

# Dislocating Delhi

## A City in the 1990s

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Delhi in the 1990s may be described as a postcolonial city with a first-world desire. In part, this desire of the city-planners to make Delhi into another global metropolis, may be ascribed to the rapidly emerging 'new global order'. In a sense, what marks this new global order is the 'de-territorialization' of the third-world metropolis, a sundering of its ties with its national location and its integration into the network of a handful of global cities.<sup>1</sup> It is worth bearing in mind that the postcolonial city has been marked by a deep and organic connection with the village/countryside, which functions as its 'constitutive outside': what the city is, can only be understood with reference to the non-city, especially rural areas. For those who make their journey to the city, it represents the land of opportunity and promise, however much the realities of decaying urban existence may eventually work towards smashing that dream. Continuous in-migration to the metropolises from the villages has been a central feature of urban life here, especially in the decades after independence. However, what marks out the postcolonial city as separate from, say, a first world city is the fact that large sections of these populations streaming into the city have retained their connection with the countryside. If the countryside feeds the city, it is the city that, in the context of the continuing poverty of rural India, provides the basis for the 'money order economy' that operates in many parts of the country.

In Delhi, which has been one of the major centres where such job-seeking in-migration takes place, industrial employment went up by 300 per cent between 1970-71 and 1990-91. In the same period, the number of industrial units in the city went up from 26,000 to 93,000. In the mid-1990s, it was estimated that more than 200,000 people had migrated into the city in the past decade. (For details see, *The BS Reader*, special supplement, *Business Standard*, January 3, 1996). In 1996-97, the number of industrial units in the city stood at 1,26,000, with an employment of 11,36,000.

It was in order to deal with continuous pressures of in-migration that planners in the 1970s mooted the idea of developing a number of satellite or 'ring' towns around Delhi, which would provide employment opportunities to people. The idea of a larger National Capital Region (NCR) that included six districts of neighbouring Haryana, three districts of Uttar Pradesh and a part of Alwar district of Rajasthan, was formalized in the mid-1980s, with a separate planning board, in order to encourage industrial investment and development in the proposed magnet towns. The declared objective of the NCR planning board, in the early 1990s, was 'to deflect 20 lakh people' from coming into Delhi. Among the proposed ring towns were Meerut, Khurja, Rewari, Rohtak and Panipat. Poor infrastructural facilities like roads and availability of power saw to it that these remained mere dreams of the planners. In any case, till environmental concerns became pressing, it was Delhi that was the preferred location for new investment, thanks to its being the seat of power. The symbiosis between town and country, therefore continued to characterize Delhi's economic life. It is this symbiosis that is sought to be destroyed by the city planners by 'relocating the city' in the global network.

If Delhi has to be 'relocated' in this new grid of global cities, it must be subjected to major internal transformations. It has to also make way for the new kind of investment that is streaming in. In contrast to the smaller and almost primitive, industrial units that inhabited Delhi so far, there has been a big inflow of multinational investment in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s, it was the multinationals like Sony, Samsung, Daewoo, Motorola and Nokia, which were moving into Delhi in a big way - apart from international banks, financial companies and fast food chains. To them, Delhi was also a favoured destination because of greater international connectivity, and better communications access. (For details see, "The New Delhi", *India Today*, Dec. 6, 1999). It is to cater to this new inflow of global capital that Delhi is being spruced up.

Delhi in the year 2000 presents a picture of hectic 'developmental' activity, with scores of flyovers of different shapes and sizes being constructed along the Ring Road and outer Ring Road that surround it, as well as in several other parts inside the city. Hotels, posh commercial complexes and shopping malls, displaying familiar signs of giant global chains that mark any first-world city, within and in suburbs like Gurgaon and parts of Noida, complete this picture of 'development'. It is however, a different kind of development from the one that had been thought of so far - a development that at least pretended to be for the poor. Simultaneously, Delhi has been witness to the mass displacement of the poor, particularly in the last four years. Since 1996, the flashpoint has been provided by the conflict around the relocation of polluting industrial units. Much of the conflict that has arisen around this issue, one can safely say, is because of the fact that the entire edge of the state's inter-

vention in this regard has been directed entirely against the poor. There has been no effort to see that the abysmal living and working conditions for workers is improved. On the contrary, the attempt is to simply move these units out of sight. A recent Urban Development Ministry estimate of the fallout of the closure of factories and mass displacement of workers believes that this will release 700 MW of power and 50 million gallons of water, alongside a reduction of 40 mgd of sewage disposal. One cannot help suspecting that it is precisely to make available these facilities for the new investors that the state seems to be moving with such frantic speed in the matter of relocating polluting units.

