

The National Commission On Urbanisation and Its Present Day Relevance

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In 1986 the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi constituted the National Commission On Urbanisation with Charles Correa as Chairman and Ashish Bose, Nilay Chaudhary, Xerxes Desai, B.G. Fernandez, Cyrus Guzder, V.K.Pathak, Amit Sen and Kirti Shah as members and Naresh Nared as Member Secretary. I had the honour of being appointed as Vice Chairman of the Commission. The Commission had an eclectic mix of architects, planners, industrialists, economists, environmental engineering experts and administrators. We submitted our final reports to the Prime Minister on 12th August 1988.

The reason why the Commission was set up was that whereas India's population had been growing steadily so that between 1947 and 1987 it grew from about 35 crores to about 80 crores, the rate of growth of the urban population was twice as fast as the growth of rural population and the urban population quadrupled from about five crores in 1947 over twenty years in 1988. In fact the Census of India tells us that between 1901 and 2011 the total population of India grew five-fold, whereas the urban population increased seventeen times. However, in these 110 years the urban population as a proportion of the total population grew three-fold. Despite the great differential between the rate of growth of rural and urban population, as a proportion of the total population urban growth did not achieve a dimension where the equilibrium between the urban and rural population became totally biased in favour of the urban. In 110 years between 1901 and 2011 the urban population grew from 10.8 percent of the total to 31.2 percent, which means that overwhelmingly India continues to be a rural country. In fact when one looks at the small towns of census classification VI to IV, that is, 3,000 to 30,000 population, 7.5 percent of the urban population lives in these towns, which accounts for about 2.5 percent of the total population. These towns have employment characteristics which are so intimately linked with agriculture that at best they can be defined as semi urban and if their population is deducted from the total urban population, then the real urban population of India would be about 28.7 percent of the total and the rural population would be in excess of 71 percent. However, let us not indulge in what Prof. Ashish Bose, arguably India's greatest demographer, called decimal point demography.

To return to the reasons for setting up the National Commission On Urbanisation government recognised that in absolute numbers urban India's dimensions are such that our urban population alone was more than the entire population of the United States. Were our cities heroic engines of growth which created wealth for the nation, or were they settlements in which large sections of the citizens live in squatter colonies under the most brutal and human living conditions imaginable? Undoubtedly there was a bit of both in our urban settlements, but there is no doubt that the economic potential of urban India, which could act not only as generator of wealth but as a pool for providing gainful employment to the surplus of rural population, was not being achieved because of the sheer degradation of the urban environment. Decaying urban infrastructure, defective planning, administrative inefficiencies and inadequate resource mobilisation and allocation are all part of the urban malaise. Therefore, it was decided by government to set up a Commission to examine the whole gamut of urbanisation and facilitate the formulation of policy which could set matters right.

In this behalf the National Commission On Urbanisation in Volume I of its report commented, "Obviously the urban situation in India is one of deep crisis and calls for measures analogous to those used when a house is on fire, or there is a city wide epidemic". The Commission formed a view, which can best be illustrated by a quotation from the same volume of the Commission's report "Having examined the crucial issues (from resource mobilisation and land supply policies to water and shelter for the poor) this Commission has identified ... viable programmes ... We must acknowledge the positive aspects of cities and the opportunities which they represent. Urbanisation is a necessary concomitant of the development path we have chosen". In other words, the National Commission On Urbanisation, after a deep examination of all the issues relating to urbanisation and the urban rural nexus, has stated, "Urbanisation involves two closely related factors.

The first is the people-work relationship in rural areas, in which land is the essential medium and which is right now so critically balanced that any addition to the population must inevitably push people out of agriculture into non agricultural operations. The second is the fact that only urban settlements can offer substantial non agricultural employment and absorb the migrants who are moving out of an agricultural economy". Great credit, however, must be given to the Commission for stating and I quote "In fact in States where irrigation and the extension of appropriate technology to agriculture has led to massive surpluses in production, the urban rural nexus has actually been strengthened, largely because of the operation of market forces. Thus while migration from rural to urban areas is a process which seemingly holds out the greatest danger to our urban settlements, it is in fact one of vital importance for the development of rural areas and thus for the nation as a whole. It is from this perspective that the Commission has examined the crucial issues and conceptualised the strategic thrusts needed for the next few decades without, in any way, questioning or preempting the development and reform which must be carried out with the greatest urgency within rural India itself".

