



The Contemporary Urban Conundrum

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SPRING 2017
Quarterly

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Conundrum

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EDITORIAL

It was the best of cities, it was the worst of cities.

(brutal misquote of the memorable opening lines from *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens).

In the mid-1980s, urban studies found little space in academic publishing. Today, it is quite the opposite. Universities across the country include courses on urban studies, and there are a number of research institutes and think tanks that focus on contemporary urbanisation as part of larger centres for policymaking. This volume, with contributions by academics and academic-practitioners, lays out for us the different and complex dimensions of urbanisation and its impact on our lives. Urbanisation goes hand in hand with ‘development’, with little thought for the fallout in terms of a breakdown, not only of physical infrastructure, but also quality of life, as this volume shows.

Despite this, however, we are passionate about our cities, even vociferously protective. We protest against malls being built in our colonies, or trees being sacrificed for development projects. We think nothing of polluting our environment, but we take pride in the metro. India Gate in Delhi is still a favourite place to walk on hot summer evenings when electricity fails. Marine Drive in Mumbai is another iconic space to walk, jog, or do nothing at all. The huge open space near Victoria Memorial in Kolkata is a blessing for the young who have dreams of becoming football or cricket stars.

We have to acknowledge that urbanisation is inevitable. And while we look to the state to provide not just basic amenities but better planning of cities, we have to ask how we, as citizens, can contribute to making our cities liveable today and for the future.

I will not hold you back from the brilliant contributions to this volume. It is our privilege that some of the best minds in the field agreed to come on board to make this a rich addition to the literature on urbanisation.



OMITA GOYAL

FOREWORD

Every year we choose one area for our double issue in which we bring together a broad spectrum of views and ideas from a number of scholars and concerned citizens. These have become collectors' items and are often published as hardback books. This year we have chosen to concentrate on Cities.

Urbanisation is a major concern as our population continues to grow exponentially, and the middle class is also rising. We have, of course, a long and rich tradition of planned cities, going all the way back to Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus Valley/Sarasvati Civilisation, and also since Independence with Chandigarh, Bhuvaneshwar, and now Amravati. However, apart from the rare planned cities there is a proliferation of unplanned urbanisation in the metros and semi-rural areas. All of these raise a number of crucial issues which need to be frontally addressed.

How can we ensure that some sense of order and logic is brought into our urban development? The concept of the city itself has expanded, and Delhi for example is now a federation of many townships rather than an integrated city. Therefore, it is necessary to have a structure of Resident Welfare Associations to oversee the requirement of individual townships. Here our Corporations, Municipalities and Panchayats have to be motivated to try and ensure some degree of coherence in our urban expansion. Another question is with regard to the massive influx of population from rural to urban areas. Unless satellite towns are developed around the major population hubs, the whole structure is rapidly becoming clogged and dysfunctional. Central and state agencies need to become much more active and effective if the situation is to be reversed.

A third issue that faces our cities emerges from climate change which is beginning to produce, with startling regularity, extreme

weather conditions that cause havoc. The latest phenomenon that we have witnessed is the drowning of entire cities. This has happened in Chennai, Bengaluru, Srinagar, Mumbai and elsewhere over the last few years. The Srinagar flood was a classic example of a climate crisis compounded by human error and ineptitude. It is difficult to believe that many parts of Srinagar were submerged under 30 feet of water for several days. With climate change speeding up, such ecological disasters are likely to increase. We need, therefore, on the one hand to re-structure our water management systems in the cities, and, on the other, to keep ecological factors closely in mind while planning new urban settlements.

Another area that has not received adequate attention is the structural aspect of urbanisation. I recall several decades ago there was a buzz regarding prefabricated houses which promised large-scale low-cost housing. However, subsequently, the concept seems to have vanished, although I understand that the technology has greatly improved and could now provide the possibility of massive construction, particularly in semi-urban areas. Green technology also needs to be developed instead of our increasing dependence on cement concrete. Structures that are environment friendly, such as those having solar panels, would help in reducing our carbon emissions. The whole technology of construction, therefore, needs a fresh survey and an innovative approach.

Finally, the importance of civic amenities in our cities has been gravely discounted. Waste management is still generally a disaster story. Potable drinking water is still not available in many areas and medical facilities fall far short of the growing requirements. These are areas upon which the central and state governments must concentrate their attention in the decades ahead. While the old concept of the city as a meeting place of people from different backgrounds has virtually disappeared, it is still necessary that areas for creative mingling should be provided within our urban conglomerations.

Taken together, these constitute a massive challenge to the country. This issue contains a number of insightful essays by people who have studied the problems in depth, and will surely be a valuable addition to the literature in this area. I commend it not only to directly involved organisations, but to concerned citizens without

whose active interest the massive challenges that we face cannot be effectively met.

KARAN SINGH

