

Delhi—Beyond its 'appearance'

Anupam Bansal

Cities across the world are identifiable through their images, particularly of its iconic architecture. Delhi is no different. With varied layers overlapping in Delhi's political and cultural history, each era has left its indelible mark on the face of the City. Iconic images of Qutub Minar, the Humayun's Tomb, Rashtrapati Bhawan (former Viceregal Palace), Kartavya Path (Former Raj Path and Kingsway) or modern icons such as the Ashoka Hotel, Claridges Hotel etc. have formed the imagination of Delhi in people's mind particularly those who have not visited the city.

Fig. 25: New Delhi, Connaught Place (1933) in the 1960s.



The postcard collection sent by European travellers from India scattered among collectors all over Europe formed the starting point for this essay. The collection reflects the choices made by the visitors sometimes on a professional trip, sometimes young people on a “hippie trail”. These photos capture the ‘appearance’ of the city. It is ironic that these images seem frozen in time particularly when viewed from the context of a city which has expanded or rather exploded in the last 40 years.

The lived experience of Delhi has altered immensely from a sleepy political capital to a fast-transforming megapolis. It is projected that Delhi will overtake Tokyo as the most populated urban agglomeration by 2028. Most of the expansion in Delhi has occurred on the peripheries as rural areas have become more urban and densification of existing unplanned areas in the core, which lack proper development control regulations. The geographic size of Delhi has more than doubled from 624.28 sq. km.¹ in 1991 to 1483 Sq. km. in 2011.² Since Economic Liberalisation in 1991, the population has doubled, from 8.4 million³ to an estimated 19 million today. Delhi has grown from being a political capital to a business hub and a magnet of urban migration. People have moved to the city to find jobs, for education and other newly available opportunities. But residential space to accommodate them, at least planned space, has been scarce. The Delhi Development Authority’s (DDA) planned development has severely failed to keep pace with migration and economic changes occurring in the city.

This housing gap is disproportionately skewed in the low-income segment, therefore poorer migrants often retort to being accommodated in the low-income settlements such as unauthorised colonies, urban villages or slum clusters.

1 Dupont, Véronique, *Spatial and Demographic Growth of Delhi since 1947 and the Main Migration Flows*, Institut de recherche pour le Développement, Paris, 2000, URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282170328_Spatial_and_demographic_growth_of_Delhi_since_1947_and_the_main_migration_flows (15.02.2023).

2 Census of India, 2011.

3 Dupont, *op.cit.*

Fig. 26: New Delhi, Parliament House (1927) in the 1960s.



Fig. 27: New Delhi, All India Radio (1936) in the 1960s.



“The development of land and housing in Delhi has largely been the prerogative of the public sector, with limited private participation. Such processes have not kept pace with the growing demand for housing. The high cost of land in the city has also resulted in making housing unaffordable.”⁴

4 Draft Master Plan Delhi (MPD) 2041; p. 50.

As a result of the widening gap between the rate of migration and rate of development of planned housing, several types of housing settlements have evolved, mostly outside the ambit of the Master Plan and other legal provisions. Colonies, Jhuggi Jhopri Clusters (Squatter Settlements), planned Low Income Group or Economically Weaker Sections Housing and many more form a complex web of settlement patterns in the city. Instead of the periphery, or squatter settlements on the urban edge, the influx of migrants has permeated in the oldest settlements of the city, the so-called *Lal-Dora (Red Line)*⁵ areas or "Urban Villages", where new forms of rental housing have emerged. These enclaves bear the brunt of urbanization and have transformed both socially and physically.

Settlement types

In its report on cities of Delhi, the Centre for Policy Research has classified (as originally classified by policy and planning documents) eight types of settlement in Delhi, only one of which is termed "planned". The other seven types of settlement become, by opposition, 'unplanned'. This 'unplanned' city houses the vast majority of Delhi's residents across the economic spectrum: these settlements include both the affluent farm-houses of South Delhi, which are well-built colonies populated by successful businesspeople, and 700+ dense slum-like areas spread across the city. Only an estimated 23% of the population of Delhi resides in the so-called planned settlements.⁶

This essay depicts the character of the grain of the city rather than its iconic. It presents a day-to-day reality of the city rather than its '*appearance*' captured in tourist postcards. Vasant Kunj, a large, planned colony

5 The land earmarked for village abadi (land and building inhabited by villagers) and the agricultural land of the village were duly demarcated in the land settlement of 1908–09 and the abadi site was circumscribed in the village map in red ink. That is how it came to be commonly known as Lal Dora.

