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Not Homeless, but Houseless in Delhi

Ranjana Mital

Ranjana Mital is an Assistant Professor in Architecture in the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. The quality of life on the residential streets of Delhi was the subject of her PhD thesis, and the present paper is being used as the basis of a research project with some final year architecture students. Currently Ranjana Mital is also working on a research project on 'Temple Architecture: a need to review and renew' on a Senior Fellowship awarded by the Department of Culture, Government of India.

If one were to write about the acute problem of shelter-poverty in my country, it would necessarily be an extremely depressing tale.

The estimated housing shortage in India as per the 1991 census was almost 23 million dwelling units of which more than 90% was for the poor and low-income category.

I would probably be expected to furnish columns of staggering figures illustrating housing deficits, exploding population, number of destitute, number of homeless etc.

There would be facts about housing schemes that failed because of a lack of funds, land allotments that got misused by speculators and squatters who refused to relocate. It would be about a poor and hapless central government and poorer and equally helpless state governments struggling to tally numbers of demand and supply in the face of staggering odds.

Almost as if poverty and population were not enough, disasters, both natural and man-made, occur with frightening regularity: floods in the east, earthquakes in the west, tsunamis smash into coastal settlements

in the south and militant outfits keep development at bay in the north. The National Housing and Habitat Policy estimated that about 1,500,000 houses are destroyed every year due to natural hazards.

News magazines publish pictures of women with sunken cheeks and a sense of hopelessness in their eyes. One hand holds the end of the saree drawn over the head and across the mouth, the other supports a listless child hitched on to the hip. Around them huddle a number of little children with dark inquiring eyes, a little intimidated by the camera person and his troupe. This is the classic photo-op – the image of the Third World ... and woefully true.

The pain in the pit of your stomach worsens as celebrated public servants are suddenly exposed for what they are – unscrupulous individuals brazenly fattening on funds meant for relief for the destitute and the devastated.

In New Delhi with a population that equals almost a tenth of the entire country's, the scenario is equally grim. With almost 40% of the city's population below the poverty line it is apparent that the problem of inadequate housing is exacerbated by the fact that a major part of the housing deficit is concentrated among the urban poor.

As in all other Indian metropolises, the housing shortage in Delhi is real – very real as much for the middle class as it is for the economically weaker sectors. It stares us in the face at every hour of the day, in every part of the city. Nowhere are you far from this harsh reality: in the overcrowded residential areas; in the slums; on the pavements of older city areas; in the exorbitant rents or in the soaring real estate prices that are the norm.

According to the Census of 2001, Delhi alone has a net housing shortage of about 100,000 dwelling units and on the basis of projected population figures for 2021, the housing stock required will be about 2,400,000 dwelling units including an estimated backlog of 400,000 dwelling units.¹

A glance at the density figures for the capital over the past decades reiterates this 'crowding' quite categorically. A density of 274 persons per sq km in 1901 increased to 1176 persons per sq km in 2001. Delhi is one of the fastest growing cities in India attracting about 500,000 migrants a year of which approximately 25% end up as squatters or in slums.

The reasons for migration are variously due to family ties (50%), in search of employment (38%), in search of education (3%), with the balance (9%) being for other reasons.²

Unplanned Housing

However, while the above are facts, no less true is the phenomenon being played out in 'non-sanctioned' development.

The focus here is on a housing option that is 'unplanned' but successful, driven as it is by market forces applicable in the 'un-organised' sector.

It is as much about surviving in the city as it is about the unextinguishable hope that keeps the migrant doggedly determined to overcome all odds. It is not so much about providing for the poor, but possibly about learning how to provide or more appropriately enable.

It is about a large percentage of the city's population whose occupations are clubbed under sub-headings like 'private sector' 'service' or 'construction' and the majority of whose housing type is not recognised in the master plan for the city. It is about their perceptions of the city, about their hopes and aspirations, above all it is about the meaning of 'homelessness' and the relative nature of the term particularly in the context of this group of the city's residents.

Depending on the authorities concerned there may be up to 13 identifiable housing sub-systems in New Delhi. However, this paper concerns itself with the category of unplanned areas, which include urban villages, slums and squatter colonies.

As their classification suggests, these areas do not follow any development rules or building regulations.

Urban villages were, till recently, outside the purview of the Delhi Development Authority. They are the residue of New Delhi's spread, particularly since Independence, which engulfed a number of villages. While the agricultural land around these villages was acquired and developed, the core settlement or the built-up area was not formally integrated into the surrounding development. For reasons including problems of jurisdiction, ambiguity regarding application of building regulations and soaring land values, much has been built within the 'village areas' that has no sanction from the development authorities.

Thus, without a development plan and with the given pressures on land in or near urban areas, substantial alterations in the original rural fabric of the villages have occurred, some encouraging and much that is unacceptable.

