

## **UNDERMINING MUMBAI'S PLANNING**

**2<sup>nd</sup> September 2005**

**P K Das- Architect-Activist**

At the root of many crises that the city is facing today, is our failure in planning for the city. We have also failed to carry out planned development. Instead the development models that we are aggressively pursuing in force are contrary to larger social and environmental interest. Various policies and programmes have to be critically reviewed and radically altered if we want our city to have a high standard of life.

In 1991 our government formally announced its commitment to privatization of development. Mr. Sharad Pawar the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra carried out significant changes in the development control regulations for Mumbai to enable privatization. Three important changes that were introduced has since gravely affected the city's landscape and life. The introduction of transfer of development rights (TDR), sale of mills land and a policy for slum's redevelopment were forced around strong opposition from slum-dwellers organization like NHSS, Mill workers union like Datta Savant's and environmentalist organization like BEAG. All these organizations challenged these changes in the Mumbai High Court and not surprisingly lost. Essentially these three changes were carried out at the behest of the builders and developers in order to facilitate and promote their business interest under the guise of development of the city particularly for providing Housing. After nearly 15 years it is needless to say, the terrible impact these regulations have made in several ways. What is interesting is that along with the policy for privatization of development, the government considered wise to completely absolve itself shirking its own responsibility. As a result while the city saw rapid construction activity with buildings having steel, granite and glass finishes, there was no development of infrastructure and social amenities and no planning for it was undertaken. The government also backed out of constructing mass housing for the bwer middle class and the poor.

But what is even more heinous is the fact that the government stopped planning for the city. The various planning agencies of the government be they the Municipal Corporation and or MMRDA stopped preparing plans for the development of the city. Instead the government thought wise to allow the market forces to decide and dictate development. A major pre-occupation of the government thus has been to change and remove reservations and tinker with the DC regulations. To facilitate the construction of buildings by various builders on their individual plots even at the cost of the city's collective interest. What we have realized in these 15 years is that the people living in the city have had to bear with a very high social and environmental cost.

It seemed to those in the government and builders that development means the construction of more and more buildings in the city, it does not matter how and where they are built and whether they compliment one and other in a comprehensive area or

required plan. It is not expected that the builders and developers will be concerned with larger issues other than their individual project. They have very limited interest, which is to achieve quick turnover. Buildings are thus commoditized, packaged and marketed. To the credit of many of our builders we must admit that there has been a considerable change for good in the quality of finishes of the new buildings.

I would like to go one step forward to say that the government has not only stopped planning for the city but is actively engaged in connivance with the builders in undermining planning for the city and planned development. As a result, the development is anarchic and caught in its own web of contradictions. By this process of development we are merely slumming our city, with lower and lower standards of infrastructure, environment and quality of life.

Let us look at the Bandra-Kurla Complex as an example to understand some important issues in the development of our city. The government's premiere planning agency, the MMRDA has masterminded and planned the Bandra-Kurla Complex as a financial and corporate hub. The MMRDA carried out land-filling of mangroves and mud flats along the Mithi river to the extent of cutting to create land at the Bandra-Kurla Complex. In this process it tampered with the various backwater channels too. But what is most surprising is that it did not consider necessary to deal with the Mithi River and understand its environmental sensitivity and impact. None of their development works at the BKC has been for the Mithi River, its conservation and revitalization. The MMRDA auctioned land at the BKC and is continuing to do so without earmarking even a small fragment of the proceedings towards the protection of the Mithi River, its tributaries and the mangroves. Each auctioned plot has been developed by the respective private owners with very high investment in order to make the BKC a global land-mark having glass and steel structures as in New York, London, Tokyo etc. Each developed property has an investment ranging from Rs.100 to Rs.300 crores. Saleable value of premises here is between 15000 to 20000 / sq. ft. A simple system could have been devised by the MMRDA by which a small fraction or percentage of the individual developers investment was collected for the general infrastructure development of the BKC.

