Research Paper

The Anti-city
Gurgaon and its villages

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Abstract

Today is a time of unprecedented growth — of shaping newer and ever changing environments around. Issues and shortcomings of rapid urbanisation offer opportunity grounds for architecture and planning, in this changing maze of activities. The paradigm shifts in the way how people see spaces, and how professionals see the same, are exposing and challenging the architect and urban designer to current harsh realities.

India has been home to the earliest of civilisations and growth. Its intense engagement with the other continents have shaped and reshaped its culture and political ideas. With ginormous populations, extraordinary cultural mixes and rising economies, some of its regions are sites of intense action. This stage of intense fluctuation and turbulence demands reflection on how they have shaped (or are shaping) our relationships, societies and human exchanges. One is also forced to ask questions as to whether the existing knowledge capacities are enough to help manage and intervene these situations. It's time we decoded our development trajectory and identified the fault lines so as to aim for a favourable projected future.

Keywords

Liberalisation, privatisation, service villages, anti-city

1. Introduction

Serpentine flyovers, glazy facades, sky-kissing towers — who knows the history to this 'millennium city' of Gurgaon? For a region that belongs to a country that was home to some of the most urban ancient civilisations as compared with its contemporaries, how is it that the impression of it, left on its rampant modern versions shrank down to a negligible?

The late twentieth century urbanisation that spread (in India) was in complete disconnect to its past centuries (McNeill, 2000). Never had humankind (all over the world) left behind what existed before this much, and never had it impacted such a wide spectrum of both animate and inanimate matter as it did starting from the late 1900's. As patrons kept changing, what the land saw was the rise and fall of cultures and power forces, thereby giving in to dystopia. Liberalisation and globalisation gave birth to 'world cities' (coined by Patrick Geddes in 1915) that brazenly allowed transnational business interests to eat them up. Such 'New York, London and Tokyo models' infected our cities and social styles to change in an uncurbed manner. The new urban landscape has fallen prey to late global capitalism with zero connect to context or people. We are thus in and around *anti-cities* that highlight the differences and not similarities among its lot.

The consumerist trait was effortlessly transferred overseas to a subcontinent that was in thirst for this postmodern drift. One would wonder how such control exertions could ever be so powerful. The backward or the East (with reference to orientalism) is subtly convinced that this is the only best thing that could ever happen to them – through literature, education and media (Gramsci, 1930's). The images of America, Shanghai and Dubai thus haunt our bigger cities – the watered down version of which will soon start hitting the smaller ones. The over emphasis on universalisation of what 'living' or 'habitat' means has gotten us mind blocked, so much so that they shy away from the truth that none of this will make any sense unless grounded in a specific locality. The cultural (il)logic of late capitalism as explained by Fredric (Jameson, 1991) is a kick-starter to the postmodern catastrophe that hit (or will hit) all areas alike.

The 'culture of congestion' (Koolhaas, 1978) engulfed the East almost a century later than it did in the West. Cities, its people and its architecture followed the image of an image – simulacrum[1]. It could be thought of as an era of hyper-reality which took away from the originality or genuineness of a place. In semiotics this stage is considered as an inability of one's conscience to differentiate reality from a simulation of the reality – where one is surrounded wholly by pseudo-reality. There is thus a comfortable existence of the self in a constructed (though temporary) 'new real'. Cities today, have conveniently absorbed this concept for their growth. Nehru's vision for modern India could be read under similar lines; history and environment took a backseat while capital intensive strategies were welcomed with the backing of a large group of deeply patriotic men (Guha, 1995). The planning of the capital city of New Delhi and the dream city of Chandigarh were on-ground realisations of this vision which initiated a new wave of city planning and development in the country. The act of mimicry they followed is clearly evident from how our cities are being viewed since then with a top down approach, blanketed by master plans.

Design and development of many contemporary cities in India are active examples of this phase of liminality[2]; Gurgaon being a perfect case for investigation. The name Gur*gaon* (*gaon* meaning village) with its added note of being the 'millennium city' is a striking contradiction in itself. Its history is splendid and eventful – references in the *Mahabharata;* oldest agrarian settlements in the area; along early important trade routes; base of early British units — all vocabulated contextually through either history, art or architecture.