6 Centre for Policy Research, *Categorisation of Settlement in Delhi*, Mai 2015, <http://cprindia.org/project/cities-of-delhi/> (15.02.2023).

in S-W Delhi is studied as a spatial transect rather than a single neighbourhood or housing typology because this type of spatial analysis allows for a picture of Delhi that demonstrate the ways in which the formal and the informal, the authorized and the unauthorised, and the planned and the unplanned coexist. Outside of Lutyens Delhi,⁷ any such transect will reveal a similar cross-section of settlement and housing types. For this essay, Vasant Kunj is referred to as a geographical extent extending approximately 7 km between the Mahipalpur Village on the West and Mehrauli on the Eastern edge.

Vasant Kunj as a spatial transect

Vasant Kunj was developed in the late 1970s as a residential area by DDA to address the growing housing needs of the city. The construction of the first phase of the housing was completed in the 1980s. It was largely developed on agricultural land acquired by DDA from farmers residing in Mahipalpur, Masoodpur and Kishangarh villages. The visual study conducted through google maps illustrated here reveals at least 4 distinct settlements; it highlights both the spatial diversity and inequality that exists in these various settlement types.

Planned—DDA Housing

The first settlement identifiable by its grid-like geometric layout of apartments arranged in vast open green spaces are the “planned colonies” in Vasant Kunj, primarily developed by DDA. Planned colonies are also referred to as “approved” colonies. These settlements sit on land demarcated as “development area” in the Master Plan of Delhi. At the time of construction, housing units in these colonies comply with planning norms and are fully serviced with infrastructure such as water

7 Lutyens' Delhi is an area in New Delhi, named after the British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869–1944), who was responsible for much of the city planning and architectural design during the period of the British Raj, when India was part of the British Empire in the 1920s.

pipelines and sewerage systems. The housing constructed by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) exemplifies this category of settlement.⁸ Vasant Kunj is divided into five sectors numbered from A to E. Each sector is treated as an individual colony with its own services and facilities such as markets, schools, and recreational facilities. Often arranged in blocks of sixteen dwellings: four storeys with four units per floor. While some of the blocks of four are joined to the adjacent ones, the others have passages between them for the service pipes and infrastructure. These passages alternately widen to allow movement through them.

DDA housing in Vasant Kunj (like other parts of Delhi) are characterized by flat roofs, external surfaces finished in plain plaster with cement or lime wash, with functional sunshades providing the only relief to an otherwise bland facade. It has often been criticised for its repetitiveness and 'rubber stamp' architecture. Though utilitarian modern to start with, most apartments have acquired a unique character that has been shaped by individual owners particularly in their remodelled interior layouts. Almost all the sectors built in Vasant Kunj consist of four storeys walk up apartments as lifts were considered very expensive during the time these were built. Providing open space in the form of parks, tot-lots for children were the prime considerations for design. This idea permeated the design of typologies as well; terraces, balconies and accessible roofs were provided as a response to the Indian lifestyle where people often slept outdoors in the absence of air conditioning. The dwelling units provided residents with ample space on all floors to sleep outside. When initially built only scooter parkings were provided in colonies. Post Liberalization in 1991, and with a proliferation of private car ownership, today there is a severe shortage of parking spaces, sometimes even leading to neighbourly discord.

8 Centre for Policy Research, 2015; *op. cit.*

Urban Villages—Kishangarh, Masoodpur & Mahipalpur

“Urban Villages” are the second type of settlements, identifiable through their narrow streets, densely built fabric and lack of open spaces. The word ‘urban village’ holds a unique meaning in Delhi. First used in the Master Plan it applies to villages whose *abadi* (Land and building inhabited by villagers) areas are within the urbanizable limits. Once the entire region surrounding the village is urbanized and no rural livelihoods are continued, the village is declared as an urban. Upon declaration as “urban”, the “*Lal Dora*” area in a village ceases to exist and the provisions of the Master Plan, Zonal Plan, or relevant Area Development Plan and Building Byelaws become applicable. Agriculture lands of Masoodpur, Kishangarh and Mahipalpur villages were taken over by DDA soon after Master Plan I (1962) and they became part of urban Delhi (when Vasant Kunj flats had been partially constructed) around 1985. Locals were paid Rs. 1.70 per sq. Yards as price for their land.⁹ Now listed as urban villages under the municipality, these villages have transformed from a few hundred households with one dominant caste to many thousands of households and a mix of tenants from multiple regions of the country. This reflects the lack of availability of planned housing for the poor in the city.

