

A Farewell to Urban Planning : Sequel to Urbanisation in South Asia

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Introduction

Asia is becoming a continent of megacities. In 2000 there were 15 Asian cities amongst the 30 largest cities in the world. By 2015 this number will be 18 with a population of 10 million or more in each. A city is an oasis in the desert of rural poverty. There is pseudo-urbanisation and parts of megacities are agglomerations of villages. About 25 to 40 percent of the people live in slums and squatter colonies and there is a growing informal sector of economy. The government needs to spend huge amounts of money for sanitation, water supply, garbage disposal, infrastructure development, housing and community facilities. Increasing health hazards, traffic congestion, crime and violence with unemployment have surfaced with politics at every sphere of life. Some megacities have centralised governments like Shanghai or Seoul, some have fragmented geographical authorities like Dhaka or Manila and some have an urban development authority like Kolkata or Karachi. Yet there is an absence of linkage between planning and development processes, absence of participatory governance, absence of local capital investment plan and lack of technical capacity and implementation of fiscal measures (Edralin, 1998). There is also little coordination between these development authorities and municipalities and the difference between rich and poor is becoming wider. In such cities globalisation has been advocated with liberalisation and privatisation.

A review of Brundtland Commission's Report (Safting, 1998) says that 'Globalisation is a kind of blanket concept. Such concepts have a tendency to hide rather than reveal'. Uneven development has been an inevitable outcome of the new global economy (Lo and Yeung, 1998).

The French Revolution had a bye-product- the bourgeois class of people; globalisation has a bye-product of an elite class, a new colaburger dot com society- with new consumption standards, foreign goods, exclusive houses, cars etc. This is true in some western cities and someone has said 'homeless people and stretch limousine are two fastest growing items on the streets'. The conflict of ideologies make globalisation and its impact on cities complex. The Chinese leader Deng Xiao Ping's famous statement can be quoted 'the colour of the cat is unimportant so long as it catches mice.'

The pattern of urban development is the same. Some highrise buildings at the centre destroying the historic buildings and quarters and depleting ground water and creating problems in sanitation, traffic etc. and a suburban sprawl destroying agricultural and forest cover and filling waterbodies. There are pockets of slums and pockets of housing estates,

gated, grilled and protected. The economic boom has led to ecological doom. Some people thought that with globalisation and rise of information technology, rise of education and economic level of rural people and development of electronic and celuloïd culture there will be decentralisation of megacities. But these work only marginally, and centrality remains. The agglomeration economies will continue to play a vital role in increasing the productivity of wide range of economic activities and services. One World Bank report (The World Bank, 1999) says, 'In the future the faces of globalisation including trade liberalisation and financial integration will continue to influence the importance of urban agglomeration economies.'

There are some characteristics of urbanisation in the Indian subcontinent of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. These countries are mostly agriculture based rural countries where the level of urbanisation is low. In 1950, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) had 4.2 percent, Pakistan 17.5 percent and India 17.3 percent urban population. In 2000, the percentage of people living in urban areas has become 21.2 percent, 37.0 percent and 28.4 percent and by 2015, the level of urbanisation will be 30.8 percent in Bangladesh, 46.7 percent in Pakistan and 35.9 percent in India. The levels of urbanisation in Iran, Indonesia, Korea and Philippines are much more.

In 1950 only Kolkata and Bombay were included in the list of 30 largest cities in the world. By 1970 Delhi was added and by 1980 Karachi was included. Interestingly Dhaka became the 28th city in 1990 only but in 2000 it became 15th and by 2015 it will become the 5th largest city in the world with 19.5 million population i.e. next to Bombay. By 2015, Kolkata, Bombay, Delhi, Hyderabad, Karachi, Lahore and Dhaka— seven cities will be in the list of 30 largest cities with a combined population of 119.8 million. These cities contain most of the urban population i.e. only a few cities have become megacities. In 2000, Dhaka contained 40.41 percent of the urban population of the country. Karachi contained 20.37 percent. Within the State of West Bengal in India, Kolkata contains two thirds of State's urban population. Bangkok, Jakarta, Yangon and Manila have the same characteristics (The United Nations, 1998).

