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Here, tourists slum it by choice

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In Sanjay Colony They See A Different Way Of Life And Learn To Count Their Blessings

In Sanjay Colony, the sky is only as wide as the lane below. Stacks of matchbox houses rising three or four storeys a few feet apart from each other cut it into jagged strips like the machines at the garment factories where many residents of this slum work. Large blue barrels kept outside homes leave just enough space for a bike, or a cow, to pass. There's no piped water and the barrels stock several days' supply bought from tankers. The scrubland outside the colony is a communal toilet but the air within is also heavy with the mingled odours of thousands of people breathing, cooking and working close by. Also the stench from the black, open drains that run on both sides.

It could be a scene from any of Delhi's 700-odd slums but for about a year now Sanjay Colony in Okhla Industrial Area Phase-II has been the most visible and talked about of them globally. Ever since a Mumbai-based travel company started tours of the colony, tourists from USA and a number of European countries have been there to see what life without privileges is like. There are testimonials online describing the experience as "a different level of understanding about India" and "eye opening and incredible".

On Monday morning, TOI also went on a tour of Sanjay Colony to find out whether "slum tourism" is a meaningful experiment or—as its critics say—just "poverty porn". To ensure that the organizers treated us no differently than their other clients, this reporter booked a slot as a researcher from Faridabad.

It is best to use the Metro to reach Okhla from where a guide can pick you up. After the airconditioned ride, conditions in the colony seem shocking at first. This is not a shiny, stainless steel world. After 36 years, it is still waiting for its first public toilet. A moat of dark sewage encircles it, and naked brick walls and large white nylon sacks stuffed tight with cloth scraps bound it.

The garment industry is among the main sources of livelihood in Sanjay Colony. People who don't work in Okhla's garment factories sort these scraps by type of fabric and colour to feed the rug and yarn factories of Panipat in Haryana. The scraps sell for Re 1 to Rs 400 a kilo. Expert tailors cut and sew the larger pieces of cloth into new garments or accessories.

The colony tour has been a hit with foreigners and the guide, 26-year-old Pradeep Kumar, has got glowing testimonials on travel review portals. At the outset, he makes it clear that the trip must not become intrusive and photography is not allowed. “The idea is not to get the best picture but to see and understand local life,” Kumar, who is studying masters in tourism from IGNOU, said. (A TOI photographer visited Sanjay Colony on Tuesday to shoot the accompanying images.) After setting these terms, Kumar briefly explained the character of the place. The rents are steep for the modest means of the residents, and a room can cost from Rs 1,000 to Rs 6,000 a month, he said. On average, there are 10 people to a room in the colony .

Yet the tour is not about showing the dark side. “A slum is not all dirt and filth. We make an effort to tell visitors that people here do have many problems but they too live in families and have a community life like us. They too receive guests with the spirit of atithi devob hava.”

Kumar showed a Hindu temple and a mosque inside the colony before leading to a small informal school run by missionary organization. There's a municipal school nearby with 10 teachers and “about 650 children each in two shifts.” Foreigners, he said, ask questions about all sorts of things, from Ganesha heads to chillies and lemons hung outside doors and ‘STD’ painted outside phone booths (“Does it mean ‘sexually transmitted disease’?”). “When they ask why all houses are of different colours, I say India is a colourful country .”

There's no government dispensary in the colony and the nearest hospital is in Kalkaji.

For anything major, the residents have to queue up at Safdarjung Hospital. Dr Sarkar, who has a clinic in the colony, said diarrhoea is a common ailment due to “lack of clean water, toilets and covered drains”.

Fluent in English--he teaches at an informal centre of Prithak, an NGO, in Sanjay Colony--Kumar pointed out electricity meters outside rooms. “The average bill per family was Rs 200 but it has halved after the new government came.”

Piped water supply remains a dream though.

The older residents seemed accustomed to these tours and merely glanced up but the children shouted “Hi! And bye!”.

From the roof of Prithak Centre, Kumar pointed out: “There is no park or open space here. So for entertainment, people only watch television or play cards.”

How do most visitors react after a tour of the colony? “Some say they want to do something for the people, others say they will stop cribbing about not having enough, some even want to come back with their children so that they would be less demanding.”

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Photos: Anindya Chattopadhyay



A HARD LIFE

LOCATION | Okhla Industrial Area Phase-II in south Delhi. It is less than 1km away from Okhla Metro station

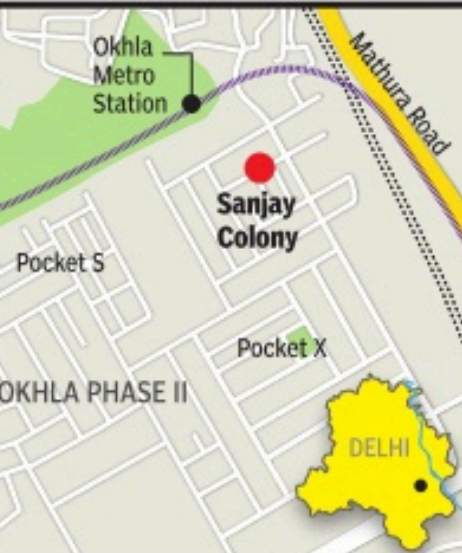
EXTENT | The slum started forming in a forested area in 1979 and has since grown into nine blocks covering 18 acres

POPULATION | About 45,000; mainly from UP, Rajasthan, Bihar, Jharkhand and Nepal. On average, there are 10 people to a room

WATER | Most of the blocks buy water from tankers as piped supply is not available

SANITATION | Diarrhoea is quite common as drains are not covered and people defecate in the open. First toilet cluster is still being built

EDUCATION | Lone municipal school is up to class 5 and admits about 650

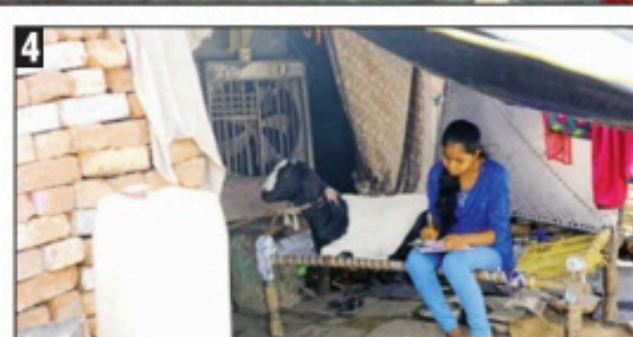


students each in two shifts. There's a government school near Okhla Metro station

LIVELIHOOD | Residents work in the nearby industrial area. Many sort snips of waste cloth from garment factories, earning about ₹150 a day. Those who stitch clothes out of waste cloth earn twice as much



LIVELIHOOD AND LIFE: (1) Workers sort scraps of waste fabric from the garment factories in Okhla; (2) an open drain outside Sanjay Colony; (3) the tours focus on the way of life rather than hardship; (4) for a better tomorrow



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