

**Workshop on
Shelter Security and Social Protection for the Urban Poor and the Migrants in
Asia**

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Key note speech

A roof and a Toilet for Each

Presented By,

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I thank you for inviting me to the regional workshop that is concerned about the issues of shelter security of the urban poor.

In India, our favourite slogan is Roti, Kapada, makan meaning food, clothes, shelter but we have yet to graduate from roti to makan. Shelter somehow has not got prominence on political agenda. I am puzzled, despite shelter being obvious, concrete, visible vote catching benefit to massive number of voters, why political parties have not put shelter as their priority programme. For poor and women, as SEWA experience goes, shelter is their number one priority in life.

Our SEWA Cooperative Bank experience has been that even a humble small input to poor womanlike housing finance has strengthened our organization. The members have appreciated SEWA providing technical assistance, facilitating land title clearance, enlisting them into government programmes and more. However with regard to political parties, hardly any of them has taken up shelter provision on priority basis with political power in ruling or in position. The parties could have habilitated thousands and lakhs of citizens bare minimum with a roof and toilet. So, how can we bring a roof and toilet on political agenda?

A roof over their heads make their family complete. Physically and mentally it feels protected against the wrath of nature and violent forces of the society. Since home is another name for peace, I wonder why during conflict resolutions the issue of home is hardly discussed.

We see with our own eyes that home is also a workplace. In city slums, people work under their roof and earn their livelihood stitching garments, making kites, producing food items, assembling machinery parts, running shop, holding tuition classes or using a corner as storage. For them their houses are their assets, their own wealth. House is where the next generation is raised and reared. We all have home. Do we need more official studies and policy documents to find that the safer the living conditions the better is the future citizenry?!

Above all, secure shelter gives citizenship rights to urban residents. For a large portion of the urban poor who live in slums, there is a problem of who you are. Unless you have a house, a house address you do not exist. The house you live in is illegal so you cannot have power nor water connection, nor ration card. If residence is illegal, how does one establish one's legal citizenship? Moreover, you as a poor and a woman work in informal sector and contribute to the city economy. Because your home which is your workplace is nonexistent or "illegal", you can't improve your living conditions nor increase your productivity or increase income by working for longer hours. So, your right to citizenship is denied, your right to make a living is denied. This is not *Swaraj!*

Moreover, it is absurd to apply the rule of land ownership or land tenure to the provision of basic primary human needs of water and sanitation. Minimum level of safe water and sanitation, irrespective of identity proof or status of migration should be extended to every city dweller, in their own right, - this is freedom..

It is puzzling that why the poor are not encouraged to make investments in their own existing housing? Why is tenure security required for the purpose? In fact, we should encourage the poor to invest in their living place. How long do we go on stating this issue? I remember, since the first Habitat Conference in 1976 at Vancouver, this has been argued but there has been very little progress on this front.

It appears that the cities and the city government do not want to give land access to the urban poor!

The other puzzle in my mind is that providing toilet and shelter is not all that costly. It is cheaper than loans written off to big farmers. It is far more cheaper than the concessions provided to the industries in SEZ i.e. Special Economic Zone, even less expensive than the bad debts that the banks wrote off. If we look at the investment side, the amount needed by a poor family for a roof and a toilet is far less than the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme, in India. If we look at the scale of investments that is coming in India, the scope (cost) of providing shelter and toilet to the needy is very small percentage of it. It is unbelievable that still after 60 years of Independence and three decades of economic progress, and even after committing ourselves to the shelter for poor in the Vancouver World Conference and every conference thereafter; we have not come out with a National shelter or housing guarantee programme. We should ask our Governments to provide in their budgets for a national housing guarantee programme for the poor, particularly women among the poor and spell out how it can work with the existing government machinery with the partnership with people's own initiatives. The question is, why we do not take benefit of the various initiatives taken by the people themselves. Of course, we must build new housing units but we must also facilitate all other approaches to shelter security for the urban poor.

