

# Discipline in Sri Lanka, punish in Pakistan: neoliberalism, governance, and housing compared

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*Abstract:* In discussions of urban infrastructure and land, neoliberalism is often presented as a hegemonic economic model with, seemingly, identical outcomes across a range of historical and political circumstances. For instance, in large cities of the Global South, a combination of speculative capitalism, and increased privatisation in the provision of public services, has been blamed for structural dispossession and the pushing out of working-class and vulnerable groups from urban centres. However, little has been said about how these processes interact with more contextual specificities—longer histories of state provision, existing inequalities, local political dynamics and legislative structures. Through comparative work on urban infrastructure projects in Lahore and Colombo, this article tells a story in which historical differences in state policy on housing and governance have impacted the ways in which dispossession is meted out, experienced and contested. Contributing to calls for studies of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Wacquant 2012), we illustrate the importance of closely examining the relationship between neoliberal policies and dispossession on the ground through a historical perspective.

*Keywords:* Housing, poverty, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, dispossession, neoliberalism, state.

## INTRODUCTION: THE WORLD-CLASS CITY AND THE POOR

Rajeshwari is a 43-year old factory worker, married with two daughters. She now lives in a new multi-storey housing block on the outskirts of Colombo. Her family had been moved here in January 2015 just before the presidential election in which President Mahinda Rajapaksa was defeated by the coalition led by Maithripala Sirisena. She told us that she had ‘*just finished building her own house*’, from the money she had managed to save by working as a domestic maid in the Middle East, when she was given notice that all the houses in her community were going to be demolished and the inhabitants moved to the flats. Within three months of receiving an official notice from the Urban Development Authority (UDA), the bulldozers had come in.

She told us that, although the UDA had planned to collect a one-off down-payment before handing over the keys, the upcoming elections had expedited the process:

*They were in a great rush to move us before the election. Although there was some talk of an initial down payment, in the end we were all given keys and we didn't have to pay anything. We only signed a document that would transfer the ownership to us after we pay rent for 30 years. ... This flat is in my name and it will pass on to my daughter. We cannot sell it.*

She told us how in the first few months she felt she was, ‘*Going mad. It was so lonely. All the doors were closed. It was so dark. All there was to do was watch TV or go to sleep.*’ From Rajeshwari’s balcony on the first floor, she showed us what was left of her old neighbourhood. A few wooden shacks remained in a field of overgrown grass in between her building and the next about 500 m away. It was hard to imagine how the landscape, now dotted with high-rises, had dramatically transformed in a span of only five years.

Across Asia, cities are changing fast as developers, politicians and policy makers commit to the ideal of the ‘world-class city’, an alluring combination of high-rise residences, new and visible transport infrastructure, and carefully tended public spaces and amenities, punctuated by showy developments, shopping malls, and five-star hotels (Bhan 2009, Gooptu 2011). The world-class city is a place for those who aspire to join Asia’s growing new middle-classes. It is not, on the whole, a place built to accommodate the working poor. So it is that low-income communities have been identified as ‘slum-dwellers’, whose unsightly presence requires demolition of their homes, and relocation into less unsightly accommodation, often far from the gentrifying centre of the city. The process is not simply guided by the aesthetic desire to ‘beautify’ the urban environment (by removing less than beautiful groups of people); across Asia an overheated and highly speculative real estate market drives the demolitions and the rebuilding, alongside a great deal of other new urban development.

This paper draws from a comparative study of urban development in two South Asian cities—Lahore in Pakistan and Colombo in Sri Lanka—where state-led infrastructure development has resulted in the displacement of working-class neighbourhoods, the loss of livelihoods and especially the disruption of social networks of kin, care, and community. We examine how the state in each country responded to the problem of eviction and relocation: specifically how the state treated its citizens in carrying out evictions and in paying compensation for the loss of homes and livelihoods. We then consider in what ways and to what extent the state has recognised low-income communities living in cities as belonging to the city and as citizens of Pakistan and Sri Lanka, by tracing the history of the state’s involvement in providing adequate and affordable housing to the urban working-class poor.



**Figure 1.** Upcoming luxury development project being built on a private land that was once home to more than 500 families in Colombo.

The research in Lahore has focussed on the Orange Line Metro Train Project—a 27km long rapid transport system due to be completed in 2019 at an estimated cost of \$1.6 billion—which has resulted in the displacement of several communities. In Colombo, the research has concentrated on the consequences of the Urban Regeneration Project. From 2010 onwards, this project has resulted in the eviction of a significant number of poor working-class communities from what is deemed to be prime commercial property in central Colombo, and relocation in high-rise apartment blocks in the outer periphery of the city. From January 2018, in both Lahore and Colombo, we have been conducting ethnographic interviews with those displaced in both cities, eliciting information on how these communities were displaced, where they have been relocated, and through a focus on life histories, the sets of relationships and networks that have been disrupted.

