



# Housing for all, understood by few: Colloquial narratives from Delhi

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## **Abstract**

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In this conversational piece, the authors reflect on their process of designing an interactive toolkit, named *'Kaun Hai Master? Kya Hain Plan'* (Hindi for *'Who is the Master? What is the Plan?'*), in a step towards linguistic decolonisation. It was developed as a part of the *Main Bhi Dilli* (Hindi for *'I'm Delhi too'*) Campaign—a civic society campaign in Delhi formed to inclusively reimagine the latest Master Plan for Delhi 2041. The toolkit deconstructed the technocratic documents in English that represent Delhi's Master Plans, and present a more inclusive alternative to the typical top-down processes behind formulating them. It was developed keeping in mind the communities who are typically left out of planning processes.

Drawing from the experience of the workshops conducted using the toolkit, emergent narratives are offered to discuss methods in which key terms and concepts related to housing can be broken down to inform, and align with, people's struggles in asserting their right to the city. The authors discuss outcomes from the workshops that may enable us to think of ways to embed learnings from on the ground experiences in policy and planning frameworks. Simultaneously, they urge for the expansion of vocabulary located within a particular place and its people.

## **Keywords**

Colloquial, India, master planning, housing, urban vocabulary, urban informality, Lexicons of housing struggle.

**RHJ:** Your work starts from the acknowledgement of an existing gap between the language of planning and the language of the city, particularly shaped by informality in Delhi. Could you tell us how you see that distance or disconnection manifesting in Delhi's housing struggles?

**Swati & Anushka:** We could begin by sharing a common response from the workshops we had held across Delhi earlier this year. This one was from the residents of Seemapuri, a resettlement colony<sup>1</sup> near the city border. We were discussing the role of the State in providing affordable housing and one of the participants shared, *'We simply cannot afford to live in 'their'<sup>2</sup> houses, so we have built our housing ourselves'*. Like many others in the neighbourhood, he had built his house incrementally over time with his wife and two sons. This is the case in all big Indian cities that are facing an acute shortage of affordable housing today. Despite its promise of 'housing for all',<sup>3</sup> the government has been unable to provide affordable housing to low-income groups where the shortage is the highest,<sup>4</sup> thereby compelling people to build their own housing outside the purview of planning processes. As long-standing ally Gautam Bhan (2019) puts it, the Indian planning system fails to support such practices as to 'squat, repair, consolidate' as an integral part of 'colloquial' housing as a process in the global South.

Why do most housing policies in India seem to ignore these colloquial experiences? One important reason, we feel, is that the understanding of policy is restricted to its professional and institutional modes alone, and does not reach out to those who are impacted by it directly. There is a strong need to engage with housing policies and Master Plans beyond their 'formal' space, requiring legible ways of communicating them. Even if you try to seek information from government portals, there is very little information on forthcoming plans that you can find in the public domain, necessitating regular RTI applications.<sup>5</sup> Feedback mechanisms are largely digital, making them inaccessible to most, and obscure at best. One almost wonders if it is by design, as it displays very little will to involve residents in planning processes.

Then, there is the vocabulary and language of policy itself. India has the second highest English speaking population in the world (ToI, 2005), a consequence of having been a British colony. Demographically speaking though, not more than 10 % of the population speaks in English (Masani, 2012). However, all our key policy and planning documents are most often discussed only in English, and in a technocratic language that is understood only by a few.

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to a neighborhood allotted to families relocated from a more inner-city location

<sup>2</sup> Referring to planned houses built by Delhi Development Authority or private developers

<sup>3</sup> The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) is an initiative of the Government of India which aims at providing affordable housing to the urban poor by the year 2022. The scheme was first launched on 1 June 2015.

<sup>4</sup> 98% of India's housing shortage is in Low Income Groups (LIG) and Economically Weaker Section (EWS) as per the Technical Urban Group (TG-12) report on Urban Housing Shortage 2012-17, Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, September 2012

<sup>5</sup> The Right to Information Act, or simply known as the RTI, is an Indian Act that aims to promote transparency in government institutions in India. The Act came into existence in 2005, after sustained efforts of anti-corruption activists.

**Figure 1**

On the left: Toolkit and its components; On the right: Resource cards as part of the toolkit

This is where the toolkit we designed came in—to engage with residents of self-built settlements who work as farmers, street vendors, waste pickers, domestic workers, home-based workers and in other informal livelihoods. We realised that there is a critical need for a translation and expansion of planning and policy vocabulary.

