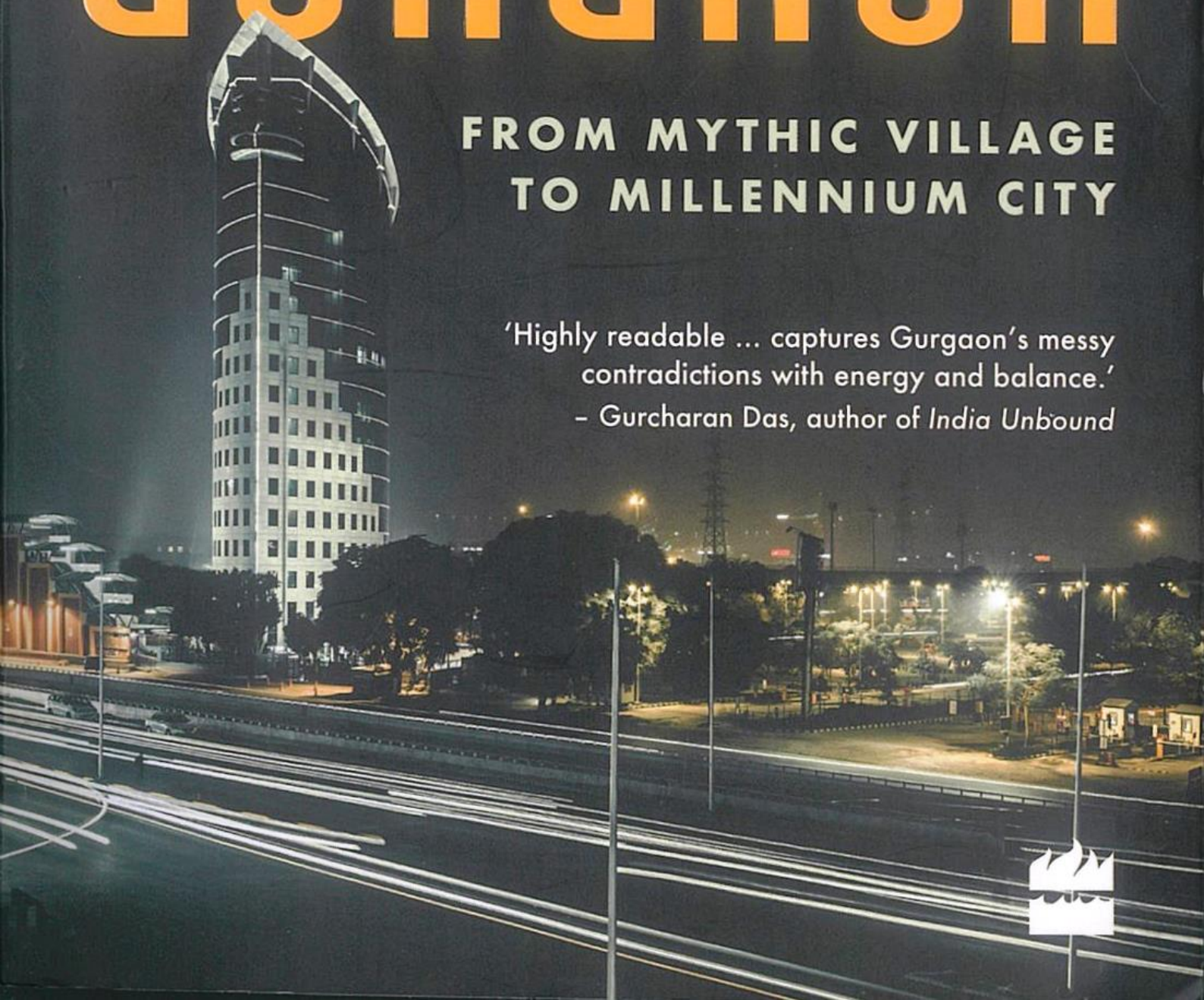


VEENA TALWAR
OLDENBURG

GURGAON

FROM MYTHIC VILLAGE
TO MILLENNIUM CITY

'Highly readable ... captures Gurgaon's messy
contradictions with energy and balance.'
- Gurcharan Das, author of *India Unbound*





(top) A government school in Sector 46, Gurgaon, once abandoned; (above) The same school, now transformed into Vishvas Vidyalaya for mainstream students and for children with special needs.

COURTESY: AUTHOR

The Government of Haryana (education is a state subject—subject also to its whims and official apathy) has pleaded that it has no funds to execute such a grandiose plan as the Right to Education Act has spelt out. In fact, what resources the governments do have are inadequately deployed and indifferently administered. Given this dismal state of affairs, the government showed remarkable wisdom in 2008 by permitting the enlargement of an excellent school called Vishwas, an inclusive private institution lodged in cramped quarters, to move into the expansive premises of a derelict and abandoned government school. It is an inspiring story. The

focused vision and zeal of Neelam Jolly to establish such a facility in Gurgaon, where nothing at all existed for children with disabilities, came to fruition in 2007 in a small one-storey building in Sushant Lok. Her experience as a teacher and therapist at the pioneering Spastic Society of India in Hauz Khas, New Delhi, where children with cerebral palsy were taught and treated, prepared her for implementing the plan of combining health care with education. The demand soon outgrew the space; the number of children with special needs was so great and so urgent that Neelam began to look for a larger place. While scouring the neighbourhood, she found a government school in Sector 46 on a four-acre plot. The building was derelict with broken windows, the floor brittle with shards of concrete lying about. Bats flew in and out of the crumbling structure, its grounds a tangle of weeds and brambles where monkeys and wild dogs had made their home. Neelam was overjoyed—surely the government would not deny her the opportunity to rehabilitate this forsaken school into a much needed place where students with different abilities could study together. The days of educational ghettos for the disabled were over.