2. Pre-liberalisation Gurgaon

2.1. Early history

The oldest record of Gurgaon is in Mahabharata (the ancient Hindu mythology), where it is believed to have been an area granted by the eldest Pandava king Yudhishthira to Dronacharya. Around 900 BCE, this area had been under the effective control of Maurya Empire. The area of Gurgaon also formed a part of Harsha's empire in the 7th CE, and then of the Gurjara-Pratiharas. From 763CE to 1156, it was under the Tomara and Chauhan dynasty. In 1192 during the rule of Delhi Sulatanate, people were forced to convert to Islam, creating

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[1] A blind imitation of a person or thing; *image of an image*.
[2] The idea of threshold. An in-between mental stage; interstitial space/phase.

years of Hindu-Muslim unrest. During early 1700s the area was under Rajput rule, and in the late 1700s it was conquered by French generals.
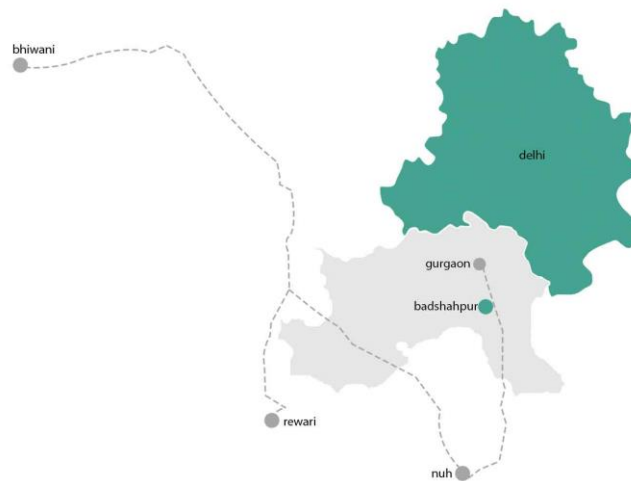

Figure 1 Gurgaon and its surroundings, Source: Author

2.2.   The British influence

The proximity of Gurgaon to the imperial capital (Delhi) played a major role in shaping its destiny. In 1803 The East India Company took control over Gurgaon, and in 1816 the town became its administrative headquarters. The feudatory races continued to engage in agriculture while the higher castes were involved in trade or British service.

The 1857 uprising created huge unrest in Gurgaon, due to the constant fights between the Nawabs and the British. There was a considerable loss of life and built, and no steps were taken to develop Gurgaon educationally or economically. After the World War I, the policy of ignorance was slightly modified as the people of the district contributed liberally in men and money for the war.

With the strengthening of Muslim League in 1940, communal tension increased in the following years. Following independence in 1947, the Punjab Province was bifurcated to East Punjab (India) and West Punjab (Pakistan). Members of the minority community on either sides fled for their life in large numbers leaving everything behind.

2.3.   Urban rehabilitation

The government distributed land to employ all the displaced farmers, where all of them who owned land or were cultivating it in Pakistan were declared eligible for temporary allotments. Each family was given a plough unit of 10 acres (or 4 hectares). Because of this, despite the shattered economy during the post partition years, agricultural production in the state did not remain low for very long.

With majority of the displaced persons settling in urban areas, the trade and industrial sectors saw a development, initiating an industrial economy in the district.

2.4.   Contemporary phase

In 1966 when the state of Haryana was formulated Gurgaon was designated as one of its districts, with an agro-based economy. Planned urban development of Gurgaon started in 1966 with the Urban Estates Department Haryana. 1970s marks the beginning of the city's growth and development journey.

The potential evolutionary prospects of Gurgaon were noted by the authorities during the preparation of the first master plan of Delhi. Gurgaon remained a small farming village while Delhi emerged as the political capital of India.

Figure 2 Map of Haryana showing growth potential zones, Source: Government of Haryana, Graphics: Author

In the 1970s the town of Gurgaon expanded initially juxtaposed to the old colonies of Gurgaon. Later, residential and industrial sectors were realised. Gradually the expansion started encroaching upon the agricultural land of the villages surrounding Gurgaon.
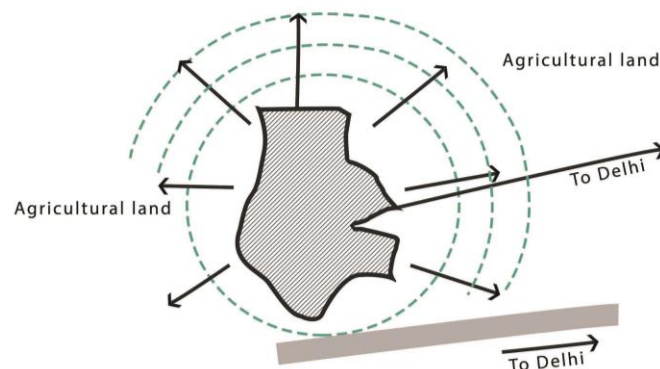

Figure 3 Growth expanding to agricultural lands by early 1970's, Source: Author

With the establishment of HUDA (Haryana Urban Development Authority) the growth and development gained momentum. More villages were acquired and converted to residential sectors in the 1980s. The implementation of Haryana Urban Development Act in 1981 was a gateway to the entry of private developer groups like DLF and Ansals. The coming up of Maruti Suzuki plant in 1983 triggered a new industrial fabric thereby making Gurgaon a priority town in the metropolitan area. These developers transformed the growth trajectory of Gurgaon.

