

For 40,000 People, This is Home By Amina Khatun

Twenty people to 100 square feet, 100 people to a single toilet, open drains, illegally “hooked” electricity, young men wrapped in plastic sheets sleeping out in the rain....Part 2 in our series on urban poverty in Priya Manna Basti, Howrah.

Priya Manna Basti in Howrah grew around the jute mills that provided employment to the migrants who flocked into Calcutta in the first half of the 20th century. A hundred years on, little has changed. It continues to be backward and it continues to be populated by permanent or temporary workers at the jute mills, owners of small shops, fruit and vegetable-sellers, rickshaw-drivers or workers in shops in Kolkata's Barrabazaar. Very few have white-collar jobs.

Ainul Haq is 58. He works in the jute mill. His father and grandfather both grew up in Priya Manna Basti. Ainul was born into a very poor family. His father drank excessively and squandered his money. His mother worked as a domestic help. At an early age, all three brothers worked in other people's homes. Ainul fetched water, held umbrellas over street vendors and worked in a barber's saloon, first as a masseur and then as a barber. He started working at the jute mill when he was about 18. He has never been inside a school.

Ainul recalls the days when there were intimate and harmonious relations between people. He realises today that their parents never thought about their children's future. He has three daughters and two sons; the eldest daughter is married. When asked what he wants for his children, he says he has no dreams of turning his children into doctors or engineers. He wants them to be good citizens and decent human beings. He has sent his eldest son overseas, to the Gulf, to work. "I did not want my children to face the hardship and hard work I did. I want them to have a better life."

Besides being a place of dwelling, the basti is also a place where a lot of household manufacturing takes place. Among the products made here are knives, footwear, hair clips, bangles, bindis, polished vessels, zari embroidery, and toys. There are also a few nihariyas who extract precious metals from the floor sweepings of goldsmith shops.

Most of the people of Priya Manna Basti are uneducated. Indeed, this settlement of around 40,000 people has only one higher secondary school (Urdu-medium) which came up around two years ago. Earlier, girls could study here only till Class 8; then, about five years ago, a separate girls section was started, going up to Class 10. The school was extended to Class 10 (for boys) in 1986. It received recognition as a junior high school in 1978. There are also two smaller Urdu-medium primary schools that are recognised and aided by the government. In addition, there are two unrecognised junior high schools (till Class 8) -- one for girls only and one for boys and girls. And there is one non-formal school, Talimi Haq School.

There are two mosques and one madrasa in Priya Manna Basti. There is no government healthcare centre although, at least on paper, there is supposed to be one. If there is, no one knows about it and no one goes there. Apparently, it has been turned into a political party office. There are a number of youth clubs and associations inside Priya Manna Basti. In fact, every lane has several. But only a few are registered organisations. There's Bharat Gymnastic where one can exercise,

watch TV and play carom. This is also the venue for the government's anganwadi programme. Then there's Seven Star Club for TV and football; Tiger Club has carom and also boasts a football team.

Riyaz Ali (name changed) is an unemployed youth who lives in Priya Manna Basti. He is a graduate. He visits the clubs frequently. Or he goes to his former college, Shibpur Dinabandhu Institution. He says he plays carom to freshen his mind, and for entertainment. Everyone is allowed to play in the club; those who lose pay Rs 4 each. That's an income for the club. Riyaz confesses that he often entices girls and gets his way with them by putting drugs into their tea. One girl tried to kill herself when he refused to marry her. After suffering for several months, she died. Riyaz Ali used to live near Mallik Phatak in Howrah. He says he received "training" at an early age from local youths, delivering letters and buying medicines or condoms. He has mastered the art of "assessing" girls, spotting who is fair game. When he was young he would lay wagers on accosting and "squeezing" girls.

