

Makeover for Delhi's historic nullahs

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THE drainage system of Delhi – an elaborate network of big and small nullahs (drains) that runs over a distance of 350 km – was built seven centuries ago by the Tughlaks. Today, under the unrelenting onslaught of decades of unplanned urbanisation, these nullahs have been reduced to veritable garbage dumps all across the city, posing grave risks to public health and the environment.

With illegal colonies dumping their waste into them and the city administration turning a blind eye to the rapid degeneration of the drainage system, these stinking nullahs are full of sludge, sewage and silt. They breed mosquitoes and eventually pollute the river.

The nullahs are unable to perform the tasks that they were created for – carrying storm water into the Yamuna and serving as groundwater recharging bodies.

One of the most visible fallouts of the destruction of nullahs is the utter chaos that Delhi's congested roads are plunged into every time the city receives an hour or two of heavy rainfall.

But there are intimations of hope on the horizon. In an "urban regeneration and renewal" initiative promoted by Morphogenesis, an Indian architecture firm, plans have been drawn up to revive the long dormant nullahs of Delhi in the run-up to next year's Commonwealth Games and bring about sustainable change.

The Delhi Nullahs Project (www.delhinullahs.org), the brainchild of Mani Rastogi, managing director of Morphogenesis, aims to transform Delhi's age-old wastewater system into "a usable transportation and recreational network". According to Rastogi: "Restoring nullahs would be the basis for effective and sustainable upgrading of the capital's infrastructure... This model is applicable not only in Delhi but other cities across the country."

Indeed, the experiment of reviving traditional drains and turning them into spaces that can be used by the urban community for multiple purposes has proved hugely successful in cities like Seoul (South Korea), Fuzhou (China) and Valencia (Spain), among other places. "In Seoul," says Anupam Yog, Managing Director of international economic development consultancy firm Mirabilis Advisory, "an entire stretch of road was ripped away to facilitate the regeneration of a drain."

The drainage system revival plan entails cleaning the nullahs of garbage at source instead of letting all waste and sewage flow down across the city to ineffectual treatment plants. But that is only a part of the project. Morphogenesis envisages the creation of lush walkways and cycling paths along the nul-



Anupam Yog



Stretch of a nullah being covered up to make a parking lot for the Commonwealth Games

lahs in closed loops within localities and last-mile connectivity to mass transit routes.

Also on the anvil are plans to develop these green lungs as entertainment and recreational zones built around Delhi's numerous architectural monuments, and grow native plants around the nullahs to slow down the surface run-off and allow storm water to seep back into the soil to replenish the groundwater.

However, this mission, timely as it is, is predictably up against an unyielding system and a disinterested government. Anupam Yog, who is an integral part of the project, admits as much. "A lot more needs to be done before this can be called a full-fledged project. The impact has been pretty telling and public perception is changing. What is still missing is political will. That is why we are in an aggressive advocacy mode to secure the buy-in of private enterprises, the government and citizens. This project is emblematic of all the challenges and opportunities of urban regeneration," he says.

As Yog points out, over the last two decades sev-

eral attempts have been made, but in vain, to clean the Yamuna and regenerate Delhi's nullahs. "This time around, we are looking at a holistic solution rather than just a beautification project," he says.

As part of the Delhi Nullahs Project, Mirabilis Advisory has joined hands with India Habitat Centre to establish a public awareness platform, Urban Habitats Forum. In September last, the Forum hosted the 1st Habitat Summit to highlight the immense possibilities inherent in the revival plan for the nullahs of Delhi.

The idea is to create a citizen-led "Games legacy" that will make a long-term difference to the lives of the people of Delhi. At the Habitat Summit, Morphogenesis put up a three-dimensional installation depicting the significant facets of the Delhi drainage system restoration project and its numerous beneficial spin-offs. Says Yog: "In the Yamuna clean-up projects of the past, the focus was never on the nullahs, from where the problem of pollution really emanates. What is needed is a new and creative approach to the project."

The Commonwealth Games organisers, Yog fears, are not in a position to grasp the problem in its entirety. "This has to be seen as an opportunity to seek a long-term solution that uses traditional technology embedded in the city for centuries. We have

been using outmoded methods for too long," he says.

The Commonwealth Games organisers have covered the nullah behind Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium with concrete slabs to create a parking lot for VIPs. "This might be a temporary arrangement but the damage will be permanent," warns Yog. "The slabs can only hide the eyesores that the nullahs have become; they cannot clean up the mess. Instead the nullahs should be restored to their former state and projected as tourist attractions."

Madhukar Gupta, who was the vice-chairman of Delhi Development Authority (DDA) when a comprehensive study of the nullahs – 18 main ones plus 15,000 subsidiary drains – was first commissioned in 2004-2005, describes the degeneration of this system as "a complex, multi-dimensional issue".

Having kept close tabs on the problem for several years now, he believes that the Delhi Nullahs Project hasn't been conceived a day too soon. "Taking it forward is absolutely essential because of the multiple benefits that will accrue. I am not sure, though, that the entire project can be completed before the Commonwealth Games is upon us. Some stretches can certainly be done by then, but this will have to be a longer term project," says Gupta, who retired recently as Union home secretary.