

URBAN ILLUSION
CAN HOUSING RESIST COMMERCIALISATION?

Housing in urban India is a commercial and highly profitable business reflecting the political and economic objective of the ruling class. Systematic and planned efforts are being made towards further commercialising this sector. The Government's thrust in all its policies towards increasing privatisation of housing is a clear example of this objective.

In India today, the housing question poses a serious and alarming threat to the very life and dignity of nearly sixty percent of its urban population. The majority live under the most inhuman conditions in slums and on pavements.

Housing cannot resist commercialisation under capitalism. It is reduced to mere objects, manufactured and sold like any other industrial and consumer produce to maximise profits. In the process, technology and materials are important considerations prevailing upon the historical, social and cultural needs of the Society. Conveniences of the industry and of technology decide the pattern of living. It imposes irrelevant and superficial needs and standards. Advertising, marketing and the media, establishes the illusion of urban and industrial life under capitalism. This illusion is very much a part of the urban experience in India and in that sense forms the part of an ever-evolving Society. Hence, the apartments and high-rise buildings have become the symbols of progress. Owning a nook in this outfit is a reflection of individual capability and success.

Decentralisation :

Excessive concentration of business, administration and politics in a few urban centres has influenced the land-use and development pattern. Even in the urban centres, a single central business district (CBD) dominates the life of the city. Naturally, prices of land and buildings rise to phenomenal heights at these centres which are then controlled by the ruling class and

the poor are pushed further and further to the outskirts. Evictions are carried out regularly not because there is shortage of land but because the land on which these slums are settled is needed for making further speculative profits. Even resources are manipulated and shortage created so that a few industrialists, builders, developers and estate agents can dominate the housing industry. The problem is therefore, not one of space and resource but of its effective and just utilisation.

Under these conditions, slums will continue to dominate the urban landscape while a few 'modern' buildings having irrelevant and superficial architectural expressions will continue mushrooming.

Housing therefore should be nationalised. It is as important a sector of the economy as Banking or Railways. In fact, it is more important and ought to be declared a priority sector. The private builders and developers ought to be pushed out completely. The nationalisation of housing should also include nationalisation of the production of building materials. This is necessary so that the quality and price of these materials are maintained at proper levels and their availability to the poor ensured.

It is also important that housing be made a fundamental right. The State would then be forced to lay down appropriate norms and standards which can also be challenged if found inadequate or improper.

Finance :

In the Government's budget, there is a constant decline in the outlay for housing while the outlay for defence and other sectors rises steeply. This is because the overwhelming thrust of the Government's policies is to shift the responsibilities of housing completely on to the private sector. In the recently launched 'National Housing Policy', housing is declared an industry so that the private sector can get increased outlays for building houses on a clear-cut commercial basis. The policy emphasises the need for corporate

development in housing. A 'National Housing Bank' has also been constituted recently to support this objective. Governmental finance will now be available to big Financers, builders and estate developers. As a matter of fact, we will now see the emergence of large corporate construction agencies reducing further the numbers involved in construction and housing. This encourages and legitimises complete commercialisation of housing and exploitation of the poor. The number of shelterless will increase manifold.

In housing finance, the World Bank and other foreign agencies are actively participating. They are giving loans not because they want to help the poor but because it helps them to make further profits through interest payments. This concept worsens the housing situation as the majority of our people live under poverty line and can by no means make available these loans and moreover return them with interests.

Architect's Role :

As a community of architects, we represent the interest of the ruling class. We cater to those who patronise us and work for their whims, fancies and desires.

Architecture like any visual and performing arts, is a cultural expression of the economic, political and cultural fabric of our Society. As sensitive Architects, it is imperative that we question the economic, political and social issues so that our perceptions are affected by them.

In our practise, we look for immediate solutions; a screw-driver system by which picking trends and adapting them becomes the present context of our architectural programmes. As Architects, we have been trained to restrict our ideas to technology and objects. We look at buildings as end-products and are pre-occupied with forms, aesthetics and finish, the physicality of the structure. These are important aspects, but on their own do not constitute architectural development.

In our education, we still follow the colonial pattern. The colonial influence is even strong in all walks of life in the country. In our designs and buildings, we aim for grandeur and monumentality to establish and reflect our power, glory and superiority.

Our Architect's are taught and trained in schools set-up in big cities and towns and feel close to New York, London and Japan. We are much divorced from people and places within the country. Development in communication has further helped us to update our information and knowledge about developments and movements in developed countries. Japan Architect, A + D, Architectural Review, form the source of our reading. In spite of more than 10,000 Architects now registered in our country; we have not been able to establish our own ideology, politics, philosophy and direction.

We as a community of Architects are merely supporting commercialisation of housing. The house is not simply a commodity. It is a part of collective human existence and dear to the family. It is as crucial as life itself. It is necessary therefore that people at all times maintain control over the designs, construction, maintenance, repair and expansion of their own houses.

We have to now look in a new direction, establish close contact with Society at large, understand the social, cultural and political needs and allow for individual freedom and expression in housing resulting in tremendous variety of form, structure, colours and framework of an ever-evolving and living aesthetic.

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