

Decentralised Urban Planning: A Pressing Priority

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Abstract

Decentralised urban planning, along with decentralised urban governance, are two key areas for delivering productivity, efficiency and quality of life to India's cities. The first deals with the city as a product. The second is concerned with operationalising that product. Since, in the next two and a half decades, the majority of Indians would be living in urban settlements, the role of the national government and the states assume critical significance. Their role lies in prescribing policy frameworks, broad strategies and in finance and investments. Cities at their level need to employ decentralised planning processes, including wide citizen consultations. This will allow cities high levels of productivity, efficiency and liveability.

Keywords: decentralisation, urban planning, nation, state, city, citizens

Introduction

Urban decentralisation is mostly viewed from the prism of urban governance. As a consequence, urban governance gets overwhelming attention in any discourse on urbanisation. One of the reasons for this is that since governance deals with the operationalisation of a city on a day-to-day basis and directly and continuously touches the lives of the people, it generates more action and visibility. Governance, therefore, becomes the preferred area of enquiry among urban thinkers and scholars. Of equally demanding significance, however, is the aspect of urban planning. This includes land use, economic, physical, social, environmental and equity planning. Such planning should result in city efficiency, sustainability and an adequate quality of life. Since cities are dynamic, they are impacted by demographic variations, economic and social changes, technological innovation and by global and local factors. Planning, therefore, needs to unceasingly respond to such new challenges and factor these into city plans so that cities may be equipped to deal with them.

Decentralised Urban Planning at the National level

One of the key elements of modern urban planning is the need to decentralise it. Indeed, decentralised urban planning is an essential ingredient for quality urbanisation. This comprises decentralised urban planning at the national level, the state level, the city level and the zonal and local or ward level. Let us firstly take up the matter of decentralised urbanisation at the national level. What this entails is to spread urbanisation throughout the country as far as possible and not allow it to get concentrated in a few pockets and in a handful of cities. National regions and select cities also require a study from the point of view of their strengths and weaknesses so that a decision could be arrived at in regard to their thrust areas that could be afforded specific attention. This also spreads out the fruits of economic growth, employment and well-being, along with well-rounded urban development in all areas of the country.

Wide differences in levels of urbanisation among states

This is not the situation in India today. India has very high levels of differences in urbanisation among states. Among the larger states, Tamil Nadu, as per Census 2011 had 48.5 percent urbanisation; Kerala stood at 47.7 percent, Maharashtra 45.2 percent, Gujarat 42.6 percent and Karnataka 38.6 percent. At the other end of the urban spectrum were states like Bihar with 11.3 percent urbanisation, Odisha 16.7 percent, Uttar Pradesh 22.3 percent, Chhattisgarh 23.2 percent, Jharkhand 24.1 percent and Rajasthan 24.9 percent. Some of these less urbanised states have turned out to be the largest contributors to distress outmigration – families without employment and compelled to migrate to make both ends meet. These distress migrants are spread over the western, southern and northern states. Since there is general universal acknowledgment that urbanisation has strong linkages with the economy, high urbanisation can be successfully used as a tool for higher GDP growth in low GDP states and for reducing poverty.

India is Urbanising

The United Nations estimates that by 2050, India's urban population, despite its slow pace, is likely to cross the 50 percent threshold. That would mean a staggering figure of more than 700 million people living in the country's cities and towns. For these women and men to be provided employment, housing, education, health, transport, recreation and public

spaces along with a decent quality of life, it is imperative that several hundred towns and cities across the country are targeted to share this urban load. Such urban centres would have to be equipped with industry, employment, infrastructure and public amenities. These would give these cities the strength to develop into vibrant urban centres and the ability to attract migrating populations.

Urban Destination Deficit

The above cited model of urban development essentially means plugging the overall 'urban destination deficit', defined as a lack of urban destinations that have the economic, physical, environmental, social and infrastructural capacity to meaningfully absorb migrants. This becomes a sine qua non for speeding up urbanisation by providing viable alternatives rather than restricting it to a limited number of megacities. Their spread over the country will encourage villagers, who like to keep linkages with their villages, to come to neighbouring cities and become a part of the urban workforce. This will also lighten the agricultural sector, which is currently severely constrained by an overload of marginal farmers and labourers that are dependent on that sector.

Up till now, a limited number of megacities and metropolitan cities have carried almost the entire migration burden. These cities have also cornered the bulk of government and private investment to become thriving urban economies. However, their demographic densities are unsustainable, severely straining infrastructure and services of such cities. Perpetual demographic growth has spelt disaster for them, particularly the ten largest Indian cities. This is repeatedly experienced through infrastructure breakdowns in these cities. A conscious attempt to build many more such city economies through extensive and broad-based investments as well as physical, social and infrastructural investments could have avoided this situation. Hence all future urban planning must focus on balancing the built and non-built environment in cities by preventing their over-densification. This is also critical from the point of view of climate change and the need for disaster management and mitigation.

