



SEWA Bharat

All India Federation of Self-Employed Women's Association

Light at the End of the Tunnel- A Case Study on Street Lights Provision in B1 Jhuggi, Raghubir Nagar

March, 2020



B1 jhuggi (slum) was established around 1984 as part of Raghbir Nagar, that lies in West Delhi. Residents here largely hail from Gujarat and migrated here in search of livelihood opportunities. Most women in B1 jhuggi work as street vendors, selling steel and plastic utensils in areas such as Vikaspuri, Janakpuri and Rohini.

In B1 jhuggi, tenure security is weak with some residents possessing a mix of General Power of Attorney (GPA) documents, and slips, and others possessing only ration cards and electricity bills which play merely de facto roles in strengthening tenure security.

For over 10 years now, the main road, on the corner of which B1 jhuggi is settled, has had streetlights. Over the years, these have been upgraded on multiple occasions, but they function erratically, leading to accidents, multiple cases of theft, as well as harassment.

On the occasion of Diwali (ironically called the festival of lights), 27th October, 2019, these street lights had been dysfunctional for over 10 days. As the day closed, many residents who work as vendors started returning to their homes. Anita, a resident of B1 jhuggi, who is a street vendor selling plastic and steel utensils needed to use the community toilet that is located across the main road. In the absence of individual toilets¹, residents depend solely on the faltering public infrastructure present here. As she began to cross the road, a distant firecracker distracted her. By the time she recovered, a bike had smashed into her, dragging her along the road for a few meters. Others gathered around her, helping her to the side of the road, and attending to her deep wounds, swellings and injuries.

Over the next few days, aggrieved citizens led by Savitri ben took charge of the matter. Savitri ben has been part of SEWA for over 15 years, evolving as an agevan². She grants credit to SEWA for the vending space she holds in Mahila Bazar (a space allocated exclusively to migrant women vendors after strenuous negotiations) to sell her goods.

Savitri ben had attended the agevan training organised by SEWA Bharat under the WOW project, and felt confident with the knowledge she had gained. “Mujhe pata tha kis sanstha mein jaana hai, aur kaise kaam hoga” (I knew which government agency to go to, and how to get the work done), she said with a newly acquired belief. Other residents lacked this understanding and insisted on visiting the nearby Delhi Jal Board (DJB) centre. This government agency works solely on water and sewerage provision, and not on street lights. Savitri says that she knew this, but realised that others were driven by anger and would not listen, so she went along (‘Dil rakhne ke liye bola maine chalo’). In a few hours, the other residents realised that the DJB was not the authority in charge of this problem, and began to rally around Savitri.

¹ All of the 500 odd residents of B1 jhuggi use a single community toilet for their bathing, washing, and toilet needs. Because of their weak tenure status, as well as the lack of space, individual toilets cannot be constructed within B1 jhuggi. SEWA Bharat is working to ensure better facilities at the community toilet, as well as provisions for additional mobile toilets - a demand put forth by the community.

² Local community leader

Savitri speaks of the confidence she has gained by joining SEWA. The organization has granted her exposure and multiple learning opportunities. It has helped open up a world outside her family.

Once the local SEWA Shakti Kendra (SSK), SEWA's community outreach centre reopened after Diwali, Savitri and the other residents went to meet the team and drafted a letter for Purva Sankhala (the local elected representative known as the Ward Councillor). However, lack of confidence and knowledge meant that this letter was not used and the community (10-12 residents) went to Purva Sankhala's office, accompanied by Anita's brother - the woman who had suffered injuries. Anita and Savitri ben explain that the submission of a letter as an official complaint is not something they are used to doing, as a result of which it was not initially thought of as necessary.

Over the week, Savitri made three such visits to Purva Sankhala's office. At times, the streetlights would begin to work, as a result of which the complaint was not taken seriously. At this stage, the local SSK team stepped in. Along with Savitri, a fresh letter was drafted highlighting the problems faced by citizens, and the multiple attempts made to address the issue. Armed with the letter, on 10th December 2019, another visit was made to the Ward Councillor's office. While the Councillor was available between 9 and 11 am, residents arrived by noon, after having set up their vending stalls. By this time, only the personal assistant (PA to the Ward Councillor) was available. The residents said, "pehele do-teen baar aa chuke hai, hamari sunai nahi ho rahi hai" ("we have come multiple times before, but no one is listening to us"). The PA accepted the letter, signed off on a copy, and took Rami ben's (SSK field staff) contact details, promising a permanent fix.

A week later, late in the evening, Rami ben received a call from the PA asking if the problem had been fixed. Rami ben in turn called Savitri ben to check, who verified



In picture: Workers repairing the wiring system so that outages can be reduced

that the streetlights were now functioning. Changes had been made to the wiring system as well. The PA assured Rami that a permanent fix had been done, and that he could be contacted directly if the problem recurred.

Functional street lights have alleviated many concerns. Toilet access is now easier, especially in the later part of the day, and crime, theft and harassment has significantly decreased. With this victory, residents are now empowered to take on other linked issues. In their immediate list of priorities are cameras and a traffic signal, both of which will create a safer neighborhood for residents and their children.