Urbanization, Urban Poverty, Homelessness

and the Way Out

Urbanization, has been touted as the talisman and panacea for all the ills of rural poverty. A pill if taken will usher a nation into the trajectory of affluence, glitter, glamour, SMARTness, was what was taught to many. What happened really, let us see.

"Today the phenomenon of urbanization is at its acme where an additional 404 million[[1]](#footnote-2) people are expected to be living in the cities by 2050", notes Anju Reshma Manikoth (2015). She further states, " by 2030, it is expected that more than 50% of the Indian population will be living in cities. According to 2011 census about 31.6% (37.7 crore)[[2]](#footnote-3) of the population of India resides in urban areas[[3]](#footnote-4). Presently the pace of Indian urbanization is 31.6% and is expected to increase in the future. Today urban centres have become the drivers for the economy by contributing for more than 60% of the GDP. "

"According to the 2011 census, India has about 53 cities with over one million population, 475 urban agglomerations, 3894 census towns and 4041 statutory towns. Migration from rural to urban areas for better opportunities is the fundamental driver of the urbanization in India. Figure 1 shows the urbanization rate since independence where the left axis shows a share of total population and average annual urbanization rate by decade (right axis), 1951 to 2011.

Table 1: Urbanization Rate

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | India | China | World |
| 1950 | 17% | 11.8% | 29.4% |
| 2011 | 31.6% | 49.2% | 52.1% |

Source: UN Habitat Report, World Urbanization Prospect, 2014

Indian urbanization growth rate was about 2% per decade since independence while the rest of world was growing at a much faster pace (see table 1). For example, China strategically planned its economic future through urbanization by investing in infrastructure, education and health for its people resulting in a faster pace of urbanization. The rest of the world also urbanized at a faster pace when compared to India. Indian urbanization rate was nominal because far too many people dependent on agriculture (about 50%) and contribute less than 15% of GDP (Planning Commission Report, 2012), indicating low productivity of labour. This resulted is a very low per capita income which is crucial factor for urbanization. Economists keeps pointing out the massive disguised unemployment where over 1730 farmers are working per hectare of land which is proportionately much large when compared to the developed nations where only 15 people work per hectare ... This excess human capital needs to be diverted into the industrial and manufacturing sector. This massive transformation needs to be planned and guided for more efficiency and effectiveness. "

"In 1950 the rate of urbanization in India was only 17%, which is actually not a small figure. Subsequently, the initial three five year plans targeted the creation of institutions and organizational structure of the town and country planning organizations of the cities and towns thus creating capacity for balanced regional development. The Fourth plan focused on regional development emphasizing on land regulation and pricing, preparation of master plans etc. The fifth plan recommended the state governments to undertake city development plans and keep in check the growing areas outside of the administrative city limits. The sixth five-year plan shifted the focus from the metros to small and medium towns. Integrated Development of Small and Medium Towns (IDSMT) scheme was launched in 1979 by central government. The seventh five year plan for the first time intended to give Urban Local Bodies (ULB’s) constitutional status with a three tier federal structure which was passed only in 1992 as the 74th Constitutional amendment act. The eighth and the ninth plans had a two-pronged strategy of focusing on both metros and small towns through Mega city scheme and IDSMT scheme in an attempt to divert migration to small and medium towns by boosting employment generation in the same. It also emphasized on decentralization and financial autonomy of the urban local bodies. Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojna (SJSRY) was introduced to reduce urban poverty and encourage self and wage employment. The Tenth and the eleventh plan stressed the need to strengthen the capacity of the urban local bodies thus increasing efficiency in delivering urban services and infrastructure. One major initiative of the eleventh plan was the introduction of central government scheme Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JnNURM) which was designed to provide financial assistance to 63 cities across the country to bolster the urban infrastructure and services. Alongside JnNURM, Rajiv Awaas Yojana (RAY) was launched for creating slum free cities. The JnNURM [transmuted to AMRUT] and RAY [now it is called PMAY] is extended to 2022 but is now renamed under the bracket of 'Smart Cities' by the new government. The government has increased the number of cities to 100 and hopes to provide smart solutions to problems encompassing supply of basic services, energy, transport safety and quality of life."

"Although cities drive economic growth, the quality of life in Indian cities is below satisfactory levels. Erratic water and power supplies, high levels of pollution, congestion lack of safety are looming at large in Indian cities. Urban poverty levels and inequality are also rising. Here we discuss some of the challenges facing Indian urbanization."

