

## FF report on the incident in Noida on 11-12 July 2017



On 12<sup>th</sup> July 2017 early afternoon, the media channels flashed images and videos of ‘mobs’ attacking an upper-middle class gated colony, Moderne Mahagun in Noida Sector 78. The inhabitants of the gated colony took to social media- flooding Twitter and Facebook with images of ‘rioting and vandalism’ against them.

It is against the backdrop of this news that a team of 7 from Delhi comprising of activists and students from JNU\Delhi University combined made a visit to Noida Sector 78 on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2017 to listen to the other side of the story.

### **The incident**

On the previous day, on 11<sup>th</sup> July, Zohra, a migrant domestic worker from Dinhatra in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal had gone off to work at 6.30 AM as usual. Unlike other days, she did not return home for lunch nor did she come home in the evening, when she usually returns. Abdul, Zohra’s husband returned home in the evening after his work and could not find her. He tried calling her on her phone, however it remained switched off. Zohra’s family knew that she had gone to house no 012 in the apartment complex to claim her salary as she had decided to discontinue her work there. Abdul and their eldest son approached the security staff at Mahagun to ask about Zohra’s whereabouts. It is there that they came to know that Zohra had been accused of theft. While the security guards insisted that she wasn’t inside, the entry-exit register only showed an entry mark against Zohra’s name.

The security guards also informed Abdul that her employer, Mrs. Sethi had intimated at the gate to not allow Zohra's further entry into their house. Amidst this, another employer of Zohra's got involved and took Abdul to house number 012 to meet with the Sethis. There they started speaking in English and also played an audio-recording to Abdul where Zohra was saying that she did not steal anything. However, he was informed that Zohra left the building at 5 pm and they were not aware of her whereabouts henceforth. The fact that Zohra's phone was switched off and that hse had been accused of theft made Abdul really worried and he dialed for the police at about 10 at night. The police too came and only spoke to her employers, leaving Abdul outside. The police asked Abdul to look for her outside the complex as well as file a report at Sector 49 police station. Along with the security guards, Abdul made a thorough search in the building basement at least 3-4 times before heading to the police station. The police refused to file a complaint.

**12<sup>th</sup> July 2017**



The next day, at about 5.30 in the morning, Abdul spoke to other domestic workers who were going to work and informed them about Zohra's disappearance. Abdul also requested the other women to help him locate her. The domestic workers who had gathered to enter their jobs decided instead to not go inside till Zohra was found. Hundreds of workers gathered at the entrance of the apartment complex. The situation started becoming tense as workers became agitated over the disappearance of a fellow worker in the apartment building. The workers also started checking all the vehicles that were coming from inside. Upon seeing hundreds of workers, the security guards in fact fired thrice

into air. This agitated the workers further. The hostility meted out to them by the security guards and the apartment residents further intensified the situation. To control the situation, security personnel informed the workers that Zohra was found and would be brought to the gate soon. During that time of unrest the small gate of the apartment was crashed down and people entered within the apartment premise and demanded to meet alleged residents. Suddenly, against all claims of the security guards and her employers, they noticed that Zohra was forcefully dragged into the police jeep. The workers in anger pelted stones to which the residents and security guards also retaliated with pelting from the other side.

Around 12 at noon, Abdul got to know that Zohra was brought to the Government Hospital in Sector 30, at Nithari. After lots of difficulties, when her family finally managed to reach the hospital, the hospital authorities informed that she was sent back with the police. The hospital staff also casually mentioned how Zohra was again dragged away. Zohra's family again reached the police station at sector 49 where they were not allowed to meet her. On several requests, police staff informed that she was not feeling well, so it was not possible to meet her. But one inspector suggested Abdul to take Zohra home without lodging complaint. The proposal was rejected by Zohra's family immediately. After few hours of waiting at the police station, Abdul lodged a complaint against the owners, Sethis, of flat no.012 of Mahagune Modern Apartment and narrated the whole incident on paper. After that, Zohra was released and brought home in a police vehicle. Abdul was continuously harassed to even get a receiving of the copy of his complaint.

Zohra was handed a few pain killers by the police, and they did not share with her the prescription given by the doctor.

**On the night of 12<sup>th</sup>, three police vehicles came in between 11 pm and 12 pm and raided the workers colony. 58 men were picked up, their homes ransacked, beaten badly and taken to a building at night. While Abdul managed to run away into the fields behind, their 15 year old son Rahul was also taken along with the others. On the next day, 13 among them were further detained and framed under charges of attempt to murder and rioting. The 13 workers were not given jail ad was sent in judicial custody to**

### **Zohra's personal experiences in House no.012**

Zohra had been only working there for the last 4 months. There are no agencies involved in recruitment, and workers generally get to know about work through security guards whom the prospective employers inform. Since beginning, the Sethis delayed giving the salaries to the workers who work for them. Due to this, and increasing work, Zohra had decided to quit her work here and had informed her employers beforehand, but since then, their attitude towards her changed drastically. They started accusing her of theft of money and other valuables. The flat owner did not pay her salaries for next two months. The accusation has no basis because each domestic help and other service staff of the apartment was thoroughly checked twice both during check in and checkout. In fact, every worker have to show their identity card as well as wallet to the security guard every time they leave. Bringing any extra stuff from inside the apartment requires written permission from residents which was also reconfirmed over the intercom system.