Inadequate, but Meeting a Need

One such development is the building of walk-up tenements of up to four floors that are rented out to migrant workers. Thus while development authorities, planners, environmentalists and custodians of heritage stand aghast; frenetic construction activity takes place within the notified (i.e., designated) area of the village. Block upon block of rooms-to-let come up, a steady source of income for the usually unskilled, possibly uneducated owner of the land. The pattern followed is standard – as many independent rooms as possible with or without a kitchenette and common baths and WCs. With no development norms in place for this notified area, the construction is neither sanctioned nor illegal.

The poor facilities in terms of size and number of rooms, ventilation, privacy, toilet facilities and availability of potable water

as well as water for washing would together establish this housing option to be substandard and tending to slum-like situations.

Notwithstanding the above, this provides an option that is popular. The migrant with no initial intention of settling or the poorer one who cannot hope to build or buy his own house sees rental accommodation as a viable option.

On the other hand the development authority or other providers of land or housing do not actively consider encouraging the building of 'hostels' for the migrant.

Another reason for considering this option is the distinctive characteristic of the so called 'homeless' of Delhi compared to other Indian metropolitan cities is seen in the sex ratio and average size of household. As per the 1981 census the number sex ratio was lowest in Delhi at 187 females per 1000 males as against 400 in Kolkata, 278 in Mumbai and 955 in Chennai. The average size of household was 1.9 in Delhi against 4.8 in Kolkata, 2.0 in Mumbai and 4.1 in Chennai.³ The sex ratio according to the 2001 census though on an all-Delhi scale (that is, not just the 'homeless') suggests that the situation may not be much different to that of 20 years ago with there being 827 women for every 1000 men in Delhi. This is lower than the all-India figure which stands at 927 women for every 1000 men.

Who Are These People?

What Are Their Occupations?

Among the pavement dwellers could be the rickshaw puller. On the other hand he may also be sharing a rented room with a friend or relative of his.

The taxi driver is a youth just into his twenties perhaps.

The night watch-man is registered with a private firm that supplies security personnel to clients across the city.

The part-time domestic helper leaves early in the morning rushing through her chores at all the homes that employ her. (She might wash, clean, cook, mind little children in either one house or many).

The full-time one spends the day at her employer's house holding fort so that her mistress can go to work.

The press-wallah (he irons clothes washed in various homes - a characteristic feature of every residential colony in Delhi) seems to be at his iron all the time.

Nearby at a construction site, migrant labourers build their temporary shacks along the plot boundary wall.

The little boy at the tea-stall and the waiters at the local restaurant stay on the premises itself.

The cook and his helpers at the mess in the students' hostel stay on the premises too. They have hardly any belongings and need no place of their own. The dining room is their own once the students have had their meals.

Where Do They Come from?

They come from as far away as Bihar and Bengal in the East and Kerala in the South. The Nepali also crosses the border regularly in search of employment. Of course the maximum number of migrants is from contiguous states like Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. These people come singly at first and are then followed by other members of the family or acquaintances.

In this lot would fall the construction-site worker who is a 'seasonal' citizen for he returns to his fields in the village in time for the harvest season.

When Did They Arrive in Delhi?

They may have come as recently as a few months ago or have been around for almost ten years, returning periodically to their 'homes' to celebrate a marriage, a religious festival or even mourn a death.

Why Are They Here, Crowded Together in Rented Spaces?

Life is tough in these rented tenements as anywhere else in the city for those who are poor and uneducated. Their biggest expenditure is the rent which could eat into as much as 50% of their meagre salaries. Yet it seems a better option than be unemployed in their villages or even country as is the case with the migrant from Nepal. They are here because they cannot get the wages they get here at their villages or even hometowns. And all the while they dream of putting back a pile to take 'home'. Some even manage.

The case of the Nepali couple, Nirmala and her husband is a legend. Both husband and wife were lucky to find employment as domestic workers in an expatriate's house with salaries considerably higher than the usual. At the end of his tenure, when the master left for his country, he left much of his household effects for his servants. The couple gleefully returned to their country to enjoy their 'savings'.

Sumitra and her husband work as cooks in different houses. At the end of the day they take home the left-overs which may be augmented to make up their evening meal- the afternoon meal is provided by the employers. Apart from the rent which is phenomenal they save every possible paisa – children wear hand-me-downs given by the families they work for. Sumitra is looking forward to a 'comfortable' future but needs someone to look after her children while she is at work. She was planning to call a relative to stay with them.⁴

How Did They Choose Their Part of the City?

