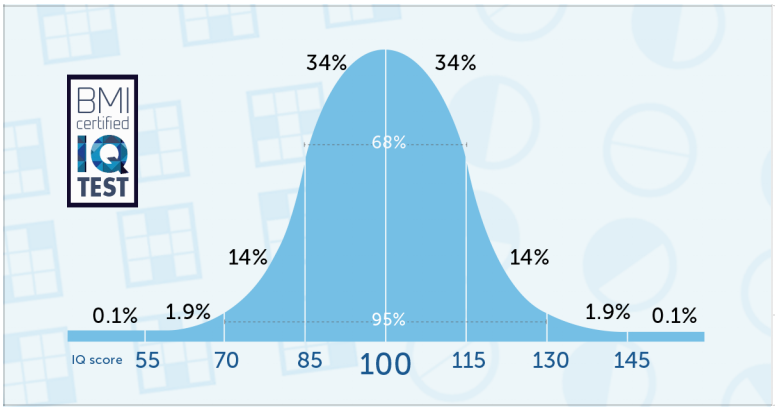

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URBANISATION

1,500 people evicted from slum in Dharamshala; rehabilitation uncertain

People living in Charan Khad slum for over three decades are now being chased away from Dharamshala as local authorities don't want them to stay in the city

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By Subhojit Goswami
Published: Monday 27 June 2016

The residents, mostly migrant workers from Rajasthan and Maharashtra, work as construction labourers and rag pickers Credit: Endangering Himachal

unicipal Corporation of Dharamshala launched a drive to demolish C 500 residents who had been staying there for over three decades. The eful eviction without a plan for rehabilitation. The evicted residents 0 children, are now braving rain and desperately looking for shelter.

MCD in a spot is the press note it issued on June 21, says Manshi Ash orm to share environmental issues emerging in Himachal Pradesh. A d by Himdhara Collective, a cooperative involved in research work o MCD's press note stated that anyone who provided accommodation t ction and the occupants would be evicted under section 278 of the Hi lowing this order, the recently evicted people were thrown out of the accommodations and villagers chased them away from panchayat areas. "The district administration simply doesn't want them to settle anywhere near the MCD area", says Asher. "They feel distraught at the way the whole incident was orchestrated," adds Asher.

Since the eviction, slogans like '*Garibo ko Ujadna Bandh Karo'* (stop evicting the poor) and '*Charan Khad Visthapiton ka Punarwas Karo*' (rehabilitate the people displaced from Charan Khad area) have often been heard on the stretch from the Shaheed Marg Park to the office of the Municipal Corporation of Dharamshala.

Demolition of slum in the name of defecation

In April 2016, the MCD officials started a dialogue with the residents of Charan Khad—a settlement of about 300 makeshift structures accommodating close to 15000 migrant workers. On May 16, the MCD issued the first order on eviction, and again on June 3 it sent out an order stating for the first time that since the slum dwellers defecate in the open, the place is becoming a public hazard.

“Open defecation is not a reason for displacing thousands of people. They (MCD officials) could have built sanitation facility in the past 35 years,” says Manshi Asher of Endangered Himachal—a platform to share environmental issues emerging in Himachal Pradesh. Arguing that demolishing homes is not the only solution to prevent water contamination or open defecation, Asher says, “No studies of water contamination are provided and there are no details on health survey being conducted or any water samples being tested.”

Charan Khad—home to migrant labourers

Charan Khad, located close to the Dharamshala cricket stadium in the southern suburbs, is home to labourers from poor parts of Rajasthan and Maharashtra who had migrated to Kangra Valley. They work as construction workers and rag pickers. Disease used to be rampant in the area and they were exacerbated by severe malnutrition.

Where did MCD go wrong?

The main grievance against the government is the failure to provide a plan B—a provision for rehabilitating the slum dwellers before the eviction drive was carried out.

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After submitting a memorandum to the Deputy Commissioner demanding immediate access to shelter and long-term rehabilitation, activist Akshay Jasrotia pointed out that these homeless people depend on daily wage and their existence is at threat due to this sudden uncertainty.

Moreover, the eviction, as he argued, is a violation of Article 21 of Indian Constitution that guarantees the Right to Life, Right to Shelter and Right to Dignity.

Activists are also questioning the relevance of the sections of the Himachal Pradesh Municipal Corporation Act that were referred to as a pretext to launch the eviction drive. The MCD order cited Section 278, which is about “disputes”, and Section 369, which doesn’t even exist.

On June 25, the High Court rejected a petition by Karan Kumar, a resident of the area, asking on what grounds they were evicted. The court asked the MCD “to pass orders, as warranted under law”. “But the order doesn’t say that the MCD officials can evict them without making provision of their rehabilitation", says Asher.

Is sanitation the real reason behind eviction?

Down To Earth asked this question to Jatinder Kumar, sanitation supervisor at Municipal Corporation of Dharamshala. "I think the reason is not sanitation. On September 21, 2015, Dharamsala Municipal Council was upgraded to Municipal Corporation. The MCD is now in expansion mode and it needs space to set up offices of mayor and deputy mayor as well. Hence, they chose the Charan Khad area," says Kumar.

Is MCD doing anything to rehabilitate the people? A vacant government land has been identified some 8-10 km from the city centre and most of the former residents of Charan Khad have been asked to shift there. "There are only about 40-50 people who don't want to reside away from the town because they sustain themselves by doing odd jobs like rag picking and polishing boots", says Kumar. According to him, the government doesn't have any vacant land within the city.

If sanitation has ever been an issue, why didn't the government build a sanitation facility in the last so many years? "Earlier, the Charan Khad area was under the ambit of village panchayat and not municipal council. Hence, the council didn't take any action despite some NGOs raising the issue with the authorities," says Kumar.

