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Falahak, Inshallah (Flowering-God's Will): the struggle of the labouring poor, and a vision, strategy and programme for tenant-led *basti* and city renewal

V. Ramaswamy with Manish Chakravarti

SUMMARY: *This paper describes a new programme to assist tenants living in the bastis (low-income settlements) in Howrah. After this introductory section, Section II describes the development of low-income rental accommodation in the city including the establishment of the thika tenancy system in Calcutta. Despite legislation to improve the situation of tenants, living conditions remain very poor. Section III summarizes government responses, first through legislation and then through settlement upgrading programmes. These responses, however, did not secure improvements in living conditions. A new programme, the Calcutta Environmental Management Strategy and Action Plan (CEMSAP) has provided a new opportunity to look afresh at the needs of the city and its low-income residents. This programme has benefitted from being able to draw on several decades of innovative thinking and experience in urban development. The final section describes the local environment in one settlement where 80 per cent of the residents are tenants, and discusses the plans and activities to strengthen local representative groups and make interim improvements in living conditions. However, these improvements are recognized as being inadequate. The legislation has resulted in the tenants being virtual owners within the settlement and the authors end the paper by describing recent plans for more substantive improvements.*

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I. FROM TENANCY TO BASTIS

ACROSS THE RIVER Hooghly, which flows alongside the city of Calcutta, lies Howrah with a population of well over one million. Long before the setting up, in 1690, of the English trading post which eventually became Calcutta, the site of today's Howrah

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was a well-known centre of trade and commerce, pilgrimage, learning and handicrafts.⁽¹⁾ The development of Calcutta, which went on to become the "second city of the British empire", has, historically, overshadowed that of Howrah. However, Howrah's location opposite Calcutta and the existence of a hinterland rich in both labour and raw materials led to the rapid establishment, consolidation and extension of industries in the city. Several docks were built in the mid-eighteenth century and, with the building of the railway terminus in 1854 and the (old) bridge in 1874, industrialization received a further boost. Jute mills and presses, iron foundries, engineering works and cotton mills emerged in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and, by the turn of the century, a number of chemical, wood-work, oil and printing plants had also been established. The two World Wars helped to sustain this industrial base.

In nineteenth century metropolitan Calcutta, large numbers of labouring people were employed in factories, manual labour and domestic service. A complex arrangement developed that eventually led to a unique three-tier tenurial structure. A landlord would typically rent out vacant plots under his ownership to members of his retinue ("intermediate agents" who became known as *thika* tenants) who, in turn, would build a large number of small huts on the plot. Rooms within the huts were then rented out to labourers. As this part of the city attracted more people and started benefitting from civic improvements, landlords would have some of these plots vacated and sell them for a handsome profit. The labouring tenant dwellers simply moved on to another site.

This arrangement, and the informal settlements or *bastis* which developed, meant that a place existed in the city for its labouring population, albeit an insecure one.⁽²⁾ With no investment being made in the properties or neighbourhoods by either the landlords or the civic authorities, the very poor conditions in the *bastis* were viewed as a threat to public hygiene. Colonial Calcutta saw frequent *basti* demolitions in connection with civic improvements which were usually inspired by public health goals. But the situation of the labourers, and the question of their shelter, was never substantively addressed.

Partition and independence in 1947 deprived the Indian state of West Bengal of the jute growing hinterland necessary to feed its factories⁽³⁾ and this proved disastrous for Howrah's industry. In the late 1960s, the serious economic recession suffered by the country, and the Calcutta metropolitan region in particular, further worsened conditions in Howrah. The shifting course and siltation of the river also rendered Howrah increasingly insignificant in national and international terms. By 1947, the metropolitan area had a large number of *bastis* which had been in existence for a considerable period of time and which housed most of the city's low-income, labouring and poor people. Metropolitan Calcutta was also home to a large number of single male migrant labourers from the eastern hinterland. The *bastis* accommodated them and others along with their households, extended families and kin networks. With the influx into the city of hundreds of thousands of refugees after partition, the *bastis*

1. References to Betor, in the southern part of Howrah and which includes a port, and to Ghusuri, in the north, are to be found circa 1498 AD. The ancient eastern Indian sea port of Tamluk mentioned in Indian epics may also have included parts of Howrah.

2. *Basti* is a well-known term meaning "settlement" or "place of habitation" in northern Indian languages. In metropolitan Calcutta, it now means the place where the city's low-income and the poor live. *Bastis* are physically distinct, with tile-roofed huts made of brick, earth and wattle, and are generally poorly serviced in respect of water, sanitation, sewerage, drainage and waste disposal.

3. At partition in 1947, when what had previously been British colonial India was divided into East and West Pakistan and India, what had been the "province of Bengal" under colonial rule was divided into West Bengal (part of India) and East Bengal (which became East Pakistan – and subsequently Bangladesh).

became even more severely overcrowded. The largely unresolved question of responsibility for services meant that living conditions in the *bastis* were very poor.

II. GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

a. A Legislative Response

A COMMUNIST-LED movement in the 1950s focused on the shelter rights of the *basti* dwellers. This coincided with the development of national "slum clearance and improvement" legislation which ensured that all dwellers were entitled to resettlement in the event of *basti* demolition. Post-independence legislation curtailed the rights of the landlords while granting tenancy rights to the intermediate (land-renting, hut-building) agent (the *thika* tenant). In 1956, the West Bengal Premises Tenancy Act was enacted. Tenants of private premises were given relatively secure tenure rights to remain in their current place of occupancy. Provisions for the fixing of a "fair" rent were introduced and tenants were given the right to receive basic services (water supply, electricity, sanitary services). Provision was made also for regulations covering the recovery of premises by the owners, grounds for eviction and due process in the event of eviction. During this period, *bastis* were also brought under the Slum Act which was introduced with a view to enabling slum improvement works and for the provision of basic amenities to the dwellers.

In the four decades since the enactment of the West Bengal Tenancy Act, urban conditions have changed drastically. A large number of houses are now protected tenancies, paying very low rents and, consequently, there is no maintenance or improvement by the owners. Over the years, an enormous amount of landlord-tenant litigation has accumulated in the courts, enabling tenants to resort to courts as a means of indefinitely stalling any action by landlords. In general, the courts have tended to act in favour of tenants. Whilst there is a large market for high rent apartments, the construction of houses for rent that are affordable by the low-income and middle-income groups has been a major casualty. Thus, the obsolete legislation has itself become a major factor in retarding housing development in the city.

Successive governments have sought to address these problems. After the coming to power of the Left Front government in the state of West Bengal in 1977, most *basti* lands were taken over by the state. However, the state's right to carry out developments on this land was impeded by a court ruling upholding the right of the *thika* tenant to undertake improvements to the existing *basti* structures. In 1981, the Calcutta *Thika* Tenancy (Acquisition and Regulation) Act was passed and this was subsequently amended in 1993. With this Act, the rights of the intermediate *thika* tenants were restricted while seeking to protect those of the tenant dwellers.

The National Housing Policy of 1992 recognized that rent con-

trol laws were among the legal constraints to housing activity and thus proposed amendments. Following the preparation of a model rent control Bill by the government of India, a Bill to amend the 1956 Act was tabled in the West Bengal legislative assembly in 1996. This is at present under debate and tenant organizations and their supporters have condemned the proposed amendment as being anti-tenant.

b. *Bastis* Today

The Calcutta Metropolitan Development Agency has estimated that, in 1990, about 470,000, or roughly 52 per cent of Howrah's population, lived in the *bastis*. (Howrah is one of the 41 urban units included within the Calcutta metropolitan area.) While precise information on Howrah's *bastis* is not available, estimates indicate that between 1951 and 1991, the *basti* population grew by seven times while the city population doubled. A *basti* survey undertaken by the state government in the 1950s found that over 80 per cent of the *basti* dwellers were migrant workers from neighbouring states. Table 1 gives more information about accommodation in the metropolitan area of Calcutta. In Howrah, some 55 per cent of households are tenants. It is estimated that over 90 per cent of tenant households in Howrah and over 80 per cent in Calcutta may actually be *basti* dwellers.

The problems facing tenants living in *bastis* are of an entirely higher order than those pertaining to non-*basti* tenants due to the degraded environmental conditions in the *bastis* and the institutionalized crisis of services provision and management in these settlements. Most of the vulnerable population in the metropolitan area of Calcutta population lives in *bastis*. Whilst *basti* dwellers are not the poorest of the poor, many very poor people live in these areas. *Basti* dwellers are subject to marginalization by socio-economic forces. However, by virtue of having a legally recognized foothold in the city – their *basti* tenant (*bhadatiya*) status – and the stability that this brings (in comparison with less fortunate, unrecognized squatters), it is possible to think about addressing their social development.

Currently, two types of land tenure exist in Howrah *bastis*: those on state lands (as a result of the state taking ownership of the land in 1981); and those located on private (*maurasi*) lands.

Table 1: Accommodation in Metropolitan Calcutta (1990)

Settlement type	Estimated Calcutta metropolitan area population
<i>Bastis</i>	3 million
Refugee colonies	1 million
Derelict buildings	1 million
Self-help housing in fringe areas	200,000
Jute workers colonies	40,000
Unrecognized (squatter) settlements	unsurveyed; estimate of 200,000*
Pavement dwellers	60,000

SOURCE: Census of India, 1991; Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA), *Plan for Metropolitan Development*, Calcutta, 1990.

When it was proposed that the issue of tenant empowerment be explored in the Calcutta context, it was felt that this study could be a means of exploring, in depth, the whole issue of *basti* conditions. This would include the need for urgent action, prospects for city renewal and social empowerment through *basti* development, key opportunities and constraints, strategic imperatives and some kind of "action plan" for advancing the idea of "tenant-led *basti* development", something that has not yet happened in Calcutta. It was hoped that the study could, through meetings with the tenant dwellers, also present their side of the picture and touch upon the principal action points at the community level.

c. Improvement Programmes in the *Bastis*

4. According to local wisdom, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, Dr B.C. Roy, apparently petitioned President John Kennedy of the United States to give support for aid for Calcutta's development and especially for the "slums" – lest Calcutta went the communist way.

