THE URBAN AGENDA

REGAINING AN IDEALIST VISION

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The uncontrolled degeneration of India's urban centres is to be deplored, but by opening up more land in conjunction with a well-planned and efficient system of transportation, its cities can still become centres of hope and economic growth, given the idealist and mataphysical vision that is so essential to the making of a city.

Over the last 50 years of independence, the physical degradation of our urban centres has been appalling — not only in the largest cities, but in the small towns as well.

The crux of the issue is this: we do not really seem to have any real interest in or coherent policies about our urban centres and how we should go about managing them. Unlike, say, our sportsmen who even when they lose at least have a basic understanding of the game and what they should be trying to do on the field, we as a society seem to be appallingly ignorant of how to deal with towns and cities.

Historically speaking, perhaps there are good reasons for this. Down the centuries, we have built sacred temple towns, like Varanasi and Sri Rangam. And we have built many *mundi* or market towns, where goods are bartered and exchanged. But we have not built any great metropolises. Calcutta, Shanghai, Bombay, Singapore, these came into being in the nineteenth century, through the process of industrialisation. These metropolises were really created by the colonial powers. Barbara Ward has rightly called them "compradore" cities

created to ship the gold back to London and other western ports. And they generated among the natives a compradore class which produced those skills needed to help ship that gold back to London — lawyers, engineers, doctors, administrators. This is why our political leaders, including Gandhi, have always had a certain suspicion of cities — a sort of anti-urban bias which is still part of our political luggage.

What Ward says is true. But it is not the whole truth. Take, for instance, the example of the railways. Undoubtedly, this was the highest technology of the nineteenth century, and it was introduced into India by the British for their own reasons, such as to move troops around the country in times of trouble. However, as we all know, the railways have been one of the most wonderful things that have ever happened to our country, for they allow every Indian, even the poorest, to return year after year to his *muluk*, or birth-place, at a price he can afford.

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So also our cities. The skills developed by the colonial powers for their own exploitative purposes have turned out to be exactly the skills we need to bring about our own development — ie, the skills of doctors, nurses, lawyers, administrators, engineers, and so forth. Indeed, a crucial part of the wealth of India is her urban skills, being continuously generated in a hundred towns and cities across the country, from Coimbatore to Cuttuck to Jalandhar. In this regard, India is particularly fortunate. Other Third World countries have to import these developmental and management skills, through the United Nations or the World Bank. India is an exception. The urban skills we generate are truly invaluable. Like the wheat fields of the Punjab and the coal mines of Bihar, they are a crucial part of our national wealth.

CENTRES OF HOPE

In short, I believe in our urban centres for at least three fundamental reasons. Firstly, as we have just seen, they develop the skills we need for development and growth. Secondly, they are centres of hope. Too often we look at our cities from our own self-centred point of view. So we see only the shortages, the

failures. But for millions of migrants, the landless labour and the wretched have-nots of our system, cities are perhaps their only hope — their only gateway to a better future. (During the Middle Ages in Europe, serfs who fought for their barons and earls were given their freedom — they became Freemen who moved to cities. And they loved that freedom. This is the genesis of the pleasurable urban life of Europe: troubadours singing love songs, taverns and inns, and so forth. This same phenomenon is happening in India today, but we do not seem to recognise it, except perhaps in popular cinema which makes this new freedom vivid. Thirdly, cities are engines of economic growth. Although there is no way, either politically or morally, that we can divert rural funds to develop towns, cities if properly managed can generate surplus funds, not only for their own development, but to help subsidise the surrounding rural areas as well.

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Cities, therefore, are an essential concomitant of the developmental path we have chosen. Only when we actually understand this will we find ways to manage them better. Today, as we all know, more than half the population of cities like Delhi and Mumbai (Bombay) comprises illegal squatters living in filthy slums, under dehumanising conditions. Obviously, these cities need to open up more urban land, on a scale commensurate with the demand. By urban land one means land with jobs, or with public transport that provides access to jobs. This is crucial. After all, migrants do not pour into a city for housing, but for work. Creating the same number of new jobs in an alternative pattern might greatly increase the area of urban land that is generated. This in turn reduces the cost of housing — as also its means of production, since traditional ways of construction generate far more employment among the poor and semi-skilled.

