

THINGS FALL APART

Voices Of Women Affected By The Closure
Of 168 Industrial Units In Delhi



A Report Prepared By
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This report is the outcome of interviews of families affected by the closure of factories in Delhi. The women openly shared with us much more of their lives than what we have been able to portray here. This is a modest attempt to reflect the courage of these women and families in the face of such hard times.

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Introduction

An order of the Supreme Court dated July 8, 1996 directed the closure/relocation of 168 factories categorized as "H" ("noxious and hazardous"), in consonance with the provisions of the Delhi Master Plan. As a result of this order, 50,000 workers were thrown out of the factories on November 30, 1996. More than a year has passed since then. No worker has been paid wages for the period or compensation, nor has relocation of any factory taken place.

In our earlier reports, we recorded the flagrant violation of the compensation provisions of the Supreme Court orders by factory owners. In addition we showed that while concern for the environment was the ostensible reason for the closure, in fact the real impetus came from the politics of real estate and the growing push to restructure urban spaces for the elite.

This report tries to capture some of the human cost involved in the closure of 168 "polluting" industries in November 1996, and the consequent mass dislocation of workers. Cold statistics do not reveal the sudden unravelling of family ties, the shock of childhood abruptly abandoned. Nor do they reflect the particular pressures on women - as workers, as wives and mothers, desperately trying to adjust to drastically changed circumstances, bearing as ever, the heaviest burden.

Those interviewed were workers or families of workers employed in Umashankar Khandelwal & Co., Nova Steel, Sawhney Rubber Industries, Birla Cotton Mills, Swatantra Bharat Mills, Shriram Foods and Fertilizers and G.D. Rathi Steel Ltd. Only a few had been permanent, and others were contract or casual labour, regardless of the years of service they had put in, which ranged from 2 to 35 years.

We spoke to 53 women - workers themselves or members of workers' families - in informal, loosely structured interviews. This is not a representative sample, since (a) most of the workers affected by the closures, though working for decades in the same factory were not on the rolls of their employers. They are now scattered beyond trace and we could have no access to them. Therefore all the 7 factories we could cover are organized industrial units. Most of these had some trade union activity, which provided us with a vital link to the prevailing situation. (b) only 8 of the 53 interviewees were families of contract workers, although the average proportion of contract/temporary workers in the 168 closed units is estimated at 60% at least, going up to 80% in many cases.

Nevertheless, we believe that the voices which emerge through these interviews are representative in another sense. They are representative of a human tragedy of vast proportions, a tragedy of which the city has chosen to remain unaware.

Living On The Edge

Only 16 of the families interviewed have a regular source of income after the closures, but in all cases, the income has fallen steeply. 20 are employed as casual labour, which means low wages and no guarantee of work. 5 families are engaged in-piece-rate work, which is highly exploitative, being meagrely paid and involving back-breaking labour. In many cases women who have not been in paid work before, and school going children, have taken to piece-work to save their families from starvation. Those who remain unemployed after the closures are largely in the older age group (45 to 60), as their age is a limiting factor in their finding employment. These are naturally also those who had the longest years in service at the time of the closures and are left with nothing. This is specially true of workers who were about to retire and collect their benefits. Now they survive on the income generated by their family members, loans in anticipation of the settlement of accounts, and in some cases, on a little income from their homes in the villages.

Bimladevi's * husband worked in Shriram Foods and Fertilizers for 20 years with a salary of Rs. 2500 per month. Now he plies a rickshaw, paying a daily hire charge of Rs. 20, and on good days, earns up to Rs. 50 a day, much less on others.

After 20 years of service, Susheela's husband now does construction work (*beldari*, i.e. the lowest paid unskilled labour), and her daughter supplements the family income by hemming blouses for a tailor at Rs. 4 a piece. She does 4-5 pieces a day.

Geeta's family income has fallen from Rs. 2200 per month which her husband earned as contract worker at Shriram Foods and Fertilizers, to the daily wages he earns as *beldar* whenever he can get work, Rs. 60 a day.

