

## Raju and the Radisson: Informality Rules

By [Howard Spodek](#), Ph.D.

*This is the author's true story of a tea vendor, his family, and the Radisson Hotel in Ahmedabad.*

*Studying "informality" is a central concern of Professor Spodek's research into city planning in the western Indian city of Ahmedabad, a city of six million people.*



*Raju's was more than a tea stall.*

Raju's tea kept me going the last few steps to my home. Sometimes, at the end of a long series of interviews or photography sessions, I needed just those few ounces of brown, milky, sweet tea before I walked the last block to my apartment at the end of the shaded Ashok Wadi lane. The weather in India can be grueling, maybe that is why there are tea stalls on almost every street corner, especially in crowded neighborhoods, and almost all neighborhoods are crowded.

Raju's was more than a tea stall. Friends in the neighborhood told me that he had been in his spot for at least a decade, slowly building it from just a makeshift home that later sprouted an outdoor tea-shop as well. Two shops actually. Raju's, the one on the right, sold tea, cigarettes, tobacco, and small packets of junk snacks; his wife's shop, the one adjoining on the left, sold soaps, a little food, buttermilk, some home-made jewelry. Sometimes their two young children were there, too. When I stopped by, they often gathered around me. A white person, a foreigner, who spoke Gujarati, was a rarity for them, so I became their entertainment as they asked my name and where I was from, checking out my Gujarati and practicing their few words of English.



*The twin shops were attached to the home, a makeshift brick hutment with a tarpaulin roof, which ran the length of both and seemed to accommodate an extended family.*

The twin shops were attached to the home, a makeshift brick hutment with a tarpaulin roof, which ran the length of both, and seemed to accommodate an extended family. Early in the morning I would see older women – maybe grandmothers? – coming in and out of the house and cooking in the open space just outside its makeshift cloth and plastic door-hangings. I couldn't tell where they got their water or what they used for toilets. Their home and shops backed up against the wall of a new construction project, and I guessed they used the water and toilets there. This was

not an unusual arrangement in urban India, where 30-40% of the population live in slums with difficult access to water and often no access to toilets. In the last few months I had heard the words “open field defecation” a lot. The facilities of a construction site could be a great convenience.

Raju’s family was better off than most slum dwellers. They had staked out an independent, free-standing home and a small business in the center of a wealthy and improving residential-commercial neighborhood. To their immediate left, a bus stop provided many of their customers and the construction workers provided more. The biggest problem for Raju and his family was that their home and small-but-flourishing business were illegal. They were an encroachment on the pedestrian pathway between the construction project behind them and the main road in front.



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Illegal encroachments are not at all unusual in Indian cities. Regular payoffs to the police, and often to a local politician, provide a hedge against eviction. Raju was just one of tens of millions of urban entrepreneurs in India’s “informal,” “irregular,” “illegal” economy. They include sidewalk vendors, pushcart peddlers, small-scale artisans and crafts workers whose production facilities spill out of their one- or two-room home-workshops onto the street. Tens of millions of slum dwellers have no legal rights to the land on which their jerry-rigged homes, shacks, and tents are built.

“Informality” is not only for the poor. The wealthy, too, participate – on a much grander scale. Zoning rules require

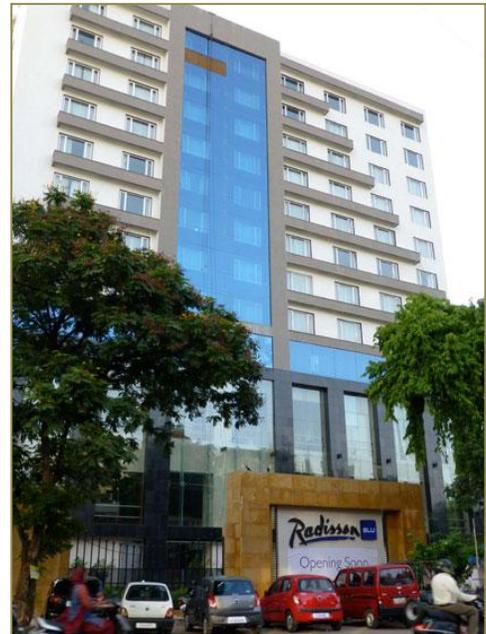
businesses to provide parking spaces for their customers, but owners turn these valuable properties into shops and storage rooms. Other zoning regulations limit the heights of buildings, but developers often add one or two additional stories. Building codes specify the quality of construction materials, but builders cut corners. Expensive homes as well as shacks are often situated on land without clear title. Cheating the system is so common that “informality” IS the system, or at least a large part of it. Illegalities, small payoffs, bribes, are everywhere. Professor