However, global integration provides only one of the immediate and most compelling grounds of this transformation. There is another, equally compelling and somewhat more internal ground that has been active in the thinking of the state elite, throughout the past decades. This is the desire to 'rationalize' city space and build a modern Delhi, with proper infrastructural facilities and a healthy environment. Even in the good old days of Nehruvian self-reliance and import-substituting industrialization, the impulse to make the city a prototype of the first-world city was a fundamental one. And yet, the state-elite had to wait till the imposition of Emergency by the Indira Gandhi government in 1976, for the slums of the poor to be demolished. In a certain sense, there was a recognition of the fact that the state was responsible for some alternative arrangement, before large-scale demolitions could begin. There was recognition that things had to move at 'our own pace'. The difference between then and now, however, is that now the pace is dictated by the pace of the global economy, that demands a virtual severance of ties with the national location. There is a certain frantic quality to the way the reconfiguring of urban space is being undertaken now - as if in a race where 'we' can ill afford to be 'left behind'.

In his discussion of the politics of public hygiene in eighteenth century France, Michel Foucault notes that this new regime of public health "entailed certain authoritarian medical interventions and controls" (Foucault 1980: 175). The most crucial aspect of this authoritarian project, remarks Foucault, was the control over urban space: "The disposition of various quarters, their humidity and exposure, the ventilation of the city as a whole, its sewage and drainage systems, the siting of abattoirs and cemeteries, the density of population... are decisive factors for the mortality and morbidity of the inhabitants" (Ibid.: 175).

Foucault's discussion, it is important to note, is situated within the overall practices of governmentality and the emergence of 'the population' as the object of its welfare functions. However authoritarian this bid of the modern state to control urban spaces, it is eventually carried out in the interests of the well-being of the inhabitants of the city - at least notionally. Foucault also points out that the real targets of the state's intervention in this regard are the "privileged breeding grounds of disease", like prisons, ships, harbour installations, where vagabonds, beggars and invalids mingle together.

The politics of urban spaces in a postcolonial city like Delhi, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, displays a certain resonance with the kind of medical interventions described by Foucault. There is no doubt that the early efforts at town planning in Delhi were all characterized by this fear of disease. The document prepared - by the Town and Country Planning Organization (TCPO) in the 1970s, implemented with an unprecedented brutality during the Emergency, and witnessed in the large-scale demolitions of urban slum -

was framed by this fear. It was the designation of these areas as 'plague spots' and 'dens of vice', that underlay the entire discourse of town planning. However, in the 1990s, unlike Foucault's Europe, the inhabitants of the city do not seem to matter. The targets of the state's intervention here have not merely been 'vagabonds', 'beggars' and 'invalids', but the working poor of the city.

It was the late eighties, and particularly the nineties, that saw the rapid restructuring of the city space. In this period, the concerns of health acquired a particularly elitist character, alongside a cynical disregard for the lives of the poor. If the earlier concern was with epidemics and diseases in the poorer settlements, however anti-poor the actual practice of those interventions, the more recent discourse on urban health and environment has been marked by the complete disappearance of the poor from the horizon of planners and jurists alike. As a recent Supreme Court order famously put it, the health of some is more important than the livelihood of others. If the demolitions of the 1970s at least provided alternative residential sites to the oustees, even if outside the city, the recent conflicts over the environment have been singularly unconcerned with any such matter.

