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India

Slum dwellers organise against demolitions

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The recent spate of demolitions has brought slum dwellers together and an umbrella organization "Jan Aandolan" (People's Movement) has been formed. In its first state wide protest program, rallies and demonstrations were held on 21st December demanding Housing as the Fundamental Right, implementation of the government's own policy and an immediate stop to demolitions.

India, with its 7% GDP growth rate last year and a target of 8% for this year, occupied the top position in a global survey of business confidence by Grant Thornton International, pushing behind it not only the G8 giants but also its nearest rival China. In order to sustain this position, providing infrastructure to local and foreign investors is at the top of the Indian Government's priority list. Land acquisition on a large scale by the government in both rural and urban areas and then passing it on to industrial house builders at a nominal price is at its historical peak.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/indiapic1a.jpg>]

The space is being cleared for building roads, flyovers, multiplexes, skyscrapers to house offices of IT and financial businesses, multinational corporation-owned shopping malls and housing colonies for these few neo-rich. The construction industry is growing at a rate of 5% and is at 12th position in the world. On the other hand, with a high level of automation in new investments and the upgrading of previous industries, large scale closure of small scale industries and cities becoming the hubs of IT and finance sectors, the requirement for manual, skilled and semi-skilled labourers is at its minimum in the cities. So the local governments in all the major and minor cities and even towns are on a slum demolition spree.

Four hundred thousand slum dwellers were rendered homeless within a period of two months just before heavy rainy season of this year in the city of Bombay alone. The exact figure for other cities is not available but demolition of slums is almost a routine affair in all the cities and towns - without giving any alternative accommodation, with 7 days notice and with extreme brutality during these operations.

Ahmedabad in Gujarat has had four or five slum demolitions a week during last one and a half months with each slum having from 100 to 700 dwellings. A temporary brake has been applied in Baroda because of the organized protests as will be described later. West Bengal where Stalinist parties have ruled for last 25 years is no exception, the only difference being the demolitions there are the fastest, using the most brutal force, giving no time to slum dwellers to organise any help.

India is signatory to the declarations by UN conference on 'Human Shelter' 1996, which only reconfirmed the previous commitments of 1976 conference. In this declaration it is said that enough shelter with all basic amenities is recognised as a human right and it will be the government's responsibility to see that all the people get it. In the last 10 years, umpteen number of times promises have been made by state and central governments to build houses for the slum dwellers. Gujarat state government's policy on paper is to provide houses to every slum dweller wherever they are located at present. But exactly contrary to all these on paper promises a large scale slum demolitions are undertaken daily to 'beautify' the cities.

The only problem with this whole dream of Indian ruling class to create 'beautiful' cities for themselves is that the people who are being uprooted do not want to take it all lying low. After all they had erected these dwellings by saving pennies from their meagre earnings. Most of them have lived there for last 25 to 30 years or even 50 to 60 years. To get their votes in elections they were given water connections metered electric connections and charged taxes and now bulldozers are coming and destroying everything pushing them back by 25-30 years!

Slum dwellers organise against demolitions

The resistance to slum demolition has always existed on the part of different groups working independently, the authorities giving practically no response as the resistances remained low key because of slum dwellers' difficulties in waging a continuous fight as most of them are daily wage earners, the inability of the organizations working with them to realize the need for unity or the hold of one or the other bourgeoisie political parties in slums fooling them giving false promises and so on.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/slumprotest1.jpg>]

The recent spate of demolitions has brought some of the organizations and slum dwellers together and an umbrella organization "Jan Aandolan" (People's Movement) has been formed. It has started organizing slum people, forming committees for putting up a long term fight. Taking legal help of activist lawyers who are among the founder members of "Jan Aandolan", quite a few court orders staying demolitions have been won at the same time. In its first state wide protest program, rallies and demonstrations were held in two cities Ahmedabad, Baroda and four towns Vyara, Kalol, Himatnagar, Modasa of Gujarat State on 21st December demanding Housing as the Fundamental Right, implementation of the government's own policy and an immediate stop to demolitions.

Rallies were held on the 8th day of local civic election results in Baroda and though no mention of slum dwellers' wellbeing was present in the pre-election manifesto and in fact notices were being served for demolitions from the day one of the election results, by the 5th day of the rally the elected mayor started talking of settling them in situ! Municipal offices have started responding the demands for basic amenities in slums very quickly. In fact the Baroda Municipal commissioner promised to provide light and water wherever it is absent right at the time of receiving memorandum. The promises can be just to calm down the tempo of the movement and actual work is not done at that speed.

The picture is not as rosy at other places in Gujarat and demolitions continue. In Mumbai the schemes are being prepared by the government under the pressure of the agitations there. But it is very difficult to sustain these movements during time taken to prepare and implement the schemes. Some of the slums are saved intact with quick legal actions using lame laws of Indian constitution but where bulldozer has already destroyed it all, how long can they stay in the half or fully broken houses or tents to occupy the same place facing the extremes of weather vagaries that India has.

"Jan Aandolan" has been formed with a long term perspective of taking up all the other issues like unemployment, education, health, etc, of poor people and not demolition alone. Much more is required to be done and this is just a beginning.