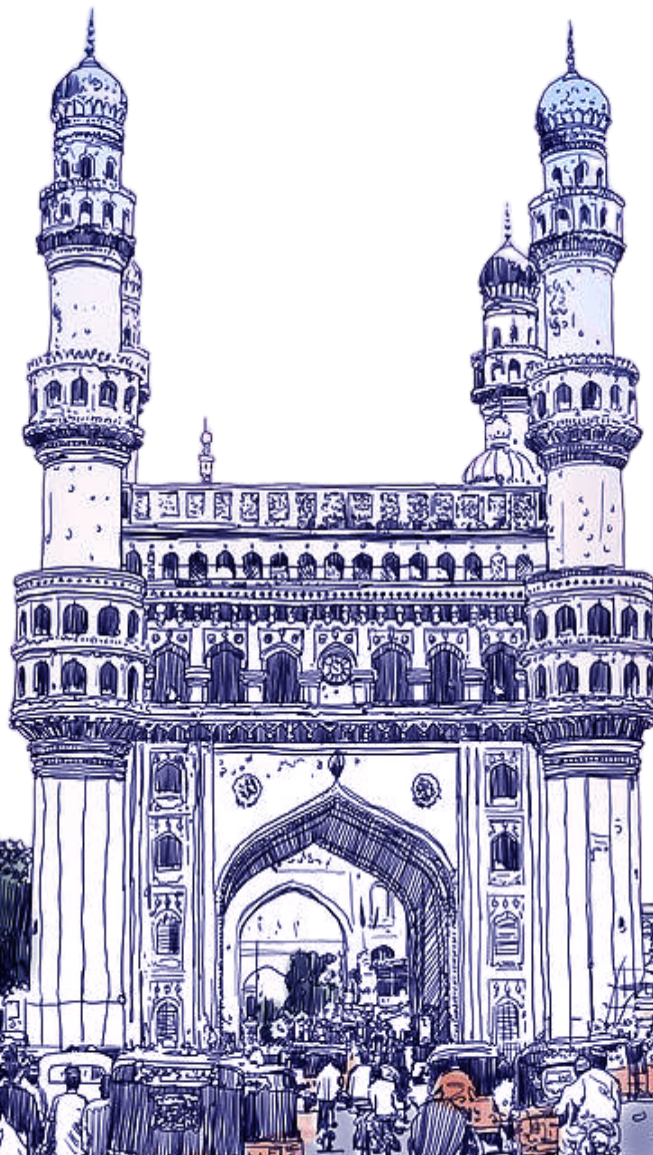# THE STORY OF URBANISATION IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

The formation of National Commission on Urbanization in 1986, after 40 years of independence, was a beginning to shift policy focus on cities. It was followed by a series of programmes and missions in the next three decades. Seeing the state of Indian cities today, we need to step up our efforts

Leaderspeak

Govt's nudge in urban policy reforms can transform Indian cities

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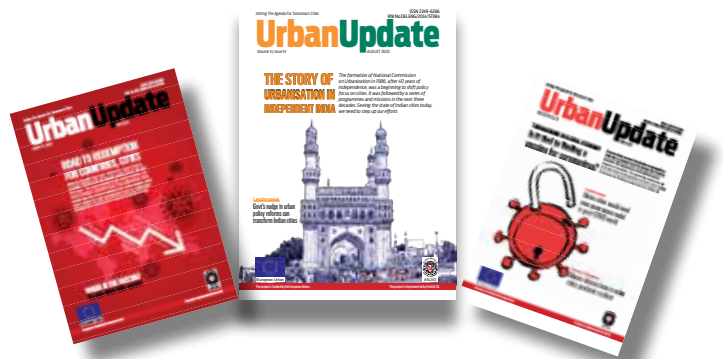
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AIILSG

FIGHTING CLIMATE CHANGE; DOING MORE WITH LESS

Rajiv Agarwal
Editor-In-Chief
dg@aiilsg.org

'One World, One Sun, One Grid'. Prime Minister Narendra Modi recalled this vision for the development of a transnational solar grid in his Independence Day Speech on 15th August. He spoke about India's leading position among nations in the field of renewable energy, about how India is showing the world that it is possible to pursue development in harmony with nature through measures such as promotion of clean fuels; LPG for cooking, ethanol blended motor fuels, CNG and e-mobility.

This is a reminder of the grim battle against Climate Change while the world is engaged with a severe public health challenge. There is a feeling in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic and the world-wide lockdowns induced by it, that there has been a soothing effect on the environment due to vastly reduced greenhouse gas emissions. While there are various estimates of the reduction in emissions, the beneficial outcomes could be overstated. One research even termed the effects of the lockdowns on global warming as 'negligible'. However even if these modest reductions are worth pursuing, the highly discomforting fact is that these reductions have come about at a huge cost. Over 770 thousand lives have been lost, millions are fighting infection in hospitals and quarantine centres, factories around the world have ground to a halt, schools and colleges are shut, informal businesses like street vending have had to shut and livelihoods of millions have been snatched even if temporarily.

Another impact has been on the finances of governments including local governments. These have been badly affected; on the one hand due to the massive, unbudgeted expenses on fighting the pandemic; and on the other due to vastly reduced taxation incomes given the shrinking economic activity. This could severely impair governments' abilities to implement social welfare programmes and infrastructure creation for future economic growth, among others.

Therefore any modest gains on global warming front have come at big economic and social costs. And in any case when the lockdowns are lifted, emissions will be back. So one thing is quite clear. This is not the route to cutting emissions and fighting climate change.

Factories must run, cars must ply, planes must fly, schools, colleges, and offices must work, and yet there needs to be an even bigger reduction in emissions if we are to effectively fight climate change and save the planet. We must find more and more environmentally benign ways to run our factories, fuel our aircraft, and drive our cars. The idea is not to do less, but to do more with less. Long term strategic decarbonisation of entire economies must be the underlying theme of the fight against global warming. One way could be a massive and permanent shift away from fossil fuels to renewable sources. Such measures must be combined with significant behavioural shifts in the ways we go about our daily lives. This could be a more lasting and effective path towards sustainable climate action. ■

"

Air pollution does not respect borders be it cities, states or countries. Improving air qualities requires collaboration from within the countries and across regions

Michael Greenstone
Director, Energy Policy Institute, University of Chicago

"

"We have been brought to our knees -- by a microscopic virus. The pandemic has demonstrated the fragility of our world. Entire regions that were making progress on eradicating poverty and narrowing inequality have been set back years,

António Guterres
Secretary-General of the United Nations

PIN POINT

"

"As there are waves of this infection going through countries, people are going to develop antibodies and those people will hopefully be immune for sometime so they will also act as barriers and brakes to the spread."

Dr Soumya Swaminathan
Chief Scientist, World Health Organisation

"

"Evidence suggests that the pandemic-induced lockdown did not make any substantive difference to the water quality of rivers with respect to their biological load, as domestic wastewater still found its way into the rivers."

Sunita Narayan
Director General, Centre for Science and Environment

BUZZ

Parameswaran Iyer
Secretary, Dept of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Ministry of Jal Shakti, GOI
@paramiyer_

Sustaining our efforts to build a #SwachhBharat will go a long way in ensuring a #SwasthBharat. Now, it is crucial more than ever to practice safe #sanitation and good personal hygiene. Let's do our bit towards flattening the curve!

