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How far can we wish away the city's poor?

ONE EARLY morning, when the rush hour traffic spells chaos on the NH-24, I came across a philosopher cop. He was standing listlessly at a crossing off Khichripur – one of the many resettlement colonies in the backyard of housing societies in East Delhi. The traffic was blocked for a kilometre with hundreds of pedestrians, bicycles, two-wheelers, hand-pulled carts and cycle rickshaws crossing the highway.

As I tried to squeeze my car through, I shouted at the cop: "Why do you allow the horizontal traffic block the highway for so long? Which is the main road?" The cop smiled: "Depends on where you look at it from." Then, pointing at the slow-moving mass pouring out of the narrow feeder road to block the highway, he asked back: "For them, their lane is the main road, isn't it?"

His words fell into perspective a few hours later when I heard a seminar paper by some college students. They spoke passionately about how Delhi had no space for its poor, quoting from NGO reports on urban poverty. NGO reports, as most said were too scared to go into slums for case studies.

That seems to be true for most of us too. In academic debates, we make the right noises but our class bias is in-built. How irritated we get if pedestrians cross our way on a signal free Ring Road, or a slow moving rickshaw comes into the fast lane.

The slums in our backyard are eyesores, so what if they give us our daily supply of maids, chowkidars or laundry men.

Like us, our governments too are obsessed with the idea of making cities look world class. So when slums don't look good on the Yamuna riverbed, they are uprooted and its people are thrown to the outskirts. And there is always the "how it is posing an environmental threat or violating the Master Plan" logic to justify it. But this logic is promptly defied when the same riverbed is given out for construction of a temple or a games village. After all, it is expensive piece of real estate – the DDA plans to sell a single apartment in the Commonwealth Games village for over a crore.

To make us world class, we need high-speed flyovers and expressways and there is no space for slow moving vehicles or pedestrians. It was only when 20 people were killed in two months crossing the Delhi-Gurgaon Expressway that the highway authority thought about building pedestrian crossings.

If we continue with this process of social fragmentation, we will end up with an aggressively upwardly mobile middle class and an increasingly hostile under-privileged class.

The indifference of the upwardly mobile middle class towards issues of equity and justice may eventually prompt the under-privileged to create law and order issues.

That Khichripur cop was spot on. If we care to look while on Delhi's roads, we will discover many similar recipes for conflict. Better we change gear, now.

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