# The Matters of Definition

The Slum Areas Act, 1956, act declares slums areas as settlements which ‘[…] by reason of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangement and design of such buildings, narrowness or faulty arrangement of streets, lack of ventilation, light or sanitation facilities, or any combination of these factors, are detrimental to safety, health or morals’.[[1]](#footnote-1) In Hindi, the slums are translated as *jhuggis* and *jhoparis*. The official departments as the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB) and Delhi Development Authority’s (DDA) Slum and *Jhuggi Jhopari* Rehabilitation extend the official designation, recognition and nomenclature to slums as such. Collectively and popularly referred to as the Govindpuri *jhuggis*, the settlement I am concerned with in this book is located in South Delhi and consists of three different camps: Jawaharlal Nehru Camp (referred to as abbreviated Nehru Camp in everyday use, and the nomenclature followed in the book), Navjeevan Camp, and Bhumiheen Camp. Adjoining the jhuggis is an authorised, legal colony known as Govindpuri[[2]](#footnote-2), from whose referential location the camps also acquire their name in the popular usage. The three camps fall under the Kalkaji constituency, which is one of the seventy Vidhan Sabha (Legislative Assembly) constituencies of the National Capital Territory. The total area the slums cover is 103896 sq m (Nehru and Navjeevan camp=103896 sq m and Bhumiheen camp =35156 sq m) with 6706 households (Nehru and Navjeevan Camp = 4578 and Bhumhiheen camp = 2128) in the three camps, according to the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board List of 675 JJ (Jhuggi Jhopdi) Bastis[[3]](#footnote-3).

The official definitions of the slums enters the everyday imagination and translations in such a manner that the structural factors are employed to exert practices of othering on the residents of the jhuggis, with implications of social, physical, cultural, financial, emotional and political discrimination, denial of agency, and claims and rights as citizens. And thus residing in a jhuggi and thus being a jhuggi-walah, slum-dweller, significantly limits the spaces, services and rights one can claim in the city. Throughout the course of the essays, particularly when insisting or highlighting the narratives and experiences of the residents, I use the self-identified term which is either jhuggis or the specific camps to refer to their homes, which also marks their official addresses. In their usage, jhuggi, first and foremost, is the site and space of their settlement, habitation and belonging. When used in singular usage, jhuggi refers to a house, when evoked in the plural, jhuggis, it is in the collective sense of referring to the entire settlement. Whilst I do acknowledge that the inherent othering which the ‘naming’ is laden which needs to be dissipated, I also remain astutely cognizant of the fact that whilst dealing with the issues of rights (particularly in regards to demanding judicial interventions, by the way of stay order on sudden, and often violent, demolitions and evictions, but also claims to resettlement in case of such a predicament and other services) the evocation of this particular ‘naming’ - slums, and its associated disenfranchisement, also accrues weight and validity to the arguments.

In the essays, I use the terms of slums and jhuggis interchangeably, without laden prejudices and politics of othering.As deems most suitable to the particular narrating of experience and experiencing, I also either refer to the camps in their specificity or to the collective of the slums, which I often choose to take the liberty of referring to the ‘slums of Govindpuri’ and for the sake of convenience also abbreviate to GP.

Unless asked or agreed upon threat perceived, the names of individuals, groups and communities in the essays have not been anonymized. The decision to be known, written and referred to by their real names was in deliberation with the residents of the slums, and should be insisted on as a position of self-assertion by the slum-dwellers. Whilst conducting my doctoral research to fulfil the criterion of meeting with all the rules and regulations of the ethics committee, I had to seek consent from the people I was interviewing and hanging about. One of the assurances I had to extend amounted to ensuring that their ‘names will be anonymized, and their identities not be revealed so as to not invite any harm towards them’. I always found making introductions or following the intense conversations about one’s lives with the clause of anonymity rather trite and lacking in merit of truth. During one of such conversation, when I was repeating the whole consent form for the benefit of the recorder and to record the participant’s response as a record of her consent (the verbal, record consent had to be sought as most of the participants were not formally educated and the literate, written compulsions needed to be circumvented), a fiery woman in her 30s lashed out at me, however lovingly, to say, ‘we are telling our stories because we want them to be told. What is this nonsense of not writing our real names, I want the world to know this is who I am and this is what I think. And don’t worry about our safety, it is my challenge to anyone from, use my name and if you have the gumption, find me in these lanes. And if you do find me, I will be here to take you on’.

Since then I have followed the wisdom and claiming of not only one’s lifeworlds and spaces these are unfolded within and only annonymized names when have been asked for. I do however leave out the address within the lanes of the slums of Govindpuri, almost in perverse pleasure, for someone to take on the fiery woman’s challenge of finding them with the name as a maker in these lanes and take her own.