Almost four decades after their acquisition, each village has acquired its distinctive image and economy depending upon its location and emerging needs in the city. Mahipalpur has emerged as a hotel enclave owing to its proximity to the Delhi Airport. Masoodpur is characterized by retail shops mostly catering to the needs of Vasant Kunj residents and its dairy farm which continues to supply milk to the surrounding areas

9 Interview with Mr. Rattan Singh, resident of Kishangarh Village whose father had sold land to DDA and received compensation in return. He remembered how his childhood was spent helping his father in farming. After his father sold their land, he took up a government job, and retired from the TATA company. While he was barely educated until high school, his children were educated and practicing professionals. He owed this transformation to development of Kishangarh as a result of development of Vasant Kunj.

to this day. Kishangarh has largely transformed into Rental housing for the migrant populace. Kishangarh was settled around 150–200 years back when the farming Jats from Mehrauli moved to their field slowly by establishing *chappar* (small huts). They were however dependent on Mehrauli for their daily needs and to sell their grain and crops in Mehrauli *mandis* (wholesale markets). Children from the village used to walk to Mehrauli to attend school as well. Mahipalpur on the Western edge of Vasant Kunj, close to the IGI Airport is a historic village located north of the Mehrauli-Mahipalpur road and east of NH-8 in the area where the north-south ridge and the southern east-west ridge meet. In the 14th century Feroze Shah Tughlaq had built here a hunting lodge (which still exists) and a *bundh* (embankment) to retain rainwater flowing from surrounding hilly mounds. Close to the Mahipalpur towards the Southeast also lies the historic site of Sultan Garhi, built in 13th Century by Sultan Iltutmish. In the past two decades, Mahipalpur has emerged as Delhi's largest hotel hub after Paharganj. The Jat-dominated village, which once had warehouses, factory outlets, and car workshops, today boasts of more than 150 hotels, half of them owned by villagers, who proudly term themselves farmers-turned-hoteliars. Most villagers who run hotels continue to live in the locality but with new lifestyles: there are many who have switched from motorcycle to Mercedes in a few years. Among the new residents of this village are youngsters working in Aerocity, the Delhi airport and Gurgaon. It is not unusual to see young men and women working with airlines walking in the streets of the village in uniform. Masoodpur village is located midway between Kishangarh & Mahipalpur. Its settlement area was on the north, while cattle sheds of some families and common grasslands were on the south of the road. The village had more than 300 households. At its center was the old *chaupal* (village community space), which had a tree with sitting space around till 2006 and is now a concrete hall structure; an ancestral shrine that is worshipped by all castes in the village is to the west. The common well is on the north edge; adjacent to it was a rain-fed water pond (johar) now a DDA park, further north is the cremation ground. To the east along the road are commons, which house a community centre.

The economy of these villages apart from other income sources like hotels in Mahipalpur, retail shops and dairy in Masoodpur are largely dependent on rental income. They provide cheap residences catering to diverse income groups ranging from professionals, educated migrants and domestic workers who cannot afford the steep South Delhi rents. The villages are now characterized by five to six storey buildings. These buildings are owned and managed by Jat landlords who converted their two-storey houses into multi-storey buildings to lease to migrants from north and eastern India. They invest the rent collected from these tenements in the real estate market on the outskirts of the city. These buildings have largely come up in the last two decades after Liberalisation. As buildings above 15m height are classified as "High Rise" as per the National Building Code of India, making it mandatory to meet requirements for fire safety, majority of the new buildings in the villages limit within 15m height. However, it is not uncommon to find buildings that do not comply and brazenly flout fire safety norms.