"The institutional challenges of urban governance, planning, finances and regulation are inhibiting growth and development. The 74th amendment is not fully implemented by states hence compromising and handicapping the municipalities and urban local bodies. Planning is also centralized. Until now, the planning commission dictated the terms and conditions to the states and ULB’s. True decentralization of 74th amendment act is yet to be realized. Financing and revenue generation of ULB’s is declining", notes Anju R. Manikoth (2015, pp. 5-8).

The lack of governance and non adherence to Master Plans and askewed development is what has led to poverty getting extended from rural areas into urban areas, with its amelioration becoming a mirage, all over the country. Our "ROBUST" bureaucracy has not been a mute spectator to all this but rather the progenitor / facilitator / ... of urban poverty as the twin of rural poverty.

One of the worst manifestations of urban poverty is homelessness. Homelessness is not a malaise but a symptom. A symptom of serious distress. Serious distress of grave economic disorder, and social injustice/ tribulations, like: atrocities against dalits, rape and torture of women, riots. The only personal dimension is the person who faces it, alone or together with her / his family. Homeless, then is a person who has no roof over her/his head or his family’s head.

Even if a person has a home in the village, is that home of any use in the urban context. Besides, if the home in the village could serve all the purpose of a HOME: security, love, health, education, employment, food, land ... why would anybody leave it to sleep on (in) the Footpaths/ corridors/parks, flyovers, handcarts, rickshaws, night shelters (wherever it is there)... of a city.

Our studies and interactions with homeless across the country, have shown that **people come to cities as a last resort**, each one due to one of these reasons: **poverty, unemployment, destitution, heavily in debt (of usurious money lenders), caste atrocities (against dalits, women …), communal riots, drought, floods, cyclone, earthquake and personal hardships** (usurpation of property by relations/ dominant castes etc., disowned elderly parents, …). Illnesses, and stigmatised diseases like leprosy too have dehoused people. Besides being displaced due mega dam projects mining, Special Economic Zones (SEZs), Special Tourism Zones (STZs), etc.

 Unlike, what our bureaucrats and economists are wont to think that the people from rural areas coming to cities do so, as they are attracted to the cities due to its glow and glamour; we have been informed by the homeless that they are in the cities for they were compelled to leave their villages. It was not volitional. Strong structural / systemic processes of destitution and distress are responsible for pushing people to the cities, over which many vulnerable communities in rural areas, have no control.

The entire talk of some of the bureaucrats to put a check on migration from rural to urban areas is not only unjustified and inhuman, it is also unconstitutional, as it is violative of Article 19 of the Constitution of India. **Article 19, empowers the people of this country, with the freedom to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India.**

Poverty then is systemic/ structural in nature. And is a product of askewed social relations/ interactions (hardships) and economic processes. Ascribing it to any person as a personal attribute is a fallacy. A product of misconception, guided by myths and opinions. The government programmes and policies have made an half hearted approach to deal with poverty: rural as well urban. Rampant corruption at all levels is responsible for it. If all the resources that were put in towards poverty alleviation been utilised in full sincerity, we would have by now eliminated poverty, not just alleviated. And surely the quality of life (QOL) would have been better everywhere, both rural and urban. As cited by Anju R. Manikoth, " [as per ]E. Erich Boschmann and Mei Po Kwan ... , Quality of life is improvement in standards of living and equitable distribution of benefits and burdens of development." Unfortunately, in many cities of the world, and especially in India for sure the benefits accrue to the rich and elite; and the burden is sold to the poor as a gift, than the refuse of the powers that be.

Manikoth further notes, "The UN – Habitat survey (2011) gives importance to good quality education, adequate housing with basic services, freedom to live and work, meaningful employment with decent income as factors impacting QOL in cities. It also implies that there is a positive correlation between commitment to address quality of life and the possibility of designing specific policies.[[4]](#footnote-5) In general, cities policies are targeted towards infrastructure development and consider quality of life as a by-product. While the focus is on promoting economic growth, there is a possibility of incurring negative externalities if not considered and acknowledged adequately. On the other hand if the policy design is targeting quality of life, the repercussions will lead to positive externalities. The UN Habitat policy analysis reveal that in most cities, there are no clear policies or actions/ procedures that focus on delivering better quality of life to the whole population.

