

Changes, Challenges, Connections: A Glimpse into Life in Kusumpur Pahari

Kusumpur Pahari, in the city-state of Delhi is one of the sites for my research on built environment issues. The following is a brief account of some of the challenges, opportunities and resources of Kusumpur Pahari residents based on formal interviews, conversations, and participation in NGO-organized meetings.

The Delhi Government identifies several types of informal settlements, with slums being one of the categories. A slum is defined as “a compact settlement with a collection of poorly built tenements, mostly of temporary nature, crowded together usually with inadequate sanitary and drinking water facilities in unhygienic conditions in that compact area commonly known as “Jhuggi Jhopri”.”¹ Such settlements are characterized not only by the poor living conditions but also by their lack of legal property rights and security of tenure.

Kusumpur Pahari (KP) falls under this classification. It is located in the midst of an affluent area of South Delhi on land owned by the Delhi Development Authority. There are several JJ Clusters in this part of Delhi and KP is one of the largest in its municipal ward. Residents who have lived here since the late 1970s recall that at that time the area was mostly jungle and there were only a few dwellings clustered together. Since then the numbers have expanded and, according to the Delhi Urban Improvement Shelter Board (DUSIB), there are now 4909 households in an area of 1732 sq. m. The residents of KP, typically, have migrated to Delhi from the neighboring states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Haryana in search of better opportunities. The neighborhood has grown in a haphazard way, with each incoming resident staking out a piece of land (though they do not have state-recognized title to the property). There seems to be a correlation between the duration of residence and the size of property with the earlier settlers having more sizeable properties and the later arrivals, smaller plots. It has narrow alleyways with open drains on the sides, and brick houses with rudimentary construction, many just the size of a room.

KP, which is considered a squatter’s settlement, has only very tenuous, if any, legal standing and for its residents, the Damocles sword of demolition and eviction is always hanging over them. However, the degree of threat varies based on the prevailing political climate, and cycle in electoral politics. For instance, I did field work for about eight months in 2015 and 2016, which was a period of political volatility at the Delhi state level when two elections were held within a span of fourteen months. Several KP residents, whom I interviewed then, expressed optimism about getting some form of legal standing. This perhaps was attributable to the fact that the various political parties, in their eagerness to garner votes, were making campaign promises to that effect. Quite a few of the KP residents expressed confidence about their political clout. One of them cited the fact that Sheila Dixit had visited the settlement several times when she was Chief Minister of Delhi. Another drew comfort from the sizeable population of the settlement, though he grossly overestimated the population size and the number of voters in the settlement.

In spite of or, perhaps, because of the periodic/sporadic attention that KP residents get from politicians, they wrestle with all manner of challenges. With regard to food, KP residents rely heavily on the public distribution system, which leaves them vulnerable to the many flaws in the system. Sanitation is another major concern. Water is a particularly fraught issue both in

¹ Urban Slums in Delhi state report (Feb 2015) based on NSS 69th round

terms of quantity supplied and the mode of delivery. There have been improvements from the late 1970s when, to get water, residents had to walk some distance to the public taps located at an adjoining affluent neighborhood. Now, residents receive water from the Delhi water authority operated tankers, which come to KP once a week, and from borewells that have been installed in different sections of the settlement that also run on a weekly schedule. However, the supply remains woefully inadequate, and the mode of delivery places a particularly heavy burden on the women, who shoulder the responsibility of getting the household water allocation.

Electricity, in contrast, was not mentioned as a concern; and when asked specifically, the residents seemed to be satisfied with its provision. This is a marked change from about ten years prior, when the only way residents were able to obtain electricity was by installing illegal connections to the supply network. The police would periodically conduct raids and disconnect these improvised installations. Since the repeal of a statute that restricted the state utility from providing electricity to informal settlements, and the privatization of electricity distribution, KP has been connected to the Delhi electrical distribution network. Moreover, there is an added incentive for getting metered connections since these serve as proof of residency, should the settlement be regularized. Many of the households have electrical appliances like televisions, and air coolers. Also, despite not having piped water, some of them have washing machines. I was told that these are used not for washing but for wringing out clothes so they dry faster.

A narrow walkway separates Kusumpur Pahari from the upper middle class neighborhood of Vasant Vihar, where a number of KP residents are employed as domestic help, for example, as cooks, housemaids, drivers, and guards. Others work in the various businesses, such as shops and restaurants, in the vicinity, primarily in low-skilled jobs like stocking and delivery. While most of the residents I met are employed in the informal sector, I did encounter some exceptions, such as a retired schoolteacher who had worked in the Delhi government run schools, a lab assistant at a private school, and a health worker at an NGO run clinic in KP. Employment is highly gendered. The women work primarily as domestic help, whereas the men have opportunities in businesses as well. Even within domestic service, employment is gendered – the women work as maids and cooks, while the men work as drivers and guards. The latter are considered more prestigious and are better paid.

KP residents use a mix of strategies and engage with different actors in addressing the many challenges that confront them. For example, they direct their complaints about water to the local state representatives. A resident also cited seeking the representative's assistance in enrolling her child in the neighborhood government school. On certain other issues they seek aid from NGOs. For instance, the NGO, Satark Nagrik Sangathan helps residents navigate the Right To Information Act to address problems pertaining to their pensions and ration cards. They turn to another NGO, Asha for some health and educational services. They also draw on the social capital of their middle class employers to intercede on their behalf with diverse agencies like the police and their children's schools. Additionally, they take collective action in dealing with certain situations, as happened when a pump at one of the borewells malfunctioned. The residents who obtained their water supply from that well, pooled their resources and got it repaired. However, KP lacks collective representation of their interests by a formal organization such as the Residents' Welfare Associations that play a prominent role in many of the middle class neighborhoods in Delhi.

The above is a brief recounting of the changes, challenges, and connections in the lives of Kusumpur Pahari residents. I heard and saw expressions of exasperation, frustration, even anger, but not despair.