Following a World Health Organization study of Calcutta in the early 1960s which expressed serious concern about public health risks and, particularly, those arising from conditions in the *bastis*, a high-level planning effort was initiated.⁽⁴⁾ The *Basti* Improvement Programme has been implemented in phases by the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) since 1970 and aimed at the conversion of service latrines, the connection of water taps, the provision of surface drainage facilities, the construction and widening of roads and pathways, and the provision of street lighting and waste disposal facilities within the *bastis*. According to the CMDA, as of March 1990, about 2 million of the 3 million *basti* population had been covered under the programme.

Despite major investments through the *Basti* Improvement Programme, conditions remain poor. The reasons for this are multiple and include the prevailing conditions in *bastis* and the accumulated deficits from decades of neglect; the complexities arising from their unique three-tier structure; the sheer scale of the problem; the absence of an institutional framework; and entrenched rent-seeking behaviour. Moreover, *bastis* improved under the programme are today, once again, facing acute deficiencies in services. For example, toilets may be used by as many as 300-400 people; infrastructure maintenance is a major problem; there is very serious overcrowding; and drainage or sanitation improvement works are the sole responsibility of the local body which is not in a position to undertake these.

If *bastis* in the metropolitan centre of Calcutta were degraded by the time of the *Basti* Improvement Programme, in Howrah, where there had been no real planned development over the years, *bastis* presented an even greater challenge for improvement. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, *in situ* work was initiated for the improvement of the water supply, of sanitation, street lighting, the construction of pathways and roads and the alignment of open drains. Where it was possible to install water mains, this was done; elsewhere, tubewells and handpumps were installed.

In contrast to *basti* improvement in Calcutta city, the work in Howrah involved no settlement-level planning. In fact, *not* affecting anybody negatively, and *not* necessitating any negotia-

tions with the dwellers was, *de facto*, the primary design parameter in the improvement programme. Consequently, the improvements could hardly be anything more than a token gesture. Whilst in Calcutta, the improvement programme became an occasion for a rudimentary sensitization of the urban development profession on issues of community participation and responsibility, this was not so in Howrah. Since the mid-1980s, improvement works in *bastis* have been the responsibility of the Howrah municipal corporation. Given this corporation's chronic shortage of funds, this has meant that today, *bastis* in Howrah are once again under severe stress.

An indication of the consequences of environmental degradation in Howrah's *bastis* may be obtained from available statistics about infant mortality in Howrah. The infant mortality rate for the majority Hindu population of Howrah was just under 45 per 1,000 in 1992 while that for the Muslim minority population was about 105 per 1,000. (By 1993, the figures were about 37 and 83 respectively.) Given that the Muslim population of Howrah is made up predominantly of labouring people living in *bastis* whereas the Hindu population comprises both labouring as well as more affluent groups and is distributed across both *bastis* and non-*basti* areas, the statistics may be indicative of *basti*:non-*basti* differentials in infant mortality.

The corporation is now very weak institutionally. Properties are undervalued; tax collection is the main source of revenue and is low; there are very large arrears in property tax with much of the arrears being carried forward over many years; and a large number of holdings are occupied by industry which is in serious economic difficulty. Under these circumstances, it is likely that conditions in the *bastis* will degenerate further.

d. New Developments in the Bastis

At present, the tenant *basti* dwellers are in a situation of some insecurity as the housing scarcity and real estate forces work to push out the poor and low-income – either to fringe areas or to unrecognized dwellings. Recently, with the existence of a significant supply-demand gap in the housing stock, large tracts of land in Howrah with closed or derelict factories have become caught up in illegal real estate projects. Regulations controlling the conversion of industrial land for residential and commercial purposes have been violated and high-rise structures have been built along stretches of the Grand Trunk Road. This has caused considerably increased strain on the already overstretched city services.

Bastis in certain locations are subject to strong development pressures. Thus, Chowrah *basti* and PM *basti*, two large settlements along the Grand Trunk Road of nearly 4,500 and 6,500 households respectively, have been the centre of large-scale illegal construction. As mentioned earlier, *basti* land holdings either belong to the state (but with the hut-owning *thika* tenants present) or are entirely privately owned. The rights of the *thika* tenants to develop the existing hutments is restricted; no such restrictions apply in the case of the private owners. External

promoters approach the owners and *thika* tenants – who, at present, receive nominal rents and also lack the capital to undertake any development – and obtain the right to construct four to five-storey buildings. The buildings do not have municipal sanction, the structures violate building bye-laws and lack any sanitation facilities. Households discharge human wastes directly into the drains in the *basti* lanes and bye-lanes.