**RHJ.** How did your project come about? Could you tell us what was its aim, what was it about, what tools did it use, and how did it recognise and navigate those ‘colonial’ and ‘colloquial narratives’?

**Swati & Anushka:** Our capital Delhi has been busy envisioning its next Master Plan for 2041 with the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) having released the draft document in June 2020 for public suggestions and objections. The previous three master plans have been heavily criticized for adopting top-down processes. The inadequacy of our planning processes is apparent from the chasm between the city we live in, and the city imagined by the plan.

To bridge this gap, participatory processes are critical for more equitable planning and implementation. In this context, the *Main Bhi Dilli* (Hindi for ‘I am Delhi too’) Campaign was created—a civil society campaign by community-based organisations and academic institutions to push for a more inclusive plan by engaging with communities that have been left out of the previous master plans for Delhi. The Campaign has been conducting multiple workshops and meetings with under-represented communities since 2019. Our team at Social Design Collaborative is also a part of the Campaign.

In early 2021, we developed an interactive map-based toolkit for the Campaign to facilitate workshops across Delhi in order to help under-represented communities understand what a master plan is, how it impacts them directly in their daily life, and how they could engage with the feedback process. The toolkit itself was developed through an

iterative design process based on feedback through multiple pilots held in different informal settlements across Delhi.<sup>6</sup> The objective was to translate the technocratic and clunky Master Plan 2041 document written in English into easy to understand concepts in the local language, which was Hindi in this case.

We developed different activities based on the main chapters and themes in the master plans to break-down their complexity.<sup>7</sup> A common response from the participants on whether they knew what a master plan was *'We never know who makes it or doesn't. Who is the master? Who is not? We never come to know'*. Therefore, an important first step in this process was simply coming up with an apt title that questioned the obscurity of the plan and could decolonise the term 'master plan' itself which indicates a classist, colonial and sexist approach to city development. The toolkit came to be called *'Kaun Hai Master? Kya Hain Plan'*<sup>8</sup> (Hindi for 'Who is the Master? What is the Plan?'). This was important to subvert the narrative that there is a master above us all, who is male and who will make plans for us which we might not even come to know about, leave alone, be able to understand and influence. It also became a playful take on the planning process which always led to smiles or laughter at the start of every workshop.

For the participants to be able to question and inform the master plan, it became important to first learn the language of the plan, which is essentially spatial and map-based. Therefore, the format and the activities of the toolkit were designed to be map-based as well. However, a map can be an alien and intimidating medium for those who might not know how to read it or use it. Therefore, the toolkit used gamification as a strategy to deconstruct the plan and create a playful environment.<sup>9</sup> The activities were designed to be floor based where the participants could huddle around, and sometimes even over the map of the city, akin to a bedsheet. The map itself was made easy to read with the help of popular landmarks and metro lines whose different colours helped participants easily identify which metro station they stayed closest to.

Several storytelling tools were employed for communication such as using mascots which depicted marginalised or vulnerable groups—people with disabilities, women, children and the elderly. Everyday vernacular items like *bindis* (coloured dot stickers adorned on foreheads by Hindu women in India) and tapes were used for voting to boost collective participation. The components of the toolkit are locally available and affordable, so that the different organisations using the toolkit could restock items like *bindis*, slates and chinks as and when required. The toolkit itself was a low-cost cardboard box costing only \$25 USD overall.

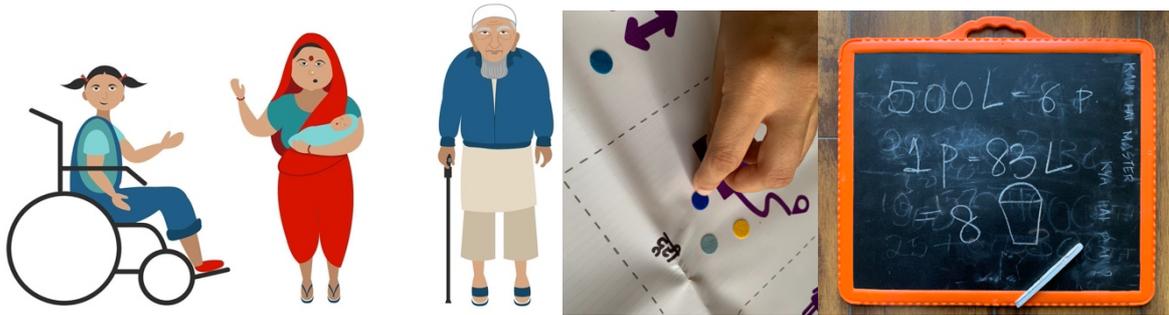
Of the six activities in the toolkit, 'Housing' was found the most important, informative and helpful by the participants. It was also found the most challenging. After their

