



AFTER THE CRISIS

Ian Jack, a veteran British journalist, recalled his stay in luxury hotels in India in the wake of the terror attack on the Taj Mahal hotel and other centres in Mumbai on November 26, 2008. When he lay on the bed in the hotel he would wonder why no one wanted to kill him. After all, it would take months for a labourer to save enough to afford a night's stay in the hotel.

Curiously, this harsh reality of India seldom dawns on our rulers. So they remain obsessed with making India a global power and Mumbai a world class city, which would not be so bad, if they had taken enough cognisance of the basic needs of the people. London and New York, despite their wealth, have a serious problem of poverty and are tackling it. In Mumbai, though poverty is on a much larger scale, it seldom figures on the agenda.

With the financial meltdown even London has suffered a serious setback because of the greed and corruption of bankers. So much so that British Prime Minister Gordon Brown wrote a signed article in the Observer (22-2-09) saying we should serve the interests of common people, not of bankers. But our union finance ministry has not only, not given up on the idea of the international financial centre, it now has higher ambitions. It wants to make Mumbai an alternative to New York and London as these cities have taken a bad hit with the meltdown. The news appeared in the Economic Times on April 1, 2009 and the paper suitably added that this was no April fool's joke. This would appear to be a cruel joke instead. Considering that at that very time, several parts of Mumbai were facing an acute shortage of water and politicians complained that they could not face the electorate for the ensuing Parliamentary elections. Also on that very day London's financial district was the target of the wrath of protesters at the G-20 meeting, who smashed the windows of the tainted Royal Bank of Scotland in the city. Sachin Tendulkar was a brand ambassador of this bank. The district was seen as a major cause of the world financial crisis.

That is why we should pay heed to what Eric Hobsbawm, perhaps the most eminent living historian, has to say. He argued that precisely because of London becoming a global financial centre the impact of the world crisis on the pound and the British economy is likely to be much more catastrophic than in other major economies.

The test of the enormous wealth generated is not that it contributes to the high GDP of a country but how it affects the lives of millions who live and work there. If it can't it is no compensation that London is a paradise for the ultra rich, Hobsbawm argued. (Guardian 10-4-09).

Yet, MMRDA (Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority) officials are talking of building an iconic 101storey tower in Mumbai to rival high rises in other parts of the world. We clearly seem to learn little from what is described as the soaring folly of Dubai. The city built on laundering the profits from oil, drugs and arms is in deep grief. Till recently a playground for international finance it boasted of a chorus line of towers, each louder than the other. People were ants. It may meet the same fate as emperor Ozymandius of Egypt whose statue falls trunk less in the desert to recall Shelley's famous poem. That is how an observer put it.

A fancy sports complex is to be built in Dharavi, for long a symbol of urban poverty and neglect, which has now attracted international attention with the Oscar award winning film Slumdog Millionaire. All this at a time when 184 municipal schools are in a dilapidated condition, and 88 are considered extremely unsafe for children. What Dharavi needs is sanitation and basic infrastructure, not fancy redevelopment projects. It will not cost much to provide toilets so that several areas are not littered with human excreta as outside the Dharavi bus depot opposite the Mahim Nature Park.

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Attention to basics is important. That is why a presentation on improving the slums of Caracas in Venezuela got a big applause at an international conference of architects, engineers, designers and scholars organised by the journal 'Indian Architect & Builder' in Mumbai in March 2009.

Alfredo Brillembourg, architect of Urban Think Tank, who made the presentation, showed how a sprawling slum in Caracas rises on a hilltop to a height equivalent to 23 floors and is served by a cable car to connect it to the formal city. It is the slum-dominated informal city that deserves the most attention of authorities but it is this very majority of the population which is ignored in urban planning, he pointed out. Give power to people and we can bridge the divide between the upper class and the poor, he said.



One thing is clear now. Ordinary people are being marginalised because the upper class 'corners' many of the benefits. There is also poor city planning and poorer land management. So, the poor suffer for no fault of theirs. Urban poverty is not so much a matter of economic deprivation as of lack

of access to basic amenities. This is the main conclusion of a recent report on urban poverty prepared by UNDP in collaboration with Amitabh Kundu, professor in JNU, (Jawaharlal Nehru University). The challenge is to provide basic services to slum dwellers without letting the elite capture all the benefits, according to Kumari Selja, union minister of state for urban poverty alleviation.

New York's Mayor Bloomberg, one of the richest men in the US, has declared a war on poverty in the city and is giving cash to parents to keep children in school and healthy.

London plans to halve child poverty by 2010 and eradicate it by 2020.

