



# Tracing Land Alienation and Livelihood Concerns of Kathputli Town

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## ABSTRACT

The rising land price, FAR<sup>1</sup>, decentralisation and desperate attempt by the policy makers to build a world class city has been transforming the socio-economic relationship of the urban poor especially that of marginalised communities of artisans, whose traditional art-form has been acknowledged at both domestic and international level seems threatened. The work attempts to garner emerging and existing issues for one of its kind artist's ghetto, Kathputli, in metropolitan Delhi. It embarks on vulnerability issues which have come to the forefront with media reports of in-situ rehabilitation of slums (first experiment) undertaken by Delhi Development Authority on PPP model paradoxically without involving the beneficiaries in the project, thereby raising reservation for the same. The study seeks to find the livelihood concern that emanates from their being alienated from the land, which has been their home since ages. Relocation and resettlement to new place would jeopardize their economic prospect and spell a doom to their art. The study specifically examines and presents the views and perceptions of these communities in the face of the impending eviction from their colony and also focuses on their need so that they fit in the changing landscape. It brings out their apprehensions, concerns and prospect about the future.

Keywords: artists' colony, in-situ resettlement, livelihood concern, vulnerability.

## INTRODUCTION

Kathputli is a tinsel slum in Shadipur depot area of Delhi, the administrative capital of India. The uniqueness of this colony lies in the profession its inhabitants pursue. It contains communities hailing from different parts of the country, who earn their living by performance and practice of their century old art and culture, which they proudly announce to have inherited from their forefathers. The colony is a mosaic of puppeteers, kalandars (monkey handlers) magicians, acrobats, jugglers, mime artists, folk dancers, street performers, sarangi<sup>2</sup> players and singers from different parts of India, settled here in 1970s, when Rajiv Sethi<sup>3</sup> had taken the initiative to organise artists in a cooperative society, so that they can avail the right to their land. This slum also got mention in Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight's Children* and has caught attention of American documentary filmmakers Jim Goldblum, Adam Weber and Joshua Cogan, which

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<sup>1</sup>Floor Area Ratio

<sup>2</sup>short neck stringed musical instrument

<sup>3</sup>Indian designer, scenographer, art curator and Padma Bhushan awardee (1986).

culminated in a film documentary, “Tomorrow we disappear” (12). The film highlights the destruction of Kathputli as well as disappearance of other heritage arts in South Asia.

Kathputli, a Hindi word for wooden puppet, began as a makeshift tent set up by traveller puppeteers from Rajasthan in an open field. The Bhatt/ Nutt community from Rajasthan were the first settlers in the colony who over the years were joined by other performers from U.P., Bihar, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, artists from different states practicing similar profession eventually resulted in the establishment of this colony which is now famous as “Kathputli Colony”. Around 700 artists of this ghetto have represented India in different international cultural events. Its national and international recognition has earned it names like Kalakaronkibasti, Bazeegar-colony, Jadugaronkiduniya, Madari-colony. History of evolution of this art can be traced in the bygone era. After the war, combat scenes were demonstrated with wooden sticks, mime, folk tales, dance and songs that praised at length the strength and courage of their king and his cavalry. They acted as a medium of communication about the king’s might to the neighbouring area and also a source of entertainment. Being nomadic and rebellious by nature they spread the news and lived by their own rule. They were in great demand for they acted as either maker or breaker of royal image. A lot of their narrative (folk lore, song and drama) even helps to stitch pieces of history.

In recent years, like most urban slums, this locality too is looked down upon more as a sore in the metropolitan landscape which is striving hard to earn world class status. In this loop, Delhi Development Authority has shifted from eviction driven approach to PPP (public-private-participation) model, so as to acknowledge urban poor in the planning process and make all clearances in accordance with the agreement need to be obtained by the developer (13). DDA is tracking existing and new encroachment of its land online with real time mapping through satellites. It is estimated that out of its 79,000 acres of vacant land, 1500 acre is encroached upon (The Economic Times, 2014) that makes a case in point for Kathputli town (7). DDA’s resettlement drive for the slums proposed resettlement for Kathputli in VasantKunj or Mehrauli or Dwarka, (basically South Delhi) but did not implement the proposal as neither of these place was as centrally located as their current Shadipur settlement. GPMA (Gian P. Mathura and Associates), architecture and planning firm was consulted by DDA on Kathputli project and they together worked on the details and designs of the project. This would be DDA’s first experimental project of its kind wherein 5.22 hectares of Kathputli land will be developed by M/S Raheja Developers, a private firm in partnership with DDA and Delhi’s first true skyscraper – a 190 meter high tower with 54 floors of luxury flays, a sky club and a helipad will come upon the present Kathputli colony (1). The highlight of this project is construction of 2800 EWS flats for the artisans and residents of Kathputli colony. Meanwhile, residents of Kathputli colony will be shifted in transit flats in a nearby locality – Anand Parbat (11).