It is interesting that the entire effort of the past decade and a half has been to cordon off the city from the poor. In the eighties, the political threat from 'terrorism' and a spate of bomb explosions in the capital, in the wake of the insurgency in Punjab, led to the cordoning off of New Delhi. In the late eighties, the Boat Club lawns were made inaccessible for public protest. Prior to that, it will be recalled, the Boat Club used to be the site for political rallies and demonstrations, thanks to its proximity to the Parliament and the ministries.

Through the 1980s, settlements of the poor were removed to the outskirts of the city, in areas far flung from their places of work. Much of the restructuring was of course done in accordance with the Mater Plan of Delhi, drawn up in 1962 (MPD 62), with help from a team of the Ford Foundation. This Plan was based on an elaborate idea of 'zoning' wherein residential, commercial and industrial zones were spatially segregated. As it happens, the industrial zones provided for plots to house machines but had no provision for the workers who would be brought into these areas. Consequently, there was no way a mushrooming of 'illegal' squatter settlements and *jhuggi jhonpris* could be prevented. As a matter of fact, such mushrooming of 'illegal' or 'unauthorized' settlements has been an abiding feature of Delhi's growth in the past decades.<sup>3</sup> What has happened as a result of this kind of expansion

is that settlements came up without any civic amenities like sewerage, water and electricity supply. It is such settlements that became the target of the first wave of relocation in the 1970s and '80s.

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The idea behind the exercise, at the time of drawing up of MPD 62, was that it would have to be renewed every twenty years. The new plan should have been ready by 1982. However, as some critics have observed, instead, the run-up to that very year was to see the biggest violations of the MPD 62, as flyovers, hotels, stadia were built gearing the city for the Asian Games.<sup>4</sup> It was only by 1986 that a revised Plan was passed and even that came into force in 1991. (Ibid) This plan is

referred to as the Delhi Master Plan 2001 (DMP 2001). It is important to note that the DMP 2001 already marked a serious shift away from the MPD 62, even in terms of the provisions that were made for space allocations for the poor. To take just one instance, while the MPD 62 considered a minimum of 80 sq. metres as the minimum space for the residential requirements for a single family of the poor, the later plan brought it down to a mere 25 sq. metres. In reality, often they are expected to make do with a mere 12.5 sq. metres per family.

It was practically in the interregnum between the two plans, when no Master Plan technically existed, that a case was filed with the Supreme Court, regarding the pollution of the river Yamuna. The second wave, that centres around the serious conflicts over pollution, came to the fore in 1996 as a consequence of this case. On 8 July, the Supreme Court passed its judgement on this 'public interest' litigation, filed by an 'environmentalist' lawyer, M.C. Mehta. Initially relating to the pollution of the waters of river Yamuna, the case extended to include the entire question of water and air pollution. In this judgement, the court decreed that 168 hazardous industries be 'relocated' i.e., shifted outside Delhi. In the 11 long years that the case had been pending, at no point of time were the workers employed in these industries (and clearly the worst affected in any case, relocation or no relocation) ever considered as affected parties, whose voice needed to be considered.

The judgement ordered the summary closure of the concerned industries by 30 November. Its argument was that since neither the employers nor the government had in this intervening period, cared to install Common Effluent Treatment Plants (CETPs), they must simply shut down the concerned units. The cavalier fashion in which the matter had been treated was evident the minute the judgement was sought to be implemented. For, it came in as a handy instrument for the owners who were in any case seeking to close down these units and put their money in more profitable businesses – many of the hazardous industries being sunset industries. It was only after an interlocutory petition was moved by the Home Minister of the then ruling United Front, that some modifications were made to the first judgement that made the closure option a bit more difficult for the owners.<sup>5</sup> So, for instance, the judgement had provided that while about two thirds of the vacated land of these units would be taken over by the government to develop green 'lung spaces', the remaining one-third would be available to the employers for their use. It had also provided for the payment of a mere one year's wages to workers who decided not to take the relocation option. Both these options were unrelated to actual relocation. In other words, if the owners so decided, they could simply close down and get rid of the workers. The revised judgement of 4 December, however, linked the first question to actual relocation: the employers would be able to get their share only if they showed evidence of relocation. The compensation for workers was increased to the equivalent of six years' wages.

