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Towards Sustainable Development : In-situ Urbanisation

- Sujith Kumar N

Smart habitation is an integrated area of villages and a city working in harmony and where the rural and urban divide has reduced to a thin line

- A. P. J. Abdul Kalam

Ravi left his village in Nalgonda district, Telangana in search of a job in Hyderabad and currently makes his living as a cab driver while his spouse works as a domestic maid. After spending their family income on school education and private tuition for their children, they can only afford to live in a squatter settlement. Both their kids suffer from stunted growth and malnourishment due to improper nutrition and repeated illness due to poor living conditions. Ravi's elderly parents are left estranged, uncared in the

village and dependent on state's mercy for pensions etc.

This is the story of a typical Indian migrant worker. Most of the migrants end up doing low-end jobs including working as lift operators, night watchmen, and street vendors. This often leaves them precariously placed with regard to shelter and economic situation eventually driving them right into the vicious cycle of poverty. This is due to the push factor of rural urban migration. The pull factor which includes

rapidly growing megacities, the livelihood opportunities they offer and prospect of better living standards, facilities encourage people to bet their lives on big cities. Both these factors are tied to the distress in agriculture and inactivity in rural economy. The result is overcrowded, haphazardly grown mega cities plodding on the wheels of crumbling infrastructure, poor mobility, weak governance structures, and disenchanted public participation steered only by growth in the services sector.

Imagine a situation where Ravi never had to migrate to the city because of the availability of employment opportunities, decent living standards, good physical and social infrastructure such as schooling for children and health care for family within a convenient distance (which takes less than the average commuting time in an Indian city) and at the same time leaves him with a comparable disposable net income. This is where in-situ urbanization comes into the picture.

In-situ Urbanisation

In-situ urbanisation is a growth model where a cluster of villages are economically integrated into an identified growth centre/small town which offers decent livelihood opportunities and necessary social infrastructure. The idea is to establish synergy between rural and urban economies so that benefits of urban growth spill over to rural clusters or peri-urban areas. For example, Springfield, Illinois was a small village which over a period of time grew into a respectable town. It is not a big city even today and it need not be as long as basic needs of citizens are met with decent physical and social infrastructure. This is a good example of in-situ urbanization. Urbanisation in China, especially in the south-eastern parts, is driven by this pattern. Closer home, Kerala which has been amongst the leaders in most social indicators is characterised by an even, relatively less dense pattern of urbanisation.

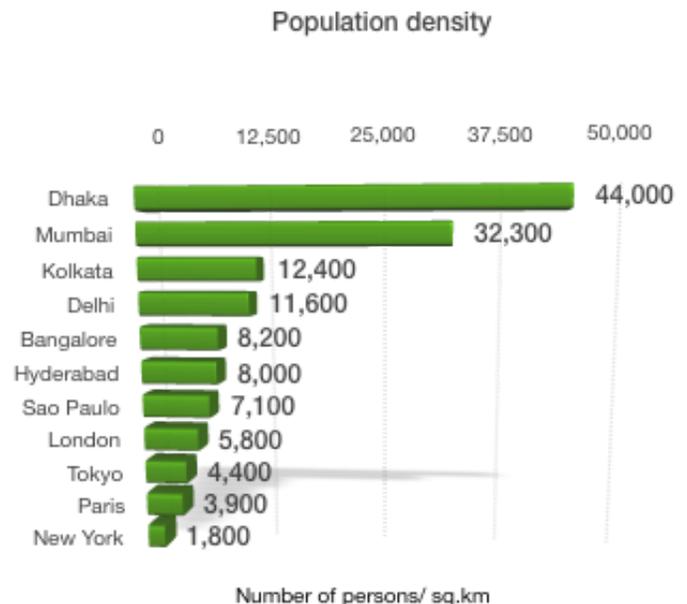
Challenges with concentrated urban growth

To understand how in-situ urbanisation could be a game changer, let's look at the current trends of urbanization and its issues. According to the Census definition¹, India is currently 34% urbanised by population percentage. Satellite images, as per European commission definition, show that India could be 63 % urbanized and as per World bank agglomeration index urban population in India is 55 %. Even by a conservative estimate of 50%, the institutional and structural challenges faced by our urban areas paints a glaring picture of the impending crisis.

- For instance, a NITI Ayog report points out that 21 Indian cities will run out of ground water by 2020.
- India is set to become the third largest passenger

vehicle market by 2021² while daily commuting time in Indian cities is also third highest in the world³ and as of now parking continues to be a back breaking task in our cities.