What has emerged from these interviews, and from the work we have done on the political history of dispossession, is a set of important contrasts between Lahore and Colombo in terms of the experience of dispossession. In Lahore, displacement itself

had a seemingly random and sudden quality; those displaced were compensated with money and left to fend for themselves. In Colombo, displacement has been part of a grander project of social engineering: the poor were to be rehoused in a new spatial order, high rises with small uniform housing units in which poor people would learn to live in morally superior modern modes. To understand these different experiences, we need to go beyond straightforward references to ‘the state’ as an agent of change. In neither context is the state a singular, unambiguous presence: different agencies pursue different agendas, as do different powerful individuals, and it is only by understanding ‘the state’, in Wacquant’s terms as ‘a space of forces and struggles over the very perimeter, prerogatives and priorities of public authority’ (Wacquant 2012: 73), that we can begin to understand the complex political history behind the contrasting experiences of dispossession. That in turn will allow us to inject depth and nuance into the often too-predictable narratives of the march of neoliberalism across the urban landscapes of the Global South.

### **HOUSING THE URBAN POOR IN COLOMBO**

In Sri Lankan housing policy in the past ten or so years, there has been a dramatic shift from a language of social welfare, that translated into providing basic needs to low-income urban residents, and integrating poor communities within the city, to a language of economic regeneration that emphasises making Colombo a ‘world-class’ city. In practice, this has resulted in mass evictions of the poor and relocation in state-funded high-rise buildings on the outer limits of Colombo. As a result, the state is no longer seen as a benevolent patron; rather, its interventions are perceived as authoritarian and indifferent. Under earlier policies, through the provision of public and environmental services, infrastructure development, and the establishment of local government within these communities, the poor were implicitly recognised as citizens of the country and as belonging to the city. Evictions that commenced in 2010, however, undermined the various measures taken by earlier governments to support these groups and regularise their presence in the city. By demolishing communities that had been established or upgraded by previous governments, and by refusing to acknowledge their right to the land they occupied and the houses they owned, the state effectively pushed significant segments of the urban poor back to the margins of the polity. For some it was even worse: only those who could ‘prove’ prior ownership (by showing official documents) were recognised, while many families who had been renting in these communities for years lost their access to affordable shelter. Their stories actually remain unknown.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Two words used here require some qualification—‘poor’ and ‘community’. Colombo’s areas of low-income housing tend to be clustered together in spatially discrete settlements of varying sizes,

Although there is an earlier history dating back to Independence in 1948 and beyond, the immediate roots of the pro-poor housing policies that shaped Colombo housing for thirty years were part of a package of measures usually thought of as introducing liberalisation, or what might now be called, neoliberalism, into the country. In 1977, the United National Party won a landslide election victory, coming into power with the promise of economic reform through an open economic policy, *and* the introduction of social welfare and housing for all. It was under Ranasinghe Premadasa—a working-class Colombo politician who became Prime Minister and Minister of Housing—that the state introduced housing policies that had far-reaching consequences for the provision of adequate and affordable housing in both urban and rural areas. The Urban Development Authority (UDA) and the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA) were established in 1978 and 1979, respectively, and were the primary institutions in charge of implementing a series of housing programmes: the Hundred Thousand Houses Programme (1978–1983); the Million Houses Programme (1984–1989); and the 1.5 Million Houses Programme (1989–1994). The overall objective of these programmes was to empower people who did not have the economic capacity to build their own houses, thus attacking the twin problems of shelter and poverty simultaneously (Niriella 2010, Samaratunga & Hare 2013).

These programmes were implemented in three ways: aided self-help, direct construction and housing loans for self-help housing. Under the self-help programme, the NHDA provided families with land, loans, information, management guidance and ‘housing kits’ comprising a house plan, a building manual and building materials (Joshi & Sohail 2004).<sup>2</sup> From the start, the state adopted the ethos of the ‘Assisted Self-Help Strategy’ by explicitly declaring its role as being about ‘minimum intervention, maximum support’, and by recognising the people as being central to the process of house building and house ownership (Clark & Brana 1984). According to an early report, the Million Housing Programme was ‘predicated on the ability of families, within a supportive context, to establish and satisfy their own needs and priorities’ (Clark & Brana 1984: 17). According to several project reports produced in the early years of the programme, the state’s intentions were not just rhetorical (Royo-Olid *et al.* 2018).

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usually referred to by the Sinhala word *watte*. At this stage of our analysis we use ‘community’ as a descriptive word for the people in a *watte*, with no claims as yet about the nature of the ties that bind or divide these people. Economically there is much more variation between households in *wattes* than stereotypes suggest. But for many politicians (and most policy makers), the stereotypes are key: *wattes* are not merely homes to ‘the poor’, they are also necessarily associated with crime, drugs and moral decay.

<sup>2</sup>The state loaned Rs 5,000 to rural residents and Rs 8,500 to urban dwellers (in three instalments), which had to be paid in fifteen years in monthly installments of Rs 35. The funds were released through a state bank and given to the individuals or sometimes to a cooperative society (NHDA, n.d.)

