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How do we tackle urban planning?

P.K. DAS



Mumbai-based architect-activist P.K. DAS walks a tightrope between architecture and activism. He talks to MADHUMITHA SRINIVASAN about juggling the two roles.

Indian cities don't have planning. It has led to anarchic growth — cities and town are growing, more people are coming, huge construction turnover, huge investments in healthcare and educational sectors that are exclusive and unaffordable for the majority. This is not urbanisation. We assume that cities are urban and use the two words — city and urbanisation — synonymously. This is the myth I want to expose.

How do you define 'urbanisation'?

When people live in 'urban' areas, they are expected to have access to the benefits of development — education, healthcare, employment, gender equality, etc. But do our cities give access or zones of liberation for all? Even cities like Mumbai are backward in these aspects... they are abundant with experiences of discrimination and exclusion. More than 70 per cent of the people live in slum-like conditions — inferior, unsafe, unhealthy. There is undesirable density that is detrimental to growth.

How can democracy step in?

It's a democratic government, something forgotten in the euphoria of liberalisation and privatisation. The failure is so severe the government has to come back and play a dominant role in city planning. Citizens have to play a primary role. This has been done successfully in many areas, even in Mumbai, through smaller projects and neighbourhood efforts. The people of Bandra planned their own waterfront, the people of Juhu reclaimed the Juhu beach for the public, the slum redevelopment and rehabilitation project of the Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti was started by Shabana Azmi, Anand Patwardhan and Gurbir Singh, besides others... Such collaborations ensure accountability, maintain a check on investments and returns. That's what democracy is.

The problem of shrinking open spaces...

We are shrinking our public spaces as cities expand. Even our democratic rights are shrinking – to participate, to access info. In Mumbai, even with wealth, you are leading a very underdeveloped life. You might own expensive cars, but your children are still playing cricket on the streets; there are no playgrounds. Clubs and atriums are becoming new ideas of public spaces where rich children go for recreation. These notions of public spaces are oppressive to children. We are all trapped in our high-density capsules that will lead to serious health and mental trauma, what I call congestion trauma.

How do you strike a balance between being an architect and an activist?

Being an 'architect-activist', as the media calls me, is not easy. First, I am culturally fighting from what I have imbibed, what I have grown into, what I want to achieve . The second struggle is to give up the baggage carried through our education system and learning to be creative, individualistic... Those are huge struggles.

There is also huge difficulty in sustaining my lifestyle where I also aspire to take my family on a holiday, my children to the best schools, and give time and effort to a common cause, which obviously is at the cost of earnings during that period. It's not that I have balanced it the best but I have not fallen out. I am continuing; I am surviving. And that I think is the mark of success to a person. So I think it's not a sad story.

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