Interview with Madhu Sarin on 14\textsuperscript{th} of March 2011

Madhu Sarin is an social activist and urban theorist and lives in Chandigarh. In 1982 she published the book „Urban planning in the third world: The Chandigarh experience“.

Moira Hille: When did your parents come to Chandigarh?

Madhu Sarin: My parents were refugees from Pakistan. My father was a lawyer. Initially they have made Shimla the temporary capital - the High Court was there and in January 1955, the High Court started functioning here, so we moved down, we came to Chandigarh on the 1\textsuperscript{st} of January 1955.

Moira Hille: When were you born?

Madhu Sarin: I was born November '45 in Lahore, before India was partitioned.

Moira Hille: Do you remember these times?

Madhu Sarin: I was too small, not even two years old. My sister who was three and a half years older than me, she remembers a lot more. She was the eldest and was somehow much more involved in helping my mother, not an easy time.

Moira Hille: How did you develop your interest in the people working in Chandigarh?

Madhu Sarin: I studied architecture. When I studied there was nothing about people and their problems. Then I went to UK and I did a postgraduate course in development planning, which for the first time talked about the socioeconomic context, the focus on the poor and the stagnant employment incomes, social relations etcetera. And for the first time, I started wondering:

Where did all these people live? Where do all these people live? We grew up in our house that was the second house in this sector to be built. It was all open undeveloped land, probably someone’s field, I don’t know. And when the foundations were dug, we played, jumping up and down and loving it as children.

There was the labor, which built the buildings in the capital complex. They built our house as well, women, men, and you just took them for granted. They were like a part of the landscape. They came and they worked. My mother was very caring, so she was feeding them and bought dolls for them or their children or whatever. We extended the house in ’61, and I joined architecture in ’62. That was a more immediate thing and so I began wondering: Where do all these people live in Chandigarh? They used to come, do the work and then they used to disappear.

I got a grant from England. I was in London at that time and I came back and I spend a year-and-a-half looking at all the things, which had been fitted into the plan, all the unauthorized settlements and all the unauthorized commercial enterprises.

Moira Hille: When was that?

Madhu Sarin: ’73, ’74. I went back to London in ’75 to write up. That research studies are the basis of my book. I started trying to trace: How did all these settlements come up? And I traced their history, where they started, etcetera. I chased out some people who were actually involved with some of these settlements and reconstructed the history. You see, to build Chandigarh you may have the best architect in the world and you have engineers, you have architects, you have administrators, but none of them built, they only just give orders and tell others to build.

The first people to come in in large numbers have been building labor. Usually a labor contractor organized all these people himself from somewhere. Something like 30,000 laborers had come and they lived in typical huts and had very, very basic facilities. Today there is a law: If there is a certain
number of labor working at a site, then the contractor is legally bound to provide trash and sanitation facilities etcetera, some minimal requirements. But I don’t think anyone does it and no one enforces it.

For example: Recently, during the Commonwealth Games in Delhi, CNN was doing a story on “modern day slavery”, as they called it and they’ve covered India too. In this feature they are equating what in India we call “bonded labor” with modern day slavery, which is actually quite prominent in the country.

It is very, very difficult to get rid of it: Someone takes a loan and the moneylenders chuck them in these kinds of relations. They are given a loan at such a huge interest that they are never really able to pay it back. And then they are trapped in relationships where they just have to keep working for it and are still always in debt.

At one of my first exposures to rural areas in Bihar, I think it was in ‘77, or ’78, I was absolutely shocked to see the tribal people made bonded laborers on their own land. Their land has been mortgaged to middle men who have given some loan of maybe two quintals of wheat for a wedding in at such an unpayable interest that those people were never able to pay it be back. They had to work on their own land, but as laborers.

So during the construction of Chandigarh the laborers built their huts, no one talked about it. It was natural, Chandigarh needed labor and the laborers needed huts. A trade union leader, maybe a member of the communist party told me during my research that till 1959 no one talked about the huts. But when the buildings started being finished, they started to say: ‘Oh, you can’t build like this, this is illegal use of the land. Their vested interest will grab valuable land in the new city and so we must ask them to get lost.’