Ram Nath Kovind
President of India
@rashtrapatibhvn

The COVID-19 protective gears are meant to safeguard and protect health workers associated with IRCS medical services in these states as well as the volunteers of IRCS who are at the forefront of flood relief and rehabilitation efforts

Piyush Goyal
Minister of Railways & Commerce & Industry, Government of India
@PiyushGoyal

Keeping Wheels of Trade Rolling: Further accelerating freight transportation, Railways doubled the speed & increased loading by 8%, as compared to same day last year

Anand Mahindra
Chairman, Mahindra Group
@anandmahindra

Ironically, Covid 19 is raising per capita water needs to more affluent country levels. Not just Mumbai, but other Indian cities could face a crisis in water supply by next year... We will need to aggressively plan ahead to save water & augment resources

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COVER STORY

Indian cities have been neglected by the central government in the independent India despite growing their financial strength by each passing year. The formation of National Commission on Urbanization in 1986, after 40 years of independence, was a beginning to shift policy focus on cities. It was followed by a series of programmes and missions in the next three decades. Seeing the state of Indian cities today, we need to step up our efforts

LEADERSPEAK

India is yearning to become a 5-trillion dollar economy. All of us know that the dream cannot be fulfilled without making our cities world-class because cities are the biggest contributor to any country's GDP. The government has to learn from the urban policy reforms in the past and bring new reforms to suit the requirement of the day

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ARTICLES

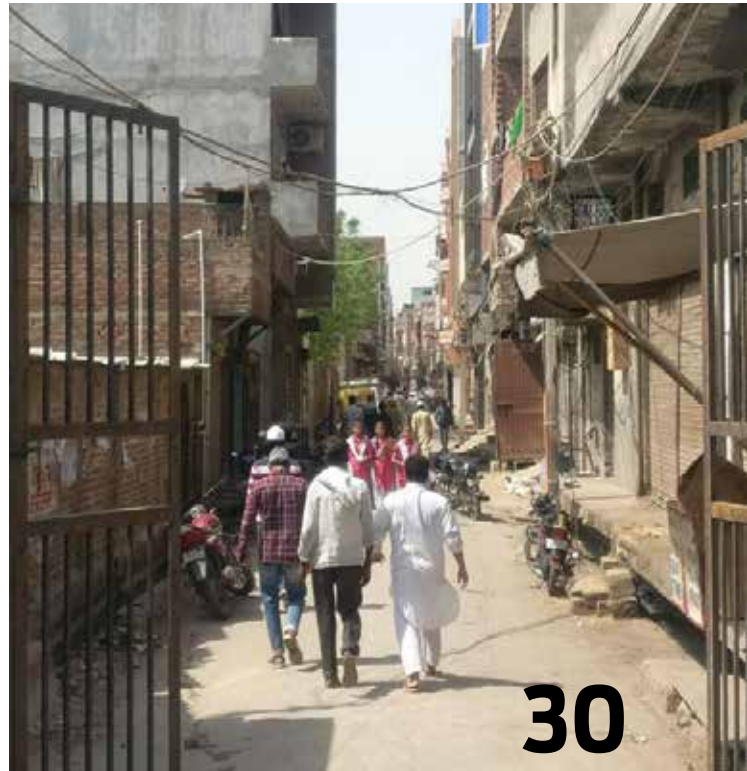**30**

E-DIALOGUES

BOOK REVIEW

CLIMATE RESILIENT AND INCLUSIVE CITIES

With urban growth averaging 4,4% annually, Indonesia experiences the highest rate of urbanisation in Asia (higher than in India and China). It is predicted that 68% of the population will live in cities in the next ten years. Urban population densities exceed 15,000 habitants/km² in cities like Jakarta and more than 30,000 habitants/km² in some inner-city areas. Cities are hard hit by climate change, although they could be seeds for solutions. Cities like Jakarta are sinking below sea level and could be expected to sink by 2050. Countries like Vietnam (36% of urban population) and the Philippines (45%) concentrate large urban areas, with fast growing centres. Urban areas host most of the vulnerable populations, as well as vital and social infrastructure, and local governments have increased pressure to develop services, infrastructure, and employment. Hundreds of millions of people in poorer urban areas are hit by pockets of deprivation, due to lack of basic infrastructure (such as water and sanitation). Problems will worsen when the most fragile territories could be affected by rising sea levels, flooding, landslides, toxic peaks of air pollution, typhoons alerts, storms, or periods of more extreme heats and droughts related to climate change. Cities and local governments are increasingly recognized as key actors in addressing climate challenges and the SDGs.

The project fully meets the global objective to promote sustainable, green, and inclusive urban development, and to promote climate resilient and inclusive cities. It aims to foster and strengthen partnerships among Local Authorities in accordance with the 2030 Agenda on sustainable development. The project proposes capacity building and transfer of tools in the areas of disaster risk management, climate/sustainable use of resources, and water/sanitation. Peer to Peer exchanges will be organized for both city leaders and urban practitioners. It also proposes to build up and extend partnerships, to upscale cooperation, to sustain cooperation networks, as well as to maximize the impacts of action in a unique, innovative and original manner.

GOALS

- ♦ Improve resilience and greening of cities: The project is geared towards sustainable and climate resilience policies and action and is promoting a shift towards sustainable and green urban development.
- ♦ Urban governance: It will address the question of governance to reach sustainable urban development through capacity building and training materials on good governance.
- ♦ Ensure social inclusiveness of cities: The CRIC project will strengthen and support social policies and social inclusion of the poorer population. Engagement will be achieved through the involvement of civil society. Improvements in water and sanitation in particular, have a large social impact especially on the marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as rural migrants. The project will also have a highlight on culture through exhibitions.
- ♦ Improve prosperity and innovation in cities: The sustainable action plans for environment, climate, water, sanitation, waste and a sustainable use of resources will trigger local investment, local economy and schemes for the emergence of a local circular economy, waste to energy plants or other investments which can be beneficial for jobs and innovation.

The project will have substantial impact on the achievement of SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities. It supports triangular cooperation through which exchange of knowledge and capacity building among countries such as Malaysia, Vietnam, Philippines, India, Nepal and Bangladesh will take place with European counterparts. The project will support job creation by the promotion of green jobs and a circular economy.

OBJECTIVES

Considering the urgency of the climate resilience issues, United Cities and Local Government Asia Pacific (UCLG ASPAC) initiated the Climate Resilience Inclusive Cities (CRIC) Project along with its partners All India Institute of Local Self-Government (AIILSG), Pilot4Dev, Université Gustave Eiffel, ACR+ and ECOLISE. It is a five (5) years project with overall objectives to propose a long lasting and unique cooperation through a triangular cooperation between cities and research centres in Europe, South Asia (India, Nepal, Bangladesh), and Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand). The Project will also contribute to sustainable integrated urban development, good governance, and climate adaptation/mitigation through long lasting partnerships, and tools such as sustainable local action plans, early warning tools, air quality and waste management & Circular Economy in consultation with experts' panels.

PROJECT ACTIONS SINCE JANUARY 2020

The CRIC Project started on 2nd January 2020 and it was kicked off in Jakarta, Indonesia on 29th January 2020. The delegation from AIILSG was headed by Mr. Ravi Ranjan Guru, Deputy Director General, AIILSG along with Devarshi Pandya, CFO; Kamlesh Kumar Pathak and K Vishnu Mohan Rao. Over the next six months various events were planned under the CRIC project and several events such as stakeholder meeting, seminars, expert meetings have taken place.

One of the foremost events that took place in lines with the CRIC Project, the Global Launching of United Network of Circular Cities at the 10thWorld Urban Forum, Abu Dhabi on 10th February, 2020.

The event aimed at creating polycentric and multilevel governance at the national, sub-national and local level towards the circular economy and sustainable development. The program promotes creation of multilevel partnerships with suitable enablers towards policy level action and financial mechanism trough private sector cooperation. The event promoted the concept of resources management and circular economy through exchange of resources through a network of cities.