Following the havoc wrought by the judgement, a two year long movement was conducted under the auspices of *Delhi Janwadi Adhikar Manch* (DJAM), that was formed in December 1996, with the coming together of a number of smaller trade unions, democratic rights and other activist groups. The activities of the DJAM did manage to bring the issue into public debate by bringing in questions of urban planning and questioning the entire method of preparing Master Plans. The DJAM critiques also focussed on the very logic of

planning as embodied in the two Master Plans. More significantly, the intervention of the DJAM also succeeded in reorienting the terms of debate in a way that sought to transcend the dichotomy between environment and workers' rights that had been set up and within which the leading trade unions too sought to understand the question. Looked at from within that kind of framework, there was no possibility of addressing the problem of a clean environment itself as a question of workers' rights. The critiques made by the DJAM argued that there could be at least two ways of dealing with the question of pollution: one, that simply relocated pollution outside the elite's backyard, that is out of the precincts of the city; and the other, that recognized that the question was integral to the health of the workers who would have to nevertheless work in those units, irrespective of where they were located. The second approach required much more than a 'not-in-my-backyard' approach and a solution from that angle lay in clearly involving the workers in the very formulation of plans for a cleaner environment.

The problem with the 'not-in-my-backyard' approach is that it not only ignores the workers' relationship to pollution; equally, it ignores the health concerns of the populations in areas where pollution is sought to be relocated. In at least one such instance, the farmers of Bawana, an outlying village where some of the units are to be relocated, voiced their strong protest against such callousness with regard to their health concerns.

The movement initiated by DJAM, however, could only stall the second leg of displacements for a few years. In real tangible terms, it could not really prevent the relocation. A part of the problem was also because the major trade unions refused to take up the issue in anything but a ritual manner, and that too, only after the question became a matter of serious contention.

In the event, more than 50,000 workers along with their families were displaced. What happened to the industries and the workers who agreed to go to the new sites, in other states like Punjab, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, is yet another painful story, but that cannot be gone into here. Subsequently, in November 2000, when the next round of industrial relocations began, this time enveloping a much larger segment of the city's population, Delhi almost came to a standstill.

This time round, the lead was taken by the small manufacturers associations. In the first bursts of violent protests, workers and employers joined hands in resisting this attack on their livelihoods. Considering that the net was cast much wider this time, it could not but affect big chunks of voters of every political party that mattered in the city. If the displacements in the first round affected only a 168 units, this time round practically all units in the polluting category as well as those in the 'non-conforming' areas were under attack. The category of units in the 'non-conforming areas' are basically units that are located in areas marked for residential purposes in the Master Plan. This includes a phenomenal number of registered and unregistered units working with less than ten workers – and often with only two or three. Many of them can be better described as slightly upgraded artisanal units. They function in almost all the pores of the city and in fact account for the subsistence of a phenomenal number of workers and small owners. Inclusion of these units in the ones slated for relocation meant that the lives of literally lakhs of workers would be adversely affected.

As the mainstream parties have jumped into the fray, the old terms of debate seem to

have been revived and populist rhetoric takes the place of a serious reconsideration of the problem of pollution. A strong opinion now being voiced by influential members of both the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party is that the Master Plan be so amended that the non-conforming units are excluded from the purview of the units to be relocated. While this can be a short term measure, the question of tackling the unhygienic and unhealthy living and working conditions of the poor remains. So does the larger question of the right over the city space, the allocation of which today follows an altogether different logic.

#### NOTES

- 1 The term 'global city' is being used here in an entirely descriptive sense and should not be confused with the term as it is used by urban theorists.
- 2 The relative size of investment may not be very big, but there is no doubt that it has been enough to transform the landscape of the city.
- 3 There is a complex dynamic that has operated in the coming into being of such settlements, the details of which cannot be gone into here. The dynamic involved the complex interplay of the politics of survival of the poor and the politics of patronage of the ruling Congress politicians.
- 4 See Dunu Roy, "Plan for the Masters", *The Hindustan Times*, Nov 24, 2000, p. 12
- 5 For greater details, see the report *The Order that Felled a City*, Delhi Janwadi Adhikar Manch, Delhi, 1997