The old colonies and the adjacent sectors located to the right of NH8 were largely built by the government authorities prior to 1990s and these constitute the Old Gurgaon. The areas built to the left of NH8 were built by private developers from 1990 onwards to form New Gurgaon. The small villages that exist till date and have become urbanised in the process of the city's growth spread in both Old and New Gurgaon are the Urban Villages.

3. Post liberalisation Gurgaon

The sectors built after 1990 were largely built by private developers. New Gurgaon experienced a job centre boom in late 1990s which resulted in more people moving into the city. Several multi-national companies like American express, IBM, Microsoft, Infosys, Ericson, Oracle, Bank of America, Nokia, The Coca-Cola Company, and many more chose to locate their offices in Gurgaon during the late 1990s. The sudden demographic changes and cultural changes gave the city a new identity.
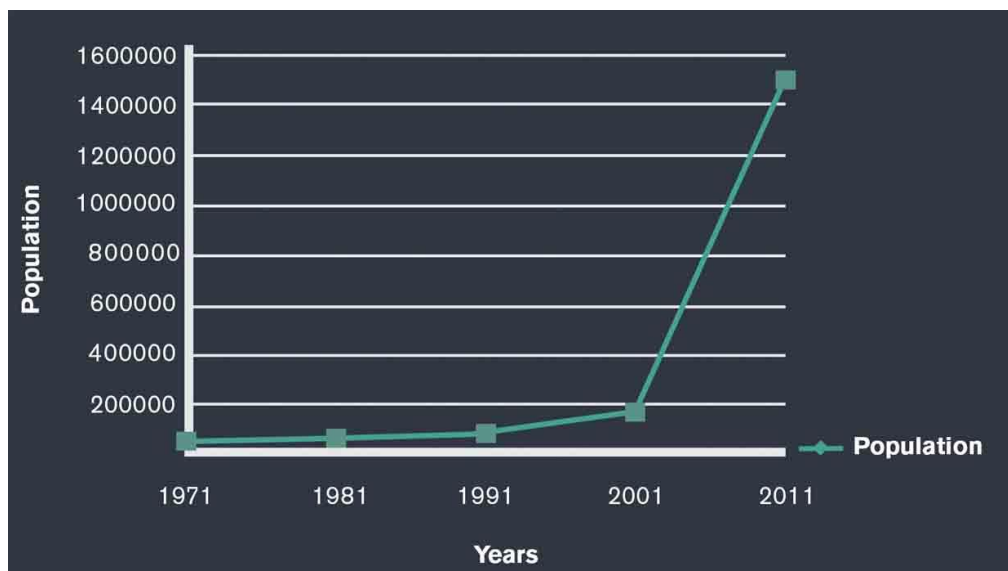

Figure 4 Population influx post liberalisation
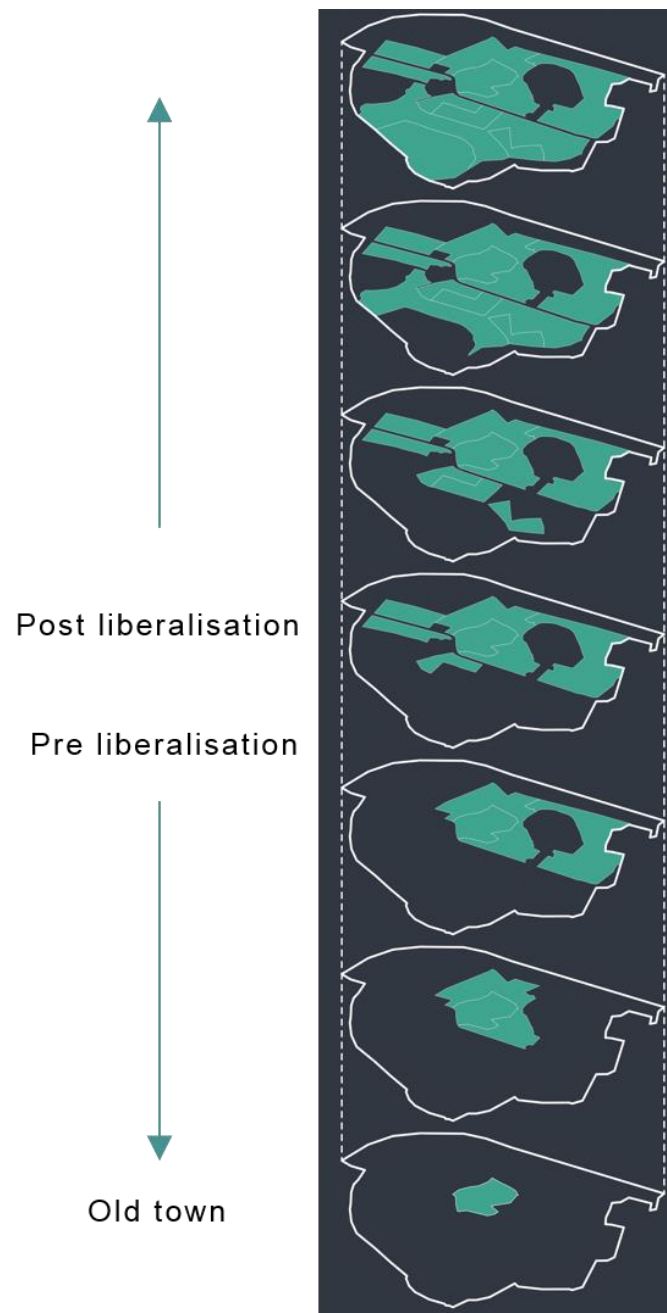**Source: Census 2011, Graphics: Author**

