

ESSENTIAL **but ILLEGAL**

**Migrant workers affected by
jhuggi fires in Noida**

**Migrant Worker Solidarity Network's
fact finding report on jhuggi fires in
Noida's Barola (Sector 49) and
Bahloipur (Sector 63) villages
in April - May, 2021**





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Migrant Workers Solidarity Network

Essential but Illegal: Migrant workers affected by jhuggi fires in Noida

Fact-finding report on jhuggi fires in Noida's Bahlolpur (Sector 63) and Barola (Sector 49) villages in April – May 2021

Date: May 7, 2021

By-standers videographed two major smoke clouds emanating from informal jhuggi clusters in Noida within a month's time. The first incident took place on April 11, 2021 in Bahlolpur village in Sector 63. Two children died and around 200 jhuggis burnt down within an hour and a half after a fire broke out around 12.30 pm. The second instance took place around 9.40 pm on May 4, burning down around 150 jhuggis.

In both cases, the victims were migrant workers engaged in ragpicking, who sort waste collected from municipal dumping grounds for recycling. Some women in these slums are also domestic workers. They do not exist in any official documents and are often termed 'illegal' squatters. However, they remain an essential workforce appended to major gated commercial and residential complexes that dot the landscape of Uttar Pradesh's economic epicentre in Gautam Buddh Nagar.

The facts are outlined herein.

Issued by:



Shreya Ghosh
Migrant Workers Solidarity Network

Barola, Sector 49 – May 4, 2021

1. Around 150 jhuggis divided into two or three plots were located next to the open sewer near Noida Sector 72 metro station. These were around 80 square feet in size, making Barola village a densely populated area.
2. The jhuggis were built on private lands owned by local landlords. Rent of ₹1,000 to ₹2,000 is collected from each jhuggi on a monthly basis. Rent is based on area as well as non-monetary arrangements with the landlord, such as providing labour.
3. Its residents are migrant workers from various districts of West Bengal and Bihar from historically marginalised groups. Most are engaged in sorting waste for contractors. Around four or five contractors pick up waste for reselling, each collecting from around 25 families each. Hence, while there is a degree of permanence to their job, they are not considered employees by the municipality or the contractors but as independent entrepreneurs. The waste is stored within the residence itself or in open godowns.
4. Most residents have been living here for more than two years. Many from the younger generation took up rag picking as a profession after failing to find stable employment elsewhere, despite some having been educated up to matriculation level or beyond. The average level of education and political awareness here is greater than in Bahlolpur.
5. Residents reported that the fire broke out around 9.40 pm and raged on for about half an hour before fire responders arrived. This is despite repeated calls made to the Sector 49 police station, which is less than 500 metres from the spot. As a result, the two fire brigades that arrived initially were unable to douse the flames and backup had to be called for. Finally, the fire was put out after the National Disaster Response Force arrived.
6. The cause of the fire is yet to be identified.
7. The most urgent need is for cooked meals twice a day, as ovens and utensils have also been burnt down, and tarpaulin sheets to begin reconstruction of homes. On the day our team reached the spot, a langar service had been arranged by a gurudwara nearby and a NGO had promised food for the night.
8. The administration has promised compensation of ₹7,900 per household destroyed. Names and bank details were being recorded when our volunteers reached the spot the morning after the fire. It may be noted that many residents have lost their identification documents and bank passbooks in the fire. Follow-up regarding disbursement of the compensation promised is underway.

