

THE SQUATTER RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMME IN THE CITY OF DACCA : A Critical Analysis.*

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Introduction :

In January 1975, the then Government of Bangladesh launched a slum clearing operation in the capital city of Dacca whereby about 2,00,000 squatter dwellers of the city were forced either to return to their native village or to settle in one of the three camps: Mirpur, Demra and Tongi (Dattapara), the locus of which are within 5,10 and 15 miles respectively from the heart of the city of Dacca. The conditions of the camps and the dwellers were appalling as summed up by a responsible newspaper—'they had been slipped into hell with the Government's good intension'.¹ The authors of this paper undertook a case study of the resettlement schemes in order to understand more clearly the various aspects of the problem and devise, if possible, a set of guiding principles which would ensure better schemes in future.

The first impression derived out of the case study is that the schemes were prepared with no concern for the squatters' economic problems and social bonds. They were taken far away from their jobs without provisions for alternative employments or easy and cheap transport facilities. The entire squatter community was not moved as a unit which dismembered the common ties between people, organisations and the sense of community feeling. The rational procedure of any resettlement calls for a well-conceived 'pre-transfer, actual settlement and post-transfer' planning which was callously omitted all the way in this case.

It was not a humanistic approach towards the problem nor a comprehensive measure for a lasting solution. While the squatters were being removed, they were hostile towards the Government because they found themselves at a sea of uncertainty about the whole movement and their future. The result was a scene of misery, and many of them slowly tracted back to the city. The fallacy of the administrative measures helped to defeat its purpose. About 40,000 families were evicted, and yet provisions were made for and plots distributed to only 12,063 families. Nobody showed any real concern for the fate of the rest of 28,000 families.

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Hardly did they have any option for survival but to surrender to despair, starvation and ultimately to desperation. Many of these who even got the plots, fell ill, most of them underwent an extreme hardship as they lost employment and other regular source of income due to dislocation, and ultimately a significant number of the ill-fated destitutes succumbed to death. Some other started deserting the camps in quest of old jobs in the city. Those who managed to hide themselves during the slum clearance operation, came out and joined them, in no time.

An Appraisal of the Resettlement Programme :

In these three camps about 12,063 plots, on average 14'0" x 25'-00" each had been allocated to the destitutes. Grid pattern layout and modular units for shelter were used in the camp planning and designing. The shelters were repeated throughout the layout with twin and single units. The materials used in the camp housing were bamboo and straw for walls, and bamboo and polithylene for covering roofs. The floors were of clay and raised about one foot from the ground. Construction work was done by hired labours on payments, not on self-help basis. Site and services were given. Community latrines were provided but did not serve the purpose well. They were either filled up or destroyed by cyclone. In Dattapara and Mirpur the Community latrines were left unused and the dwellers made their own convenient arrangement, frequently out in the open. The situation in Demra gave a bit different picture. Community latrines were somehow being used there. Sewage was collected in huge plastic bags. Latrines were taken care of by a paid latrine supervisor. Still those were not clean enough to be hygienic. Water supply came from tubewells near-by which served the purpose fairly well. There were primary schools and dispensaries for the destitutes, one of each kind in each camp. These camps were run by the Government with its own resources along with the contribution from and direct participation of international philanthropic organisations like "CONCERN", "WORLD VISION", "RED CROSS" "OXFAM" etc. Provision of other community facilities were in the process of development. Low-priced ration and doles were supplied to them at intervals.

As regards the tenure of land, however, Government has not yet decided whether destitutes will be rehabilitated in these camps permanently or any other suitable sites will be provided for. This uncertainty has resulted in a disincentive among the residents for taking proper care of their shelters. They do not feel those huts of their own, but simply holding possession of land with a hope that some day they might be granted a ownership gratis. However, in the course of investigation, it is gathered that the settlers are now better off in terms of shelter, but worse off in terms of real income. Employment opportunities are very limited in scope and seasonal in nature. Commuting to and from place of work takes away lion's share of their earning and working hours. Children and women do not have any employment there. They cannot commute either. Shelter proves to be a very limited help because of its distant location from the place of employment. The case of Mirpur, however, depicts a different situation. The dwellers there are more or less content with the present condition, not that they do not want more, but they are in a less vulnerable position. Many deserters from the two other distant camps seek refuge in this camp.

