

Diversity, informality and opportunities for the poor in villages in megacities: examples from Delhi and Mumbai

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Annotated outline

Background of urban villages in Asian cities

The development and expansion of cities in many parts of Asia follow a characteristic pattern of engulfing traditional farming and fishing villages. These villages, once they become part of the urban area, are known by the self-contradictory term of 'urban villages' or 'villages in cities'. Urban villages can originate in three distinct and different ways. First, villages legally become urban when city or municipal limits are extended (Adusmilli, 2004), a practice widely followed throughout Asia. Second, expanding cities interface with rural areas in a peri-urban mosaic of urban and agriculture uses, typically in South and South-East Asian megacities such as Jakarta, Bangkok, Colombo, Dhaka and Kuala Lumpur as what has been called 'desa-kotta' regions (McGee, 1991). Third, rural land is expropriated or purchased for urban use but the village habitation is not taken over and gets engulfed by the city, which is planned and developed on its agriculture lands. A fair amount of recent literature on rapidly developing Chinese megacities such as Beijing, Shenzhen and Guangzhou focuses this third kind of urban village (Chung, 2013; Gransow, 2010; Zhenj, 2008; Guo, 2006). A similar pattern can be found in Indian megacities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and Bangalore and, for instance, in the Pakistani cities of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. A typical urban village in such cities is associated with squalor, narrow dirty streets, overcrowded dwellings and sweatshops - characteristics which often lead to their being called slums. On the other hand, some of these villages are being celebrated as places with a unique historic character and attracting high end residences, art studios, boutiques and restaurants.

Villages that live in the megacity: the focus of this paper

This paper is primarily concerned with the last typology of urban village, and particularly with the Indian megacities of Delhi and Mumbai, where villages have been progressively included in the city since the 1930's as specially demarcated zones, with their surrounding lands being expropriated for urbanisation. Once they are within the city, traditional village life intermixes with both formal and informal urban development in a variety of ways but for several reasons the villages themselves remain as distinct territorial enclaves. Within their boundaries they continue to operate under non-urban governance systems, especially in terms of land relations, and enjoy a certain degree of immunity from urban planning and regulatory frameworks. At the same time they have access to urban infrastructure, even though of a lower quality as compared with the planned city. This shortcoming is often overshadowed by the locational advantage the villages enjoy as the city grows around them.

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Unlike informally developed areas such as squatter settlements or illegal subdivisions, urban villages enjoy security of tenure. But legal transfer of property is problematic because no records of individual properties in village habitation areas are maintained, even though property owners enjoy traditional occupancy and development rights. The situation is comparable with urban villages in Chinese cities, where collective ownership of lands makes it impossible to sell individual village properties (Guo,2006); or with Kampung in Indonesian cities, which display a wide array of adat or customary land rights, most of which can be inherited, but not legally transferred (Loffler, 1996).

From farmers to urban landlords

This combination of circumstances has transformed farming village families into urban landlords, who have over time, turned to property development as a main source of income. Empirical evidence points to a unique system of investment in and income from land, which generates and perpetuates an incremental process of land development. This process responds to the demands of the growing city, within the confines of a rural village morphology of narrow streets and large plots. The need to maximise incomes with the least possible investment has led to three distinct streams of development. One is the construction of cheap rental housing for the vast numbers of migrants flowing into the city. The other is renting or leasing plots for informal commercial and industrial activities. Both these streams thrive and survive because of the availability of basic urban infrastructure as well as the freedom to respond to market demand unfettered by the regulatory framework of urban planning and control. The third stream consists of transferring land to developers through a quasi-legal process, where substantial portion of payments remains unaccounted (Government of India, 2007). Invariably such land is used for cheap rental housing till better market opportunities come up for construction and sale of middle class housing or show rooms.

Rental housing and informal economy linkages

Cheap rental housing in urban villages is far below prescribed norms and standards of health and structural safety, but affordable and conveniently located for poor migrants. For tenants it also provides a measure of security which is absent in squatter settlements and also allows clustering of caste and kinship groups, creating social capital essential for survival in a big city. For land owners it brings high returns on low investment. What is more significant is that the perpetuation of this kind of housing is closely related to the demand for cheap labour in the informal economy of warehouses, factories, workshops, shops and markets that develops within the urban village in the absence of land use restrictions (Bentink, 2001). Thus the two property development streams reinforce the locally self-contained informal economy with close work-home relationships. In time private service providers come in with dispensaries, schools and day care centres to serve migrants who have yet to get entitlements to government facilities

