NEW ESSAY

Delhi Needs a Second Layer of Student Housing

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University hostels and private PGs need not be Delhi's only choices. A professionally managed, institution-linked layer between the two may offer a safer and more scalable answer.

> *"There is no logic that can be superimposed on the city; people make it, and it is to them, not buildings, that we must fit our plans."*
> *— Jane Jacobs*

Two reports in The Times of India this morning caught my attention. Read together, I think they point to both the problem and a possible solution to Delhi's student housing crisis.

The first is that Delhi University is substantially increasing its hostel capacity. At present, the University has 3,422 hostel seats at the university level and another 3,788 seats in its colleges, giving a combined capacity of 7,210. Ongoing and planned projects will add another 5,544 seats, taking the total to 12,754.

This is a significant increase and should certainly be welcomed.

But look at the other number. Delhi University has roughly 2.5 lakh students.

This means that today, institutional hostel capacity is available for less than 3% of the total student population. Even after the planned expansion to 12,754 beds, the figure would be only about 5%.

Of course, every Delhi University student does not need hostel accommodation. Many students live with their families in Delhi and NCR. But the University's own annual reporting indicates that more than half its students come from outside Delhi. If we use even this only as a rough indication of the potential accommodation requirement, the planned 12,754 hostel beds would still cater to barely one in ten outstation students. That, to me, is the important number.

It also tells us why the debate after the tragic Satya Niketan building collapse should not become a choice between "build more university hostels" and "regulate PGs better". We need to do both, but even that may not be enough. Delhi needs a second layer of student housing.

Interestingly, the second report in today's Times of India points exactly in that direction.

Delhi Education Minister Sh. Ashish Sood has said that vacant and under-utilised government land and buildings will be examined for student accommodation. He specifically referred to the possibility of using unused buildings in Narela, provided connectivity to educational hubs can be arranged. The newly constituted committee on student accommodation has also been asked to examine land and buildings belonging to DDA, MCD and other government agencies.

I think this is an important development.

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The problem is no longer being seen only as a Delhi University hostel problem. It is beginning to be seen as a city-level student housing problem. That distinction can change the solution completely.

University hostels are necessary. But how far can they go?

After the Satya Niketan tragedy, the understandable demand is that Delhi University and its colleges should build more hostels. They should.

The current expansion by more than 5,500 beds is therefore an important step. Existing university land should be used more efficiently. Pending hostel projects should be completed faster. Colleges which can add residential capacity should be encouraged to do so.

But we should also ask a basic question.

Can universities realistically build and manage housing for the tens of thousands of additional students who require accommodation? Even doubling the present hostel capacity leaves a very large gap. Campus land is finite. Construction takes time. Public funding will always have competing demands. And every new hostel also has to be operated and maintained for the next 30 or 40 years.

A university is primarily an academic institution. We should perhaps not expect it to also become one of Delhi's largest residential real-estate developers and landlords. This is why I believe the next stage should be different.

> *We need professionally managed student housing outside university campuses, but institutionally linked to them.*

A second market already exists. It is just largely informal

In practice, Delhi already has a second layer. It is the PG market.

Students who do not get university accommodation move to Satya Niketan, Katwaria Sarai, Hudson Lane, Mukherjee Nagar, Laxmi Nagar and several other areas. A large private housing economy has developed around universities and coaching institutes precisely because the demand exists. This market is performing an essential function.

But it has evolved largely by converting ordinary residential buildings into high-density student accommodation. The building may have been designed for one or two families, but over time it might have started housing 20, 30 or even more students. That is where the problem starts.

Earlier this week, MCD carried out a physical safety survey covering 1,150 PG establishments across its 12 zones. Around 20,000 people were found staying in these facilities. This itself gives an indication of the scale at which private accommodation is already operating.

We therefore should not think that the alternative to a university hostel is something that still needs to be invented. It already exists. What is missing is a professionally planned and regulated version of it.

This is where Finland offers a possible solution

Finland provides an example worth examining, not because Delhi can copy Finland but because it separates the university from the housing provider.

In Finland, universities do not necessarily construct and operate every student residence themselves. Specialised non-profit student housing organisations perform that function.

The Finnish Associations of Student Housing Organisations has 21 member organisations which collectively own more than 45,000 rental apartments. One of the better-known examples is HOAS, the Foundation for Student Housing in the Helsinki Region. It was established by student organisations in 1969. It develops housing, rents apartments to students, maintains the buildings and renovates them over their life.

The university remains connected to the student. The housing institution remains responsible for the housing.

This may sound like a small institutional distinction, but it has major practical consequences. The university does not need to become responsible for every lease, every electricity bill, every broken lift or every plumbing complaint. At the same time, the student does not have to depend on an informal landlord operating a residential building with uncertain safety and maintenance standards.

> *There is a professional institution in between. I think Delhi needs such a layer.*

How could Delhi adapt it?