There are a number of social organisations in Priya Manna Basti. Anjuman Tamiri Millat distributes clothes among poor women on Id, gives out blankets in winter, and assists in the marriage of poor girls. Tanzeem Aslah-e-Millat has a dispensary run by someone who calls himself a doctor. It provides nursing training to girls who have passed Class 10, and first-aid training to young people. The organisation attempts to place the girls in nursing homes, but charges Rs 200-250 every month, besides a hefty admission fee. It also lends old schoolbooks to children. Sir Syed Library used to distribute books among poor students, but has now stopped. It runs a school elsewhere, in Fazir Bazaar. All these social organisations get funds from the basti community, through the sale of animal skins after Bakri Id and from zakaat contributions. The NGO SEED runs a dispensary and a so-called "English-medium" school that charges the same kind of fees as other local "English-medium" schools. SEED also maintains a short-stay home for girls, but the girls here are not from Priya Manna Basti. South Point is a dispensary run by the German Doctors' Committee. It provides free medicines.

Howrah Pilot Project is a voluntary association that runs a pre-primary and primary school, a sewing and stitch-craft school, and a school for working boys. It also organises free cataract operations and undertakes family planning counselling. Because of problems between the mill authorities and the people of the basti, and following a court order, the playground adjoining and serving the community at Priya Manna Basti has been closed for some years.

Twenty to a room

The people of Priya Manna Basti live under the 'thika tenancy' arrangement. The land belongs to one person (the mill), the hut to someone else (the thika tenant), and a third party lives in the hut (the worker). Most people are long-time residents, having lived here for generations. The average dimensions of a room in Priya Manna Basti are 10x10 sq ft. Each room has a small verandah out front where the women cook, bathe and wash clothes.

Earlier, the single huts were made out of mud and had semi-cylindrical tile roofs. Some of these are still visible today. Later, the huts were integrated around the four sides of an open courtyard, or aangan. During weddings, the guests ate in the courtyard. Clothes were washed and hung to dry in the courtyard; indeed there were so many quarrels over the drying of clothes that an arrangement

was worked out whereby time was allotted to each family for this purpose. The women did not stir out of their homes. When the men left for work, they emerged in the courtyard and sat in the sun. When someone died, the body was washed in the courtyard before being taken for burial. Thus, the courtyard was the focal point for most families.

When hutments around a courtyard are demolished to construct a building, there is a discussion between the tenants and the hut owners. The tenants are told that they will get a proper room within six months. But during those six months they face enormous difficulties. They have to find a place to stay and often end up paying ten times higher rent for temporary accommodation. Sometimes, the building could take up to two years to be completed.

Sogra Khatoon, a middle-aged woman, recalls that while sunlight and fresh air were abundant earlier, in the new buildings people pine for a bit of light and air. Rooms given to people in the new buildings measure a maximum of 100 sq ft; they could be as small as 60 sq ft. As many as 20 people often live in these tiny quarters (the minimum number would be six). In several houses, chickens and goats too are raised in this small space.

The women sleep indoors, men outside. When shops in the basti close for the night, people sleep outside them, or on handcarts. Quarrels over sleeping space are common, especially when darkness envelops the basti during a power cut or when the electricity inspectors arrive. Most of the electricity in Priya Manna Basti is come by illegally. Not just here, but in bastis across the city, electricity is mostly obtained illegally, by "hooking".

The most trying time for the inhabitants is during the monsoon. People who do not have a roof over their heads stand through the night waiting for the rain to stop so they can lie down somewhere. Young boys who drive cycle-rickshaws all day wrap themselves in a plastic sheet and get comfortable on a handcart. Rain or no rain, it makes little difference to them. They have to go out to work the next day, so they have to find a way to sleep at night.

Mohammad Raja, 15, is a cycle-rickshaw puller. During the monsoon, he sleeps out in the rain under a plastic sheet. Raja has four sisters. Three of them are married but they continue to stay with him and his mother. Their elder brother is mentally ill. Their father is dead, so the responsibility of the family has fallen on Raja's young shoulders. He had to discontinue his studies and start driving a rickshaw. He has been doing this for the last three years. The vehicle is not his; he drives a hired rickshaw for which he pays Rs 30 every day as rent. "If I stay away from work for even a day, how will my family survive? And I have to pay a rental on the vehicle too. So I have to get some sleep at night in order to be able to go to work the next morning. Ours is a small room. There is no space for me. So I have to look for place outside."