Integrated Development of Small and Medium Towns

In the 1970s, the Government of India (GoI) essayed the development of small and medium towns through its Integrated Development of Small and Medium Towns (IDSMT) scheme. This, in concept, was a laudable initiative. It hypothesised that a city's economic efficiency declined as its population surged beyond a level. It, therefore, assumed that further governmental and private investments stood to significantly gain by shifting their attention to other locations. Such redistribution of investment would also support healthy national characteristics such as population distribution and the spread of developmental goals, as suggested by the National Commission on Urbanisation (NCU) in 1988. The NCU had identified 329 centres as Generators of Economic Momentum (GEMs) and 49 Spatial Priority Urbanisation Regions (SPURs). These potential urban centres were recommended for special financial allocation and developmental effort by GoI and state governments. However, the IDSMT was largely not aligned with these recommendations and petered out as a feeble attempt since it was not backed by finances at appropriate scale. It did not have the strength to make an impression on a country as large as India. Subsequently, the scheme was wound up when the need was to strengthen the programme and pour resources into it. The country today needs a better and updated version of IDSMT with a similar vision of decentralized urbanisation as the earlier one, but a much larger outlay and a vigorous and tight implementation time frame.

The absence of such a national programme and poor state partnership will damage India's urbanisation and its most significant cities. The lack of new urban destinations will slow down India's urbanisation, as evidenced in the past. At the same time, megacities will continue to unsustainably densify beyond their carrying capacities, leading to infrastructure inadequacies and failures and worsening liveability quotients. The megacities will generate more wealth, though with compromised productivity, but pile greater misery on to the citizens.

The resulting fall in the quality of life in megacities, apart from reasons of poor governance and mismanagement is a consequence of the attempt to accommodate every incoming individual into the city. This means carving out space for their multiple requirements—housing, workplace, recreation, education, healthcare, water, sanitation, and waste disposal. Most of such human activities demand more construction and larger conversion of

environmental spaces into built structures. All this comes at the cost of the city's environmental sustainability. Past megacity outcomes should serve as a conscious reminder that India must offer a better future for its citizens by investing in decentralised urbanisation.

China's Conscious Efforts at Decentralised Urbanisation

A comparison with China here would not be out of place. The demographic profiles of both countries are roughly similar in numbers. However, while China's developmental model and its faltering economy point towards the existence of serious systemic flaws, that country appears to have done a much better job in decentralising urbanisation. China today has more than 160 cities that have populations of a million or more while India has about 50 cities with similar populations. The hurricane growth of mega cities such as Shanghai and Beijing has raised concerns of sustainability and management amongst the Chinese decision-makers. That appears to have led to a recalibration of the national policy and a conscious attempt to disincentivise the growth of very large towns and to spread out its massive urbanisation drive. One of the strategies favoured was to knit together smaller cities and towns into new city constructs, with the expectation that it will draw rural migrants away from cities already struggling with large populations. The Chinese government consequently tweaked rules allowing cities with populations of less than 300,000 to confer migrant applicants with a local *hukou* (a system of population registration where an individual is in possession of an urban or rural hukou, aimed at placing restrictions in switching from one to the other). This incentive to migrate to smaller cities was coupled with a local hukou for mega cities such as Beijing, designed to restrict entry into the cities to only the educated, entrepreneurs, and investors. At the same time, there is evidence that China has decided to cap the populations of Beijing and Shanghai and has undertaken demolitions to address the problem of '*Chengshi Bing*' (big city disease).

Role of Government of India in urbanisation

In the past decades, GoI's role in urban matters has been peripheral, since the subject is placed by the Indian Constitution in the State List. Time, however, has come for a more central role of the GoI in urban affairs. Given that rapid urbanisation has generally been the most significant instrument behind the sustained economic growth of countries, GoI scarcely has an

option. Besides, if most people are going to reside in cities and towns, it is natural that they would demand enhanced attention. In the given context, GoI has three significant roles to perform. firstly, GoI should think out the broad strategies for urbanisation and write them out in a national policy; secondly, implement that policy to the extent it pertains to GoI. Lastly, it should exhort and help states to implement their share of it. In the national policy on urbanisation, a key element would be the dispersed development of towns. The potential centres of urban and economic growth would have to be identified. The suggestions of the NCU, made after a detailed study and referred to above, could be used as the starting point. This of course would have to be updated in the light of developments in the last three and a half decades. States would have to be incentivised to take up the catalysed development of identified cities. Programmes like the Integrated Development of Small and Medium Towns (IDSMT) that earlier took a narrow, fragmented and minimalist approach for the holistic development of towns, would have to be energised through large allocations to the states. GoI itself would have to target them for national investments through the location of its own industrial, institutional and administrative organisations in these cities as well as from the private sector. A third and crucial element of central initiatives in urban development would be the provision of financial help to local governments for the creation and upkeep of infrastructure.

