

## Conference Report

# Social Segregation and Slums: The Plight of Dalits in Delhi

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The city of Delhi, being the capital of India and the centre of administrative and political activity, has witnessed rapid growth over the years and in the process attained a multi-functional character that has attracted people from all walks of life largely in search of better economic opportunities. From an urban agglomeration with a population of just 200,000 in 1911, Delhi today has grown into a metropolis with more than 13.8 million inhabitants, accounting for 1.34 per cent of the country's population. In catering to the requirements of the growing multitudes of people most of them are migrants from other states, the city administration has, however, lagged behind, such that, currently, glaring inequalities exist in meeting the basic civic requirements of the residents of the state. The most drastic reflection of the polarisation of the population in the specific context of living conditions emanates from the nature of housing prevalent in the state. Here the polarity stems from the existence of luxurious residential complexes and bungalows alongside slums and squatter settlements that are characterised by inhuman living conditions.



As elsewhere in the country, dalits constitute the majority among slum dwellers in Delhi, forming over half of the total slum population in the city. These dalits are mostly migrants from the rural areas of neighboring states who are driven from their native lands under economic and social compulsions, the roots of which lie deeply embedded in a repressive caste-structured society. In the city, they continue to be the objects of social ostracism and contempt having to put up with the most frugal living conditions in order to lead a hand to mouth existence. Fleeing from the 'repressive agents of exploitation' in the village the migrants to the slums become the victims of apathetic government policies that are catered to the interest of the ruling minority and aimed at giving the city a 'poor-clean' appearance.

Very often slums are projected in bad light and blamed for all the ills of the city that include pollution, lawlessness and overcrowding. Little appreciation is made of the fact that these micro-units of community life are constituted by rational individuals, the victims of circumstances, who are constantly striving for a better life in the face of deprivation and hostility. In a rigorous caste segregated society the hostility towards the slum dwellers who are largely constituted by dalits or the so-called untouchable caste is all the more intensified. Here, a socio-economic appraisal of the different social groups in the slums becomes imperative in order to better appreciate the status of the dalit slum dwellers in the framework of the existence of social segregation both within and outside the slums.

Against this background and in light of the rising levels of migration of marginalised communities to the city's slums, an exercise is carried out by the Indian Social Institute through a critical examination of the socio-economic characteristics of dalit slum dwellers vis-à-vis other social groups in the slums so as to gain deeper insights into the conditions that compel the dalits to adapt to unhygienic and insecure habitats and those that prevent them from adopting a better life. Such an analysis, it is hoped,

will serve to throw more light on the process of social change manifest in migration and to highlight the plight of dalits in the slums in the face of caste based social segregation both within and outside the slums.

The objectives of the study were:

1. To examine the socio-economic status of dalits in Delhi slums vis-à-vis that of other social groups
2. To understand the reasons for the migration of these communities to the slums
3. To critically evaluate the extent of integration of these migrants to the city environs, their links with their native lands and the problems they face in the new environment of the slums, and thereby
4. To understand better the process of social change manifest in migration.

After the comprehensive study by a group of researchers the study drew the following conclusions:

The analysis on the socio-economic background of the migrants revealed the majority of migrants to have been landless and unemployed prior to migration. The proportion of landless and dependents was observed to be the highest among the dalits. Against this background, it was also seen that the majority of migrants from all social groups opted for migration under the economic compulsion of finding a job. Among the pull factors for settling down in Delhi, the presence of relatives in the city was seen to be an important factor for the choice of the city, particularly among the dalits. Also observed was a decline in the proportion of migrants to the city in recent years. However, the proportion of migrants to the slums in recent years was seen to be higher. The analysis on the participation of the slum dwellers in the electoral process and in the celebration of festivals showed the majority of migrants to be involved. With regard to their links with the native village, the dalit migrants were seen to visit the village more frequently and were also found to send money to their relatives at home more frequently compared to the other groups in the slum. Coming from poor socio-economic backgrounds, it was found that the prospects of getting a job in the city far outweighed the problems of living in the unhygienic and insecure environments of the slum for the majority of migrants. Again, among the different social groups a greater proportion of dalits were unwilling to reveal the sources from which they face harassment. Of the various sources of harassment, the threat from the police was cited to be a major cause of concern by a larger proportion of the slum residents from all groups. Forced to leave their native lands under economic compulsion, the slum dwellers have but little choice in adapting themselves to the new city environs in spite of threats from external agencies.