Bahlolpur, Sector 63 – April 11, 2021

1. The slum is on private land divided into seven plots and held by five landowners from the same dominant caste. It is agricultural land—an adjoining plot is still used for farming—that has been leased out to migrant workers to reside in over the last two or three years.
2. The area is divided into two parts by a gully coming down from the main road and traversing through the middle of the settlement. The three plots owned by Prem Yadav are all on one side.
3. Depending on informal agreements, monthly rent ranging from ₹1200 to ₹2000 is being charged. Electricity lines were connected to most jhuggis and water was pumped using electric bore wells. The housing was assembled using bamboo poles and highly inflammable tarpaulin sheets.
4. The fire is said to have broken out on the plot closest to the main road. Short circuiting is speculated to be the cause of the fire, which may have been exacerbated by bursting LPG cylinders. The colony was sparsely populated at the time since the fire broke out close to noon. Most residents had gone out to work or were asleep. The two children who died belong to the same family which lived closest to where the fire broke out.
5. Most residents are migrant workers from Bihar's Nalanda, Nawada and southern districts, belonging almost exclusively to Paswan or Bind scheduled castes. Most residents have been living in Noida before moving to Bahlolpur, many having moved there after being displaced from Khora Colony (around 7 km away), which was considered to be Asia's largest labour colony till quite recently. Almost none of the children go to school.
6. The nature of the settlements may be considered semi-commercial and semi-residential since the waste collected by residents is also stored adjacent to their homes. This is sorted for further sale using family labour or by contractors employing a group of younger, unmarried male workers staying together. Waste collected includes paper, electronic parts, plastic bottles and rubber parts—these contributed to the spread of the fire—and are sold by weight to contractors. The waste is either collected from municipality waste pits or door-to-door from gated colonies. Thus, the fire not only burnt their residences but also the source of livelihood for these migrant workers.
7. Delay in fire services responding to the call led to the spread of the fire. It is estimated that fire brigades took around 35 to 40 minutes to reach the spot from Sector 58, which is otherwise around 15 minutes away. It is highly unlikely that the fire would have crossed the gully dividing the slum and burnt down the majority of the jhuggis on the other side had fire services responded on time. The spread of the fire meant that most residents were left with just the clothes on their back.
8. The Uttar Pradesh government announced compensation of ₹4 lakh for each of the children deceased. This has not covered the majority of claimants. The District Magistrate promised compensation a night after the incident and the police compiled a list of beneficiaries' bank accounts. A notification issued by the Relief Officer's office, Lucknow promised compensation of ₹7,900 for each jhuggi destroyed (see *Appendix C*). When a municipality bulldozer came to flatten the ground, residents refused to allow operations before materials for rehabilitation were delivered.

9. After initial relief operations, MWSN volunteers accompanied residents to the Charkhi Dadri Tehsildar's office which is responsible for disbursement of compensation. A list of names and bank accounts was found with the administration. The administration promised to revise the lists in case a significant number of victims were found to have been excluded. It may be noted that the government has refused to provide material for reconstructing the jhuggis stating that they were located on private land. Any rehabilitation package would amount to legal recognition that these jhuggis exist.
10. A few days later, Uttar Pradesh gram panchayat polls concluded and the state went into Covid-19 lockdown in end-April. As of last reports from locals, less than 40 percent of the beneficiaries listed by the Uttar Pradesh government have received compensation so far.
11. While landlords had made word of mouth assurances to forgive rent for six months, residents have no guarantee that they will not be evicted for failing to pay rent in the coming days.

A note on urbanization and labour

The underlying circumstances common to both these jhuggi fires show that these are not mere fire hazards. Viewing them as isolated instances hides an element of planning that is fuelling perennial precariousness for a major section of Noida's workers in the so-called 'informal sector'.

The New Okhla Industrial Development Area, or Noida, was envisaged by the Government of Uttar Pradesh in 1972 to decongest industries in the national capital, stop further in-migration and absorb industries which did not conform to urban regulations. Moreover, the first Master Plan drawn up in 1972 (and adopted with revisions in 1983) also stated curbing speculation on land in the predominantly agrarian regions surrounding Delhi and developing affordable housing for a section of the city's workforce among its objectives (Noida 1983). Accordingly, 50 villages in the erstwhile district of Bulendshahar were designated as the Yamuna-Hindon-Delhi Border regulated area under the Uttar Pradesh Regulation of Building Operations Act, 1958. The Greater Noida Industrial Development Authority (GNIDA) was set up to acquire land for phased development, and it managed to acquire around 20,316 hectares of land spread across 81 villages with the aim of developing a township for three lakh residents by the year 2001. The GNIDA adopted the new Draft Master Plan 2031 in 2011 (Noida 2011).

Noida emerged as a preferred destination for an emergent professional class in post-liberalization India that was employed in the booming IT-led service economy. As of 2011, around 27 Special Economic Zones (SEZs) had mushroomed in Noida and Greater Noida, of which the majority deal with IT or IT enabled services and are reliant of foreign direct investment (Dupont 1983). However, since its inception, planned development of SEZs and Export Processing Zones (EPZs) in peri-urban centres in the Global South has been accompanied by 'uneven development' of its periphery (Smith 2008). For instance, Khora Colony came up as a hidden adjunct to Noida's sprawling cityscape that housed its massive workforce and also emerged as an abode of semi-legal productive activities (Dubey 2017). Local agrarian landholders operated within a grey zone of the law to extract surplus from the new flood of precarious migrant workers who were excluded from the low-cost housing constructed as part of Noida's Master Plan 2001. Meanwhile, they waited for more profitable avenues to open up, such as for government compensation for acquiring their land.

As Khora Colony undergoes such a process of redevelopment, hidden enclaves around Gautam Buddh Nagar have opened up to accommodate more semi-legal housing. This is where our jhuggi fires seem to be taking place. Built on private land, these migrant 'squatters' have no security of tenure even after staying at a spot for years or even decades. Moreover, these 'migrants' have no hope of being gradually absorbed within the city's populace as 'residents' by moving up in terms of claiming legal status, secure employment or permanent housing.