In urban settings, considerable consultations with communities were conducted before upgrading existing houses or relocating communities. For example, Navagampura—located in Northern Colombo—was one of the first urban projects initiated by the NHDA in partnership with USAID in 1985 (Ruwanpathirana n.d.). The 500 beneficiaries were from ‘squatter settlements’ living near the northeastern entrance to the city whose houses had to be ‘demolished in order to keep the city entrance clean and landscaped’ (Ruwanpathirana n.d.: 56). The physical layout of the community was designed by government planners at a workshop conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The residents were given a standard plot size of 50 square meters (2.5 perches) and a loan of Rs. 15,000. The land was given on a thirty-year lease with the right to ownership after the lease expired. The housing units were supposed to be single-storey row houses laid out in clusters of 14–25 units, with each cluster sharing a courtyard, community toilet, and bathing facilities. Homeowners were expected to build their houses, and the interior design and layout were at the owners’ discretion, with technical advice provided by officers stationed at the site. A model cluster was constructed to illustrate the design concept and to house those who first started building. A Community Development Council was formed in each cluster to manage public amenities. In consultation with the community the project also provided water and electricity to each of the houses, installed street lighting, and built a community centre, a shrine room, and a pre-school. Neither Rajeshwari’s building (in our opening vignette), nor the other high-rise buildings we have been studying, have any community facilities, except a tiny community hall that can seat no more than twenty-five people.

### **FROM WELFARE TO REMOVAL**

Although the shift in housing policies from a social welfare orientation to prioritising capital enterprise is thought to have taken its most dramatic turn under Mahinda Rajapaksa’s regime (2005–2015), the emphasis on gentrifying Colombo started under his predecessor. Under Chandrika Kumaratunga’s Presidency (1994–2005), the government reformulated housing policies, and created legal and institutional conditions more favourable for private sector involvement in housing development (Samaratunga & Hare 2013). This changed the government’s role from a direct provider of housing to a facilitator (Niriella 2010).

A Presidential Task Force on Housing and Urban Development was appointed in 1998 to draw up a macro-policy framework and an action programme for both the short and long-term physical development of Sri Lanka. Based on its recommendations, Real Estate Exchange (Pvt) Limited (REEL) was established, which was owned

by several state agencies: the UDA and the NHDA, the Sri Lanka Land Reclamation and Development Corporation (SLLR&DC), and the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC). REEL's motto was 'Homes for people and lands for development' (Niriella 2010). The operational arm of REEL was the Sustainable Township Programme (STP). Established in 1998, its main objective was to 'liberate' 70 per cent of 'encumbered lands' occupied by low-income groups located in commercially viable locations and dispose of them in a public market for alternative use. The Sahaspura high-rise low-income housing project was the pilot project under the Sustainable Township Programme (STP). Sahaspura was completed in 2001, and was, at the time, the biggest high-rise relocation programme undertaken in Sri Lanka, housing 671 households over fourteen floors. Its apartments were allotted free of charge (Samaratunga & Hare 2013).

Following the end of Sri Lanka's thirty-year civil war in 2009, Mahinda Rajapaksa's government prioritised infrastructure and urban development. The NHDA lost much of its authority over the construction of urban housing while the Urban Development Authority (UDA) was brought under the Ministry of Defence, led by the President's high-profile brother Gotabhaya Rajapaksa (Amarasuriya & Spencer 2015, Spencer 2016). The Urban Regeneration Project (URP), whose aim was to 'beautify' the city by making it 'slum-free' and moving its dwellers into 'modern houses', relocated a significant proportion of the working classes into high-rise apartments. The aim of the URP and the Metro Colombo Urban Development Project (MCUDP) funded by the World Bank was to introduce 'new housing schemes of internationally recognised standards and in doing so to make the City of Colombo the most attractive city in South Asia' (Perera 2015: 15). In addition to the emphasis on creating a 'world-class city', the former Ministry of Defence and Urban Development also highlighted the economic and social benefits to the underserved communities. They emphasised the legal right and prestige of being an owner of a house; social recognition; a permanent address—all of which was supposed to improve young women's marriage prospects as well; and children's better access to education (Ministry of Defence, quoted in CPA 2014: 18–19).

The Rajapaksa government's URP has continued under its successor after the 2015 election; it still aims to beautify the city and create a slum-free capital. The rushed evictions under the previous regime paid scant regard to the rights of affected persons, and to the practical impact of evictions on their lives, including lack of access to services, loss of shared community, increase in physical and material vulnerability, disruption of education and loss or reduction in livelihood options (Perera 2016). Evictions had often been carried out by military personnel in uniform armed with weapons (CPA 2014). Even though the current government delinked the military from urban development in 2015, communities still have to deal with key

military, or ex-military, personnel who continue to head and administer the URP (Perera 2018a, Perera *et al.* 2017). While there are no official data available on evictions between 2010 and the end of 2014, the UDA website states that approximately 5,000 families had been relocated by then. Overall, the URP aims to relocate 65,000 families, which roughly means anything between 350,000 and 500,000 directly affected persons: 50 per cent of the city's population (even though they occupy only 10 per cent of Colombo's land mass according to the government's own statistics).