## The Spread of and around the Slums of Govindpuri

In the map [GP\_Maps\_Overview & GP\_Maps\_Camps], the slums of Govindpuri are marked out in red, defining their boundaries. For those venturing into this space via this aerial, zoomed out perspective, if the slums appear like a patch-work pattern weaving into the broader spread of the neighbourhood that is because they are. GuruRavidas Marg is the main arterial road along which the slums are located, which leads towards Tughlakabad Extension on one end and at the intersection of another main arterial road, Ma Anandmayi Marg, lies the Govindpuri Metro Station. The Govindpuri Metro station was opened in 2010 to coincide with the inauguration of the Commonwealth Games. It falls on the violet line of the coloured-code Delhi Metro Map.

In my initial years of conducting research in the slums, I rarely used the public transport systems. The buses were erratic and demanded long waits and longer, convoluted routes to where I lived in the city, in its Northern end. I either used auto-rickshaws or made use of my then partner’s bartered old red Maruti. In fact it is only in the last few years after the connectivity of Govindpuri Metro with other intersections were operationalized that I have started using the metro service regularly. To avoid making a knee-jerk acquaintance with the slums of Govindpuri, I propose a walk from the Govindpuri Metro Station wading through the neighbourhoods of the slums to insist that in their make, materiality and markets the slums are woven into the spread out the larger settlement, perhaps as a patchwork, but still held together by the fine threads of shared histories, spaces, contestations and alliances.

At the intersection, as one sets about on the GuruRavidas Marg towards the slums, across from the metro station, stands the Masjid Govindpuri. In my initial days of researching, I had created my own mapping of the neighbourhood depending on the availability of and access to toilets, especially if I were on a rare chance was using the public transport system. Adjoining the mosque, facing the main road, is a workshop which specializes in amplifying horns volumes, tunes and sounds for different vehicles. Tom Rice and I interviewed him for the BBC documentary Govindpuri Sounds[[4]](#footnote-4)**,** and even though it has been a years (2013) and I do not recall much of the conversations, but the sounds of the amplified horns and the man’s delight in giving us a demonstration and our own pleasure in it seem like an afternoon from yesterday. Alongside the road, on both sides, push-cart eateries offering all kinds of street-food indulgences are offered and of course tea-stalls. Here, I often make pit-stop for the snack, tea and smokes. Next to the metro station, on the GuruRavidas Marg, is a small settlement of about 30 families displaced and evicted from settlements in the city. The main preoccupation is playing drums, *dhol,* at social and cultural events, and are colloquially referred to as the *Dhol Basti*. Considering the eviction and the subsequent settlement here happened fairly recently (post 2010, the exact year is not known to me), the settlement is not registered in the list of slums and JJ clusters and thus not eligible for any resettlement claims[[5]](#footnote-5). Even though in the few years since the settlement started forming its bearing here, I have interacted with a few of its residents, mostly children, hanging about the roadside and during my snack/smoke/tea breaks I have never conducted deliberate research here.

Giri Nagar is the first marked out residential area which falls on this route. The development of this neighbourhood witnessed sustained growth from the mid-1960s when Okhala Industrial Area for small and medium scale industries operationalized and started drawing traction. At the following intersection, down this road, where an inner road cuts through, starts sprawling the neighbourhood of Govindpuri from whose referential proximity the slums draw their colloquial name as a collective. Govindpuri is a mix of middle-class, lower and working class, and a high migrant labour rental residential population. It is marked out along 16 parallel, intersecting *galis* (literally, lanes) with residential quarters and building across the lanes. Govindpuri has witnesses resettlement in phases, first post-1971, India Bangladesh war, and 1984, post the assassination of the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, and the riots targetting the Skih community that followed. Owing to its proximity to Okhala Industrial Area and Nehru Place, from the early 70s, Govindpuri emerged as a strong hub and neighbourhood for the emergence of small-scale industries running out semi-residential until 2000 when Supreme Court ordered the closure and relocation of all ‘non-conforming industries’ operating in the urban area of Delhi[[6]](#footnote-6). The combined pull factors of availability of jobs and cheap rental arrangements, along with the overwhelming prospect of hacking it out in the city, significantly contributed to drawing migrants from across the country, particularly its northern states – Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan - here.

At the intersection of GuruRavidas and Baba Fatehsingh road, lie the slums of Govindpuri. Opposite the fifteenth street, across the road, is the encroached Govindpuri - slums of Govindpuri, as they are termed in popular usage. Nehru camp is the first camp on this layout, followed by Navjeevan camp and separated by a drain, which in the present day is not easily visible. Across Govindpuri, and its 16 lanes, lies the middle-class settlement, Kalkaji and its extension, leading all the way up to the DDA flats in Kalkaji opposite to Bhumhiheen camp in the slums. On that route, pursuing the Ma Anandmayi Road, at the intersection from the DDA flats of Kalkaji on one side and Bhumhiheen camp on the other, the Tuglagabad Extension neighbourhood is marked out.