The investigation offers us some more ideas of vital importance in dealing with squatters resettlement problem. For example : (i) there is a lack of clear understanding on the part of both:

the authorities and the welfare organisations operating there, about the needs, desire and aspirations of the camp dwellers, as well as the total resources that may be available at their disposal to meet the needs; (ii) some kind of arbitrary solutions are being imposed on the camps without having any regards even for the physical requirements of the inhabitants involved. To cite an example, the ten by sixteen feet thatched huts for two families which have been built up there on a mass scale, seem to be inadequate for providing a minimum environment for life and living of the camp dwellers; (iii) the concept of voluntary labour mobilisation in low income housing process has no trace over there. It deprives a project of enjoying some basic advantages to meet with success; (iv) it is observed that newly built-up huts are more vulnerable to the occasions of violent weather condition than their previous shelters of poorer quality. We wonder, whether fault lies with the geometry of design of the new huts; lastly, (v) the Government has drawn up an economico-physical plan for them, the layout of which is though a monolithic one, apparently looks quite ambitious, but nothing tangible, particularly with regard to employment has been achieved as yet. The welfare organisations have also certain programmes to bring an all round improvement of the camp-dwellers. With our all regards to their mission, we have a feeling that their efforts are purely temporary, and not oriented to the real crux of the problem. As regards shelter they have provided is uneconomic from durability point of view, and hence, in a sense, wastage of scarce resources too.

Conclusion : Some Policy Proposals :

As an aftermath of this ill-planned social experiment, there has been a continuous back flow of deserters towards the city which we term "resquatting". This problem of resquatting needs to be considered in three levels :

- (a) resettling those who have already resquatted in Dacca City;
- (b) putting an end to deserting camps by improving employment situation, ensuring better living environment and awarding permanent settling rights to the inhabitants over there; and,
- (c) stopping new inflow of squatters, who are rendered destitutes by natural hazards and economic exploitation, through more extensive rural development projects, dispersal of footloose industries and thereby decentralization of urbanization. However, we will concentrate on the first level here for the purpose of the paper and attempt to develop a set of relevant policy-proposals and viable techniques designed to achieve a conceivable improvement of the existing harrowing living condition of the resquatters.

Despite their poverty, illiteracy and absence of skill, the squatters are self-selected enterprising group with high aspirations. They are generally hard working, depending almost entirely on themselves and are ready to bear economic risk and psychological cost of migration. These people play a critical role in the dynamics of urban growth and development. Most of them find a role for themselves in the urban economic milieu, do not pose so much a social liability. Therefore, the society must assist them to adjust and contribute their talents towards progress, rather than forcing them out of the city. A social tolerance and understanding is called for in establishing a good relationship between the citizens and the

so called floating population : squatters, which will ensure the latter a psychological rehabilitation and provide them with economic motivation. But this can hardly be achieved through social institutions alone or to quote Angle,³ through the traditional 'paternalism' philosophy of squatter improvement, the idea of father-child relationship between the elites and the squatters. What is needed is the legal sanction from the authority in support of their right to stay in the city, and their representation in the local government while decisions relating to improving their lots are taken.

The fundamental issue is how to make available land for resettlement of the squatters at little or no cost because the squatters virtually cannot pay for land. So the crucial issue in the set of policy proposals for resttlements is the land policy—the location of the land, the availability of land, and the terms and conditions of providing land. The squatters cannot be settled in the central and middle zones of the city, because land economics rules out the possibility of this sort of low-rise development, nor they can be removed far off the urban core since this will dislocate them from the proximity of their job. The only compromise left with us is to settle them in the periphery of the city. Assuming that there will be government land available in the periphery, the question that comes to mind is what is the rationale of providing the squatters with pieces of land. One reason may be that they are landless and poor. If this is to be the criterion, then the vast multitude of 37 per cent rural landless and unemployed,³ may also claim this endowment. It does not require the stretching of imagination for that there may be a huge influx of the rural population into urban areas in order to avail themselves of this opportunity of having land gratis. Obviously the cure of a disease must not create fresh problems of higher magnitude. So it seems that a feasible solution would call for stringent conditions to be imposed on squatters for the bestowal of a piece of land as follows : (i) the squatters must be landless persons, (ii) he must have a genuine and lucrative employment in the city, (iii) he must not be in possession of any plot in any other Camp (iv) the land must remain the property of the Government, he will be given a tenureship for many years, but not ownership right. This is to prevent speculation or other misuse. He must also undertake that no trade whatsoever shall be carried out there, and his family will keep the environment neat and clean. They should be on record of the local authority to ensure efficient administration.