I accompanied Neelam in 2008 to see what she had found to move her tidy little school; I could hardly believe that the ruin would serve at all. She prevailed on the government to trust her project and allow her to use the building and grounds for which she would raise the funds to restore; she triumphed against the usual sceptics. With grit, imagination, hard work, judicious use of meagre funding and unrelenting supervision, she managed the transformation of the place into an outstanding schoolhouse with a garden, trees and a playground in a very short time. The bureaucrats shook their heads in disbelief, I imagine. The attention to detail was laudable, down to the toilets that had to accommodate wheelchairs, and the entire building made user-friendly for children with physical disabilities. Ramps replaced steps and special furniture was designed and built in situ. As a good Haryanvi, Neelam said that she realized a long-standing dream to help the children of this city. I wondered at the possibility of what

would happen to Gurgaon schools if they were freed from the clutches of an insouciant bureaucracy and if more such underserved institutions were made over to dedicated educators. The mind boggles at the possibilities.

In building Vishwas—the name, which means ‘trust’, ‘belief’—old shibboleths had to be knocked down. The age-old idea of lumping all ‘handicapped’ children in a ‘special’ school is now passé and as per government rules, regular schools are supposed to include students with special needs, but most schools do not adhere to this rule. Vishwas has a mixed population of children from the mainstream and those with special needs, who are taught, at each level, in the same classrooms with a common curriculum. About 90 per cent of the children pay only a token fee of Rs 25 a month as tuition (yes, I blinked at the figure in disbelief) and even receive free uniforms and books if the parents are truly poor and needy. The mix has marked benefits for both groups; the goal is to integrate the two differently abled populations in a classroom, and children who do not have disabilities are exposed to the less fortunate and will, Neelam says, become sensitive to their needs and perhaps to all human beings. However, Neelam added, that the integrated model works best at the primary level but as kids grow older their needs diverge. The school has 280 students and goes up to Class VIII. It is a fully recognized inclusive middle school and has a satisfactory student-teacher ratio of 30:1 with one helper in each class. This last factor alone makes Vishwas stand out as a school where every child, however abled, gets personal attention.

I visited yet again, in 2010 and 2014, to see the place run and was stupefied at how many hats Neelam Jolly was wearing; she was the chairman and the principal, the accountant, the headhunter, the gardener, the fund-raiser, the interviewee (to extraneous people like me), the person who addressed many children by name and had personal conversations with them on her way to the staff room to talk to the teachers. (Luckily, the success of the place and the largesse of corporations have enabled her to hire the personnel needed for

administering the institution.) I visited the staff in their cheerful lounge and attended a class with the mixed population and was very impressed. This is what our government should be investing in, I remarked. 'Oh,' said one of the teachers, who wished not to be named, 'the DC [district commissioner] and others inspected the school and promised to give a sum of rupees ten lakh only if we did something innovative!' Another teacher who also spoke anonymously, said, 'They did not think that this school was innovative enough. The DC did not give any ideas of what we should do to be regarded as "innovative". It was a ploy to dodge giving us even what they had said they would give. I am from Gurgaon and I know how little the government cares for education, and they really have no understanding or sympathy for why we even bother with the children with special needs.' I nodded, sipped my tea and thought: 'That may be true, but we have private citizens like Neelam and her well-chosen staff who will do what they can and more to change this ignorant stance.'

Vishwas, with its range of extra-curricular activities, such as special art workshops, special sports, yoga and theatre, and its many annual events, and its three school buses, two of them with hydraulic lifts for wheelchair users, is a complex and expensive affair to sustain. They also have a programme to train teachers for students with special needs and have workshops for parents where they can learn the skills they need to deal with such children in the most beneficial manner possible. Their operating cost in 2016 was Rs 700,000 a month, which included salaries for teaching and maintenance staff and the upkeep of special equipment in each classroom.

The government does not contribute any funds to run the school; fund-raising, from corporations and private sources, is done every term and adds greatly to the exhaustion and tensions of those in charge. Neelam is trying to eliminate this major anxiety by building a corpus of money that would serve as a permanent endowment for the school so that they could exist on the interest (it is a tax-free institution) and make their budgets based on the assured resources. The drive is on, but the amount collected so far is a paltry one, and efforts to raise funds

will be redoubled in the coming school year. Any corporate manager can calculate what the endowment should be to yield this monthly income; I hope they will step up their donations to build up that corpus. The greatest gift an institution can be granted is an inflation-proofed, anxiety-free running budget and autonomy to shape its own aims, goals and curriculum, and in recruitment of teachers. Alongside, it can be open to periodic (three to five years) check-ups from a body of professional educators constituted for this purpose.