Post liberalisation

Pre liberalisation

Old town

Figure 5 Growth of Gurgaon, Source: www.shodhganga.com, Graphics: Author

Various jurisdictional changes were also seen in the period of 1991-2001, where many rural villages merged to form municipal corporations or tehsils in and around Gurgaon. The 2018 September *Hindustan Times* newspaper reported an incident where 46 villages in Gurgaon decided not to pay property tax to the Municipal Corporation of Gurgaon (MCG). The villagers claimed that the land was rightfully owned by them and were transferred illegally to MCG. It was also mentioned that since the inception of MCG in 2008, all their lands were brought under the jurisdiction of MCG, all local panchayats were disbanded, and plot lands worth crores of rupees were transferred illegally.
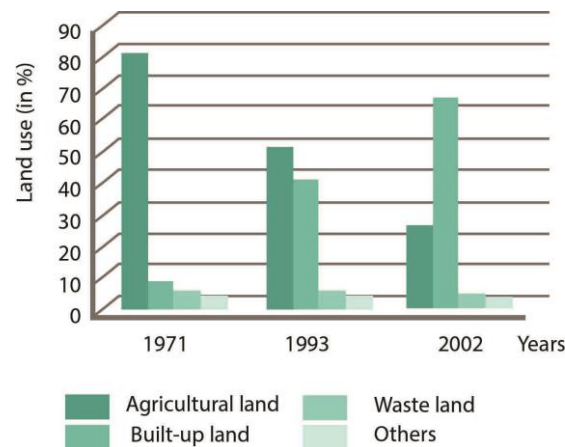
Figure 6 Land use transformation
Source: Population explosion and land use changes in Gurgaon city region
– A satellite of Delhi Metropolis, IUSSP

4. Urban village/city?

Post-independence, Gurgaon – along with other cities/towns in and around Delhi – (unfortunately) got absorbed into the 'new plan wave for future cities'. Migration (both in and out) created unsettling environments for a while but the emphasis, as priorly planned, was more on the urban agenda of creating a new face to the city. The 1970's saw Gurgaon falling on the track of accelerated urban growth and development – enormous population influx post liberalisation caused the growth rates to shoot up in the 1990's. Gurgaon was no more a village, but a rapidly growing city.

Land values and land ownerships juggled in the years that followed – owing to sectorisation and privatisation of land. There was a rapid flow of people into the sectors of Gurgaon, small and big – from villages (to the former) and *New* Delhi (to the latter). The 'surburbia' concept that was tested (and which had failed) in the West, was thus tweaked and appropriated to Gurgaon where the new city was advertised as a better liveable one as compared to the congested city of New Delhi. The way in which Gurgaon started pulling in people like a hungry magnet is a marker to a subtle new trend of city growth dominated by private players – a trend that was borrowed from the West and which was comparatively new in India. The spatial ideas though remained the same (as the West) with zero considerations to site history/context. Sector plans proudly adorned the plots where once (probably) stood native agrarian community neighbourhoods which were probably sent away to some inner villages nearby. Many villages in Gurgaon saw shifts in their built landscapes due to this.

4.1.   Villages of Gurgaon

The villages Jharsa, Sukhrali and Sarhol were studied for an understanding of the trends (Source: Author, Ashin Thomas, Venna Sri Hari Kanth – M.UD Batch 2019, SPA Delhi), which revealed a fascinating picture of the past and present conditions of these villages.