On Tuesday morning, both Zohra and Mamata (who worked as a cook in the same house) were asked to come in the evening to collect their salaries. Zohra noticed that a new domestic help was recruited in the same house. Zohra went to other houses for work and did not come to her home for lunch. It was raining in the evening; she went to the flat no 012 and asked for her salary. The flat

owner suddenly started beating Zohra, slapping and pulling of her hair. She was held captive for the night without giving her any water and food.

Zohra hails from Cooch Behar district in West Bengal. After working in construction sites along with the rest of her family, they had moved to sector 78 near the apartment complexes. Most women in the colony worked as domestic workers in the building complex, while some of them continue to work in construction of expanding metro lines. Her eldest son too worked as a service staff in the apartment complex. Overlooking the apartment complex, their colony comprised of houses made of corrugated iron sheets and mud. About 200 families stayed in that small colony, which has no proper drainage system or water and electricity supply.



(The workers colony)

### **The RWA, the Police and the State**

From the beginning, the attitude and the role of the police have been to side with her employers. The fact that no action has been taken on the complaint filed by Abdul (even though that is the first complaint that was filed) and that 13 workers were arbitrarily picked up and slapped with cases of attempt to murder and rioting only reveals which side they are on. Police dragged Zohra away to the hospital and from there to the police station and eventually dropped her off at her home only after much pressure from her family. As Zohra said, 'they are all rich people, they have so much

money to throw away, if I had 10 rupees I could throw at them, by now some action would've been taken'.

The police came twice to intimidate and threaten Zohra, her family and rest of the workers, telling them to 'stay in their place' and 'not to take things in their hands'. The police then went on to demolish shops run by migrant workers near the housing colony on 18<sup>th</sup> July, making a clear attempt at intimidation by brute force, besides the harassment they are already facing between the court-police-administration triad. The demolition has deprived many of their source of livelihood for no reason at all.

The RWA has emerged as a quasi-governmental body that is running the apartment complex. The complex is in fact managed by an MNC named Jones Lang LaSalle, an America based real-estate service provider. Together, they have taken out a list of **over 80 workers** who have been blacklisted -- barred from entering the complex premises. The RWA also actively ran the malicious campaign that Zohra, her family and all the other workers were 'illegal' migrants from Bangladesh. At times they became terrorists, at another time they were thieves; thus running a venomous campaign against the workers who were till a day ago, doing all the work in their houses.

At the same time, the Union Minister for Culture, Mahesh Sharma has come out in open and unequivocal support for the residents and 'assured' that the 13 workers arrested after this incident, "will not get bail for years". Without any trial having taken place, a union minister has already declared the employers innocent and sentenced the workers to years of jail. The incident in fact hauntingly reminds one of the recent acquittal of 117 Maruti workers, declared innocent after having spent more than 4 years in jail, to reassure investors in the area. This also reflects for us how a Union Minister or MP is 100% likely in the present scenario to personally identify with the upper-middle class employer, that he shall twist all laws and levers of the state to keep himself and his class fellows feeling safe and secure. That as in this case, the State itself shall fight "on behalf of the employers", clarifying in absolute terms that the state will not belong to the working, slum dwelling millions of this country, however much it may parade as a democracy because it in fact belongs to the class of employers whose first interest is the control and repression of those who work for them, who they detest as desperately as they need them.

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Zohra's experience tells us how, as a Muslim migrant worker and slum dweller, one can turn from person, to machine, to captive, to thief, to illegal immigrant, to communal rioter, to what not, at the whims and fancies of the police, the minister, their employers, their neighbours or a media anchor. Not only can one lose their job at any moment, one can lose their homes, their shops, their savings and property - everything. While workers are NECESSARY for running a city, there is nowhere in the city where they may live and work with security and dignity. That the forces confronting us can say anything, do anything. In a world where the production of identities too is a function of the capital invested, OUR ONLY WITNESS IS OUR COLLECTIVE STRENGTH, hundreds standing in and for one.

The courage shown by the friends and neighbours of Zohra has clearly sparked off a longer story of struggle and repression. We salute them and fight by their side.

- Abhishek (Journalist), Anirban (DU), Shreya (JNU), Pankhuri (JNU), Uditā (JNU), Shambhavi (JNU), Arya (JNU)