Gurgaon: what life is like in the Indian city built by private companies

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The first thing you notice when you come to Gurgaon is the number of skyscrapers. The second is the pigs.

In the past few decades, Gurgaon, a city 32km outside the Indian capital New Delhi, has risen from a former agricultural wasteland. But it wasn't the government, or even individuals, that led Gurgaon's growth. The city was built almost entirely by private companies.

According to census data, Gurgaon's population doubled between 2001 and 2011, from 876,000 to more than 1.5 million[1]. Its people are made up of the two extremes of India's developing society: rich, well-educated urban professionals who work for some of the biggest firms in the world live side by side with urban slums, home to villagers who used to own the land where Gurgaon now stands and migrants, who come to do blue-collar jobs for corporations.

Gurgaon has golf courses and shopping malls but it also has mountains of uncleared garbage, leaky pipes and potholes along government roads.

Water logging and patholes in Gurgoan. Photograph: Ravi Batra

The companies have created a city to suit their needs. Big multinational firms, including Google, HSBC, Nokia and Intel, all have offices there. Startups too like to base themselves in Gurgaon, so they can be close to the huge network of corporates.

Because the city appeared so quickly, there was no basic infrastructure to make them work. The company buildings were built before the roads, electricity, sewage, waste disposal, security – and even emergency services – could be established.

Employees on their way to the Cyber Hub in Gurgaon. Photograph: Ravi Batra

Instead of waiting for the Haryana Urban Development Authority to set up the services they needed, the companies improvised, bringing in private builders to pave roads and drill borewells, and buying privately owned backup diesel generators. Private companies, they felt, would do the job faster and better than the government could.

Take the privately run fire service, managed by real estate company DLF for residents of its properties. "Many of the buildings here are over 90m tall. The government's fire brigade doesn't have hydraulic platforms that can reach that height. We do. In fact, we were the first in the country to get them," says SK Dheri, DLF's head of fire safety.

Fire drill in Gurgaon. Photograph: Ravi Batra

Residents' organisations and private developers who manage Gurgaon's elite residences do all the work that governments are normally responsible for. "We all used to pitch in around 3,000–4,000 rupees a month (£30–40)," says Surendra Lunia, a former resident of the DLF private colony. "The residents' organisation uses that money to fix roads, build parks, pay for security and any other needs. If we left it to the government, it would never get done."

India's municipal governments are infamously inefficient. Slow bureaucratic process and corruption have left many parts of urban India without basic infrastructure. Even in megacities such as Mumbai and Delhi, chronic water shortages and power cuts are common. The idea of private companies running public services is not new, but it has never been done on a scale like Gurgaon's.
[2]

"If a streetlamp breaks in Gurgaon," says Manjit Rajain, another

resident, "a private technician will come and fix it the next day. If the government were in charge, you could be waiting for a month or more."

Yet private services are far from ideal. Gurgaon has no sewage system, so private companies collect the sewage in septic tanks and dump it in nearby rivers or on open land. Privately drilled borewells have quickly depleted the amount of groundwater in the city. Other problems, where solutions are less obvious, such as the city's roaming pigs and aggressive monkeys, are ignored.

Garbage dump in Gurgaon. Photograph: Ravi Batra

Gurgaon was built because the northern state of Haryana cut red tape in the land acquisition process in the 1970s, allowing private developers to buy land quickly and cheaply in an area that was close to the capital. "Once the developers had the land, they built all the infrastructure. Gurgaon grew so fast that the government would not have had the ability to meet its needs," says Rajain.

The wastelands have gone, but the pigs have stayed. The villagers whose lands were bought and then developed, were squeezed into ghettoes near the high rises of Gurgaon. Their hogs and livestock wander freely through the maze of skyscrapers and private fences. "The private colonies in Gurgaon are some of the best homes available in India," says Lunia. "The other colonies, in Old Gurgaon, are the worst."

Sakuina lives in a temporary shelter, in Gurgaon. Photograph: Gurinder Osan/AP

Municipal government exists but is relatively small. Residents of Old Gurgaon have huge problems getting water, power and basic public sanitation, but have no-one to provide it.

Shruti Rajagopalan, an economist who has studied the region[3]

says, "Even the poor in Gurgaon are willing to pay for public utilities. Poor women are willing to pay for clean water that is reliable. Same for electricity. The urban poor in India so desperately needs access to utilities, they don't seem to care who provides them. And they are even willing to pay higher charges."

Some of the former villagers have accused Gurgaon's developers of pushing them out. "There are fights all the time. The villagers say their land was undervalued, the developers say the land wasn't worth anything until they came and built it up," said Rajain.

Women walk through Old Gugaon. Photograph: Ravi Batra

In contrast Gurgaon's private colonies feel surreal. "Entering a private colony is like crossing an international border," says Rajain. "Firstly, the checks you go through at the gate with the private security guards. And when you do eventually cross the gate, its like you're in America ... with perfectly manicured lawns, and sprinklers and picket fences."

Municipal government is relatively new in the city. It was formed in 2008, and has been playing catchup ever since. New plans to solve Gurgaon's problems are regularly floated: electricity from recycled waste, GPS on garbage trucks to make sure waste is being removed, a new mobile app so residents can report problems easily. But despite these hi-tech aspirations the corporations face the most basic problems: supplying water, removing sewage and fixing potholes.

In the past two years, developers have started handing utility services over to the state, leaving many of Gurgaon's private residents with a reduced quality of service. In exchange, the municipal government has started charging property taxes to all 368,000 owners of private properties in the city, for the first time this year.

Related: Plastic roads: India's radical plan to bury its garbage beneath the streets[4]

Haryana's chief minister has said the Gurgaon model – allowing private companies to buy land directly from villagers and develop it as they choose – can be replicated[5] in other parts of the state.

In the western state of Maharashtra, a similar experiment, a city called Lavasa[6] – which is run without any state involvement – has sprung up. And in 2011, Afghanistan sent a delegation of officials to Gurgaon[7] to study its development model with the aim of replicating elements in Kabul, the Afghan capital.

The model has yet to be tried outside India but has inspired

similar ideas such as Paul Romer's "charter cities"[8], where
urban settlements in developing nations could be run entirely by
other nations or private companies. In Honduras, where the idea
was floated[9], courts quickly rejected plans, fearing companies'
ambitions could undermine the constitution.

Referencias

1.^from 876,000 to more than 1.5 million
(www.census2011.co.in)

2.^India (www.theguardian.com)

3.^who has studied the region (mason.gmu.edu)

4.^Plastic roads: India's radical plan to bury its garbage
beneath the streets (www.theguardian.com)

5.^can be replicated (www.livemint.com)

6.^Lavasa (www.theguardian.com)

7.^Afghanistan sent a delegation of officials to Gurgaon
(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)

8.^Paul Romer's "charter cities" (www.ted.com)

9.^Honduras, where the idea was floated
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