The 1848 East India company map of Delhi district shows the prominence of a place called *Jharsuh* along the trade route between Delhi and Ajmer. *Jharsuh* and *Sookralee* are amongst the oldest settlements of Gurgaon district. As evident from the map, *Jharsuh*, or modern day

Jharsa village was more important than Gurgaon for trading and agriculture. As the traders always preferred routes which were safe from natural obstacles such as mountains, deserts and deep forests, and which had easy access to supply centres, Jharsa was a much convenient option for being a halt point.
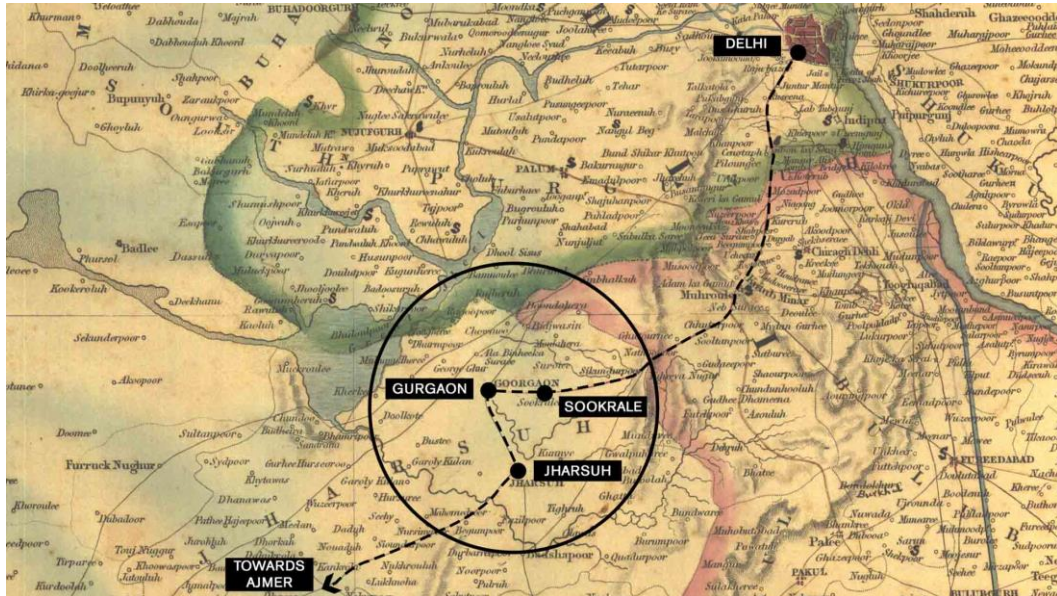

Figure 7 The 1848 East India Company map

What blew away the economy of Jharsa was the partition of India in 1945 when the trading communities migrated to the Muslim dominant country of Pakistan. The village witnessed influx and outflow of people leading to changes in settlement patterns and housing typologies. Changes in the community profile and occupation were observed as the new immigrants were either absorbed in the field of agriculture or were accommodated in the newer markets formed near the core city area. There was thus a major shift from agriculture to service sector during the 1960s. When HUDA acquired land in the core city, people started moving to outer villages like Jharsa, Sukhrali, Patel Nagar, Dhankot and the like. As the city had more and more to offer to its people and outsiders, many more in-migrated to the city and surrounding villages.

Sectored developments appeared around Jharsa, especially in 2004 when the Cyber Park was opened and the construction of Medicity Hospital was initiated. It was approached by workers and migrants, which marked the beginning of a new real estate market. The village witnessed the emergence of a new service/working class population. With Medicity hospital and Cyber Park fully operational by 2008, huge migrant population from other cities and states approached Jharsa for cheap and affordable housing. This led to construction of newer floors and buildings to appropriate the village to absorb the migrant working class. By 2014 this trend became stronger and the peripheries of the village began to change to include newer requirements of the working population. Jharsa today is primarily populated by these migrant workers with small groups of natives also living in it.

The work flow patterns were observed to find out that majority of the people who lived in Jharsa were migrant labour groups (of various economic classes) who worked in the nearby city areas.

Figure 8 Live-work patterns, Source: Author

The present community fabric of Jharsa could be understood as follows:

Residents of old village Jharsa	Property owners in Jharsa village	Workers of Cyber Park	Workers of Medicity	Other residents
• They constitute the native population of Jharsa village • People are involved in cattle rearing and such local jobs • Significant presence of unemployed population • Isolated from the outside city as there are no major job/other connections to and from the village	• Major property owners are Jats – they have strong community feeling and dominance in the area – they rent out their floors for the working population • Presence of Pandits and muslims who also rent out their homes to the various working population there • No new buying/selling of property – high demand for land and space – great opportunity for rental business	• Stay on rental basis in Jharsa – cheaper rents and convenient accessibility • Do not have a sense of belonging to the place – they see Jharsa as merely a place of residence • No community unions or associations	• Doctors and nurses of Medicity form a significant population of Jharsa due to easy accessibility and cheap rents • Dominant presence of Malayali and Afghani population – small stores and restaurants that cater to them present in the area • Start of cultural identification to the place – the Syro Malabar Prayer centre in Jharsa	• The population working in other areas of Gurgaon find cheap accommodation in Jharsa • No significantly visible cultural associations to the place

Figure 9 Community fabric of Jharsa, Source: Author

The fact that Jharsa is rapidly becoming home to more of migrants and less of natives is thus very evident. The question that rises is, if this trend continues, what would be the identity of Jharsa tomorrow when the identity of it today bears no relation to its past?