In 1959 they issued the first notice to remove the huts at their own cost within such and such time. ‘If you don’t we will do it and we will forcibly remove and we will recover the cost from you.’

Moira Hille: Were there protests?

Madhu Sarin: The Capital Workers Union was the first union to be formed in the city. It was the CPI, Communist Party of India, which organized the labor. They put up a united fight and said: ‘Hang on, you can’t do this to us, you tell us where to go and you give us small plots for which we are willing to pay in installments. But you can’t just bulldoze us.’ And according to the union leader I interviewed when the government sent the bulldozers the people laid in front saying: ‘Look, you will have to first get these machines over our bodies, you can’t demolish our huts.’

So the government said: “We will eventually give you small plots as you are demanding, but for the moment you move from here to there into a temporary kind of labor colony.” So they moved these people. There was one settlement in the capital complex; there was another one in Sector 17 because in the first phase there was in fact hardly any construction in Sector 17. They started construction in Sector 16 where all five of us, me and my brothers and sister, were going to the one and only school in Chandigarh at that time, which the Government Senior Model School. There was some construction in Sector 22 and next to 22 used to be a village, Bajwada and that’s where the paralleled unplanned or non-planned city came up.

With providing building materials and low cost shops, services, etcetera, which catered to the needs of the people and including people like us -- for a long time if you needed bamboo, ladders, tin, trunks iron ore, iron rods for work, you could only get them in ex-village of Bajwada, which has now been cleared. When I did my study the reminisce of the village was still there. Over time they’ve been removing it and really cleaning up and basically not analyzing that all this is there because you haven’t planned for it. This is not going to go away because no matter when your capital complex maybe completed, the city is yet to be built and you’re going to need the labor. And where is this labor going to live? And look at what they were paid: I think it was one rupee twelve annas, which would be 1.75 rupees per day for men and 1.25 for women, something ridiculous like that. I think probably that purchased more than what 100 rupees purchases today. But that was certainly not enough pay.
The standards, which were made minimum standards for Chandigarh - that the only house you can build must have pakkha construction, brick walls, cemented roofs, pipe water supply and electricity - were very nice, everyone should have it, but they saved money in their pocket or you have the money to subsidize.

I think for a long time a lot of the senior bureaucracy people just thought: “Oh this is temporary, they will go away, they have come from villages and they will go back.” And it's quite possible that some people do go back to their villages, they come seasonally when there is a crisis back home or want some money, but many stay.

Moira Hille: There is this myth that the people who came in the '50s are not here anymore, and that there are always new people coming.

Madhu Sarin: When I did my study, the only person on the original team of architects who started feeling very uncomfortable about the situation and started asking questions was Jane Drew. She kept saying: ‘Look there are a lot of people we haven’t planned for at all and we need to plan for them.’ And she actually pestered the senior government officials to allocate a budget for cheap houses and it’s because of her persistence that 800 cheap houses were built in Sector 19 and I think maybe in Sector 15 too.

I know that the mason who build our house and the carpenter who made all these doors and windows, they stayed from 1955. Those guys were so skilled. They just came and built – today the walls are not straight, like this partition wall I got built about 10, 12 years ago is not straight.

Anyway, both of them were lucky, they got one of these houses at that time. And they stayed here -- the mason died some years ago and I haven’t seen our old carpenter for some time, he used to keep dropping in every now and then, so maybe he is also gone. But I know his family is still living in that house.

So the government provided housing in the early years for the all government employees, including cleaners, sweepers, etcetera, even for the lowest category of Government of India employees. Which I believe was the first time ever that the Government of India provided housing for its own employees. But not for the prevalent people who worked outside the government. Government employees are in any case very privileged, they get regular salaries, they also get some allowances, they get pension after they retire. But people out in the private sector, they are struggling to keep body and soul together. They have no safeguards, no social security, not even housing. So from these locations, Sector 17 capital complex, these people were lifted and put what was the outskirts at that time. Today those outskirts are also very upper class areas.

So they created what they call labor colonies. One was in Sector 26, which is where now you have these very good schools – the Sacred Heart School, St. Johns School, the real elite schools of the city. And there were two in the industrial area and one in the university. When I did my survey in 1973-74 these colonies were still there.