Asian cities today, are busy preparing City Vision Plans. What vision, whose vision?! Tall buildings, glass buildings, exhaling more emissions and throwing more waste!? Is this the vision of citizens or someone else? Asian cities today are competition of building tall towers, Dubai, Shanghai, and Mumbai, copying each other. Is this the concept of World Class cities? Is there a race to copy? Where is the creativity of Architects and originality of city planners that suit our conditions?

I wonder, why there is no competition among cities to make cities slum free. A world Class city is one where each one is a citizen and each citizen has a roof and

a toilet. I would welcome the world competition of slum free Cities. But wait! A slum free city would not mean that the slum dwellers will be ousted from the city or that they will be not allowed to even enter the city.

Of course, the houses for the poor have to be affordable to them, if not; the houses will have to be made affordable to them. So I think of the market.

It has been the fact that the market did well as we have seen in last 8-10 years with rising GDP and unprecedented amount of investments and limitless salaries for the Executives and Professionals – I am puzzled then that even in the times of wealth, the poor do not have access to shelter or land for shelter. When the times are bad now, there is financial meltdown; we hear that the real estate market also has collapsed. We hear, houses are being sold off at ridiculously low price – even in these circumstances also the poor do not have access to shelter or toilet or the land for shelter and toilet!

What is it then that keeps the poor out, in good as well as in bad times, away from their basic primary need like a roof and a toilet? This puzzles me.

Regarding access to land: when policies are controlled e.g. when Land Ceiling Act is enforced, some amount of land does go to the poor for housing. Actually the Act has very limited and not many benefits. It is encouraging that when land laws are liberated, we see that in 3 months time in a private company can get land in SEZ or in a month's time a business house can get port/ harbor, and in 3 days time a company can get an auto factory plan cleared! However, even in these liberalized circumstances, to get land to house the poor takes years, if at all. Yes, one may be able to buy 500 sq. yd or 200 sq yd in the city but 20 sq yd plot is almost impossible for a family for a roof and a toilet. Even the most liberalized land policy keeps poor away from access to land.

It seems there is no land left in the city! So, no wonder the slum dwellers have to combat with cut throat antisocial forces, today, to hold on to the minimum shelter they already have. But then what about the new comers to the cities, do they have any option? Cities invite investments but not those who make those investments generate profits. Labour is welcome but not labourer.

We also have to recognize the fact that increasingly in some rural areas; adverse forces are so powerful that despite great reluctance to leave their homelands, the rural poor head for the city in search of work. This kind of migration is painful and traumatic. But greener pastures are nowhere to be found – certainly not in the city. The first thing they need is a place to sleep – not easy to feat in cities where even sidewalks are spoken or. Public places are continuously patrolled by the police – less for public safety and more for fees to look the other way.

The city municipal systems hardly touch this vast population; with its number growing, their issues are overwhelming. Actually, their instability and illegality are of advantage to the city. The city wants to prosper on this cheap, docile and easily available labour. By keeping their homes and work unauthorized a vast urban workforce is denied identity and their due economic return. Their children are everywhere, visible, working in streets, in factories, in markets, in homes but not in schools. Schools are far from their homes. Where is the social protection to the working poor, and the future citizens?

The constant feeling of being unwanted does not generate civic mindedness or loyalty to a city where they live and work for long years. Thus alienation roots in and opens a breeding ground for violence.

Simply put, if urbanisation is welcomed then the urban poor are also have to be welcome in the cities, and, we do need to find them space to live in the cities.

Earlier, when Textile industry was thriving in this city, almost till early '90s, this city had some obligation of shelter security like Mill Chawl housing provided by the industry to their laboring class. They were not evicted from their homes nor did they have to pay more rent (as these housing was under rent control), their children were not run over by traffic on the road and the children continued their schooling. But the era of industrial workers housing is gone with the Textile industry in the city. The new industries never thought of their workers' shelter security since most often they thrive on migrant labour. I am not sure that provision of shelter for the workforce is made an integral part of industrial investments documents.

The key note that addressed is rather sharing of the puzzle in my mind. You are all knowledgeable and experienced personalities. I hope we will be able to discuss and together find a constructive, peaceful way ahead.

If the present realities are not bettered, I fear, we will be left with hunger and more violence in our cities.