

Mill land and City Development

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The development of 600 acres of land in the heart of the city is a rare and challenging opportunity for effecting much needed change and solving some of the key problems that the city is facing. This opportunity cannot be frittered away by letting individual and disparate developments as that will be contrary to the crying needs of the city and its entire people. This is where government must step in and set out the larger objective of the city's development. But tragically the state government has betrayed its people and acted irresponsibly to subvert public interest, in the mill land development.

The city is faced with an insurmountable housing shortage. There is no supply of affordable housing for the poor. Large sections of the middle class too cannot afford the high priced real estate. Both the central and state governments have stopped constructing housing for low-income groups. These are the reasons for which nearly 60% of the city's population is forced to live in slums. But slums occupy a mere 8% of the city's land mass. The development plan of the city does not provide adequate land reserved for housing of the poor. Therefore there is an urgent need to allocate additional land for housing. Development of mill land gives the city a rare opportunity to promote affordable mass housing for the poor and the lower middle class along with other construction. In the present blueprint, which now bears the imprimatur of the Supreme Court, there will be a large quantum of high-end housing, but this will not contribute in any manner to reducing the housing shortage in the city. The shortfall will continue to rise in spite of mill land development.

Mill land development would have also given us an opportunity to develop open spaces for the public. The city, as we know, has a very low ratio of open space at 0.03 acres per thousand people against the international standard of 4 acres per thousand people. Under the approved policy, the public will not get any open space. Such spaces created in the layout of property developers will be exclusive and private.

The city lacks social infrastructure too. There is urgent need for promoting affordable schools, health care and recreational facilities. We had a chance in the mill land development to fulfill some of these needs that are vital to social development. There may be some high-end schools and hospitals built here but these will be beyond the reach of most people.

Comprehensive planning of the entire mill land along with development control regulations as formulated by the government in 1991 (where one-third of the total land was meant for public housing to be developed by MHADA, another one third for public open spaces and the remaining one-third to be developed by the mill owners for profit but with FSI on two-thirds of the total area) would have led to a meaningful development in the larger interest of the city. But subsequently the state government carried out dubious amendments to the D.C.Regulations in 2001 by which the share of land for public housing has dropped and the share for open space has reduced from 33% to 14% as explained in the judgment of the Supreme Court while it is as low as 7% as per BEAG submissions. The earlier policy would have fulfilled to a good extent the critical needs and demands for low-cost housing, public open spaces and social infrastructure for the city while providing sufficient business opportunity to the developers and mill owners. But this has now been lost.

There will indeed be large volumes of construction, over a eight million square feet at an average FSI of three including various concessions, if not four FSI as in some instances, of high-end housing, malls, multiplexes, I.T. parks and offices. Shockingly there has not been any study of the impact of this growth on environment and the carrying capacity of the area, be it transportation, amenities, roads etc and plans drawn up to combat the new pressures. This construction will not only subvert social development priorities and the well being of the majority of the citizens but will also add to unplanned growth.

Inspite of the Supreme Court verdict validating the development policy in force, the state government has the right, which it must exercise, to intervene in the public interest to frame new policies to regulate the development of mill land in accordance with the overall development of the city and the needs of all its people, so as to make Mumbai a truly international city. But the decisions taken by the government will depend only on the pressures put on it by public opinion and mass movements in the city.