In this process, a Mass Rapid Transport (MRT) is of prime importance. For example, although there was no master plan for Bombay, the two railway engineers who laid out the pattern of the railway lines created the city's Y-shaped structure, along which settlements and housing colonies sprang up. Result: people in Bombay are far more mobile than their counterparts in Delhi, despite transportation provided by the highly subsidised DTC (Delhi Transport

Corporation). Delhi is expanding at a staggering rate without a thought to the inherent logic of linear patterns of public transport that must service a city and its citizens. Compare this to the extension of the London Underground in the 1920s and thirties, which opened up huge areas beyond Hampstead. In short, Demand often follows Supply — and a subsidy on public transport is really an indirect subsidy on housing. So instead of investing heavily in the production of private cars, we should really encourage industry to invest in better public buses, trams and trains and thus open up more urban land, at a price the public can afford.

Another crucial way to increase the supply of land is to re-allocate existing land-use that has become obsolete. The enormous holdings of the Port Trust in Calcutta, or the Textile Mills in Mumbai, are cases in point. To insist on uses which are no longer economically viable is not only to condemn the workers to an occupation without a future, but it also denies them the new jobs that they, and the city, so desperately need. Boston is an example of a textile town which was dying for this very reason in the 1950s, and which has now re-invented itself very successfully as a high-technology city. Similarly, Glasgow, once home to the world's largest shipyards, realises it now needs a new re-incarnation. Why can't the politicians who are responsible for our cities understand this?

Perhaps the reason is that the key decisions about our cities, such as funding, land use, FSI (Floor Space Index), etc, are made not by those political representatives who are ostensibly in charge of them (ie, the mayor and the city councillors) but by the state government. That is to say, all the key decisions for Mumbai or Madras or Bangalore are taken by political representatives who are not accountable to the people of that city. In fact, each cabinet minister is elected from a constituency far removed from the city. And, judging from recent history, the main motivation for wanting to be chief minister of a state is the opportunity to loot its principal city — a sort of perk that goes with the job. Obviously, this must change. The only city in India which is managed by a government directly accountable to the people of the city is Delhi. And look at the result. The difference is palpable.

Two other factors have increased prices drastically — Rent Control and Urban Land Ceiling. Over the last 50 years, while demand has been allowed to escalate, supply has been effectively reduced to a trickle. That the Rent Control Act should keep prices at World War II levels, without any correction whatso-

ever even for inflation, let alone rising real estate values, is not only manifestly absurd, it has helped to create a new category among the privileged. Despite whatever altruistic motives there might have been for the Urban Land Ceiling Act, statistics show that in city after city it led to a severe crisis in the availability of land, and hence to a sensational rise in prices. Result: the rich have become even richer.

This is why the National Commission on Urbanisation, appointed by Rajiv Gandhi in 1986, recommended that the Urban Land Ceiling Act should be replaced by a tax on unused urban land, which would be used exclusively as a shelter fund for the urban poor. (In the instance of Bangalore, it was calculated that a nominal tax of Rs 3 per square metre would result in the fund receiving an income of over nine hundred million rupees per annum). The Commission also recommended that rent control of commercial premises (and later of high-income housing) should be phased out. Allowing office rents to climb to their actual market prices (which in most cases is what the end user, through a labyrinth of sub-lessees, is paying) would not only result in very much better maintenance of the buildings, but also provide an entirely different tax base for the city. No longer would we need to finance our municipalities through octroi, which in any case is no better than a form of highway robbery. Instead, the city administration should be financed as it is throughout the world, by real estate taxes.

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In its report, the National Commission on Urbanisation also emphasised that India is especially fortunate in that the settlement pattern across the country is largely in equilibrium. There is no single primate city; instead we have a balanced pattern with real linkages between village, town and city. Today this system is under strain because of various pressures. The main thrust of the report, therefore, was not to find easy solutions for the problems of large metropolitan centres, but to suggest ways in which this vital balance could be strengthened and enhanced.

For instance, in order to divert distress migration away from the larger cities, the Commission identified 329 towns and cities which have shown promise of growth provided they receive the correct inputs. (One hundred and eight of these are located in districts where less than 10 per cent of the population is urban). Since rural and urban development are closely interlinked, these fast-growing

urban centres could serve as markets that would encourage higher agricultural productivity as well as generate the services which villages need. This would further reinforce the urban-rural continuum.