Rashmi's husband used to do electrical work in Umashankar Khandelwal, earning Rs. 4500 a month. He is unemployed now, and the income she earned from a buffalo is gone because she could no longer afford fodder for it, and so had to send it back to the village. Her two sons aged about 12 and 10 have started doing electrical piece-work at home after they return

* Names of all the interviewees have been changed in order to safeguard their identities.

The Heavy Price Of Survival

At Swatantra Bharat Mills as we were looking for the families affected by closure, we were told about a particular family by neighbours. They escorted us to the house. As we entered the door, a strong smell of rubber hit us. In a small squarish open verandah, on a wooden plank, 35 year old Kiran Kumar and his 12 year old son were separating rubber *chappal* straps. There was no place to sit. Standing, we talked to the father. The need to cut the targeted number of straps was so pressing that during our conversation both father and son, like machines, continued their work uninterrupted.

As we were talking to them the aged parents of Kiran Kumar and a younger brother came out of the house. The father commented, "In the name of the environment the factories closed, but what happens to the polluted environment of our home?" He then climbed a bamboo ladder to the roof. There, we were told, other members including his married daughter were cutting straps.

With the closure, Kiran Kumar and his two brothers lost their jobs. The father was forcibly retired in 1994 under the voluntary retirement scheme. He did not get the full gratuity due to him after 35 years of service and so has gone to court to get this amount. In addition, the company has filed cases against many families within the complex, including this family, to get the company quarters vacated. The unemployed father is following these cases in court.

With four earning members out of jobs, managing two meals a day became a herculean task. We were told by neighbours that Kiran Kumar's wife, who was pregnant at the time of the closure, used to cut *chappal* straps the whole day and virtually survived on lemon water. She was anaemic. At the time of delivery, when she was taken to the ESI hospital, she was refused admission as they no longer had ESI benefits. She was brought home, where after delivering a daughter, she and the child both died. The neighbours told us that the family did not have the money to buy a *kafan* and do the funeral rites. With contributions from neighbours, the last rites were finally performed 24 hours after the death.

from school, at Rs. 7 per 100 pieces. They work for 3 to 4 hours every afternoon. Rashmi's husband also has some savings which they are living off.

Munesh's husband used to earn up to Rs. 3000 per month including overtime at Nova Steels, where he had been employed for 7 years. Now he works as *beldar* at daily wages of Rs. 50-60 a day. Munesh took up the work of hemming *dupattas*, but could barely make Rs. 200-250 per month. She found it too strenuous and left it.

In the Swatantra Bharat Mills complex, most of the workers' families were busy in piece-rate work - sticking *bindis* on to sheets, filling water colour boxes, cutting rubber straps for *chappals*. Wives and children of Birla Cotton Mills employees staying in Khilona Bagh were making flower garlands, wrapping Poppins or knitting laces. Everywhere the common refrain was that the rates were pitifully low. What emerges quite clearly is that now with the whole family including women and children, putting in longer hours at more exhausting work, the income is still lower and more uncertain than before.

Faced with resistance to their working outside, women are forced to resort to home-based work paid at piece-rates. Our interviews have shown that such work further exploits women's labour.

Home And The World

Most of the women we interviewed had taken up some kind of paid work to meet the crisis. Some of them had never done so before and have had to encounter resistance from their families as well as cope with their own fears about city life.

A woman from rural Bihar lamented that she cannot do the kind of work available here - "In the village I could get some work or the other in the fields throughout the year. Who will give us work here?" Another migrant woman told us that one cannot feel secure in the city - "It is not safe to go outside and work. All kinds of things happen here."

"I do manage to get some *bindi* work. I take 2 to 4 days to complete a gross and then I get Rs. 2. Before this I worked in a *kothi* for Rs. 200. We women had to take up some work or the other when the factory closed. It is very hard, with so much housework, children...but what can we do? *Aadmi paise nahin laa paata, kisi na kisi ko to kaam karna padega*."