Even though UDA figures claim that a total number of 68,812 families live in 1,499 community clusters (underserved settlements) which 'do not have a healthy environment for human habitation and access to basic infrastructure facilities such as clean water, electricity, sanitation etc',<sup>3</sup> according to a 2012 survey by the Colombo Municipal Council and the housing NGO (non-governmental organisation) Sevanatha, 54 per cent of settlements in Colombo fall into the category of 'upgraded' and a further 39 per cent fall into the category of 'fully upgraded'. Only a little over



**Figure 2.** Many houses occupied by the urban poor in Colombo have been significantly upgraded over time to the status of 'permanent housing' even in the absence of title.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.uda.gov.lk/urban-regeneration-programme.html> (accessed 4 February 2019).

6 per cent fall into the categories ‘underserved’ (5.9 per cent) or ‘extremely poor’ (0.3 per cent) (Perera 2015, Sevanatha 2003)

Under the URP framework, a key goal of urban development is ‘improving under-served settlements in the city of Colombo through private developers and liberate [sic] prime lands for commercial activities. Through this process, under-utilised urban prime lands will be utilised for development and commercial purposes by private sector.’<sup>4</sup> There has never been any elaboration of what is meant by ‘under-utilised’, though a close reading suggests that what this actually implies is that these lands are not available for private commercial exploitation. In many cases, ‘under-utilised urban prime lands’ have been home to the urban poor, or to lower-middle income communities, for decades; transferring this land to the private sector raises significant concerns regarding equity which go well beyond the simple equation between ‘40,000 apartment units for the poor’ and ‘20,000 luxury and semi-luxury apartments’ (CPA 2014). If it exists at all, a systematic cost–benefit analysis of this, or other dimensions of the URP, has never been subject to debate in parliament, the municipal councils, or scrutiny in the public domain.

There is no doubt that many of Colombo’s low-income settlements need significantly higher levels of service provisioning and that lack of adequate housing, secure tenure and title is a concern. However, the URP, which lacks a comprehensive framework of entitlements and an involuntary resettlement policy in line with national and international standards, essentially makes accepting relocation a precondition for access to better housing and services.<sup>5</sup> The priorities driving this are clear enough: for example, the Housing and Relocation of Administration chapter of the Western Region Megapolis Master Plan states ‘The underserved community regeneration programs are urgent; [e]specially to release the economic corridors occupied by them’ (Western Regiona Megapolis Master Plan, page 105, quoted in Perera *et al.* 2017). The working-class poor continue to be seen as impediments to development and growth with no consideration of spatial injustice and social equity.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the refrain of ‘development’, the claim that revenues from private exploitation of urban land are needed to provide better housing and amenities, especially to poorer residents of Colombo, is frequently used to justify the relocation. However, the reality is that massive debts are being incurred on vanity projects with questionable or untested public utility, such as the Lotus Tower and the Colombo Port City, both funded by millions of dollars in loans from China. With the exception of

<sup>4</sup>Department of National Planning (n.d.: 115).

<sup>5</sup>National Policy on Involuntary Resettlement in Sri Lanka (NIRP 2001). International guidelines include the UN Guidelines on Development Induced Displacement (United Nations 2018) as well as involuntary resettlement policies of agencies like the World Bank.

<sup>6</sup>Nagaraj (2016).

much-needed flood-control measures, much of Colombo's urban development over recent years has, in fact, focussed on rebranding the city as a hub for global capital, tourism and entertainment (CPA 2014). Yet, the expected financial returns to the government have not materialised, which means that the UDA is unable to manage and maintain the thousands of apartments it has built, causing further deterioration in the lives of the urban poor relocated there (Perera *et al.* 2017).

## HOUSING AND THE STATE IN LAHORE

In Lahore, as in other major urban centres in Pakistan, the poor have largely been forced to find their own housing solutions, primarily through the creation and densification of *katchi abadis* (informal settlements), or the illegal subdivision of agricultural land on the city's periphery (Van der Linden 1994). It was only in 1992, with the passing of the Punjab Katchi Abadis Act, that the state formally adopted a policy to regularise and upgrade existing informal settlements in the province.<sup>7</sup> While the legislation has given residents *de facto* security of tenure, a degree of vulnerability remains, and implementation and improvements over time have been slow with extensive bureaucratic hurdles. Successive governments have promised to provide housing for low-income groups, and particularly around elections, have promised *malqana haqooq*, housing ownership rights for residents living in *katchi abadis* or in settlements without security of tenure. Yet, very few low-income housing projects of modest scale have been developed by the state. In addition, housing ownership rights have continued to be provided as 'favours rather than as rights'. Housing by the government, particularly through the Lahore Development Authority (LDA), and by the private sector, has mainly continued to cater to middle-high income groups. In addition, both public and private schemes, have by design, encouraged speculation and investment in land, resulting in developed land lying vacant for years on end. The absence of affordable housing has, in turn, led to an increase in densification and overcrowding within existing settlements and contributed to a deterioration of the existing housing stock (Van der Linden 1994).