Amongst the residents of Govindpuri and the slums, more immediate, authorized markers are used to refer to the three camps. While the Nehru camp camp and Navjeevan camp are the slums *of* Govindpuri, Bhumhiheen camp is evoked in reference to the slum *of* Delhi Development Authority (DDA) flats, as this camp is opposite these flats. Pooja Masala, something of a landmark of a grocery store falling along the Kalkaji Extension neighbourhood, is a common reference and meeting point for the residents of the slums and the neigbourhoods. Pooja Masala, as a landmark, is evoked to map spatial, temporal and social markers: *I am 15 minutes away from Pooja Masala; the lane into the jhuggis bank opposite Pooja Masala is where I will be waiting for you;* and, *she is doing well for herself, now she has rented an apartment only a few lanes away from Pooja Masala.* [GP\_Maps\_Pooja Masala]

Nehru camp was one of the first slums in the area: as mentioned, settlement here started from the early 1970s. Most of the initial settlers were migrant labourers who rented in legal Govindpuri. At that time, the rent was quite reasonable, INR 8–12 per month (Jiyo Devi, Local head) with the development of Okhala Industrial Area offered livelihood options. With the setting up of small-scale and other industrial units here, the rents shot up dramatically from INR 8– to INR 20–25 per month as Govindpuri became the outpost for this industrial area. Thus the migrants started arriving in Govindpuri in the late 1960s to work in Okhala Industrial Area and the upcoming small-scale industries, the land area wherein the slums are now situated was a large, unoccupied, infested with overgrown thorny shrubs. In the Master Plan for Delhi, 2001 and 2011, this tract of land is marked for residential use [GP\_Maps\_2001\_DDA & GP\_Maps\_2021\_DDA]. In the Master Plan for 1962, the land area is marked but it is not clear for what purpose [GP\_Maps\_1961\_DDA]. In the shared, local historical recalling by the long-term residents, this was a barren tract of land meant to be a park. Recounting from these narratives, the shift from the lanes of Govindpuri to the barren, shrub infested area was obvious and logical. The rentals in Govindpuri were not proportionate to the earnings as manual labourers, and lacking any social security systems to absorb the simultaneous shift to the city and supporting the families in the villages, the shift to tame the uninhabited, barren, thorny area to save on rents and other overheads was a logical decision. The task of taming this bareness – or as it is reckoned as encroachment in official records and popular reckoning – was by no means an easy feat.

It was then that the people started to move in and set up their makeshift houses in the barren tract of land. The period between the 1970s and the late 1990s was favourable to the current and prospective slum-dwellers and the three camps saw steady inflow of migrants in the camps: government had assured resettled land plots of 12.5 square metres; and the *Olga Tellis case* of 1985 had categorically identified slum-dwellers’ right to live, safeguarding them against evictions, which ‘contributed to their sense of security’. However, the ‘real reassurance for this sense of security … came from no major evictions taking place after 1977 until 1997–98’.

In this scenario, most of the initial settlers did not mind shifting their base from legal Govindpuri to the slums, given the economic hardships they could avoid along with the promise of a resettled plot in the future. For this particular group of slum-dwellers, their shift from lower middle-class status to that of slum-dwellers is a testament of the lack of social, financial and allied support and security systems for the urban poor. The majority of this section of the urban population essentially subsidizes the everyday and sustained living of the middle-classes in the city by providing cheap, menial labour and also being critical in value-supply chains where they work in highly exploitative, precarious conditions. Whilst the promise of the resettled plots and a life of dignity in the city, and an urban futures for their families, was a compelling factor, they have to endure loss of social, cultural, political and emotional capital and capacities. During the initial years of the research (2004), the shift from Govindpuri and other parts of the country into the slums was a constant reference on two accounts: I was pursuing the line of questioning and because of the recent closure of the small-scale industries in Govindpuri, which had left a significant section of the population jobless.