Tenant dwellers move out temporarily to return to single, ill-lit, poorly ventilated single-room units on the ground floor of the new structures. Such units are usually smaller than the tenants' original ones and involve a doubling of the rent (from Rs 10-30). Given the acute scarcity of housing for the low-income groups and the middle-class in the city, and the relatively greater scarcity in specific sub-markets – such as in areas where the city's large Muslim minority population lives – there is a sizeable potential market for the larger units on the upper floors. These units are given out by the promoter for a one-off lump-sum payment (*salaami*) – but still only at about one-fifth of the market value of built-up space in the locality – and a relatively modest monthly rent. The *salaami* gives the new household “secure” occupation rights over the unit. The promoter keeps the *salaami* and collects the rent for five to seven years, after which the right to collect the rent is given over to the owner or *thika* tenant. (For the ground floor erstwhile *basti* tenants' units, the enhanced rent is retained by the owner or *thika* tenant.) Although every aspect of these transactions is illegal, they continue to flourish.

It is clear that in a context of severe stagnation and capital shortage, those with access to even a little capital are in a position to bend the whole system in their favour. Given the already severely degraded conditions in the *bastis*, such illegal construction further complicates the possibility of improvements or of planned *basti* development. The tenant dwellers are the ones for whom conditions are unambiguously made worse as a consequence of these developments. In recent months, the Howrah municipal corporation has declared its intention to take stringent action against those responsible. Promoters and landlords have been arrested. Work on upcoming structures has been frozen. As a consequence, there is considerable tension in the *bastis*.

It is increasingly recognized that *bastis* in the Calcutta metropolitan area have offered little hope of tenant-led development. The principal actors in *basti* improvement have been political parties and the state, with some social welfare agencies and community based organizations undertaking welfare activities. *Basti* dwellers are not organized as a class and within the *bastis* it is the *thika* tenants, promoters and their allies (often political party activists) who are more powerful. Given that *bastis* are spread throughout the city (rather than concentrated in a separate shanty town), most of the *basti* land is very valuable. The major success of the *Basti* Improvement Programme has been in reinstating these settlements in the land market. With the existence of a large demand for housing among the lower-income groups and the middle-classes, the blighted *bastis* present

good opportunities for profitable development but with the tenant dwellers losing out.

Parallel to the imperative of tenant dweller-led *basti* development is the need to devise collective modes of ownership, management and control of settlements in programmes of resettlement to ensure that the benefits of secure housing are not appropriated by other groups. Integrating into all these mechanisms the means to empower and protect women also presents a specific challenge. Here, one may emphasize the importance of equal rights for men and women in any community based process of shelter entitlement. This is now an explicit objective in the government's national housing policy and is being raised by women's organizations across the country. The following section looks at a development plan that has sought to address these needs and subsequent sections look in more detail at the initiatives being taken in one settlement.

III. CEMSAP: THE CALCUTTA ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

a. Overview

IN MID-1995, the Department of Environment of the state government of West Bengal initiated the Calcutta Environmental Management Strategy and Action Plan (CEMSAP). This was the result of the growing concern within sections of the administration over environmental degradation in the metropolitan area despite large-scale sectoral investments in urban infrastructure over the last two and a half decades. The objective of the CEMSAP project was to undertake a rapid analysis of environmental problems in the Calcutta metropolitan area and to develop a set of strategies and detailed action plans for sustainable environmental management. This was to be undertaken through extensive consultations with government departments, institutions, professional bodies, industry, business and trade associations, trade unions, NGOs, CBOs and citizen groups.

On the basis of this analysis and the consultation, plus qualitative area-focused studies in different low-income metropolitan neighbourhoods, water supply and sanitation were identified as the key issues affecting the poor, and *basti* development was identified as the key action issue for achieving sustainable environmental improvements benefitting the vulnerable sections. In the light of the silence and capability vacuum in this regard as far as formal institutional plans and perspectives were concerned, **capability-building for community based environmental management in bastis was seen as a strategic imperative for advancing dweller-led *basti* development.**

Devolution of responsibility for environmental services management to community based organizations and the reorientation of urban governance in this light was highlighted as the strategic means towards enabling local bodies to fulfil the obligations under the recent 74th Constitutional Amendment. Under this amendment, local bodies have been granted greater powers and

responsibilities including that for environmental management. Capacity-building, in CBOs, NGOs and among local government functionaries, was seen as a key requirement.

The work of CEMSAP's social development group had become an occasion for the crystallization of the various elements of civic initiative, consciousness and wisdom that had been developing in the mind-sphere of Calcutta for almost two decades with the common thread of a sensibility towards social justice and intellectually-driven endeavour for its achievement. CEMSAP became a means for the development of a strategic vision for community empowerment and city renewal, and for the launching of a community based programme inspired by such a vision. This was only possible because of the prior existence and work of city individuals and organizations, the presence of social activists in the city who had learned through this action experience, these people's purposeful entry into the CEMSAP process and committed ownership of these concerns within the project. Box 1 describes these initiatives.

The area studies developed for CEMSAP included some *basti* settlements in Howrah. From May 1996, a programme of community and institutional interaction and mobilization in Howrah was set up. The objective of the programme was to identify possible community based service improvement initiatives which could be taken up in partnership with the local body. As a result of this work a proposal for a pilot project was prepared which included supporting the installation of hand tubewells and sanitary latrines and repair drains; funds were also provided to undertake awareness programmes.