They identify closely with their villages. As they come to the cities in the classic 'follow the leader' pattern, they gravitate quite surely towards the area where their friends or relatives live. Initially a friend

or relative accommodates the newcomer and helps him or her get a job. It is a matter of time before another room gets taken. Rooms here are often rented according to 'type'. A certain building or street could have a majority of tenants from a particular part of the country. Hometown or village ties are very strong and those that are not close by are kept in touch with over telephone or through occasional visits. Migrants learn to make their way about the city remarkably quickly.

What Does the City Mean to Them?

Ask the rickshaw-puller where his home is and he proudly tells you of a village you've never heard of – when he sees no recognition of the name registering on your expression he helpfully tells you how long it takes by train and what the fare is.

Ask him where he lives in the city? He waves a hand vaguely in the direction of an unauthorised colony. He probably does not even rent a space in the summer months!

A good number do not bring their families to the city. They live by themselves in shared accommodation or on the premises of the employer thus minimising their cost of living, allowing them to send home a little more. Taxi-drivers, who spend whole seasons in a tent – on call for anyone who might need a taxi, are a pertinent illustration for this kind of the city resident. There are instances of male domestic helpers staying on with the employer's family, regularly sending money home and making the annual visit until they are too old to work. At that point, they identify a substitute and return to their villages and families.

The city to these people is not home even if they spend most of their lives here.

Unhappily they see the city only as something they can take from and ironically the city gives them very little.

All they need is a place to live in at the least cost possible, preferring to take up a smaller place if less expensive for after all it is only 'temporary'.

Not Homeless, but Houseless

This paper attempts to reveal the distinction made between 'home' and 'house' by those who are 'homeless' or living in substandard housing.

As a direct consequence of poverty as also the inability on the part of the agencies expected to provide shelter for all due to policy and financial constraints, it is the urban poor who are compelled to live in substandard housing.

Delhi Urban Environment and Infrastructure Improvement Project, 2021 categorized substandard housing to include the following:

- Slum areas
- Unauthorized squatter settlements

- Planned squatter settlements i.e. i) resettlement of households
ii) providing developed sites and services plots
- Pavement dwellers
- Unauthorized colonies (permanent structures on land that has been encroached upon)
- Regularized unauthorized colonies(colonies subsequently regularized by the authorities)⁵

It is evident that ‘substandard housing’ or ‘inadequate shelter’ are relative terms and sensitive to regional variations as well as group perceptions.

For the rickshaw puller, stretching out on the pavement on summer nights and paying a nominal sum to use common toilet facilities is a completely acceptable way of living for the present.

The housemaid is happy to live the way she is provided her children can be taken care of.

In other words, at least some of the ‘homeless’ in Delhi live the way they do because it suits them. Putting aside an extra rupee for the house in the village, to buy that all-important TV or even to be able to bring the family over seems motivation enough to rough it out. None of them perceived themselves as ‘homeless’ as they all had strong associations with ‘home’ however distant in physical terms.

Can they then be referred to as ‘homeless’ when they are only ‘houseless’?

They are not homeless. They seem to require a peculiar housing system not formally provided for. They can and do pay rents and would probably benefit with better facilities for health and education.

Basing the argument on the fact that the number of poor is far more than the rich in the city, and the well-proven fact that providing “shelter for all” is easier said than done, it stands to reason that more dwellings of a special kind are required.

Authorities, practitioners and academics are agreed that to support is far more rewarding than to attempt to provide from scratch.

The National Housing and Habitat Policy 1998 declared a “war against human indignity” stating that “.... Those in a state of undeserved want have a right to governmental assistance” and that the” Ultimate goal of the policy to ensure that the basic need ‘shelter for all’ is fulfilled and a better quality of life provided to all....”

Almost a decade later, it is still a dream.

There seem to be lessons to be learned in the depths of poverty and unauthorized construction in New Delhi, from the daily lives of the ‘houseless’ and in the perseverance and tenacity of the urban poor who toils for a better tomorrow.

Notes

1. Delhi Development Authority Public Notice *Master Plan 2021* New Delhi, March 2005, p. 274.
2. Pallavi Kinikar, Sneha Telang, Sidhartha Patnaik *Strategy for Squatters for Delhi – 2021*, New Delhi, Unpublished report, Department of Housing, School of Planning and Architecture, 2002.
3. Government of India, Ministry of Environment and Forests and Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi *Delhi Urban Environment and Infrastructure Improvement Project. Status Report for Delhi 2021* New Delhi, January 2001 Ch 6, p. 4.
4. The characters and cases described here are true. The author has been interacting with/observing many of these service providers over the years. Thus while Sumitra was actually employed with the author for a while, the rickshaw-puller happily chatted about himself during a very informal interview. Other examples are based on observation and stories through maids, friends and colleagues. All cases save one described here are typical examples; Nirmala's story is obviously though unfortunately not a typical one.
5. *Delhi Urban Environment and Infrastructure Improvement Project*. op cit.