

Planners have to realise that housing needs of the rural population is a significant issue, which needs to be addressed sooner rather than later

## Home in on rural housing

Both houses of Parliament have recently cleared the Rural Employment Guarantee Bill. Under this, they propose to launch the scheme on November 14. This makes it an appropriate time for the government to consider a connected, yet largely neglected issue - that of rural housing.

Twenty-five years ago when I was a student at the School of Planning and Architecture (SPA), rural housing was a topic discussed and debated with fervour. Does India's rural population require the professional services of a doctor, or perhaps a lawyer? Does it deserve safe and good quality houses? Does it need good architecture and engineering skills? Do professional skills need to percolate down to that level of society? These and other such questions were vigorously debated all those years ago by us and perhaps by many in other architecture and planning schools. Now, the issue of rural housing is barely heard of.

In the ever-growing Indian economy even Colgate toothpaste and Rin soap have moved towards the rural markets. Yet, why is it that safe and aesthetic housing is relegated to the background? As I am not a trained economist, perhaps I am only equipped to raise such questions, rather than answer them. Yet, these are not merely leftist ideas; rather they reflect practical concerns. It shall not be long when the realisation will



dawn upon the planners - both economic and physical - that needs of the people at the grassroots level have to be addressed. And housing will be a significant issue here.

It seems natural that rural housing and architecture require careful consideration. While it is true that the surge towards urbanisation

conditions. On the other hand, the country's urban areas are fast becoming slums, and the conditions in some places are much worse than where migrants originally came from.

### Learn from others

Historical data supports improving rural living conditions. When Britain, and later Europe, embarked on their railway and road building initiatives, transportation between towns and cities improved dramatically. The industrial areas moved out from the centres of big manufacturing towns to smaller industrial estates built in the countryside. Apart from providing employment in surrounding areas, they also inspired better quality villages and ser-

vices in rural districts.

All over Europe the trend is the same. Improved telecommunication systems have helped bridge the divide between urban and rural populace. An urban-rural divide has similarly been bridged to a large extent in India thanks to the telecom leap, especially in the last decade (the cell phone is only 10 years old in India). Road networks too are improving steadily, albeit a bit slowly.

The US too enjoys the benefits of a good network, both communication and road, coupled with an excellent air-transport system. Together, these factors have created better opportunities and infrastructure in rural areas, thus releasing pressure on big cities and towns.

If one picks up an edition

of the daily papers, one notices a large number of advertisements for mass housing, which are being built in the suburbs of existing towns and cities. The major cost component here is that of urban land. However, very little attention is paid to improving built environment in the rural areas.

This is a strange omission, especially because the 74th amendment to the Indian Constitution in Article 243 ZD mandates that every district shall have a draft development plan which shall include spatial planning and integrated development of infrastructure and environmental conservation.

This amendment to the Constitution is now

**The country's urban areas are fast becoming slums, and the conditions here are worse than where migrants come from**

more than 10 years old. It, however, remains to be seen how long the concerned authorities take to act on the issue. If we are to build a stable and more sustainable economy, the aspect of housing and architecture, especially in rural areas, needs to be addressed seriously. ♦

The author, an architect, a member of the team drafting Delhi's building byelaws



tion is due to economic factors such as better employment opportunities and better-expected living conditions, it is also an undeniable fact that urban areas have not been able to fulfil expectations of better living