



Nehru Place, South East Delhi

# A tale for many **CITIES**

Pradeep Sachdeva

In just eight years, 2020 will be upon us. By then, our cities will be either areas of more chaos or meaningfully planned. The choice is ours.

We are at a crucial junction as far as urbanism goes. The need to work vigorously on our cities and improve them is urgent and critical. Their populations have surged tremendously in the last few decades. Delhi's population increased from 12.8m in 2001 to 16.3m in 2011. Bangalore grew from 5.7m to 8.5m during the same period.

Our urban planners have perhaps not understood the nature of the modern city, what it takes not just to run them but to make them livable. The two key requirements of a city are: provision of basic services and

social infrastructure. These need to be developed together.

So what is a city? It's a dense amalgamation of buildings and people. A city must provide equity and also be sustainable. As an architect who has been closely connected with Delhi and its planning, my wish list is more about the direction we need to take so that future generations don't end up living in chaotic dysfunctional cities.

The first requirement for a city is a pragmatic plan. Many of our cities such as Delhi and Bhubaneswar and even Port Blair in the Andamans have reasonably good master plans. Many also have City Development Plans which have been made an essential requirement to draw funds from

the government's Urban Renewal Programme (JNNURM). But they should be updated frequently based on the changing needs of its people.

And let's not forget its citizens – they need to be more pro-actively involved when evolving master plans. But often, there's lack of planning and inadequate implementation systems. This applies to all essential components of a city – streets, public transport system, traffic management, affordable housing, cars and parking, drainage, water supply, sewerage and garbage. And deficiency in these will lead to poor quality cities which won't be able to handle the pressure of increased population and changing needs.

The second requirement of a good city is good social infrastructure such as parks and places for leisure such as river and sea fronts. It needs to preserve and protect its heritage. We are nation with a rich diversity in culture, arts and crafts and cities are platforms for that, given the right facilities. And let's not forget good and affordable educational and healthcare facilities too.

We don't have to look far. There are enough cities worldwide which has managed to radically improve the quality of life of its citizens. Take Singapore. It has managed to limit cars and has a very efficient transport system. Shanghai has wonderful footpaths everywhere. New York is actively developing cycling facilities in large parts while Holland, Denmark and other Scandinavian countries have develop cities around a bicycling infrastructure, creating a complete culture around them which is humane and ecological. There's Tokyo, the world's most populous city, which has a metro system used by 80% of the population.

But a great sustainable and livable city doesn't emerge by accident and its development cannot be taken for granted. It requires hard work, cohesive planning and meticulous implementation. And high management skills.

Perhaps the time has come to have an Indian Urban Service, a body of highly trained professionals who will manage the city. This could be akin to IAS, IFS, Revenue and Forest services. There's also a need for a top-

notch think-tank which develops policy and goals for urbanism, These should include the best people from various areas – town planning, urban designing, transport, energy, environment, public utilities, landscape, housing, etc.

## GOING SLOW

While 70% of the population of industrialized nations lives in urban areas, in India, it's far less.

India's urban population (% of total)

1990	25.5
2000	27.7
2005	28.7
2010	30
2020	33.9

But a start has been made, JNNURM, which is some six years old, has started an ambitious development plan in many cities. The results have been encouraging. But to bring our cities to any basic level of development, many more need to be brought into its fold. More areas need to be addressed. We also need to reinvent and restructure the institutions that served us well in the past such as Town and Country Planning Organization, the DDA in Delhi and the MMRDA in Mumbai. Then, there are also research organizations such as CRRRI for roads and transportation and CBRI for buildings. Reinventing them will need political will and administrative vision.

There are some glimmers of hope. I met up young Navdeep Ahuja who along with another

colleague began the innocuously named Graduates Welfare Association Fazilka. They are bringing about change with the mandate of citizen participation in governance and are facilitating the creation of physical and social infrastructure across 22 cities in Punjab. They have put in place a network of cycle rickshaws called Ecocabs which can be booked through a mobile phone. They are also developing car free zones, food and culture streets in these cities. All this is being done very efficiently and at a low cost. We need many such organizations.

However, my ideal of a city in 2020 is not utopian dream. It is achievable. It has streets where people walk I wide footpaths shaded by leafy trees. Streets are usually one-third of a city's area and its most democratic segment. Public space dedicated to pedestrians reduces inequality and should be accorded priority when developing cities.

Adjoining the streets should be cycle lanes where bicycles and rickshaw can sail past smoothly. It'll have a great public transport system with buses, metro and taxis. Parking will be difficult and expensive so people will use public transport rather than cars. There will be parks and gardens and the air will be clean, as pollution levels will have dropped dramatically.

And then, cities will become areas of graceful living and a charmed way of life.

Source: The Times of India, New Delhi, January 25, 2012