

APPU  
GHAR



People's Union for Democratic Rights  
Delhi  
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Appu Ghar is a familiar landmark for Delhi citizens. Lakhs of people who cross it daily are greeted by its mascot the baby elephant. Inside, it provides fun and frolic for children. On an average ten thousand people visit it every day. That is, every year about five times the population of Delhi visits Appu Ghar. Its name and mascot originate from Asiad '82 which bequeathed to our city magnificent stadia and fly overs. No one now knows what happened to all those 2.5 lakhs workers who built them. Nor do any of the thousands that flock Appu Ghar know the sordid tale that lies behind this most popular attraction of our city.

Appu Ghar was inaugurated by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on 19, November 1984. This was barely a fortnight after over 3000 people were massacred in the anti-Sikh carnage in Delhi. The amusement park was supposed to provide children with 'education for acquiring scientific knowledge and intriguing (sic) them with latest technology'. These lofty goals perhaps explain the terms and conditions of the lease.

The lease was signed between the International Amusement Limited, a registered private company that runs the Appu Ghar, and the Trade Fair Authority of India (TFAI), that runs the neighbouring Pragati Maidan. Most of the 'education and scientific knowledge' is now reduced to a variety of expensive joy rides, imported from Italy. The lease requires the company to pay just about Rs.25,000 per month for the prime land that now houses Appu Ghar, while its earnings amount to over Rs. 1 lakh per day from joyrides alone. Additional income from advertising, contracting out snacks and soft drink stalls, though difficult to estimate, is substantial. In contravention of the lease agreement, there also exists a shopping complex adding further revenue to the parent company, at no extra cost.

Appu Ghar employs about 350 workers, one fourth of whom are women. An additional sixty to seventy workers are employed by the five contractors who run the contracted stalls. Those employed directly by the company are divided into thirteen

departments dealing with various jobs ranging from sweeping and cleaning to operation of rides and provision of security.

Initially, the working hours were seven, from 2 to 9 P.M. As the place grew in popularity, the working hours were continually increased first to eight and now to above eleven (10 a.m. to 9.15 p.m.) with a half an hour lunch break. But there was no commensurate increase in wages. Right now only a chosen few from among the workers get a consolidated over time allowance. In spite of the long working hours, there is no provision for a place for resting or relaxing for the workers on the premises.

The workers have to commute long distances to get to work. Most come from distant suburbs in Delhi, some even from as far as Gurgaon and Sonapat. Transport to get back to their homes after closing time (at night) is provided to only a few of the women employees, the cost of which is deducted from their salaries. The others have to make their own arrangements. After providing eleven hours of 'education with entertainment' to thousands of children, these workers reach their own homes and families around mid night. And then Appu Ghar doesn't close on holidays either. In fact what are public holidays such as festivals or even the day of the elections, are days of peak business for Appu Ghar.

There are three categories of workers at Appu Ghar. The lowest -- Assistants, get a total of Rs.750/- per month. The second category, semi skilled, get Rs.850 and the highest, skilled workers, get Rs.1200 per month. Their average daily income comes to just about the same as the amount spent on a single child who visits Appu Ghar.

Though on paper these workers are classified as permanent, temporary and casual, in actual status, wage level, benefits and facilities no clear distinctions are visible. Not even Mr. K.C.Arora, the General Manager (Personnel) whom we interviewed, could enlighten us about the actual meaning of these distinctions.



Permanent employees salaries are further reduced due to deductions for Provident Fund (PF) and Employees State Insurance (ESI). Enquiries from these concerned institutions reveal that the management is not being regular in depositing the amounts. The Compulsory Dearness Allowance (DA) of Rs.17 per month announced by the Delhi Administration also did not benefit the permanent employees, unlike the temporary workers, for, it was deducted from their in service increments. But who are these permanent employees and how many of them are there? Management says 300 out of 350. Workers say at best 200. The division between permanent and others is based neither on the nature of the job nor on the length of the service. We came across a number of instances where workers with similar qualifications and performing similar jobs and with the same length of service are drawing different salaries and have different status.

