

Safdarjung Airport to Safdarjung Playfields? Make it possible

TNN | Sep 10, 2019, 10.01 AM IST



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Delhi is slowly, but surely, getting starved of large public places. Three decades ago, it was common to see people spill out on to the Central Park of what was then called Connaught Place. A metro station took over that green, perhaps correctly so, as it was the right place for a junction. Till very recently, the lawns of India Gate and Central Vista were hubs of public activity.

While the green lungs — created first by the British and, then, by Delhi's planners of the early 1960s — still hold firm on the landscape (the ridge was created under the British rule in 1920 and the Hauz Khas forest and many others were formed under Master Plan Delhi 1962), open green recreational areas are running out of space.

ISSUE

- Delhiites are running out of open green recreational areas
- Safdarjung Airport stopped

flying fixed-wing aircraft several decades ago

- Parts of the 200-acre land parcel still used as a heliport for VIP flights for PM and

President by IAF

- But more than 150 acres taken up by a golf course and a racecourse, both out of bounds for common man

File photo



SOLUTION

- Consider converting Safdarjung Airport into a public green space
- Move almost-privately run racecourse from prime city land to Dhaula Kuan Cantonment's edge
- Take cue from Tempelhof Airport in Berlin that has given way to Tempelhof Feld where people can indulge in recreational activities

But there are examples to learn from. Berlin's Tempelhof Airport ceased flying operations in 2008 and was quickly converted into a recreational area. Skating, wind surfing and many other sports now abound on what was a runway. Berlin has given back nearly 350 acres to its residents.

Safdarjung Airport stopped the flying of fixed-wing aircraft several decades ago as the Aurobindo Marg flyover was dangerously close to its flight path. While parts of the 200-acre land parcel are still used as a heliport for VIP flights for PM and President by Indian Air Force, more than 150 acres are taken up by a nonpublic golf course and, again a non-public, racecourse.

When the then Wellington Airfield was commissioned in 1928, it was located on the southern fringe of the New Delhi plan of 1922. There was no habitation around it till the ancient city of Mehrauli about 8km away. But now, Safdarjung Airport sits in the heart of the city.

The ministry of home affairs decided that it was best used as an emergency getaway for VIPs after the 2001 attack on

Parliament. While the idea of giving this open green space back to the city for recreational purposes was mooted and examined in 2003, why it died is not public knowledge.

IAF now operates VIP flights for PM and President from a small part of the airport, which sits in a corner behind Safdarjung Tomb and has its own access that does not disturb the city traffic.

In 2010, the airport was partially converted into a park-and-ride facility for Commonwealth Games. So, examples of change are as recent as less than a decade away. A metro station at Jorbagh is a stone's throw away and the redevelopment of Ring Railway (which has Safdarjung and Sarojini Nagar stations at walking distance) will also bring the airfield within easy reach of Delhiites. Citizens have already adopted metro as a preferred mode of transport.

The recent creation of National War Memorial at India Gate hexagon where 30 out of the 90 acres have been subsumed into a restricted public space is another example of how the city's open green public spaces have been pruned to give way for other uses.

So, with all these changes happening in the city, and with Delhi getting starved of open public spaces at an alarming rate, is it not the right time to dust out the idea of making the airport into a public green? Do we really need an almost-privately run racecourse to occupy prime city land, used mainly by the likes of what are now known as the "Khan Market people"? Can IAF not play golf a wee bit away at Dhaula Kuan Cantonment's edge — a mere 4km away from Safdarjung, and not putt in the heart of the city?

These are not esoteric and wild ideas. Tempelhof Airport in Berlin has given way to Tempelhof Feld — a field where city residents ride cycles, skate, wind surf, play ball, skate board and roller board and breathe a breath of fresh air. There are other such examples. Croydon Airport in London has now got large open public playfields. The same is the case for many smaller European towns, which have grown around their original airfields.

So, why can Safdarjung Airport not convert to Safdarjung Playfields?

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