"My husband does not know housework. If somebody could look after the house and children, I would be able to earn something. *Kamana kaun nahin chahta?*"

Some of the women we spoke to were hesitant to reveal that they had been forced to take up piece-work to make both ends meet. One woman explained that she did not do such work because her husband did not want her to, while another, an upper-caste woman, declared she would never do work of this sort - "*bhuki mar jaungi par nahin karungi*."

"My husband does not like me working here and there. He says if we have to die without eating, we will die."

Clearly, over and above the shock of changed circumstances, these families were experiencing shame in losing a crucial marker of their status in society - the fact "their" women did not "go out" to work. This pressure of patriarchal values sharpens their crisis in other ways as well, as we will see later.

Rahne Ko Ghar Nahi Hai, Hindustan hamara

~~Only 3 workers~~ have modest houses inherited from their families. 15 others have built their own accommodation in resettlement colonies like Jahangirpuri and Shahdara or in "unauthorised" land in Harinagar village in Jaitpur. They are just one-room tenements without any basic necessities of life. One family has left a room half-constructed. 11 families live in rented accommodation.

11 families residing in self-constructed *jhuggies* are facing all the problems that confront any *jhuggi* dweller. One of the main anxieties of these residents is that the *jhuggies* will be demolished at any time. The Supreme Court order which directed that Delhi's environment should be cleaned up by removing the *jhuggi-jhopris*, has emboldened both the government and the land mafia. The Delhi Janwadi Adhikar Manch has noted that over the past year the concerted efforts of these two parties has successfully rendered thousands of families homeless in various parts of Delhi. This is therefore a continually present threat in the *jhuggi* dwellers' lives.

The wife of an ex-employee of Nova Steels told us that her *jhuggi* was on railway land near Shahdara and therefore could be demolished at any moment. The notice to vacate the land has already been served. If the demolition takes place, they have no where to stay. Her husband now plies a rickshaw and the family is in deep debt. They cannot dream of managing the additional Rs. 400-500 which would be required for rent. In addition, if *jhuggis* continue to be demolished as they have been over the last year, less *jhuggis* would be available, and the rents would shoot up.

We visited Amar Park *jhuggi* colony at Zakhira to meet the families of contract workers there. We saw families that had been rendered homeless living in the open. They said they could not again construct *jhuggis* in the same place because whatever construction material they manage to procure is forcibly removed by goons of the land mafia. This is yet another stretch of railway land where a petrol pump owner with political clout has removed the *jhuggis* for his own construction..

Another category of workers are the 12 families living in factory quarters in the old Birla Mill complex and the Swatantra Bharat Mill complex.

These are little better than slums, and sometimes joint families of father and son live in the same one-room tenement. But even these residences are under threat, and we were told that the mill authorities are trying to get the prime land vacated. Much before the judgement they had already used all manner of legal and illegal tactics to get rid of workers in order to reduce their compensation burden, a common strategy used by many of the 168 closed industries, as we showed in the report, "The Day After". In Swatantra Bharat Mills, a large number of employees are involved in court cases with the management, and many of these cases relate to housing. With the Supreme Court orders allowing relocation anywhere in the country, and permitting the owners to retain a large part of the proceeds of the sale of land, the workers are very tense. Even a reasonably well-off family would find itself reduced to penury if it had to suddenly find housing at existing market rates.

Being evicted from these quarters would affect their living standards in other ways. For instance, they would not get piece-work because the employer is not assured of getting back the work from a non-permanent resident. Then there is the matter of education. Both the mill complexes have factory-run schools, which are cheaper than schools outside, and the education of children is closely bound up with housing. In short, the move to demolish mill-complexes and transform them into green belts and housing for the richer sections of society will have serious repercussions, involving social, cultural and economic dimensions.

