

What Vadodara's Slum Displacement Reveals

Case of Kalyannagar and Kamatipura

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The demolition and displacement of two major slums in Vadodara has revealed that little, if any, of the pervasive communal politics has changed in Gujarat. This coupled with anti-poor policies of the state have ensured that poor Muslims are denied the right to housing in most urban areas of Gujarat.

Gujarat has a high degree of urbanisation. As per the 2011 census figures, 42.6 % of the state's population is urban (Times News Network 2011). However, the character of this urbanisation needs probing. Slum demolition and subsequent relocation in highrise buildings (in situ or government land) in the outskirts of the city has been the norm. It is a different question altogether as to how the land released by evicting slum dwellers is utilised by the government.

The growth of Muslim population in urban areas of Gujarat is higher than other states (Varma 2015). This population is largely concentrated in slums and low income neighbourhoods.

The Gujarat government has grand plans to make cities slum free by relocating slums in pucca (permanent structure) housing through a public private partnership under the Mukhya Mantri Gruh Yojana. Slums in cities have been surveyed and according to the Gujarat Housing Board in 2013-14, a total of 79021 houses are planned. The scheme specifies that 7682 houses are directly under the plan, 20416 are under tender, 49923 are in progress, and altogether 23077 houses are allotted.

Kalyannagar and Kamatipura Slums in Vadodara

Vadodara Municipal Corporation (VMC) plans to make Vadodara a slum free city. It has already implemented part of this plan and the rest is in progress. Four-floor vertical buildings are constructed either in situ, close by or far away from the existing slum site to house the displaced slum dwellers. According to the VMC Department of Basic Service to the Urban Poor (BSUP) and Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) Housing, some 1900 homes were demolished in Kalyannagar and another 350 in the adjoining Kamatipura settlements (Raja 2015a). Both these slums are on the bank of Vishwamitri River.

In November 2014 the authorities razed Vadodara's Kalyannagar and Kamatipura slums. A large percentage of the families living in those two slums were Muslims. Of the 1900 families, 730 from Kalyannagar were to be relocated to a housing scheme in Tarsali-Dabhoi Road and 656 families to Maneja. Some 400 families from Kalyannagar were to be moved to Sayajipura and the rest to a housing project in Kalali in the city (Raja 2015a).

The draw for allotment of JNNURM housing scheme flats for the displaced began soon enough, but was suspended. The Mayor and Corporation officials assured the displaced that the problem would be resolved at the earliest. This was in the beginning of March 2015, nearly four months after the demolition took place.

In the meantime, the displaced from Kalyannagar and Kamatipura, mostly Muslims, had no roof on their head, and their children's schooling was affected, all this during the inhospitable summer months. J S Bandukwala, a retired professor of MS University, Vadodara, and a former People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL) chairperson of Gujarat, along with Shaukat Indori, Arif Pathan and others took up the cause of the displaced and made representations to the Mayor as well as to the VMC Commissioner.

There was stiff resistance from the neighbouring housing societies in Sayajipura and Kalali, populated mostly by Hindus against the relocation of Muslim families in Sayajipura and Kalali. They argued that Muslims were dirty and poor, and some of them were illegal migrants from Bangladesh. These were likely to create law and order problems, and disturb peace and communal harmony.

Bandukwala and his team went about looking for the stakeholders who were mobilising resistance against the relocation of Muslim families in Sayajipura and Kalali. Newspaper reports indicated that the stakeholders—builders, corporators, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) members, political lobbies, and religious groups, were residents of adjoining areas. Bandukwala visited the sadhus of the Swaminarayan temple at Ataladra about one kilometre from Kalali to enquire if they had any problem if Muslims relocated to Kalali. They had no problems. However, the proximity of Kalali to the temple was cited as a reason by other vested interests.

It is revealing that both BJP and Congress leaders, including the mayor of Vadodara, held substantial stake in real estate development in and around Sayajipura and Kalali. The Mayor's son is also involved in a 115-crore residential project of Earth Realty, a real estate company. This luxury residential complex is coming up a few metres from the JNNRUM flats for the displaced slum dwellers.

Communal Elements Among Locals

VMC Officials admitted that they were under "tremendous pressure" from real estate companies developing luxury apartments as well as Sayajipura locals against allotting houses to Muslims. The BJP bigwigs and Sayajipura residents, supported by local BJP members, decided to move a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Gujarat High Court against the decision to relocate Muslims into their "peaceful Hindu neighbourhood." They gheraoed the house of the Mayor until the police intervened. The residents later went to the house of Vadodara MP R Bhatt, demanding that no Muslims be allotted flats in their neighbourhood.