In pre-partition Bengal, Kolkata was the most dominant city. Within the next 15 years' time Dhaka became the most dominant city. During 1990-95 the average annual growth of population of Dhaka was 6.35 percent and during 1995-2000 it was 5.01 Percent while in Kolkata these figures were 1.88 percent and 1.58 percent. Kolkata has the slowest growth of all megacities in India and also in Asia.

After partition, the then East Pakistan had the advantage of having many urban centres besides Dhaka like Chittagong, Mymensingh, Khulna, Rajshahi and others.

In 1950, Chittagong had 1.5 times more population than Dhaka (629,000 compared to 420,000) but in 2000 while Dhaka's population exceeded 10 million, Chittagong's population was about 3 million only. The absence of regional planning, Pakistani regime's neglect and lack of clear cut decentralisation policy were responsible. In case of Kolkata, the situation was difficult as Kolkata was the most dominant centre not only in the State of West Bengal but also in the entire Eastern Region. The Kolkata Metropolitan Planning Organisation with Ford Foundation Consultants emphasized regional planning,

encouraged development of Haldia, Durgapur and other towns and later on initiated development of small towns and with election of rural councils (Gram Panchayet) extensive rural improvement and agriculture development were taken up. With one-third of the elected members being women, local development became important and despite political conflict, migration to Kolkata slowed down. Kolkata's growth is now due to natural increase and migration from other States of India. But with increasing communication and transportation, day time population has become bigger putting strain on services.

Pattern of Programmes

During the last few decades various urban development and environmental programmes have been taken up and urban planning vis-a-vis metropolitan planning for many Asian cities has followed the same pattern. A long range master plan or development plan for larger area is prepared with intensive surveys, and studies, sometimes with foreign technical consultancy. The plan is oriented towards landuse and infrastructure development like transportation, sanitation etc. and a patch work like Central Business District, shopping complex, industrial areas, satellite towns and housing estates. Some decorative features are added, conservation of historic buildings and areas, and environmental improvement are the latest additions to the list of programmes of infrastructure development and programmes to alleviate poverty and provision of basic services in slums and low income areas. The dream is painted and various government agencies, municipalities and the private sector start implementing such dreams often without coordination. There are expensive metropolitan level projects and local level small projects. Often local problems overshadow the metropolitan problems. Private real estate developers take advantage of infrastructure facilities provided with public expenditure. Profit making values collide with socially rooted values. Cities cease to become communities, they are considered commodities. Politicians and administrators want some dream projects and they want their cities to look like New York on picture postcards.

There are several experiments— ecovillage, ecopolis, sustainable communities, green architecture etc. While micro-environmental factors or brown agenda are for the city, macro-environmental factors or green agenda are essential for the habitat. Sustainable human settlement has broader dimensions as it goes beyond the building and infrastructures.

The World Bank, separately and also with the United Nations Organisations, has taken up a number of plans and programmes. The Urban Management Programme (UMP) has been initiated in a number of cities focussing on five areas— management, infrastructure management, municipal finance and administration, environmental management and poverty alleviation. Sustainable cities programme is another programme emphasizing citizen participation and partnership of all stake-holders. There is the Healthy Cities programme launched by the World Health Organisation. All these are trying to make cities livable.

Kolkata Case Study

Kolkata (Calcutta) Metropolitan Area is one of the largest megacities in Asia. It is a linear conurbation of municipalities, adjacent non-municipal urban areas, rivers, canals and drainage basins geographically, socially and economically linked on two sides of the river Hooghly— a tributary of the Ganges in the eastern state of West Bengal in India not far from the Bay of Bengal. Kolkata was the capital of British India till 1911. It was the second capital after London of the British empire. Portuguese and Armenians came to this area and the Mughals had outposts but it was established by the English in 1690. The French, the Danes and the Dutch also came and established their settlements. However there was gradual decline of Kolkata when the Capital of India was shifted to Delhi in 1911. Despite some improvements there was British apathy due to the freedom struggle. There was economic depression, Second World War, Bengal famine, communal riots and finally with partition of India and Bengal in 1947 the influx of millions of refugees.

In 1961 the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation was established and with the help of the Ford Foundation it prepared the Basic Development Plan for Calcutta Metropolitan District 1966-86 (CMPO, 1966). Two other sectoral master plans were also prepared : the water supply, sewerage and drainage master plan (with WHO support) and the traffic and transportation plan. Later many other plans and programmes were formulated.

