REIMAGINING THE CITY

Relevant for: null | Topic: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies incl. Migration & Smart Cities

Between the year 1 CE and the start of the Industrial Revolution (around the early 1800s), the decadal growth of the global population was around 0.8 per cent. With the advent of concentrated production centres, improved medicine and the era of fossil fuels, the global population has shot up by seven times in the last 180 years, clocking a decadal growth rate of over 11 per cent.

This population growth rate has been largely urban and metro-centred. Today, cities consume two-thirds of the global energy consumption and account for more than 70 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions. London became the first modern city to cross the one million population mark around 1800. By 1960, our planet had 111 cities with over a million inhabitants. In China and India, the number rose from 371 in 2000 to 548 in 2018, with 61 of these cities in India. Recently, the UN projected that by 2030, 28 per cent of the world population will live in dense, congested spaces, jostling for ever-dwindling space and choked infrastructure. Population densities have increased enormously, with the Dharavi slum in Mumbai registering a mind-boggling density of 3.75 lakh persons per sq km.

But COVID-19 has raised the question: Will concentrated, high-investment, high-density cities have a prominent place in the new, emerging world? Are they successful at providing an adequate return on investment? And, above all, do they provide a quality of life and happiness to all their inhabitants? An average Mumbaikar daily spends 95 minutes commuting between office and home, wasting nearly 10 per cent of his time awake everyday. Eight people die every day in Mumbai in local train-related accidents, and in Delhi, five people lose their lives in road accidents.

Going by present trends, India will build a new Chicago every year to accommodate new urban dwellers. This will require about $2.5 trillion of investment until 2030 — to create more congested urban spaces. Should we not look at alternative models of habitations, which are more frugal, more sustainable and offer more satisfying lifestyles and higher welfare levels?

Once cities expand beyond one million, they start to experience dis-economies of scale with pressure on every urban amenity increasing exponentially — more people means more vehicles, more vehicles mean need for more roads and increased pollution, which mean more hospitals, more energy and more waste. Even the most robust megacities can easily witness the "domino" effect where a minor and local failure is compounded into a catastrophe. In China in 2010, due to some broken cars and road repair work, a minor traffic snarl expanded quickly into a massive jam of 120 kilometres on the highway connecting Inner Mongolia and Beijing. Drivers were left with nowhere to go for a punishing 12 days. Even in India, we have witnessed smaller but painful versions of the same phenomenon. The truth is that overpopulated cities strain their resources inordinately and leave little room to successfully tackle every contingency.

Thus, cities are the most affected by natural and man-made disasters. Nearly every hot-spot of the COVID-19 outbreak is a congested urban centre. The low-income areas of cities, where anything from drinking water to sanitation can be a shared facility, are the most vulnerable to any disease outbreak. Congested low-income urban spaces not only bear an inordinately high disease burden, they also bear the brunt of air pollution, water contamination and crime infestation. In the face of any disaster like a flood, earthquake or, worse still, a pandemic, migrant workers, who throng these megacities, rush to go back to their villages. India, with its approximately 72 million migrant workers (including their families), is vulnerable to such

disruptions as amply demonstrated in recent weeks.

Some of the principal and strong advantages claimed for megacities with their sky scrapers are the economies of agglomeration and the generation of new ideas and innovations through multi-disciplinary interactions. These advantages have been largely nullified with advances in digital technologies that have made online interactions numerous, equally rich in content and covering a wider range of disciplines. The "cloud" is the new interaction space, which can be accessed by innovators from widely-spread geographies. Digitisation has apparently resulted in the loss of cities' innovative mojo.

With this major transformation and with the onset of COVID-19, it is surely the time to reconsider our habitation model. Gandhiji's model of gram swaraj, APJ Abdul Kalam's vision of providing urban amenities in rural areas and Nanaji Deshmukh's idea of self-reliant village development clearly deserve of fresh and focused attention. We have vast swathes of land, people and resources located in our over 6,00,000 villages. These offer another chance for us to pursue an alternative model of development where agriculture, industry and service sectors move in sync for sustainable development, which is in harmony with nature. This will minimise our carbon footprint. At the same time, it will also minimise social disruption with jobs coming to people rather than the other way round. New technology, the carbon constraint and diseconomies of congestion and density must force us to review our urbanisation landscape.

Kumar is vice chairman NITI Aayog, Singh is CEO of Dr. Kalam Centre, New Delhi. Views are personal

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