The local residents of Sayajipura and Kalali were mobilised under the banner of "Hindu Hitrakshak Shanti Samiti" (Hindu Welfare and Peace Committee) and submitted a memorandum to the District Collector Avantika Aulakh on 13 April 2015. They said allotting houses to the Muslim families of Kalyannagar must be declared illegal as procedures have not been followed. "The VMC has not conducted a background check on the residents, who could be illegal Bangladeshi immigrants etc," they told the collector. However, the collector said that this matter was not in her jurisdiction. VMC had followed the due procedure and her office would not intervene in this matter, she added. (Raja 2015b).

BJP leaders stepped in to pressurise Muslim families to withdraw from Sayajipura. They met Kalyannagar Muslim leaders and urged them to give an application to withdraw the allotments made by the civic body, given the possibility of communal discord (Raja 2015c). A bandh was called on 27

April by residents of Sayajipura, during which about 250 shops were closed, and residents of about 40 residential colonies gathered together overlooking the JNNRUM housing scheme and called Ram Dhun (Hindu religious hymns) for keeping intact the sanctity of their Hindu neighbourhood. The Hindu Hitrakshak Samiti appealed for donation of Rs 100 per family to fight out the PIL in the High Court.

VMC commissioner H S Patel, caught in between the persistence of the displaced and the other stakeholders, suggested an alternative site for relocating the displaced Muslims. The Tandalja area was Muslim dominated and there was a plot kept for a school; it was offered to the displaced Muslims under the Rajiv Avas Yojna (RAY). Initially, the displaced agreed. However, on knowing that construction would take perhaps more than a year, and that too seven storey building with lifts, they were discouraged.

The displaced felt that they were being pushed into a Muslim ghetto. Secondly, they felt that they could not afford to pay for the elevator and its maintenance. Also the locals in Tandalja would be deprived of a school. Tandalaja was a middle class Muslim-dominated area and they were not keen on having lower class Muslims around.

Return to Kalyannagar

The scene then shifted to Kalyannagar after neither of the sites were deemed suitable. The VMC with political heads, and other stakeholders decided to relocate the people displaced from Kalyannagar slums to Kalyannagar itself to be built under RAY. VMC Commissioner and Mayor held a press conference to announce the decision to relocate nearly 700 families of Kalyannagar and Kamatipura near Kalyannagar itself (Raja 2015d).

There were other disputes about the number of homes and the displaced, about duplicating the documents, and so on. Once bitten twice shy—the displaced now demanded written assurances from the VMV and continued their protest at the VMC. The displaced also demanded, under the leadership of Bandukwala, for a monthly rent of Rs 3000 for each household for finding renting a house until their new accommodation near Kalyannagar was ready.

Continuing Polarisation

There is religious polarisation in many cities of Gujarat such as Ahmedabad and Vadodara. The area of Juhapura, almost a Muslim ghetto with minimal urban amenities, in Ahmedabad is locally known as Pakistan. The Muslims are dubbed as dirty, poor, disturbers of peace and communal harmony, and hence not wanted either in Hindu colonies or in housing societies, as was the case of Sayajipura, in Vadodara. From the case of Sayajipura it appears that it was not so much the local Hindu residents that rose up in arms against the Muslims but the real estate builders, politicians and corporators who had conflict of interest that mobilised the ordinary Hindus against Muslims.

Upper caste opposition to Muslim housing in their vicinity is not just a regional issue limited to Gujarat. It is becoming a national issue. In Gujarat this opposition is more aggressive among upper castes who are rich and politically active. They exercise a strong influence in inculcating prejudice against Muslims.

The Role of Civil Society

The case of Kalyannagar also showed the role of civil society. It was not easy for Bandukwala to lead this agitation, keeping in mind the divisive forces among the displaced Muslims and stiff resistance from stakeholders. One must also note that this was a non-violent agitation. It is rare that one finds non-violent agitations and protests these days. There is a firm belief that unless vandalism and violence were resorted to, the authorities would not lend a patient ear.

It was not easy to contain the anger, frustration and impatience of roofless slum-dwellers who have been living in the open for months, especially in the excruciating summer heat. But civil society's intervention in Kalyannagar case is worth emulation. The leadership must also be credited with, for efforts were made to break the unity of slum-dwellers, and attempts made to discredit their leadership.

The demolition of slums was quick with short notice but rehabilitation or relocation has been very slow, causing inconvenience to school going children of the displaced. Would they pursue their studies after this interval or give up and join the army of unorganised labourers? Is this good governance and minimum government? Could bodies like VMC plan and execute their designs with least suffering by planned operation? These questions are yet to be answered by the powers that be.

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