The first phase of the research was a humbling experience, during which I had to *learn* how to conduct research in and about sonic cultures. In that sense, the problem was not the inability of the residents to engage with my research questions regarding engagement of the everyday through its soundscapes. It was the limitations of my ability to articulate my research agenda and aims – a methodological concern of sensual scholarship raised by Paul Stoller in The of Ethnographic Things. By insisting on humbleness as a much-needed perspective and personal trait, Stoller highlights the phenomenal task that lies ahead in building a robust epistemological, academic and intellectual tradition for sensual scholarship. Senses, and here soundscapes, as *ethnographic objects* are tenuous and delicate. Senses as *ethnographic agendas* are complex and overlapping. Senses as ethnographies, not surprisingly, demand humility. It is not merely a matter of ‘describing the way things look or smell in the land of others[[7]](#footnote-7)’. A sensual scholar needs to surrender to the world of senses – their meanings, their connections, their articulations and aspirations – humbly and patiently, without preconceived notions and prejudices. A sensual scholar needs to have the sensibility to sense the senses as they are sensed in its context. In short, making sense of *senses* is not an undertaking without its moment of sensorial-intellectual-methodological numbness, deafness and blindness.

The constant mention of factories and construction sites to recount the Govindpuri slums’ sonic past, which in the initial phase had exasperated me, in fact provided important sonic references for further listening. It was in these factories and construction sites that the residents found their main source of income. The persistent humming of machinery lent a sonic temporality to the everyday. After the factories were relocated in the early 2000s, due to the Delhi government’s drive to curtail sources of pollution – noise amongst others – the residents recalled the place feeling ‘eerily silent’. This silence was not literal, as even without the machineries the soundscape of the Govindpuri neighbourhood and the slums is very dense. This silence was the social and cultural articulation of exasperation at a ‘loss of livelihood’ and the anxieties that surrounded it.

The settlement patterns in the other two camps were similar, except that Navjeevan camp was the last to be settled on account of a lack of basic amenities – water and electricity. Unlike the other two camps, Navjeevan camp does not share close proximity with any Lower Income Group (LIG) -Middle Income Group (MIG) settlements, which made it almost impossible for the residents to tap into their networks for these resources as Nehru and Bhumhiheen camps could. Most of the residents of the Govindpuri slums hail from small towns or villages – primarily from the states of Uttarpradesh, West Bengal, Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Maharastra, where the social, cultural and moral climate is rigid, conservative and restricted, based on strictly demarcated and defined caste, class and gender roles with prescribed responsibilities. As recounted by the residents during the course of my doctoral research, in the context of their villages, it was not possible for men and women to break social and cultural barriers and undertake jobs outside of their prescriptive caste, class and gender roles. Slums, however, offered a possibility to negotiate these barriers and roles. For instance, many residents of the Govindpuri slums – mostly women but also men – work in middle-class households as cleaners or cooks, an economic undertaking they would not have been able to pursue in their hometown or village on account of social-cultural pressures. Also, for many upper-caste men and women, it allows a move beyond caste hierarchies and roles and enables them to take jobs otherwise not allowed; these include, but are not limited to, working in leather factories, or working as cooks and domestic servants. This is not to suggest that Govindpuri slums have no caste, class and gender hierarchies. The compulsion to earn a livelihood, along with the distance, social, spatial, cultural, moral and psychological factors carried from their native homelands, allows the residents of the Govindpuri slums to negotiate around such issues.

In the later years, when the residents of the slums and I had negotiated anxieties and lens of engagement with the *other,* we rarely spoke about the past or evocation of the villages as a reference point. Instead we remained, as we still are, indulged, intrigued and exasperated by the fate of our beloved city, Delhi, and what how its fate and ours our intricately linked and our ambitions, aspirations, desires, dreams and dreads about the collective futures.

**The Markets and Materiality of the Govindpuri slum**

The three camps Nehru, Navjeevan and Bhumhiheen, are distinct from each other – though this is not necessarily obvious to an outsider. An open drain separates Nehru camp from Navjeevan camp, while a main road divides Navjeevan and Bhumhiheen camps. One of the key distinctions between the three camps are highlighted by their markets. Each camp specialises in certain markets, which lends it a particular materiality while revealing the community, religious and caste affiliations specific to each camp.

All the camps lie alongside a main road connecting south Delhi to southwest Delhi. Most of the LIG and MIG settlements are located across this road. Most of the local markets of Govindpuri slums are strategically situated alongside this road, as they cater both to the local Govindpuri as well as the LIG-MIG population.