<sup>6</sup> These covered what are officially termed 'unauthorised colonies', 'resettlement colonies' and JJs or 'jhuggi-jhopri clusters' by the Delhi Development Authority

<sup>7</sup> The final activities developed in the toolkit were Public Transport, Housing, Utilities, Livelihoods, Public Space and Social Infrastructure

<sup>8</sup> "Kya Hai Plan?" is a very common phrase in Hindi to deliberate on next steps and it helped lend an informal and playful tone to the title

<sup>9</sup> Activities involved pinning up *bindis* and using resource cards

**Figure 2**

On the left: Mascots; In the centre: bindis being stuck on the map; On the right: slate and chalk

development and deployment, 5 toolkits were used by different organisations of the Campaign for over 100 workshops across Delhi between July and August 2021 to collect suggestions on the Master Plan 2041. Over 25,000 objections were filed through the combined efforts of the Campaign. It is important to note here that the objections filed by the Campaign significantly surpassed the less than 5000 objections that were filled out through the official online portal set up by the DDA.

**RHJ.** Planning –and planning language– has been widely scrutinised from an epistemic perspective regarding its complicated, and usually negligent, relation to informality. How do you see “*Kaun Hai Master? Kya Hain Plan?*” disrupting those dynamics? How does it intersect with current debates on informality and Indian cities, and more widely with questions of linguistic rights and colonial history?

**Swati & Anushka:** Like we mentioned earlier, conventional development proposals and policymaking reveal an absence of empathy to everyday life in the city and the way residents build their own housing. We feel that a large part of this can be attributed to the language of these plans and policies which indicate a narrow understanding of the incremental and self-organised characteristics that shape urban growth in Indian cities. Keeping this in mind, colloquial vocabulary was critical to employ in the workshops to facilitate collaborative planning. Here the language also became an entry point to understand social dynamics of the community and learn from tacit knowledge within the neighbourhood.

Dominant definitions of housing in India, particularly for informal settlements, not only disregard the rights and contributions of the dwellers but also devalue opportunities to generate an in-depth understanding of effective planning approaches to ensure affordable housing. One way for us to overcome this shortcoming in housing discourse was to question technical and official terminologies, using local terms instead. For instance, the official terminology for ‘squatter’ settlements in Delhi is *‘jhuggi-jhopdi’* cluster (JJC) which in Hindi translates to ‘shanty-hut’. This is an output of the lexicon of the formal regime of planning, wherein these self-built settlements are often referred to as ‘slums’, synonymous with poverty and precarious living conditions, neglecting the dynamic aspects of dwelling and living within these settlements. The politics of social exclusion is a result of such expressions and has detrimental implications within the development discourse. Therefore, in the workshops, we relied on the more humane and commonly

used word ‘*basti*’ which stands for a self-built neighbourhood that has grown organically (Bhan, 2017).

Similarly, using colloquial words for activities such as street vending (*‘pheri’*) or waste-picking (*‘been-na’*) became very important while interacting with communities involved in informal livelihoods whose representation and identity is missing from current planning discourse. We realised that absorbing these terms in our planning lexicon would help make it both effective and necessary for reaching perspectives towards inclusivity, equity and liveability.

In terms of technical lexicon, it proved effective to use units of area commonly used and easily understood by people in informal settlements of Delhi such as *‘gaj’*<sup>10</sup> which is approximately a square yard, whereas the byelaws and Master Plan use the metric system. While Delhi’s latest Master Plan has taken a step in the right direction by providing the document in Hindi for the first time, along with English; can we imagine more such ways by which the technical information is made increasingly accessible to the residents of the city?

In terms of tools, visual cards were used to discuss self-built housing typologies in Delhi and allow participants to understand characteristics of their own neighbourhood from a planning perspective. These were colour coded with relevant icons so that they could be read pictorially without relying on words which can prove challenging for semi-literate participants. Such cards were also used to depict typical plot sizes to aid in area calculations.