The study focuses on pre-post relocation issues, vulnerability and livelihood concerns of slum artisans. It makes a sincere attempt to understand the needs of artisans for whom the policy has been framed, the gap between practical and theoretical applicability and also, critically analyse the relocation and in situ rehabilitation policy. The objectives of the study were examining the vulnerability, livelihood concern and future prospect of slum dwellers and exploring the rehabilitation policy in light of Kathputli and suggest concerns.

## METHODOLOGY

The study is based on primary data obtained through structured questionnaire designed for residents of Kathputli. The questionnaire has been so distributed amongst the respondents to include variation in age, gender, craft, class and workers. Also, secondary data sources have been explored through various magazines, articles, newspaper, journals and blogs.

## DISCUSSION

The artisans ghetto-Kathputli colony, is dotted with dilapidated mud huts, hovels, shanties without shades, open drains, narrow alleyways, pigs, stray dogs, heaps of garbage, flies, mosquito, without running water and basic sanitation. A very few families have pucca house or cemented structure, indicating a sort of class division amongst them. The Kathputli community is amalgamation of people from different states. There are acrobats and puppeteers from Jhunjhunu district of Rajasthan, magicians and kalandars from Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, folk singers, dancers, jugglers, drummers from states like Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Rajasthan. Members of Valmiki caste from Delhi and Gurgaon have also joined them but they are employed as cleaners and peons in offices. All these communities have got settled and organised around its artistry, and have formed BhuleBisreKalakar Cooperative. Artists of this colony found work through SangeetNatak Academy. These communities are a mix of Hindus, Muslims and Christians (4). The place represents a melting pot of diverse culture, community, religion, talent and art form, all sustaining peacefully.



Fig.1 Stilt artists



Fig.2 Puppeteers

There have been many existing and emerging issues arising from the DDA's in-situ resettlement plan policy (land alienation) for the slum areas that may have a long lasting impact on the livelihood (vulnerability concerns) of the slum dwellers. First, artisans apprehend, how would they continue their work and livelihood as wood workers, idol makers, stilt artists who walk on 15 foot tall stilts (Fig.1), puppeteers who make fifteen feet tall puppets (Fig.2), painters, magicians, drummers who play dhols<sup>4</sup> that weigh 60kg in small flats. Also rickshaw pullers need place to park their vehicle, toy makers, magicians, rope walkers need space to store their equipment. But the EWS (Economically Weaker Section) dwelling unit as per RAY (Rajiv Awaas Yojna) is a minimum of 30.5 square metres i.e. two rooms inclusive of kitchen and bathroom only (8) and does not provide enough space for an average family of five members (9). Second, efforts by the authorities to beautify city at the time of Common Wealth Games and Grand Prix events attracted focus on relocating slums. Also, surge in the real estate price in Delhi due to rapid growth of Indian economy has put pressure on the authorities to reclaim valuable

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<sup>4</sup>double headed drum, musical instrument

