



Learnings from Covid. Making the city more democratic and people-friendly

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The Covid-19 virus and the subsequent lockdown have hit Maharashtra's economy, impacting Mumbai. On the other hand, Covid has brought some scientific temper among people.

Over the past several years, the trade unions were completely subdued. With the media virtually blacking out working-class struggles and issues, this class became almost invisible to the majority. The capitalist class became dominant. The informal economy became widespread, workers lost all protection, and they too became invisible. Then the sight of the mass exodus of a huge number of migrant workers from Mumbai and other cities after the Corona lockdown suddenly brought us face to face with their presence, their plight. We were quite shocked by this reality. A positive sign is that there is an outpouring of support and sympathy for migrants and our domestic help and other workers in response to the plight, just as there was support for the farmers' march in Mumbai two years ago.

I am daily being reminded of the plight of construction workers from a redevelopment site next to my building on Manuel Gonsalves road in Bandra. One misses quite a few heartbeats as they work without realising that they perform amazing balancing feats at a height with little protective gear, no medical facilities or insurance. This is the scene all over. Construction has been one of the biggest capitalist enterprises for some time, yet the working conditions are becoming more precarious; there are protective laws but not implemented.

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Rahul Mehrotra noted architect had been rightly talking about creating an ephemeral architecture to deal with the changing needs of the Metropolis. With Corona presenting us with new challenges, we can incorporate these ideas. We never planned for the housing, eating and other needs of migrant workers. We also have to reorganise our mass public transport in view of the need to maintain physical distance. Besides, a very inexpensive solution would be to promote bicycle riding, provide space for cycling on roads and parking for them. It is not difficult. As one who has cycled for long in heat and rain in Nagpur, I can say it is possible; only we need to give up our timidity, our prejudices.

During the worst days of the lockdown, the humble BEST bus network came to our rescue; it was the only means of travel when cars were also banned. Fortunately, former municipal commissioner Praveen Pardeshi had revived the BEST from near collapse caused by government policies. The lifeline needs to be strengthened with injection of more resources. We have finally learnt that public transport is a valuable public service, you cannot expect it to profit all the time. Of course, it has to be efficient.

Mumbai is known for its resilience, but Covid has shown we can also be very timid and fearful. All precautions need to be taken, but is it not strange that many well-to-do people have not stepped out of their houses for months? This is likely to do more harm to health than good. There is no harm in going for walks if there are very few people around. But some office-bearers of housing societies have proved to be what Barkha Dutt called tin-pot dictators, not allowing even a father and daughter in the same housing complex to meet each other. I managed to take daily walks to Joggers Park in Bandra, and sadly it remained almost deserted for long. Part of it has been sadly concretised; we must prevent other parks from being paved with cement. We desperately need more greenery, more biodiversity of grass and

shrubs and plants and trees. Sadly, in the name of neatness, in some sections, the grass is being mercilessly mowed, turning the areas into brown deserts. It is a joy to walk barefoot on thick, green grass, as poet Rabindranath Tagore said. It is also good for health, helps us develop immunity. Such simple measures, coupled with other steps, can help us with the struggle to get over Corona.

We need to rethink our policies completely, as Jayant Patil, Maharashtra's water resource minister, former finance minister and one of the brighter politicians, said. He did not elaborate, but he has been warning about certain trends. Even before the Corona crisis, he had said that the Metro rail projects in Pune and Nagpur might turn out to be white elephants.

The massive Mumbai metro rail project needs to be seriously examined. With the economic crisis, where will the funds come from? And where will the number of commuters come from in the changed context? The authorities rushed into the projects, starting work all over the city, causing huge disruptions. They floated ideas like selling the Worli dairy plant land and increasing density through high rise buildings along the Metro route with higher FSI to raise money. But most builders are now drained of funds, and there are not enough buyers as well.

With so many luxury flats envisaged, the number of cars would also sharply increase and defeat the whole idea of reducing congestion of roads. The Metro enthusiasts have been arguing that the Metro will reduce car use, but here, the authorities are doing exactly the opposite by promoting high rises, providing for more parking, and encouraging car use. The real design seems to be to hand over the roads completely to the car sector and push common people into Metros.

