



photo: SEWA

Wanted: Space in the City Vendors Gain Ground in Munger, Bihar, India

Impact: *A group of impoverished waste pickers in Munger, Bihar, India organized to protest the demolition of their traditional homes to make way for a railroad overpass. Their lives and livelihoods were disrupted, and no suitable land offered. With the support of SEWA, the residents have taken their case to government officials for a year-and-a-half while living in plastic makeshift housing. On August 18, 2011, having exhausted all democratic avenues, dozens of members of this community began a hunger strike.*

Munger is a small town in Bihar, one of the least developed states of India. A branch of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was formed here in 2000. SEWA Munger works on several issues related to microfinance, livelihood, and health linked to urban informal sector workers.

In 2007, Bihar became the first state to constitute a commission to undertake focused work toward improving life for Mahadalits in the state. Mahadalit is a term used for an extremely vulnerable category of dalits, the oppressed class in the Indian Varna's caste division system.

Around the same time that the Mahadalit Commission was formed, another less positive event affecting vulnerable people took place in Munger: construction of an ambitious railway overpass was planned. In late 2009, the Ministry of Railways sent an order to approximately 70 Mahadalit waste picker families to vacate the land on which they had resided for 70 years.

The order was in English and the families did not understand its repercussions until the bulldozers came and demolished their homes in the winter of 2009. Then they approached their ward councillor, but no help was extended.

SEWA Munger intervened. Members were organized, and they approached the District Magistrate, the Commissioner, and the Nagar Parishad (urban local body). While the affected families continued to stay in temporary shelters on the site where they had always lived, sustained advocacy was undertaken with local bodies and administration. However, the urban local body decided that if these families wanted assistance, they would have to move to a hilltop outside the town – a place that has been ravaged by bandits for past many years. As Umesh Manjhi explained, "It's better to die here where we lived than shift to Murli Pahar, where without work and [with] bandits around there is no security to our lives."

Left in the lurch, the Mahadalit families sent application to the Chief Minister, who asked district officials to take action. Still, no help was offered. The families, along with the SEWA Munger team, even went to the state capital and met with a government minister, hoping the minister could finally bring some relief. All they received was apathy.

While construction has yet to begin, for residents like Rinki Devi and her husband Pakori Manjhi, living in makeshift plastic tents on the land has been miserable. They have only their daily income for sustenance; they must work to eat or go hungry. But sometimes they stay at home, forgoing work, to guard their temporary shelter when it is threatened with removal. Many times, they have gone hungry trying to protect an already destroyed home.

When the families had exhausted all the democratic avenues to garner attention, and after a year-and-a-half of withstanding chilly winters, scorching heat and monsoons in their loosely tied tents, about 60 Mahadalit families began a hunger strike and protest in front of District Magistrate office in August 2011. 300 SEWA members and other social activists joined the action in support of the affected families.

It is the last recourse for people who have waited so long for public servants to serve them. Following the announcement of the protest, the urban local body initiated an inquiry to find vacant "poor houses" for their resettlement. The officials approached the members to stop the hunger strike with assurances that living space will be provided very soon. The protestors, however, were determined to continue the strike until they have received safe, secure housing inside the city.

The livelihood of these families is closely tied to the city where they have lived for generations. Space outside the city is untenable for their livelihoods – and it is something these families, and their supporters in SEWA Munger, would not settle for.

The district administration soon agreed to do something for the families, and the hunger strike was deferred. This hard fought struggle has demonstrated that by organizing and creating a united front, even those who are among the most underprivileged can defend their interests.

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