In 1973, The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), came to power with the promise of '*roti, kapra, makan*' (bread, clothing and home) for all. In Lahore, during their first

<sup>7</sup>Under the Act, a *katchi abadi* is an area that has been 'occupied without authorisation' by at least forty dwelling units before a certain cut-off date (which has been extended several times). However, in order for the *abadi* to be officially recognised by the state, landowning departments have to provide a No Objections Certificate, and the district administration has to give a Non-Encumbrance Certificate, stating that the land is not disputed. Once declared a *katchi abadi*, the Lahore Development Authority is responsible for regularising and improving the settlement.

term in power (1973–1977), residents in a number of settlements, including in Anarkali, where residents were later displaced for the Orange Line, were offered housing ownership rights. Although there is limited documentation of the low-income housing schemes developed during this period, projects such as Anguri Bagh, a small housing scheme for the working poor, were designed and constructed during their time in power (Lari 2015). In the years that followed, partially due to changes in international policy circles that supported the legalisation and improvements of squatter settlements, the failure of existing policies and pressure from below, the state began to adopt policies to regularise and upgrade *katchi abadis*. However, there were no matching efforts to develop housing projects for working-class groups on a large scale. During military rule (1977–1988), some public sector housing schemes were initiated in Punjab, yet most remained incomplete, unable to meet their initial targets (Hasan 1991).

National housing policies had signalled a gradual shift in the government's role, from a housing provider to a regulator, since the mid-1960s. However it was only in 1994, under the PPP government, that the state began to explicitly absolve itself of the responsibility to provide housing (Mahmood 1999). The National Housing Policy paper states:

The role of government as a catalyst has been suggested in case of land policy, financial policy, improvement of *katchi abadis* and slums, research and development and institutional development. The private sector shall play its role as a developer and provider. This is the cornerstone of the National Housing Policy (quoted in Mahmood 1999).

The Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN, in power 1997–1999), in effect, continued to abide by the same principle, with housing taking a back seat to their focus on infrastructure and road development in Lahore. Under the new military regime (1999–2007), the 2001 National Housing Policy was finalised. Like the 1994 policy, the new policy explicitly states that the government will focus on creating a 'favourable and conducive environment ... to promote and facilitate this [private] sector where the role of Government would change from provider to facilitator' (Ministry of Housing 2001: 3). However, it also stressed housing affordability, particularly for middle and low-income groups.

Nevertheless, during the military government's rule from 1999 to 2007, the question of low-income housing was largely missing from public debates. In 2010, some years after the return of democracy in the country, the provincial government under PMLN set up the Punjab Land Development Company (PLDC), and soon after announced two affordable housing projects in Lahore. With the exception of these two projects (only one has been partially constructed), the government has largely continued to

focus on housing that targets middle–high income groups and speculators interested in benefitting from rising land prices.

Writing about Lahore in the 1990s, Jan (2013) speaks of the city’s ‘Hausmann moment’ as the provincial government began to focus on city beautification, road widening, highways, flyovers, and rendering poverty invisible in the city. From 2002 onwards, the new government, under the military regime, continued its focus on road and infrastructure development in Lahore, aspiring to make the city an engine of growth, enhancing its competitiveness, and modernising in general. In 2005, a private consulting company was asked to conduct a feasibility study to develop a mass transit system for Lahore. The following year, it proposed a system consisting of four lines: Green, Orange, Blue and Purple. In 2012, after much delay, the Green Line was constructed by the Nawaz Sharif government in the form of a metro-bus, which is largely believed to have assisted their election success the following year (Sajjad 2014). It was also in the run-up to the elections that the PMLN government began to publicly share its plans to build the Orange Line, if back in power.

#### **AFTER RELOCATION: COLOMBO**

In Colombo, it is important to highlight that, behind the state and class narrative about the ‘slums’, there were very significant differences in how people lived before displacement. Hence, while for some poorer residents the relocation, and the new apartment, offer an improvement in their quality of housing, for others, like those who owned two-storey homes with modern toilets and multiple rooms for domestic activities, relocation has been a shock. Many affected families had title deeds to their old property and received no compensation. Instead they now have to pay back a loan over twenty-five to thirty years for the property they never asked for, in the first place.

