



Money and Economy: Cities, Both Paradise and Hell for Migrants

AJIT RANADE

- Invited for the theme of 'Reimagining the Post-Covid-19 City'

Till the end of March, the world was marvelling at the success of Singapore for having controlled the spread of the pandemic. Its lockdown was not as severe as India, and yet with a combination of sanitising, social distancing, movement restrictions, testing and tracing protocols, it had managed to keep its numbers relatively low. It was flattening the curve. Even its schools and colleges were running.

Then over the month of April, its numbers went up from around 1,000 to 15,000, and by the third week of May, it has doubled further to 30,000. Singapore's population is about 5.6 million, so if the same infection rate would have happened in India, we would have 70 lakh virus positive patients. Today we barely have 1.2 lakh.

But this is not about trumpeting our record. India needs to scale up its testing in any case; what is remarkable that even with relatively strict protocols, Singapore numbers have skyrocketed. Unlike countries of the West, Singaporeans do not mind strict controls and curtailment of their personal liberties, if it is for their own safety, health or national interest. It is also one of the world's richest countries in terms of per capita income and has a world-class health care system and infrastructure. And yet the infection numbers have risen so dramatically? Why?

The answer is that the second surge came from their migrants' quarters. The elaborate protocols on movement restrictions, sanitisation and distancing, had failed to include protocols for

DHARAVI, MUMBAI
IMAGE CREDIT: ANUJA VORA

REPUBLISHED FROM MUMBAI
MIRROR WITH DUE PERMISSION
FROM AJIT RANADE.

PUBLISHED 23RD MAY 2020

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where the migrants lived. Can you observe social distancing when you are cramped ten to a small room of 100 square feet? These are the 'foreign workers' who do menial jobs in construction, cleaning, domestic help, nanny care. These are different from the other, smaller set of foreign workers who are bankers and wealth managers for the elite and tycoons all over Asia. But the fancy life of bankers depends crucially on the services of the hidden class of those other 'foreign workers', pejoratively called 'migrants'.

One-fifth of Singapore's residents are foreign workers, and most of them are living on the edge. It's not the same as the edge of poverty but is precarious nevertheless. They live in cramped dormitories where the level of hygiene and sanitation is far below that of those who live in glitzy towers on Orchard Road. These migrant workers are often single people separated from their families in the Philippines, Myanmar, Laos or Bangladesh, and send a big part of their earnings to 'back home'.

Singapore is a heavenly opportunity for them to provide for a decent livelihood to their families back home. But that same paradise is where the virus has spread rapidly. Singapore has come to a late realisation that it can win the war against the virus only if its strategy is inclusive and attends to the health and hygiene needs of those who live in those cramped dorms and who are the underbelly of the prosperous economy.

Now think of Dharavi. It has seven lakh people in about 2 sq km. And 1,400 positive cases. Maybe so far, two lakh migrants have gone back to their 'home towns'. Ever wonder why can't Mumbai be their 'home town' even if they are second or third generation? Mumbai is a magnet for workers looking to improve their lot. So are most big cities in India. But their living conditions can be quite pathetic, which they can bear, knowing that some remittance money is going back home.

But in virus season, living crowded in a few square feet, how can there be social distancing? How many can afford washing their hands twenty times a day? And changing masks every day? Dharavi houses perhaps only ten per cent of Mumbai's slum dwellers. So similar conditions prevail elsewhere, too, whether you call it a 'Janata Nagar', a hutment area, koliwada, gaathan, transit housing for SRA or project-affected people. Their living conditions provide a big challenge on how to manage and curb the spread of the pandemic. Only a highly localised approach, different in each area, can be successful. There are pockets in Delhi and other cities, too, with similar challenges. Thankfully, India's aggregate numbers give us cause for optimism.

The national lockdown was announced with four-hour notice, but no thought was given to the plight of the urban poor, who are housed in places like Dharavi or the jhuggi jhopadis of Delhi. Thus India committed the same sin as Singapore of forgetting the silent contributors to the city's economy, the migrants, who live in the shanties. When the migrants hit the road; and televisions flashed their agony and plight on the screens, that's when food and shelter and trains were arranged.

Now there is apprehension that if the 'migrants' don't come back to the cities, the post-lockdown economic recovery could be jeopardised. But come back, they will. That is the migrant's fate. And it is the same story, whether in Singapore, Mumbai or Dubai.

Ajit Ranade earned a B.Tech in Electrical Engineering from IIT Bombay, a PGDM from IIM Ahmedabad and holds an MA and PhD in Economics from Brown University, USA. He is an economist and a political analyst; his professional career spans across various academic and corporate assignments in India and the US.

He is a member of the Senate and Advisory Council of the IIT, Bombay and serves as the President and Chief Economist of the Aditya Birla Group.

Ajit is a Director on the Board of Hindalco Almix Aerospace Limited and a member of the Board of India Today Economists. He is the Chairman of the CII West Zone Sub Committee on Economic Affairs and the Indian Institute of Banking and Finance Research Advisory Panel. He has been on various Reserve Bank of India committees and served as Independent Director of Multi Commodity Exchange of India Ltd. (2007-2010).

