

The fall of Defence Colony: A classic Indian urban tragedy

Hindol Sengupta • July 14, 2026

Def Col is a microcosm of the deep rot of absolute political and public apathy and ghoulish attempts at social mobility that plagues much of India's urban existence, especially in Delhi, Mumbai and a few other major cities



Defence Colony's decline is not just the story of one Delhi neighbourhood—it is a warning about how unchecked urban greed, political apathy, and real estate speculation are turning India's most prized localities into unliveable concrete jungles. (AI image)

At least since 2009, I have had an intimate connection with Defence Colony. Some of the people I have been closest to call that neighbourhood home. So, not only have I visited 'Def Col', as it is popularly known, more times than I can count – I have often stayed there too. Until recently, I also had cousins living there.

I therefore have what is known as an outside-insider perspective (close enough to notice the degradation and distant enough not to be emotional and blind) on how one of the most 'elite' residential areas in the capital went – well, it went primarily to the lawyers, actually.

Let's just say Defence Colony first fell as a tragedy, and now, it collapses every day as a farce.

Even 15 years ago, Defence Colony was a leafy, quiet enclave of mostly retired personnel from the armed forces who were allotted land according to their designation (higher-ranked officers got larger-sized plots) with a cosy market in between. It was and is conveniently located – close to major hospitals, to Khan Market and Lutyens' Delhi, to government offices, and to key schools and colleges. Yes, there was a 'nala' of a major drain running through it, but it had been sort of maintained by controlling the flow of water.

Then, and it is a bit unclear who first had this bright idea, but someone decided that Def Col could do with some aggressive 'mixed use' planning. In what seemed to be an 'overnight' avalanche, offices, especially those of legal firms, and lawyer chambers mushroomed in every corner of Def Col. Now it is a well-known fact in Delhi that lawyers in the city are one of the most efficient and well-networked communities – therefore, once they made the locality their home, there was no turning back.

The number of private cars going in and out of Def Col exploded. What used to be a quick trip to the local market for residents started to take much, much longer because the market area is always clogged.

Now if the offices sprouted, could the builders be far behind? India's urban scape, as everyone knows, is controlled by a ruthless nexus of local politicians (often corporators but also MLAs) and 'builders', or real estate companies. Many of these companies are by their very nature fraudulent and operate as money-laundering fronts – their key methodology is to try and cheat buyers and land or property owners as far as possible and take over prime real estate.

This mafia – that is really the only correct word for this nexus – is now taking over vast areas of prime Indian urban land and neighbourhoods and destroying them one by one to extract maximum profit and paying off every political party in sight.

This operates on a simple principle – old residential areas must be torn down to build tall apartments to 'unlock value' and 'make better use of land'. Both these arguments are completely wrong. This is because it only makes sense to build tall buildings if the ecosystem can take the pressure. Indian cities are collapsing. They cannot take the pressure of more people, more cars, more concrete jungles. They are too hot, too

crowded and mostly unliveable these days. What is the point of crowding them even further when the basic system has no ability to handle the pressure?

In such circumstances, redevelopment that adds more construction, more people, and more cars in a place which is already highly stressed makes no sense. Also, most Indian cities are now precariously short of water. Delhi, for instance, requires around 1,250 MGD but receives about 904-950 MGD of water. Its key water source, the River Yamuna, is a poisoned drain. It quarrels incessantly on water with neighbouring Haryana. It is constantly launching mega water conservation drives, and yet the desire to build more flats, more shops, and more offices in highly water-stressed environments continues – because who can say no to the builders? (The same, by the way, is the story of neighbouring Noida and Gurugram, which have absolutely abysmal water quality and yet an ever-expanding array of expensive condominiums).

Back in Defence Colony, as offices continue to proliferate, the water situation has become dire. Many of the older residents are refusing to pay the water tax as they receive little water. There is ‘no pressure’ in the supply. But how can there be any pressure if every household is using high-pressure pumps to extract as much water as possible to service the numerous offices?

Meanwhile, the nala had been covered by concrete and a garden built over it. For a few years, many in Def Col pretended that there was no nala, while others, the more sensible ones, protested that trapping toxic gases in concrete was a bad idea. Now it seems that the fumes turned violently odorous and corroded the covering – so, now, they are having to break everything down and rebuild. And the stench is horrible.

If you think all this means demand for homes in Def Col is shrinking, you are wrong. For every bungalow that is being torn down, a rash of apartments is spreading in its place – and each is priced between \$500,000 and \$2,000,000, or more, depending on the size and location. Many people who are buying these know the real condition of the locality. So, they don’t wish to live there. They want to rent out their newly purchased apartments as offices. That’s the only way they can quickly get back their investment. And so, the pyramid scheme goes on and on.

For the real residents of Del Col, life is only getting worse. The drainage system has collapsed, and so to keep out any puddles or flooding, concrete ramps now line up

outside every gate. There is no place to walk. The parks are abysmal. Def Col has big schools, but most of the elite who live there have never considered sending their children to the local schools. These schools have wide spaces, which could be converted into swimming pools or open-air playing areas for locals – but, of course, no one has ever considered this.

And so, Def Col continues, like the canvas monogrammed handbag from a Paris brand – everyone knows its real worth, but everyone is pretending that the logo is so valuable that it makes everything worthwhile. And such is the keeping-up-with-the-Aroras mindset of Delhi that no one can call it out without severely damaging their own social-climbing-ness.

Def Col, therefore, is a microcosm of the deep rot of absolute political and public apathy and ghoulish attempts at social mobility that plagues much of India's urban existence, especially in Delhi, Mumbai and a few other major cities. We often get angry that people from outside point out how shabby our cities are and how polluted. This anger is misplaced and facetious. We should be angry at the people who run (or don't run) our cities instead.

(Hindol Sengupta is professor of international relations at OP Jindal Global University. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.)