The Institute (Indian Social Institute) decided to conduct a national level workshop on 'Social Segregation and Slums: The Plight of Dalits in the Slums of Delhi' after completing the research study to share the outcome of the study and also to plan for the future course of action to improve the living conditions of Dalits. The workshop was held in Indian Social Institute on 18-19<sup>th</sup> October 2002. There were around 150 participants from all over the country that included slum dwellers, social activists, academicians, concerned citizens etc. The workshop had a lot of discussions and debates.

## Memorandum

A memorandum is prepared based on the resolutions brought out by the participants and the same is submitted to the Ministry of Urban Development, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Municipal Corporation of Delhi on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2002.

### The Memorandum

- a) The strict enforcement of land reform measures in all states and the proper implementation of employment schemes in the rural areas.
- b) Recognising the prevalence and inhumane nature of a caste structure that clothes the rich at the expense of the poor. In addition there should be the amendment of laws and the implementation of policies to protect the minorities and disadvantaged sections from discrimination, harassment and deprivation.
- c) Implementation of policies and programmes for the socio-economic upliftment of the socially marginalised sections of the population by the state with the active involvement of the civil society.
- d) The provision of laws that take into consideration the interests of the slum inhabitants. This should include the conferring of legal status to existing slum clusters and working towards improving living conditions in these areas. Wherever slums have to be relocated, care should be taken to see that the slum dwellers are not in any way disadvantaged. They should be also informed in advance. Also the Government should play a monitoring role later on as anti social elements don't come in and take advantage on the cost of the marginalized. The present system of giving lease for a period of 5 years should be enhanced to 90 years in case of evictions and reallocation of places. Proper attention should be given to look after the educational aspirations of the displaced as it get hampered during relocation.
- e) Proper co-ordination and co-operation between the various agencies working for slums, ensuring that these agencies are free of corruption and red tapism and consistency in slum development policies and programmes.
- f) The incorporation of expenditure on slums as an item in the Central Government Budget and the allocation of funds to states for the implementation of slum development programmes. In this, the gender component has also to be taken care because women suffer the most in arranging for water, food and access to toilet facilities etc.
- g) Implementation of subsidised programmes for the educational upliftment of slum groups, particularly of those belonging to the marginalised sections, and for the provision of subsidised job-oriented courses in the vicinity of the slums. Also library or reading facility for slum dwellers who want to work for better future.
- h) The proper implementation of minimum wages legislation and the amendment of laws to protect the workers in the unorganised sector from exploitation.
- i) Provision of subsidised medical and educational institutions in the vicinity of the slums and providing the slum dwellers, including those migrants from across the borders, with ration cards. Since children from slums are denied admission in good schools necessary steps should

be taken to ensure that they are given permission in good schools. Provision of safe drinking water and electricity supply for the slum dwellers. More schemes for health for critical and terminal stage patients, provision of mid-day meals for school children, provision of adult education and information sharing. Some facilities for students who pass 12<sup>th</sup> standard and seek admissions in universities/colleges so that they don't face language problem or harassment.

- j) As paternalistic approaches to slum clearance and slum improvement-where things are done "to" rather than "with" slum dwellers-are proving to be excessive, the formulation of appropriate housing models that consider the aspiration of the slum people themselves needs to be carried out. When slum dwellers are asked to pay money (Rs.7000) and get some amount of land, they should get small houses instead of land and they should have access to loans.
- k) The development of employment programmes and saving and investment schemes within the slums and the formation of self help groups on productive lines.
- l) Providing the slum dwellers with easy accessibility to credit at subsidised rates of interest with proper monitoring in order to avoid default of payments. Loans should be directly given by the Government agencies and not through Banks.
- m) More toilets should be built either through the DDA (Delhi Development Authority) or Sulabh International. It may be noted that many surveys had been done in the past to construct but it never came through.
- n) Regarding reallocation of land, special attention should be given to elderly and disabled. Moreover, the amount of loan given should be either based on bare minimum space needed per person or should be based on number of persons in the family and access to minimum basic infrastructure should be available.