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THE CHALLENGE OF MASSIVE URBANIZATION FOR SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT*

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Urbanization today is indeed massive. No less than 54 per cent of the world population was resident of towns and cities in 2017. This amounted to a count of about 4 billion people; three times the total population of India. This equalled the total population of the world just around 4 decades ago in 1975. Today there are no less than 500 'million' cities in the world; among these 20 are mega-cities, each with a population of at least 10 million. India is also going to reach the land mark of half-a-billion urban population at the ensuing 2021 Census of India.

In the context of such an evolving scenario toward transformation of our planet from entirely rural to fully urban, it would be fascinating to visualize how the different regions of the world would look like if the present conditions persist. Here is what Thomas Friedman, the author of book *World is Flat*, would like to make us believe. The Western Europe would be a neighbourhood of senior citizens being lavishly attended by nurses from the neighbouring Mediterranean countries in Africa and also from Asia. The United States would be a gated community, with a sensor at the gate. Entry would be restricted. A small opening in the fence would, however, tempt many Mexican and energetic immigrants from anywhere to make a way in. Latin America would be a fun part of the city, where the working day begins at 10 pm and every one

sleeps until mid-morning. The Arab world would be a safe alley but outsiders would fear to tread here. India, China and East Asia will be crowded neighbourhoods, with big teeming markets, and every one would be looking for any space left to park or travel. Africa would be a place in need of constant care and construction.

Our concern here is the imperative of sustainable urban development in the face of the challenge of massive urbanization. Let us see what 19 papers included in the festschrift released today in honour of Professor Manjit Singh have to say on this. To begin with, a plea is made for a directed or regulated urbanization in place of spontaneous or freelance urbanization. This calls for a proper design and layout of cities. Necessary financial provisions are also a must. A holistic smart city route for urban sustainability has also been advocated. On similar lines, application of systems approach and systems dynamics technique is said to be one of the best options to evolve realistic sustainable development plans. In ultimate, a sustainable city is expected to have a value based soul. It should have the capacity to integrate the individual with nature and culture. Auroville is a living example of the kind.

A viewpoint on somewhat different lines cannot be missed. It has been recommended that quality ruralization, in addition to rationalized urbanization, is equally

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necessary for ensuring sustainable urbanization directed toward management of global warming. Simultaneously there has to be a check on urban sprawl. The cities are to be developed as mosaic of self-contained but mutually integrated segments. Rural-urban synergy is to be stimulated. A due care is also to be taken of the soil-moisture depletion in rural areas surrounding cities. This is attributed to intensive horticulture in response to urban demand. Such a situation is more typical of cities in the Indo-Gangetic plain than those in South India.

A due concern has been expressed for critical issues pertinent to urbanization in India. Urban housing tops in such a list. It has been suggested that to acquire additional land for housing, a policy of land readjustment is superior to that of land pooling. In the former case, the original owners of land do not lose title to land, even when it has been pooled with that of others for urban development. No less critical is the issue of dualistic nature of urbanization which got accentuated in the post-reforms period. The recent urbanization has been inordinately selective of regions, cities, and localities within cities. To ensure urban sustainability, urban growth has to be inclusive of both areas and people. The 2011 Census of India has thrown up still another issue to manage. There has been a threefold increase in the number of census towns from 1362 in 2001 to 3892 in 2011. Officially these are treated as rural. This anomaly needs to be corrected by giving them statutory status for functional reasons.

By taking the case of the Himalayan region, a neglected dimension of sustainable urbanization has been highlighted. This pertains to under representation of the marginalized groups in urban setting. In the region under reference, 26 per cent of total population is urban while the comparable figure for its tribal population is 17 per cent.

The sustainability concern of hill states like Himachal Pradesh, finds another expression too. These states are marked by certain parametric constraints, such as topographical unevenness, climatic extremities, and limited number of working hours. All this raises the per unit cost of development. This fact has to be taken into account while devolving funds from the national kitty to the states or cities. This apart, urban sustainability is to carry on a war against urban criminality. The crime index of million cities in India is 1.5 times higher than that of national average. An atmosphere of insecurity defies sustainability.

At the state level, a great concern has been expressed for rapid urban growth in Punjab and Haryana since their formation in 1966. A well thought of, integrated, sustainability ensuring management plan has not been prepared by either of them. The approach remains fragmented and piecemeal. A particular case of massive urbanization giving rise to large scale mining of sand and stones as construction material in the Aravalli region has also been brought to notice. This is proving highly detrimental to environmental conditions around. The Kolkata City and its metropolitan area present another worrisome situation. Here urban growth is sluggish in consonance with decline in economic and employment opportunities. The question is how to revive such a metropolis which had a glorious past.

The messages emerging from research exercises focusing on individual cities, such as Chandigarh, are of special interest. The contention is that planning and designing of compact cities can ensure better sustainability. Such cities are distinguished by high density, mixed land use, and regulated mobility. Singapore is one example and Tianjin City in China another one. For Chandigarh, a number of recommendations have been put forward. These include densification of its low density sectors, transformation of its institutional

campuses into green localities using solar energy, recycling of water and sewerage, and promotion of bicycle for travel. The digitization of urban services at the city level has been listed as another imperative. By comparison, Bengaluru was noted for good architecture but bad town planning. The result is a chaotic traffic mess.