The physical urban development in Kolkata Metropolitan Area was a programmatic plan with a view to improve the livability. Three essential tasks were identified in the plan (a) the arrest of deterioration (b) better use of existing capacity of several kinds and (c) provision of massive new growth. It was a very difficult task as the designated metropolitan district had three municipal corporations, 36 municipalities, one notified area authority, 94 non-municipal urban units and 416 rural land units. In 1991 it had 1350 sq. kms. with a population of 11.02 million. In 1996 another 185 sq. kms. area was added. In 1971 the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority was set up and with the help of the World Bank it took up massive urban development programmes including environmental improvement of slums. Two major projects i.e. construction of high level second river crossing and underground metro railway were outside the programme.

The Basic Development Plan emphasized the regional plan— decentralised industrial development in industrial townships, development of a new port and agricultural development as, when Kolkata is excluded, the State has a low level of urbanisation with strong agricultural base.

The Basic Development Plan departed from the usual Anglo-saxon town planning practice based on landuse and zoning control. As the implementation programme was taken up by the Development Authority the planning organisation was abolished and the Authority was given planning powers in 1977 and in 1979 the West Bengal Town and Country Planning (Planning & Development) Act was enforced. The Calcutta Municipal Corporation Act 1980 introduced a new administrative set up. For the first time in India, the municipal cabinet system of city government 'Mayor in Council' was introduced. In order to strengthen the village councils and municipalities and institutions of local self-

government and to improve their capabilities to provide service to the people, the Constitution of India was amended by the 73rd and 74th Amendments. But appropriate action regarding metropolitan planning has not been taken.

The Government of India initiated the Megacity Scheme for major cities, where Central and State Governments each will finance 25 percent of costs and the balance 50 percent is to be met from institutional finance and market borrowings. Project areas are of three categories— the projects that are remunerative, projects for which user charges can be levied and projects for basic services where very low or no returns are expected. Only projects of regional or citywide significance that are in accordance with the regional and metropolitan master plan or development plan will be assisted. The megacity projects went halfway and the progress and flow of future are slow. Several environmental groups protested against adhoc selection.

CMDA produced many reports and planning documents. A perspective plan for Kolkata 2011 was prepared by the State Planning Board in 1990 but it was shelved. Various adhoc projects were initiated like the Transport Department's flyover projects. Adhocracy, technocracy and bureaucracy dominated and metropolitanism was lost even with initiation of megacity projects of adhoc nature. The conflict and gap arising out of very long range perspective plans and very short range project plans with different gestation periods resulted in incomplete projects, unbalanced sectoral outlay with lack of socio economic and environmental objectives.

The Basic Development plan mentioned, "an effective infrastructure of public services and utilities must be available to support the improvement projects. The implementation of major public works in the central area must wait for these first steps to be taken (CMPO, 1966)." But the private real estate development promoters took advantage.

Several pollution problems of air and water surfaced. The environment deteriorated affecting the people. NGOs and the media highlighted the problems and Kolkata High Court set up a Green Bench to deal with cases regarding the environment. The Environment Department of the State Government with British financial and technical help prepared the Calcutta Environment Management and Strategic action plan— another dreamy picture was presented to the public with the slogan 'a better place to live, work and invest in'. The exercise, however, became academic and failed to generate any interest, not to speak of dream, to make Kolkata environmentally sustainable.

While Kolkata through a quarter of a century invested in urban development projects with or without proper urban plans in order to rescue the city from disaster, to provide facilities for livability and to provide new growth, the vision became blurred. There is however awareness for conservation and historical buildings are listed. The State Government has carried out agricultural land reforms and elections to the village councils were held. With emphasis on rural development, agricultural productivity has increased many times. Rural people are being contained in the rural areas. Amongst megacities of Asia, Kolkata's growth is the slowest. In 1972 when an extensive urban development programme with a variety of projects was undertaken, an urban design framework was proposed within which urban renewal projects as well as neighbourhood development

programmes could be integrated. There was no comprehensive spatial framework to guide and coordinate physical growth.