The other workers number about 150, some of whom are supposed to be temporary while others are casual. But it appears that both are paid on muster roll basis. They get a day off for every week of work but are denied any other leave facilities. Deductions like PF are also made from the wages in some of these cases. It appears to us that these deductions are not legal. Moreover, on leaving service few workers are paid the deducted amounts. In any case no worker gets a pay slip. And so they remain in the dark about their rightful dues and just take whatever they are paid. Among these are also casual labourers who have been in service for 'more than 240 continuous days' in contravention of law. Some times the law is observed in letter by arranging for a break in service for a day. There are also some temporary workers who have been in service for more than three years. They have not been made permanent by simply transferring them from one to the other of the thirteen departments and issued new appointment letters each time. More ridiculously some times the names of the department themselves or even the formal ownership of the department is changed. Thus the Food and Beverages Department was Food and Beverages Department in 1984, 'Pragati Foods' in 1987, 'A.V.Hotels' in 1988 and is now back to being called 'Food and Beverages Department'! This kind

of arbitrariness enables the management to keep the workers in a perpetual state of insecurity. This is also the source of confusion about who are permanent workers and who are not.

There is very little the workers can do about their status, wages, increments, working conditions and facilities. For many of them are forced to sign blank sheets of paper either at the time of joining or sometime during their service and hence are in fear of victimisation. Yet some of them took initiative to form a union and struggle for their rights.

## II

Appu Ghar Karmachari Sangh, affiliated to Hind Mazdoor Sabha, was registered in late 1987. The union's demands include uniforms, bonus, subsidised food at lunch hour, leave and medical facilities. It also demanded wages on par with Delhi Administration workers which is what workers in the neighbouring Pragati Maidan receive. The Union presented for the first time a charter of demands in March 1988. The management's response was prompt. It filed a suit in the civil court against its own workers. Shri R.K. Tiwari, ADJ, Civil Court was convinced that the "interests of justice require the defendants (the union) are restrained.....from shouting slogans from the distance of less than 250 metres from the entrance of the establishment".. It was an ex parte ad interim injunction. The distance of 250 mtr. involves a bit of trickery. The management claims that the lease signed by the four directors of the International Amusement Ltd. and Mr. Mohammad Yunus, the then Chairman of the TFAI includes the parking space of Appu Ghar in its premises. And so effectively the workers are restrained from even an ordinary demonstration by the civil court, unless they choose to hold it inside the premises of the Supreme Court of India.!

The stay was in force for over nine months. In the meantime services of about seventeen workers were terminated under some pretext or the other. Eventually in December 1988

the management entered into negotiations, although they had refused to recognise the Union upto then. On atleast minor matters that involved no additional expenditure some sort of a written agreement was made. The suit in the civil court was also withdrawn. But even the minimal agreement was not implemented. So the Union gave a call for<sup>a</sup> general meeting of the workers in June 1989. Summer month, being the peak season, the management became restive. It was again able to obtain an exparte, ad interim injunction from the civil court. The workers meeting never took place. Almost a year later the order is still in force. This time around the management became more vicious. Threats of physical violence apart, one worker was actually beaten up. Workers were terrorised. Daily harrasments like show cause notices, disciplinary action, arbitrary deductions increased. In the case of a couple of active union members even trumped up charges of molestation, threat to visitors were manufactured against them. The complete arbitrariness that governed their status and wages has now become a weapon to intimidate, cajole or split the workers. Some of the permanent workers for instance were granted their due increments while others were denied the same. Atleast six workers were suspended in recent months. The blank sheets signed by the workers have now come handy to the management. Presently most workers are too terrorised to speak. The management has created an informal system of vigilance to keep a track of the movements of workers. So they live in perpetual insecurity even as they continue to provide the most delightful entertainment for the children of Delhi, everyday.

We appeal to the government to either ensure that all labour laws are implemented and the Union is recognised by the management or take over the establishment and make it part of Pragati Maidan. We also would like to appeal to the conscience of Delhi's parents and children. Here is a place where public spends so much money for a few hours of fun and frolic, a place that came to represent best entertainment for thousands of children. Let those who struggle hard to provide it have a decent life. We appeal to the public to pressurise the management by boycotting Appu Char.

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