But by then the city had caught up with these locations and they wanted to throw them out further out. These people were very, very angry and they said: ‘Look, we were promised.’ They never asked for free anything. They said: ‘Give us some plots and let us pay in installments over time’. Which is how the government forwarded plots like this. They were almost begging people to buy land in the city, there was a lot of uncertainty whether the new city would really take off. People after partition and being displaced and refugees from Pakistan had to invest in a risky enterprise.

So the government was giving all sorts of things, but the labor didn’t need anything. When I was doing my survey, they were very angry because they are being told, now we are going to move you to transit camps.

The people lived there from 1959, for 15 years. So in '74, the people were saying: ‘No way, you give us the small plots you promised and you give them us at the prices prevailing in '59 when you made the promise, because now the land values have gone up a lot’. By then these colonies were laid out, they had proper streets, some open drainage, plots for which they were charged a rent of something
like 1.5 rupees a month. There were a few common water points and a few street lights, very, very basic.

But it was proper -- I mean if they had made that permanent, today all those plots would have been very good sort of housing areas with these people integrated in the city. It would have been a wonderful opportunity to locate them within the main fabric. But they just kept lifting and dumping them out, which is what is still going on and in the process it totally ruined the villages.

They've taken all their land and they are dumping all these people without much of concern. You buy the agricultural land of the village, you take away their source of livelihood and then you pick up all these people who are really amongst the most deprived because they cannot afford to be legally in the city. Maybe the village originally had a population of 5000 and you pick up 20,000 or 40,000 of these people and dump them in the village. I think the villages are real hell holes now.

There is waste; there is congestion. They give them tiny, tiny units, and so the villagers are very bitter now because they say: 'This is our land, we are not permitted to use it or to do anything with it. And then the government picks up people who came illegally and squatted, and dumps them on us.' It really is quite crazy. When I framed my research proposal, I just wanted to understand why that these people could never fit into the plan, and why did the original architects, planners, administrators, why did no one think about these people. And I was particularly interested about what the École des Beaux-Arts thought about this. So I spend three months studying at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, going through his Le Corbusiers not ebooks, trying to see if it didn’t cross his mind where these people building these famous buildings are going to fit in his city.

I came across these sketches and saw scribbles, which said in India you don’t need to tailorize on labors, you don’t need to economize on labors. These women in their beautiful skirts and the men in their traditional dhotis, lungies, they stepped out of it, they pitched up for poles, they put up some sort of a shelter on top, their children play in the sand and they’re working. It was like an idyllic non-problem, very aesthetic, very beautiful, these women carrying bricks on their heads and -- but that was it.

My book is as far as I know is the only one, which has been looked at this problem.

Moira Hille: What happened with the protestors?

Madhu Sarin: They did succeed in a limited way. They were not bulldozed like it happens elsewhere. In this case the government did create lots, although they were temporary, they did make promises.

There was a period when the communist party and the more militant leftwing -- the Naxalites, what they call Maoist today -- when they were very strong in Punjab. Chandigarh during the mid 60s was the capital of just Punjab. But I don’t think they have much of a base any longer. The administration is very smart, I mean, these bureaucrats are trained -- the basic principle of divide and rule, which is how the British used to rule us for 200 years and they must getting training in that, how you break unity amongst people.

When I was doing my survey in 1974 we tried very hard to persuade the administration: ‘Look don’t lift them and dump them like rubbish out there again on a temporary basis.’ They’ve been around for 15 years involved in labor politics and they listen and say: ‘You don’t know the practicalities that’s what the government’ – everyone exactly told us, the advisers for the committee for the new masterplan, last week also. ‘You maybe professionals, but you are not practical’, he said. And I said: ‘Who says that professionals are not practical?’ I mean, we are practical, and it’s shocking.

I was quite shocked because what we had said was that they should not acquire whatever is left of the land of the villages and keep it as the open area that was meant to be kept in the periphery -- secured for retaining some contact with the culture and also the future needs of the region. You say future of the villagers, you said of the villages, you mean to say unauthorized development for the villagers? I said whoever says, but he said, you mean to say we should plan for the villagers? I said why not? Aren’t they citizens of this country - this was last week.