Nehru camp is closest – spatially, socially and culturally – to legal Govindpuri and the Okhala Industrial Area, where ‘sweatshop’-type production houses thrive. These sweatshops provide an important occupational engagement for the residents of this camp. The camp is divided into three communal affiliations: lower caste communities who are professional cleaners/sweepers; fortune tellers from Maharastra; and fruit sellers from Uttar Pradesh, comprising both Hindus and Muslims. The fruit sellers do not set up their stalls in the camp, but in a daily *haat –* vegetable market – that is held across the road. There are a few tea stalls catering to the workers in the production houses. Within and outside the camp, the two communities of cleaners and fortune tellers are socially and culturally ostracised on the basis of caste, and implied cultural decadence and moral bankruptcy. Even the social workers operating in this space do not venture into these areas until and unless absolutely necessary, evoking ‘alcoholism, crime and dirt’ as the main hindrances. The lack of markets in this camp is attributed to the presence of these communities: ‘Even if we wanted to set up shops, no one would come. It is the better for us to explore into other territories.’ (M, 40, tea stall owner)

Navjeevan camp, on the other hand, has a thriving market specialising in meat products and plastic goods – sheets, containers, and so on. A significant percentage of Navjeevan camp’s population is Muslim, a group that traditionally deals in meat products – which explains the concentration of this business in the area. The density of the plastic market is remarkable to an outsider, middle-class sensibilities; it is an important element of Govindpuri’s materiality.

Two kinds of housing that are prevalent in Govindpuri : *pucca* (concrete) and *kaccha* (makeshift). The materials used for *pucca* houses are bricks, cement and iron. The *kaccha* houses, on the other hand, use bricks, wood, bamboo and plastic sheets, which are used to shield the houses from both the sun and the rain. Plastic is affordable and durable. The plastic containers – usually having the capacity to hold 20 litres as a minimum – are very important aspects of the landscape of the Govindpuri slums. A shortage of running water means residents have to constantly evolve ingenious ways to store water. The plastic containers serve this purpose while also being used for storage of other kinds as well. Each household has at least one, if not more, of these plastic containers. These containers are also often used to hold up a wall or boundary. They are also in demand to serve the needs of the production houses in legal Govindpuri , as well as the storage needs of LIG-MIG residents, as water is scarce in these areas as well.

The plastic market of Navjeevan camp is a very profitable business. Most of these shops, however, are not owned by the residents of the camp,

A few years back all the shops were demolished. Those whose shops were demolished were entitled to resettlement and a lot of them got plots either in Kondli or Narela. However, as the pressure of the authorities started to ease, most of the families came back and once more built their shops. Most of them sold their resettlement plots, bribed officials for fake I-cards [ration cards] to become eligible for resettlement in the next lot of demolition as well. They have shifted out of the slums into legalised colonies but they still want to retain control over this space on two accounts: first, the business is profitable over here; and second, they will be able to claim resettlement plots yet again. (Male, 32, shopkeeper, Gandhipuri camp)

Bhumhiheen camp is the most prosperous camp in the slum cluster. Its population base is distinctly divided amongst Bengalis (immigrants from West Bengal and Bangladesh after the Bangladesh Liberation war) and non-Bengali settlers. The latter comprise families mainly from Uttar Pradesh, but also from Haryana and Rajasthan. There are limited interactions between the two communities at an everyday level. Bhumhiheen camp has several market pockets specialising in different commodities. On the main road, the vegetable market is held daily. This market caters to the local as well as a significant LIG-MIG population. As the vegetable market shares proximity with the slums, the prices of the vegetable are considerably lower than in other middle-class areas, attracting customers from this area. It is not easy to set up a stall in this area. One has to bribe local police personnel, acquire consent from local politicians and other important parties, and pay rent to the shopkeeper in front of whose shop the stall is set up. These shops alongside the road specialise in bamboo and woodwork. Most of these shops are owned by people from Uttar Pradesh, a northern state in India, where shopkeeping is a traditional professional for many communities. As mentioned earlier, these shops cater to the architectural needs of the local residents, as bamboo is an essential architectural feature of houses in all camps. It also provides bulk orders to other slum areas in the city.

Bhumhiheen camp is also distinct from the other camps in that it has a thriving market *within* the camp. This is called the Bengali Market. It is an organised and formal market controlled by the Bengalis, who form a significant proportion of the population of this camp. This market is further demarcated into specialised units offering specific commodities catering to the needs of Bengalis within and outside the camp. There is a specialised fish, jewellery and cloth market. One of the nearby MIG settlements, Chittranjan Park, has a high population of Bengalis, who patronise this market at an everyday level, contributing to the prosperity level of the Bengali community within Bhumhiheen camp. In 1991 a major outbreak of fire gutted most of jhuggis in Bhumiheen Camp, and which is often evoked as reference point whilst charting out the camp’s history, as following which the camp received both state and non-state investment to construct *pucca* houses.

Each of the camp is popularly referred to and mapped out in individual and collective geographies and memories by its markets. In the initial years, when the lanes of the slums still bewildered me and I had not the confidence to lose myself to find the ways, if Pooja Masla was the landmark for me to keep appointments with the residents of Nehru Camp; the plastic-ware shop at the corner of Kalkaji Main Road in Navjeen and the fish market in Bhumhiheen camp were the rendezvous points. There is significant mobility between the three camps, but community members in each camps have their own biases and marking of socio, cultural, emotional and spatial othering. I have detailed these practices whilst discussing the water routes and other negotiations in my doctoral thesis.