At the time these villages were notified, the bulk of houses in the villages were '*havelis*'. The term *haveli* usually referred to private mansions in North India, which would contain one or more courtyards. While some *havelis* were rather elaborate with as many as four or five floors, the common ones existing in the by lanes of these villages were rather modest with a row of rooms interjected by a courtyard in the centre. Scattered in the numerous *galis* (lanes), the *havelis* had similar architectural features such as *darwaza* (gateway with an ornate wooden door) *angan* (courtyard), *tekhkhana* (underground chamber) *deori* (raised plinth). The *deori* ensured privacy and prevented ingress of water during the monsoon season. It was common for most *havelis* to be constructed with stone or brick masonry, with roofs made of stone slabs supported with wooden rafters. Toilets were not inside houses, and everyone had to go to grasslands. Washing water was drawn from the well by women and stored in the common wash area. Today it is difficult to find surviving *havelis* as most of them have been demolished and replaced by 4–5 storey concrete and brick buildings usually with typical units plans stacked over each other. The houses had started moving vertical about 20–30 years ago after the 4 storey DDA flats came up in the area. The most

intensive construction came after 1995 when most houses were replaced with multi-storeyed buildings.

Jhuggi Jhopri Cluster (JJC)—Rangpuri

The third type of settlement in Vasant Kunj, identifiable by the small size of houses, temporary materials of construction, lack of proper roads and services are the “Jhuggi Jhopri Clusters (JJC)” These slum settlements have continued to grow and expand across Delhi. These non-notified slums are categorised as Jhuggi Jhopri Clusters (JJC)s. These are defined as “squatter settlements” located on “public land”—land owned by any government agency—which has been occupied and built on without permission. As a result, these settlements are often referred to as “encroachments” in official discourse.¹⁰ Rangpuri Pahari is one such settlement located west of Vasant Kunj Flats or it is more accurate to describe Vasant Kunj as the area east of Rangpuri Pahari, (which has been there long before). Quarrying of stone (‘pahar’) in the area started in the ‘50s. Depending upon specific locations in the area and demographic profile of their residents different names have evolved such Rangpuri Pahari Malakpur Kohi, Rangpuri Pahari Nala, Rangpuri Pahari Sarak Paar and Israil Camp.

A fair amount of Delhi’s ‘planned development’ including its airport is made out of stone quarried from Rangpuri Pahari. These settlements were of workers who quarried this stone when needed, broke it into various sizes and transported it until the quarries were closed pursuant to Supreme Court directions. Even now, especially in Malakpur Kohi and Nala, most families are of quarry workers. Being a stone’s throw from the sprawling Indra Gandhi International airport and not far from the gleaming business district of Gurgaon, it is typical of the fringes of India’s national capital. It sits amidst the dusty landscape, in what were once low-lying hills before the scramble for urban growth consumed the area. Today, the surroundings have been reduced to a dumping ground for construction waste and litter. Tarpaulin tents and makeshift cabins, lining narrow alleys, make up the settlement and house the residents.

10 Centre for Policy Research; *op. cit.*

Unauthorized Colony—Green Avenue

The last type of settlement in Vasant Kunj are the “Unauthorized Colonies”. The character of Unauthorized colonies can vary from a dense settlement like Sangam Vihar to sparsely populated Sainik Farms (both in South Delhi). Unauthorised colonies are built in contravention of zoning regulations, developed either in violation of Delhi’s Master Plan or on ‘illegally’ subdivided agricultural land. The literature on unauthorised colonies sets out two distinguishing features: one, these areas have been ‘illegally’ subdivided into plots, and; two, the buyers of plots in these settlements possess documents (mostly in the form of a general power of attorney or GPA) that prove some form of tenure, which may be characterised as ‘semi-legal’. In recent years, the government has introduced a policy framework for regularisation of these colonies, a process designed to bring these settlements into the legal ambit.¹¹ According to the current official estimates there are 1700+ unauthorised colonies in Delhi housing more than 5 million inhabitants. Ironically the unauthorized colonies are not restricted to housing the urban poor or the migrant population. Farmhouses for the most affluent of Delhi’s population occupying about 3500 hectares of agricultural land also constitute “Unauthorized Colonies”. Owned by the elites of Delhi, these enclaves have brought profound changes in the size of land holdings, spatial shifts in agricultural practices and changes in land values.

