

## Big city blues

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The periodic drama of sealing and demolitions of illegal constructions has become the unfortunate leitmotif of Delhi's development. It is usually portrayed as a law and order issue, not the failure of urban planning. Not surprisingly, the judiciary has emerged as the arbiter in the field, thus further marginalising the role of the urban planner. As in any complex legal argument, the *casus belli*, the vision and the implementation strategies as defined by the Master Plan of Delhi (MPD), are now elided by issues that have arisen subsequently as its consequence. This inversion of intent and its outcome in providing the rationale for sealing and demolitions needs to be dispassionately analysed in order to formulate redressal mechanisms, not only to resolve the present predicament but also develop more effective long-term strategies to manage urban development.

This task has been long overdue. The fact is the spatial norms, development controls and even the basic planning ideology on which the present Master Plan of Delhi (and other Indian cities) is based are modelled on urban development strategies that evolved in post-war Europe and the US under entirely different social and economic circumstances. These were eagerly adopted after Independence by the governing elite (including urban planners) because they neatly aligned with their aesthetic aspirations for Indian cities. This has proved inadequate to handle the complexities of Indian urbanisation and the nature of indigenous urbanism: Hence the drama of sealing and demolitions. But such insights have not triggered self-reflexive reform in the profession. So tragically, the misguided strategies of MPD continue to be defended as adamant certainties.

All over the world urban planners have responded with pragmatic creativity — not the police powers of the State — to the changed circumstances they confront in the management of their cities, but not in Delhi. For example, the development of slums, mushrooming commercial, retail and industrial activities, are all evidence of a robustly developing political economy, but instead of mediating this processes by appropriately modifying the MPD, its subsequent revisions have treated it as urban malaise to be uprooted.

As a result, the city today is not so much the product of the original vision of MPD as it the product of the contest between the haves and the have-nots. Those at the receiving end of the police actions have naturally appealed to politicians to negotiate relief or resorted to corrupt means to “regularise” their initiatives to survive under hostile circumstances. Seen in this light, both the strengthening of democratic processes and the imperatives of a soft State are implicated in the subversion of MPD. The process has been so pervasive that some analysts believe that 70 per cent of the city has been regularised. Thus, sealing and demolitions has only shifted the focus from the original source of the problem, the MPD and the lack of imaginative governance, to its victims, the migrants and entrepreneurs who have immeasurably contributed to India's success story.

So, what is the way forward? So far the government has only tweaked the flawed MPD by “regularising” its failures because the MPD is considered a sacrosanct legal document. Meaningful reform can only begin by understanding the nature of Indian urbanism. Instead of importing solutions, it requires a fine-grained engagement with the problems of the habitat that has not been attempted so far. Given the history of urban planning and urban governance in our country, and the fact that so much water has already flowed under the bridge, the concept of Local Area Planning (LAP) offers hope. LAP seeks to find solutions for urban problems from the bottom up. Interestingly LAP is an integral part of MPD, but was never used as a tool to resolve urban problems.

About 10 years ago, it was decided to invite five institutions to try it out on an experimental basis. I was part of that exercise. LAP brings civic governance closer to the people by providing a mapped framework of the existing ground realities for taking development decisions for each of the 272 electoral wards of the city. It enables the public, elected representatives and civic authorities to transparently negotiate local issues and find solutions, including how to deal with slums and illegal development. Stakeholders are brought to the table to reach satisfying settlements. This was no mean feat in a planning system that expects society to submissively accept the dictates of MPD or be labelled illegal. Of course, it was an intelligent initiative whose time had come, but the civic authorities burdened the exercise ab initio by expecting the institutions to make recommendations that adhered to the prescriptions of MPD. Not surprisingly, the exercise was aborted. Nevertheless, while it lasted, the exercise demonstrated that there was a democratic process available to resolve seemingly intractable urban planning issues that are currently being dealt with by sealing and demolitions.

Regrettably, urban planners seem to be the last to realise that cities are neither abstract nor static entities and that a Master Plan is not written in stone. Unless they seriously engage with the people and the ground realities of Indian cities to come up with humane solutions, the profession can only hold on to the judiciary's coat-tails to manage the city. The challenge, therefore, is to look inwards and not outwards for solutions to make Delhi a better city.

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