A standard apartment in the new blocks consists of two bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, bathroom and a small balcony area—all fitted into 400 square feet. (This has been increased to 500 square feet in a recent design change.) The policy of the URP is the exchange of an apartment for a house, and not an apartment for a family, and it does not take into account the size of the previous home. This means that families who had houses bigger than 400 square feet, or those with houses with more than one floor and which had more than one family living there, as was often the case, were entitled to only one apartment. Some families with larger houses over several storeys negotiated with the UDA for two flats. Some who had businesses—grocery shops, tailoring, catering—were given separate units to run them from. Others now have to continue their income-generating activities out of their living room. Every family has to pay Rs 1,000,000 (about £5,000) in order to get a deed to the apartment, irrespective



**Figure 3.** An Urban Development Authority complex in North Colombo, comprising 872 apartments.

of whether they owned their previous land, which adds to other financial burdens of livelihoods being lost and added transport costs (Perera 2018b).

Sellamuttu Jayamala (33) lived all her life in 219 *watte* in Dematagoda, which was one of the first low-cost housing estates to be demolished in late 2014. About half the residents, including Jayamala's family, were moved across the road to Muwadora Uyana in January 2015—a state-built tower block comprising four ten-storey buildings with twenty-six apartments on each floor. She lives with her husband and two sons, aged twelve and four. Jayamala says her father's family lived in 219 *watte* for several generations. Her great-grandfather had arrived before World War II from



**Figure 4.** An Urban Development Authority Complex with 500 apartments that was declared open in November 2014, and has become one of the most badly off complexes so far in terms of security and maintenance.

Trivandrum, in what is now Kerala, and had worked in the port as a labourer. Her father had told her that they had gone back to Trivandrum when there were rumours that the Japanese would bomb the Colombo port. He had returned after the war with his family and lived close to the port for several years. Jayamala's father had started working as a labourer in Pettah, the bazaar area in central Colombo, in the 1960s when he was around ten years old. It is during this time that he recalls being moved from near the port to what became 219 *watte*. Plots of 2 perches were demarcated and distributed to the families. Jayamala's family had built a simple two-room house with wooden planks. Jayamala's father remembers how the municipality provided electricity and water to the *watte* in the mid-1980s under Premadasa's regime. Electricity meters were installed, and water was provided to houses that had toilets, and also to the shared toilets. A yellow card was issued with the house number, and the owner's name. Jayamala kept a file with all the documents issued at the time.

Before Jayamala got married, she lived with her parents, her grandmother, and four brothers. It was a 'very small house', according to Jayamala, and they did not have



Figure 5. New apartment complexes completed in 2018.

their own toilet, but shared a community toilet with several neighbours. They used to bathe and wash their clothes in the public tap. When she got married, her brothers bought her a small house across from her natal home. It had one room and a *'tiny kitchen'*. The house belonged to a relative who was selling up and moving in with one of their children. The transaction was overseen by the local government officer for the area and a Justice of the Peace signed the transfer papers. The ownership document was also a card issued by the Premadasa regime.

Jayamala remembers UDA officials coming in 2014 to distribute forms to fill in. They assigned numbers to each house and residents were asked to submit the following documents: (i) Election papers or proof of having voted for a number of years; (ii) water and electricity bills; (iii) deeds or official documents of ownership; (iv) ID cards. After submitting these to the UDA, they were immediately assigned a house number from the lottery system. Jayamala and her family were given less than a month to move, just before the presidential election in January 2015. She remembers only two buildings being ready, so her parents and kin were only moved 18 months later.

Because of the sudden order to move, Jayamala does not have anyone from her old community in her building. Later, they allowed one person to pick numbers for several families so they could live together on one floor, which is what her other family and kin did. She said, *'We thought these buildings were tourist hotels. They looked really fancy from our watte. It was clean and gated.'*

Jayamala recalls the UDA showing the community a film about 'modern' living.

*They showed us how farmers live, how poor people live and how we should live; how to use the modern toilets, how not to spit. People have to slowly learn how to live in these spaces, but the people haven't evolved as yet, that's why they are chewing betel and spitting out of the windows. In the watte, they would spit into the drains.*

Jayamala's old house used to leak when it rained. But they were not affected by floods as 219 *watte* was in the middle of other *wattes*. She liked the flat as it was a *'much bigger place than original house'*. She liked having her own toilet, and she believes she can learn to improve her life through new hygiene habits. She said her children are cleaner and don't loiter outside. They stay inside the house or play on the common balcony.

However, they are in debt. Her mother migrated to the Middle East to pay back the loan they had taken for the down payment to the UDA. Jayamala used to work in the tea-packing factory nearby, but had to give up the job as soon as her mother left because she did not have anyone to take care of her four-year old son. Her husband works as a welder in a welding shop, but his salary can barely meet the household expenses. They owe the UDA more than Rs 40,000 in rent (2,600 per month – a little over £10). Their electricity and water bills amount to Rs 9,800, which is much higher than they used to pay in the *watte*. *'We pay water and electricity because they cut it if we default; but cannot afford to pay rent on husband's salary.'*