Mithi River as we know originates from the Powai Lake and flows down through various parts of our city including Kurla and Bandra before meeting the Arabian Sea at Mahim. Unfortunately, its links with the lake has been hampered due to indiscriminate landfilling and pollution. Simultaneously, the river is used as a major sewerage channel. Also we have been dumping solid-waste into this river. As a result of these abuses and neglect, the flow of the Mithi river and its eco system has been destroyed. The irony is that in spite of this grave environmental destruction, we have been proudly showcasing BKC. In the recent downpour and floods in Mumbai, the rainwater in and around BKC could not drain out resulting in the flooding of the basements and the ground floors of our "global land-mark". This story relates to almost every part of the city landscape with differing situations and disaster levels.

The BKC example is not just about the environmental crises, it is also about indiscriminate land-filling, change of land-use and reservations, short-sighted real estate

development, lack of comprehensive planning, the underdevelopment of infrastructure, social amenities, lack of open-space, etc. Development of “MindSpace” in Malad is yet another environmental disaster. Amongst the most coveted development housing international call centers and corporate offices has been built over land which has been largely created by land-filling the creeks and the mangroves inspite of several objections with evidences sighting the illegality of this development construction work continues unhindered. Super-markets, multiplexes and office complexes are being expanded in this area.

It is necessary for us to critically review the development plan of our city (DP). Mumbai’s first DP was prepared under the Bombay Town Planning Act 1954 for a period from 1961 – 1981. This plan was further revised for another 20 years period i.e. for 1981-2001, though the draft DP work was sanctioned only in 1991. Now this DP has been extended for another 10 years period without revisions. This development plan has achieved no social and development purpose, it is irrelevant and fraud. It does not cater to the needs and demands of the people living in the city. Instead of carrying out revisions with shorter durations to keep the plan relevant, extensions are granted.

Case about the housing of the poor is one example of the D.P. fraud. People living in the slums constitute more than 50% of the city’s population. As for numbers this population exceeds six million. It is common sense that unless the working and living conditions of this 50% population is radically improved, the city’s overall living environment and social condition will not change for good. Condition in the slums and the overall living environment in the city are intrinsically intertwined.

Let us at this point take a look at some important data to understand the absurdity of this and how forcibly we created a situation concerning land and housing for the poor. 50% of our people living in slums occupy a mere 6% of the city’s land area. Slums occupy approx. 2500 Ha out of a total area of 437 sq. km (43700 Ha) being the area of the city. Average land area reserved for residential is about 50% of the total land. 6% of the total land area occupied under slums is approx. only 12% area in relation to the reserved residential zone area. This means 50% of the population belonging to MI and HI groups have access to or occupy 88% of the residential land whereas, the other 50% of the population belonging to the working class and the poor live in very high-density slums settlements. This is clearly unreasonable and absurd. The Fundamental objective of any development ought to be to take cognizance of the needs and demands of the city and allocate land accordingly. It is this deficiency in land allocation for housing of the poor that slums come into being. This situation therefore calls of an urgent revision of the development plan in which exclusive reservation of land is necessary for housing of the poor. At the same time it is important that adequate land must be reserved for infrastructure and social amenities including public open-space as per the various planning norms and standards. Most importantly this proposed revision of the development plan must be carried out in full public knowledge with the active participation of all categories and groups of people.

Thus what is needed today is a priority for infrastructure development that includes safe drinking water supply, sewage disposal, sanitation, storm water clearance, stable electricity supply and open-space. Along with infrastructure our priority must also be to built affordable houses for the working class and the urban poor to check the proliferation of slums. Redevelopment of existing slums must be carried out with many alternatives to reinforce the relevance of our development works. It is the high standard of infrastructure and housing for all that will enable Mumbai to be truly an international city. Needless to say that the development in both sectors have to be environmentally sustainable with special focus on environmental conservation.

A radical shift from the present commitment and development policy of privatization are required. We have to ask a basic question as to who ought to develop, for what purpose and for whom. Who will build Mumbai? The government has to undertake greater responsibility and carryout significant projects to enable social development and thereby the overall development of the city.