In London while the bankers have snapped up yachts and huge bonuses, millions struggle to make ends meet. London, the centre of capitalism, has always had widespread poverty. Life and Labour in London 1886-1903 is a monumental 17-volume study conducted by Charles Booth, a businessman with interests in shipping and leather, but with a great concern for the poor. It is an early example of social cartography. It shows each street coloured to indicate income and social class of its inhabitants.

Mumbai has a very unsatisfactory intellectual and academic life compared to Delhi or Kolkata. And much fewer committed scholars. Considering the significant work done by Prof Dinesh Mohan and Prof Geetam Tiwari of IIT Delhi in public transport and planning, Mumbai IIT would seem to lag far behind. Even more odd is the obsession of its students with producing a formula one racing car rather than coming out with bright ideas on mass transport. Engineers remain obsessed with technological, expensive solutions, rather than innovative, low-cost ones. So, one of the best presentations in Mumbai on transport was made at IIT in March, 2009, by an outsider. He is an earnest fresh graduate in his twenties, Faizan Javed from Rizvi College of architecture. He has made good use of the architect Norman Foster's travelling scholarship to produce a film based on innovative transport solutions in Europe, Latin America and other places.

Sadly in Mumbai while the administration is going all out to provide facilities for the rich, ordinary people are treated with absolute contempt. Nothing shows this attitude than the hundreds of new stainless steel BEST bus shelters erected in Mumbai which are a torture for commuters. The mass-designed shelters present an ordeal to sit, even for a while,

on the narrow strip, and one cannot stand comfortably either. To be inside is like being in a cage which may seem an appropriate imagery, considering that passengers are treated like cattle. They seem to serve the interests of only the advertisers. In the evenings diesel generators chained to bus stops light up the advertisements emitting unbearable heat, noise and foul odour. In a hot and humid city where millions have to walk quite a distance, a little place to sit down is desperately needed. But even this little courtesy is denied to the masses. These bus stops are built as part of an exercise of Mumbai Makeover, a shining Mumbai. Plenty of seating in public spaces is a common sight in much of the Western world. But our ruling class seems to think that ordinary people here do not deserve even basic amenities. In the few places where these exist they are appallingly designed and user-unfriendly even in such a central public space as the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, formerly Victoria Terminus. Here the seats are cement concrete monstrosities or chairs made in steel which make you slide to the ground. This happens in a world heritage site. Such problems also occur because many rate the buildings' aesthetics to the neglect of public amenities and shoddy new constructions that undermine such heritage sites. It is surprising that this happens in a country with a great tradition and with institutes of design, technology and architecture.

One reason for this appalling neglect is that many activists, who are otherwise quite well-meaning and honest, do not take this issue as they seldom use public transport. And we do not have committed visionaries like William Whyte who spent over 17 years studying street life in cities, mainly in New York.

Fortunately, Mumbai has an active heritage conservation movement. But buildings, howsoever beautiful and well preserved, need a clean environment. For example, Bandra suburban railway station, a lovely, small, red-tiled building,

is being renovated for the last several months at great expense. But just across the tracks I have been seeing for decades, not just a few months, a huge pile of burning garbage constantly emitting a thick, black, poisonous smoke, a serious hazard for train commuters as well as residents of neighbouring slums. The culprits are not the poor residents but authorities who fail to clean up. And this happens at a prime, high profile railway station, a walking distance from the top planning authority MMRDA which is flush with funds.

Along with the heritage movement there should be a campaign for proper preserving of historic records of Mumbai dating back to the 17th century, of Shivaji and the East India Company which are crumbling in the government archives in the Elphinstone college building. Land was earmarked for a special building in the Kalina campus of Mumbai University. It will cost only a few crores, a fraction of the cost lavished on wasteful projects.

There is also a sad neglect of intellectual and social capital. The neglect of the library sector is particularly scandalous in a city aspiring to global status. And Mumbai, the capital of Hindi cinema, did not even have its international film festival this year because of lack of funds though smaller centres like Thiruvananthapuram did. This is unbelievable in a city where more money is spent on drinks and dinner in an evening in Bollywood than would be needed for a film festival. There are very few serious books in bookshops and more disappointingly on streets either. The once thriving working class culture has been systematically decimated, immigrants are sought to be hounded out and there is less space for dissent though the people of Mumbai are extremely docile and pose little threat to public property unless passions are whipped by chauvinist forces. Only a little space is provided for demonstrations in Azad Maidan and rest of the ground is barricaded. It is an indication of

the ideological trend in the city's elite culture that a book on classical music written by leading classical vocalist Kishori Amonkar was released by Raj Thackeray, the leader of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, an organisation known for its silencing of dissent.