It would have made more sense to promote buses that are far more flexible to use than Metro, which has a fixed route, and the trains cannot reach everywhere a bus can. That is a big difference.

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Cutting down bus routes so that people switch to the Metro is wrong. London has an extensive bus network, several routes cover very long distances, and there are all-night buses, despite the tube and extensive underground rail network. It would be suicidal in Mumbai to reduce bus trips and run buses only as a feeder for Metro rail. BEST should remain the dominant mode of transport as it is much more friendly to use. It is at street level; it goes into all sorts of the area which the Metro can never do. Metro is all right for long distances. To impose it as almost the only means of transport is unwise.

Since the lockdown has yielded unintended benefits like improving air quality, this is the time to push for car-free days to curb car use. A universal impact of Corona is that the community spirit is now stronger. So, motorists should learn to limit car use, respect non-car users who bear the social costs imposed by cars in terms of pollution, congestion, deaths and injuries.

There is clearly no alternative to environmentally sustainable ideas. We must immediately give up elitist projects like golf courses and bullet trains, and the coastal road. A few years ago, some bureaucrats were brazen enough even to push for the Formula 1 race track in Mumbai. What a monstrous waste of money in a poor state it would have been. We already know what a waste the race track has become in Noida near Delhi, The Buddh International Circuit.

Corona has also made us realise that air-conditioned comfort is not without a negative impact on health. Sadly, even some well-meaning NGOs doing good work are addicted to A.C. comfort. It is time to change this mindset.

The air-conditioned trains introduced recently in Mumbai proved counterproductive as they disrupted the schedule of several other trains.

Since repeated washing of hands is now so crucial, steps need to be taken to provide washbasins in all public places, especially in railway stations and bus depots. Most municipal toilets, hopelessly inadequate as they are, either do not have washbasins or the existing ones are without water or non-functional, unusable. The Western railway general manager could walk across the road from his office in the colonial headquarters at Churchgate and visit the toilet there. The administration should note that there is only one toilet block for tens of thousands of commuters. It is so narrow, congested and even this is run as if they are doing a favour to the users. Incidentally, even toilet use is very price sensitive. Many cannot afford to pay even Re 1 for a pee, and so there is a long queue for the other section of the toilet, which is free. The queue spills on to the concourse.

The railways could easily vacate some administrative offices from this building, not difficult in these days of the internet and introduce various amenities for commuters.

The authorities need to learn from the Corona experience that we need big open, public, accessible spaces for relief work. So, they should immediately give up the short-sighted policy of selling government land. Already they have given away several playgrounds, gardens for Metro work, robbing ordinary citizens of fresh air. Corona can be stopped from choking people; the question is how to stop the authorities from pursuing policies that result in denying fresh air to the masses.

With the need to maintain physical distance, it is now imperative that we build footpaths all over the Metropolis and widen existing ones so people can walk properly.

I noticed bad walking conditions, particularly while walking to Andheri railway station, after listening to Architect Bimal Patel's lecture by the Urban Design Research Institute at the All-India Local Self Government (AILSG) auditorium in Andheri in February

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2020, that is pre-Covid time. At least this road connecting the premier urban governance apex organisation with the station should be in order.

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Our administrators have suddenly woken up to the idea of providing last-mile connectivity to the proposed Metro railway stations in Mumbai. They are ready to spend millions for this connecting elite residential and commercial areas with Metro stations.

This is because the Metro is a dream showcase project. They do not even realise how they have neglected the suburban railway network and the bus network all these years and continue to discriminate against them.

What prevented them all these years from building proper walking connectivity to existing railway stations. A lot can be done to improve footpaths without spending any money. The civic corporation simply has to issue a directive to multiple corporate, commercial and upscale residential buildings which are wrecking the footpaths all over Mumbai while building the driveway for their cars. So, they turn the footpaths into a deep slope so the cars can slide smoothly down the road even while this creates torturous conditions for walkers for whom the footpaths are meant.



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