Ananya Roy, of Berkeley, argues that city planning, at least city planning as taught in the West, is not possible in India since planning requires rules and regulations that are implemented and observed consistently. That is not the Indian way. (It may not be entirely the way in the USA either, but that is a subject for a different day.)

Studying this “informality” was a central concern of my research into city planning in the western Indian city of Ahmedabad, a city of six million people, which I knew reasonably well from my earlier studies of its recent history. I had received a fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies for 2011-12 and had taken a year’s leave of absence from Temple to carry out the study. Analyzing formal plans and procedures turned out to be only a small part of my work; informality was at least as important. Raju’s home and tea shop not only served refreshments, they also provided source materials for my study.

Then, one morning in late June, Raju’s home, shops, everything was gone, gone in one day, nothing at all left. If you hadn’t known that a home and two shops had filled the now-empty space, you would never know. The reason seemed obvious. The construction project behind Raju’s establishment was just about complete. The sign on the thirteen-story building proclaimed that a “Radisson Blu” Hotel, the high end of the Radisson chain, would be “opening soon.” From the hotel’s perspective, Raju’s establishment, which had provided such benefits to the neighborhood, was an eyesore. It had to go.

I was astonished at the abruptness of the removal. I wanted to know more. I began to ask friends and academic colleagues. None of them knew the specifics of Raju’s case, but they were familiar with the removal of encroachments. Each ventured a guess on the basis of his or her perspective. The first person I asked was a very distinguished city planner with decades of experience, formal and informal, and a belief that there is order even in the apparent disorder of Indian cities. His guess: “The hotel paid him off. They negotiated until both sides were satisfied.”



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The hotel wants no fuss. Raju had no legal rights, but he had an entitlement, which would be recognized in the courts, based on his years of occupancy. Some NGO [non-governmental organization, voluntary group] would have emerged to represent him. The fuss, the mess, the negative publicity is not what a new hotel would want at its opening. Surely they must have paid him off. Maybe Rs. 75,000 [US\$1,500].”

The second friend had an answer 180° in the opposite direction. He is the director of an NGO with years of experience representing poor people in their struggles with government. Class struggle was his perspective. “Paid him off! You’ve got to be joking! The hotel must have called the Municipal Corporation and had the man and his family, their shops and their homes, evicted, removed. Just like that. This is the way that power and wealth confront weakness and poverty in this society.”

A third friend charted a middle course, but one more extreme than either of the first two. Her organization works with city administrators to improve their efficiency in Ahmedabad, nationally, and even internationally. She sees issues in their complexity. “Well, maybe the hotel paid him off. They certainly would not want a fuss, and Raju could file a court case and raise a fuss if he wanted. In fact, they might have paid him even more than Rs. 75,000. On the other hand, if the hotel wanted to play tough, they could have had Raju evicted directly. The police might even have confiscated his goods. Raju might not only have gotten nothing, he might have had to pay to retrieve his goods. Hard to tell. Each case is different.”

A fourth friend, leader of a internationally-known organization of working-class women, saw the whole incident from a more visionary, if romantic perspective: “You know, the hotel could have kept Raju’s establishment in place and fixed it up to be a welcome station for newly arriving guests. Raju and his family could have received guests with flowers and tea.” But this creative and innovative perspective, with all its charm, came, unfortunately, after the fact.

