

Some Thoughts on Urban Identity and Emerging City Forms

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In any discussion on what constitutes the urban as distinct from the rural one faces a definitional problem. The Chambers Twenty-first Century Dictionary defines urban in the following words “relating to, belonging to, constituting, or characteristic of a city or town. The same dictionary defines town as “urban area with relatively defined boundaries and a name, smaller than a city”. This inevitably takes us to the meaning of village, which is “a group of houses, shops and other buildings, smaller than a town and larger than a hamlet, especially in or near the countryside”. Rural is defined as “relating to or suggesting of the country or countryside, pastoral or agricultural”. In a way this last definition is more exact than any of the others given above because the Indian Census itself distinguishes between urban and rural on two criteria. The first is the population of a settlement and a figure above that which is prescribed by the Census is considered to be an urban area. The second criterion is the dominant occupation of a settlement and if the people in excess of seventy percent of the population are engaged in agriculture or agriculture related occupations, then the settlement would be considered a rural area. The dictionary meaning of rural as being agricultural and pastoral would perhaps be the best distinction between that which is urban and that which is rural. Put another way, the occupation pattern of a village would be relatively simple, being either agriculture based or having a close link with agriculture in terms of labour, transportation of agricultural goods, marketing, agro processing and servicing of the agricultural sector. An urban settlement, however, would be heterogeneous in the occupations it offers to its residents and, therefore, the urban economy would be complex and the manner in which people earn a living would be multi-faceted. What is more, because an urban settlement is larger and more heterogeneous than a village, it would offer greater opportunities for development of social infrastructure than would be possible in village because of the scale of operations. This distinction is important to remember because ultimately our approach to the whole issue of urbanisation will be dependent upon heterogeneity of activity and scale of activity. This is the theme to which we shall revert at a later stage.

Let us begin by burying a few shibboleths, the most prominent of which is the widely held belief that ancient India had very strong urban character. Perhaps the Mahabharat and its description of Hastinapur as a city, perhaps Ramayan and its descriptions of the splendours of Ayodhya and Lanka, are responsible for us to believe that there was a major urban element to our ancient settlement pattern. To some extent the reference to Patliputra and its description as the capital of Magadh in the era preceding the Mauryan Empire, the stories of the splendours of Taxila in the north gave rise to the belief that the ancient Indians were a highly urbanised people. The descriptions of the Maurayan city of Patliputra, the dimensions of its walls and the street patterns are available to us from what the historical accounts of that period that have come down to us recount, because after all, the written word had become available through Prakrit, Pali and Sanskrit. However, in terms of remains which can be seen by the naked eye, almost nothing remains. Certain sacred buildings such as the stupas of the Buddhist period do still exist, but of the cities as such and the temporal structures therein nothing is visible. As an example of this we have Ujjain which, together with Varanasi, is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, in which not a single

structure of a residential house, a shop, a school, a government office, a hospital is to be seen. The explanation given by Percy Lancaster is that almost all construction of a temporal character was of wood and none of the structures have survived over the ages. He gives two examples to prove his point. The peripheral wall of the main stupa at Sanchi appears to be made of uprights and wooden horizontal slats, except that the material used is stone. The workers who built it were very familiar with wood working and, therefore, they have imitated a wooden fence rather than constructed a stone wall. Similarly, in the cave temples of Ajanta and Ellora, as also Karla and Kanheri, the ceiling looks as if it is made with wooden members, whereas actually they are chiselled stone. According to Percy Lancaster it is only the religious structures, or some monastic structures such as at Nalanda and Sanchi which were made of stone, which have survived. This is a theory worth mulling over.

There are exceptions to this. The cities of the Indus Valley Civilisation, which would certainly be considered ancient, such as Mohenjo-Daro, Dholavira, Lothal, all in Sind and Gujarat and, surprisingly enough Kapishtasthal, or modern day Kaytha in Ujjain District of M.P, which is on the Malwa Plateau, have all got remains of the Indus Valley Civilisation cities, naval dockyards, ports, etc. These structures are in good shape because they are made of brick or stone and though they were buried under centuries of deposits, they have been excavated and are open for viewing. Included in this is Harappa in Montgomery, now Sahiwal, District in Pakistan, which is important because it provides a link between the Indus Valley Civilisation and the Gandhara Civilisation further north in Rawalpindi District at Taxila and beyond to Bamian in Afghanistan. However, the fact remains that whereas in Greece and Rome, in fact the whole of Italy, there are well preserved remains of the ancient era, their survival happened because they are made of stone, whereas the timber built cities of ancient India have disappeared.

