

GIVING THE URBAN INDIAN A BETTER LIFE

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“The need now is to turn to sustainable and ‘ecological urbanization’.” | Photo Credit: SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

The theme of World Cities Day (October 31) this year was “Financing Sustainable Urban Future for All.” Finances must be channelled in the right direction such that urban futures which are being cut short on account of flawed urbanisation are checked, and, in turn, cities made liveable and safe. It is atrocious that [air pollution](#) is taking away over 10% of our life expectancy.

A report released by The Energy Policy Institute at Chicago (EPIC) shows that out of the 50 most polluted cities in the world, 39 are in India. Pollution directly affects the health of people, and an average Indian loses 5.3 years of his life expectancy due to this; for the residents of Delhi, it is 11.9 years. This data only highlights the need for policy shifts to ensure better and liveable futures.

Pollution results in burning eyes, irritation of the nose and throat, coughing, choked breath, and asthma apart from causing cardiovascular diseases. Recently, a media report labelled air pollution in Mumbai as “Death by Breath” due to very unsatisfactory Air Quality Index levels. Bad air is not limited to the Indo-Gangetic plains anymore where the argument of inversion of temperature and slowing down of wind speeds was considered as a factor for poor air quality. The situation is getting to be bad even in India’s coastal cities.

Why is the problem so acute in Indian cities? The overall development strategy of urban development in India — apart from proper execution of enforcement by agencies — needs a paradigm shift. The need now is to turn to sustainable and “ecological urbanization”. The trajectory of urban development, where the focus is more on real estate development, a widening of roads, allowing large fuel guzzling vehicles on them, in turn squeezing the space meant for pedestrians, and redevelopment are the major reasons for increased pollution in Indian cities. Road dust, concrete batching, polluting industrial units and their extension in the cities, and vehicular emissions are key factors too. It is estimated that motorised transport alone is the cause for 60% of urban pollution. The green lungs of the cities, water bodies, urban forests, and green cover on urban commons, and urban agriculture have all reported shrinkage, even as “grey” infrastructure has seen rapid expansion. Hence, the priorities need to be set right.

During winter in North India, there is a hullabaloo over the burning of paddy straw (called Parali)

as being the cause for smog (smoke and particulate matter). This is partially true. The burning of paddy, primarily in Haryana and Punjab, only escalates the problem. But this is only a small and seasonal part of the problem. India's automobile market has risen in value from \$100 billion and is expected to touch almost \$160 billion by 2027, registering a growth of 8.1%. Between July 2023 to September 2023, passenger and commercial vehicles sales touched 13,22,818 units. While this figure is not only limited to urban India, it is clear that such growth must serve as an impetus to the new design of and direction to urban development. Widening roads, in turn inducing people to buy more cars, while ignoring the fact that traffic snarls are increasing each day, thus leading to more pollution levels, is not the way to go. Construction activities, which are on the rise in almost every Indian city, contribute to roughly 10% of air pollution in the National Capital Region region. There are hardly any steps being taken to monitor and control construction activities with formulated standard operating procedures.

City residents, unfortunately, have hardly any participatory role and are forced to become passive bystanders in the urbanisation process.

There is a compelling need to have an alternative strategy of city building, where the focus is on more public transport, having secure pedestrian paths and bicycle lanes with the creation of a post of bicycle officers, and regulating construction activities through standard operating procedures.

There needs to be good public transport, with investment in buses for towns and cities. It is estimated that nearly 10 lakh buses would need to be added to the existing bus fleet in cities to meet the demands of urban mobility. There must be firm initiatives that emulate the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission. Public transport must be made accessible and affordable to people, 85% of whom are in the informal sector.

Strong steps need to be taken to control private motorised vehicular movement in the cities. A congestion tax being levied on private car owners driving during peak hours can be thought of. Likewise, an odd number-even number plate formula can be another important intervention. Some cities have a no car day on certain days — an example that should be put into practice by those in power and with influence. City leaders, the elite as well State Chief Ministers should use public transport at least once a day as an example of token motivation. Transitioning to green vehicles is important.

Delhi has a Graded Response Action Plan, or GRAP (a set of anti-air pollution measures), the moment air quality deteriorates. There are four different sets that get activated based on the quality of air. Such a mechanism must be adopted in other Indian cities as well.

There should be zero acceptance of industrial pollution and real-time monitoring must become a reality. There must be street supervision by residents instead of waiting for the statutory bodies to react, which urban local bodies can ensure.

Urban commons (ponds, water bodies, urban forests, parks, playgrounds) are another major area that should not at all be allowed to be taken over by either public or private bodies for private gains. Urban communities must protect, nurture and expand them.

Ian McHarg's influential book, written in the 1960s, *Designing with Nature*, synthesised and generalised ecological wisdom shaping landscape planning and design as a way to build our cities. However, our urban development strategy has been the inverse of that. Massive land use changes and the handing over of open spaces to real estate developers do not look to be ending anytime soon. Redevelopment across the country has resulted in pollution. A city's ecology is one of the first casualties and there is hardly any meaningful afforestation within a

city. Planting trees 50 kilometres away from the city does not help in curtailing pollution in the city.

So-called solutions such as smog towers or even watering roads are just cosmetic. People's empowerment through the city's governance architecture is a firm step forward. Pollution guides and standard operating procedures for various line departments and agencies must not only be made readily available to the people but should also become a part of the way of life in the city. When certain standard operating procedures were enforced without being challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic period, should not people come forward now and support implementation of the odd number-even number plate formula or even a 'no-car day' every week? For this to happen, there must be a strong GRAP-like standard operating procedure. Likewise, the medical fraternity must support the putting out of a public health advisory.

We cannot afford to let our lives be shortened by reasons such as air pollution. The poor and the marginalised are the least contributors to pollution but are the segment who are most exposed to it and who pay a heavy price. They need a better life.

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