke to attempted to justify their parents’ decision to withdraw them. In a cruel irony, some were even proud of the fact that they had sacrificed their future for the sake of the family.

There were other reasons too for discontinuation. As expected, the inability to meet expenses and the need for girls to work to supplement the family income were most often mentioned. However, some children specifically mentioned abuse and humiliation from teachers and fellow students as reasons for dropping out.

Older girls also contribute to their parents’ economic activity by taking on the unpaid work within the house. Pinky (age 14) says she had to drop out because there is no money at home. Both her brothers go to school—one has failed his exams this year but has not been pulled out of school and continues to study. Both her parents go out to work. So, Pinky is responsible for running the household.

Jahana (age 13) is in the same situation as Pinky. She feels that there is pressure on girls to learn housework because it is considered a virtue that makes it easier for girls to acquire a good husband.

Parents’ reluctance in continuing their daughter’s education has much deeper roots. Parents who spoke to us said that Bawana is not like Pushta—the *mahol* (environment) here is unsafe and bad for girls. Girls too speak of the hostile atmosphere they face in the colony.

Julie, 17, remarks: “*Ladkiyon ko dekhte rehte hain, aur gandhi baatein*



The primary school in Bawana

bhi karte hain. Yahan par ladkiyan akeli kahin nahin ja sakti hain.” (They keep staring at girls and making obscene remarks. Girls can’t go out alone in this place.)

At the best of times, patriarchal notions of women being the repositories of the “*izzat*” (honour) of the family is used as justification for restricting the mobility of girls and preventing them from straying into ‘unsuitable’ relationships. In a situation such as the Bawana community finds itself in, where all the certainties of life have been overturned, *izzat* is seen as the only asset that remains and must be guarded at all costs. This has usually been found to be the case in the aftermath of other crisis situations such as wars, communal conflicts, displacements and natural disasters. When survival is at stake, communities react by curtailing and constraining the rights, privileges and entitlements of women and girls. The patriarchal urge to protect values and traditions from being swept away in the turmoil is reinforced and justified by the changed economic circumstances that make women’s labour a valuable commodity, exploitation, which is necessary for survival.

Older girls pay the price. Meena, 16 years old, states: “*Mere Papa izzat ke bhuke hain.*” (My father is hungry for honour!”)

Nazra, 16, reports: “*Ma ko dar tha ki koi ched na de kyunki izzat badi mushkil se banti hain.*” (My mother was afraid that someone would harass me—it is very difficult to safeguard one’s reputation.)

The fact that safeguarding the reputations of their daughters impedes their education is of little concern to parents.

The fifteen girls who have dropped out face a bleak future, and seem doomed to repeat the cycle of poverty and exclusion that has destroyed their parents. Only nine out of all the girls are in paid work. One girl, who belongs to the Dholakwala community of traditional entertainers, has joined her family in performing and begging on the streets. Another girl has an occasional job as an assistant for the Polio Eradication Campaign. Five girls say they can do sewing and embroidery but are not able to find any work. The nine girls who have found work make cheap bead jewellery at piece rates for local contractors. None of them has ever been taught any special skills. The work is poorly paid and insecure—an average day’s

work fetches barely Rs.10/- and even that is hard to come by since so many women compete for the same orders.

Life for Girls in School

Parveen, age 12, experienced humiliations by her teachers: "*Khana dete hain to Madam bolti hain, dekho bhikhari jaise lagte hain, jaise kabhi khana nahin dekha.*" (When they give us food, the teacher mocks us and says that we are like beggars who have never seen food before.)

Shehnaaz, 11 years old, reports similar happenings: "*Yadi kabhi late ho jate hain to teacher humse ground ki safai karati hain. J.J.Colony ke bacche kehkar hamari bezzati karte hain.*" (If we are late to school, the teacher makes us sweep the grounds. They humiliate us by calling us slum children.)

Classmates of Shabina, whose parents work as cleaners in the school where she studies, become quite mean at times: "*Tere Mummy-Daddy to bhangi hain.*" (Your parents are low-caste sweepers.)

The twenty girls who are still in school are aged from 10 to 15. All of them go to school in Bawana village, some in the MCD primary school and the others in one or the other of the two private schools. Our conversations with them were punctuated with bouts of nostalgia for the schools they had left behind in Pushta. Given that the schools in Pushta no longer exist, we could not confirm their assertions that facilities in the Bawana schools fell short of what they were used to earlier.

However, our interviews revealed one undoubted fact—children from the resettlement colony routinely face humiliation, abuse and ill treatment not only from their classmates but also from their teachers. While it certainly also reflects caste prejudice, most of the time it is contempt for their poverty that inspires this abuse. The violence is not only verbal—although the girls



Children of Bawana

are not very open in discussing such issues—they are subjected to beatings and physical violence by male teachers. One child told us of an incident where a teacher hit a girl on the chest. It is quite likely that girls who are keen on continuing their education would prefer not to speak openly on the issue of sexual harassment in school, since it would give their parents a reason for pulling them out.

Chanchal, 13, says: "*Bus mein gaon ke log hoten hain, woh chhed-chhad karte hain, kabhi hanste, kabhi ishare karte hain.*" (The bus is full of people from the village—they harass us by laughing and making rude gestures.)

Shehnaaz, 11 years old, reports: "*Conductor badtamizi karte hain aur kae baar hamare bache hua paisa bhi wapas nahin karte ... tuu-tadak kar ke baat karte hain.*"

(Conductors are rude and often do not even give us our change back. They speak to us with contempt.)

Children, particularly girls, are also targeted by people from Bawana village. Children are afraid to take the bus to school because of harassment from passengers and conductors.