When the metropolitan area had large projects of metropolitan nature and many small projects of local importance, a synthesis in spatial order was necessary and it was thought that urban design would play a vital role by establishing relationships among macro and micro elements both functionally and aesthetically in time-space sequence.

Unfortunately the urban design programmes or urban renewal projects were not pursued. CMDA continued uncoordinated engineering projects with some social welfare programmes which helped private developers to speculate land price and launch piecemeal projects and the environment deteriorated. On the other hand other industrial towns like Haldia port or Durgapur have also grown. The Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation's concept in 1960s that metropolitan development was to be linked with agricultural development also is paying dividends, together with development of small and medium sized towns and decentralised industrial development.

Some people without government help have taken up development with contribution to sustainable environment on the eastern side of Kolkata. Solid waste is being transformed into natural compost and there is extensive vegetable production which is keeping the city's edge green and providing employment to a section of urban poor. The city's waste water with sewage effluent is being recycled into a aquaculture with production of fish. An isolated water body has been developed into nature park recycling industrial waste water. There is a growing informal sector of economy sometimes with help from financial institutions and banks and mostly with individual or community efforts.

Urbanisation is always seen as an effect of industrialisation and a tertiary sector development. In the 1970's when the benefits of India's green revolution in agriculture were being felt, the author propagated the concept of agriculture-based urbanisation emphasizing the development of small and medium sized towns with agricultural hinterland. Today the prophecy has become true.

A quarter of a century of urban development has rescued this megacity from disaster. There is an unending list of new programmes as well as unfinished projects. A new vision is now required. The vision will not be towards projects of grandeur and glamour, neither popular programmes to remove squalor and decay, but towards an ecologically and environmentally sustainable city.

Vision for a Future City

Any vision for the future of an Asian city will not be a plan for a dream city but for a long range achievement of goals for making a healthy and livable city (Ghosh, 1998) :

1. Improving the planning process and strengthening the planning machinery at the local and regional levels.
2. Changing the fiscal systems with new incentives and institutional finance, mechanisms for economic regeneration and implementing remunerative projects to raise funds for development projects.

3. Development of a new model of partnership between the public sector, private sector and the people through NGO's and community based organisations.
4. Integrating the environmental and ecological parameters in planning and development with the new concepts of 'reuse, recycle, reduce, recover and rehabilitate' as well as conservation of nature and cultural heritage.
5. Developing mechanisms to control poverty, pollution and population and improving health, hygiene and housing.
6. Reducing imbalances in social, economic, demographic and physical aspects with special emphasis on women, children and the disadvantaged in the society. The Government needs to increase its role in developing an enabling framework for investment, innovation, and initiative by others.
7. Developing an urban design structure with better architecture and an aesthetically designed structure with some new concepts such as urban agriculture, pedestrian areas and conservation of historic districts.
8. Introduction of new technical innovations including cybernetics in the functioning and governance of the metropolis.
9. Incorporating sustainability in the entire development programme at all levels and capacity building and human resource development with active participation of citizen's groups in civil society. Sustainable use of energy, sustainable transport and building will be emphasised.

The future Asian megacity will not be a dream city. There will not be any political promise to take the people to the moon but efforts are to continue to make cities livable. The human face is to be restored, the city will be considered as a community not a commodity and a new type of environmental planning and management is required.

Conclusion

According to one UN handout, megacities were destined to dominate the planet the way dinosaurs once did. But the supercities may be handicapped by a problem the dinosaurs also faced i.e., sheer size.

In a city where each year two to three hundred thousand new people are added along with more vehicles, autos and rickshaws, pavement dwellers and shanties, the Anglo-saxon concept of urban planning becomes of theoretical importance and acquires the status of political science or philosophy in the universities. From the bureaucratic master plan based on landuse the urban planners have gone to the sky and are utilising remote sensing, satellite pictures etc. and providing unrealistic solutions, often uncoordinated with the projects of the transportation, water supply and sanitation departments.

Urban planning as taught and practised in South Asia will remain with micro level area projects. For megacities like Kolkata or Dhaka, a regional ecological plan, a multidisciplinary long range plan must be prepared. The sustainability balance can only be achieved by bringing vast rural hinterlands in this regional ecology plan but such exercises are yet to be taken.

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