Nothing shows Mumbai's history and contradictions more sharply than Bandra and its surroundings. This is a prized suburb with a beautiful long promenade on the sea, quaint old streets and houses dating to the 19th century surviving amidst high rise development prompted by big money. On the eastern side, across the tracks, are sprawling slums, the Mithi river still has its water black and dirty despite a massive works programme, and beyond there is the rather soulless landscape of the Bandra Kurla complex housing the corporate world, stock exchange and banking. And recently a posh club on 13 acres has been built on land that was earmarked for a cricket academy. It boasts of everything being imported and its sprawling premises shows that the problem with Mumbai is not one of land shortage but of totally unequal and unjust distribution. People were invited in a front page advertisement in The Times of India to see the club and become members.

Opulence on one side and the presence of Dharavi slum a little beyond; far from a shining, world class city, Mumbai is a stinking city if one just walks around- that is crucial- to get an experience of what Mumbai actually is. One can never get an idea by sitting in a car, especially an air-conditioned car with tinted glass. I went on a Save Mithi river yatra led by Rajendra Singh, the water conservation man and Magasaysay award winner. One was struck by the stink. It also pervades railway stations in Mumbai which should be kept scrupulously clean. After all, people are paying for their use.

As for Dharavi, what it needs is basic amenities not 20-storey high buildings in which the residents will be crammed in 225 sq ft cubbyholes. As scholars have pointed out it has a self-contained, thriving cottage industry and walkable neighbourhoods, the work place is close to the house built with local materials. The fancy redevelopment idea is a Machiavellian attempt to deprive lakhs of families of livelihood. It is the cruellest and biggest perfidy perpetrated on the poor in Mumbai as Prakash Apte, a planner and World Bank consultant points out. The low-rise sustainable model of development was also praised by Prince Charles in the wake of the screening of the film Slum Dog Millionaire. The prince, known for his progressive views on architecture, sees skyscrapers as rash carbuncles which disfigure the city and which are bad for future generations.

Significantly, he said that the West has much to learn from societies which may be economically poorer but are infinitely richer in ways in which they live and organise themselves as communities.

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The prince who had visited Dharavi in 2003, said the traditional settlements would deliver more durable gains than the brutal and insensitive process of globalisation shaping so many aspects of our lives. We are building faceless slab blocks to warehouse the poor, not fit for human habitat, he said.

The prince's views apart, the whole model of urban development built around a culture of high-rises, highways and motor cars, and contemptuous of ordinary people is being rejected as unsustainable in the West. Paris has prepared an ambitious plan for a sustainable city with

much more greenery and expansion of public transport. Singapore implemented a massive programme of increasing greenery long ago and that has made it a prime destination for foreign investment. Thoroughfares lined with banyan trees and a lot of greenery is far more impressive than sales pitch by ministers.

Western cities and the legislature in America is enacting special laws to promote bicycle use.

After decades of plunder of natural resources threatening the very survival of the planet there is now awareness about a sustainable form of development. The financial downturn has brought about a sea change in thinking. Shanty towns are springing up in several American cities. Public anger is rising against the executives of the financial world who brought about the present crisis through greed and racketeering. Growing joblessness is creating serious social tensions in several so-called world class cities. All this has important lessons for Mumbai. Time for Mahatma Gandhi's true economics, declared the headline of an article by noted social scientist Jeremy Seabrook in the Guardian (27-3-09). Commenting on the bleak unemployment scenario in New York and other places, Robert Reich, former US labour secretary wrote that it is time we talk of helping workers build their future, not of Wall Street. The proponents of Mumbai as an international finance centre may please note.

Shanghai can hardly be a model for Mumbai. To understand why skyscrapers went up so quickly in Shanghai and other cities like Beijing one has to know what did not go up elsewhere in the country. It turns out that it was education, especially rural education. Even as China's urban boom dazzled many Indian observers, China was raising tuition fees in rural areas and under-investing in health and education. China made a costly trade off in favour of physical infrastructure and urban white elephants at the expense of human capital. The ghost of illiteracy returns to haunt the country, the China Daily said in an article in

2007. The staggering figures of illiteracy are confirmed in official statistics.

Mumbai is a magnet for migrants from all over the country as it can provide them a living. But there is widespread joblessness in Mumbai and other urban areas. The rural employment guarantee scheme initiated by the Congress-led government at the Centre in 2004 should be extended to urban areas.

