

Is India ready to plan a 'SMART' urban future? – Planning education in the post liberal Urban India

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1. Challenge of planning in India

'The growth of India shall be written on the canvas of planned urban development' is the mission statement on the web site of the Ministry of Urban Development, GOI. The recent Union Budget and the policies of the new government have once again established planned and well serviced urbanization as the chosen path to rapid economic development for India. Infrastructure, technology and 'smart' urban development has been put high on the agenda of growth. At the same time, the budget aims to tackle the issues of housing and housing finance for economically weaker groups in urban areas. All legitimate priorities, but the key question to be raised is whether the country has the kind planners who can envisage and facilitate an urban growth encompassing both the need for modernization and the abject urban poverty that is evident in our cities?

The 'failure' of urban planning in India is an often repeated subject of discussion round board room and living room tables alike. The everyday experience of overcrowded, chaotic and polluted cities with failing infrastructure and inaccessible governance institutions makes urban planners a natural scapegoat for blame. The solution then lies in better 'future proofing' or making plans that cater to real projections of growth and with an equitable and fair planning for all. Future proofing in this context means plans that reflect the needs of the future in a realistic and reliable manner, while being representative of the challenges of the present. A tall order for planners considering the challenges facing them.

The challenge of large numbers

According to the Census of 2011, 65 million urban dwellers live in slums or substandard housing not fit for human habitation. Which means every one in five urban resident is deprived of basic infrastructure and a decent standard of living. The Census of 2011 also reports that for the first time since independence, the growth rate of urban areas in India has been higher than in rural areas – 32% (377 million people) of India now lives in urban centers and the number is growing at a decadal growth rate of 31-32% since 1991. The slum population on the other hand had a decadal growth rate of 37% since 2001.

A recent report on Indian urban infrastructure and services (HPEC Report, March 2011) finds that there is a backlog of 50 – 80% in investment on urban infrastructure in most cities in India. The estimated investment required in urban infrastructure is of the tune of Rs. 39.2 lakh crores in the period 2012 – 31. This accounts for increasing the spending on urban infrastructure from 0.7

per cent in 2011 -12 to 1.1 percent by 2031-32. The report goes on to say that the backlog of investment is not only in terms of physical infrastructure but the need for upgrading governance and service delivery in urban areas.

Challenge of informality and inequity

The Indian economy, not least the urban Indian economy is predominantly 'informal'. Definitional differences aside, the now dissolved National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) estimated in 2009 that 86% of the employment in the nation was in the unorganized/informal sector in 2004-05. With such a large share of urban employment in the informal and unorganized sectors, most urban development takes place outside the domains of the formal and planned city. Informal land markets, construction and unregulated spatial development are the order of the day. The divisions between the formal and the informal are further intensified by the income inequalities and the lack of entitlements that comes with formal employment. The UN Habitat reports that urban inequality in India rose from 34 to 38% (Gini Index based on consumption) in the period 1995 to 2005 (UN Habitat, 2010).

Global challenges of climate change and disasters

Inequality and poverty makes urban Indians even more vulnerable to the risks posed by the increasing occurrence of man-made and natural disaster. A World Bank report on Cities and Climate Change (World Bank, 2010) estimated that India has the second highest population (30 million) living in Low Elevation and Coastal Zones (LECZ) that will be at risk as sea levels rise due to climate change. The highest population at risk is in China with almost 80 million people living in LECZ. It is estimated that 70 percent of India's population is at risk to floods and 60 percent susceptible to earthquake, making it the most disaster prone country in the world (UNDP, 2014). The risk levels are higher in urban areas owing to density and overcrowding.

Institutional challenges and a legacy of Physical planning

Three recent and significant reports on the status and expected growth of cities in India viz. McKinsey Global Institute's India's urban awakening 2010, HPEC Report on Indian Urban Infrastructure and Services 2011 and the Ministry of Urban Development's National Mission on Sustainable Habitat Report (NMSH), 2010 concur on the key institutional challenges for urban planning in India. All three reports conclude that urban planning in India is plagued with fragmentation, centralization and an outdated focus on landuse planning. The fragmentation starts with the separation of the Ministries dealing with Urban Development, Housing and Poverty Alleviation. Despite the intentions of the 74th Constitutional Amendment, 1992 the function of making plans has still not been decentralized to ULBs, making planning a technical exercise conducted by State planning authorities and departments. Integration of the siloed and mainly physical Master Plans with other infrastructure plans especially transport is rudimentary. Implementing line agencies of the State have little or no input to the landuse plans being made. Social development goals such as housing for the poor, health, education etc. are planned by the respective Departments, not coordinated within the Master plans. The Government's initiatives through programmes such as the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) is a step in the right direction but still a long way to go for achieving decentralized and integrated planning by ULBs.