In December 1996, the pilot project was started in selected *bastis* in three wards of the Howrah municipal corporation. These *bastis* house some of the most vulnerable sections not only of Howrah but of the entire Calcutta metropolitan area. The environmental problems in Howrah were seen to be deep-rooted and complex, making improvement difficult and slow. The *basti* situation represented a major challenge but, in a context where the scale and intensity of problems serves to provide a pretext for continued inaction, it was precisely for this reason that it was felt that it was areas such as Howrah that most needed a new pilot initiative.

The work at the community level and with institutions was begun by a young team of committed social development workers supported by locally recruited field workers and supervisors. The perspectives informing the work approach reflected the valuable experience in community organization and empowerment built up over the last two decades through NGOs such as Unnayan. To gain an understanding of the milieu, extensive dialogue and interviews were undertaken with Howrah municipal corporation and Howrah Improvement Trust as well as with political party members, scholars and long-time residents of Howrah.

Apart from a few inputs on health, no agency, either government or non-government, has any programme in these areas. Hence the communities have not had any opportunity to participate in development programmes apart from occasional cul-

Box 1: Influencing the “Unintended City”

In 1975, Jai Sen, an architect and planner, wrote an influential essay entitled “The Unintended City”. He argued that inside the planned and respectable city of Calcutta was another city, that of the labouring poor. Sen argued for a programme of empowerment for the neglected citizens through community based action planning initiatives. In 1977, he started a social action group, called Unnayan, to set up an ambitious long-term programme of work in east Calcutta. Unnayan’s work grew to cover a range of social and technical support initiatives among the marginalized communities of Calcutta. Its work extended to include labour rights, environmental issues and housing. More importantly, it touched a civic stream which was part of the everyday concerns of many local citizens, helping to return to Calcutta a tradition of civic enlightenment.

In 1986, Unnayan convened and took on the secretaryship of the National Campaign for Housing Rights. With the objective of preparing a Bill of Housing Rights, the campaign worked for several years on a wide range of civic initiatives dealing with housing issues. The National Housing Policy that emerged in 1992 was heavily influenced by the campaign’s platforms and recommendations. Through the campaign, a wide range of different individuals and organizations across India were brought together. Many groups began to understand the implications of making housing a fundamental right.

In 1992, TARU, a Delhi based action research NGO began to prepare strategic housing action plans for different states in India. In part, this work was a means of furthering some of the strategic openings created by the national housing policy. The feasibility of using locally appropriate technology alternatives was established. TARU also undertook a study of the legal constraints to housing activities resulting in an in-depth understanding of how the present system might be improved.

These initiatives spread beyond India through networking at an international level with the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights and Habitat International Coalition. Locally, it is now apparent that such initiatives have played a critical role in enabling and facilitating subsequent social development initiatives.

A New Proposal

In 1995, Unnayan initiated the preparation of a set of recommendations substantively addressing the issue of unrecognized settlements in Calcutta. The overall context facing these dwellers had become worse, with many evictions taking place; also, a new economic régime was emerging, highlighting the irrelevance of old state-oriented proposals. New city improvement projects were likely to displace a large number of poor citizens and their resettlement not likely to be considered. Thus, a new initiative was called for.

A sizeable proportion of the squatter communities resided on the banks of the Beliaghata canal in Calcutta. The canals were foul and choked with sewage. The area as a whole was characterized by low-rise development, full of *basti* holdings, low-income housing, closed and abandoned factories (including some from a century ago), a few functioning low-grade industrial units and some vacant plots within the factory compounds. From Unnayan’s work in this area, a proposal was developed for a comprehensive renewal of the blighted canalside area.

It was felt that a proposal that addressed itself solely to the issue of squatters' rehabilitation would not be taken seriously. Hence, the preferred approach would be to think of an area renewal programme which deliberately sought to use the real estate market mechanism to achieve public goals for the city. The proposals also argued for the de-silting of Calcutta's canal network and the introduction of waterway based public transport. By landscaping the canal surroundings, a highly attractive new residential, commercial and institutional enclave could replace the existing degraded and blighted environment. The benefits would be multiple and positive impacts would be felt on the city's drainage, irrigation and pisciculture systems on the city fringe areas, and on transport management systems with further possibilities for tourism and recreational developments.

The development plan included an area of some 300 acres, with a population of about 30,000. It was intended that all the residents, and especially the low-income and poor, would get new, better and affordable housing. This would be paid for by the sale of high quality residential and commercial space through the better utilization of the land with additional densification. The ideas in the proposal were substantiated with estimates of areas, costs and rates of return. The proposal was found to be eminently feasible - but the key challenge it raised was for the institutions. How should an effort like this be initiated and undertaken?

tural or religious events. The existing CBOs in the three wards are by and large small youth clubs, often with political affiliations. The ward committees stipulated under the 74th Constitutional Amendment have only just been formed and hence their role in local area improvement is yet to emerge. The local corporation councillors are reasonably active but very often do not have the necessary resources.