Another Circular Economy Event was conducted on 5th March 2020 at the 5th South Asian Cities Summit hoisted by AIILSG in Goa, 4th – 6th March 2020. The thematic track was conducted to involve the Municipal Corporations and Boards of South Asia who were represented at the conference. The discussion was on Creating Circular Economy towards Shaping Resource Efficient, Sustainable & Circular Cities. In this session of discussion, the focus was on Marine Circular Economy and Costal Cities and Circularity in Fashion Industry.

Beside the seminars, CRIC conducted an e-FGD i.e. a Focus Group Discussion with the stakeholders over a web-based platform. The discussion brought about valuable information also in terms of current situation and the readiness of each city in particular their commitment and agenda.

♦ For the CRIC project to succeed, its implementation will be through collaboration of national policies of Indonesia's National Policies (NDCs) where climate resilience and DRR

issues has been placed as one of national development priority; it aimed to reduce potential economic impact due to climate risk. The project would assist monitoring or measuring the level of climate resilience and city inclusiveness with SDGs and development parameters through various planned activities.

♦ Role of Bappeda (Regional Planning Department of Indonesia) and local government official is a key factor, in particular to prepare climate action plan to count the potential economic losses as it relates to the local investment, and efforts to avoid the potential losses.

♦ Bappeda at city level will demand the policy makers to generate macro action into micro action. In terms of that, the EU is interested to learn from UCLG ASPAC and cities through sharing information and knowledge. Project team & cities can work closely, share information and experience, and support the project which can run and meet the existing targets.

♦ During the urban analysis, the CRIC project team will discuss and assist the city team with regard to the preparation of the project implementation policy with the RPJMD, and with the RPJMN as well. The CRIC Project team will support the policies taken by the City Government.

On 12th June, 2020 the first expert meeting took place. Experts from Indonesia and Brussels joined the meeting.

ALLIED ACTIVITIES

As per the requirement of the project, AIILSG who is representing South Asia, has recommended the names of six experts to join the expert panel of the CRIC Project. These are eminent experts on various sectors of sustainability and environment. Dr Anil Kumar Gupta from National Institute of Disaster Management; Dr Suresh Jain, IIT Tirupati; Prof S K Singh, Delhi Technical University; Dr Deepali Sinha Khetriwal, Sofies Consultancy and Abhisekh Kumar Mishra, IISER Mohali.

Besides this, a GHG Accounting and Carbon Offset Proposal for the Climate Resilient and Inclusive Cities (CRIC) Project has been designed to accommodate and offset the emissions generated while undertaking the project activities.

The proposal has tried to understand all the variables involved with the project and has brought a cross-sectoral calculation and analysis method to account as much as possible. The proposal follows the standards proposed by the Green House Gas Protocol (GHG Protocol Corporate Accounting and Reporting Standard, March 2004) developed by World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and World Resources Institute (WRI). The standards are usually for corporates or businesses developing a GHG inventory but can be extended to any operation that involves the emission of GHG.

The emissions for the CRIC project will be considered under two scopes of calculations. Scope1 is on direct emissions that can be considered directly due to project operations and Scope 2 is indirect emissions such as power consumption.

The emissions sources are also divided into two categories, stationary and mobile sources. This broad classification will help us to understand the sources of emissions properly and create transparency and clarity in calculations.

This proposal also defines the options and opportunities available for the CRIC Project to make its Carbon-offset plans. A proper description of the options has been provided with their pros and cons. ■

Delhi seems to flatten COVID-19 curve

NEW DELHI: The condition of the coronavirus pandemic in Delhi in the last one month has improved significantly and the COVID-19 curve seemed to have flattened the curve. The national capital has so far reported a total of 1,35,598cases, out of which 1,20,930 coronavirus patients have been cured.There are 10,705 active cases in the capital city, while 3,963 have succumbed to the deadly virus. The recovery rate in Delhi, however, increased to 89.18%, while the death rate stands at 2.92%. Arvind Kejriwal, Chief Minister, Delhi, in a tweet on July 27, said,"Delhi flattens the death curve, COVID deaths down 44 per cent in June. Personally, this has been my most important mission from the beginning of the pandemic. We will not get complacent even now. This figure needs to come down to ZERO."

Delhi's daily figures have been steadily dropping since June 23, when 3,947 cases were reported in a single day. At the time, Delhi was one of the fastest growing states in terms of daily COVID-19 cases, growing at nearly six per cent every day.However, this rate of growth dropped to 1.21 per cent on July 21. Satyendar Jain, Health Minister, Government of Delhi, on August 1, said that Delhi's doubling rate of coronavirus cases has now gone up to 50 while across India it is 21 days. The ranking of Delhi in terms of total coronavirus positive cases has dropped from the second position to the twelfth position among all states in India.

Over the last two weeks, during which the slowdown took place, Delhi has regularly screened between 20,000 and 25,000 samples every day, much higher than it was doing earlier and a total of 10,32,785 tests to detect COVID-19 infection had been conducted in Delhi till August 1.Increased testing, in fact, is one of the reasons for a major turnaround in Delhi. As the city increased the testing about a month ago — at that time, the city was screening just about 5,000 samples every day— there was a significant rise in the number of people diagnosed with the virus. The city registered between 2,000 and 3,500 cases every day for approximately ten days.At that time, only Maharashtra was reporting higher numbers. It was also the period when Delhi overtook Mumbai as the city with the country's highest caseload. The increased testing could have enabled early detection of infected patients, and new health facilities, like the Sardar Patel COVID Care Centre and Hospital, have been successful in keeping them isolated so that the disease spread is restrained and controlled.There might be other reasons as well for the drop in cases, but increased testing has definitely played a significant role.

The fruits of Delhi's containment and treatment efforts began revealing themselves in numbers at the start of July. The pattern of recovery was also followed by a decrease in the number of hospitalized patients that came as a relief for the government, which had intended to turn Delhi's stadiums into COVID-19 care centers if no change was observed on a daily basis. Experts, including Dr Randeep Guleria, Director, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), believe that the COVID-19 curve is flattening, and the city may have crossed the peak. Dr. Guleria, during a press conference on July 20, said that looking at Delhi's COVID-19 data, it seems that the curve has been flattened and it is even showing a downward trend. Certain areas have hit their peak in COVID-19 cases, and this seems to have been achieved by Delhi as cases have significantly decreased.Certain areas have yet to reach the peak. Cases are increasing in certain states and will reach the peak a little later. He added that this does not mean that Delhi should let its guard down. It is best to remain vigilant, considering the events of occurrence of a second wave of the pandemic in other cities and countries around the world. If social-distancing norms and other COVID social behaviours are not followed rigorously, there is a possibility of resurgence of the pandemic in the city.

Over 1.60 lakh HCF in India operate without authorisation: CPCB to NGT

NEW DELHI: The novel coronavirus has put immense pressure and attention on the state of healthcare facilities (HCF) around the world. In lieu of this, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) on July 22 has told the National Green Tribunal (NGT) that of the total 2,70,416 healthcare facilities in the country, only 1,10,356 facilities have obtained authorisation from CPCB under the Bio-medical Waste Management (BMWM) Rules, 2016. The remaining over 1.60 lakh facilities are running without any authorisation. CPCB told the Tribunal that as per the annual report submitted by State Pollution Control Boards, only 1,11,122 units had applied for authorisation out of which, just over 1.10 lakh units have obtained authorisation.