2. What kind of planner is needed for planning sustainable and prosperous cities?

As the new government envisions a 'smart' urban future for India, it is perhaps the right juncture in time to reflect on the challenges we start with and the capacity needed for future proofing our cities. It is important to stress here that a 'SMART CITY' model for India cannot be limited to the high tech avatar being implemented in Europe and South East Asia. A 'smart' urban future for India would have to be technologically advanced, socially inclusive and economically diverse.

Generalists vs. specialists

But the key question is what kind of planners do we need for such a complex task and what kind of plans should be made? While the latter is an important discussion, we concentrate on the first issue in this article. Planning education in India, which has its origins in the British and American Town and Country Planning education, has always struggled with the conundrum of the Generalist versus the Specialist. After independence, when the first Town Planning Acts were enacted, the role of planners was confined to State and City level Planning Authorities for the preparation of primarily landuse plans called Master Plans, at city level, and Zonal Plans at sub city level. The planner was seen as a technocratic expert who would be trained in the preparation of these plans with an ability to understand and incorporate inputs from multisectoral actors from the implementing line agencies. We define this role as that of 'Generalist Landuse Planner'. Until liberalization of the economy in 1991, the function of urban planning was mainly the domain of State agencies. However, retraction of public functions especially from sectors such as housing and land development after liberalization opened up the field for a wide and diverse range of actors. Private property developers, public private partnerships, international real estate players, professional consultancies, single window industrial development agencies, private service and infrastructure providers and civil society actors such as NGOs and INGOs are just some of the stakeholders in urban development – all of which employ and work with planners. While all these stakeholders influence the course of urban development, public planning agencies still make 5 – 10 year Master Plans. This form of landuse planning has long been abandoned in most parts of the world and liberalized nations such as the UK and Netherlands have completely abandoned the practice. Instead strategic and multisectoral plans are made that guide physical development. Physical planning is done by private landowners/developers, negotiated with ULBs on a project basis. The only city level planning that takes place is integrated landuse and infrastructure planning that determines landuse and urban structure at a very large scale. The planner in such a multi sectoral and interdisciplinary system takes on varied roles from the 'Strategic Planner' to the 'Technical Professional Planner', 'Project Planner' to the 'Urban Manager' and the 'Advocacy Planner' who represents the interests of the weakest in society.

State, Market and Civil Society Planners

The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 (CAA) aims at decentralizing the function of urban planning from the State to the lowest level of ULBs also known as the 'third tier'. The 74th CAA only 'recommended' the decentralization of functions listed in the 12th Schedule of the Constitution – of which urban planning is one. As a result the CAA has only been partially implemented by State Governments and almost no financial devolution has taken place. The JNNURM and other programs for capacity building of ULBs have been a step in the right

direction, but the majority of ULBs still lack the human resources for undertaking planning on full scale. Public Private Partnerships have been explored as an option for boosting capacity of ULBs but weak revenue sources and no real financial devolution makes it unviable for market actors. As recommended by the three key reports mentioned earlier, there is an immediate need for restructuring the institutional structure for planning and bringing the responsibility of planning down to the lowest level of elected government.

According to the Census of 2011, there are 7000 certified towns, 626 districts and 6,00,000 villages. If the 73rd CAA (dealing with decentralization of functions to Village Panchayats) and the 74th CAA would be implemented in its entirety, then planners would be needed at each ULB in addition to the higher tiers of Government. At present, even State planning departments and national planning institutions suffer from the lack of qualified planning professionals. According to the Institute of Town Planners of India (ITPI), an institution that accredits professional planners in India had 2,899 Associate Member in 2013. It is estimated that the total number of planners may be about 5,000. Using the latter figure there are only 1.32 planners per 100,000 urban dwellers. This low figure is comparable to the poorest countries in Africa such as Uganda, Mali and Tanzania (UN Habitat, 2013). Developed countries such as the United Kingdom have 37.63 planners for every 100,000 population (ibid, 2013). As is evident, there is a huge shortfall of planners in the nation at various levels of the State institutional structure.

Another key aspect for the efficient running of cities is that of implementation and monitoring of the implementation of plans. This aspect of the 'management' has been highlighted by the HPEC Report which calls for the training of Urban Management specialists through the setting up of four national level schools of urban management. The key role of urban managers would be to focus on the coordination and collaboration between service delivery agencies, private infrastructure providers and civil society organizations. The role of urban managers would become even more critical in the 'Smart Cities' envisaged with a high level of technological infrastructure to be integrated physically and institutionally in existing cities.

However, planners are not just employed in public institutions; on the contrary the most attractive working environments have been in the private sector. With Public Private Partnerships and the active involvement of private actors in urban planning and development, especially in Real Estate and Infrastructure, planning professionals have become invaluable to the market and public sector alike. With an ever increasing demand from the private sector, cash constrained ULBs would have a tough job competing for scarce human resources within this field. This has two implications – one in terms of the number of planners that need to be educated but more importantly the kind of planners.