Modern urban settlements, their planning, form and function cannot be compared with the cities of ancient India because there are no existing points of reference in built form. We are, therefore, forced into comparison with the cities of medieval India which were built of more durable materials, have survived in their old form and, what is more, are even today lived in and are very much alive. Some, like Orchha and Chanderi, are almost pristine because though they are alive there is very little pressure of modernisation and, therefore, the medieval form and life style still exist. Others, like the multiple cities of Delhi, have been built in, on and around the medieval predecessors and now the medieval portion exists more as an archaeological curiosity rather than an entity which determines the urban form of its modern successor.

The above point has been made specifically because it is in the co-existence of the medieval and the modern that our present day urban form depends. One could divide it into three distinct segments, each with a completely different lifestyle. The medieval segment represented a lifestyle in which public space really mean the street, the square used for community functions and certain buildings with a religious significance which had their own private spaces. The Jama Masjid at Delhi and the Taj-ul-Masaajid at Bhopal are two examples of religious structures which both have a public space around them and a private inner court for prayer and meditation. Like the medieval cities of Europe the Indian medieval cities also had streets and localities which went by function. The guilds in Europe divided localities between the streets of silver smiths, copper smiths, candle makers, ship's chandlers, etc. Similarly, we had localities like *loha bazaar*, *sarafa*, brass workers bazaar, etc. There was the mandi for grain, for spices, for fruits and vegetables, but the residential streets, like in a medieval European town, had a façade of houses with no set-back or front garden. This

makes the streets appear crowded, but the logic of such construction is that whereas a continuous façade gave protection, the buildings also kept each other cool in a tropical country because they cast shadows on each other and prevented the walls from overheating. Inside, however, there would be a series of courtyards surrounded by rooms, which provided ventilation, open to sky space and a common space where the family could indulge in all kinds of social activity. This city form, largely enclosed by the outer protective walls of the city, provided for community living and also safety in unruly times.

Then came the next phase of city planning which can be broadly termed as British colonial. The British did not want to live inside a crowded walled city and in any case they did not want to live as close neighbours of Indians. What is more, they considered Indian cities to be insanitary and smelly and, therefore, both on grounds of sanitation and to achieve distance between the ruler and the ruled they set up civil stations and cantonments outside the old cities. There was now an old town and a new town. In a way hygiene and sanitation forced a new urban form on India because the new settlement had wide roads, large compounds, each with its independent bungalow and instead of the private space being within courtyards they were now contained in the compounds and garden surrounding the bungalow. This is a totally different urban form from the medieval cities. Of course as time passed and the urban population grew the new settlements, or colonies as they are called in India, continued to be developed on the old principles of British India of an independent plot, marginal open spaces and a separate bungalow. There was, however, a major difference. Each of the old bungalows had acres of space whereas the new developments were on small plots in which an individual bungalow still remained, but the vast open spaces were reduced to postage stamp lawns and gardens. This is the phase of urban planning which can best be described as bastardisation of an urban planning principle by planners and architects who were probably not very skilled, conscientious, sensitive or knowledgeable town planners. This is also the period when our architects began imitating the architectural schools of the West, including Mies van de Rohe and the Bauhaus School, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, even the Chicago School, all of whom built for temperate countries and whose architecture was totally unsuited to a tropical country, in which the northern part of the country experienced extremes of climate between winter and summer. A prime example of the total irrelevance of these modern structures to India is the old Vikas Minar, then headquarters of DDA, which is at best a glass enclosed coffin, boiling hot in the summer, freezing cold in the winter and totally unsafe for its inhabitants because access to upper floors was through a central core, which was really a chimney which would have ensured that a fire on any floor would be sucked through this chimney and would engulf the entire building.

The third phase was the vertical phase in which the bungalow living was replaced by living in flats in buildings in which floor was stacked on floor. The problem with vertical growth is that it is not just a case of more intensive use of land which gives more dwelling units per hectare than horizontal growth. That can only happen if the co-relationship between floor area ratio (FAR) and density is no longer maintained. If, however, the planning process provides for both the desirable density and the prescribed floor area ratio, then regardless of the height of the building the total built up area would be in consonance with the desirable density and this would be reflected in a much larger land area being made available for roads, parking and common open spaces. A very good example of what happens when the density and FAR co-relationship is abandoned is from Bombay. In the Thane-Bombay area the Hiranandani group has built a fairly extensive development in which the FAR is 11.5.