**RHJ.** Can you share a bit more about how you communicated the different aspects of housing as presented in the Master Plan?

**Swati & Anushka:** One of the responses from the participants on what is a master plan was *‘It talks about the platform outside our house, whether we are allowed to build it or not’*. This simple statement wonderfully captures the detail of what a master plan can stipulate in terms of housing byelaws, and also helped us understand potential conceptualisations of communicating it. In addition, we realised that it is necessary to also talk at a broader level about how the delivery of housing has led to an unequal distribution of the housing stock. On one hand, the housing produced by the market has largely been unaffordable to those in need of housing, and on the other hand, the state-led housing delivery system has been inadequate in meeting the actual demand. While discussing the state of housing, major concepts like ‘unaffordability’ and ‘shortage’ became important to discuss through easy to grasp concepts for the residents.

To discuss the concept of ‘affordability’, typical rents and household incomes in the neighbourhood were discussed using rules of thumb such as—if a third of your household’s monthly income or less is spent on rent, then it is considered affordable. However, challenges posed by issues such as absence of tenure security need to be factored in as well. Similarly, to communicate the concept and extent of ‘shortage’, various

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<sup>10</sup> 1 sq.gaj = 0.8 sq.m

**Figure 3**

On the left: Area cards; On the right: Housing Typology cards

housing typologies linked to different income groups i.e., Economical Weaker Section (EWS), Lower Income Group (LIG), Middle Income Group (MIG) and Higher Income Group (HIG) were discussed. As per the affordable housing standards laid out by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, these are the different income groups that have been prescribed different standards of housing in terms of their areas.

Representing these typologies through picture cards helped visually and clearly depict that housing shortage in India primarily lies in the LIG and EWS housing categories but that the supply of housing, as per policies, has focused on the delivery of MIG and HIG houses instead (TG-12, 2012). This instantly helped inform the participants that the shortage is governed through the unequal distribution of resources and is a systemic issue, and not the individual's inability, which ultimately disregards the 'right to the city' for the self-built communities.

Furthermore, India's housing shortage of 18 million houses (TG-12, 2012) which is widely discussed at a policy level was translated simply to the participants as a problem of overcrowding within houses of poor quality, instead of simplistically being read as that of homelessness. This was done through a quick calculation of area available per person (household area divided by number of members in the household) vs the average habitable space as per city byelaws (12 square metres i.e., 15 *gaj*), which led to the conclusion that two or sometimes even three households can be found living in one house in informal settlements, which are starved for space.

This condition of cohabitation, due to lack of affordable and adequate housing has led to overcrowding in our cities—diminishing per capita space allocation to a mere 1.5 *gaj*/person for the urban poor in the capital city of Delhi, with an adverse effect on the quality of space and services, and hence on their quality of life. This disparity was important to bring out, and also provided a tool of conversation on housing in Indian cities. It helped establish that addressing housing shortage does not translate into the daunting task of building 18 million new homes, but rather the gradual process of

supporting residents in incremental retrofitting existing homes or auto construction of new homes.

**RHJ.** What would you say have been the main lessons and challenges in this process?

**Swati & Anushka:** Community engagement in times of COVID-19 has been a pronounced challenge. Since it was crucial the workshops be conducted on the ground, various strategies needed to be devised such as limiting the number of participants and hosting the workshops in open public spaces such as parks, *'chowks'* (public spaces at street junctions in India), under a tree, along roads or in rooms with ample ventilation as precautionary measures from COVID-19. This openness of venue also helped lend an informal and relaxed feel to the workshops. Furthermore, limiting the number of



**Figure 4**

On the left and above: Physical workshop with limited participants; On the right: Online meeting linked to the on-ground workshop

participants made the format of the workshops more intimate and conversational. After the draft Master Plan was released, Delhi went under a lockdown due to the second wave of COVID-19. This necessitated a hybrid format that combined online platforms with in-person meetings between a limited number of participants. This was found to be an effective and an easily scalable approach for reaching more people.