- Such alarming trends can be observed in almost all other aspects including pollution and solid waste management



Comparison chart of population densities of major Indian cities with world cities. Source - World bank

- As per census 2011, the slum population in India is

¹ if it has an urban local government (i.e., statutory towns notified by the state government); and (b) any place that satisfies the following three criteria: (i) minimum population of 5,000; (ii) at least 75 percent of male main working population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits; and (iii) population density of at least 400 persons per sq. km (1,000 persons per sq. mile)

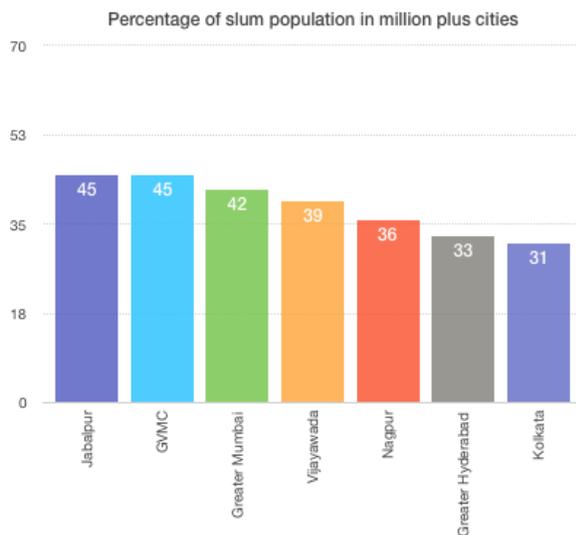
² Mckinsey report, HS Auto Database, Light Vehicle Sales Forecast, ihsmarkit.com

³ <https://daliaresearch.com/the-countries-with-the-longest-and-shortest-commutes>

approximately 17% of total urban population of India. Some think it's a conservative estimate but the actual number could be as much as 25 % according to a former chairman of the National Statistical Commission. Urban slums have witnessed a decadal growth of 34% between 2001 and 2011 (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2017). Though official poverty estimates (Tendulkar committee) indicate 20 % of the urban population to be poor, poor living standards experienced

by slum dwellers such as lack of better drinking water and sanitation facilities push them into poverty due to higher healthcare costs.

India's problems of urbanisation are mainly because of lack of planning and disempowered urban local bodies, but urbanisation must be viewed as a path for better standards of living and is thus inevitable. A more dispersed pattern of growth in the form of in-situ urbanisation may be more desirable and sustainable for India. In fact, statistics suggest urban growth in India is not just driven by major cities but also by census towns and small towns which, according to a study by the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), contribute to one third of the urban growth. Census Towns are settlements that are classified as urban areas by the Registrar General of India on three specific urban characteristics, size (population of at least 5,000), density (at least 400 persons per



square kilometre) and at least 75% of male workforce in non-farm sector. However, these settlements are administered as rural areas. Till recently many of the peri-urban areas of Hyderabad were considered as gram panchayats leading to haphazard urban development. This phenomenon can be observed in almost all the cities and towns along major transport corridors/highways.

Past experience - PURA and Rurban

In-situ urbanisation is not a new idea in itself as Union government earlier tried to implement this model in the form of PURA and the present government tweaked it to Rurban mission. The objective of Rurban mission was to stimulate the local economy and provide basic amenities in 300 rural cluster of villages. While Rurban scheme has elaborate guidelines for scientific identification of rural clusters, the quantum of funds allocated in past 4 four years to each identified rural cluster is around Rs. 8 crores and the scheme

works by convergence of various central schemes and also state schemes. Given that various departments in India work in silos and state governments operate in their own political and social atmosphere, such a scheme will find it hard to takeoff. It is unlikely that state governments would actively take part in a scheme which would give political benefits to the ruling party at the centre.

Transformational Potential

Instead, if such a model is spearheaded by states by giving a push to local infrastructure which includes water supply, sewerage, electricity, etc. which are essentially the functions of states and local bodies, and social infrastructure such as health and education, transformational benefits can be observed. While reclassification of census towns and small towns as urban local bodies is a bureaucratic exercise, streamlining the administration, and devolving funds, functions to local bodies and making it politically viable is the need of the

hour. Local administration which is sufficiently empowered has to be supported by an expert body for planning and designated funds have to be allocated for each cluster. For instance, if 200 such clusters in Telangana and 300 in Andhra Pradesh are scientifically identified based on the geographic, demographic and economic potential and provided with Rs. 100 crores over a period of five years i.e. a total amount of Rs. 50,000 crores and this is spent on the aforementioned aspects, rural economy can turn around as better civic and social infrastructure incentivises people to settle in the surrounding areas and can offer them better livelihood opportunities. If at least 8,000 such clusters are developed all over the country then there is a good chance of India giving China a hard run for its money.

In the context of political parties rolling out several freebies and unsustainable schemes like loan waivers to address agricultural distress, it is pertinent to note that increasing farmers' income and

agricultural productivity is not possible unless there is a synergy between rural and urban economies. According to a World Bank study in 2009, countries with higher level of urbanisation have shown higher agricultural productivity and lower-level of poverty. In-situ urbanisation can potentially tackle India's unemployment problem by giving a fillip to agricultural sector, agri-related industries and MSME sector - the two top-most employing sectors of India. Growth of dispersed urbanisation and manufacturing sector can be mutually reinforcing as in the case of China. Tamil Nadu is the second most urbanised state in India and exhibits a spatially dispersed trend for the same reason. Telangana government's proposal to set up MSME industrial parks in all the districts is a step in the right direction and must be complimented by an in-situ urbanization policy as discussed above. Apart from addressing problems of migration and correcting the course of

geographically concentrated city development, urbanizing rural areas also leads to political empowerment of people by breaking the shackles of caste rigidities.

Urbanization is an inevitable trend in any nation and it is time we stopped romanticizing about villages in the present form and instead concentrate our efforts on sustainable urbanization rather than on concentration of development in cities. ▪