Thushara (53) works at a state institution as an administrative clerk in Colombo and had lived and grown up in 34 *watte* in Wanathamulla all his life. Despite stereotypes about *wattes* being riddled with crime and drugs and a low level of sanitation, his memory of the *watte* is different. He remembers the upgrades the local government did to their area over time, providing water and electricity connections as well as paving roads. His home was one that was built during the Million Housing Programme and he had deeds from the government for it. He and his neighbours had incrementally improved their houses over time, expanding sections and even building more than one floor. When the UDA officials and military personnel started collecting their household information in early 2014 and subsequently informed them that they would have to move to the high-rises in the adjacent property, Thushara and most people in the *watte* were against the decision. Their main reasons for opposing this was that the new apartments were small—their own houses were almost double in size, they already

had title to their property and did not have the financial means to pay Rs 1,000,000 even over twenty years in order to receive a new deed. He was close to retirement, his three children were still in school and his family had no savings to speak of. However they were scared of the military and had heard about forced evictions by the military in others parts of Colombo. Even though some of his neighbours chose to fight the acquisition of their land in court (they claimed that provisions of the Land Acquisition Act had not been followed by the state when acquiring their private land), he and his wife decided it was best to move to the apartments. They randomly picked an apartment number at the complex they were assigned to, and moved in in late 2014, leaving behind most of their furniture as the new apartment did not have adequate space.

Today, Thushara's life is burdened by stress and increasing debt. The water bills they receive monthly are astronomical when compared to the average water bill of a house in Colombo with washing machines, which Thushara's apartment does not even have. His wife had met several officials at the UDA regarding their bills, including



**Figure 6.** The apartment blocks for the relocated communities have no common spaces for children to play, and the anonymity of the buildings mean that families want to keep their children within their sight at all times.



**Figure 7.** Newer Urban Development Authority complexes do not have individual balconies, which means that people have to dry their clothes in the public corridors.

a military brigadier heading the URP, but have received no relief or sympathy. In order to meet their increasing expenses, his wife has started working at a factory close by, which means that when their young daughters come home from school, there is no one to keep an eye on them and supervise their school work. They have no neighbours or family from their *watte* on their floor and do not really know any their neighbours. As the front doors have no peepholes, he and his wife have taught their daughters a coded knock on the door—they are to open the door only if they hear that particular set of knocks. Thushara says petty crime and drugs in the building have increased and there are many unknown men loitering about the complex at all times, and they do not know whether they live in the building or not. He speaks wistfully of their life in the *watte*, and says that even though they all lived in close quarters and had little privacy, the sense of community and security they had built over time can never be replicated in the high rise buildings. Even after four years of living there, he still speaks of their life as if still in transition and as if they are biding time until the government sorts out the policy that had them relocated to, what they now call, a vertical slum.



**Figure 8.** Dedicated shops are not available for those who ran businesses before which means that in a 400 square foot apartments, the living room is turned into a shop space.

### AFTER RELOCATION: LAHORE

If in Colombo, families were systematically removed from their homes, the process of dispossession in Lahore was deliberately chaotic, with uncertainty and lack of information serving as tools for spreading panic and fear among residents. In Anarkali, one of the main sites for evictions, very few residents knew that they might be affected by the construction of the Orange Line. Some had a vague sense that the train may pass close to their homes, but others had not even considered the possibility. It was only when officials from the LDA arrived to survey the house that people began to realise that something was wrong. Many residents recalled that it was during Muharram in 2016, when everyone in the neighbourhood was busy preparing for the activities for the month, that *'The LDA team came and put marks on homes that would be affected by the project. When people got back [home], there was a lot of confusion about it meant that their homes were marked.'* Soon after this, LDA officials started visiting regularly, often accompanied by the police, telling people that their homes would be demolished to build the Orange Line and that they should take whatever compensation they were given and vacate. At this stage, some residents—fearing that

if they did not leave then, with the compensation, they would not be given anything later—vacated their homes and left, while others began to protest and campaign against the evictions. With support from civil society activists and lawyers, some of the residents filed a stay order, which was first granted, but later revoked on appeal, in the Supreme Court in 2017.

Seema bibi and her son, Ahsan, had lived in Kapoorthala House, one of the buildings that was partially demolished, and had contested the eviction for two years before they were ultimately evicted. Seema was born in Amritsar and, like many others in the area, had moved to this neighbourhood at the time of Partition in 1947. Although most families who had moved into evacuee property—houses left vacant by Hindus and Sikhs fleeing across to India—did not possess land registry documents, Seema bibi's family had acquired papers during an allotment scheme started by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government in the 1970s. Seema bibi had spent her entire life in this neighbourhood: *'I was a girl here, one or two years old when I came from India, and I became an old woman here.'* Talking about the neighbourhood, she said,

*All of us were here, twenty-five to thirty houses. ... Some relatives, some neighbours who feel even closer than family. We were born in the same place, grew up in the same place. We were like sisters ... about fifteen girls from these twenty houses.*

Seema and her family were reluctant to move, and were actively involved in the protests against the evictions. Ahsan, who owned a book-mending business nearby, had to ultimately close down because he spent so much time protesting or visiting one or another government office, in the hope of convincing a *'high-up'* to intervene on his behalf. During the time that they remained in Kapoorthala House, they were regularly intimidated and scared. On some days, the LDA would park many trucks and bulldozers in the area and, on others, officials would arrive accompanied by police officers holding sticks. Electricity and gas were cut off for hours on end, and roads around the area were dug up to make it difficult for residents to go in and out of their homes.