A Fate Worse Than Debt

All our respondents were in debt to differing degrees - they had borrowed from friends and family, their provisions were on credit, rents were overdue for as much as up to 10 months, and many women had sold or pawned what few ornaments they had. Debts with money lenders at high interest rates goes on accumulating every day. Families have sold assets like ceiling fans, TV sets, and coolers. These families are constantly being harassed by moneylenders, shopkeepers, brokers or landlords.

One woman told us that they could not go back to the village without paying the landlord, and so they are trapped in a situation where they have to continue staying there, with debts accumulating, till the settlement comes. It is a vicious cycle.

In most cases small debts for daily necessities are accumulating, and in others, big loans have been taken for specific requirements - one family had

Against All Odds: The Story Of A Woman Worker •

Tara Devi, a 58 year-old woman worker, has been struggling for over three decades now. At the age of 25, the first major accident devastated her life. A major dust storm that struck Delhi caused the death of her father-in-law, husband and a son. The quarter she is staying in was allotted to her husband by the factory where he worked, and now she stays on, paying a rent of Rs. 15 per month.

After her husband's death she took up the job of processing and cleaning cotton at Birla Textile Mills and reared her son and daughter. Her pregnant daughter-in law died five years ago, her health having been ruined by numerous pregnancies. Tara Devi again got saddled with the responsibility of looking after her son's family of two daughters and a son. The eldest grand-daughter was forced to leave school at twelve to shoulder the domestic responsibilities and to look after her younger brother and sister.

As the family managed to settle down after this tragedy, the fateful Supreme Court order came, forcing the closure of Birla Mills. It seems Tara Devi's son was in some casual employment which he lost as a side-effect of the closure, and so both mother and son are out of employment. The family is badly in debt. Money has been borrowed even to buy *atta*. The family has sold all its possessions, including brass utensils. Tara Devi said that even her local shopkeeper feels bad for her; with a bent head and in a low voice, he expresses his helplessness when she wants provisions on loan.

The social pressure of a dowry weighs heavily on this family. Tara Devi said that a minimum of Rs. 50,000 to 60,000 would be necessary for the marriage of her grand-daughter.

Besides the basic family requirements, she also has to finance her unemployed son's pocket money. For all this, she depends on loans and distress sales. She hopes that one day the settlement would come from the factory owners and she would repay all her debts.

borrowed money to buy a handcart to start a new livelihood, and one or two had borrowed money for medical expenses. The sudden withdrawal of ESI facilities has thrown them at the mercy of private practitioners, depleting their already scarce resources. Several were in debt on account of weddings. Other families who have fixed up their childrens' marriages have already decided to take loans if the settlement from the employers does not come through in time. At this hopeless time, the desperate anxiety the workers and their families experience is sharpened by the pressures of a patriarchal society which force them into debt for the weddings of sisters and daughters,

which cannot be conducted without exchange of gifts and cash and the feeding of relatives.

Parvati, whose husband had been a contract labourer at Shriram Foods and Fertilizers for 10 years, wrote to her husband from the village, asking for money to send their children to school. He replied that the factory had closed, and that he was in no position to send anything. Parvati then sold her anklets and earrings in order to enrol the children in school.

Sheela, married for two years, with a 6 month old son, whose husband lost his job at Nova Steels, has sold the ornaments she had brought with her when she got married. On the verge of tears all the while she spoke to us, she said, "I haven't yet told my parents about my ornaments. They will be so upset."

Many of the women spoke sadly of Diwali having passed like any other day - "*Jab tak jeb garam ho, tabhi to Diwali mana sakte hain.*"

"When my mother died," said Poornima, worker at Sawhney Tyres, "I took a loan of Rs. 2000 at 5% interest to go the village to be with my family. Now, with the little we get, do I buy ration or return the loan? *Sirf andhera hi dikh raha hai, charon ore*".