The present strategy of government seems to be to encourage the secondary sector so that manufacture becomes the main source of employment in India. Because manufacture needs a certain critical size of settlements this automatically requires the growth of urban centres in which industry could be located and which could provide employment for persons siphoned away from the rural areas and from their traditional agricultural operations. How does this policy synchronise with the view of the Commission that the settlement pattern India is largely in equilibrium from the smallest village to the largest metropolitan centre? In fact India has no primate cities, such as Mexico City which accounts for more than twenty percent of the entire population of Mexico and Bangkok which has about fifteen percent of the entire population of Thailand. Compared to that our metropolitan centres are only pimples on the face of India if we view them in the context of our total population. Even today whereas 53 million plus cities which are categorised as metropolitan by the Census of India contain 19.24 percent of the total urban population so far as the total population of India is concerned they account for only six percent. The Commission was opposed to disturbance of this equilibrium, which is why it emphasised that development and reform must be carried out with the greatest urgency within rural India.

While recognising the role of the mega metropolitan cities, Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi and Madras, to which we can add Bangalore, Ahmedabad and Pune, as generators of wealth at the national level, the Commission has not been unmindful of the fact that between 1971 and 1981 six hundred urban centres lower in size and population scale have exhibited the maximum demographic growth. The Commission recognised that the mega metropolitan centres had a huge financial, business and industrial establishment, their infrastructure, whether physical or social, was under immense pressure and unless national priority was given to their revival it would have massive implication for the Indian economy. However, the Commission has also recognised that whereas a mega metropolitan city hardly has a definable hinterland, the smaller towns and cities do have a definable localised hinterland which ensures a rural urban continuum. Therefore, the development of the intermediate level urban centres would have strong regional ramifications and would assist in strengthening the economy at regional levels. That still leaves us with those towns and cities which were largely static, whose slow growth would still not stop them from becoming the centres of local migration, with the migrants not having gainful employment and thus merely transferring rural poverty to a larger population centre which was semi urban at best. This would constitute a tragedy of the first magnitude. To this could be added another dimension, which is that forty percent of the growth of urban India is due to natural birth within the city, which means that even without migration our towns and cities would continue to grow. This factor by itself is justification for upgrading the infrastructure of our urban centres.

If we look at the Commission's report in depth it clearly emerges that the Commission strongly favours an active urbanisation policy in order that there can be positive growth of our economy. In other words, urban India would transform from merely being a concentration of population in towns into one which is capable of generating economic growth in a sustained manner. To quote the Commission "Instead of remaining isolated centres of economic activity, with weak linkages with the rural hinterland, the cities must become vibrant

centres, making the best use of the natural and human resources in the region where they are located and, over time, expand their economic base to enable them to assume economic functions which transcend their regional boundaries”.

To further reinforce the argument that the Commission advocated continuum rather than just urbanisation, in Volume II, Part 1 of the Commission’s report, in paragraph 2.2.7 the Commission states “In a country like India, where over two-third of the work force is engaged in agriculture, urbanisation should be visualised as a major instrument of agricultural and rural development... Our urbanisation strategy should aim at promoting both agriculture and industrial development and thus play a role in the challenging task of generating rapid economic growth”. On this basis the Commission recommended intervention strategies in the field of urbanisation which would give adequate attention to agricultural development and the rural poor. If intervention takes place at district level, if there is vocational skill development at that level and employment can be generated at district level itself, this would open up the rural hinterland and avoid blind migration to cities. If agriculture prospers and the rural demand for consumer goods increases it would certainly benefit industry. All this calls for a highly efficient system of planning, both economic and social, at district level so that there can be integration of spatial, economic and social development.