The evictee community is itself not homogenous—caste biases and communal prejudices colour their perceptions of their neighbours. The community-specific clusters of Yamuna Pushta have been broken up and previously isolated communities live uneasily in close proximity in Bawana.

The Mother of Rizwana puts the blame on lower-caste children: "*Dholakwalon ka gand phir se yahan pe daal diya hai. Inki ladkiyaan bahut kharab hain. Yeh Gujjar ladko ko kharab kar dete hain aur inke ladke baki dusre ladkiyon ko chedte hain.*" (They have put these filthy Dholakwalas here again. Their girls are bad. They spoil the sons of the Gujjars and their sons tease our daughters.)

It is depressing to see that even in a situation where all communities are experiencing the same levels of deprivation and loss, it is girls and women who are blamed for creating insecurity and vitiating the atmosphere. The Dholakwalas, a community of Muslim traditional entertainers, are particular targets as they are seen as living by a different set of rules. Girls from this community

are accused by others of being “immoral” and “spoiling” the local boys.

The 14-year-old Meenu makes it clear: “*Yahan par bahar jaane ka man nahi karta.*” (I don’t feel like going out here.)

Nasreen, whose age is not known, says: “*School door parta tha. Bus mein bhi bheer hoti thi. Buswale bus stop par bus nahi rokthe the. Aur bus mein Jat log aate the. Unka vyavahar theek nahi laga. Isliye school chhorna pada.*” (The school was far away and the bus was crowded and did not stop for us. The Jats in the bus would misbehave with us. So I had to leave school.)

Whatever the cause, there is no disputing the fact that the environment in Bawana is unsafe for girls. The few older girls who continue to go to school feel insecure and vulnerable. These are girls who have fought to stay in school—but after a year of living in Bawana, facing harassment on the way to school and humiliation in school, they are losing their energy and motivation and are falling in line with their parents’ notions of ‘protection’.

Some “supply-side factors” may also be involved. Enquiries about local schools and interactions with parents revealed that there is a very real resentment against children from Bawana in local schools. Apart from social prejudices, teachers also said that the sudden influx of children from the resettlement colony had placed the already limited infrastructure under strain.

Capacity limitations of local schools in Bawana may also be behind the high failure rate of children from the resettlement colony in the last examination. The report cards of the children who have failed appear to have been filled in very carelessly—in many cases, marks for individual subjects have not been recorded, and the word “Failed” has been scrawled roughly across the report card, raising



A small girl picks rags for family’s livelihood.

legitimate suspicions of foul play in the minds of the children and their parents. In fact, most of the girls covered in this study reported that they used to get good marks in their earlier school. The few report cards that have survived the eviction bear out this statement.

Will Dreams Survive?

The Government of India is proudly announcing at international meetings that it is very close to the goal of universalisation of education. Our study exposes the hollowness of this claim. The fact that they are not so visible after being pushed to the margins of the City does not change the reality that the girls in this study are as much the responsibility of the Government of India as children living in a posh colony of South Delhi.

Neither is it true that poor parents do not want to send their girls to school—this may have been true ten years ago, but it is not the case now. The families covered in this study are convinced of the benefits of educating girls. While in Pushta, they were confident that they would be able to give their

daughters at least 10 years of education. However, after coming to Bawana, this commitment has definitely become much weaker.

Rather, it would appear to be the Government of India, the Supreme Court, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi and the privileged section of citizens that are reluctant to allow these girls to lead a life that is different from that of their parents. How else can one explain the prioritising of a tourist promenade over housing for legitimate citizens? How else can one justify the quashing of the petition by Yamuna Pushta residents praying for a stay of eviction until their children could complete their final examinations? How else can one justify the fact that the Municipal Corporation of Delhi knew that these children are being relocated to Bawana, and yet did not make a move to set up schools in the resettlement colony or increase the capacity of existing local schools? The prejudice and aggression of the local residents of Bawana village is matched by the silence and unconcern of those living in the distant colonies of Delhi—for both, the children of the

resettlement colony are not worth their concern.

All the girls we spoke to had dreams of a different life – but after one year in Bawana, these are dying. The evictions have had a major impact on the girls’ self-image and self-esteem. The loss of economic status and the humiliation attached to living in a resettlement colony rather than in a ‘decent’ locality like Pushta is keenly felt. They no longer have the confidence that they can make anything of their lives.

Khushboo, age 12, remarks: “*Mere school mein naye dost nahin bane hain kyunki woh JJ colony ke bacchhon ke sath bhed-bhav karte hain, woh hamare*

sath khelte nahin hain. Woh hamare sath baithna bhi pasand nahi karte hain.” (I don’t have any friends in my new school. They discriminate against us because we are from the JJ colony – they don’t play with us or even sit next to us.)

Given the economic pressures, the insecure environment, the risks of violence and the need for girls’ labour, it is very likely that not all the girls at present attending school in Bawana will complete twelve years of schooling. Even if they do, this education will not increase their employability or chances of earning a higher income. The available work opportunities are all in low-paid, insecure and unskilled or semi-skilled sectors. These are the jobs

that girls who have dropped out are doing.

These girls are only a drop in the ocean—they represent the millions of children who have lost the opportunity for education as a result of eviction and displacement. It is a tragic irony that their right to education has been violated by the same State that is charged with protecting and ensuring that right. □

JAGORI is a Delhi-based women’s resource centre, which has been working for more than two decades on issues of women’s rights. This article is based on a study carried out by the JAGORI Research Team. For the full report in Hindi, contact <research@jagori.org>

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