In sharp contrast to the élitist perception of environment, the urban poor generally look at environmental problems in terms of their proximate living conditions and social milieu. As can be seen from Table 2, *basti* communities defined and perceived environmental problems in terms of their unhygienic physical surroundings and lack of basic services such as sanitation and water. Some have identified the deteriorating social environment as the major problem. Among the major social problems, drinking liquor and hooliganism by local rowdies are the ones that most worry residents.

b. Priya Manna *Basti*, Howrah

A more detailed study was undertaken in one of the largest and most complex of the settlements, Priya Manna *basti* in Ward 31 which had been established in the first decade of this century. Some basic information on this *basti* is given in Box 2 below. It was in this settlement that successful intervention might be considered the most difficult. The settlement has a complex situation of severe environmental degradation, service deficiencies, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and youth frustration. There are a large number of local organizations with complex inter-relations, there is illegal construction activity and, perhaps most importantly, the Muslim minority status of most of the dweller households (92 per cent) must be taken into account.

Table 2: How *Basti* Residents Define Environmental Problems

PHYSICAL ASPECTS	SOCIAL ASPECTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Heaps of garbage - Uncleaned drains - Mosquitoes, flies and worms - Dirty roads - Overflowing gutters - Lack of proper latrines; most of the existing ones are unhygienic - Inadequate water supply - Unlit neighbourhoods, as street lights are not working 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open sale and drinking of liquor - Local delinquents - Indifferent attitudes to community environment - Government's apathy towards <i>basti</i> improvement - Unemployment

In parallel with planning the improvement programme, survey and planning analysis were undertaken offering both strategic information and a sound analytical base for a development vision. Local fieldworkers undertook the survey with the help of this paper's second author who also conducted extensive interviews with *basti* tenants, *thika* tenants, promoters and other local informants. On-going, community-level discussions and meetings with various groups of dwellers, community based organizations and municipal functionaries were used to raise the *basti* development issue. A day-long community programme was also organized, involving debate and poetry recitation competitions, a seminar on *basti* development and a photo exhibition. A sample survey of 176 households in the *basti* was undertaken through the CEMSAP project and the tables in Box 2 summarize some of the findings.

The team was constantly faced with the challenge of retaining a positive outlook. It was imperative to make some meaningful impact within a short time and there was the need to ensure that the intervention would not be of a distorting kind - for instance, by simply coming into the community and spending money on this or that improvement and thus further nurturing the top-down, non-participatory approach and further encouraging non-ownership and community dependence upon external authorities.

Considerable time was invested in developing close rapport with some of the community youth so that they could make frank and honest comments on how they viewed the project team and its role, comment on what local people were thinking and saying, say whether any tensions were being created, and voice the issues on which the community was not informed which resulted in communication gaps arising. Thus, the team was able to remain aware of as much of the "full picture" as possible. In turn, this became the basis for decisions on how to rectify mistakes. Decisions and initiatives which appeared to be ineffective or which resulted in negative tensions within the community were rapidly reviewed and reversed if circumstances merited this. Admission by team members of their ignorance or error, as well as clarification of the underlying sincere objectives, ensured that the project retained a clear "learning experience" focus throughout. In this sense, many mistakes were made

Box 2: Basic Facts about Priya Manna Basti, Howrah

Population: Approximately 4,500 households with a total population of around 30,000. Eight per cent of the households are Hindu, 92 per cent Muslim.

Household size:

Number of persons	Per cent of households
1	1.1
2	4.5
3	6.8
4	12.5
5	18.8
6	19.9
7 or more	36.4

Water supply: Limited supply from public standpipes. Number of non-functioning tubewells.

Sanitation: Non-functioning septic tanks. Faecal matter flows into open drains.

Drainage: Due to dumping of garbage and faecal contamination, blocked drains in basti, neighbourhood; main drain heavily silted.

Garbage: Garbage accumulation in basti and in drains.

Housing tenure:

Tenure status	Per cent of respondents
Owned	9.7
Rented	78.4
Sub-tenant	2.8
Relative's house	0.6
No reply	8.5

Number of years living in the community:

Number of years	Per cent of respondents
Less than 10 years	0
10-20 years	2
21-30 years	12
31-40 years	46
More than 40 years	40

Overcrowding:

Number of rooms	Per cent of households
0	1.1
1	72.3
2	17.0
3	3.4
4 or more	5.7

but, within the team and at the community level, admitting a mistake, learning from it and taking the appropriate action became a means of strengthening goodwill and of stimulating community interest and involvement.

As a result of the programme activities, the functionaries and outreach of government programmes such as the nutritional supplementation scheme were mobilized to meet and start a dialogue with *basti* women. A number of performances of an environmental awareness play were staged by street play groups as a means of wider contact. Rapport was developed with several of the teachers in the schools in and near the *basti* who had been born and grown up there, been able to pursue higher education and then obtained employment as teachers in these schools.

c. Institutional Support

Given the presence of a large number of community organizations in the *basti* and the team's perception that the community had its own fairly deeply entrenched dynamics, intra-organizational and intra-community relations and tensions, it was decided to try and mobilize a forum from among the local organizations, youth and ward committee members. A local activist and six field organizers were selected from Priya Manna *basti* to assist the project team. The appropriate strategy of intervention was arrived at through team meetings. Available qualitative information on the local situation was analyzed using common sense and whatever was known on the basis of team members' experience in working with low-income communities; of the wider awareness of development experience over the last three decades in metropolitan Calcutta; and on the subject of community empowerment in general.

