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Hyderabad's homeless

A hundred beats  
By Fatima Bhutto

A mile or two down Khayaban-e-Imam Khomeni in Hyderabad lies Makrani Para, a katchi abadi railway colony that consists of 100 squatter settlements. The colony is situated on a rather prominent garbage heap and the tents that the residents of Makrani Para live in are pitched around, over, or next to the gargantuan mounds of rubbish that cover every surface of the area. In most cases, the garbage reaches as high as the tents do.

Five days ago local policemen and women came with lathis and ordered the people of Makrani Para to pack their belongings and leave. The police came without notice and when the people refused to abandon their homes, insisting that they had no where else to go, the policemen and women beat them and kicked their tents to the ground -- a generous term, the fortunate of Makrani Para had dirty greying encampments that could pass as tents, but the majority weren't so lucky. They tied a sheet of fabric or an old ralli to two sticks that they then dug into the garbage and lived underneath a patch of shaded land not larger than five feet wide. The police told the people of Makrani Para that they were encroaching on railway land and had a week to find new accommodation. The police promised they would be back on the third day of Eid to finish the job. One woman, Hadna, died as a result of the injuries she received that day.

"How can they say we're encroaching?" said Hadna's daughter, a grey haired woman named Lassi, "We have lived in this area since the time of the British. We were evicted from our homes because they wanted to use our land for construction and so we were forced out to this area and have been here ever since". A man spoke up, his name was Sher Mohammad and his lips trembled as he spoke to us "They want to throw us out because they say we're encroaching on railway land but we pay rent to live here, every family pays Rs100 a month" One hundred rupees for the right to live in an unsanitary, exposed garbage heap. They pay it to the city. "There's a McDonald's hotel on the other side of the tracks," continued Sher Mohammad "they are even closer to the tracks than we are, but nobody is moving them".

I have seen a fair number of katchi abadis, I have spent time in the squalor of Karachi's ubiquitous slums, but I had never seen anything as disturbing as the Makrani Para colony in Hyderabad. I was not at all prepared for what I saw in Hyderabad that afternoon. There were black garbage bags everywhere -- the people used them for warmth at night. Old beaten down crates were used as their furniture and there

was no running water or private, let alone clean, toilet spaces. How can I describe the violence of the place? The utter marginalization of these already marginalized people? I smiled at a young girl; she must have been around two years old. She had her hair tied up in a ponytail with a rubber band right on top of her head. She just stared at me. I kept smiling at her. Nothing. I made faces, I motioned hello with my hand, but she wouldn't respond. There was nothing left in her. Her spirit had been beaten out of her; so effective is the violence of poverty and disenfranchisement. When the third day of Eid comes, the government will not need bulldozers to empty out Makrani Para of its residents, just lathis -- they will do the job just fine, how blissfully easy it is to destroy a tent. As a side observation, there were banners and posters all over Hyderabad city advertising one of those monstrous new apartment complexes that are springing up all over the place. These ones were called 'London Towers' and had a garish drawing of Big Ben placed in between 'London' and 'Towers'. If you cannot afford a four bedroom in the eerily named London Towers, what then of your right to shelter?

It was midday and the sun was beating down on us, and I was carrying a book and a sheet of paper that I was writing on. When I stopped behind my mother, who was speaking to Sher Mohammad, to jot something down I was enveloped by a swarm of women. "Bhaji, write my name down" someone said touching my arm. "Write mine too" insisted the others. Zora Deva, Ani, Karim Bux, Dhaneer, Arshad, Bano, Hamida, Imam Bux, Lalla, Janaat, Mira, Paloo. I was overwhelmed with the names that came at me, some Hindu, some Muslim, some Sindhi, some Balochi. I didn't have it in me to ask what they thought would be accomplished by my writing down their names, they seemed so sure that it was going to mean something, so I continued to bear witness to their destruction and wrote down whatever they told me to. "Write my name down and my children's too" said Sassi, a woman whose newborn baby was tied to her chest. "I was beaten" she said and lifted her kameez sleeve to show me the lathi scars "They beat my arm so badly I can't work on my machine. I have two children, what am I supposed to do?" What machine do you work on, I asked. "I weave carpets" Sassi replied. It was child labour. Sassi barely looked my age; she could not have been over 18.

I kept writing and as I did one of the women held her dupatta over me to block the sun from my eyes. "Where is Benazir?" asked another woman, cheekily hoping to get some gossip out of me while they had me working as their ledger. I ignored the question and continued writing. "Oh she's in London, let the girl finish writing," shouted an old woman busy swatting away the flies around us. I looked at her and smiled and she smiled back and put her hand on my shoulder "You got my name, didn't you?" I did. She was Hamida; she wore a green shalwar kameez and had family in Lyari. "Can't you go and live with them?" someone asked her. "Why should I?" She replied. "This is my home".

I left the railway colony armed with names and a heavy feeling of gloom. Eid was not far away and there seemed little one could do. Every week since I've been writing this column I've received many kind

emails from people across the country, they are letters of support, suggestions, questions, and criticism. I am always happy to receive and read them but this week, don't write to me.

Write to Kanwar Naveed, the nazim of Hyderabad. Mention those names – mention Zora Deva, Karim Bux, Arshad, Bano, Imam Bux, Sher Mohammad, Hadna, and Sassi. Write to Kanwar Naveed and ask him why the people of Makrani Para are being forcibly evicted from their homes and why they have not received any compensation or resettlement money from the government or the railway authorities. Ask him what he will be doing on the third day of Eid.

Ask him to stop these forced evictions in his city. You can reach the Hyderabad Nazim's office at this address: District nazim Hyderabad, District Council Office, Opposite Shahbaz Building, Gymkhana Road, Hyderabad and at these numbers: 9200709 or 9200069. You can also reach Anjum Parvez, the Secretary of the Railways Board at D Block, 4th floor, Pak Secretariat, Islamabad or call at 051-9206154.