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Delhi's Collapsing Buildings are Part of the Plan

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Urban planning in Delhi has historically underplayed the need for mass housing. The consequences are seen in a proliferation of rickety buildings that are often the only affordable option for the city's residents.

A recent spate of fires and collapses of buildings in Delhi has brought to the fore concerns around the lack of preparedness for such disasters. In 2026, a building collapsed in Said-ul-Ajaib in April, a fire broke out in a hotel in Hauz Rani in June, and yet another building collapsed in Satya Niketan in September-to cite three widely reported incidents-all of them leading to several lives lost. These are not isolated accidents, but are symptomatic of deep structural failures in urban governance rooted in Delhi's peculiar history of growth.

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Policy and planning documents have often described housing and construction through the binaries of planned and unplanned, formal and informal, legal and illegal, trying to establish a clear distinction between the two categories. Yet, Delhi's forms of informal housing are corollaries of planning, regulation and localised politics. What the policy framework labels as informal is not a deviation from the system but is the system. Poor housing and unplanned residential areas -the sort that become news due to disasters-exist because Delhi's formal urban housing system, like in most of India, has catastrophically failed to provide affordable housing at scale.

Delhi's Urban Morphology

The Delhi Urban Environment and Infrastructure Improvement Project in 2001 categorised Delhi's housing settlements into eight types. It estimated that 'planned neighbourhoods' housed less than a quarter of the city's population. The 2008-9 Economic Survey of Delhi estimated that one third of the population lived in sub-standard housing-spread across slums, 'unauthorised' colonies, old dilapidated areas, and villages, all lacking structural safety and basic services. This count does not include other forms of vulnerable housing such as resettlement colonies, urban villages, and 'regularised' unauthorised colonies.

The development of substandard housing can be traced alongside the evolution of Master Plans for Delhi. These Master Plans conceived the urban space of Delhi through regulating land-use zoning, but failed to account for rapid economic and spatial changes. The first Master Plan, from 1962, envisaged a decentralisation of population towards regional centres and spatial planning through land-use zoning. Crucially, it estimated the population to rise to 5 million by 1981, underestimating the inflow of migrants (the plan anticipated 70,000 migrants, while the actual figure came to 2,50,000). Delhi's population thus grew by approximately 1.5 million more than what was planned for.

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Other events between 1961 and the latest Master Plan of 2021 shaped the planning process. The Emergency and the period leading to it in the 1970s saw demolitions and resettlements of bastis, reflecting the state's approach towards lower-income housing and the micro politics of negotiations of the urban poor to claim their space in the city. The 1982 Asian Games led to a shift in building the city for a global image, rather than a national one. The liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s and the establishment of offices of multinational corporations led to an influx of white-collar employees. These events collectively shifted focus towards developing the National Capital Region, addressing migration and commercial development through high-density, low-rise development, and mixed land-use.

However, the model to develop land remained the same, with the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) having a monopoly on land acquisition and development. The DDA's housing schemes were too slow to come up, and for the urban poor and lower-middle class, too bureaucratically inaccessible and expensive. Organised private real estate developers had no incentive to build for this

segment. Public rental housing barely exists as a policy instrument in India. In response to the growing demand for housing across socio-economic and demographic sections, which the Master Plans never operationalised, developers and others who controlled land produced an informal real estate market in Delhi. The ensuing speculation in land only rose following the Urban Extension Plan of 2001.

The problem of affordability has only worsened since. In recent years, Delhi's infrastructure development, particularly the expansion of the metro, has led to exacerbated rents across neighbourhoods. New housing stock remains slow to come to the market, and landlords in planned neighbourhoods frequently churn tenants in order to hike rents to the new market rate. The only actors filling the huge gap between demand and supply were in the unregulated private sector, who found two kinds of profitable sites in Delhi to expand with little oversight or penalty: the 'urban villages' and the 'unauthorised colonies'.

The City That Built Itself

Delhi is made up of pre-existing villages that were engulfed by the city's expanding limits. In 1908, a few years before Delhi became the imperial capital of India, the British introduced the *lal dora* system. Taking its name from the red boundary line in revenue maps that demarcated village habitation areas, the *abadi*, from agricultural land, the system exempted construction within the lal dora from municipal building regulations and development controls. This continued into independent India. Legally acknowledged as villages, these habitations were exempted from the Delhi Municipal Act (1957) and building bye-laws (1963), under the assumption that these small rural settlements did not need urban regulation. These exempted zones became the 135 'urban villages' of Delhi, enclaves of a past rural society in the urban space.