A number of workers have been used to giving financial help to old parents or brothers and sisters in the village. They feel totally inadequate now, although they know their relatives understand their plight. Some workers continue to send money by taking loans. One worker said he borrows money to send Rs 500 every two months to his parents - "*Unka kya dosh? Yeh to meri zimmedari hai, nibhana hi padega.*"

Health Takes Its Toll

The illegal withdrawal of ESI facilities has critically affected the health of workers and their families, because they cannot afford private treatment and medicines for illnesses ranging from filaria, goitre, chronic anaemia and low or high blood pressure to a host of children's illnesses. In the case of Kiran Kumar's wife, [See box titled: Heavy Price Of Survival, page 3], she was already anaemic and suffering from malnutrition after the family lost three jobs. When she was taken to the ESI hospital for her delivery, she was refused admission, and she died in childbirth at home.

In the case of Birla Mills, where ESI facilities continue, they have been

abruptly terminated for newly-born children. Thus, one of the women who spoke to us, had availed of ESI for her delivery, but her child was not included in the benefits. It is shocking that while the settlement is yet to be done, ESI facilities have been withdrawn in most cases.

Most of the women live in a state of continuous mental stress. Anxious and despairing, they worry about how they will get through each day, and about how their childrens' futures will be affected.

"I keep worrying all the time. My head is full of tension. I go to the hospital for BP treatment. They say I am anaemic. They say I should be relaxed. How can I relax? I keep thinking all the time - what if something happens to my husband at the factory gate? We keep hearing about the police and the goondas. How will I survive with five small children?"

"It is difficult to spend even one moment in peace. Every waking moment I can think only of my debts."

"I get no sleep. I wake up late at night and lie thinking about all this till morning."

"I am always very tense and worry all the time. I cannot sleep. But still, a woman can express herself in many ways. My husband suffers inside."

"My husband keeps falling ill, basically from worrying too much. Sometimes he suffers from stomach ache and body ache and misses work. So we earn nothing on those days."

We found many of the women having to go through repeated pregnancies in the hope of a son. They have no control over how often they will become pregnant and when. Some of them expressed their frustration to us, about untimely pregnancies which interrupted piece-work at home or taking up work outside.

"How can I cope with all this? If the doctors ask me to relax I cannot, if they ask me to go in for sterilization, I cannot. Nothing is in my hands."

Women's health is always the last priority in every family and this perception of their low worth is internalized by the women themselves even when their contribution in such crisis is vital to the survival of the families.

"During my last delivery I suffered heavy bleeding. I needed blood - we could not afford it. The doctor said my husband could donate. But he did not. After all, he has to earn. What will happen if he becomes weak. loses his strength? I just lay in hospital for a month. Aurat ko kaun poochta hai?"

On The Brink Of Starvation

The burden of running households and stretching the family budget falls on women. The aftermath of the closure has pushed them to the verge of desperation - putting together meals with whatever is available, planning for the next day.

"Jab bachhe roti mangte hain, man karta hai ki khud ko maar dun ya bachhon ko maar dun."

All the women spoke of cutting down drastically on food. There is no longer any milk for children, just enough for tea, provisions are bought in smaller quantities, which also raises the price, *chapatis* are eaten with *chutney* or salt, vegetables have all but disappeared from their diets.

"Sabzi ek hi bar banti hai, phal khane ka to sawal hi nahin."

A few could afford meat or fish occasionally, a luxury now far beyond their dreams. Breakfast is a meal many have learnt to skip, children no longer get fruit or biscuits.

Undaunted By Jail

Sarla, aged 38, is the wife of a worker of Birla Textile Mills. He was a machine operator for 18 years with a salary of Rs. 1600 per month and is now unemployed. The family, including five children, lives in Khilona Bagh in a *kacha* house on factory land. Now, after the closure, she and her children, ranging in age from 14 to 9, wrap poppins sweets at the rate of Rs. 25 for a bag of 40 kg. She works for about 10 hours, her children join her after school, and they try to wrap 2 bags a day.