A fifth friend, a young student of architecture, smiled, amused by what was becoming my obsession. He took the whole issue in stride, and suggested that I do the same: “Howard, tea stalls come and go. Sometimes they just can’t make it. Sometimes they are evicted; they move to a new place and start over again. This is just the way of the world over here. What’s the big deal? Chill.”

Raju’s tea stall had become a touchstone that brought out so many different perspectives. Still the question remained: What, in fact, had happened to Raju?



*Raju now rides a bicycle to deliver goods for sale.*

I asked the gatekeeper at the Radisson what he knew. “An agreement was reached and Raju left on good terms. He is working nowadays as a deliveryman. He rides his bicycle by here every day at about 10AM.” I handed the gatekeeper a slip of paper with my name and phone number and asked him to give it to Raju. Two days later, about three weeks after the move, Raju phoned. Two days after that we met at a tea stall just down the street, a block away from where his had been. Raju told me his story:

The home had actually been established thirty years before by Raju’s mother- and father-in-law. Then, too, this had been a construction site, but for an earlier enterprise. A few years after Raju married into the family, they invited him and his wife to set up the tea stall as an extension to the home. Raju and his wife accepted the offer, but they did not come to live in the house. The house had only four inhabitants: Raju’s in-laws and their surviving parents. They got their water from a tap that ran outward from the construction project, left over from the earlier project. For a toilet they walked five minutes to a nearby park to use the public facility. [Men, of course, just peed against the closest wall.]

Raju and his wife had their own home in Nagoriwad, an older part of town. Every morning at 6 AM Raju rode his bicycle to the tea shop. His wife followed at about 10 AM with a tiffin, a lunch pack, for him. Their two children, a boy about 11, a girl about 10, stayed home to attend school. Relatives and friends looked after them until mom and dad returned in the evening. They came to the shop on Sundays. The business had been successful. In about two and one half years, Raju told me, they had earned about Rs. 500,000, about US\$10,000.

The Radisson negotiated with the family, actually with the in-laws, who had held their ground for thirty years. In the end, the hotel paid them Rs. 1,200,000 – about US\$24,000.

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Not all stories from the informal economy have such happy endings, but Ahmedabad has active NGO's that would have supported Raju's case and courts that might have listened sympathetically. The five star hotel, with deep pockets, chose to pay rather than fight. How has the windfall affected Raju and his family? How much is left after they pay off the final bribes to police and officials and the debts that poor families accrue over the years for marriages, funerals, and health emergencies.

Raju invited me to his home in Nagoriwad to continue our conversation and to meet his family. I went with a friend. When we arrived, Raju was out, finishing his morning sales rounds. His wife, Pinky, welcomed us into their one room apartment where their daughter, Sweta, was playing happily with a cousin.

Compact, efficient, and carefully furnished, the apartment consisted of just the one room, about 15 feet square. A balcony overlooking the street housed the kitchen at one end, the bathroom at the other. Here, bathroom means a place for bathing (and usually peeing). For the rest, the family uses a public toilet about ten minutes walk away.

Pinky made us feel at home and then began to tell her story. The hutment had been her home from the time she was ten months old. Her parents had built it while they were serving as *chowkidars*, or watchmen, for the surrounding property.

The story was familiar. An owner invites a chowkidar to guard his property while he is away for long periods. When he returns, the chowkidar refuses to vacate, claiming *occupancy rights* over at least a small part of the land. These claims are frequently recognized by the courts. The claims in this case would be further complicated: was the hutment on the private land of the owner, or the public land of the street, or on a blurry border between them? Was the hutment of



*Raju's wife Pinky had worked alongside her husband at the tea stall.*

today the same as the one of 32 years ago? These are the questions that arise in a land tenure system marked by informality and irregularity.

Shortly after they were married, Pinky and Raju opened a tea stall just across the street from her family's hutment. They were even more entrepreneurial; they also negotiated contracts to supply tea to nearby offices. But neighbors objected to their presence and forced them to close down. (My young friend who had told me that tea stands come and go had a point.)