Located on SE fringe of Vasant Kunj, the farmhouses of Green Avenue occupies a large area characterized by high security walls, gates and palatial villas amidst lush and verdant landscape. Typically, farmhouses are large and luxurious amidst spacious and green surroundings. These farmhouses comprise a large plot of land ranging from 1 to 5 acres having enough space for a large house, a garden and other amenity. Usually, the houses are built with high-quality (expensive and modern) materials and have several bedrooms, living, dining areas along with a large kitchen etc. High boundary walls around the plot (owing to privacy and

11 *Ibid.*

safety issues), Large windows and balconies that offer views of the surrounding greens characterize the luxury houses. Majority of these may consist of a garden or a lawn along with an outdoor swimming pool with a deck or a patio. Additionally, these farmhouses would also have a range of amenities like a gym, home theatre, play area for children and servant's quarters depending upon the personal preferences and the budget of the owner. The architecture of the farmhouses varies from Colonial, Neoclassical, Traditional to Modern and minimal.

Current challenges—Ecological / Unsafe Buildings in Villages / Unsanitary living conditions of JJC

Though only four settlement types are illustrated in the essay, a microscopic view will reveal further gradation of housing types. It is common to find overlap of different types within the confines of the identified settlements. Unauthorized constructions are rampant in Urban Villages. Many smaller examples of JJs like Arjun camp, Masjid Compound are found in interstitial spaces or along roads and undeveloped land. The only strong connection between the disparate settlements is the Vasant Kunj Road. Other connections and linkages between planned sectors or between planned, urban villages, JJCs are almost non-existent. The DDA master plan developed each sector as an independent unit and virtually without any links with the other settlements. Thus, the overall experience in Vasant Kunj is that of a fragmented and disjointed city. The mix of planned, dense, luxurious, and temporary forms an unexceptional urban form, it lacks a vocabulary to satisfactorily describe it. This urban form and its organizing principles are hard to decipher. Further scholarly inquiry is required to map and document the complex pattern of built form as well as the socio-cultural aspect of their residents.

The frenzied pace of development in the last 3–4 decades has rendered the once rural landscapes unrecognizable and transformed. Remnants of the past both built and natural have been erased. A closer look at the water bodies in and around Vasant Kunj gives an idea of the ecological transformation. The traditional water bodies and the drainage

channels have faced the onslaught of urbanization. The village pond of Kishangarh next to Baba Laturia Temple built with ghats is all but bone dry now. The pond now gets only a few inches of water during the monsoons. Barely about 30 years ago, the entire village's cattle came here to slake their thirst. Barely a kilometer from the Kishangarh Village Pond is Machali (Fish) Park named after a thriving population of Cat Fish found in its lake where water runoff from Mehrauli is still collected. This is one of the only surviving lakes in the area owing to its location in a popular park as well as good maintenance and upkeep by DDA. On the other end of Kishangarh Village, the extremely picturesque lake known as the Neela Hauz was almost killed for widening the road into four-lanes in the run up to the Commonwealth Games in 2010. The residents of Vasant Kunj, through a citizen's initiative were able to intervene in a timely manner to partially save the lake. However, the fate of village ponds of Masoodpur and Mahipalpur has been of utter neglect and apathy. The Masoodpur lake has been converted to a DDA park while the development of Vasant Kunj has completely disrupted the watershed of the Mahipalpur bundh (embankment). The built environment in the urban villages is considered unsafe as a result of a combination of factors, including population growth, inadequate planning and investment.

These villages are densely populated, leading to overcrowding. People live in cramped and poorly ventilated spaces. Lacking basic service infrastructure such as proper sanitation facilities, clean water supply, and waste management systems result in unsanitary conditions. Often constructed with low-quality materials and poor workmanship, buildings in these villages are often vulnerable to collapse and other safety hazards. Most buildings lack proper fire safety measures, such as fire escapes, smoke detectors, and fire extinguishers. Narrow access roads limit access of emergency vehicles. In addition, residents of these villages have limited access to green spaces, which can contribute to a lack of fresh air and recreation opportunities for residents. Residents of Rangpuri Pahari's (JJC) access to basic services and social security programs is practically non-existent, services too are scarce. Due to lack of identification documents the residents remain out of many services and social security benefits—most of which are now linked to biometric

identification processes. Lacking access to primary education, young boys often labour on construction sites or occasionally fall back on traditional occupations, such as drumming at wedding ceremonies. The girls, on the other hand, help with domestic chores and join their mothers as rag-pickers or domestic help in the houses of the middle-class families in apartment blocks nearby. However, close they might be to the engines of growth these communities lack secure habitation, only a small proportion of households have access to adequate sanitation, while health care and education are also out of reach for most of them. Most worryingly the residents face a constant threat of eviction from Government agencies.¹²