Meanwhile, the service jobs that they are engaged in, such as paid domestic labour or waste management, are of a permanent nature and are disdained by locals. That is, if one set of these essential urban workers are displaced then another set must be brought in from the countryside to take up their place in the socio-economic hierarchy. Moreover, they cannot be so far removed from the city so as to make it unfeasible to engage in such labour. This claim to citizenship cannot be granted recognition by the city planners in order to sustain the peculiar model of urbanization that Noida represents. The 'Noida model' cannot be sustained without denying basic civic amenities or citizenship rights to these migrant workers.

The specific mode of urban segregation that Noida epitomises has led to discontent. Sporadic out-

breaks, such as a minor riot that broke out in Noida Sector 78 in 2017 after a domestic worker, Zohra Bibi, was forcefully held by her employers in a gated complex called Moderne Mahagun, characterise the most visible of working people's response to such undignified living conditions. What they point at is that such working and living conditions are intrinsic to the development paradigm that shiny cityscapes like Noida (Uttar Pradesh), Gurgaon HUDA (Haryana), Navi Mumbai (Maharashtra), Salt Lake (West Bengal) and Cyberabad HITEC city (Telangana) represent. As long as our political decision makers remain committed to this socio-economic model, stray jhuggi fire 'accidents' like the ones referred to above will remain an unaddressed element of Noida's Master Plan.

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Appendix A: Images from Barola jhuggi fire

Visit MWSN's Youtube channel for a video report from our visit to Barola a day after the fire incident. See ['Fire 'accident' in Noida Sec 50 leaves 150 migrant worker families homeless'](https://youtu.be/-BGVbnPL5L0) (<https://youtu.be/-BGVbnPL5L0>).



Appendix B: Images from Bahlolpur jhuggi fire



Visit MWSN's Facebook page for a video report on the effect of Covid-19 lockdown on migrant workers in Bahlolpur. See <https://www.facebook.com/mwsn.in/videos/751920042181484/>.

Appendix C: Compensation notice for Bahlolpur fire victims

प्रेषक,
जिलाधिकारी,
गौतमबुद्धनगर।
सेवा में,
राहत आयुक्त कार्यालय,
उत्तर प्रदेश शासन,
राजस्व अनुभाग-10, लखनऊ।

पत्रांक /सी0आर0ए0-अग्निकाण्ड/21-22 दिनांक अप्रैल 2021

विषय-आज दिनांक-11.04.2021 को हुई अग्निकाण्ड की सूचना दिये जाने के सम्बन्ध में।
महोदय,

कृपया उपर्युक्त विषयक के सम्बन्ध में अवगत कराना है कि आज दिनांक-11.04.2021 को ग्राम बहलोलपुर सैक्टर-63 नोएडा तहसील दादरी जनपद गौतमबुद्धनगर में हवा के झोंके से झुगियों में आग लग गयी। अभी तक प्राप्त सूचना के आधार पर झुगियों के जलने से 02 बच्चों की मौत हो गयी, जिसमें अभी भी राहत कार्य चल रहा है, उक्त प्रकरण में अहेतुक सहायता की कार्यवाही की जा रही है। शासनादेश सं0-32-7/2014-एन0डी0एम0ए0-1, दिनांक 08.04.2015 के आधार पर क्षति का भुगतान निम्न प्रकार किया जाना है-

क्र0सं0	क्षति का विवरण	देय धनराशि
01	मृतक प्रति व्यक्ति	4,00,000/-रु0
02	प्रति परिवार कपड़ों का नुकसान	1800/-रु0
03	प्रति परिवार बर्तन/घरेलू सामग्री के नष्ट होने पर	2000/-रु0
04	प्रति व्यक्ति गम्भीर चोट, जिसके कारण एक सप्ताह से अधिक समय तक अस्पताल में भर्ती होने की आवश्यकता हो।	12700/-रु0
05	प्रति व्यक्ति गम्भीर चोट, जिसके कारण एक सप्ताह से कम समय तक अस्पताल में भर्ती होने की आवश्यकता हो।	4300/-रु0
06	क्षतिग्रस्त/नष्ट प्रति झोपड़ी	4100/-रु0

भवदीया,

अपर जिलाधिकारी(वि/रा)
गौतमबुद्धनगर।

प्रतिलिपि- जिलाधिकारी गौतमबुद्धनगर को सूचनार्थ प्रेषित।

अपर जिलाधिकारी(वि/रा)
गौतमबुद्धनगर।

Dist. epd 731