Around May 1997, about seven months after the closure, the workers of Birla Textiles got to hear one day that wheat would be distributed by the management. The families of Khilona Bagh, their hopes high, rushed to get their share of wheat. When they all reached the spot, they also started to demand their wages and compensation, and the security guards tried to disperse them. This resulted in a scuffle, police were called, and 11 people including 5 women were taken into custody. Sarla told us they were taken to the Shakti Nagar Police Station and kept there for the whole day without food or water and finally taken to Tihar Jail. There they were kept for 3 days and released on bail. The case is still going on.

As a mother of five children facing the brunt of the closure, Sarla says, *"Bachhon ki khatir main kuch bhi kame ke liye taiyar hun, jail bhi jane ke liye..."*

"Whatever we earn every day we spend on food, always anxious about the next meal. *Roj lao, roj khao!*"

One or two women who had buffaloes would get milk for their children, but because of the expense of fodder, which they can no longer afford, have either sold the buffalo or sent it back to the village.

Pregnant and lactating women, several of whom were among our interviewees, are in particularly poor health. Even with regular wages, their nutritional needs were barely met, but with the closures and the consequent drop in income, even their minimum nutritional needs are not getting fulfilled.

It is evident that even before the closure, nutrition levels were at a minimum, with fruit, vegetables or even biscuits for children being a luxury. However, the closure and the loss/reduction of income has made matters considerably worse.

Social Ties : Testing Times

Family tensions have increased, including incidents of wife-beating. Usually, quarrels and physical violence follow from friction over reduced money for provisions, and general uncertainty about the situation. Women are the most convenient targets for men driven to desperation - "*paise nahin hain to jhagda hota hi hai*" said Lakshmi. Women perceive it as natural that under such circumstances, alcoholism among men is increased. As usual in every situation where people are oppressed, here too, women are the most vulnerable, bearing the brunt of both the overall pressures as well as the frustration of the men.

The aftermath of the closures has driven the workers and their families to utter isolation. On the brink of starvation, they cannot share their anxiety with family members elsewhere. Women related how they are unable to visit their married daughters because of the ritual necessity of carrying gifts they can no longer afford. One woman said she had not been able to meet her daughter who had just delivered a boy - "*khali haath nahin ja sakte*". Unable to break from these age-old customs, these families see no hope of seeing their children again.

Even attending other people's functions is beyond their means. The fight for survival leaves no scope for maintaining any social ties. All such obligations have come to a stand-still. The women we spoke to were filled with a sense of shame as they see it as not being able to live up to social norms they had been practising. There is an increasing sense of isolation from the things that matter in their lives.

It is only under severe economic hardship that people migrate to alien cities to eke out an existence, with the hope that they may have a home to go back to. But for the migrant families we came across, that hope is an impossible one today. While even families who belong to Delhi and its peripheral areas have curtailed their interaction with close relatives, those from Bihar and UP seem to have lost all touch. Many women expressed their anxiety about ever being able to afford a rail ticket to their native place. A young woman with two children said she had not seen her parents in five years. They were planning to make a trip to Bihar when the factory closed down. She said in tears, "*man to bahut karta hai, gaon jane ke liye, magar hum kya kar sakte hain, jab paise hi nahin hai?*"

Migrant Workers : A Different Story

The plight of migrant workers and contract workers which constitute the bulk of the 50,000 who lost their jobs seems to be the worst. A large number of migrant workers have lost their base itself in Delhi and therefore, have been compelled to send their families back to the villages.

"Hamare koi parivar ya baal-bacche hote to aapse mila dete. Factory band hone ke baad unko goan bhej diya. Yahan ka kharcha kaise chala sakte."

The migrant workers have taken on to all kinds of work as vendors, construction workers, rikshaw pullers etc. Ram Yadav from UP narrated to us how whenever he tried to eke out a living, he ended up incurring debts only. He has sold eggs, pickles, etc., but he has been unable to collect payments from the local customers. This is part of the general harassment which these migrants face as 'outsiders' from the local economically and socially stronger communities.