Whereas within the development there are open spaces and movement spaces, the density achieved is so high, the number of households so many, the number of motor vehicles in such astronomic numbers, that at any given point of time this housing estate disgorges hundreds of vehicles on the main road passing the complex. This road has eight lanes of traffic but even if it were twenty lanes wide it would still remain choked because of the enormous volume of traffic entering it from one single housing complex. That is the inevitable consequence of trying to achieve impossibly high densities.

Vertical living as a part of normal city form and life may be reasonably comfortable for the middleclass because the living space would be adequate if not luxurious. When this is converted into living space for the poor that is quite another story. Our definition of an Economically Weaker Section (EWS) dwelling is one room, kitchen and bath covering an area of less than 300 square feet. A Lower Income Group (LIG) dwelling would be only marginally larger. Can one imagine the fate of a family with three children cooped up in a single room on the eighth floor of a multi-storeyed building in which most of the time the lift, if any, does not work? The man may go away for work and the woman is left with three or more squabbling, crying children who, because they have no space to play, cause the mother's nerves to fray. A good example of very bad urban planning is the fishermen's housing built by the Tamil Nadu Housing Board about 45 to 50 years ago on the Foreshore in Madras. Fishermen need space in which to dry their nets and they have to be physically present there lest someone steals them. A fisherman cannot carry his nets to his one room dwelling on one of the the upper floors of a multi-storey unit. Nor can a slum dweller keep his goat or his chickens in such a flat. What happens to his bicycle or motorised two-wheeler? Because of these practical problems the poor prefer low rise development because at least the land around the house, even if common property, is available for common use. That is why they prefer slum housing which is self built to the high rise buildings of the development authority. Ultimately the Foreshore fishermen's colony has been converted into middle income housing by combining several units into one because the fishermen refuse to live in them. This lesson has still not been learnt by our urban planners and in JNNURM (Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission) slum dwellers are being relocated in multi-storey structures, badly built because they have to be cheap and in any case the authorities building them are thoroughly corrupt. Will these new slums be any better than what they replace?

A slum, because it is self built and the structures are of no great height actually grows almost organically from the earth. The architectural aesthetics or ugliness of colonies of individual structures hardly registers because visually they have no distinctive features. What causes disgust with the slums is the virtual nonexistence of any services, so that pools of sewage accumulate, there are heaps of garbage in which rag pickers and pigs rummage alike and the general impression is of filth everywhere. Remove these, provide proper drainage, reorganise the slum spatially with the help of the slum dwellers so that there is orderly access and provide the minimum basic service and the slum will no longer be obvious or even visible. The slum dwellers, unorganised, illiterate and untrained as they are, have found living space for themselves, albeit by encroachment, where the trained urban planners had said that no land is available. When we talk of city form we must take into account the ingenuity of the slum dwellers. Harness their energy and accept that for the poor jerry-built housing will be the first phase of city dwelling, with the proviso that because there is some planning input these areas are amenable to upgradation over time. This is one lesson that our urban planners have to learn and our urban administrators and politicians have to accept if we

are to have cities which are friendly to people, especially to the poor. Give them physical and social infrastructure, help them to improve their housing and we can eliminate DLF, Lokhandwala and Hiranandani till such time that the median income in India rises to a level where everyone can afford a properly built dwelling unit of adequate size.

This point is emphasised in the present paper because unless our architectural and town planning education establishment sensitises students and faculty to the reality of urban India we can have neither proper planning nor a desirable city form. In this behalf it might be worth quoting from Volume II, Part IV, Chapter 10 of the report of the National Commission on Urbanisation. The Commission states “ Thus talk about producing high rise housing for the masses is absurd, since the high land values and expensive construction that such a typology represents can be afforded by only a small segment of our society, forcing the others into squatter colonies and precipitating exactly the kind of polarisation which is destroying our cities, like a cancer”. The Commission goes on to give in detail a comparison between low rise high density housing and vertical housing. The Commission says, “In fact, if the advantages of these open to sky spaces (in low rise high density development) are taken into account, then the cost benefit trade off would come down even more decisively in favour of low rise high density built form, since it is possible to promote the use of such spaces primarily through a pattern of individual houses (as opposed to apartments). Henceforth, instead of viewing sites and services schemes merely as ghettos for the urban poor, that typology should be perceived as part of a continuum of low rise high density urban form that stretches all the way up the income profile to the elegant town house, making this form of tightly packed individual houses one of crucial relevance to the entire spectrum of income groups that constitute our society”. The above quotations have been resorted to in order to prove the point that a vertical profile of an Indian city is not suited either to economic realities or the reality of Indian urban lifestyle.

