

New township raises the bar for slum rehab

Asia's largest slum re-housing project in Chandivli gets its first occupants

Madhurima Nandy
Mumbai, May 1

SAVITA RAO is looking forward to a good night's sleep after three decades of disturbed slumber. She has just moved into a spanking new studio apartment in Chandivli, 15 km south of her ramshackle tenement bordering Sanjay Gandhi National Park.

"Every night, we would sleep in fear that a leopard would pick up our children," said Rao, 45, who lived on the edge of the forest.

On Tuesday, Rao and other families were re-housed as part of a slum upgradation scheme. Some of them turned emotional, their eyes glistening with tears as they accepted keys to their flats in a 45-acre township that raises the bar for slum rehabilitation projects.

Instead of the unimaginative and shoddily constructed buildings that are the hallmark of slum rehabilitation projects, the Chandivli township has been designed from the bottom-up, with the socio-economic needs of low-income groups in mind (see 'The new design'). In the past, poor design has contributed to slum dwellers selling out and moving back to shanty towns.

If the township succeeds, it could become a model for other

projects. The success of slum upgradation is critical for improving the deplorable living conditions of half the city's residents, and a prerequisite for Mumbai becoming a world-class finance hub.

The Chandivli slum re-housing project is also the largest in Asia. By the end of the year, twelve thousand families will move in: equivalent to one-fourth the population of the city's 'A' ward, consisting of Colaba, Cuffe Parade and Fort. In ten days, one third of them will have shifted.

The township is unique also because groups usually at loggerheads with one another have collaborated: the government, builder Sumer Corporation, independent architect P.K. Das and NGO Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti.

Nivara Hakk initiated the project eight years ago after environmental groups took legal action to get the slums removed on the grounds that they were encroaching on the park. The NGO has been closely involved with the project to ensure that the quality of construction is good and that the allocation of flats is fair and transparent, its activists said. Other slum re-housing projects have been ridden with corruption on these two fronts.

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The new design

- A township spread over 45 acres in Chandivli
- Very close to the up-market Hiranandani Gardens in Powai
- 12,000 housing units spread over 15 clusters, with 16 buildings in each cluster
- Four buildings in a sub-cluster, which open out into a courtyard to enable community bonding
- No dormitory-type corridors, but two flats on each side for good ventilation
- A small foyer in every building, in an effort to create more communal space
- Well lit and ventilated flats
- Nicely tiled bathrooms
- Drying balconies
- Central maidan
- Three parks

A NEW BEGINNING: Asha Giri Goswami in the balcony of her Chandivli flat.

UNLIKELY PARTNERS



Shabana Azmi
Member of Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti



Vilasrao Deshmukh
Chief Minister, chairman of SRA



P.K. Das
Architect and member of Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti



Ramessh Shah
Partner in Sumer Corporation, a construction firm

This township is an example where an NGO has helped the government, slum dwellers and the developer to come together to build a township.

The township shouldn't become an improved slum. Workshops should be held to make sure that residents take appropriate care.

We tried to design the township in a way that would preserve the communal life that people are used to in slums.

It's a very important project for me. I spent three-and-a-half years from morning to night on the site. It is a one-of-a-kind project in India.

'I'll never give this house up'

Madhurima Nandy
Mumbai, May 1

ASHA GIRI Goswami, 40, has never lived in a high-rise building. After 20 years of living precariously in a shanty town on the fringes of Sanjay Gandhi National Park, on Tuesday she finally entered her home.

"This township was a dream for all of us and we have seen it develop from scratch," she said. An added surprise was that she was allotted a top-floor flat. "I have never lived at such a height before," she said, smiling. "I hope the wind doesn't blow us away!"

Goswami and her husband came to Mumbai 20 years ago from West Bengal. Her husband worked as a plumber and she sold bangles and other costume jewellery that she made at home. Will she eventually sell the house? "Never!" she replied emphatically. "We have struggled for years along with Nivara Hakk to get our own place. We would never give it up."