

GETTY IMAGES/ I STOCK PHOTO | Photo Credit: [uschools](#)

Soon after World War II, Americans chose to align their cities not with European ideals but with places that reflected American conditions. That great swathes of cheap land and newer technologies for construction were available meant that the new American city could have denser civic centres, a large component of suburban homes, private cars to access long distances, and a new conception of city life.

Dynamic Indian cities

The Indian city of the 21st century is a similarly dynamic entity, with palpable differences from its modern conception after Independence. Chandigarh, under Jawaharlal Nehru, began with a minuscule population of 20,000. This has grown to 1.2 million people today and the city's construction has no allegiance to its original conception. Similarly, Delhi began its post-Independence life with less than a million inhabitants. Today, on a GPS map, the National Capital Region's unhindered spread across three States resembles muddy water spreading from a broken drain.

Delhi's per capita GDP rate gives no indication of its true demographics. The city has the largest population of urban poor in the world. Its antiquated urban policies — by-laws, civic regulations and building parameters — that were drawn for a city of 750,000 middle-class residents are today out of sync for a population of 22 million, of which 80% are poor, homeless, or slum inhabitants. With similar statistics, a continual expansion northwards, and a system out of touch with ground reality, Mumbai is a close second.

Use-value versus exchange value in Indian cities

The liberalised economy of the last few decades has created two pockets of city life: a small exclusive elite that occupies urban space but remains cloistered and outside of its civic forces, and a majority of dispossessed who fill the empty crevices of the city with meagre possessions and rudimentary needs. A supposedly thriving middle class remains a figment of the bureaucratic imagination, while the overwhelming population is of the poor. What does this say about the future of civic planning and urban life?

Looking to West Africa

If the bureaucrat and the politician wish to deal with the real city today, they must look closely at Lagos and Kumasi rather than Copenhagen or Shanghai. Like Delhi and Mumbai, West African cities are migrant towns whose development and future prospects are tied to the economy of day-to-day minor endeavours. To give civic space to people with nothing, to allow for a spread of temporary commerce, cattle fairs, public festivals and vegetable markets as the mainstay of civic life makes West African towns strikingly similar to Indian cities. A mix of agricultural town, rural outpost and cosmopolitan centre, the city's migrant economy takes centre stage in civic life. Indian towns too rely on the surrounding farming economy or are artisan centres for small-scale — often illegal — industry.

Consequently, the signals are all directed towards a future urbanity made up of rural inhabitants, where the more pressing needs of civic life will be addressed by informal associations. Norms of space occupation, building design, size and density have to therefore grow out of people's own comfort and familiarity, not as an imposition of imaginary European models or even Indian middle-

class values. Civic mayhem is created by persistent and erroneous calls for public space, cultural centres, stadia, etc., rather than open maidans and temporary bazaars where migrant patterns can be openly expressed in city life.

Demographic changes in Indian cities occur much too fast to be acknowledged in government policy. In fact, perceptible changes in the city's public disposition have already begun to project rural patterns. The wide open green space at Delhi's India Gate — designed as ceremonial space for government monuments — now functions as an unselfconscious city ground for the capital's poor. The northern fringe of hillocks outside Jaipur's old city is a cataclysm of expanding tenements. Mumbai's Marine Drive is public space without intent, as is Chennai's Marina Beach.

Revitalising cities

Unless there is a serious rethink of the value of urban life, the city will remain mired in its present muddled state of trial, error and miscalculation. Cities throughout India have to be revitalised, for which three serious approaches are available.

Exporting Indian urbanism

First, given the trends of migration and the free-for-all approach to civic resources, land and facilities, the government's inclination to appease the larger numbers should take precedence. The city's overriding plan should be directed towards an accommodation of all migratory tasks — home, employment, entertainment, and commerce — in buildings and public facilities altered to suit their primary needs. This may radically change the overall structure of the city. But when bylaws and regulations are specifically and only written for a migrant city, it would be far more acceptable than the current city profile as desperate slum.

The second idea could adopt a draconian model of restrictions similar to Chinese and some European cities, allowing entry and civic facilities only to those with either home or employment. Physical control and access to roads, parks, housing and utilities becomes a position of fewer people sharing a limited reserve of urban space and resources. As most social scientists now admit, only controlled undemocratic space can be a functioning model for a city.

The third model, which is the most difficult and yet most sought-after, seeks a divergent and all-inclusive solution. It is what American urbanist Jane Jacobs described as 'a cultural cohesion' where the integration of economic disparities is so complete that it resembles a finely woven carpet. The design incorporates all the essential elements of habitation — home, commerce, recreation and institution — and merges them mysteriously in the carpet weave. The city and its neighbourhoods are no longer a visible intrusion of small private capitalist parts in a larger socialist city-state, or vice-versa, but an unconscious mixing of interdependence. People live blissfully unaware of the other's presence, class or economic status. Hints of such places are visible in old European and American cities, in small medieval towns in western India, even in some long-established poorer city tenements. Such cities do not follow physical, statistical or design models, but are formed out of a deeper evolutionary social core — an intent that despises easy definitions of community, residence, commercial area and public space. It takes a brave government to believe these are worth doing, and an even braver one to attempt such coalescing.

The extreme variation in all three approaches still demands decisive thought and implementation. It will take civic municipalities a serious commitment to a task so far given over to a decaying formless city — part slum, part farmhouse — born out of neglect and complacency.

Gautam Bhatia is a Delhi-based architect and sculptor

Receive the best of The Hindu delivered to your inbox everyday!

Please enter a valid email address.

Marriage is a civil contract — adultery or divorce should have only civil consequences

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

crackIAS.com