

GOING TO TOWN

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How we create Nitharis



Nithari seems to hurt more than it would have if it were a remote village in some far-off state. The

sheer audacity of the incidents hits us because we realise it is in the capital's suburbs. But there are more Nitharis waiting to crop up, simply because the root cause lies buried in our neglect of urban planning. To get there, one must understand how the Nitharis of India are being created every day.

Here's how we created Nithari. The little village had agricultural fields around it about 30 years ago — what land revenue records call the "Revenue Estate" of the village. Using an archaic colonial piece of legislation created in 1894 by the British, the Land Acquisition Act, the government acquires all the agricultural land of the villagers, and pays them cash compensation (muavza, to use the original term). But the urban planning process conveniently forgets to create alternate employment for the village folk, alternate living quarters, or any methods which can help them rehabilitate themselves in new occupations or jobs.

But it creates a little unserved piece of neither-here-nor-there habitat in the middle of urban wealth. The agricultural lands convert to broad streets, and wealthy bungalows, and surround this little habitat, which converts over the next 30 years into an urban sore. Soon, some of its original inhabitants, flush with the money they got in

compensation, move into other villages on the periphery, and lease, rent, or sell their habitat as little rooms with shared courtyards and drains, and allow migrants to crawl into the ghetto so created. Migrants who have no votes, no dignity and no future.

It does not stop here. The rich neighbourhood needs the new migrants first to build the

humanly possible.

If Nithari is in a suburb, consider these facts closer home: Vasant Gaon is a little urban village using merely 4% of the land that Vasant Vihar does. Yet, it has a population of 26,000 people, while the larger Vasant Vihar has only 40,000. Together, they make up almost a lakh, about the size of a municipal ward. Studies

please do not keep them out of your count.

That was only by way of example. The National Capital Territory of Delhi alone contains about 300 villages, out of which about 140 are already called urban villages, the Nitharis of Delhi waiting to surprise us.

The irony of it all is that no planning laws apply to these urban sores though they are not invisible: Zamrudpur is in front of Lady Shriram College. Munirka's revenue estate is IIT-Delhi while Yusuf Sarai's lands constitute AIIMS.

Do we need to name any more?

Yet, wonderously, there have been examples of inclusive urban planning processes devised by our ancestors. When Lutyens laid out New Delhi, five villages were rehabilitated and absorbed in the new city Malcha — Raisina being the most prominent. Chandigarh was created by absorbing 18 village habitats into the city's administration. Jamshedpur is another beautiful story.

All this was about 50 years ago. After that we stopped working, so we have the Ghitornis and the Sikanderpurs and the Wazirabads on way to Gurgaon.

And the Palam Gaons, the Kilokris of Maharani Bagh, the Sarai Julainas, right next to the best heart hospital of the city.

All because it actually suits us to have them as neighbours to dig, build, clean, mop and scrub for the new urban estates we create from the original revenue estates of the rural areas.

One can only hope that we wake up to the other Nitharis around us before it is too late.



homes and buildings, and then to provide us with cheap household help. To clean, sweep and wash our clothes, and now as we learn, for a lot more than we can imagine is

show that 70% of chowkidars who sit all day outside swank bungalows live in shifts in Vasant Gaon. There is no data available for the maids, dhoobis, sweepers, and such, but

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