Although Kumar claims that vacant land has been identified and people have been asked to shift there, the people on the ground have something else to say. According to Asher, "Some of the MCD officials had given hope of rehabilitating the former residents of Charan Khad by showing them 2-3 villages, but there was neither a written commitment from them nor any official communication has been received so far."

What's the progress of Integrated Housing and Slum Development Programme?

The official website of the Urban Development Department of the Government of Himachal Pradesh displays the status report of Integrated Housing and Slum Development Programme. According to the status report given on the website, 328 dwelling units were approved on February 27, 2008 and about Rs 3.5 crore was released for the project. While places such as Sundernagar and Sarkaghat in Mandi district witnessed 100 per cent completion of the project, the process of identifying and demarcating lands was still on in Dharamshala till the end of May 2014.

Now that Dharamshala has been shortlisted as a 'Smart City', and it is ready to receive a grant of Rs 1,000 crore from the Centre in the next five years, it would be focussed on building multilevel parking places, additional pavements and public convenience centres. However, it shouldn't wash its hands of an equally grave responsibility—slum development programme.

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POST A COMMENT

URBANISATION

How Uber opens cities only to close them

Uber is just another intermediary capitalist that profits from the needs of typically urban people

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By Jean-Paul Gagnon, David Carter, Fanny Thornton
Published: Tuesday 05 July 2016

Uber has successfully changed ride-hailing regulation and has a city's residents on board Credit: Scott L / Flicker

Most of us know the story of what Salon's Elias Isquith calls "Wall Street's favourite disrupter". Uber, the ride-hailing service run primarily through smartphones, is a global economic success story.

In 2008, it was but an idea held by Travis Kalanick and Garrett Camp. Today it is a profit-making "unicorn". It was recently valued at US$62.5 billion.

How Uber came to be worth such significant sums is a question often posed. Integral to its success was its speedy efforts at connecting riders with drivers through smartphones. This saw Uber become an on-demand disruptor business. In the process, it has alluringly branded itself as a service "for the good of all" that puts "people first".

Uber seemingly takes from over-priced taxis, facilitates livelihoods for its drivers, gives to the needy rider and sticks it to urban regulators – or so the story goes.

Much closer to the truth may be that when Uber isn't wrapping itself in cloaks of communal good, it is busy trying to institute a monopoly on ride-hailing. It actively encloses what could be a more open city in which riders and drivers work to benefit city residents.

Now you're open, now you're closed

Uber "opens" cities to "close" them. We think this way because Uber is just another intermediary capitalist (like eBay, Airbnb and PayPal) that profits from the needs of typically urban people connected to the internet.

Uber is therefore an extension of capitalism and, because of that, can be understood as a business trying to maximise its market share.

Uber "opens to close" a city in three steps:

- to disrupt the existing taxi monopoly (a closed system) through marketing and paying fines incurred by its drivers;
- to entice riders to download its app, drivers to "share" their car, and urban regulators to acquiesce to the popularity of the Uber service; and
- to exclude ride-hailing alternatives through its maximised market share.

The marketing Uber uses to disrupt the grip one or more taxi companies have on a city is to present a rich rhetoric of being the "alternative", somehow "grassroots" and, most importantly, a "communal" choice for drivers and riders. It casts itself as a Robin Hood in the struggle against unjust, or simply outdated, urban regulators.

This branding, Uber's cheaper price and its convenient app make it an alluring option for ride-hailers. So long, cabbie dynasty, this city's now open.

But because Uber grows within the shell of the taxi industry all it really does is open a city to enclose it for its own benefit. It does this through consistent marketing to riders, but also by enticing drivers to partner with Uber with promises of higher pay and a be-your-own-boss mentality.

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Uber also crows about creating tens of thousands of jobs and getting one million women into work. This helps to get regulators onside.

A city is "closed" when Uber's enclosure is complete: when it has successfully disrupted taxis, changed ride-hailing regulation and has a city's residents on board (so to speak).

We say closed because an "Uber city" is a city captured by intermediary (middleman) capitalism. Defeated taxis are creating their own apps, and alternatives abound. But Uber's market dominance makes it very difficult for more meaningful alternatives to emerge.

Market dominance means the exclusion of competitors and the control of the means of production so that profits keep rolling in. "Capture your market" is a mantra for a reason. And that reason is because it works – it's Capitalism 101.

An open-city alternative

A truly open city would be one where residents are invited, supported and backed by their city government to create their own ride-hailing apps. Riders still get picked up for a fair price, drivers still get paid more, but profit goes into a public trust to ensure the apps provide good service but also to fund resident-specific projects, like bike roads fully separated from cars.

Not only will this keep jobs and money inside the city, but it also puts a vital transportation resource into the hands of city residents and not a foreign business.

The need to get around a city safely, conveniently and with as little carbon emissions as possible shouldn't be viewed as an opportunity for businesses like Uber to cash in. It should rather be treated as a common pool resource.

Since the majority of people in cities still depend on cars and roads to get around, chasing the wrong incentives can lead to chronic traffic jams and a host of other problems.

City residents don't want traffic jams; moving around is a vital part of their daily lives. Uber doesn't necessarily mind traffic jams because of surge pricing and a rolling meter – it still makes money. Ironically, despite this conflict of interests, Uber is the US$62 billion Wall Street poster child and the open-city alternative is excluded.

Uber may open cities from taxi rackets, but it closes them off to the possibility of more radical and meaningful alternatives.

Jean-Paul Gagnon, Assistant Professor in Politics, *University of Canberra*; David Carter, Associate Dean of Research and Associate Professor of Law, *University of Canberra*, and Fanny Thornton, Assistant Professor of Law, *University of Canberra*

This article was originally published on The Conversation. Read the original article.

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