

An India of Cities

Tipping Point

This is a momentous point in human history. This year, for the very first time, humankind has become a majority urban species. More than half of the world's population now lives in cities. The phenomenal rate of urban growth, increasing from 13% in the 1900's to 29% in 1950, is expected to reach over 50% this year. In India, approximately 300 million people inhabit urban areas today and make up about 30% of the population. Urban India has grown by nearly 5 times over the past 50 years, even as the overall population has grown by only 2.5 times. Today, even though only 30% of India's people dwell in its cities and towns; urban areas generate over 60% of the country's GDP and account for 90% of government's tax revenues. These numbers underscore the significance of cities in India's economic and social development; more importantly, they highlight the opportunity cities represent for India in the 21st century.

To begin with, we must accept urbanisation as an inevitable process. As more and more of the population moves out of subsistence agriculture and towards other vocations, the trend towards urbanisation will continue. Urban conurbations have already demonstrated that they steer the economic and social progress of the nation. The economic foundation and competitiveness of the nation is anchored in the industries, trade, commerce and services clustered in urban conglomerations. Biases of society, too, tend to disappear in urban centers due to the exposure to diverse ideas and values. It might also be



worthwhile to look back in history and appreciate that our greatest achievements took place in our cities. The lesson: As India gets set to triple its urban population in the next two decades; we must accept urbanisation as an affirmative tendency and empower our cities.

Cities In Evolution

Conventional thinking about the future of urbanisation often delves in the megapolises of Mumbai, Delhi or Kolkata. The larger cities dominate the imagination and interests of the public, the media as well as intellectuals. Even though these megacities will play a significant role in the urban future; patterns of growth suggest that most of the world's as well as India's urbanisation will take place in smaller cities and towns with population less than 500,000. This facet of urban growth represents great challenge and a great hope at the same time.

Current planning and implementation mechanisms are very weak in smaller towns and cities. They often lack the resources, the skill set and the technical expertise to deal with urbanisation. They also offer a tremendous opportunity for setting a new urban agenda for the Nation. Given that the smaller urban centers are in their early stages of growth, they offer a far greater prospect to engage in new sustainable ideas of urbanism.

The consequences of overlooking this trend of urbanisation will have dangerous repercussions already apparent in the decaying legacies of the current set of

India's Metros. Disregarding urbanisation again will be even more damning this time around and will impact the stability of the society, economy and the ecology in a much more brutal manner.

A New Urban Agenda

The exigency of the current scenario calls for immediate action. We believe that the first step towards that action is a Vision - to establish a new urban agenda. We need to bring collective wisdom and ideas to imagine a new future. As Albert Einstein once said "The world will not evolve past its current state of crisis by using the same thinking that created the situation." The unprecedented and unmatched urban growth that we are experiencing today demands a radical and proactive response. We need to draft a wide range of vision plans, policies and practices around a new social paradigm.

None of us can accurately predict the next chapter of the world's history. But India can surely draw from a variety of lessons from the world that has already urbanised. It can base its tomorrow on the successes and failures of the past while showing a new way to the world. A direction that will be a symbol of social equity, environmental sustainability and economic stability - by building a new generation of well-planned beautiful liveable cities.

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