"Apart from those who have applied and those who have obtained authorisation, there are about 50,000 health-care facilities that have neither applied nor taken the authorisation," CPCB said in its report. A Bench headed by NGT Chairperson Justice Adarsh Kumar Goel directed the States to expedite the process and complete it by December 31 and file a compliance report with the CPCB.

According to the report, 25 State and Union Territories (UTs) have completed their inventories of all health-care facilities and 10 namely; Assam, Kerala, Mizoram, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Meghalaya and Uttarakhand, are yet to do it. The Tribunal asked these 10 states to expedite the process and ensure the submission of the relevant reports to the CPCB by December 31, 2020.

The report further stated that seven states and UTs do not have a Common Biomedical Waste Treatment Facility (CBWTF) to cater service of treatment and disposal of bio-medical waste. It said that these States are managing disposal of bio-medical waste with existing captive treatment facilities installed by health-care facilities or by deep burial of waste. These States have reported that they are under the process of setting up of new CBWTFs, the report said.

A total of 11 states and UTs have not provided any information to the CPCB in terms of monitoring healthcare facilities such as veterinary hospitals, animal houses, AYUSH hospitals and so on. The CPCB conducted random checks of veterinary hospitals and animal houses and found that most of them have not acquired necessary authorisation from concerned authorities. Moreover, these hospitals have also not registered themselves with the available CBWTFs for treatment and disposal of bio-medical waste generated in their facilities and also lack means of waste segregation using colour-coded collection bins. These facilities do not maintain any records of the waste they produce or of how they dispose of it either, the report said.

The Tribunal noted that of the 200 CBWTF facilities across the country, only 150 had connected with the Central server of CPCB for transmission of online continous Emission Monitoring Systems. CBWTFs in Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, MP and West Bengal have installed CBWTFs in all facilities, however some of the CBWTFs are yet to connect with CPCB server, the tribunal noted and said that gaps need to be bridged.

The Tribunal also reiterated its earlier direction for the constitution of District Planning Committees to monitor District Environment Plans covering important environmental issues. Explaining further, the Tribunal also said that it is compulsory for all State Pollution Control Boards to assess the status of compliance of norms by CBWTFs. If any CBWTF is found disposing of waste in an unhealthy way or dumping untreated waste illegally, the same must be reported to the CPCB and appropriate action must be taken against them.

The green panel directed all the States and Union Territories which are lacking in compliance to take further steps and give their reports to the CPCB online. A further consolidated report must be compiled by the CPCB based on information collected from all the Pollution Control Boards as on November 30, 2020, the NGT said.

The direction came on a plea filed by a U.P.-based journalist Shailesh Singh seeking directions for closure of all hospitals, medical facilities and waste disposal plants which were not complying with the waste management rules. It had alleged that rag-pickers were allowed unauthorized transportation of waste and they disposed it in an unscientific manner.

Google partners with CBSE to promote online education in India

Google announced partnership with the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) to offer digital learning modules across schools in India. Sapna Chadha, Senior Country Marketing Director, Google, said the company will collaborate with 1 million teachers from 22,000 CBSE schools across the country by the end of December. It was also announced that the Kaivalya Education Foundation (KEF) would receive a $1 million grant from Google.org for households of lower income. This fund will be used over the next year to empower over 700,000 teachers to educate them in the interactive education environment so that students can begin to learn from home.

COVID-19 crisis may get worse: WHO Chief

The World Health Organization (WHO), during a virtual briefing on Monday, July 13, warned that the coronavirus pandemic spreading around the globe will deteriorate if countries refuse to follow stringent public health guidelines. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General, WHO, bluntly said that so many nations are going in the wrong direction. He added that if governments do not come up with a comprehensive strategy to suppress transmission of the virus, and if populations do not follow basic public health principles, it is going to get worse and worse and worse.

Toxic foam engulfs Indrayani River in Pune

PUNE: Local residents in the temple town of Alandi were alarmed after they saw thick layer of toxic foam on the surface of the Indrayani River, the water from which they use for drinking and domestic purposes. According to citizens, the water being supplied by the Alandi Municipal Corporation (AMC) is contaminated due to polluting effluents being released directly into the river water by industries operating in the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC) limits.

While blaming the council for alleged incompetency in keeping the water quality of the river in check, the residents went on to say that use of water for any purpose is harmful and potentially lethal. An AMC official from the engineering department said that the water contamination level of the river is extremely high and the officials have to maintain the plant for atleast four to five times a year, which is a time consuming process.

Nitin Shinde, Sub –regional officer, Maharashtra Pollution Control Board (MPCB) said, "In the past, we have stopped industrial discharge from PCMC areas into the river, but we still survey the industrial zone afresh to find out the source, if any." He added that it could also be a possibility that the source of the toxic foam are some housing societies in Moshi and other villages along the river releasing sewage water directly into the river.

Vaijayanta Umargekar, President, AMC said that this is a recurring problem and the PCMC and MPCB need to act tough and look into a permanent solution for the problem at hand since the town of Alandi has no other source of water.

2.87 lakh COVID cases daily in India by February 2021: Researchers

NEW DELHI: A study by researchers from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) recently predicted that India may witness nearly 2.87 lakh COVID-19 positive cases daily by February 2021. The study titled 'Estimating the Global Spread of COVID-19' has made predictions regarding several countries worldwide. However, the estimate has been calculated based on the condition that till then, a vaccine has not been developed and brought to the market for consumer use.

The study also predicts that India will overcome United States in the total number of COVID cases in the country by end of this year. The US, by early next year, would be recording 95,000 cases, South Africa 21,000 and Iran would be handling 17,000 cases. The study also highlighted the extreme importance of extensive testing and tracing in order to contain the virus. Delaying or slowing down testing could be fatal to large sections of the global population.

Their model predicts there could be 1.55 billion cases in 84 countries, but just a 0.1 percent increase in testing per day would significantly reduce cases, down to 1.37 billion. "Both these scenarios project a very large burden of new cases in the fall (September-November) 2020, with hundreds of millions of cases concentrated in a few countries estimated to have insufficient responses given perceived risks (primarily India, but also Bangladesh, Pakistan, and USA). In contrast, changes in response policies would make a major difference," the study says.

₹6,642 crore for redevelopment of CSMT and NDRS: Report

NEW DELHI: The Ministry of Railways, Government of India, has decided to soon release renders for redevelopment of the New Delhi Railway Station (NDRS) in Delhi and the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (CSMT) in Mumbai. As per a report by the Business Standard, the project will see an investment of over ₹6,642 crore – ₹5,000 crore for New Delhi and ₹1,642 crore for CSMT. "The proposals are under consideration of the Ministry of Finance's Public-Private Partnership Appraisal Committee (PPPAC) and tenders will be invited within 10 to 15 days. Finalisation of the tenders is targeting within two months' time," VK Yadav, Railway Board Chairman, said as per the report. The redeveloped station will have airport like facilities and charges for passengers and visitors. According to the report, these will be revenue streams for the Ministry as both handle huge daily loads – close to 1,300 local and long-distance trains, along with over a million passengers at CSMT, and 200,000 passengers at New Delhi.

The Indian Railways (IR) has planned an ambitious ₹13.68 trillion capital investment towards station redevelopment projects over a five-year period. This also includes the New Delhi and CSMT redevelopments and another ₹1 trillion set aside for redevelopment of 400 railway stations, as per the report. "The major projects lined up include the commissioning of the dedicated freight corridor by December 2021, upgrading of high-density networks (HDN) to 130 kilo meter per hour (kmph) by March 2023, doubling and electrification of all HDN and highly utilised networks (HUN) by March 2024 and further upgrading all HDN routes to 160 kmph capacity by March 2025," Yadav added.