That is not to say that the urban village is a totally self-contained entity. Rental housing in well-located villages provides migrants the opportunity as well as the mobility and flexibility to function as construction workers, domestic workers and provide all sorts of informal services in the city. For the new generation of landowners the village is a launch-pad for fulfilling aspirations of higher education, jobs, consumer goods and housing in city neighbourhoods. Sections of the village that are in close proximity of the developed city, typically adjoining main roads and metro stations cater to populations outside the village with shopping areas, middle class housing etc., while the inner areas with their narrow streets remain the precincts of the poor and informal trade and industry. This informal trade and industry is well networked with other informal and formal trade and manufacturing. Activities

such as e-waste recycling, garment factories and metal working and auto parts industries found in urban villages of Delhi are the 'hidden' elements of global value chains, which thrive because of the low costs associated with low wages, women and child labour and lack of enforcement of workplace and environmental laws (Toxics Link, 2013) yet in a secure environment of legal property rights.

Affordability at the cost of the environment

However, the urban village economy of seemingly unending cycles of low incremental investment in, and increasing income from, property results in the inevitable consequences of overcrowded, high density, unsafe and unhealthy housing with very poor quality infrastructure. Studies in some of Delhi's urban villages show very high levels of air and noise pollution, discharge of toxic chemical into drains and closed work spaces with very poor ambient indoor air quality (Toxics Link, 2014). Health related studies show the disease burden of such environments (Balan, 2012).

The paper will use case studies from the author's ongoing research in Delhi's urban villages, publications and official documents to look into the processes that provide opportunities for poor migrants to live and work in the city, but also trap them into squalid living spaces and exploitative work environments.

Ineffective policies, changing perceptions and politics

In Delhi the initial perception of the need to protect village habitations and improving living conditions in them gave way to a concern to control development for concerns of environment, health and safety (Delhi Development Authority, 1985, 2007, 2011). However, these efforts came too late as the development process was far advanced: policies and regulations were never implemented. On the other hand were proposals to conserve the built heritage of some of the historic villages. These resulted in isolated efforts to conserve monuments (Delhi Urban Art Commission, 2014). The current policy is to encourage land pooling in urban villages for complete redevelopment, with land owners and real estate developers entering into partnership to build high rise housing. This policy is yet to be implemented.

A similar approach is seen in the case of fishing villages in Mumbai, which are now in prime locations and much sought by developers, especially after the Coastal Zone Regulations were modified in 2011 to make high rise building possible in fishing villages. However, in the last few years a resurgence of cultural identity among the village dwellers, supported by civil society groups and political representatives, has prevented large scale redevelopment (Government of India, 2011; Wagh, 2014; KRIVIA, 2014). In the case of Navi Mumbai, the new city in Mumbai Metro Area agricultural land was expropriated in 1970. Villagers, with the support of political parties and violent protests negotiated the return of a part of the developed land as part of the land acquisition package. For this, as well as the village or Gauthan lands development control regulations have been relaxed (Adusmilli, 2004; Shaw, 2004). After years of popular demand urban village boundaries were extended in Delhi in 2013 to include what was originally village common lands around habitations, but subsequently used for construction of public facilities, low income housing projects or illegally subdivided to form 'unauthorised colonies'. The immunity from regulations now extends to those areas as well. Redevelopment of villages in cities in mega cities is the current approach in China as well. Shenzhen has already formed a special organisation to implement that policy (Chung).

What are the lessons from Delhi and Mumbai?

Considering the current thinking in Mumbai, Delhi and also Chinese mega cities of redevelopment as the answer to the problem of what urban villages have become, the paper looks at some critical questions. A mega city can be characterised by the existence of a heterogeneity of socio-territorial mosaics, which are part of its historic process of development. The urban village is part of those mosaics and has become an arena to accommodate a discrepant multiplicity of urban challenges – from housing the poor, providing them jobs, fostering social capital, thriving on exploitative labour relations to accommodating environmentally precarious industry. As cities grow they will continue to engulf villages within themselves. There is a case for letting the incremental land development process flourish, as its flexibility, entrepreneurial spirit and local flavour can never be captured by the homogenised process of ‘modern’ city planning and development. It actually constitutes an efficient market mechanism for delivery of housing and jobs to the in poor. The question to consider is: can urban villages continue to hold this function, without their downsides? Can the city planning and development process accommodate such incremental development and also ensure that thresholds of health, safety and pollution are not crossed? Neglected by city planners so far, is the urban village the new frontier of urban planning in Asian mega cities?

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