Besides the peculiarity of the markets, the material fabric of the Govindpuri slums is strikingly uniform. Most of the housing types, as mentioned above, vary between the *pucca* and *kaccha.* The construction of these, however, depends on the location. Most of the constructions on the main road are up to three to four levels, used both for residential and commercial purposes. These are usually *pucca* constructions that use bricks, concrete, plastic, bamboo and wood for framing purposes. The tallest of these constructions, despite having three floors, is no more than 7 metres. As these lie on the main road, which is just over 3 metres wide, though congested with the markets around, they give a sense of space compared to the interiors of the slums.

The inside of Govindpuri is a very different reality. Most of the constructions inside the camps cannot be strictly categorised as *pucca or kaccha*, reflecting an ingenious usage of materials and optimisation of space. The streets are narrow, no more than 1 metre to 1.3 metres, in most instances. The tallest of the constructions inside of the camps is just over 3 metres. The houses are not only incestuously woven into each other but are *in* each other. The lack of space and the density of population necessitate architectural innovations, with a house’s roof serving as makeshift rooms for others, or several households having to share a common entrance. Drains, flowing or blocked, marked the trajectories on the space. With the exception of Bhumhiheen camp, none of the other camps has a dense concentration of a market, though there are intermittent shops, dealing in a variety of merchandise, spread across the camps.

Unlike other slum settlements in the city, the three camps of Govindpuri have not witnessed spates of demolitions in the heart of the cluster, though there have demolitions on the fringes undertaken by the Delhi Development Authority to clear the passage on the main road. Considering the markets open on to the main arterial road, Guru Ravidas Marg, the clearance drive to move back the push-carts and temporary shops as they extend on the road is still quite common. These clearance drives are piecemeal and not directed at the peripheral roads in the slums. In 2008, the slums of Govindpuri witnessed one of the only coordinated demolitions, though on the fringes, across all the camps. The demolitions however were not towards evictions and clearance of the land area, but in response to the Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by the members of the Residential Welfare Associations (RWA) to seek ‘a solution against encroachment of roads and services by slum residents’. The High Court responded to this demand by the ‘construction of a five-foot wall to divide a slum cluster from neighbouring middle-class colonies’ as a ‘[...] a temporary arrangement to offer protection to flat owners[[8]](#footnote-8)’. The demolition is discussed further in the essay, *I Wail, Therefore I Am.*

And thus whilst the narratives of being and belonging are replete with speculations about resettlement prospects, the threat of demolitions is not as pronounced as in other accounts. The slums of Govindpuri also stand apart from most other slum settlements in the city in regards to the proposed in situ resettlement project. In 2008, the Delhi government announced the construction of 14-storey with 3,024 apartments in the same area, about 1.5 Kilometres away from the slum settlement, Nehru camp being the closest [GP\_In Situ Rehabilitation DDA Flats]. It has been 12 years since the announcement, and the promise of the resettlement in the ‘flats’ has constantly been evoked in elections manifestos, claimed by every contesting parties[[9]](#footnote-9). The residents of the slums remain unconvinced of the promise being actualized, particularly considering there are only 3,024 flats available and no clear idea about on what basis these will be allotted. ‘Of course we will apply for the flat, and will shift into it or claim it, if we are the lucky ones’, Babu Lal from Navjeevan camp commented, ‘but we don’t know whether it will ever happen’. A real estate agent from Govindpuri contextualized the future of the resettlement project in mid-2018 by when they were almost ready:

The apartments do not look like in situ or resettlement project. They have the feel of other apartment blocks. My sense is that, even if the jhuggi-walahs are allotted the apartments, they will not able to afford it as the down payment is estimated to be around 2 lacs. What will happen is that they will sell their allotments to those who can afford it in the black, and along with the apartments, the parking spaces will be really coveted! Even if they can afford the apartments, how are they going to pay for the maintenance of the building, which the residents are supposed to collectively contribute towards…

Whilst discussing the prospect of allotment and living in the apartment block, the concerns of the apartment being 14-storey and the maintenance is constantly raised, ‘how are the elderly supposed to climb up the 14-storeys?’, ‘what if the lift if not working, and who is going to pay for the lifts and for the power-back, if there is no electricity?’. And then more compelling concerns about how the 14-storey apartment living is going to correspond to the lives in the lanes, ‘[…] the sexual and romantic encounters and affairs are just going to increase; here, at least we have some control, in the apartments, they will be making out in the lifts and on the roof’. The shift from lanes to the 14-storey apartment block is also evoked in apocalyptic predications of the fate that shall befall during violent altercations, ‘here, we are still in the lanes, I am telling you, when the same fights break out there [in the apartments], people will be throwing each other from that high!’. The fact that the Govindpuri Police station is adjacent to the apartment site is not appealing to some of the residents, ‘right now, there are places to navigate about in the lanes, which we know well, but in the apartments, the cops will know exactly where to find us’.