At the field level, besides community mobilization for the limited objectives of the project, the work was more akin to building a youth movement for public service, peace, goodwill and better living. It was felt that this would be the most enduring positive outcome from which a basis could be built to act in *basti* dwellers' interests. With the CEMSAP intervention coming to a close, follow-up actions assume greater significance in this light. It is necessary to have an independent, relatively empowered, community based presence to ensure that community mobilization is sustained and carried forward towards dweller-led *basti* renewal. Initiation of a social programme in the areas of education, health, awareness, livelihood and skill development is vital. Apart from bringing some benefits to the needy, such a presence could gain the trust and support of the tenant dwellers who would be the primary beneficiaries. This, in turn, would enable such a body to obtain their strong support for the *basti* renewal proposal.

What has emerged from this work is the formative stage of a movement for public service among the youth of the *basti*. The authors' view is that, much more significant than the study effort itself has been the breakthrough that has been achieved in communication, awareness, participation, action and conscious-

ness. The intended action plan has been rendered somewhat irrelevant, potentially to be redrafted by the community movement itself (at an appropriate moment) with the ideas of concerned outsiders being taken note of.

d. Improvements Undertaken

Twenty hand tubewells were installed by a local contractor on the basis of specifications provided by WATERAID (a UK NGO). The cost, using the best materials, was still less than that charged by the corporation who used cheaper materials. The siting of the tubewells was decided through discussions with the households in the most needy pockets. Conflicts regarding siting were resolved by the community based field workers. Materials were stored by local community organizations who also supervised the installation work.

Given the water scarcity and the consequent intensive use of the CEMSAP tubewells, wear and tear of parts is frequent. Maintenance is thus a key issue. Responsibility for on-going routine maintenance of the tubewells has been given to a volunteer squad comprised of local youth who were trained for this work and given a contract for an initial period of six months at a rate below that charged by local contractors for this task. Responsibility for major repairs remains with the corporation.

Whilst the project objectives, time frame and support provided under the CEMSAP pilot project were rather limited, for the project team this was an opportunity to see whether some long-term effort could be initiated. It was the breakthrough in community mobilization and consciousness that provided the basis upon which the CEMSAP improvements works were taken up. The CEMSAP project also provided an opportunity for dialogue with other municipal authorities in the Calcutta metropolitan area, opening up the possibility for Howrah-type initiatives in some of the smaller local bodies.

e. Towards Renewal in Priya Manna Basti

The scale of the problems in Priya Manna made it clear that, short of drastic surgery, there was no hope for the poor tenant dwellers. Apart from the degraded environment, the community as a whole was deprived in terms of social and health facilities such as schools, health-care centres and resources for community development. Community based efforts, undertaken by NGOs for instance, would, at best, bring incremental developments over a period of several years. Meanwhile, the overall context would be rapidly worsening, many more infants would die, possibilities for transformation would be set back further and, most fundamentally, rapid and comprehensive improvements in the living conditions of the community would perpetually be reduced to an unrealizable dream.

The studies at Howrah and then Priya Manna *basti* provided a vast amount of information, analysis and long-term experience. The CEMSAP pilot project team understood the need for fairly drastic action on *basti* development involving both com-

munities and the municipal corporation. The pilot project team now proposes to continue working in the *basti* and taking up advocacy with the corporation and the state government. An independent organization, called the Howrah Pilot Project has been formed with the objective of spearheading *basti* renewal in Priya Manna.

The poor have their protected status under the Slum Act as *basti* tenants. In fact, in Priya Manna *basti*, where the validity of claims to title (ownership or *thika*) are far from clear, it is the tenant dwellers who have the strongest legal rights. Thus, the potential market value of their land can be a means for their economic and social empowerment. Enabling them to take control over the development of this land so as to satisfy their own shelter and related needs, and also thereby generating surpluses to plough into the creation of much-needed social infrastructure for the community, became a strategic imperative.

The key factor preventing residents from obtaining loans from housing finance agencies was the lack of clear title. If titles are transferred to individual households, they could obtain long-term loans for new housing including low-interest loan schemes. The only meaningful option was to *initiate the process* of renewal and to mobilize the Howrah municipal corporation into facilitating this. In this way, tenants would be able to achieve home-ownership. For the pilot project team, it was precisely this that made the Howrah Pilot Project significant.

In order to take the development of the settlement forward, it was decided to work intensely with a small group of households to see how substantive improvements could be financed and managed. Through a limited community based design exercise, a plan was prepared for the development of two plots which, at present, have hutments on them and on which three-storey housing would be developed. The land includes 44 degraded residential units which provide about 9.3 square metres (100 square feet) of living area for each household. The two plots roughly correspond to an area of nearly 1,000 square metres (10,380 square feet). The design for the renewal scheme is based on a cluster module with provision for community open space on the ground floor and open terraces on the upper two floors. Units of different sizes are situated on each of the three floors and have been designed to cater to differing family preferences and also to allow a mix of social classes within the scheme. The design also conforms to the existing organic living pattern, facilitating interaction, mutual help and social living. In the new plan, the existing 44 tenant households have a larger living area of 20 square metres (215 square feet) and each household has individual services such as toilets and a piped water supply.