Thousands of construction workers and others assemble near suburban railway stations in Mumbai in the morning looking for employment. But they are seen as a nuisance by upper class citizens and sought to be thrown out. Clearly, there is need to reserve some areas for them. After all they are essential for the city. If the government can give away acres of prime space for private clubs, there is no reason why people earning their livelihood should be treated so cruelly. But elite interests seem to have the top priority for the city administration. Officials display an astonishing zeal in planning for underground and multi-storied car parking in Mumbai depriving people of scarce public space. Not once has one ever heard the bureaucrat's talk of providing much needed parking space for cyclists. At least the fact that cycling is being increasingly encouraged in several Western cities and the legislature in America is enacting special laws to promote bicycle use should drive the point home to our planners who seem to borrow the worst models from the West and reject the best. So the municipal administration brazenly refused to compensate the parents whose baby was stolen from a municipal hospital saying this would create a wrong precedent and people would make false claims. And activists demanding an adequate supply of drinking water at an official public hearing were sought to be arrested simply because they shouted slogans, as I witnessed at a meeting at Dinanath auditorium in Vile Parle in 2008.

It is possible to forge an alliance between well-meaning upper class activists and those from less privileged backgrounds to fight builders and insensitive sections of politicians, bureaucrats and planners who want to ride roughshod over the city with ill-conceived projects. This will require a more humane understanding of the city. Hawkers are generally seen by many as a menace, not callous city planning which provides no space for needs of ordinary people while pampering shopping malls and fancy outlets. Citizens and hawkers can co-exist happily with better planning. Look at the footpath opposite the City Light cinema in Mahim. Here the footpath acquires a colourful character as a large number of vendors sell green vegetables, fruit and flowers and agarbattis with their aroma. There is a friendly relationship between the buyers and hawkers and lot of social life as people greet each other and talk. This happens because the footpath is wide enough to accommodate different sections, uses.

Jane Jacobs, the visionary urban planning expert with her stress on the social life of streets and intermingling of communities, would have been delighted. There seems to be extremely poor appreciation in India of her importance though she is highly relevant to our cities.

There is increasing ghettoisation of the rich and the poor in Mumbai. The rich are of course given favoured treatment. A special hearing was held for residents of the posh Peddar Road area at an air-conditioned hall in nearby Mahalaxmi following their opposition to the flyover over their road. Many of them are earnest citizens and their opposition is justified. But MSRDC (Maharashtra state road Development Corporation) or the BMC seemed to spare little thought to the invasion of the privacy of the residents of Mohammad Ali Road and other areas by the construction of the JJ hospital flyover. The work of digging up Peddar road for civic work was also given up in deference to the influential interests. Ordinary people are expected to surrender land of their schools, churches, agiaries, and houses for road widening without a murmur for the convenience of the car lobby.

Perfectly good roads are dug up and repaved as some people can make a lot of money. Little attention is paid to underground drainage and water supply pipeline infrastructure which is literally bursting causing some roads to cave in.

The poor put up for years with endless road works but the elite residents of Peddar Road were up in arms when part of it was closed to vehicular traffic. The BMC yielded meekly and stopped the work even though sewer lines desperately needed repairs.

The Mumbai civic administration clearly needs to be more people-friendly, but even its website is extremely unfriendly and gives very little information, which is astonishing considering the huge amount spent on it. The web sites of even small corporations like Aurangabad and Solapur are far smarter. The BMC website is a very poor advertisement for a city aspiring for a world class status. It can be very frustrating even to make an ordinary complaint or a suggestion. There is nothing interactive about it. And yet, they talk of e governance and such concepts without attending even to basics.

Instead of adopting the best practices from world cities, we are imitating the worst. New York won the sustainable transport award for 2009 for providing increased facilities for bicycles and pedestrians and reducing space for motor cars. Cities can become healthy wealthy and pleasant if they create more greenery, more public spaces. This can be done at a fraction of the cost required for expensive schemes like roads and airports.

The recommendation has been made by the Commission for Architecture and Built Environment as well as Natural Environment in its report in the UK in 2009.

Yet, in Mumbai an attempt is being made to destroy some of the finest tree heritage of Mumbai in the old Ranicha Baug Victoria Garden, now Jijamaata Udyan in order to build a corporate friendly high tech zoo. If these guys can't do anything good, let them not at least wield the axe. With a little imagination we can live much more environment-friendly lives and save energy. UDRI (Urban Design Research Institute) does an excellent job of holding some meetings on civic issues in the well-managed Horniman Circle Garden in South Mumbai. You meet in a fine, pleasant environment and saves much energy, which would be required for an air conditioned hall. Others can learn from this, especially organisations with huge green campuses like IIT, Tata Institute of Social Sciences and Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai University and Bhabha Atomic Research Centre. We need more parks, more trees, more greenery, especially in view of very real and serious threat of climate change. We never hear such concepts from our authorities because there is little money to be made in these low-cost, people-friendly, environment-friendly schemes. There is a clear case for more and more people becoming pro-active and persuading if not challenging vested interests.

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