These are speculative conjunctures of the residents regarding the life in the apartments, however it must be insisted that none of the residents I have spoked to over the years have expressed any desire to continue to live in the slums, perchance their name comes in the allotment list and they have the resources to pay for the downpayment, ‘of course, we will like to shift, live in the apartments, not be jhuggi-walahs anymore’.

Across the 14-storey, DDA resettlement site lies the Transit Camp, as is popularly known. In official records, this settlement is called the Shri Rajeev Gandhi Colony. In 1984-85, several slum settlements across the city where demolished and people allotted land as a transit arrangement, and thus the name. In its materiality, the transit lies somewhere between the lower-income class houses of Govindpuri and the slums of Govindpuri. Whilst most of the houses are pucca, they lack the solidity of the houses in Govindpuri. The residents of the Transit camp[[10]](#footnote-10) and also the local politician[[11]](#footnote-11)have made suggestions for DDA to convert the land use marked in the master plan 2021, from ‘Green Area/District Park’ to Residential Area, which will make their claims for in situ rehabilitation stronger. Whilst there are strong links of mobilities between transit camp and the slums, the residents of the transit camps insist on maintaining a clear distinction lest they are also considered to be jhuggi-walahs also owing the proximity to the slums, sharing the similarities in nomenclature and the material conditions.

Owing to the proximity of the industrial area, the concentration of the migrant labourers to provide subsided labour for the small-scale industries in Govindpuri, the phases of re-settlement that the neighbourhood went through, even though the slums appear as a patch-work pattern, there are very strong, geographies of everyday, historical, cultural, emotional, financial, cultural, romantic and sexual exchanges, transactions and mobilities between these spaces. I do not intend to romantize the landscapes of these alliances between the neighbourhoods, of which the slums happen to be one. The relationships are fraught which tensions and contestations which manifest in particular kinds and practices of othering directed at the identified other, for instance, the residents of the slums for the middle-class neighbourhood and the newly arriving migrants and the *kothi-walahas[[12]](#footnote-12)* for the slum-dwellers. However, the dominance of the resettled, migrant population in the neighbourhood, the materiality and the spilling out markets of each of their neighbourhoods compels practices of ethical co-habitation between the different groups. And herein lies the promise of political alliances and spaces of ethical co-habitation being actualized, perhaps the accommodation of the identified other emanates from compulsions but the fact that these practices *in fact* exist titillates and excites the possibilities of shared, democratic and equitable political urban futures.

As late as early 2020, when I last visited the slums of Govindpuri to hang around with some of the crew there – Akki, Pooja, Sonia, their kids, partners, lovers – the living conditions of the slums have significantly improved since the early 2004, particularly sanitation, sewage and water facilities. In all of the three camps, both on the fringes and in the insides of the lanes, prominent, robust and well-built religious structures are prominent. The building practices have become more robust with people paying attention to the foundational structures, and the use of marble-flooring and tiling has increased. A few of these houses I have seen transform over the years indeed look very handsome. Baby of Navjeevan camp, who is one of the protagonist in the essays, often teases me about the sale-deed of one of her jhuggi’s she was tempting me with and which I was very keen on but for lacking resources (or living off my savings in that moment), reasons I cannot precisely recall now, I could not finalize, ‘you should have taken then, now see how it has all developed, and maybe you would have gotten an apartment too’.

After almost two-decades of ins and outs in the lanes, lives, dreams, despair of the residents of the slums of Govindpuri and also spending equal amount of time engaged in discussions about the future of the slums, the best resettlement practices, the deliberations of in situ rehabilitation, it is my political duty and responsibility to summarize what the slum-dwellers really want, and here I present a consolidation of many voices resounding over several years:

We don’t to go from here, we have created these lanes and this settlement. We don’t want to have newer, safer houses to live here, these houses are as safe as they can be, at least three-generations of families have safely grown up here. Earlier, yes, there were issues with water, sanitation, garbage disposal...these have been sorted out, we really have no issues, they could be better. If something is really to be done for us, stop humiliating us, exploiting us, denying us chances because we are jhuggi-walahs. We are proud to be living in the jhuggis, we have after all built these houses, these roads, these buildings, lives here. Just don’t treat us like ‘kheede-maukede’ (insects-spiders) […] just we because we live in the jhuggis, living and material conditions, which are beyond your experience does not mean we do not feel, we do not have self-respect, we do not desire to be treated to with dignity...all the problems of the jhuggis they keep talking about will vanish – poof – if they stop treating the jhuggi-walahs like sub-humans.

