

**URBANISING  
INDIAN CITIES  
(A Synopsis)**

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I argue that we are far from achieving the urbanization of our cities in India. Therefore, there is a critical and urgent need for urbanizing our Cities. Urbanizing cities has come to be a critical subject encompassing social, environmental, human development, jobs, employment and urban planning and design issues. Interventions are necessary due to miserable and oppressive living and human development conditions for increasing number of people living in cities. Environmental conditions are deteriorating fast to alarming proportion. There is urgent need today for urbanizing cities for liberation, human development and enhancement of environmental conditions.

Urbanization and the growth of cities are two independent phenomenons. Each do not necessarily complement nor supplement the other. Most of us assume that the two are same and therefore generally refer to cities as urban. In the same way, as commonly understood, urbanization is considered to be about building cities. That cities ought to be or should be urban is another matter and that is precisely the question that is being discussed here.

As a matter of fact we are not even conscious of urbanization as being independent of the expansion of cities programs. Merely building and promoting cities, both existing and new, cannot be synonymous with urbanization. Similarly villages cannot necessarily be considered as being non-urban. Villages may develop to provide urban conditions too.

Under the neo-liberal globalization euphoria, urbanization is considered synonymous with cities. That is why we keep saying that there is rapid growth in our urban population. Similarly and tragically, buildings and construction turnover are synonymous with the development of cities. “Cities as engines of growth” idea while promoting the material and physical turnover as being important diverts our attention from human development aspects. Physical and material growth as under the present conditions will not lead to wealth distribution amongst the poor and the under-privileged nor automatically provide urban living conditions to all the people. Arguments in favor of “trickle down effect” under liberalization of the economy and privatization policy has not succeeded nor will it succeed in the achievement of greater levels of social development for the poor and the working people. Urbanization is a way of life, ensuring open and democratic conditions for all, where access to the benefits of development are matters of rights and not concessions or matters of negotiation and denial. It may be said that urbanization is a necessary tenet of democracy. Or democratic democracy will naturally lead to the urbanization of life, be they in cities or villages. Therefore the Democratization of cities, towns and villages is an important Urbanization goal.

Tragically cities are ridden with exclusion, discrimination, marginalization and oppression of more and more people in the course of their growth and 'development'. In most instances cities are in a terrible state of underdevelopment. Mumbai is a good example in this regard. This is contrary to the aspirations of the vast numbers of working people who moved to cities to work in industries and other employments. A strong sense of freedom was initially realized. Cities and city life was then considered as zones of liberation- where working people could collectively in their unions take decisions about their working rules and benefits and put forward their demands before their employees. This is radically distinct from their subjugation as bonded labour and toiling landless farmers back in their villages.

The future of most of our cities is in terrible and deep state of uncertainty. Some are in a state of coma stagnant for long periods as regards human development and inclusionary measures are concerned. This condition is arisen not only from our failure in achieving necessary urbanization but largely due to the systematic and deliberate capture and colonization of resources and common assets for private profit. Exclusive developments and the phenomenal rise of brutal corporate power in multiple avatars defy democracy. Cities today are in a state of siege as much the way villages used to be under the clutches of feudal lords. The state machinery, under privatization commitment, actively facilitates the capture and colonization of public property for private profit. Displacements and deprivation are justified to promote the interest of economic growth- or financial prosperity of the rich.

We generally refer to accessible health care, affordable education and employment guarantee as the central tenets of human development and their achievement or failure as the basis of evaluation of Human Development index. I argue that we have to expand our ideas about social development opportunity to include democratic planning and design of cities. The state of Physical planning and design of cities ought to be a component in the assessment of human development index, as much as health care and education. Participatory planning contributes enormously towards social and community development practices – places and programmes thereby to the struggle for urbanizing our cities.

Urban planning and design could in fact be used as effective weapons against the dominating oppressive development patterns that is leading to the marginalization of more and more people from land and resources. Simultaneously this weapon could be well utilized to democratize cities and provide social and environmental justice. Such an opportunity and avenue involving planning and design have to be furthered in every possible way including its integration with social movements.

Physical planning and design are effective democratic instruments of social change. Planning and design proposals could invite a high level of public participation and evolve through the process significant ideas about development. This is a sure way of democratizing planning and design of cities too. Sadly, the present trend is limited to merely promoting projects and their implementation without planning. has ensured deep cuts and divisions in the accessibility to vital resources such as land and developmental works. Their devastating impacts are long lasting and for practical purposes permanent, as they cannot be easily demolished frequently. Cities are experiencing anarchic development and growth.

Prevailing impoverishment and mal-nutrition in physical planning ideas has led to adhoc and anarchic expansion of our cities. Being poverty stricken, physical planning and design is given a go. Instead, mere construction turnover is considered as a measure of growth and development and not its distribution, accessibility and equity.

Physical planning and design have been subsumed in the narrow and oppressive business interest of the real estate developers and builders. Architecture of our cities is smeared and reduced to embellishments and veneered beautification. Aestheticisation of urban development has indeed been a process of creating elite and exclusive spaces. Beautification and “aestheticisation of urban public spaces have produced and reproduced new forms of segregation. Such attempts in many instances are creating greater social differentiation and class polarization.” Spaces are conceived and governed increasingly on the basis of exclusion and elimination of more and more people. Even though many of the recently developed public spaces are not physically barricaded, their governance and surveillance sets out uncomfortable conditions for free use and interaction by the poor in particular. Economic, social and cultural consumption and benefits by the ruling elite and the privileged has been an underlying current in the development of cities today. But such severe trends in the development of public spaces does not necessarily negate the need for popular aestheticisation of cities evolved continuously through larger participation and struggles for democratization of cities.

Dated: 15<sup>th</sup> October, 2013