The migrant families which continue the struggle to survive in Delhi are badly in debt today. Till the settlement of their wages and compensation is made, if at all, their debts along with interest accumulates everyday. The common refrain was "*jab hisab ho jayega, hum chale jayenge.*" When that day will arrive is a big question for all of us.

Most of the migrant workers of these closed factories are also slum dwellers. Therefore the likelihood of these workers being able to stay in Delhi with the hope of getting their dues one day seems highly doubtful, specially given the intensive drive of slum demolitions being carried out in the city. Already some of the interviewees we met have lost their *jhuggis*.

These migrant families are mostly landless labourers from Bihar and UP. If the loss of their livelihood and dwelling place is compelling them to leave the city, they have nothing to look forward to.

Children Of A Lesser God

An entire generation of children have undergone a sudden and shocking transformation in their lives, as they are forced to confront the reality of the closures. By March 1997, a number of children preparing for the 10th and 12th class Board Exams discontinued their studies as they could not pay the examination fees. There is generally a clear discrimination between sons and daughters in terms of education, and this situation has worsened after the closures. The priority seems to have been given to reallocate resources to sons. In one case a daughter had to give up her ITI training because they could no longer afford the fees. She then started working in a boutique to supplement the family income. In some cases the workers have sent their families back to their villages, which is bound to have affected the education of the children. There is also a trend of shifting sons from private schools to government schools, and with the passage of time, more and more smaller children are being kept away from school altogether.

Many of the older children have had to take up piece-work - electrical work, wrapping Poppins sweets, making garlands, cutting *chappal* straps, etc - after school hours, or having discontinued school. A couple of boys have part-time jobs in shoe factories, they return from school at 2 p.m. and report for work. This seriously affects performance in school, because of the exhausting nature of the work and because the children have no time to study.

Girls help their mothers with jobs like stitching *dupattas*, embroidery and all other kinds of piece-work. Despite their crucial contribution to the family income, they are never allowed to forget for an instant their dependent status. All the families speak anxiously of their daughters' marriages, and the money to be arranged for it. They are haunted by the fear that they may fail to fulfil this responsibility. The young girls feel they are a burden, and this affects them deeply. Needless to say, a number of girls that we saw were subdued, silent and depressed. A 16 year-old girl has been depressed for months, her mother told us. She barely speaks, and whenever there is talk of money or some minor quarrel, she weeps silently. She begs her parents not to talk of her marriage. The mother said, "*Hamein pata hai ki uske samne baat nahin karna chahiye, magar ek hi kamra hai, kahan jaen? Kitna chup rahenge?*" This girl was clearly hostile to us, and kept giving her mother cold and disapproving glances for discussing family matters so frankly with us.

We often encountered hostility from grown-up children, in their teens. While the women spoke to us with cordiality, these children could not mask their resentment and pain. Clearly, they felt humiliation in exposing their family conditions to strangers.

The innocence of the smaller children is also not untouched. Mothers spoke with pain and pride of how their children have learnt to adjust, with no word of complaint. "My daughter used to drink a glass of milk before going to school, now that has stopped. And I would give her a rupee every day to buy toffees. Now she runs up to me and says, *"mummy, aath aane de do, aur nahin chahiye. Maine use kabhi ek rupiya mana nahin kiya tha."*

Conclusion

The mass retrenchment of workers in the name of pollution has to be seen in an overall context where today, thousands of workers along with their families are being pushed into the unorganized sector, where the work is highly exploitative, meagrely paid and its continuity is uncertain. This process is eroding the gains made by working-class struggles over the years.

While recording the sudden, unexpected and drastic changes in the lives of these workers and their families, it is not our intention to suggest that prior to the closure their situation was good. In terms of all the criteria that we have applied, they were just surviving, and with difficulty, but they had hopes of a better future for their children, and some stability. The closure and the ensuing financial crisis has pushed them suddenly over the edge into near-starvation and hopelessness.