A woman working as a domestic help in the nearby apartments whilst talking about the way her employer treat her and others who work for them was narrating the manner in which these working bodies are reckoned to be beyond pain and hurting (this was specifically in regards to not allowing her to use hot water to do the dishes during the bone-chilling Delhi winters), ‘s*aala, unko lagta hai unka badan mom ka, hamara momjam ka hai.* (Bastards, they think that they have wax bodies and ours are made of cheap plastic).

Babu Lal who has been in Navjeevan camp since the early 80s, has worked as a mason and contractor with several builders across the city, is a repository of the history of the Govindpuri’s social, political, infrastructural and architectural layout in the slums, and is also keenly involved in the political landscape. Presently he lives with his wife, son, daughter-in-law, a granddaughter and a dog in a three-story, marble -tiled floor house with a resplendent roof in the same lane. His astute analysis, evaluation and resolution for the slum problem, *yeh jhuggi ki samasya,* is as following (if someone in position of power indeed wants to listen, he added):

This land is marked as residential land, and so in some ways we are ahead of the fight which the Transit camp people are fighting about. So, half the battle is won. The only thing that is required of those in power is to just take out the jhuggi-jhopdi reference in the official records. They will have to give us land somewhere, why not this area? I am telling you, once the name is changed in the official records, over a period of things will change. These camps will be like any other settlement, most of the problem is being treated demeaningly as jhuggi-walahs.

These the lived experiences and accrued knowledge of their lifeworlds, aspirations and histories of the urban poor ( (as articulated by Babu Lal and others), more often than not, fail to find way into policy framing and considerations. I identify this tendency as symptomatic of the ‘denial of the self’ to the urban poor, slum-dwellers, and those on the city’s urban and margins. This ‘denial of the self’ of the urban poor is strategically imbricated within the capitalist, neo-liberal, hegemonic logics to keep this constituent population bound in exploitative relationships to extract maximum profits from them. By denying them real and active participation, the urban poor within this imagination are thus relegated only as data sets and markings on the maps which need to be cleaned, cleared and tamed towards the beautification and smooth running of the city.

The essays in the book present the fact of the matters as listened into and learned from the lived experiences of the residents of the Govindpuri slums. This task of deep, engaged, and dialogic listening into these realities, experiences and life-world of the residents of the slums is just a modest step towards the ambitious project of ‘urgent utopia’ and ‘right to the city’, theoretical, philosophical and political projects which are premised on an ongoing, dialogic interactions and encounters across all citizens of the city, including and especially those on the margins.

1. Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, DUSIB, The Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) act, 1956, http://delhishelterboard.in/main/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/SLUMACT\_14FEB17.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Govindpuri’s immediate neighbourhoods are Kalkaji Extension, the three camps, and Govindpuri Extension. The nearby middle-class residential areas are Chittaranjan Park, a middle-class, predominantly Bengali, residential settlement, and Alaknanda, an upper-middle class/middle-class residential area with several apartment blocks. In the vicinity of the slums, across the road from Navjeevan camp, are the apartment blocks, Konark and Kohinoor. And Bhumhiheen camp shares its boundaries with the neighbourhood of Tuglagabad (and its extension). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, http://delhishelterboard.in/main/?page\_id=3644., List of 675 JJ Bastis, last updated on (Updated 03-10-2019) http://delhishelterboard.in/main/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/JJBastisList675.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Tom Rice, Govindpuri Sounds, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02hm1rx. The documentary was commissioned by BBC for its The Documentary program and was aired on 2 February 2015. More information here, https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/34775/Tom%20Rice%20Govindpuri%20Sound%20REF%20document.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For eligibility criteria, Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, Present Policies & Strategies, http://delhishelterboard.in/main/?page\_id=128. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Aditya Nigam, ‘Industrial Closures in Delhi’, https://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv7n2/industclos.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Paul Stoller, *The taste of ethnographic things: the senses in anthropology,* University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989, pp-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Preeti Jha, ‘Great Wall of Kalkaji’, *Indian Express,* 05 April 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/When-their-aspirations-of-owning-a-home-hit-a-brick-wall/article14028514.ece., and https://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-2632029/Around-3-000-slum-families-set-new-homes-thanks-DDA-project.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://dda.org.in/planning/suggestions/Dy.%20No.%202790%20DDA%20MPR.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. https://dda.org.in/planning/suggestions/Dy.%20No.%202792%20DDA%20MPR.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Kohti, literally translates as bungalow, however both the houses and apartment blocks in which the residents of the slums work in different capacities are referred to as the same.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-12)