Images from the inside of Jharsa village
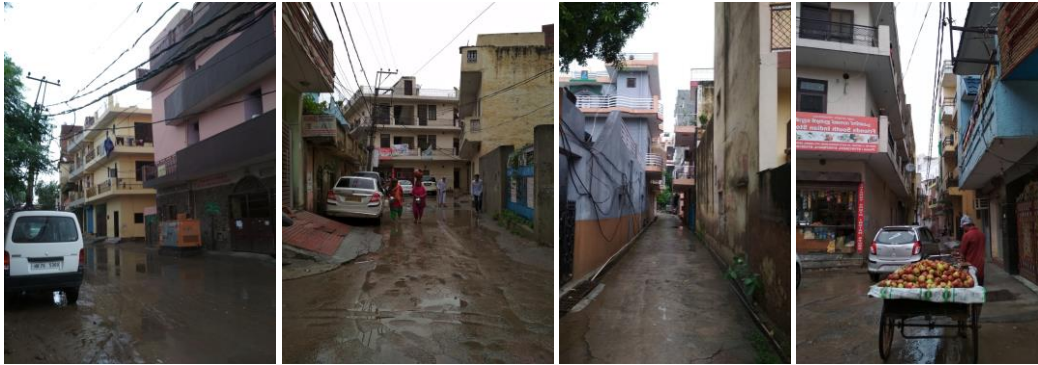
Images from the periphery of Jharsa village

The villages Sukhrali and Sarhol were also studied, and the comparison presents striking similarities in the present character of these 3 villages.

Attribute	Urban Village		
	Jharsa	**Sukhrali**	**Sarhol**
Place of residence	• Most prominent attribute • Huge rental business run by Jat communities that accommodate the service and working population • Mix of cultures and ethnicities	• Most prominent attribute • Natives have appropriated their houses to accommodate the rental floors • Huge student and working population – proximity to cyber city • Mix of cultures and ethnicities	• Lesser native resident population and dominance of service class population – trend of natives moving to the sectors for better facilities • Mix of cultures and ethnicities
Commercial space	• No major commercial magnets – therefore does not entertain outside population	• Main roads are lined with small to medium scale commercial stores and eateries – entertains both resident and outside population (to a small extent)	• Most prominent attribute • Earlier ground floor residences converted into small shops – on rental basis • Entertains outside population due to its commercial nature
Cultural node	• Living population has little cultural association to the place • Resident population unaware of the history of the place • No major festivals or procession routes in the village – culturally passive zone	• People display no significant cultural association to the place • Resident population unaware of the history of the place	• Lack of cultural prominence due to lesser residing population
Industrial area	• No major industries in the village and therefore do not provide any job/service opportunities to the outsiders	• No major industries – though small scale industrial outlets are present along the main roads – does not entertain any significant outside population	• Industries in close vicinity – entertains huge service class population
Institutional area	• Medicity in close vicinity – provides job for various working classes	• Minor management institutes in close vicinity – entertains student population	• No major institutions in close vicinity

Figure 10 Comparison of villages, Source: Author

Images from Sarhol village

Images from Sukhrali village

Source of all site images: Author

4.2.   Emergence of a new village type?

It is interesting to observe how the growth of Gurgaon into a millennium city has given way to a new trend of development of *service villages* around it.