land occupied by slums. These developments have made the inhabitants of Kathputli town apprehensive about their future. They fear that once the colony is bulldozed they may never be allowed to return. Third, earmarking a suitable area for the transit town was also a stupendous task that would not only guarantee a safe haven but also be an undisputable location. It would at least meet the needs of artists for temporary period in transit site. Various locations were initially spotted like Delhi Cloth Mills, which saw resistances from local residents; Basai Darapur, which was already booked for construction of a community centre; Jailorwala Bagh, where work had begun for relocating another slum; Ghaziabad flyover and Rohini sector 28, not selected for longer distance from the centre location (1) but were rejected for the aforesaid reasons. Fourthly, the transit town, Anand Parbat - finally selected, is five kilometres from the original settlement. It too has witnessed opposition from local residents (East Patel Nagar) who have apprehensions that their sports activities (Ramjas Ground) may be affected and further there might be misuse of space and amenities by the people after shifting. It is difficult to assume these artists will fit well in Anand Parbat on temporary basis (10) and then relocate back to Kathputli town without damaging their livelihood. The new relationship with adjoining area and insecurities without an affirmative share in the relocated colony only accentuates their fear. Fifth, the transit accommodation need to be returned intact, else the artists have to bear the payment and maintenance charge. Sixth, as per the contract, time limit set for the completion of project is two years from the date of its commencement but as the developer has to fulfil environmental clearance from State/UT Environment Impact Assessment Authority and also document all the clearances from various agencies like Delhi Jal Board, Municipal Corporation of Delhi, Fire Services and Delhi Urban Arts Commission, (1) it is estimated to stretch beyond stipulated time, thereby causing concern among the dwellers on their prospect of shifting back to the Kathputli town on the scheduled time mentioned. Seventh, the houses in the transit town are made of gypsum boards, each room with single fan and a single electricity outlet. Lack of sewage and water alarms about basic sanitation needs. Also, portable toilets will be installed for the residents. It sounds better infrastructure for some non-performers who work as peons, cleaners or guards but for most these do not help in the long run and is not in line with governments' proposal for slum development programme. Eighth, fear is writ large among the residents regarding their space ownership in transit town (Anand Parbat) and also in the resettlement colony (5). Though DDA has conducted onsite survey, biometric survey and photographed each household in front of his jhuggi, still a ration card and voter's ID (3) have each been identified as a document required for proving residence in the colony (6). The manner in which DDA has put a mark on the walls of the jhuggis has been matter of concern among the local people. The ground floor along with first floor has been marked once and is considered as a sub unit thereby causing great alarm where a large number of the older residents built upper stories when their children got married, thus inducing the fear that only older generation will be included or the different territorial floors will be included as a single unit in the list of residents eligible for rehabilitation. Ninth, there is dichotomy in approach towards slum development, where it is either seen best to develop with private partnership or such projects should be the responsibility of state and should not be used for profit. Tenth, Delhi Urban Arts Commission opines that when large number of slum dwellers will be accommodated in parallel multi-storeyed blocks, hardly 15 metres apart, this will present an architecturally and environmentally undesirable solution (2). Also, elite residents in the adjoining area of luxury flat will not approve of any low class neighbourhood. There will be wide gap and disparity in the social milieu and repercussions to follow.

For the residents of Kathputli, to get alienated from their land to a makeshift accommodation and then re-shift to so called improved structures does not translates well. These changes create a huge impact on the livelihood of the people who have been emotionally attached to the area for centuries. They have lived their lives here and also wish to see their children attend schools and local crafts workshop in future. With this shift their base is uprooted and in couple of years' time if ever they return back to newer Kathputli town it will take them many more years to get accustomed to the changes within and with the nearby area. It will transform their way of life, their relationship with their culture and tradition. They will have to adapt to space constraint & restricted movement in practice of their art-form and may have to deal with occasional resistance from the nearby elite areas. On the other hand, for some (poorest of poor) amongst them it may transform their living with better infrastructure. Also to be seen in future will be the ownership rights and maintenance of these flats. With the growth in demand and increase in slum population residential alternatives need to be explored. Though it is imprudent to generalise but the welfare concerns that mark the livelihood of these artists who have so far sustained and nurtured their art-form and the fear of being alienated from their own land emerges as the most crucial point.

### CONCLUSION

The study is an attempt to understand the urban space transformations that may have an everlasting impact on economic, social and emotional space of the people of Kathputli town. The focus should be on inclusive development of an area with a fair intent and a strong will from all stakeholders involved. The need and concern of the slum dwellers or artisans should and must be incorporated in the plan and project development. People everywhere have a strong sense of belonging to land, more so, for the artisans of Kathputli, as the land has been home, a source of livelihood and has given them identity. The open area provides them space to create, learn, practice different art forms and earn national and international accolades for their art. Land alienation and rehabilitation is a painful exercise for the dwellers. The uncertainty about their future residence, apprehensions on bills that may be levied even for using basic amenities, small size area, expanding family, duration of stay in transit camps that may even stretch, and most importantly the question, if all goes well on time will they be really rehabilitated from transit camps to proposed multi storey towers in future, and not stranded, arise. In a task to resettle slum dwellers in a high rise, close to their original home through public private partnership, the private developers get slum's land property for residential and commercial purposes. With metro in vicinity, the slum land becomes a gold mine that is being prepared to be transformed to tall towers, in exchange, artisans will be housed in multi storey flats built next door. Though the concept is normative and has yet to consider the participation and inclusiveness of the beneficiaries. Only 2800 people have shifted to transit camps in phase I for ensuring a smooth exit. Land parcel or transit camp that have been created as an temporary arrangement are too involved in hurdles as there is a discontent on duration, structure and space available. It is seen as an encroachment on the identity of artisans, as most of the steps have been taken without acknowledging their needs and thus, have created fear and discontent. Kathputli town, pilot project (PPP) is all the more important as it will set up an example for twenty other slums project lined up to be rehabilitated in the city. To develop the confidence amongst artisans and promote livelihood, it is best to develop such projects as a responsibility of the State.

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