North Delhi MC begins gender sensitivity training for teachers

NEW DELHI: The North Delhi Municipal Corporation has started training all its 7,500 teachers and principals on promoting inclusion of children with transgender identities with other children in classrooms. The training has been initiated as part of promoting the goal of 'Inclusive Education' and is being done in multiple one-hour sessions in groups of 250 participants each. Sessions are being taken by Space NGO which has been working on participative inclusion of transgender persons in society for many years.

"The topics covered include — Understanding Transgender Terminology, What it means to be a Trans person in school? How can teachers create an enabling environment in schools for all genders? And myths, misconceptions and recent judgments on the subject," said a statement by the civic body. "The aim of the training is to ensure that every child, regardless of gender identity, is able to make full use of the educational opportunities available and to equip the teachers to be able to ensure full participation of all children in the classroom," said an official from the North Delhi MC.

About 1000 teachers were trained in the first 2 days, with around 99 per cent active engagement. Showing their enthusiasm for the sessions, teachers asked a wide range of questions at the end of the session. The feedback given by the attendees is extremely positive, with most of them saying that the webinar definitely helps them recognize the needs of such children and equips them to better deal with their needs in the school setting. Earlier, the teachers were given training on Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in MCD Schools.

DSGMC starts free ambulance service for COVID-19 patients

Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC) on Tuesday, July 14, started 24*7 free ambulance services for COVID-19 patients. Manjinder Singh Sirsa, President, DSGMC, said that in different parts of the national capital, a total of 12 ambulances will be stationed, equipped with all the facilities with drivers and ward boys wearing personal protective equipment(PPE) kits and they will be providing more ambulance in coming days. He added that these will be available until the battle against COVID-19 is won.

IIT Kanpur-incubated startups develop a water quality testing device

Indian Institute of Technology – Kanpur (IIT-K)-incubated startups, Earthface Analytics and Kritsnam Technologies, have developed a device, "PADMAVATI". A colorimetric test strip, based on smartphone technology, monitors water quality by screening several critical water quality parameters in less than two minutes. The innovation allows for cost-effective, easy to run, eco-friendly analysis of multiple water parameters. The liquid quality measurement system enables the masses to tackle field-level to household-level water contamination problems with an on-site, inexpensive, smart water quality monitoring device.

'Dairies, gaushalas to follow pollution norms'

The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has directed the Haryana State Pollution Control Board (HSPCB), along with other state bodies, to adopt and enforce a categorization of dairy farms and gaushalas, as specified. Shiv Das Meena, Chairman, CPCB, stated in an order that the committee formed for classification of the industries had finalized the dairy farms and gaushalas under orange and green categories respectively. The dairy farms having 15 or more milch animals, or those located in colonies or clusters should obtain permission under the orange category while gaushalas with weak, sick, injured, handicapped, and abandoned cattle will fall under green category.

EESL, NDMC sets up Delhi's first EV charging plaza

Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL), in collaboration with the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC), set up Delhi's first public electric vehicle (EV) charging plaza. The plaza, situated at Chelmsford Club in New Delhi, will deploy five EV chargers of different specifications. Sanjiv Nandan Sahai, Secretary, Ministry of Power, said that the charging plaza will greatly spur the adoption of EV in the city. The plaza will help in making charging of EV hassle free and convenient for the consumers, thereby making e-mobility adoption an attractive proposition for residents of Delhi.

Rajasthan government to include road safety in school curriculum

JAIPUR: With the aim of improving road safety in the state and reducing the number of road accidents, Ashok Gehlot, Chief Minister, Rajasthan, recently announced that the state government will soon come up with a proper strategy to cut down road accidents in the state by 50 per cent. Though he said that a proper meeting of all relevant departments will be convened soon to discuss the intricacies of the strategy, he did mention that one of its aspects is going to be inclusion of road safety education in the school curriculum. While noting that the overall condition and connectivity of the roads in the state have marked remarkable improvement, they have also led to an increase in the number of road accidents. This is because travelers now drive at higher than usual speeds on these roads. This, in turn, has led the government to realise the pressing need for all the relevant authorities, such as police along with other appropriate departments, to put together and execute an effective awareness campaign for road safety. He added to this end, authorities should collaborate with NGOs and voluntary organizations and put together seminars and other interactive activities to raise awareness about road safety in various districts across the state.

In addition to this, he also noted that another critical factor for effectively addressing the issue of road safety is how people learn to drive. To this end, Gehlot highlighted the urgent need to set up good driving institutes at both divisional as well as district headquarters.

27% students in Maharashtra predict 'low to very low' chances of continuing education: Survey

MUMBAI: Findings of a new survey conducted to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on higher education in Maharashtra have shown that 82 per cent students found it difficult to fund their education in the academic year 2020-21. The survey was conducted independently by B N Jagtap, faculty at Indian Institute of Technology – Bombay (IIT-B) and Anand Mapuskar, Education Researcher. The survey found that 80 per cent female and 84 per cent male students have expressed difficulty in funding their education.

The urban-rural divide is evident in the response to the survey, as 78 per cent students from metro cities, 80 per cent from district headquarters, 83 per cent at taluka headquarters and 88 per cent from rural areas said they anticipated these difficulties. The survey was conducted using Google forms with a sample size of 38,108 students (19,495 female, 18,602 male and four transgender) across all university regions of the state. The sample size is about 1 per cent of the number of students in the state. So far, the state higher and technical education department has not released any data on the impact of COVID-19 on students.

Uniformly across urban and rural areas, the survey found that 27 per cent students (29 per cent male and 25 per cent female) fear that chances of continuing with their studies in the academic year 2020-21 are 'low to very low'. Whereas, 73 per cent students expect

that they will have to financially support their families.

According to the report, students have stated that a number of options will be needed to be thought of to resolve financial constraints, including part-time jobs (51 per cent), participation in earn-and-learn schemes (18 per cent), and helping family agriculture/business on a part-time basis (9 per cent).

A14 PROJECT - USING COAL ASH FOR ROAD CONSTRUCTION

DRAX, THE UNITED KINGDOM'S largest renewable energy producer, has, in addition to fulfilling its aim of becoming a carbon negative company by 2030, helped in constructing the A14 highway in the United Kingdom using ash from its power stations as a major component.

This not only makes the ash a usable byproduct of energy generation but also avoids the need to mine fresh aggregate.

Using ash also reduced the average energy required for road construction.

Don't expect first COVID-19 vaccinations until early 2021: WHO

Dr Mike Ryan, Emergencies Program Head, World Health Organization (WHO), said on Wednesday, July 22, that researchers are making "good progress" in developing vaccines against COVID-19 with a few late-stage trials. However, their first use cannot be anticipated until early 2021. He further added that it is going to be the first part of next year before we start seeing people getting vaccinated and the WHO focused on expanding access to potential vaccines and helping to scale-up production efficiency.

Britain to see nearly 30 million EVs by 2050: Report

According to estimates, the number of electric vehicles (EV) on Britain's roads is expected to reach 30 million in the next 20 years. This jump is estimated to take place due to government policies to phase out the sale of polluting cars in the country. According to a report by National Grid Plc's Electricity System Operator (ESO) unit, Britain's goal of reaching net zero emissions by 2050 is looking more achievable under three out of four scenarios modeled by the ESO. Along with electric vehicles, replacing gas boilers with heat pumps is also part of the 'zero-emissions' plan.