There is an immediate need to see the professional role of planners beyond the traditional one of landuse and physical planning. The focus on integrated landuse and infrastructure planning, capability of working with a project based approach as opposed to the long term and large scale planning, knowledge and skills for inter organizational coordination as well as awareness of financial and management aspects of plan implementation are critical for planners, irrespective of their chosen sector of employment. An emerging area of priority for public planning and an investment opportunity for the market is that within affordable housing. As highlighted by the

MGI report, this is likely to require both professional and financial resources, if the large housing gap in the country has to be addressed.

In an emerging economy with large inequalities and limited resources, the role of civil society organizations is critical. The 'third sector' as it is called, fills a gap in the delivery of services to those outside of the formal networks of governance as well as a representative of the interests of the marginalized in these formal networks. The Right to Information Act and the Public Interest Litigations are two instruments that have been used extensively by Civil Society organizations for the protection of interests of specific groups as well as the demand for transparency from the State. Planners working in such organizations function as 'advocacy planners' – taking moral and value based positions in society and upholding the rights and interests of those that are marginalized/disenfranchised by the formal institutions. However, given the scale of informality and inequality in our cities, inclusive planning with an active involvement of both the market and civil society will be essential for a sustainable and 'smart' urban future.

3. Status of planning education in India

Town Planning Education in India started in mid 1950s. This was Master's or equivalent mainly for architects, engineers and later for Post Graduates in Geography, Economics and Sociology. Bachelor of Planning (B. Plan) course was initiated about 25 years ago. At present 18 institutions offer Master of Planning and another 8 institutions offer B. Plan courses - 200 B Plan seats and 500 seats for Master of Planning are available at these 18 institutions. Specialization are offered in Master of Planning level such as urban and regional, transport, housing, infrastructure and environmental planning. At present India has 5,000 planners and it needs 1,60,000 planners by 2031 (Committee of Experts in Town Planning and Architecture for Policy on Education, Chaired by Mr. E.F.N. Riberio, 2011). Thus on an average, India needs 8,000 planners every year over next 20 years.

The Institute of Town Planners of India has prepared model curriculums for Bachelor and Masters level degree programs in Planning. The Bachelor of Planning is a four year program that covers an impressive range of 40 interdisciplinary subjects that are intended to educate planners that can function in diverse environments. Yet the practical component of the program is still geared towards mainly physical planning, training students to prepare landuse plans at various geographical scales – Site Plans, Zonal Plans, Master Plans etc. The specialized Masters/MTech curriculum takes graduates from various disciplines and offers a two year specialization in a chosen field of Planning.

Another aspect worth highlighting is the theory – skill balance in the programs. Although both the Bachelor and Master programs are designed with a Problem Based Learning approach and learning by doing by working with real life projects as the Studio exercises, the core teaching is mainly oriented towards theoretical knowledge of a wide range of subjects. There is need to reexamine the skill dimension of planning education, especially with the large anticipated demand of public planners that will be dealing with practical planning tasks within ULBs.

It can also be questioned if University level education in planning is the only way of increasing the human resources in the profession. Vocational education and continuing education programs for professionals already working in planning institutions could be a more resource efficient manner to increase capacity. In Norway for example, planning education is offered both at university level but also in what are called 'tertiary vocational schools' which are the equivalent of the technical polytechnics in India.

4. Way forward – Key ideas for planning education for a 'smart' urban future

In conclusion we identify the following key ideas that should guide planning education in India:

1. More urban planners – The volume of planners being produced in our education institutions have to be increased to keep up with the demand. These educational institutions may be public or private but a strict quality control of education is necessary.
2. Planners for the State, Market and Civil Society – There is need for recognition of the three sectors and the variation in roles planners are employed in. Planning education needs to be diversified accordingly.
3. Educate planners at all levels of ULBs – Decentralization of the functions of planning according to the 74th CAA is inevitable and planning education will have to respond with training planners for a varied level of skills required within the three tier system envisaged.
4. Balance Generalist and Specialist planners – Planning education and curriculums would have to reevaluate the mix of knowledge being imparted to train both Generalist and Specialist planners. The critical discussion of the theoretical versus skill based training is also necessary in this regard.
5. More urban managers – With the importance of infrastructure and the multiplicity of actors involved in urban development, the management aspect of planning is essential for efficient and effective urban governance. Specialized urban managers need to be educated to take on these roles.
6. Expand the scope of planners from physical to integrated planning – Landuse, infrastructure, environmental sustainability, social inclusion, risk reduction, economic productivity and financial diversity are only some of the aspects that need to be integrated for realistic and future proof urban planning. Planning education should take the lead in modifying practice in the profession, thereby facilitating long term institutional change.

The profession of planning is entrusted with upholding the 'common good' of society. While the academic community debates extensively on what this common good entails in these post liberal times, the value laden and moral responsibility of planning is undeniable. In the coming years, planning education in India has the responsibility to train professionals that carry with them the ethos of the common good and can enable the realization of a 'smart' urban future for all rather than 'smart cities' for the few.

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