The dimensions of the closure touch on so many aspects of the lives of working people, that the question of compensation must be reformulated. Compensation cannot be measured merely in terms of wages but must take into account the loss of possibilities for the future - both of the workers themselves as well as of an entire generation of children. As important is the psychological trauma and the dislocation of their lives in all possible ways.

Our conversations with these women amply demonstrates that in the context of the closure, as in any other oppressive situation, it is women who are further oppressed. But the women we spoke to are fighting back, trying to pick up their lives in some way or the other, not giving in to the circumstances.

Breaking The Silence!

Seven of our interviewees had been themselves workers in the closed units. Many of them, particularly from Sawhney Rubber Industries, have experienced sexual harrasment of a violent nature on a routine basis at work from supervisors, security staff and *goondas* of the management. The tales of brutality and sexual abuse range from public verbal humiliation to physical indignities and assault. In one shocking incident a woman (not one of our interviewees), was accused of theft, stripped and sent out of the gate naked.

However, an amazing fallout of the closures has been that in the course of the struggle built up over the issue, these women have a new-found confidence to speak openly, even at gate meetings, about these experiences. They are elated by the transformation they experience - "*Ab hamein lagta hai ki suraj paschim se nikla hai!*"

Constituent Groups Of Delhi Janwadi Adhikar Manch

- ~ All India Federation of Trade Unions
- ~ Delhi General Mazdoor Front
- ~ Pragatisheel Mazdoor Trade Union
- ~ Sarvahara Mehnatkash Sangharsh Samiti
- ~ Bandi Karkhana Sanyukt Sangharsh Samiti
- ~ UBSPD Workers' Union
- ~ Charvak
- ~ Peoples' Union for Democratic Rights
- ~ Saheli
- ~ Aids Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan
- ~ Fellowship of Blood Donors
- ~ Jhuggi Jhopri Niwasi Adhikar Samiti
- ~ Lokdasta
- ~ Progressive Students' Union
- ~ Democratic Students' Union
- ~ Bharat Naujavan Sangh
- ~ Peoples' Union for Civil Liberties
- ~ Bihaan Sanskritik Manch
- ~ Pragatisheel Yuva Sangathan
- ~ Sampradayikta Virodhi Andolan
- ~ Journalists' Forum
- ~ Asmita
- ~ Janpaksh
- ~ All India Peoples' Resistance Forum
- ~ All India League for Revolutionary Culture
- ~ Mazdoor Ekta Committee
- ~ Indian Federation of Trade Unions
- ~ United Trade Union Congress
- ~ All India Coordination Committee of Trade Unions
- ~ Rashtriya Mazdoor Kisan Ekta
- ~ Progressive National Labour Union
- ~ Human Rights Trust
- ~ Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangam
- ~ Hind Mazdoor Sabha
- ~ Navjanwadi Shikshak Manch
- ~ Sangharsheel Mazdoor Samiti
- ~ Poorvanchal Pravasi Ekta Manch
- ~ Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti
- ~ Appeal Movement Coordinating Council
- ~ Centre for Alternative Dalit Media
- ~ Sarvahara Party, Nepal
- ~ Akhil Bharatiya Nepali Ekta Samaj

Other Publications Of Delhi Janwadi Adhikar Manch

1. The Order That Felled A City
A report on the politics of pollution and the mass displacement of workers in Delhi
[English & Hindi]
 2. For Whom The Bell Tolls
A survey of six closed units in Delhi
[English]
 3. The Day After
Findings of a survey of 100 closed units in Delhi
[English & Hindi]
 4. Kanoon ka Makhoul
A report on the workers' struggle at the closed unit of Sawhney Rubber Industries
[Hindi]
 5. Supreme Court Goes 'Hammer And Tongs' At Workers
A case study of Umashankar Khandelwal and Company
- a closed unit.
[English]
 6. Findings of Public Hearings Organised By the Manch on the Issue of Closure and Demolition of Slums in Delhi
[Under preparation]
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