Let us take the government's current proposal itself.

Suppose MCD or DDA has a suitable vacant building or parcel of land. Does MCD have to become the hostel operator? Not necessarily.

The land or building can remain publicly owned. It can be leased on a long-term basis for student housing. A specialised non-profit or professionally managed student housing organisation can develop or retrofit it, raise long-term finance where required, operate the facility and remain responsible for maintenance and safety.

Universities can be linked to these facilities without owning them. They can verify student status, forecast demand, participate in oversight and remove affiliation if safety or service standards are violated. Students would enter into proper rental agreements with the housing provider.

This would create a second institutional layer between the university hostel and the conventional private PG.

The first layer — university hostels — can continue to serve students requiring deeply subsidised accommodation and other priority categories. The second layer can provide affordable, professionally managed student accommodation at scale. The existing private PG and commercial

student residence market would form the third layer, but subject to clear safety, occupancy and disclosure standards.

The three can coexist.

Delhi's Metro network changes the land question

The reference by the Education Minister to Narela is also interesting for another reason.

It challenges the assumption that student accommodation must necessarily be located next to the college. Does it?

If a student can reach the college reliably in 20 or 30 minutes by Metro or bus, a residence can still be institution-linked even if it is several kilometres away. This is how Finland has created the student housing. This considerably expands the potential supply of land and buildings.

Delhi should therefore map student housing together with public transport.

A parcel of government land which may appear unsuitable when viewed only in relation to North Campus or South Campus may become perfectly viable if connected through Metro, bus or shuttle services. The economics can also change substantially because land cost is perhaps the single biggest barrier to affordable student housing in Delhi.

This is why government land should be used carefully. If land is provided at a concessional value, the concession should remain tied to student housing for the entire agreed period. It should not become a cheap route for creating an ordinary commercial apartment or hotel project later.

Safety should also become visible

The immediate focus after Satya Niketan has rightly been on structural and fire safety. But how does a student or parent know whether a PG is safe? Today, in most cases, they do not.

A parent visiting Delhi from Patna, Jaipur, Ranchi or Guwahati may look at a room, speak to the owner and pay a deposit. There is no simple way of knowing whether the authorised occupancy is 15 students or 50, whether the structural certificate is current or when the fire inspection was last carried out. This can be changed quite easily.

Every registered student accommodation building should have a public digital record. A QR code displayed at the entrance should allow a student or parent to check the structural-safety certificate, fire-safety status, authorised occupancy, last inspection date, operator details and, where applicable, university affiliation.

The government's new high-powered committee has been asked to suggest a centralised database of student accommodation facilities and examine a digital monitoring dashboard through which students can report unsafe housing, overcrowding, fire hazards and other serious safety concerns. That is a good starting point.

Information which is today sitting in government files should become visible to the person actually taking the risk — the student.

Do not close the existing PG market indiscriminately

There is another practical issue. Delhi cannot suddenly shut down thousands of PGs. The students living in them will have nowhere to go. The answer should therefore be risk-based regulation.

A building which meets structural, fire and occupancy requirements should continue. A building with deficiencies which can reasonably be corrected should be given a defined period to comply. A building which is structurally unsafe should obviously not continue to house students. At the same time, new professionally managed supply must start coming into the market.

Otherwise, enforcement may improve safety in one building but simply push students into another equally crowded building a few lanes away.

The numbers actually tell us what the High-Powered Committee should do

I find the numbers announced by Delhi University useful precisely because they put the issue in perspective. Adding 5,544 hostel beds is substantial. It will take institutional capacity from 7,210 to 12,754. But against a student population of around 2.5 lakh, it also demonstrates why university hostels cannot be the only answer. It is simply a matter of scale. And this is why the government's decision to look at land and buildings belonging to MCD, DDA and other agencies should be taken further.

Instead of asking only, "Where can government build more hostels?", the committee should also ask: How can Delhi create a specialised student housing sector? Who can professionally develop and manage these properties? How should universities remain connected without becoming landlords? How can concessional public land, long-term debt, philanthropy and responsible private capital be combined to keep rents affordable? And how do we ensure that maintenance and safety remain somebody's institutional responsibility throughout the life of the building?

These are, in my view, the next questions.

The Satya Niketan tragedy has brought student accommodation into public attention. Delhi University is adding hostel capacity. The Delhi Government is now looking beyond university campuses for land and buildings. The pieces are beginning to come together.

In this backdrop, Delhi has an opportunity to move beyond treating student accommodation as either a university hostel or a private PG.

It can create the missing layer in between — institution-linked, professionally managed and affordable student housing. That may ultimately add far more safe beds than universities can ever build on their campuses alone.

Sources and further reading

- Delhi University hostel-capacity expansion
- MCD survey of PG accommodation
- Delhi Government committee, vacant public property and proposed student-accommodation database