The report also proposed policies which address the crucial issues of the urban poor. It recommended re-structuring of urban administration and finance, as well as reviewing the priority assigned to urban development. It emphasised, moreover, the need for a National Urbanisation Council which would monitor our cities and towns, guide policy, and interact at the higher levels of government to try and ensure an intelligent over-view of urbanisation.

GENERATING THE WILL TO ACT

Unfortunately, other political events overtook Rajiv Gandhi's government and the report was never implemented. Subsequent governments, as far as can be ascertained, have paid it scant attention. Gradually we have sunk back into lethargy. How do we generate the will to act? Unfortunately it always seems much easier to adjust to the predicament we are in. That is the nature of life. For instance, if you drop a frog into a saucepan of very hot water, it will try desperately to hop out. But if you place a frog in tepid water and then gradually, very gradually, raise the temperature of the water in the saucepan, the frog will swim around quite happily, adjusting to the increasingly dangerous conditions. In fact, just before the end, before the frog actually cooks to death, when the water is exceedingly hot, it relaxes, and a state of euphoria sets in.

Even if there are some who are aware of rising temperatures, how do they generate the will to act? Perhaps we should start by tackling some quite simple, short-term tasks which, if successfully implemented, will raise immeasurably our morale. This will give us the confidence — and the energy — to attempt the longer-term and more difficult issues we have been discussing.

This is the reason why we start each day by brushing our teeth, combing our hair, and so forth. These are all simple tasks, quite easily done, but they make us feel much better. We're ready to face the day. This is the reason that the military spends so much time polishing brass buttons. It's a very simple way to increase a sense of control over one's life. We must start with something simple — like clearing our pavements so that they are usable once again. Surely in a society with such chronic unemployment, we can organise small land armies, let us say mini

task-forces of 20 men or so, subsidised by private companies, to work in conjunction with the citizens and the municipality, and get the job done.

Look at the condition of our streets today. The horrifying thing is not just the garbage which accumulates every day. It is also the general debris, much of which has been lying around for years! Piles of stones, of sand left without a thought of the surroundings. This is the beginning of a state of disorder — the key signal that a city is no longer under control, that no one is effectively in charge. A terrifying unease that the whole edifice is starting to crumble.

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CITIES WITH A VISION

There is much more to constructing a building — or a city — than the brick and mortar with which it is built. Cities, since the beginning of time, have embodied the dreams and aspirations of a society. They are a kind of Platonic ideal of what life can be. Hence we have Jerusalem, the City of God, or Sri Rangam, the City as a Model of the Cosmos, ie, the ancient sacred diagram of the *vastu-purush-mandala*. Then there is the mythic imagery of *Char Bagh,* or the Islamic Garden of Paradise. The grid patterns of South American towns are really *mandalas,* facing directly north, south, east and west — with a sacred centre.

Sadly, today in India we have lost all this. Grappling with our cities, we seem to have become overwhelmed by the sheer dimension of the problem, by the number of squatters, the shortage of water, and so forth. In the scramble, we seem to have totally lost the metaphysical and idealist vision that is so essential to the making of a city.

This need not be. Man does not live by bread alone. Mythic imagery plays a crucial part in our lives. The Dogon people of Zaire in West Africa build their towns as amazingly lucid diagrams, structured like a human being (with the headman's house at the top, and other sections in the place of arms, legs, etc). But when you see the real town — it's total chaos! Yet most Dogons, asked to describe their town, will perceive only the idealised form, the mythic image.

Precisely the same thing happens in New York. When we visit the city, do we see it as it actually is, a decaying and monotonous grid of traffic intersections,

with buildings like pigeon holes, much like Cleveland, Detroit or any other ordinary North American city? No. Instead we see that mythic entity — Manhattan! Fifth Avenue, Central Park, Forty-Second Street, their very names are magic! We do not see them for what they really are — prosaic numbers on a map, planners' shorthand which has been transformed into cultural myth.

So also with Calcutta. To the visitor, it is a morass of chaos and decay, but to the Bengalis, it is the stuff of which dreams are made. And London — perhaps still the most liveable of all the world's great megacities. The London we experience is of course much more than just a physical entity. It is also a set of powerful, mythic images and values, some physical and some metaphysical. Images and values that enhance the lives of its citizens.

This, in the final analysis, is what cities are about. And what culture is about. And what it is we need to do, ie, find ways to help our towns and cities bring sustenance and enrichment to the lives of our people.