The women are forced to sleep indoors whether there is electricity or not. When the men are at home, the women cannot bathe. Sometimes it is a week before they can have a bath. There is no separate kitchen. Food is cooked inside the room. Some women put wooden planks over the drains and cook on them. The buildings discharge excreta into these narrow drains that run along the

lanes. And all of them are open. No one ever complains to the owner of the building. Nor does the corporation do anything. When people cook their food next to these drains, how can they stay healthy? In a plot with hutments around a courtyard there is usually just one toilet which is used by at least 10 families. That could mean as many as 100 people. Each one has to wait his turn. Women bathe with their clothes on and so are unable to wash themselves properly. When girls and women menstruate, they use old cloth which is re-used after washing.

Illegal construction Over the last 15 years or so, large tracts of basti land in the city have become targets for illegal construction. Even in the largest bastis, the characteristic red tile roofs are fast disappearing, to be replaced by ugly, unsafe and poorly constructed buildings of up to five floors. This has put additional strain on the already overstretched civic amenities in the bastis.

Buildings are constructed without any formal sanction and in total violation of the corporation's building byelaws. Corporation functionaries, political party leaders and workers and local businessmen and criminals-turned-promoters have all enhanced their mutual interests and earnings through such illegal construction. In 1997, the Howrah Municipal Corporation started taking action against illegal construction after the situation deteriorated. One structure in Priya Manna Basti was partially demolished and a few building owners and promoters taken into custody. Notices were subsequently served on the owners of these buildings. For a long time, the structures remained incomplete. Then the beneficiaries of the illegal construction grew restive and soon enough, the illegal construction resumed.

The land on which Priya Manna Basti stands belongs to Howrah Mills. But the law protects the hut-owning thika tenants' rights. And they have limited rights to develop the existing structures. External promoters approach the thika tenants -- who presently receive nominal rents and also lack the capital to undertake any development -- and obtain the right to construct four-to-five-storey buildings. The structures violate the building bye-laws. They are poorly constructed and unsafe. As they lack any proper sanitation facilities, the flats discharge excreta directly into the drains in the basti lanes.

The tenants move out temporarily, to return to ill-lit, poorly ventilated, single-room units in the new structures for which they have to pay a greater rent. They are allotted units in the illegal floors, which are usually smaller than their earlier rooms. They also lose access to open and communal spaces like inner courtyards. New flats in the illegal building are given to outsiders who are in need of residential or commercial space. They are given out by the promoter for a one-time lumpsum payment (salaami) -- a hefty amount, but still much less than the market value of built-up space in the locality -- besides a relatively modest monthly rent. In Priya Manna Basti today, the salaami would be around Rs 400-500 per square foot, and the monthly rent Re 1 per square foot. The salaami gives the new household 'secure' occupation rights over the unit. The promoter pockets the salaami and collects rent for five to seven years, after which the right to collect rent is given over to the thika tenant. For the original tenants' units, the rent is retained by the thika tenant. Though everything in these transactions is illegal, it flourishes. The police, local political leaders and activists from the major political parties, hoodlums, municipal councillors and officials -- all plan and execute the deals.

Given the already severely degraded conditions in the bastis, such illegal construction makes the possibility of wholesome improvements or planned redevelopment more remote.

The alternative After having lived for generations and decades in the basti, in the city, the inhabitants have a right to be granted legal title to shelter. The basti must be physically redeveloped in their favour, with their active participation. The manufacturing activities of small entrepreneurs in the basti are presently severely crippled because of lack of working space, obsolete production techniques, difficulty in procuring raw materials and lack of access to credit and markets. With institutional attention and assistance, these trades and self-employment avenues could be upgraded. The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission could provide a major boost to the process of basti redevelopment.

With the present economic downturn, real estate developers have become a little passive, offering the opportunity to pursue another vision -- that of community-led basti redevelopment which could be a powerful means to renew the community spirit and empower the labouring poor. It is a challenge that the youth of Priya Manna Basti must take up.