Central financial assistance to urban local governments

In the past, ULBs have received certain grants primarily based on the recommendations of the Central Finance Commissions (CFCs). After the 74th Constitutional Amendment, right from the 10th CFC to the 12th CFC, ad-hoc grants were provided to ULBs, ranging from Rs. 1,000 crores to Rs. 5000 crores. Two more CFCs thereafter, (13th and 14th) have also made their recommendations. However, in the context of urban infrastructure requirements, the most charitable comment that could be made on ULB recommendations of CFCs is that their allocations have made no impactful difference. City infrastructure is frightfully costly, but vital for the nation. Hence past assumptions that urban infrastructure is the sole concern of cities may not lend much comfort in the coming days, especially in the light of the fragile finances of ULBs. National and State centric infrastructure may have significant uses; but national economy would get a major boost also by improving infrastructure where people work and stay. Similarly, aid

would have to be extended to the cities for supporting and housing the ever-increasing numbers of the urban dispossessed and the poor. In regard to this, GoI could help cities in several ways. It could allocate a percentage of GST as advised by the Central Finance Commission. It could also allocate part of the large central land pool to ULBs for the implementation of city plans. Further, it could provide grant-in-aid for supporting incoming distress migrants into cities; allow tax-free municipal bonds and pay property tax in the form of service charges for all GoI properties within ULBs. Currently, no property tax is leviable on them.

Decentralised urban planning at the state level

Just as a national urbanisation policy needs to be crafted the central level, so also a state urbanisation policy is required to be readied at the state level. The role of the states is even more significant, especially in the backdrop of the provisions of the Indian Constitution. Item 5 of the State List of the Constitution states that “Local government, that is to say, the constitution and powers of municipal corporations, improvement trusts,and other local authorities for the purpose of local self-government....” fall within the purview of the States. The state, in tune with the national policy, would have to plan for decentralised urbanisation in all its regions. It would also have to pick up threads from the national urbanisation policy as far as that is applicable to that state. Such urban planning would allow for healthy urbanisation in the state and equity in its economic development. However, in terms of current planning processes, the state needs to walk out of the preparation of city level plans and, in the spirit of the seventy-fourth amendment, allow the cities to prepare their own plans.

It is true that due to the numerical multiplicity of ULBs in a state, there is the need to have a degree of standardisation in certain characteristics that cut across ULBs. ULBs have no jurisdiction beyond their physical boundaries; hence any common issue across ULBs ought to fall in the domain of the State for a reasonable resolution. Within the ULB, a situation could arise that is either not resolvable by the ULB or that the ULB fails to resolve the situation creating a condition of dysfunction. Any such situation cannot be allowed to continue and the State would have to step in to find a resolution.

However, if we wish to visualize ULBs as self-governing institutions, the State must necessarily reconsider its current role vis a vis the ULBs. The

State would have to accept a redefined narrative in regard to the ULBs. Its responsibilities would be greatly boosted in its strategic function and significantly condensed in its operational supervision. The Indian Constitution clearly envisages urban planning to be done by the urban local bodies themselves. Hence, such planning functions that need to be in the domain of cities needs to be handed over to the cities.

Decentralised urban planning at the city level

Urban planning at the city level is fundamental to a city. Development plans fashion the city as a product and the quality of the product that is crafted makes for simpler and better operationalisation. Indeed, such planning has not only the ability to contribute handsomely to the quality of life of the citizens, but also to make cities more affordable and make decentralised urban governance more robust. Emerging concerns such as climate change get exacerbated if they have not been factored in during plan formulation. Managing climate change outcomes such as floods and heat waves, as a result, get more difficult. Poor physical infrastructure planning in such areas as transportation, housing, solid waste, drainage, parking, street vending and urban poverty make governance of a city very difficult and complex. These kinds of situations are best avoided through the mechanism of urban planning.

