The housing crisis for the poor in India’s capital

Lack of affordable housing, reduced land entitlements and accelerated housing for the privileged are behind the crisis.

By **Afzal Sofi**
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Activists say increased commercial activities in urban centres drives up house prices and increases the inability of the lower economic class to buy or rent these dwellings. In addition, informal rental operators, who are neither tenants nor proprietors of such housing facilities, run and maintain rental housing facilities in New Delhi. They are able to change the rent or sale rates at any time, they say. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

As India becomes the world’s most populated country with 1.4 billion people, housing, particularly for low-income urban households, remains a longstanding challenge.

According to a report by India’s Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, there was a housing gap of about 19 million units throughout Indian cities in 2012. The study, done in light of the 2011 census, added that housing for low-income groups accounted for more than 95 percent of the deficit.

India’s 2021 census was suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic and is yet to be announced.

Another study by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) in 2020 found that India’s urban housing shortage rose 54 percent to 29

million in 2018 from 18.78 million in 2012. It included households that were homeless, households that lived in inadequate houses that could not be upgraded, houses that were obsolete and those that lived in congested conditions.

According to the Delhi government's Economic Survey for 2020-2021, 6.75 million people lived in poor housing in low-income settlements only in New Delhi, India's capital, which included 695 slum settlements, 1,797 unauthorised colonies and 362 urban villages.

An additional 2.4 million new housing units were required to meet New Delhi's housing deficit, it said.

"I have lived in Delhi for 40 years, worked hard my entire life, but I could never afford a better house for myself," Shah Alam, an autorickshaw driver who lives in a single room with his family in a slum in the city's Ghazipur area, told Al Jazeera.

Experts say the slow speed of building affordable housing, reduced land and space entitlements, accelerated housing production for the privileged classes, and large-scale demolitions and evictions have contributed to the urban housing crisis in India.

India's government has implemented a number of housing policies and projects in response to the perennial challenge, mainly among low and middle-income groups.

The Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB) says it is trying to improve housing quality and provide shelter to the homeless in the city of nearly 20 million residents.

"The board is implementing the approved plan schemes to improve the quality of housing in Delhi," the board's CEO Garima Gupta told Al Jazeera.

But activists say the houses built under such projects are insufficient in number, often unaffordable, or unviable for those most in need.

"Given the high cost of land and construction materials, building low-cost houses for low-income people is not economically viable. The low-income class cannot afford the house unless the charges are subsidised," Abdul Shakeel, urban practitioner and member of a civil society group on housing in New Delhi, told Al Jazeera.

Shah Alam lives with his wife and three children in a slum in the city's Ghazipur area. He moved with his father from West Bengal state 40 years ago in search of better livelihood. He says he witnessed his home and locality destroyed by fire eight times, forcing them to relocate from one slum to another. 'Delhi has changed the fortunes of so many people, but in my case, I only had to move from one slum to another,' he said. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

Ishamuddin Khan is a professional magician who has performed in various countries. But he lives in a single room with his wife and four children after being relocated there with hundreds of families from Katputli Colony, a slum which is home to thousands of street performers and artisans. The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) chose the colony for a rehabilitation project in 2008, but the work is yet to be finished. 'I have performed in foreign countries, but I don’t have own house in my country,' said Khan. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

Anjali Mandal stands on the remains of her demolished home in New Delhi's Tughlaqabad area, where the government bulldozed hundreds of homes as part of its anti-encroachment drive in April this year. Mandal, a domestic worker, paid 200,000 rupees ($2,418) to a dubious land dealer who said they could build a house there. 'It took us years to build a house, but it was destroyed in minutes,' she said. In Delhi, fraudulent property agents frequently deceive people into purchasing land in unauthorised localities. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

Firdous, 7, and his sister Aleesha, 9, play with their toys on the ruins of their home, demolished by the government in April along with hundreds of other residences in the Tughlaqabad area of New Delhi. 'We can't afford a new house or a room on rent in Delhi. So we are not leaving this place in the hope that we are allowed to live here again,' said Salma Begum, their mother. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

Shivani's home was demolished by officials in March this year. Her family took shelter under a bridge and will remain there till they find a place to live. 'My father is a street vendor. He can't afford a rented house for us. It is hard to live here with no basic amenities, privacy and safety,' the 18-year-old said. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

Farmers living on the banks of Yamuna River stage a sit-in protest against the demolition of their houses and eviction from farms in the Belagaon area on the outskirts of New Delhi. They have been protesting since March when the government carried out the demolitions. 'The land was given to us on lease decades ago, but we were evicted with no prior notice from authorities. Now we are homeless as well as landless,' Hira Lal told Al Jazeera. The Missing Basti Project, a civil society group, says it has recorded nearly 300 mass evictions in New Delhi over the past three decades. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

Piyush, 30, migrated from western Punjab state to New Delhi to receive better medical care for his dislocated hip. His treatment necessitates regular hospital visits but he lacks the financial means to afford a rented room for himself and chooses to live at the premises of a government hospital. Millions of poor Indians are forced to stay in hospital compounds or on footpaths near hospitals because they cannot afford rented accommodation. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

Shanti Devi is seen rebuilding her temporary shed under a flyover in Malegaon area on New Delhi outskirts. Her hut was washed away by the floods in July this year which displaced hundreds of families. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

A view of a government-run relief camp for the homeless affected by this year's floods in New Delhi's Sonia Vihar area. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

According to the 2011 census, India had more than 1.7 million homeless residents forced to live along roads and pavements, under flyovers, or in places of worship and railway platforms. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

A homeless family living on a roadside pavement in Mayur Vihar area of New Delhi. The Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN) estimates the number of homeless in the city at around 150,000–200,000, of whom at least 10,000 are women. The government says it has about 200 homeless shelters in the city that can accommodate around 17,000 people only. The rest are left to live in the open despite extreme weather conditions. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

A woman walks at an unauthorised housing locality in New Delhi's Ghayaspur area. It is estimated that 12–20 million households live in such informal localities. Various research findings say these settlements have little access to essential services and amenities. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

Children sit in front of a makeshift school in an unauthorised locality housing low-income migrant communities in New Delhi's Chilla Khadar area. The school is run by the community with the assistance of an NGO. However, both the community and the school face eviction or demolition threats under the government's ongoing anti-encroachment drive. [Afzal Sofi/Al Jazeera]

Source: Reuters
https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2023/8/30/photos-the-housing-crisis-for-the-poor-in-indias-capital

Discussion Questions:

What are the main factors leading to this housing crisis?

WHat are some ways to mitigate this housing crisis.