The plan has been worked out for a typical post-renewal structure within a larger *basti*-scale project. A financial analysis of this plan illustrates the underlying feasibility of renewal on a much larger scale. The remaining development area will be used for seven larger units of 85 square metres each (915 square feet) to be sold at high market rates. (The design has been based on the existing building regulation regulations on permissible floor area ratio and ground coverage.) The estimated proceeds from the

sale of just these seven larger units will more than fully cover the cost of construction of the entire scheme. Whilst affordability is a vital issue for the present tenant dwellers, they are still prepared to pay a significant amount to obtain clear title to a good quality, well-serviced apartment. For most, long-term loans would have to be arranged, for which the units would be mortgaged to the finance agencies. (The median household monthly expenditure in the *basti*, derived from the sample survey, was Rs 1,300 per month.) Assuming this scheme is undertaken by a "promoter", who would seek a rate of return of 20 per cent, the total sale proceeds of the scheme would easily cover this as well. Apart from showing the viability of development, the scheme also illustrates the fact that it is possible to plan, feasibly, for more dwelling space, good quality construction, adequate services and other social infrastructure.

This scheme also provides a pointer to the enormous renewal potential at the scale of the entire *basti*. Besides being able to address the much needed water and sanitation infrastructure within the renewal project itself, other necessary and complementary activities such as commercial spaces, community shops and markets, primary schools, children's play spaces, clinics and clubs can also be addressed. Given the large number of small business units and workshops in the *basti*, these can also be planned for within a *basti*-scale project.

It may be important to emphasize that the population in Howrah *bastis* such as Priya Manna is long-settled and hence there is little likelihood that any units acquired will be sold. (Nevertheless, any programme would have to build in mechanisms – such as through joint titles and cooperative authority – to mitigate such a possibility.)

However, there is a major problem which must be overcome prior to the implementation of this proposal. At present, developments on *thika* tenant controlled holdings are restricted. Under the restrictive provisions of the *Thika* Tenancy Act, the project described here cannot be undertaken. The current proposal is that an understanding be arrived at with the *thika* tenant and then the corporation and government will be approached to allow application of the general building regulations for the development proposal. Since such a proposal and the "surplus" generated would obviously be on behalf of, and in the interests of, the tenant dwellers and the *basti* community in general, and would also be a kind of pilot initiative for moving to a *basti*-wide project, provided the developer (the Howrah Pilot Project) has the credibility and capability, permission could well be granted.

IV. CONCLUSION

THE PRESENT SITUATION for all *basti* dwellers, and particularly for the tenants, is very difficult. There is severe overcrowding, acute service deficiencies and consequent environmental hazards with serious health impacts on the vulnerable sections. There are also illegal developments which make the ordinary *basti* tenant dwellers' circumstances significantly worse. There

is also a lack of investment finance although the potential exists for land-sharing within the *bastis*. All these point to the need for socially equitable *basti* development in order to ensure basic and long-term improvements in the quality of life of the poor and low-income sections.

Sooner or later, the imperative of strategic redevelopment of *basti* lands will have to be accepted. However, such redevelopment can mean the complete displacement of a very large population with very serious social and economic consequences for the metropolis. Lessons have to be learnt from Bombay where, since 1991, attempts to undertake slum redevelopment on the basis of land-sharing, through private developers, has resulted in insecurity, intimidation and even violence towards local residents. Thus, *basti* development that is led by an empowered community based institution is the objective that has to be worked towards.

Given the specific socio-economic conditions and history of Howrah and with the existing conditions in Howrah's *bastis* (which is where the overwhelming majority of Howrah's poor live), there is very little scope for effective improvements in the quality of life and dwelling conditions of the urban poor unless one involves the corporation and links this simultaneously with a larger *basti*, area and city renewal intervention. Investments such as improving the water supply and installing sewer lines - the kind of major infrastructure works planned for Howrah under the Mega City Plan - are ultimately needed to reduce the severe service deficiencies prevailing in areas such as Priya Manna. Improvement plans such as those proposed for Priya Manna *basti* are needed to address the housing needs of individual citizens.

Over 90 per cent of tenant households in Howrah live in *bastis*. Such a vision for *basti* and city renewal, besides substantively addressing the real concerns of tenants and thus redressing historical neglect, also offers the only prospect for very significantly enhancing, in the long run, the supply of housing in the city for rental purposes, in the absence of which the interests of low-income tenants will continue to be ignored. What emerged from the process and project described in this paper was the formative stage of a movement for public service among the youth of PM *basti*. *Basti* development, by and for the tenant dwellers, is one of the key objectives of this mobilization. Thus, much more significant than the study effort, was the breakthrough achieved in communication, awareness, participation, action and consciousness. Development of PM *basti* through dweller participation is, today, a live issue and a real possibility.