

India's moral dilemma over evicting poor

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The Tambetkars don't live on the wrong side of the tracks - they live a few feet from them. They are part of a huge influx of labour to Bombay - 350 families a day - that strain resources, and middle-class patience.

In the 1970s, desperate for a place to live, migrants built on any space they could find. Today, 32,000 families live in "hutments" within 110 feet of three commuter lines - some so close you can touch the trains when they pass.

Despite no toilet, water, or garbage service, the Tambetkars made a pucca (normal) home for three children; their grandkids go to school in neatly starched uniforms. Eight people live in a 12-by-12 space they bought for 5,000 rupees. Over the years they invested 80,000 rupees - a staggering amount for what is a 6,500 rupee (\$143) a month income. The space has a marble floor and Formica cabinets with a TV. Shiny food tins define an immaculate kitchen area; a ladder leads to an upstairs room added in 1995.

Now the Tambetkars and 16,000 other families are waiting to see if they will be part of an urban tragedy - or a change in the way this megacity treats its poor.

The Central and Western Railway has long tried to get rid of the huts, which slow down the lifeline of India's most cosmopolitan city. Some 5 million people use the rails during the monsoon flooding. Middle class anger peaked last year when two rock throwing incidents injured commuters.

Afterward, more than 30,000 huts were demolished, with no record kept of where the people went. Now, the rail company wants to bulldoze all huts within 30 feet of the track - half of the railway dwellers - by December.

However, a \$1 billion World Bank transport loan requires a resettlement policy, something Bombay has never had. In February, after a court order, the rail company bulldozed the homes of 2,000 people. The act was very popular among commuters. But the families were homeless until an organized group of dwellers, backed by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working with the World Bank, intervened.

Still, the Tambetkars feel they and thousands of others may fall between the cracks. If they never make it past a temporary "transit" camp to more permanent housing, they could lose what for them is a mortgage-size lifesavings. What they want now is the 224-square-foot apartment that some rail dwellers have been allowed to buy.

After the huts were demolished in February, pressure from the World Bank and NGOs prompted the city to allot 19 high-rise apartments for 2,000 families. Still, about 12,000 families of the 16,000 targeted don't know where they'll go.

"We have no idea what will happen to us," says Mr. Tambetkar, a silk mill worker turned night watchman. "We've been here for 22 years. I can't go back to the village."

Housing brings to a head many of the worst problems of the megacity in the developing world: In these sprawling centres there is a need for labour, but little land or utilities infrastructure. Some 55 percent of Bombay's population live in slums. Every Bombay high rise has huts next to it whose inhabitants are the drivers, cleaners, cooks, plumbers, and fruit sellers for the better off. Their services are needed, but their problems are not.

Tens of thousands of huts all over Bombay, for example, have been bulldozed in the past year, with nothing like the furore raised over the rail dwellers.

A lack of caring In this sense, say civic activists, it is not logistics of space or money that is most daunting - but a pervasive uncaring attitude among city and state officials and the moneyed class.

"The government has ... not addressed the problem of slum rehabilitation," says PK Das, a leading Bombay architect and housing activist with Nivaara Hakk Suraksha Samiti. "There is no plan to recompense the 50,000 rupees [\$1,100] in equity the average slum dweller has put into the hut. The city is happy to take World Bank money and put up a few buildings. But those buildings serve a tiny minority."

Since the 1970s, when rural India began moving to mega-cities, three different approaches have developed to squatters. The first is that no one has a right to live on public land. Second is that the city has some obligation, so squatters should accept whatever charity they are given. Third is that squatters provide productive labour for the city, and therefore have rights.

Until recently in Bombay, officials, the judiciary, and the press have largely adopted the first approach. Demands for squatters' rights clash deeply with traditional views about the poor. Middle- and upper class Indians regularly demand secure salaries, perks, housing, pensions, and so on. Absent a sense of benefit owed to the servant classes, the poor are expected to make do.

Still, publicity over the rail families, and a dawning idea about their problems, is changing some middle-class minds. A high court hearing in Bombay this month showed for the first time that World Bank rules are being taken seriously. The bank earmarked \$50 million for resettlement; in court, state officials talked about new lands that could serve as a transit camp this fall.

"If the government moved all the people by December, and there was no place to go, we would be forced to review this loan," says Chris Hoban of the World Bank in New Delhi. "The bank is also nervous about transit camps with no exit strategy."

"The process has a lot of jagged edges," says Sheela Patel of the Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC), the NGO that has been instrumental in organizing rail dwellers. But Ms. Patel also sees a "huge silver lining" for future housing negotiations, due to recent concessions by the state to resettle families.

Substitute for real policy Hardcore housing activists in Bombay worry, however, that well-meaning groups using the World Bank as leverage for change are actually watering down future efforts by creating an impression that a needed housing policy is emerging in Bombay, when it is not. They envision a future of massive transit camps ringing the city.

They argue that negotiations over high-profile cases like rail hutments ignore the old practice of "sticking it to the poor" in other parts of the city. Extracting ad hoc concessions to stop demolitions underestimates the failure of what in Western liberal circles is known as "good government", they say.

For years, Bombay officials have been complicit in the mechanism by which the poor are taken advantage of: Typically slum dwellers first buy their way into an illegal settlement by paying off city officials. They then pay costs nearly twice as high as ordinary citizens for illegal electricity and potted water (not to mention ongoing bribes for protection). If their homes are bulldozed, a new set of city officials demands money to get them on a resettlement list, often far away from their jobs and schools.

Not only city bureaucrats but elected officials "have joined hands to terrorize the people and benefit from transactions in slum lands," says Sunil Khilnani, an Oxford political thinker and author of "The Idea of India". One finds "the mere capture of power rather than its responsible exercise has become the exclusive aim of politicians", he adds.

An especially large case of displacement, for example, is happening today in a park located just inside the Bombay city limits. The Borivali National Park has some 70,000 workers' dwellings, all of which

will be demolished in the coming year. "Borivali is the largest ever public demolition of housing in post-independence India, and maybe the world," says Mr. Das. "About 300,000 people are being evicted right now."

The evictions are the result of an environmental lobby group that argues for keeping the land unspoiled. Yet the normally fellow-travelling housing activists say the environmentalists have not worried about whether the squatters will be settled.

"We will lose everything when they demolish our homes - our house, our belongings, our relationships, future of our children, our very survival is threatened," according to testimony filed in the Bombay court by slum dwellers from Borivali Park.

"Even then, the government has demanded we pay 7,000 rupees per family for allotment [of land 15 by 20 feet]. We have to spend again to build our new house, pay additionally for schools and other amenities ... all ... without any job prospects there."

During the razing of a hutment colony two weeks ago, a tribunal of retired judges met to hear complaints. "Are foreign funding agencies more sensitive than the government of India?" asked former Delhi high court Justice Rajinder Sachar, referring to the resettlement standards of the World Bank.

The Tambetkars are now waiting for the Bombay High Court to decide this month whether transit land newly offered by the state to satisfy the bank are reasons to slow the rail hut demolition.

For many slum families not living along the rail line - the bulldozers are on the way.