

Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar - The World Needs More Slums

nextcity.org - May, 7, 2013 - In a guest blog post, Indian journalist Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar argues that, contrary to their reputation for squalor and crime, slums provide a critical low-cost way for the rural poor to access a better life in cities.

What constitutes the perfect city? It's easy to make a list of utopian must-haves: Electricity and water round the clock; unpolluted air; plentiful road space for cars, bicycles and pedestrians; good educational and health facilities; lots of parks and museums. Those with an institutional mindset will argue for elected mayors with strong tax and administrative powers, giving them independence from callous state capitals.



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No matter how desirable, such utopian longings fail to place cities in the context of a poor, rural society. Cities must not be elite islands in a rural sea of despond[ency]. They must provide income and social ladders for the poor and unskilled to climb up. Cities must be havens of opportunity for those without opportunity in rural and tribal settings.

This has an implication that will make many blanch — we must have more slums. These are the entry points of the poor into urban havens of opportunity. When urban land costs crores (millions) per plot, the poor can't dream of buying land. Cities lack the funds for even basic facilities, let alone massive public housing. So rural migrants encroach on public land, creating shanty towns. These slums are eyesores — just looking at them makes urban folk shudder. Yet this should drive home to the elite how truly wretched rural India must be if poor people see more hope in filthy urban shanties than in the countryside.

Read more: <http://nextcity.org/informalcity/entry/we-need-more-slums>