Rajasthan govt approves ₹ 100 crore project to mitigate water crisis

JAIPUR: In a bid to reduce the problems faced by people residing in three water scarcity-hit districts, the Department of Water Resource, Government of Rajasthan has announced that it will expand the capacity of the tunnel that links Sei Dam with Jawai Dam in Pali. The Rs 100 crore capacity-expanding project, which was announced by Ashok Gehlot, Chief Minister, Rajasthan, will help mitigate the acute drinking water crisis in three districts in Rajasthan – Pali, Sirohi and Jalore. Currently, drinking water is transported to Pali and other districts from Jodhpur via trains.

Tender process for the project has been initiated with a sanctioned budget of Rs 15 crore for the financial year 2020-21. The completion of the project will lead to an increase in the tunnel's capacity from 34.13 million cubic feet per day to 73.87 million cubic feet per day.

According to Naveen Mahajan, Secretary, Department of Water Resources, over the years, it was observed that Jawai Dam in Pali district, one of the most important dams in western Rajasthan, was not filling up to its full capacity (which is 7327.50 million cubic feet). This was because of change in rainfall patterns and disturbances in the catchment area. Thus, the decision for rejuvenating the dam was taken in order to fill the gap in the demand and supply of drinking water and water for irrigation in the three districts.

Pandemic could force tens of millions into chronic hunger: UN

ROME: The United Nations (UN) said the number of the world's hungry last year have risen by 10 million and warns that the coronavirus pandemic could force as many as 130 million more people into chronic hunger this year. The grim assessment was included in an annual report, the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, released on Monday, July 13, by the five UN agencies that produced it.

According to the report, preliminary assessments based on the available global economic outlook indicate that "the pandemic will add 83 million more to the undernourished, taking the total to 132 million in 2020". The UN agencies reported that almost 690 million people, or almost 9% of the world's population, went hungry last year, a rise of 10 million since 2018, and nearly 60 million since 2014. As per the report, chronic hunger, after steadily declining for decades, slowly began rising from 2014 and continues to till date. In terms of sheer numbers, Asia has the largest number of undernourished people, estimated at 381 million, the report said. UN researchers found that Africa has the most as a percentage of the population, with nearly 20% of the continent's people undernourished. That compares to 8.3% in Asia and 7.4% in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to the report.

The UN agencies have said that more than 3 billion people cannot afford to purchase food for a healthy diet. Thus, it should be ensured that all these people have access not only to food but to nutritious foods that make up a healthy diet. They added that as a result of the pandemic, food supply disruptions, lost livelihoods and the inability of people working abroad to send remittances home to their families mean it is even more difficult for the poorer and vulnerable populations to have access to healthy diets.

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NGT asks UPPCB to rework spending of environment restoration fund

The Uttar Pradesh Pollution Control Board (UPPCB) has been directed by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to rework its environment restoration fund within two months. A bench headed by Justice Adarsh Kumar Goel, Chairperson, NGT, said that the environment restoration fund should be spent as per plan to be approved by the National Campa Advisory Council (NCAC) and not for government functions. The fund should be spent on strengthening the vigilance mechanism, setting up laboratories, monitoring the environment, hiring experts and consultants, undertaking remediation and study of contaminated sites.

Frothing in Yamuna, NGT panel seeks report from CPCB & DPCC

The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC), and Industries Commissioner, have been asked to submit a report about the reasons for a sudden froth in the Yamuna River by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) appointed Yamuna Monitoring Committee (YMC).The YMC asked the three organisations, to take swift action to identify the source of froth in the river and act against the perpetrators. The panel asked the anti-pollution bodies to keep it updated about the matter.

Immunity against COVID-19 driven by vaccines may exist temporarily: Study

NEW DELHI: While researchers and scientists around the world are still trying to find a cure for COVID-19, a new study done by scientists based out of King's College, London, has revealed that immunity against the coronavirus driven by vaccines may exist temporarily. The study found that people who have recovered from COVID-19 may begin to lose out on antibodies just three months after the infection.

If this holds true, it might hold a clue to the fact that immunity against coronavirus may just be short-lived and most importantly, SARS-COV2 may just continue to affect population season after season, just like the common cold. The claim of antibodies beginning to wane away may also bring to light the real purpose of a vaccine.

For the study, the scientists sampled 90 healthcare workers and noted that the level of antibodies in the body peaked three weeks post infection and began to slowly fade away post that. According to the survey, while 60% of patients showed good antibody response during peak infection, only 17% amongst them continued to have the same antibody levels three months later. It was also observed that based on a person's health and immunity before being infected, the level of antibodies may reduce by 23 folds and almost become undetectable.

The sample study was done to observe the possibility of herd immunity driven by a vaccine push for the community. Lead author, Dr Katie Doores said, "People are producing a reasonable antibody response to the virus, but it's waning over a short period of time and depending on how high your peak is, that determines how long the antibodies are staying around."

NGT asks Delhi govt to implement SOP to stop illegal groundwater extraction

NEW DELHI: In order to ensure crackdown on illegal extraction of groundwater in the national capital, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) has directed the Government of Delhi to implement its Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). A bench headed by Justice Adarsh Kumar Goel, Chairperson, NGT, noted that 15 per cent of the ground water in the capital reached below 40 metres from the ground level.

The Delhi government told the tribunal that the Environment Department, Government of Delhi, had prepared the SOP titled 'Regulation of extraction of ground water, closure, prohibition of illegal activities relating to use of borewells/tubewells'.

"An inter-departmental advisory committee has been constituted for each district to assist the Deputy Commissioners. It has been observed that often, the drilling machines/rigs are used to dig illegal borewells. The mechanism for their regulation, including registration and prior permission for movement and deployment, has also been incorporated in the SOP," the Delhi government said.

The tribunal had earlier expressed concern over the repeated allegations of "tankers mafias" in the city engaged in the extraction of groundwater without any remedial action by the authorities.

The tribunal had also constituted an independent Monitoring Committee, headed by former Delhi high court judge, Justice S P Garg, to look into the issue.

The tribunal was hearing a plea filed by city resident Rakesh Kumar alleging that water filling plants were being operated without license and supplying contaminated water to the residents at Kashmere Gate here.

NDMC installs anti-smog gun in Connaught Place to battle pollution

NEW DELHI: The New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) set up an 'anti-smog gun' on Monday, July 13, in Central Park, Connaught Place, in an effort to reduce the level of air pollution, which was increased after lockdown levels were relieved. Dharmendra, IAS, Chairman, NDMC, inaugurated the machine in the presence of the Amit Singla, Secretary, NDMC. This device is a pilot project to curb the increased pollution levels which witnessed a spike after the COVID-19 lockdown ended. More such devices will be installed if the trial is successful.

According to an NDMC official, this device is intended to minimize air pollution by spraying atomized water into the atmosphere to clear out dust and waste particles from the environment and

decrease the levels of PM10 and PM2.5. He added that the anti-smog devices are designed to produce an ultra-fine fog composed of very small water droplets (less than 10 microns) of atomized water. These tiny water droplets will be spread over a sizeable area with the help of a high-speed fan, which can absorb even the smallest dust particles in the air. As a result, pollution and dust particles are removed from the atmosphere and the amount of PM 10 and 2.5 particles is also decreased. The anti-smog system has a 100 meters long throw distance with a water droplet size ranging from 30 to 50 microns, covering an area of 27,000 to 37,000 square metres. The cost of the machine is Rs 13 lakh and will be controlled by a wired remote-control system. The NDMC official said that they could place more guns at India Gate, Sarojini Nagar Market, Gole Market, and major intersections such as AIIMS & Dhaula Kuan. He added that they will analyze anti-smog guns' performance and may employ more machines accordingly at India Gate, Rajpath, and metro or other construction sites.