For a while, they sold pencils and notebooks in Nagoriwad, but as their children reached school age, they needed more money. They accepted Pinky's parents' proposal to open the new tea stall adjoining their hutment-home – where I had met them.

Jyotsna, Pinky's mother, arrived for a brief visit. Only 17 years older than her daughter, she wore a brightly-patterned red sari, in rich contrast to her daughter's embroidered green house dress. Her eyes flashing, Jyotsna took us by surprise, launching immediately into a bitter critique of the Radisson deal (which had seemed fair-to-generous to me and most of my friends and academic colleagues):



*Jyotsna, Pinky's mother, delivered a strong critique of the Radisson deal.*

“Only Rs. 12 lakhs! That's all we got! I had hoped for Rs. 50 lakhs [US\$100,000]; Rs. 25 lakhs would have been okay.”

“Why did you settle?”

“Negotiations with the Radisson had dragged on for four years, and now the hotel was about to open. At one point we feared that they would send thugs to force us out. I was scared, but I stood my ground and they left us alone. Slowly the Radisson had increased its offer from Rs. 1 lakh to 12.

“In the end my friends and family told me to take it: ‘Whatever Mataji, the mother goddess, gives, accept it.’ ‘If you can't get the whole flower, at least get a petal.’ I also consulted the shaman of our Datania Waghari Thakore caste community. He ‘cast seeds,’



*The family's apartment is compact and carefully furnished, with a kitchen tucked in a corner of a balcony.*

down onto the ground. These special seeds came out '9,' an auspicious number, so we accepted."

"How have you spent the money? How much went to bribes? How much to pay off debts?"

"Nothing in bribes. Rs. 1.5 lakhs went to pay off debts, all of them to other members of the family. We bought three homes for members of the family, one for Rs.5 lakhs in Vasna, about five kilometers to the south, one for about Rs. 1.5 lakhs in Vadaj, about four kilometers to the north, and one for about Rs. 1.5 lakhs just across the street here in Nagoriwad for me.

[Jyotsna's own parents continue to live on the premises of a temple in Panchvati, where they also run a tea stall.] We bought one auto-rickshaw [probably for about Rs. 0.5 lakhs]."

Jyotsna's husband and both of her sons drive auto-rickshaws, which are ubiquitous in Ahmedabad, and she seems to be encouraging Raju to do the same.

"We bought a little gold for ornaments and for saving."

She went on: "I had promised to donate Rs. 5 lakhs to Mataji as part of the bargain, as *badha* in exchange for her help. But that was for Rs. 50 lakhs. Since we received only Rs. 12 lakhs, the badha will be only Rs. 1.5 or 2 lakhs. I also make pilgrimages to Mataji temples and every day I go back to Panchvati and light two *agarbatti* incense sticks in her honor."

By this time, Raju had returned from his daily rounds. He buys *gutka*, a kind of chewing tobacco, from the wholesale market in the city center for Rs. 1/packet and sells it to local merchants for Rs. 1.5; they retail it for Rs. 2. Raju's son, Ravi, an astonishing likeness to his father, arrived from a friend's home. Both father and son were direct but soft spoken, appropriate to their position among such strong women and such powerful goddesses.

The time had come to finish our visit. We descended the stairs. The street below, *Kidipada-ni-pol*, is a long, narrow, twisting ribbon, flanked by homes mostly of people of the same caste and community, typical of the centuries-old city center of Ahmedabad. Along the way to the main street, we visited Jyotsna's newly-purchased home, its prayer-space especially adorned with electric lights in celebration of Janmashtami, Lord Krishna's birthday, that very day. Loudspeakers broadcast film music and people took time to exchange holiday greetings.

Completing a year of research into urban planning, I would be leaving India just a few days later, But I was already looking forward to continuing with Raju's story, and now the story of his family, next August [2013], when I expect to return.

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