The above gleanings and observations can be juxtaposed with a critique of the recent urban development programmes and missions of the Government of India. All of these had a clearly stated objective, methodology and time frame. Each one of them involved allocation of funds in astronomical figures.

The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), launched in 2005 and extended up to 2014, aimed at a planned development of cities. Things were to be implemented through the local urban bodies. It is a pity that these lacked the requisite capability of preparing development plans or manage financial issues, or raise additional local resources. The outcome was a limited success out of a grand effort.

The present government, which came in power in 2014, launched the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) in the same year. The focus was on sanitation, in particular, to make India open defecation free by 2019. The government views this mission as a 'social movement' seeking participation of all to make it a success. The mission is taking time to demonstrate its impact. Its success is contingent upon adoption of cleanliness as a life value and daily practice on the part of people.

The following year of 2015 witnessed the launching of as many as four new urban initiatives, including Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT); Smart City Mission (SCM); Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY); and Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY). The purpose of each of

these missions can be easily deciphered from its nomenclature. AMRUT, in spirit, is a new avatar of JNNURM. The core objective of this mission is to provide support to the urban local bodies for reforming their institutional frame work. This should help them in improving the quality of water supply and strengthening of sanitation system. Greening of the city landscape, upgradation of public transport, and facilitation of non-motorized mobility are also envisaged. The mission does not involve direct devolution of urban services.

Smart City Mission is directed toward up-gradation of the quality of urban life through smart solutions and technology. An efficient use is to be made of the resources available with and provided to the city. Inclusiveness is to be ensured in management of urban services. A clean and sustainable environment is an essential feature of a smart city.

Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana aims at housing for all by 2022. The specific purpose is to rehabilitate slum dwellers with participation of private developers, promote affordable housing for the weaker section, low income group, and middle class, and give a stimulus to house construction by individual households. The mission is in the mode of a centrally sponsored scheme in which beneficiaries are also expected to make a contribution except for the component of credit linked subsidy.

Heritage City Development and Heritage Yojana, on the other hand, is a centrally funded scheme which absolves the state governments and their urban local bodies of any obligation to make a financial contribution. The preparation of a holistic development plan of the heritage city is a pre-requisite. This is meant to indicate the projects which will be implemented to renovate and renew the heritage features, strengthen the overall infrastructure base of the city, and enhance its aesthetic appeal.

As it emerges, the various missions are

scheduled to conclude either in 2019, the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, or 2022, the 75th completion year of India's independence. Both are meant to render a stimulus and strength to the process of achieving the intended goals. A collective focus of various missions on housing, infrastructure and urban services is conspicuous. Most admirable is the fact that these missions keep the local urban bodies at the centre for their implementation.

At the end of the day, where are we led to by the gleanings from the papers included in the festschrift and a critique of the urban development missions of the Government of India. Some broad observations are possible. First, sustainable urban development has virtually turned into a mantra, something auspicious to recite. It has taken the form of an ideal, a grand wish, a worthy goal to work for. It is, however, not very clear as to what would be the physical manifestation of a sustainable city in process. Is it the one urban place which is immortal with continuous growth, or is it the one which offers the best of living conditions, or is it the one which is a solution to some critical problem, such as the climate change? Is it an ecological or technological or ideological concept? All this begs clarity.

Secondly, a holistic approach is recommended as the best path to sustainability. In actual, however, the act strategies suggested or adopted are in the style of seven blind men holding the different limbs of elephant. The usual focus is upon one dimension of the city, may it be public transport in Curitiba, or green energy in Stockholm, or institutional set up in Singapore. The same could be said about the urban development missions of the Government of India, each having a different agenda. Perhaps reality defies integration. It does not allow translation of a dream into deed. Finally, the idea of placing the elected urban

bodies at the centre of things in implementation of urban missions is most laudable. This is in democratic spirit ensuring roots to the grass. The irony is that generally these bodies do not have the requisite capacity to deliver their obligations. They are usually weak in their knowledge of the spirit, purpose and modalities of a mission. They mostly lack the ability to prepare a proper city development plan. They are not well versed with financial matters of the mission. Added to all this is the reluctance of the state governments to contribute their share of development funds. The outcome is visible. The pace of urban missions is tardy and success far from desired.

What is the way out? This can be put in simple words: Set the capacity building of urban local bodies as a pre-condition for starting of any urban development programme. Who is to be trained first of all? These would be the elected members of the urban body. They are the key persons in taking care of the management issues of the city. The second target group for training would, of course, be the employees of the urban body. Here the focus will be on skill formation. Finally, a research unit is a must in each urban body to monitor the implementation of development projects and assess their impact on regular basis. They require a special kind of training. It is redeeming to learn that the Institute for Spatial Planning and Environment Research (ISPER) has adopted training as one of its major obligations. This augurs well for the cause of urban sustainability.

Thank you all!

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