*This is how they spread fear [dehshat dali] ... the police would come but not say anything, then bulldozers everywhere ... all to scare people. They would say a little boy has died, go and look.*

According to Seema bibi, the LDA officials had known even before the Supreme Court had announced the judgement that the stay would be revoked.

*LDA officials came twenty to twenty-five days before the final decision and told everyone that they had won the case, and that everyone should leave. twenty-five days later, that is exactly what happened, and they arrived to tell us to leave.*

After the stay was revoked, Seema bibi's family was given a day to vacate, *'They were there the next morning at 7, with a crane, and they demolished the house the same day.'* They had not even moved their belongings when their house was demolished:

*Half our things were broken ... like how it was when Pakistan and India battled, it was even worse for us, what happened to us.'*

Evicted residents in Anarkali were offered monetary compensation; the rate differed across buildings and many residents complain that they were not given the due amount. Even those who have received full compensation have found that the money they have received is not enough for them to buy property in the area. Most of the families are renting, with many downsizing to a single room, while others have moved in with their in-laws or started living in areas further from the city centre. Seema bibi also did not receive full compensation for her 4-marla (900 square feet) house but has been fortunate in that her family has managed to buy a similar-sized property elsewhere in the city. She is, in that respect, better off than many others. But, separated from her old neighbours and relatives, Seema is unable to feel happy in her new surroundings. She says that she has become ill—*'sick in her heart'*—and aged ever since she has moved away. In this neighbourhood, she does not know anyone and people do not make an effort to even learn their neighbours' name. Speaking of her



**Figure 9.** Construction underway for the Mauj Darya station. Both the land for the station and the surrounding barren area was acquired by evicting residents and demolishing homes.



**Figure 10.** A makeshift mosque at the shrine of Mau Darya. The original mosque was demolished when part of the land of the shrine was taken over by LDA.

old neighbourhood, she said that *'every day over there felt like Eid'* and that, here, they rarely met anyone, even when it was Eid.

*Over there, when someone died—even if no relatives came—there would be 150–200 people from the neighbourhood, who will come when I die, here.*

## REGIMES OF DISPOSSESSION

In this preliminary exploration of our field material, and the history that has immediately shaped it, we are arguing against the representation of neoliberalism as a hegemonic economic model with, seemingly, identical and inexorable outcomes: in relation to urban land, the idea that speculative capitalism and rising property prices, along with privatisation, have simply driven out the urban poor. Instead, we focus on how histories of state intervention in housing impact the ways in which



**Figure 11.** Despite fears about its structural stability, the partially demolished Kapoorthala house continues to be inhabited by residents.

dispossession is meted out, experienced and contested. In this way we are responding to Wacquant's (2012) call for closer attention to 'actually existing neoliberalism'—that is, to map out what has changed and how in the provision of housing, and its impact on the urban poor, in all its necessary specificity in each time and place under consideration.

We are also especially concerned with keeping something we understand as 'the state' at the centre of our analysis. The 'state' we invoke though is not the singular, all-determining, entity commonly deployed in analyses of situations like these. Rather



**Figure 12.** A portion of this flat was demolished. Residents use this remaining room as a living room, bedroom and for storage.

it is, as Wacquant reminds us, ‘a space of forces and struggles over the very perimeter, prerogatives and priorities of public authority, and in particular over what “social problems” deserve its attention and how they are to be treated’ (Wacquant 2012: 73). The forces and struggles also require our attention. In Colombo, the poor are not simply to be removed from the city; they are to be remade to live as modern people in a world of restricted domestic horizons and sit-up toilets (with appropriate didactic videos to help them in the transition). This is not the story in Lahore where it is indeed enough to remove them from the space earmarked for progress, and send them off with minimal monetary compensation, with little concern about their next destination.



concerns that are as much aesthetic as they are economic (cf. Bhan 2009). The land freed for development in the expropriation of the Colombo poor has *not* paid for the building of the new housing blocks. These are dependent on loans from third parties. The economic discipline imposed on people like Jayamala and Thushara is often incoherent in practice, not forging a cadre of properly neoliberal subjects, but instead drowning the occupants of the new flats in a sea of domestic debt (or, as more than one has pointed out us, sending them towards a life of illegality in order to make the new ends meet). In this process, the ‘misrecognition’ of the poor, and the ‘aestheticization’ of the problem of poverty, diagnosed by Bhan (2009: 131) in post-liberalisation Indian cities, become self-fulfilling prophecies, ostensible causes of dispossession reappearing as consequences.

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