Cities normally grow outward from the inner (historic) core forming a nucleus type of development. In most cases, the core remains intact with high historic prominence manifested through its architecture (and/or function). The cities of Old Delhi and New Delhi are the nearest examples to this. *Service villages* on the other hand follow a different growth pattern. These (urban) villages are generally the ones that surround huge magnet cities. The edges of these villages are approached by magnets that induce a gradual ripple of inward transformation in them. This inward growth is found to eat up the inner core thereby completely transforming the village into a new type bearing no relations to its past.
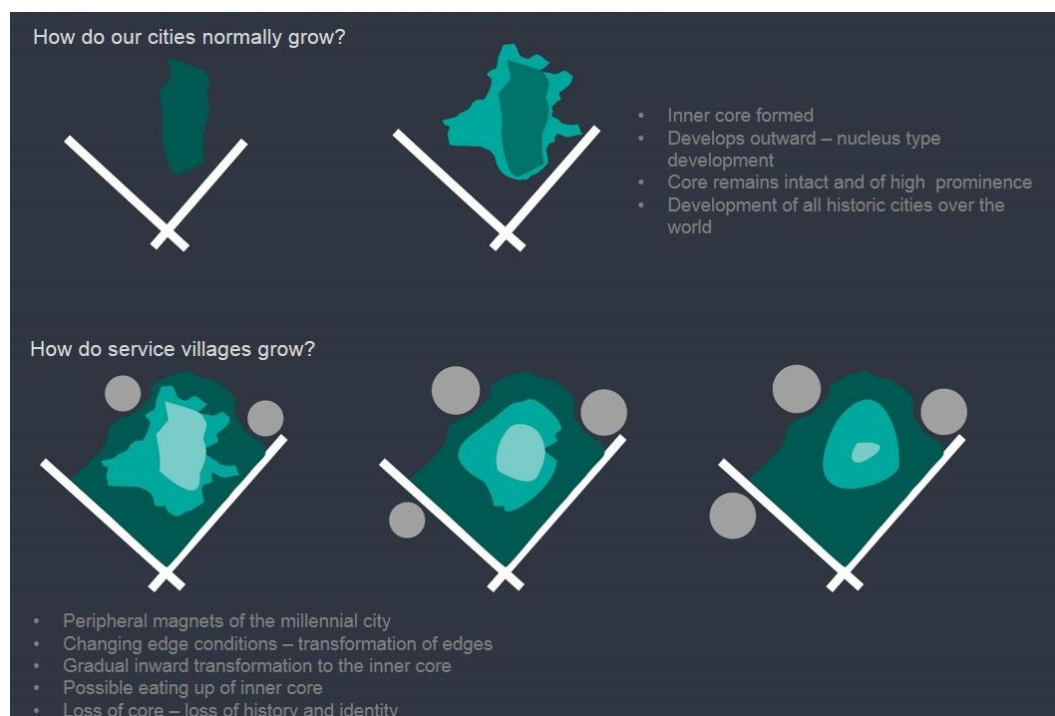

Figure 11 Service villages: understanding the anit-growth, Source: Author

All of the villages studied here, though have their respective history and evolution patterns, however today fall perfectly into the category of such **service villages** that could be identified with a common equation. The lack of connections they have with their past identities, and the similarities in their current profiles and growth trajectories presents us with a plausible future where each of these villages could be replaced in space and context with any other, and it wouldn't make much of a difference. These 'cities of non-cityness' further strengthens the argument that our cities today are traversing a path of *anti-growth*.
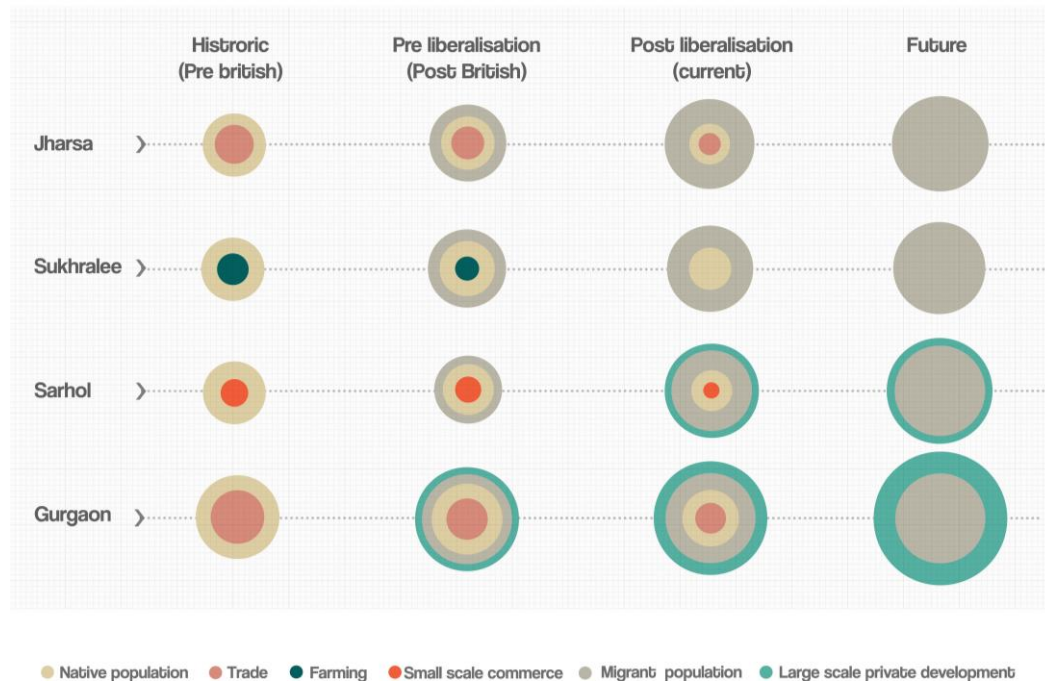
Figure 12 Comparison of villages, Source: Author