Karnataka govt allows functioning of 38 industries during lockdown

BENGALURU: While COVID-19 cases continue to pile up in the state, the Government of Karnataka has decided to exempt at least 38 categories of industries to function during the week-long lockdown. The move is expected to maintain a balance between the ongoing health and economic crisis and the state's growth capital. B S Yediyurappa, Chief Minister, Karnataka, had reluctantly ordered the week-long lockdown seeing a surge in COVID cases across the state.

This includes a list of 28 industries classified as essential including rice and oil mills, dairy and food products, bulk drugs, pharmaceuticals, Ayurvedic and homeopathic medicine makers, sanitizers, bakery and confectionary, power generation and even those making paper napkins. Even e-commerce companies for supply of food and grocery have been allowed, according to the notification by Gaurav Gupta, Principal Secretary, Commerce and Industries Department of Karnataka.

"Bengaluru Urban, Rural, Ramanagara, Kolar, Chikkaballapura, Tumakuru Districts are considered as one unit for movement & transportation of people from Bengaluru and vice-versa," the notification added.

The notification allows units in industrial areas and estates in Bengaluru urban and rural districts to operate as in industrial township. A set of eight industries that are classified under continuous process industries like steel plants, petroleum refinery, cement, fertilizer and textile among others have also been exempted. At least three other districts in Karnataka including Dakshina Kannada, Dharwad and Yadgir have announced week-long lockdowns to contain the spread of the virus.

Free reusable face masks to be distributed at PDS outlets in Tamil Nadu

Free face masks will now be distributed at Public Distribution System (PDS) outlets in Tamil Nadu, Edappadi K Palaniswami, Chief Minister, Tamil Nadu, announced on Monday, July 27. The scheme will initially be implemented in urban local bodies, including corporations, municipalities and town panchayats, excluding the Greater Chennai Corporation. The scheme will benefit nearly 69.1 lakh families and is aimed at supporting 6.7 crore members enrolled in 2.1 crore PDS cards in the state.

Aditya, India's first solar powered ferry, wins Gustave Troupe Award

'Aditya', India's first solar-powered ferry, has won the prestigious GustaveTrouve Award for Excellence in Electric Boats and Boating. The Aditya, produced by NavAlt Boats, is a sun powered commuter ferry that is one of the great stories of the future of electric marine propulsion. The ferry was designed by the Department of Ship Technology, Cochin University of Science and Technology.The GustaveTrouve Award, which was instituted in memory of French electrical engineer and pioneer in electric cars and boats GustaveTrouve, was awarded to Aditya after it bested five other finalists from European countries in the public transportation category.

High ammonia levels in raw water hits Delhi's water supply: DJB

Raghav Chadha, Vice President, Delhi Jal Board (DJB), said that the water supply in parts of Western Delhi, North Delhi, Central Delhi and South Delhi will be affected due to an increase in the ammonia levels in raw water released from Haryana. On Friday, July 24, too, because of high levels of contaminants in Yamuna, DJB had cut off supply in Wazirabad, Chandrawal and Okhla water treatment plants. A DJB official said that following heavy rainfalls, Haryana opened gates of drains having stagnant water with a high concentration of pollutants. Effluents from industrial units upstream of Wazirabad barrage may also have been the reason for increased pollutant levels in the river.

ReNew Power will invest ₹2000 crore in manufacturing solar cells

India's largest clean power firm, ReNew Power, said on Thursday, July 18, that it will start manufacturing solar cells and modules with an investment of up to ₹2,000 crore for a project with 2GW capacity that will create 2,000 direct jobs in India. A statement by ReNew Power stated that the company is in negotiations with several states to set up the facility for the purpose. It added that ReNew Power will invest between ₹1,500 and 2,000 crore to establish this facility, which initially will possess a 2GW manufacturing capacity.

NGT pulls up UP Chief Secretary for allowing operation of brick kilns during lockdown

NEW DELHI: The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has slammed the Chief Secretary (CS) of the Government of Uttar Pradesh for allowing operation of brick kilns in the state during lockdown despite its prohibition. The Tribunal had also passed an order on November 15, 2019, against operation of brick kilns apart from the expert report that their operation is in violation of carrying capacity and results in countless violation of the law due to air and water pollution. A bench, headed by Justice Adarsh Kumar Goel, Chairperson, NGT, said that such orders violate the direct orders of the NGT. It further warned the UP CS to be careful, failing which we may have to direct prosecution, stoppage of salary and other coercive measures for violation of the order of the Tribunal. The matter caught the Tribunal's attention when in March this year, the Ghaziabad District Magistrate told the bench that due to the coronavirus lockdown, it was unable to complete inspection of brick kilns operating within its jurisdiction.

He added that several brick kilns were closed in the state as workers had moved back to their villages/hometowns due to the nationwide COVID-19 lockdown. However, some kilns were still operating in compliance with the CS's orders.

Earlier, the NGT was hearing a bunch of pleas filed by journalist Shailesh Singh and others seeking action against brick kilns which were operating without complying to pollution norms and causing immense air and water pollution. The plea alleged that 600 brick kilns are illegally operating in Baghpat district without obtaining necessary clearances from statutory authorities concerned.

Delhi govt initiates work to form own education board

NEW DELHI: The Government of Delhi initiated the process of formation of its own school education board. For this purpose, the state government has formed two committees – Delhi Education Board Committee and the Delhi Curriculum Reform Committee. This comes after the Delhi government announced plans for curriculum reforms and creating a new board for the national capital during the deliberation of the Budget 2020-21. During a joint meeting of the two committees, Manish Sisodia, Education Minister, Government of Delhi said that Delhi government schools have shown remarkable performance in the Class 12 board exam results. Citing this to be an example of how far the quality of education has come from when the Delhi government assumed office in 2014, he said that this is still not enough and that the government must strive to take education levels further and improve quality of education.

The committee for creation of the framework for Delhi State Education Board will study global best practices in learning assessment, re-imagine current assessment practices and provide a roadmap for an innovative, student-friendly scheme of assessment to be followed by the new board. "The committee for the creation of a new curriculum for children up to the age of 14 years will study globally renowned best practices in curriculum and reforms and recommend what is best suited for Delhi," the government said in a statement.

"Our past results have been reflective of what can be done within the existing education system in the past five years, by bringing about massive transformation in the quality of education. But now, the team should think about redesigning the education system in a way that will suit the demand and challenges of the 21st century world," Sisodia said.

'Understanding bat immune system may help establish COVID-19 drug targets'

WASHINGTON DC: A bats' ability to tolerate viruses like the novel coronavirus may stem from their ability to regulate inflammation, according to a study review which says studying the flying mammals' immune system may provide new targets for human therapies against COVID-19.

Researchers, including those from the US Rochester University, said that the bats can tolerate the pathogens without any ill effects as they are the ancestral hosts of many deadly viruses affecting humans, such as Ebola, rabies, and the novel coronavirus - SARS-CoV-2. While humans experience adverse symptoms when suffering from these pathogens, bats are capable of tolerating viruses and, in fact, live much longer than land mammals of similar size.

In the review research, published in the journal 'Cell Metabolism', the scientists evaluated how bats' natural ability to control inflammation can contribute to their longevity and tendency to combat diseases.

Vera Gorbunova, study co-author, University of Rochester, said that the inflammation goes haywire with COVID-19, and it may be the inflammatory response that kills the patient rather than the virus itself. She explained that once we get infected, our body sounds an alarm and we develop a fever and inflammation, and this is how our human immune system works. Gorbunova said the purpose of this immune system response in humans is to destroy the virus and combat infection but added that it can also be a negative response if the bodies of patients overreact to the threat.