At the city level, urban planning has been designated as a function of the urban local body. Here, it would be appropriate to point out that the 12th Schedule of the Indian Constitution, inserted along with the Constitution (seventy-fourth) Amendment Act, lists ‘urban planning, including town planning’, ‘planning of land-use and construction of buildings’ and ‘planning for economic and social development’ as the first three municipal functions. All these three aspects get covered under urban planning. For a city, its development plan (DP), also known as master plan (MP), is the most strategic document that it prepares every twenty years. It lays down a comprehensive economic, environmental and social framework for the next two decades.

The concept of cities within a city

In the process of preparing the DP or MP, it makes eminent sense that cities should adopt a policy of decentralising the provision of public amenities and infrastructure by breaking up the city into several planning parts that could

be provided in such a way that most activities of citizens living in those areas could take place within those zones. Thus, daily activities, such as shopping, schools, health centres, residential, commercial and office spaces and similar activities could, as far as possible, happen within those zones. This has the advantages of reducing motorised transport, encouraging more pedestrian trips, less time spent on daily chores, less money spent on travel and more productive use of citizen's time. This makes the city more efficient and more affordable.

Development Plan Mumbai 2034

The above cited strategy was adopted in the preparation of the Development Plan (2034) of Mumbai. The city has a total of 24 administrative zones, each headed by an assistant commissioner. The administrative jurisdictions of each of these zones was treated as an independent city and independent zonal plans were prepared for them and then merged into the larger DP of Mumbai. The idea was to treat each of them as a city within the larger metropolis and were equipped with all such public amenities that citizens could access without travelling long distances. This automatically reduced travel, made more positive use of citizens' time, made the city more affordable, reduced transport load and had positive environmental impact. A similar attempt has been made in the DP of Akola, a mid-sized city within Vidarbha, Maharashtra, by dividing the city up into five sectors, and providing them with basic amenities.

Local Area Plans

Planning statutes also advise that post preparation of city development plans, detailed Local Area Plans (LAP) could be undertaken, providing for such details as urban renewal, housing, shopping, improvements to poor layouts, control of architectural features and open spaces. This is because the DP at the city level deals with the overall city requirements and is not in a position to be intricately informed about local issues, or to work out detailed customisation and comprehensively build them into the DP. This is indeed a difficult task and requires the ULB to prepare multiple LAPs for different parts of the city. These would also lead to the modification of some of the DP stipulations. However, there is no doubt that such plans would reflect local aspirations better and allow fulsome people's participation.

Citizen Participation in City Planning

This brings us to the lowest form of decentralised urban planning through active citizen involvement. The decentralisation of city level urban planning demands that in a democracy, the citizens of the ULB have a buy-in. Since elements of planning directly impact them, their voice needs to be taken into account. The manner in which city development plans are formulated today does not allow any transparency in the process except a peep at the end of the plan formulation process in the form of suggestions and objections. It is therefore, vital that the widest possible informed consultations lead the planning process rather than follow it at the end. Hence in the interests of a quality Plan, very high levels of transparency are called for, achievable not through mere suggestions and objections but through wide public consultations. This is eminently feasible at the LAP level.

Huge Plan Deficit

The worrisome part about city plans, however, is that according to a Niti Ayog Report of 2021, out of the 7,933 urban settlements in India, 65 percent of them had no master plan. Neither did they have accurate cadastral maps. Moreover, a study conducted by the Town and Country Planning Organisation (TCPO) and National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) revealed that as against 12,000 positions of town planners that were required, only 4,000 were available. This clearly indicates that the Town Planning directorates of the states are not in a position to assist ULBs deliver master plans. Nor was there sufficient capacity in the private sector. There is clearly a lot of room for capacity building. Fortunately, while dealing with urban development in the 2022-23 national budget, the Finance Minister of India, in regard to urban development, turned entirely to urban planning and listed it as a key instrument for achieving systematic urban development. She proposed to fund centres of excellence with endowment funds of INR 250 crore each, to take up the challenge of developing India-specific knowledge in urban planning and design. She also constituted a high-level committee for urban planning reforms.

Conclusion

The discussion above validates the point that along with decentralisation of urban governance, decentralising urban planning is a necessity in the urban context. While the GoI has a larger role in terms of direction, national urban

balance, city investments and financial incentivisation of states and aid to important cities, the states have a vitally significant role in crafting state urban policy, state-wide strategy and providing a proper statutory framework in which cities could operate. In the spirit of decentralisation, the state needs to restrict its role to broad strategic planning and leave the city planning role to cities. Cities in turn need to take up urban planning in a decentralised manner and see that amenities are planned in such a way that convenience citizens by availability at walkable distances. Additionally, it must find ways of citizen involvement in the process of urban planning. Indeed, urban planning crafted in this manner would make cities more productive and more liveable.

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