Next, the local planning authority should concentrate on problem which the squatters cannot solve themselves such as, planning in relation to the city as a whole, and for the provision of service facilities like water supply, sewage disposal, roads, electricity and other elementary human needs including medicare, school and recreation. International agencies, we believe, may be interested in extending help of this sort. The UNIDO has already committed itself for such projects.

That the Ministry of Works and Urban and Developments should build high-density multi-storied low-income flats, provide civic amenities all around and distribute these to the squatters free of charge is obviously neither economically feasible nor socially justifiable. What we mean is the Urban Development Authority should provide them with a minimal guideline for a basic layout of their environment. Long before, Abrams⁴ advised it, and John Turner⁵ nourishes almost the same idea. We would like that the authority should take note of this.

The size distribution of plots should be liberal so as to leave some space for cattle rearing, poultry farming and vegetable gardening which will ensure an additional source of income and employment as well as a regular flow of supply for kitchens. We suggest a free and active community living with (i) close connections between and among the settlement units, (ii) privacy and security from external threats and (iii) easy access to the nearby urban core. All community facilities should be centrally located. Communal privy did not serve the purpose well in the past. So the idea may be considered in favour of the family privy.

The resettlement programme faces a serious financial and material resource constraint which is quite challenging. National resource is minimal, contribution of the resquatters is not significant either. The finding of a new "miracle" in cheap building materials and cheaper construction technology constitute a theoretical possibility without much practical content. The proportion of bourgeois technological revolution in low-cost housing has already been rightly discarded by many experts including Corea⁶ and Angle⁷, in the recent past. Traditional architectural and engineering penanceas are of no use to the poor squatters. Theoretical standards and illusive middle-class values which normally the technocrats conform to, have no place in solution for the present problem. The squatters ability to pay as down-payment plus monthly instalment is not sufficient enough to provide even a small corrugated shed on four pillars. Land-use trade offs between built-up core and open-to-sky space left around the sites is of limited avail. The only untapped resource is the physical labour of the resquatters which can be profitably utilised.

In the light of the foregoing analysis and above considerations, our conceptual framework is that existing urban housing process based on imported material, technology and cutlock should be put aside, at least for the time being, till the squatters economic condition improves enough to justify the process. Instead, they should be encouraged through some incentives from the Government to adopt their familiar rural housing methods with cheap, local and easily accessible building materials and with vernacular technology. That will provide them at least a shed over their heads. If we look around the countryside, the original abcde of the squatters, we find, people build up beautiful houses without the benefit of architects and engineers. We believe that given right kind of assistance and incentive the squatters themselves can become significant contributors in the solution of the squatting problem.

Notes and References :

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2. Angle, S. and Benjamin, S. : Seventeen Reasons : Why the squatters problem can't be solved, in *EKISTICS*, Jan, 76.
3. A national survey in 1974 of rural families in Bangladesh has found 37.88 per cent to be landless, 42.00 per cent to be unemployed and under-employed and man-land ratio to be 0.315 acre. See : Abdullah, Abu. et. al : *CIDA/ILO Report on IRDP, Dacca, 1974.*

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4. Abrams, C. : *Squatter Settlements : The problem and the Opportunity*. UN Pub. Ideas and Methods Exchange Series, No. 63. 1971.
5. Turner, J. : *The Squatter Settlement, Architecture that Works*, *Architectural Design*, August 1968.
6. Corea, C. : "No Cost Housing with Vernacular Technology and Space Trade-offs" in *Urban Development-A Perspective*, Muttagi, P.K. (ed.), Tata Inst. of Social Science, Bombay, 1975.
7. Agle, S. and Bengamin, S. : *Op.Cit.* See also : Centre for Urban Studies, (Dacca University) : *Squatters in Bangladesh Cities : A Survey of Urban Squatters in Dacca, Chittagong and Khulna, 1974*. (Report prepared for the Ministry of Works and Urban Development, Government of Bangladesh, Dacca, 1975)

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1. Foreign Staff, "Dacca's Slum Squatters", in *Survey* (Dacca), April 6, 1975.
2. Agle, S. and Bengamin, S. : *Government Housing : Why the squatter problem can't be solved*, in *EXISTENCE*, Jan. 75.
3. A national survey in 1974 of rural families in Bangladesh found 37.6% per cent to be landless, 47.00 per cent to be semi-unemployed and under-employed and non-land ratio to be 0.15 acre. See : *Abdullah, Abu, et al. CIDAWO Report on IRDP, Dacca, 1974*.