Which brings one to asking the question whether our architects and planners have really understood what constitutes urban form even in the West, which we are attempting to imitate. San Francisco, arguably one of the most livable in cities in the world, has accepted that it is located in a highly earthquake prone zone. It has also understood the topography of an area in which water and low hills form an integral part of the landscape. Therefore, the urban form of San Francisco and the entire Bay Area is one of a very pleasant city which may have a degree of spread but whose general footprint is horizontal rather than vertical. The five boroughs which together constitute New York City are generally represented by Manhattan, a long and narrow island in which the entire profile is vertical. That same city has the borough of Brooklyn which largely consists of low rise buildings along tree shaded streets, all centring either on the beautiful Prospect Park or the river front. We imitate Manhattan but we are not aware of Brooklyn. Once again the point is made that if San Francisco makes topography central to its planning process, if apart from the island of Manhattan New York itself has multiple urban forms, not to mention the wooded landscape of the Palisades along the upper reaches of Hudson River, why can Bhopal not accept that with its hills and lakes the footprint of this city has to be horizontal?

Our ancient and medieval cities have all been built around an identity or a central core. Varanasi can probably survive without the Kashi Vishwanath Temple; it cannot survive without its ghats along the Ganga. Similarly, Ujjain cannot survive without Ram Ghat on the Kshipra. Both cities are more than the sum total of the two Jyotirlings, Kashi Vishwanath and Mahakal, located there which lend the cities sanctity. The Sankat Mochan Temple in Varanasi and the Mangalnath Temple in Ujjain have a completely different ambience and

serenity from Vishwanath Temple or the Mahakal Temple. Both should be in focus when we plan these cities. We cannot do what Orissa has done to itself when planning its new capital, Bhubaneshwar. That city has the Bindusagar Lake, the Lingaraj Temple and the Vaital Deol. The Lingaraj Temple is the most perfect example of Oriya architecture and the Vaital Deol is one of the only two extant examples of Brahminical architecture, the other being the Teli-ka-Mandir in the Gwalior Fort. These should have been the main focal points of Bhubaneshwar. Instead a modern capital, with its grid like planning, has been planned and built in such a way that the temple complex is virtually not a part of it and from where Rajpath ends a winding lane passes through a nondescript village to reach the temple complex. How can our planners be so insensitive to our heritage? That is why Ujjain still has an identity and Bhubaneshwar has none though it is very much in ancient Kalinga. This paper is not really designed to be judgemental. However, one would certainly try and bring to the notice of our educationists the fact that culturally we are vandals who care not a jot for our heritage. It took Britishers like Curzon, Wheeler and Marshall to remind us of our architectural treasures. Obviously, there is need to do some good hard thinking on where our urban philosophy is going. Doxiades and his theory of Ekistics, Mies Van de Rohe and Bauhaus are familiar terms in architectural education, but what about our home grown Raja Bhoj and his Samarangan Sutradhar, which so influenced Devi Ahilya of Indore that she designed Maheshwar and Indore according to the principles enunciated in this treatise?

Because form quite often follows function, just as function itself can be determined by form cities can be designed for the functions which they are required to perform and this would determine form. Pretoria and New Delhi, both cities of government, probably did need Edward Lutyens to design them because the function of these cities was to overawe and thus establish the majesty of government. Jamshedpur, being a steel town, needed a completely different architectural approach because here the industrial complex was the core and the city was designed to service it. This is true of Bhilai also. However, our city planners have to realise that if they are able to either identify the dominant function of a city, or intend to promote certain functions, then city form has to be designed for that function, or group of functions. In other words, one has to go beyond the pretty greens, blues, yellows, purples and reds which constitute a land use map and instead proceed to determine in depth the dominant functions, the form needed to support these functions and the land use needed to service them. Such a city would automatically get a logical form into which different activities would be slotted into land reserved for them. One doubts whether such detailed planning has ever been done, but we need to undertake these exercises.

In the ultimate analysis we have to try and raise the urban to the urbane. Intelligent city planning calls for the harnessing of the heterogeneous energy and cultures of a city in which there is vigorous hybridisation which, in turn, leads to revitalisation of art, theatre, music, social mores and new structures of society. We need to plan for aesthetics, but we equally need to plan for a degree of frivolity which brings joy into our lives. A sizable patch of green, a jewel of a lake, a path along which one can ramble, a funfair, a cluster of neat little eateries, a sports ground, perhaps a place of worship, these all constitute urbane living and we must plan for them, not in general terms but in detail. Lodhi Gardens in Delhi, Ekant Park in Bhopal, Marine Drive in Bombay, even the kitsch of Hotel New Woodlands in Madras all contribute to the urbanity of these cities and make them a pleasure to live in. That is the ultimate test of city form.