One of the major contributions of the Commission was that it viewed economic growth as a major factor in settlement planning in India. The Commission was able to identify 329 urban centres which had high promise of both demographic and economic growth. 109 of these towns are located in districts where more than ninety percent of the population is still rural and from which there is the highest potential of migration to urban areas. This was a major break from the British system of accumulating wealth in only a few large cities which had strategic importance for the empire. Instead it would decentralise and widely spread urbanisation, improve the infrastructure of small and medium towns, attract investment which would take advantage of the huge pool of surplus labour available in rural India and, by providing vital urban rural links, would enable an entire region to develop. To quote from the Commission in paragraph 2.3.6 “If this investment is integrated with a massive training programme which prepares the rural folk for urban employment, the whole of the middle and lower Gangetic Valley, for example, could become a throbbing dynamo generating economic power”. This is precisely what the Prime Minister said when he talked of the clean Ganga campaign. He stated that 40 percent of India’s population lives in the Ganga basin and if the river could be cleaned it would generate great economic development. Cleaning the Ganga then becomes a means of unleashing an economic revolution.

The present government has advocated the setting up of a hundred smart cities. Compare this with the National Commission On Urbanisation’s recommendation that 109 towns in districts which are largely rural should be developed as creators of non agricultural jobs and generating economic momentum. There is a ring of similarity to both suggestions. However, whereas what constitutes a smart town is still a matter for discussion, the National Commission On Urbanisation’s recommendation is both simple and absolutely focused. What is being suggested is investment in small towns which have a potential for growth, but developing them in a manner in which they provide a market for the product of the rural hinterland and by pumping money into the hinterland the urban settlement would actually fund the improvement of agriculture so that urban-rural growth is in tandem. Smart cities might become highly modern implants in a region where poverty would continue because the activities of smart cities would not relate to the rural environment. These would be entirely new towns, akin to Bhilai, Durgapur and Rourkela which were created to serve the new steel plants that were built in the middle of nowhere. In context they were smart cities because they were designed to serve a particular industrial technology. In every single case of such a city in India they became centres of relative prosperity in an impoverished hinterland and they attracted the rural poor who hoped to get some employment in the informal sector which would service the newly established cities. Every one of our new towns has degenerated into the duality of the planned township of the industry and the totally unplanned non city of slums which have grown around them to house the informal sector. Will not the new smart cities of Narendra Modi become another Bhilai or Durgapur?

The investment planned in supporting the generators of economic momentum by the National Commission On Urbanisation would be of a moderate scale in which the town infrastructure would be improved and conditions gradually created whereby sustainable non agricultural economic activity could be generated, even if it be at the small or medium scale. Here the differential between poverty and wealth would not be such that vast numbers of people would be attracted in search of jobs. In fact the suggestion here is to strengthen the hierarchy of settlements so that village agriculture improves, the selected towns service the rural hinterland, create a demand for rural product whilst developing an industrial base at a scale to which the villagers could relate and in which, with proper skill development inputs, they could find employment. The Commission's proposal is based on strengthening a continuum, whereas the hundred smart cities proposal is aimed at superimposing on a wobbly urban infrastructure a completely new implant which may not be in tune with the rest of India. The Commission's proposal is anchored in the belief that "... policy intervention must consciously seek to bring about a balanced development of all regions in a phased manner, keeping in mind the overriding resource constraint and the need for raising productivity and generating economic growth with equity". The present government's policy completely overlooks resource constraints and the competing demands on resources of the highly capital intensive smart cities and the need to invest in maintaining and upgrading the existing urban infrastructure. Concern for equity is not mentioned at all, which means that the new smart cities would corner all the resources and the Devil take the hindmost! Is this fair?

What the Commission found about the condition of cities in India and the decay of infrastructure is still valid today. The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission was aimed at investment in improving the existing infrastructure of our urban centre. The smart city concept, which is highly capital intensive, as already stated would cut into these funds and it is almost certain that the condition of our existing urban centres will degrade even further because of lack of resources. To that extent there is a complete mismatch between what the National Commission On Urbanisation recommended and what the present government is planning. It is time that administrators, planners, politicians and scholars take a good, hard look at what the National Commission had recommended because unfortunately between 1988 and 2015, apart from gathering dust, the Commission's report has remained largely unread. Not because I was Vice Chairman of the Commission but rather because as an administrator who had actually managed the cities of Ujjain, Bhopal and Delhi, I do feel that what the Commission recommended makes sound commonsense and what is being suggested now is not rooted in reality. We must dream, but we must not fantasise and my major fear is that somewhere down the line the dreams do not match reality and this can be dangerous.
