

ASHOK HOTEL, DELHI'S OLDEST 5-STAR HOTEL

It's a 300-room illegal building just 300 yards away from the prime minister's home.

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Three thousand illegal residents inside Ashok Hotel, Delhi

When Disinvestment Minister Arun Shourie told me about over **300 unauthorized staff houses** on the premises of Delhi's oldest 5-star hotel, I didn't quite believe him. How could such a large army of people be hidden behind the grand facade of Ashok Hotel? Yet Shourie is not a minister whose facts you doubt. What he wasn't sure of was the location of the houses. Disinvestment Secretary Pradip Baijal challenged me to discover them - for myself and for the "readers of INDIA TODAY".

So on a hot and windy June afternoon, my photographer colleague Sipra Das and I set out on an inspection trip to Ashok. Sipra - whose submissive appearance but aggressive style is always an advantage - hid the camera in her jacket as we walked into the hotel. We had an excuse ready in case the hotel security stopped us: we were doing a photo-feature on the hotel's architecture. But we weren't quizzed even when we wandered around the 16.1-acre campus of the hotel looking for the staff houses.

After two rounds of the hotel all we could locate was a crèche, the presence of which even the hotel's top management wasn't aware of. At best it's an exaggerated symbol of Jawaharlal Nehru's belief in the welfare state. The hotel was built in **1956** under the personal supervision of the then tourism minister Karan Singh and the staff would have you believe that Nehru personally inspected the construction once a month. After a futile two rounds, we decided to walk to the adjacent Hotel Samrat. Ashok and Samrat are two 5-star hotels of the ITDC located next to each other in the capital's posh Chanakyapuri area. Right next to Samrat's main entrance we saw a small gate marked "Way for cycle stand". The passage was covered with tall bushes. Walking further down, we saw what we had never expected to see; a yellow dilapidated, three-story building swarming with people.

As Sipra started to take pictures, a man rushed to us from the building; "From the press? You must see the hell we live in," he said, virtually pushing us into the building. A bigger shock awaited us. The stench and dirt in the building were nauseating. It had some 300 rooms in which lived as many families. **No kitchens and only 10 toilets and bathrooms for over 2,500 people.**

Ten minutes into the building and I had a churning sensation in my stomach, something I haven't experienced even at the filthiest railway platform. But what was most ironical is that the dingy and unauthorized building stands just 300 yards away from the prime minister's Race Course Road home.

The state and legal status of this building is one of the stumbling blocks in the pricing and privatization of Ashok. This, of course, was only one of the many chilling discoveries I made while investigating the ITDC story ("The Great Hotel Robbery", August 15).

Readers called in disgust to know if another ITDC hospice in the capital Hotel Indraprastha still had peepholes in the rooms (the hotel management assured me it didn't). We also found that Hotel Janpath, no doubt the ugliest hotel in Delhi, wasn't built as a hotel.

It was constructed as a working women's hostel in the early 1960s and was later converted into a hostel for MPs. It started functioning as a hotel only in the 1970s. Every single hotel of ITDC has a sordid tale swept under its smelly carpet.

Within a week of the story's publication, I was summoned by former officials of the Tourism Ministry whom I still can't name. But their objection to my story is more interesting than their identity.

They complained that I was unfair in naming only a few among those who have looted the ITDC through its 37 years of existence, and not all. The crux of their argument: I am a thief, but since I am not the only thief in the world, don't hang me.

Soon after the publication of the story I received calls from deep throats in three Delhi-based PSUs, each promising details more explosive than ITDC on their companies. That's assignment 2003.