These physical and hybrid interactions allowed thousands of residents in Delhi to understand and engage with the Master Plan which the online interface that the DDA had setup could not achieve, with less than 5,000 registrations on its official website as recorded on the last day of feedback deadline.<sup>11</sup> The online registration also required the residents to have an email ID which presented a huge digital barrier. Therefore, the physical interactions facilitated by the Campaign, despite the pandemic, became instrumental in mobilising marginalised communities across Delhi in filing objections and sharing their suggestions on the Master Plan. Over 25,000 objections were filed through the combined efforts of the Campaign. These were documented in the form of letters which were collected by the Campaign organisations and then physically submitted at the DDA office. The huge difference in response between the two approaches clearly shows which modes of communication are more participatory.

**RHJ.** Finally, could you share some reflections from this grounded experience about the need for renewed housing lexicons?

**Swati & Anushka:** We would say that the development of the toolkit enabled us to understand how one could embed learnings from people's lived experiences into planning frameworks and feedback processes. Co-creating a shared lexicon for the planner and the people would require our planning processes to be longer and more complex, which is a challenge that we believe must be taken up. What then should this engagement look like?

The real challenge lies not in facilitating a once-in-20-years public engagement, but in making participation a more engaging and continuous process. The narratives shared earlier offer a few tools and mechanisms to make master plans accessible by co-opting local lexicons through active citizen consultation. In turn, they also made the participants more aware, and in some cases, co-opt parts of the planners' lexicon and technical frameworks to strengthen their own advocacy efforts.

One example of this has been the incident of waste pickers in Delhi mobilising themselves to challenge the stipulated Development Control Norm (DCN) of 1 *dhalaos* (waste disposal space at neighbourhood level) per 10,000 households as stipulated in the new Master Plan. This would lead to a reduction in the number of *dhalaos*<sup>12</sup> and consequently, a loss of their livelihoods as the *dhalaos* are pivotal spaces for informal waste segregation, contributing to the recycling chain in the city. Therefore, the waste picker groups have been advocating for 1 *dhalaos* per 5,000 households, having worked out the numbers required to sustain their livelihoods and preserve existing *dhalaos*. This adoption of the technical lexicon was

<sup>11</sup> <https://online.dda.org.in/mpd2041/> accessed on 23rd August 2021

<sup>12</sup> This reduction can be brought about by mechanization of dhalaos

due to the relentless efforts of the community-based organisations associated with the Campaign.

The stories and perspectives emerging from the neighbourhood level not only enable community participation but also create the possibility of finding local solutions. This colloquial knowledge is crucial in tackling housing shortage as it represents real issues on the ground by challenging ‘evidence-based policymaking’ (Bhan, 2019) whose implicit speculation is that specific schemes will have specific impacts in a time-defined phase. Bottom-up narratives do not always necessarily challenge or dismiss this evidence—indeed, they inform policy and planning with data and logics of their own. In doing so, they also ask that we rethink the scale and structure of planning processes, zoomed down to the level of local zones and neighbourhoods.

One such narrative that emerged is from Savda Ghevda, a resettlement colony near the western border of Delhi. In a workshop held there, the discussion centred on a new clause in the Master Plan that facilitates amalgamation of plots in resettlement colonies across Delhi. While this was seen as a welcome move by many, the pros and cons as discussed by the residents provided key insights that would have provided critical feedback for the planners to test the feasibility and impact of the different measures introduced by them.

What also emerged from these discussions is the inadequacy in the imagination of housing itself. Can we speak of housing as it is built? Most low-income housing is built as people live and their needs grow. As a result, the rigidity of regulatory mechanisms and the inadequacy of the one-size-fits all approach that marks housing policies in Indian cities has been widely critiqued. As many Indian researchers have pointed out, it is neither feasible nor affordable. Combining incremental and flexible models could open up possibilities for a new affordable housing paradigm that learns from how residents self-build in the city.

Delhi’s draft Master Plan 2041 has no reference to this process or any provisions for upgradation of JJ clusters. Upgradation is an ongoing process involving retrofitting, repairs and gradual connection to services in informal settlements that simply cannot be ignored or overridden in a singular imagination of addressing housing shortage.

While we sincerely hope that the demands from the residents of self-built neighbourhoods in Delhi are heard and addressed by the DDA in its final Master Plan 2041, we also hope that the approaches highlighted in the process provide a template to other cities across the world in making planning more participatory. Through active listening, the language of planners and local lexicons can together create rich multiplicities of language instead of the kind of babble which has translated itself into our cities today.

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