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Governments did little to revise their assumptions even as the city grew around these urban villages. As demand for affordable housing rose, and the lack was felt acutely amongst migrant populations and the lower classes, urban villages became sites for adding housing. Buildings in these zones did not require floor plans to be sanctioned, or fire and structural safety to be certified. Construction could proceed without any prescribed Floor Area Ratios or setbacks. No government agency had clear responsibility for these urban villages.

What this translated to was that there were few restrictions on what could be built in the urban villages. Over the decades, places like Hauz Khas, Munirka, Shahpur Jat, Khirki and Said-ul-Ajaib developed dense, vertical, and structurally dubious constructions. Much of the same happened, this time illegally, in Delhi's 1,797 'unauthorised colonies'. These were residential sites which came up on agricultural or other land that owners or property developers had subdivided and sold in violation of the Master Plan.

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A third response to the housing crisis was the coming up of *bastis* and resettlement colonies, starting from the unauthorised occupancy of public or private land and evolving from temporary shacks to more permanent structures. Political negotiations at the local level kept this arrangement going, and when the government did demolish such structures, eligible occupants could be later housed in 'resettlement colonies' comprising plots of land or flats. Satya Niketan, the site of the September 2026 tragedy, was a resettlement colony developed in the 1960s and later regularised. The resettlement colony evolved into mixed land use development owing to its proximity to colleges of Delhi University, housing students who did not find a university hostel to stay in. Much of the construction was in violation of applicable laws, yet proceeded without punitive measures.

In all these cases-the exempted urban villages, the unauthorised colonies, and the illegal constructions in resettlement colonies-informal and unplanned buildings were the only affordable housing for groups including students, workers, and international migrants from poor or disturbed regions. The lack of adequate urban planning packed them into multi-storied buildings with no ventilation shafts, common spaces, or fire escapes; the tiny plots opening directly into narrow lanes where brisk commercial activity took place on the ground floors of these buildings.

A Problem of Development

While urban villages and unauthorised colonies emerge from two different regimes-one a result of formal exemption and the other of a failure of enforcement-the problems in these two areas bleed into each other. In urban villages, the exemption itself became an invitation for unauthorised construction. While the demand for housing was from the city's expansion and its rising population, the inhabitants of the urban villages were responding to social changes after their agricultural lands were acquired by the state for developing the expanding city.

These inhabitants, cut off from agriculture, became a rentier class. Most of these urban villages were in prime locations, adjacent to upscale neighbourhoods, which recast aspirations and consumption patterns of the inhabitants, especially of the youth who experienced the city at their doorstep. Driven by an aim to maximise profits from their remaining property, over time, construction went far beyond the lal dora boundary, constructing buildings on commonly held land and adding floors illegally: the origins of the 'unauthorised colony'. In both cases, political accommodation often followed: unauthorised colonies were 'regularised ', and the lal dora boundary was extended.

The problems of housing and disasters like collapses and fires are symptoms of a deeper problem: that Delhi's planned development model was never designed to absorb the speed and scale of migration the city experienced. Unauthorised colonies and urban villages that filled that gap are products of a planning model that excluded most of the population from formal housing. The accumulated set of assumptions, jurisdictional gaps, and unenforced responsibilities together have created a zone where governance in its current form does not apply.

> Recent events have shown the need for neighbourhood-level plans and execution of redevelopment with participatory governance.

Any fix will run into the tangle of property rights, community resistance, and electoral politics. While the 2021 Delhi Master Plan acknowledged the urban villages as a focus area for redevelopment, it failed to lay down a regulatory framework and no effective action was taken on the ground. Building bylaws for urban villages, as recommended by the Tejinder Khanna Committee, never came out. The changes that have come about do not go the full mile. The Delhi Village Development Board was reconstituted in 2025 to advise the government on issues connected with infrastructural development in Delhi's rural and urban villages (Economic Survey of Delhi 2025-2026). It can recommend construction and maintenance of roads, commons, assets, and other public works. Yet it does not yet have a role to check and regulate dilapidated buildings, electric meters, or open wires-hazards which have been fatal in recent incidents.

Delhi's fire and building-collapse crises are not just about poverty or ignorance, but about a deliberately created exemption that nobody ever had the political will to dismantle. When exemptions and lack of enforcement become the rule, the city grows itself. The deviation becomes the system, along with which comes risk. The complete withdrawal of the state from the regulation of the housing market, on grounds that this is outside the purview of the Master Plan, is not a viable policy response. Nor is the demolition of all informal settlements a fair resolution for citizens. The recent events have shown the need for neighbourhood-level plans and execution of redevelopment with participatory governance. This has to go alongside regulation of rentals in planned neighbourhoods and decent social housing for students and young workers who constitute the majority of the floating population of the city. Above all, the failures of the Master Plans to anticipate the pace of change should raise questions about the suitability of perspective planning in Global South cities and prompt us to think of development models that include participatory mechanisms.

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