

The slum dweller

Henrik Valeur, 2013

Pawan is 26; he's a good-looking guy, with a charming smile and eyes that inspire confidence. Furthermore, he holds a university degree in geography and is working for the High Court of Haryana and Punjab as a clerk. It's only a temporary job but he is also taking classes in the evening to pass the examination to qualify for taking on a higher and steadier position with the government.

Even so, he lives in a *jhuggi* with the rest of his family, his younger brother and sister, and their mother and father, in a small pocket of slum in sector 25 D in Chandigarh.

I was passing by this area when Pawan suddenly came out and greeted me with a toothbrush in one hand. There was still some toothpaste around his mouth.

“Hello”

“I was wondering about this settlement. Who ...”

“We are fifty families living here. We belong to the same community. We are potters.”

He continued, as if he didn't want to lose my attention: “My grandfather came here in 1951 as a construction laborer. We were promised land but we have been blacklisted. That's why we are living here.”

“Oh, how come you speak English so well?”

“I have a degree in geography from the university.”

“Really?”

I don't understand how somebody with a university degree could be living in a slum area.

“Yes, I'm working for the High Court.”

I am even more puzzled. We sit down and Pawan begins to explain. His family originates from Bhiwani, in the neighboring state of Haryana, but his grandparents left there to find work elsewhere. They eventually came to Lahore, together with 3-4 other potter families. But in 1947, when the British pulled out and the independent nations of India and Pakistan were born, they, together with millions of other Hindus, were forced to move eastward, just as millions of Muslims were forced to move westward.

They finally ended up in Chandigarh, where they found work as construction laborers. There was plenty of work going on: a whole new city was being built. So they called their relatives in Bhiwani and about 30 more families came to join them. These families lived together in temporary huts on the different building sites. They dug out the Sukna Lake and helped to build the Assembly and Secretariat buildings and the PGIMER university hospital.

The grandparents both worked as construction laborers but the grandmother also took care of the household work and she gave birth to ten children. At the age of 8 or 9, the kids began helping their parents with construction work.

The youngest of the ten children was Pawan's father. He was only seven at the time that Pawan's grandfather passed away, at the age of 52, in 1967.

Pawan's father went to school for six years. Then he started working on construction sites and later became a rickshaw puller. Today he drives an auto-rickshaw. The father tells me that the family settled in sector 18 together with the other potter families and with people from other communities. They had been promised their own piece of land there but were eventually forced to move to sector 25A, where, once again, they were promised their own land. Then, seven years ago, that land was given to Panjab University to build a new campus on.

But this time around, most of the families were given their own land. Potter families were each given a plot of 125 square meters at the village of Maloya while the rest of the families were given smaller plots of land in sector 25D. The plots of land given to potter families were three times larger than the plots given to the rest of the families because the potters need more land on which to perform their craft. Their land, however, was not located within the city limits, but outside, in the periphery.

The fifty families of potters to which Pawan belongs were the only ones who were *not* given any land. This was because, officially, they didn't exist. They didn't exist, officially, because they hadn't been registered as voters for the general elections in 1996. Why they hadn't been registered was not really clear. Pawan simply called it a "mistake".

In any case, when the rest of the potter community moved to Maloya, this group was left behind and had to find a place to live on their own. They opted for the small piece of land in sector 25D that I happened to be passing by.

Pawan took me to see his home.

There was no door!

And there was no floor – the rooms were often flooded, he told me. The ceiling was the underside of the corrugated asbestos cement sheets that were used for the roofs. It was just high enough for Pawan to stand up.

The dwelling consisted of an open entrance area, which also functioned as a workshop for pottery-making, an enclosed bedroom for Pawan and his brother and an enclosed bedroom for his sister and their parents, which also served as a kitchen. In addition, there was an outdoor niche with an open fire for making *rotis*, a second outdoor niche for washing utensils and for storing water, which the mother collects ½ km away from home, and a third outdoor niche for some undefined use.

They had electricity – perhaps it was not quite legal – and a television set, but there was no bathroom/toilet and no living room.

And there were no windows.

The walls were made of bricks that were loosely stacked on top of each other.

“They are from our previous home – the one in sector 25A.”

I guess being moved around had taught them not to use mortar.

But maybe their fortune was about to change. They had filed a case at the court petitioning the government to be allotted a piece of land.

“We have a court hearing tomorrow”

Pawan was quite excited.

They were asking for the same amount of land that the other potter families had been given. And they had already saved enough money to build themselves a proper *pakka* house. They knew exactly how to build it and what it would look like.

But when I met Pawan again, a couple of days later, he told me that the hearing had been postponed for another month.

This was nothing new to them. Ever since his grandparents had first come to Chandigarh, more than sixty years ago, his family had been living in huts or *jhuggis* on land that didn't belong to them. Pawan's father had lived his whole life in the slum. He did, however, own a piece of land in Bhiwani, together with the rest of the family. In fact, half of his sisters and brothers had moved back there. But Pawan's father had decided to stay in Chandigarh, where he could earn more money and where his three children could get the kind of education that he never got.

And all three of them had done so.

After completing twelve years of school, Pawan had to find work to earn a living. He worked as a waiter in a five-star hotel. After four years of work, he had saved enough

money to pay the annual fee of ten thousand rupees for a three-year bachelor program of studies at the university.

Now he is hoping that some day he will be able to take a masters degree. But even without this, he still has made tremendous progress.

What is difficult for me to understand is why he continues to live in a *jhuggi*.

“We should sell the land in Bhawani and buy something here,” he says.

His father doesn't say anything.

Their community, the *Kumhars*, is a so-called “backward community”. They have lived together like this for generations and even though Pawan works for the High Court and his cousin works for a bank, they still belong to the community of potters.

But just before leaving, I ask Pawan: “If you could afford it, would you move to a place on your own or would you rather continue living here with your community?” He looks around a bit. Then he smiles: “No, this thing about the community is itself something backwards: we should move on. Yes, I would rather move to my own place.”

Maybe one day, he will.

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