Future Trajectories and opportunities

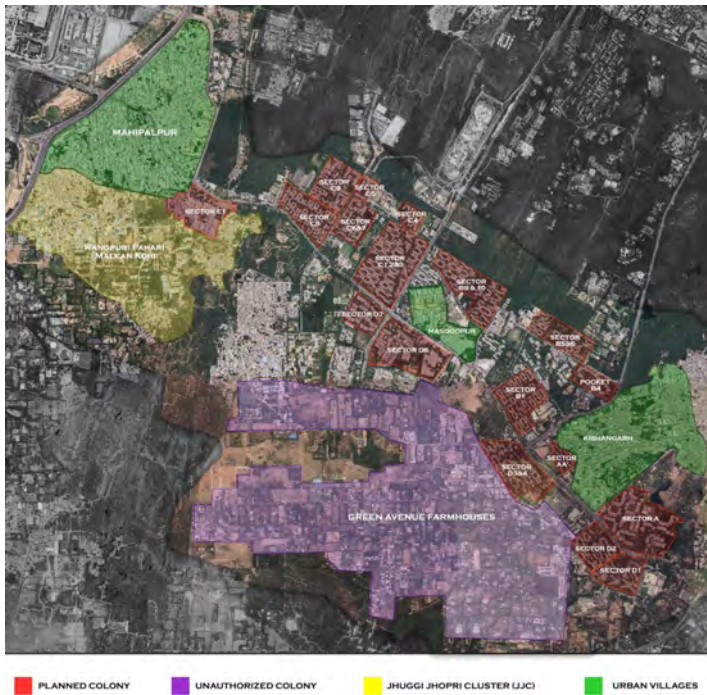
The spatial diversity and housing differences within the settlements are striking. It is worthwhile to note that while the intended population of planned Vasant Kunj (100,000) has remained static, the population and density in the so-called villages, slum settlements and unauthorized colonies now exceed DDA sectors manyfold. The “Planned” sectors stand isolated as stagnant islands not able to transform or bear the pressures of urbanization.

The “*appearance*” of Vasant Kunj, is that of an urban fringe where recognizable signs of the city are barely visible as most sectors are setback from the roads and inconspicuous. If at all the city becomes perceptible where the road intersects with the villages of Kishangarh, Masoodpur and Mahipalpur. The chaos of buildings, shops and hawkers or as in the case of Mahipalpur, the hotels become recognizable symbols of urbanity. The writing of this essay coincided with my short stint as a reviewer for an Urban Design Studio where students were researching & mapping

12 Sajjad, Hassan, “India: Living on the fringes of Delhi—the Ghyiyas of Rangpuri and their continued exclusion”, *Minority Rights*, 2018. URL: <https://minorityrights.org/programmes/library/trends/trends2018/india/> (15.02.2023).

the built environment of Vasant Kunj in order to project future scenarios of urban transformation. Two recent developments; i) the regeneration policy proposed in draft MPD 2041 and ii) commencement of Delhi Metro Phase IV construction were identified as key factors that will catalyze growth and Transformation in Vasant Kunj.

Fig. 28: Delhi, Map of Vasant Kunj.¹³



13 “Vasant Kunj is divided into five sectors (A-E). Each sector is treated as an individual colony with its own services and facilities such as markets, schools, and recreational facilities.” (A. Bansal)

The draft Master Plan of Delhi-2041, has spelled out a “regeneration policy” for areas that have come up decades ago and now need better civic infrastructure. This regeneration or redevelopment policy will enable urban transformation and upgradation particularly in urbanised villages, unauthorised colonies, resettlement colonies, where redevelopment is the only way forward to improve the quality of life and built environment. The Phase IV Metro likely to be completed by December 2024 will enable Vasant Kunj residents to connect with the Airport and the rest of the city. It will also enhance connectivity within Vasant Kunj where public transport is minimal. It is expected to alter the skyline of Vasant Kunj particularly its Urban Villages that will be subject to further densification. As it continues to transform it is imperative to recognize the interdependence of the various settlements in Vasant Kunj. Though the majority of settlements may not qualify as “Planned” or “Authorized” the resultant urban fabric is vibrant and pluralistic as it provides for a varied section of population ranging from Ultra rich to the most marginalized poor. Each group is dependent on the other for its economic or functional needs.

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