Basti Redevelopment in Kolkata

The proposal by the West Bengal government to permit multi-storeyed buildings on ‘thika’ tenancy land in Kolkata raises a lot of questions about the terms on which the land would be given to private builders and the fate of the present dwellers. Nearly three lakh people are directly and indirectly employed in basti-based manufacture of basic items in the city’s economy.

On February 21, 2008 The Statesman reported that the West Bengal land and land reforms minister had agreed to a proposal from the urban development department permitting multi-storeyed buildings on ‘thika’ (contract for temporary possession) tenancy land. The minister reportedly gave his approval provided the tenants agree to it.

Most of the slums or ‘bastis’ (low-income settlements) in Kolkata and Howrah are on land under thika tenancy. They occupy huge tracts of land spread all over the city. The 2001 Census estimated that about 1.5 million people in Kolkata lived in slums. There would be over half a million in Howrah. Thus, as a result of the new proposed policy, the habitation of about two million people of the conurbation spread across the two banks of the Hooghly is now threatened.

Background

Basti land, formerly owned by landlords, is now largely owned by the state. On this land stand structures, typically tile-roofed, owned by the thika tenants. And in each such building live many tenant (or bharatiya or raiyat) households, each one typically occupying a small room. Following a high court order, the thika tenants cannot be ousted by the state. The tenant dwellers are protected too, by the tenancy laws and the slum act. The thika tenants also have limited development rights on their property.

Bastis are spread throughout the city. The city’s labouring population, and the bulk of the urban poor reside here. But bastis are also the site of a lot of economic activities. Workplace and residence are inter-woven. A good part of the production of basic items in the city economy, like garments, footwear and paper products takes place in the bastis. Various trades are concentrated in specific areas, making location a crucial factor. As many as three lakh people may be directly and indirectly employed in basti-based manufacturing activity. Among the area where large, old bastis are concentrated are Metiabruz, Rajabazar, Narkeldanga, Sealdah, Beckbagan and Tiljala-Topsia-Tangra.

The overwhelming majority of the Muslim population of Kolkata and Howrah lives in bastis, and these are among the oldest, largest and most degraded and poorly serviced slums of the city.

Slum Improvement

Bastis had suffered long neglect, and by the early 1960s, were in a state of near collapse. Following the planning intervention of the Ford Foundation, through the 1970s and 1980s, the basti improvement programme financed by the World Bank was taken up in the slum localities. This involved conversion of service latrines, connection of water taps, surface drainage facilities, construction and widening of roads and pathways, and provision of street lighting and waste disposal facilities within the bastis. While living conditions in the bastis improved as a result, this also opened the way for new construction in bastis, principally of illegal buildings. Bastis improved under the programme are once again facing acute deficiencies in services.

Illegal Construction

With terrible overcrowding in the bastis, and given the thika tenants’ inability to extend their structures, over the last 15 years or so, illegal construction has been taking place on a large-scale in basti neighbourhoods. This happens through a nexus of builder-hoodlum-party cadres-police. The builder acts in the name of the thika tenant. He pockets the ‘salam’ (deposit) amount paid by the occupants of the new apartments, and receives the rent from the new occupants for some years. The buildings thus constructed are generally of a poor quality. They discharge toilet waste into the open drains. Population pressure also thus increases on the already overstretched basti services. Little wonder then that the combination of highly insufficient supply of drinking water and inadequate and poor sanitation emerges as the principal environmental health problem in Kolkata, resulting in gastro-intestinal and waterborne diseases, and afflicting principally the city’s poor and low-income.

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For several years now, private builders and their consortiums have been eyeing basti land, because their location makes them prime real estate. The key question is: What happens to the dwellers? Would they get alternative shelter? Where? What kind of shelter? And under what terms? Would they, for instance, get title to the shelter units, like the refugee colony dwellers were granted title to land they had occupied? How exactly would the rights and interests of the dwellers be ensured? Can this be assumed to happen on its own? What would be the arrangement for temporary accommodation of the dwellers while construction takes place?

There is also the larger question of transparency in urban governance. What happens to the land? Under what terms would the land be handed over to the large private builders? What happens to the thousands of illegal buildings that have already come up in bastis? Would the appropriate resettlement of the erstwhile dwellers be part of the builders’ project? Or would that be handled by the state, utilising subsidies from the centre, so that a promoter-friendly government and ruling party gifts the builders the opportunity to make lucrative profits?

Dweller Security
Given the very attractive commercial potential from multi-storeyed constructions in the bastis, these areas would only become centres of frenzied activity by a range of vested interests, each seeking to grab a chunk of the golden pie. Hundreds of thousands of basti dwellers in Kolkata and Howrah eke out a marginal existence through manual labour. Their daily life circumstances mean that they are least empowered to stand up, be organised and secure their rights. On the face of it, it does appear that they will simply be swept away by the tidal wave of greed and deceit.

In the late 1990s, a proposal was prepared by Unnayan and Asian Coalition for Housing Rights for comprehensive renewal of the blighted canal-side area in Beliaghata-Manicktala. The late M S Moitra, a former chief engineer of the state public works department who retired as director general of the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority, was one of the authors of the proposal. This too was about basti redevelopment, but here it was visualised as being done for the good of the city at large and of the basti dwellers in particular. Squatters earlier living along the canal were also to be rehabilitated within the proposed development. The indicative estimates made in the plan suggested that notwithstanding the social and public goals, the project could still yield attractive returns to builders. But such a project calls for a new generation of agencies and organisations, within state and local government, and at the grassroots level. These are all presently lacking.

City Renewal
Since the basti is a unit in itself, both in legal terms and in regard to civic services infrastructure, it is pertinent to ask whether individual basti plots would be available for redevelopment or the basti as a whole. Redevelopment is not just a matter of construction on land. The requisite infrastructure for water, sewerage and drainage have all to be put in place. How far would the private developers’ responsibility go? And what would the municipal corporation do? Would not basti redevelopment across the city require major city-wide infrastructure upgrading?

A blighted basti is typically at the core of a decaying locality. Upgrading the infrastructure of civic services in the basti site has to be part of a larger programme of upgrading the infrastructure of the whole locality. Thus, with blighted bastis spread all over the city, one has nodes of renewal across the city. Integrating all these nodes within a single, long-term, city renewal blueprint would effectively mean a vision for transforming the physical landscape of the city.

There is a huge human development gap between basti dwellers and the city’s middle and affluent classes. The value of the land on which basti dwellers live is the only means of bridging that gap. Hence basti land should be auctioned by the state to the private developers and the money raised should be used to construct good quality apartment blocks for the dwellers on part of the land, with adequate open and community spaces. Alternatively, the construction for the basti dwellers could be part of the private developer’s project. Squatter resettlement should also be undertaken in the redeveloped sites.

Given the huge volume of economic activity in bastis, spaces for production and marketing also need to be created. This would give a much-needed fillip to these trades, whose future is otherwise quite bleak.

A concerted effort needs to be made to ensure basti households are aware and fully informed of all matters, and participate in planning and design of the new housing. After having lived and worked for many decades in the basti – and in some places for over a century – and having suffered harsh living conditions, the households have a natural right to get title to their new apartments. A corpus should also be created for maintenance purposes and a management mechanism has to be set up, with the participation of the resident households.

This would ensure that the transformation of the physical landscape of the city is also accompanied by a transformation of its social landscape. Such a measure would significantly democratise property ownership in the city, while also strengthening the municipal corporation by enhancing its revenue base.

This is the challenge that the government should strive to realise.