The report on ‘State of the world cities 2012-13 which is about prosperity in cities advocate that social equity and quality of life are in tandem. They also suggest that the public goods are the means to improve quality of life in cities thereby reducing the gap between the haves and have-nots. Quality of life had varied convergent and divergent responses in different cities. Divergent city responses were specific to the cities and convergent were generic and applicable to all cities. If we look at the generic convergent responses to quality of life in cities safety featured as the most prominent aspect, followed by public transport, public spaces, healthcare, housing etc. Safety is paramount for a prosperous city. *‘By itself, security may not bring prosperity to any city, but its absence is fatal. Economic inequity and/ or instability nurtures high perceptions of crime and violence in various cities in the world.’[[5]](#footnote-6)*"

These words, QOL, 'safety' seem alien to the Indian context. Is it not so?

# The way out

So we are in a mess created by our own government. Made murkier by its own dealings: omissions and commissions. The way to deal with urban poverty lies in removing rural poverty, not the poor people. And rural poverty is reflected through: recurrent droughts/ floods, shrinking artisanship, no work/employment, indebtedness, poor health infrastructure/ care, absent teachers from schools, female foeticide, bonded labour, child labour….

The other way to deal with it lies in making housing accessible to all and putting a stop to all evictions in urban settings. The master plan of a city should be so made that around 30% of all residential space should be utilised for construction of houses for the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) and the Lower Income Groups (LIG). This incorporation prevents seclusion and facilitates work options being available at door step. Mindless eviction intensifies the poverty of already the very vulnerable people. With no mechanisms for immediate redressal they continue to move from one fringe to other. Surely, what is lacking is the political will. Major contribution is also made by the callous and deeply prejudiced attitude of bureaucracy (barring a few of course!). Persistent problems require innovative and honest solutions. Solutions, not merely aimed at future but here and now as well. We need to reintroduce the Urban Land Ceiling and Regulation, 1976 which was repealed in 1998. The government approach has been of allowing housing shortages to exponentially grow, closing its eyes to the abject inhuman conditions in which hundreds and thousands of slum dwellers and homeless live, and then one fine morning waking with the thought dinned in their minds by the external agencies to having a beautiful city for how else will international capital pour in? How else? How else? How else? Once out of its slumber, the government’s mode switches to demolish and relocate, with policing of lands. It doesn’t augur well for the urban poor. **It appears as though privatisation is the panacea for all urban systemic ills. For there is now premium on openness. It’s truly an open mind, open door, open land, open resources, open water, open - open policy for the rich to get richer and the poor to be removed from all open areas, thrown any where the private sector may plan. Far from the city, far from the village, far from the livelihood, into an abyss. And be there till, it is again found turned into a resource, for beauty to spawn. And have them again removed to another abyss.**

Data is really shocking: 50% of the population in slums possess less than 5% of land. Majority of the urban poor live in less than 1/10 of city space. And we all know that 90% of shortage in housing is experienced by the economically weaker sections of our society. Still we don’t tire of saying that there’s no land. For whom? The issue is that there is enough land for the rich to buy and stock it as farm houses. But for the urban poor, homeless and the inadequately housed (let’s stop calling them slum dwellers) who run the cities of India through their hard labour, construct the buildings at peril to their own health, work in our homes as domestic labour, languish in the dungeons of the city. A virtual abyss! Ironically, they are called the loads and seen as a drain on urban economy. We forget that our cities would collapse if they were not there. This is not a romantic view of their labour. It’s rather a hard fact staring in our faces which we are not willing to accept. The CityMakers get devastated in and by the same city, they create. We need to treat the urban poor as citizens (residents) of our country and not as “pick pockets and thieves”, as noted by our Judiciary.

The only hope i see in is in “**We, the People of India**”. Who have to resolutely attempt to solve the systemic ills through protest actions and constructive endeavours. Urban spaces should also spawn lots and lots of livelihood options. This needs to also embrace the rural settings. The corporate sector has an important role to play in this. And the livelihood options need to be aligned with housing locations. A divorce between the two is what has created the mess that we are in today.

We can rid this country from poverty. It’s in our powers to do so. Powers of **We, the People of India.**

1. 2014, UN Habitat report, World Urbanization Prospect [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. India Census 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. According to Census, an Urban area includes all places which have municipality, corporation, cantonment board or notified town area committee. All the other places which satisfy the following criteria: Minimum population of 500 persons; at least 75% male working in non agricultural pursuits; density of population of at least 400 persons per square kilometer. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. 2012-13, State of the World Cities, UN - Habitat [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid, pp. 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)