City in search of an idea

A recent seminar on cities in Brasilia was revealing on two counts. First, it pointed out the dismal quality of life in the world's most wretched urban areas — almost all, without exception, in South Asia. Second, since the seminar was Third World-centric, its outcome was all the more damning. The criteria it used were truly basic — health, education, population density, access to water and clean air. The seminar did not even venture into First World standards of parks, recreation, social cohesion, entertainment, culture, or the quality of life.

Polluted air, rain-flooded streets and traffic snarls — these are obvious to most residents of Indian towns, and hardly need any restating. Strained on utilities and infrastructure, the city survives from day to day like a heavily-sedated patient in an ICU. Its future, even its survival the next day, is filled with multiple insecurities. Yet, Indian cities are remarkable in that they display their warts and all without hesitation and with utmost clarity. Look, for instance, at five of India's largest towns, each a critical marker of one major problem.

Delhi's pollution levels were among the highest in the world long before they were statistically reckoned in terms of particulate matter, carbon dioxide emissions, industrial effluents and daily air quality measures. As temperatures drop and crop stubble is burnt in neighbouring Punjab and firecrackers are lit — despite bans — toxic particulate matter rises to alarming levels. Pollution spikes to such unsafe standards in winter that news reports claim — without irony — that "today's level has improved from dangerous to very harmful". Marathons and cyclothons continue to be staged in Delhi, but with participants wearing masks. Is this acceptable for Asia's largest and most populous capital?

In Bengaluru, traffic comes to a virtual halt during peak hours. While, there is no viable public transport system for a population of one crore, the city has almost 70 lakh motorised vehicles — a number that has grown by 6,000 per cent from the 1970s. As a result, the average speed of vehicles in the city has dropped radically. It was recently clocked at 4.7 km per hour, slower than a middle-aged pedestrian walking normally. With the fastest internet connections to the rest of the world, India's IT city is slowest in terms of physical movement.

Mumbai, the country's business centre, comes to a virtual standstill for a completely different reason — floods. Every year, between June and September, people are stranded on embankments, swallowed up by open manholes, electrocuted by low-hanging wires, injured under collapsed buildings, or plain incapacitated in their daily routines between home and office. At Elphinstone Road Railway Station, a stampede after the recent floods left 22 people dead. Numerous old structures are in danger of collapse. For four months, it is not business as usual in Mumbai.

Kolkata's affliction is not new and stems from a lack of civic amenities. Without regular increases in power supply and water provision, the city survives on an entirely outmoded and inadequate supply and distribution system. With the Ganga along its Western flank, the city traditionally had extensive groundwater reserves and wetlands, but large parts of South and Central Kolkata now experience chronic water shortages. With rationing, power cuts and blackouts, India's oldest and once-most sophisticated modern city is now its most un-modern and antiquated.

Chennai is still the most livable of the big five. But that does not mean that it has no problems. Indeed, it has all the same afflictions, but in smaller measure — broken incomplete roads in Perumbakkam, water logging, lack of street drainage and lighting, and continual shortage of drinking water in the new areas. Residents of Chennai have learnt to do with less.

Providing relief to people in the Indian city now lies beyond the scope of conventional solutions and governance ideas — both of which have denied residents a better quality of life. Odd and even-numbered cars, a ban on diesel, planting trees, reviving mangroves, establishing flood break-heads, rationing utilities and reviving public transport are minor and ad- hoc solutions to problems that are now beyond environmental and bureaucratic control.

More than ever now, city officials need to start asking the right questions. Will Bengaluru benefit from the graded transition from fossil-fuel powered cars to electric cars over the next decade? Or will it benefit from the reduction and eventual eradication of cars altogether? Is private pod transport an answer to traffic problems? Should bylaws be revised to allow offices and homes at one place, and cut out commuting altogether? Should Mumbai merely clean up its storm drainage system before the monsoon — or upgrade it as is normally done prior to the rainy season — or seriously examine the possibility of creating large catchment areas throughout the city? Should Delhi encourage carpooling in winter and levy fines on burning coal and — in the obvious next stage of its convoluted policies — provide government subsidies to private air purifiers? Or, as has been done in many South American cities, reduce construction and create biomass parks with a sizeable proportion of trees per person in every neighbourhood?

The real test in the next decade will be one of far-reaching urban ideas that will have to be put in place by a mayor or a CEO (city enforcement officer) — someone in a position to take on responsibilities and initiate action. The promise of a brighter urban future rests with testing new ideas from new sources enacted by new people. The choices are many, but they need to be made now and by a single authority.

"More than any time in history," wrote Woody Allen, "mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to utter despair and hopelessness, the other to total extinction". When applied to the present Indian city, Allen's prophecy has been realised on both counts.