Thus, what one sees here is the rise of an era of capitalist prone, privately planned *anti-cities* that serve a select few. Transformations have in every step, challenged the urban landscape – unfortunately in no good way – and have embraced and lived up to the concept of delirium yet again; of places, cultures and people too. The focus lies on a much larger agenda – of the so called 'growth' and 'development' that gravitates around the nucleus of a small yet powerful group. In no time, Gurgaon has become this monstrosity that engulfed anything related to context, spitting out replicas of the US - Dubai - Shanghai models. The origin and growth of service villages is the perfect example as to how the surroundings of megacities have also adapted to better suit this new model of development, thereby becoming replicas of one another. The hyperactivity of Gurgaon (and other cities of the kind) may tend to a state of rupture or redundancy in near future.

5. Conclusion

The story of Gurgaon traced through its migrants, presents one with the layered history of the city. Of religious infusions and strong trade routes, of British Raj and changing community profiles, of transforming sectors and shifting loci of urban centres — this land has been one with constant flow of activity flux. With neo liberal policies lined up for the country, and the state propagating a new wave of growth and development, one however is left with the question of 'what from the past was left behind in the run?' A new phase to the city, or an interstice of uncertainty – one is pushed into a state of indecisiveness to judge the newness that Gurgaon and its surroundings is today.

The developments in Gurgaon post the millennial year have been disturbingly absurd as they in no way relate to the history, architecture or urban form of the old city or its villages. The

engulfment by the private was so fast that one is unable to evaluate the way in which the villages around it have changed. These transformations have added a new layer to the 'urban fabric' of these so called 'urban villages'. Today, being in Gurgaon means something. The picture that an outsider has of the city is of flashy building facades, sky-high flyovers and high end living. The fabric – both built and social – has changed and is in a constant phase of experimentation and exploration. The outsider is no longer an outsider, neither is a villager any more a villager; both have access to something that previously they have not had, which brings them to a common platform under the large umbrella of the new global city that Gurgaon is today. The cosmopolitanism that the shifts have brought to these villages is worth mentioning; whether it is or not by choice is however a point of further discussion and debate.

The transforming neighbourhoods due to accelerated urbanisation in Chiang Mai (Thailand), the historical urban patterns and socio-cultural identities challenged by development pressures in Ho Chi Minh (Vietnam), the contingent socio-urban reforms giving way to gentrification in Philippines — are all indicators to the emergence of such privately planned cities all over the world. (The Southeast Asia Neighborhoods Network)

The seduction of this colonial language could be escaped only through agency[3] or autonomy. The approach should primarily be bottom up – using the lessons from ground reality rather than from constructed imagery. Urbanism and architecture – like art and cinema – should engagingly explore the idea of subjectivity[4] and self-empowerment. Concepts like local area planning (LAP) which directly communicate with the context and people should be extended to the master planning bodies of all areas. UDRI, a Mumbai-focused organisation has all of its members from Mumbai who know the city well; organisations like these could be studied to develop similar context-specific groups in other cities. COSTFORD, a non-profit voluntary organisation set up in 1984 by Center for Developmental Studies in Kerala, works with alternative design philosophies and materials developed by Laurie Baker. With the involvement of The Department of Science and Technology and The Department of Rural Development of the Government of India, The Department of Local Self Government of the Government of Kerala, Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO), and numerous experienced and young professionals, COSTFORD has over the years worked on remarkable rural development projects and schemes at both the Centre and the State. Turning 50 this year, the Aurovillian thought of an alternative, universal town to realise human unity, was an experimental step towards autonomy. One could learn from these narratives. Our profession needs to re-invent itself to cultivate meaningful and efficient patronage for now and the future. One should be able to address his city and its people, and should be able to wade his way out of social inequity and corporate fascism.

Is the projected future of redundancy of such cities and villages a fact; or a mere perception, too adamant to accept the new base layer these cities have become for newer divergent layers to be added on and grow forward? Nevertheless, it's high time we withdraw ourselves from layering the incompatibilities of environment and growth that create toxi**cities**.

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[3] Ability to act or perform an action; the facility to do in a political scenario.

[4] Subjectivity or the idea of self; as explained by French philosopher René Descartes - "I think therefore I am". The concept could also be linked to Marxist way of how to construct individuals or how to be, as opposed to capitalist hegemony of domination by consent.

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