According to the scientists, unlike humans, bats have different mechanisms that limit virus replication in their bodies, as well as dampen their immune response to the virus. As a result, there is a beneficial balance in bats with their immune systems suppressing viruses, while not staging a strong inflammatory response at the same time. They pointed out that one of the factors for this ability may be driven by their flight. Thus, bats, being the only mammals that can fly, need to adapt to rapid changes in body temperature, drastic changes in metabolism and molecular damage which may also assist in disease resistance.Andrei Seluanov, another co-author of the study, said that the bats are constantly exposed to viruses. They are always flying out and bringing back something new to the cave or nest, and they transfer the virus because they live in such close proximity to each other.

Since bats are continually exposed to viruses, scientists believe their immune systems are in a "perpetual arms race with pathogens"—a pathogen will invade the organism, the immune system will create a pathogen-fighting mechanism, the pathogen will grow again, and so on. Gorbunova said that dealing with all of these viruses may be shaping bats' immunity and longevity.

The scientists noted that while humans may be developing social habits that parallel those of bats, they have not yet evolved bats' sophisticated mechanisms to combat viruses as they emerge and swiftly spread.

COVID-19 has such a different pathogenesis in older people. Age is one of the most critical factors between living and dying, and we have to treat aging as a whole process instead of just treating individual symptoms, Gorbunova said. According to the researchers, studying bats' immune systems can provide new targets for human therapies to fight diseases and aging. Scientists can develop drugs, after studying how bats have mutated or completely eliminated several genes involved in inflammation, to inhibit these genes in humans.

Gorbunova said that humans have two possible strategies if they want to prevent inflammation, live longer, and avoid the deadly effects of diseases like COVID-19. One of them would be to not be exposed to any viruses, which is practically impossible, and the second would be to control our immune system more like a bat.

THE STORY OF URBANISATION IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

Indian cities have been neglected by the central government in independent India despite growing their financial strength with each passing year. The formation of National Commission on Urbanization in 1986, after 40 years of independence, was a beginning to shift policy focus on cities. It was followed by a series of programmes and missions in the next three decades. Seeing the state of Indian cities today, we need to step up our efforts
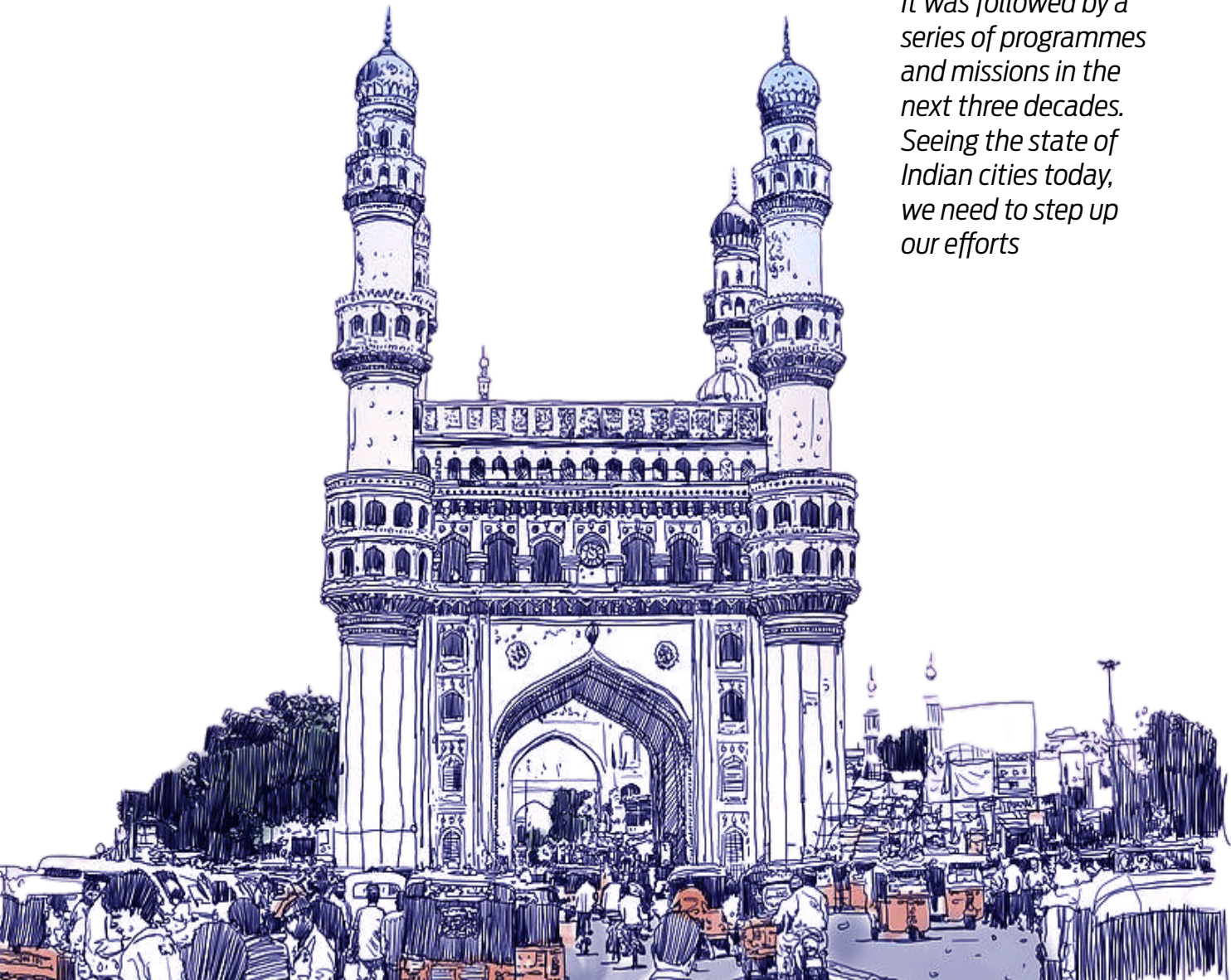
ABHISHEK PANDEY
Editor

India is still largely a rural nation with nearly two-thirds of population living in villages. Indian urban spaces, however, have grown in size and population in post-independent era but liveability of Indian cities has not improved considerably. Slums, poor infrastructure, and inequitable distribution of civic services are still plaguing the city systems. Four Indian cities, Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Bengaluru are among the 30 most populous cities of the world. Two of them, Delhi and Mumbai, are in top 10 at second and seventh position. Five Indian cities, including Chennai in the above list, have population of over 10 million.

The first census in independent India, in 1951, recorded urban population at 17.3 per cent (6.2 crore). The last census in 2011 tells us that the population has grown to about 31.2 per cent (37.7 crore). The growth in urban population in six decades is almost six times.

The growth of urban population in India has been top heavy. If you look at urbanization in different states of India, the concentration of population is in only few cities of the states. From Assam, Nagaland in North East, West Bengal and Odisha in East, to Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in South, and Uttar Pradesh and Haryana in North and Gujarat and Maharashtra in West, almost all the states have urban population concentration in just a handful of cities.

However, as per a recent report released by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), three small cities of Kerala have secured a place in the list of the world's fastest-growing urban areas. According to the report, Malappuram, Kozhikode and Kollam are the only Indian cities enlisted in the top 10 of the world's fastest-growing cities. Malappuram secured first rank in the world rankings with a 44.1% change between 2015 and 2020, with Kozhikode ranking fourth with 34.5% change and Kollam standing at 10 with 31.1%, in the EIU survey.

WHAT IS URBAN?

In India, a place is termed urban if it meets any of the following criteria: (i) a minimum population of 5,000; (ii) a maximum of 25% of the male working population employed in agriculture, the rest in non-agricultural activities; and (iii) population density of at least 400 per km2. In addition, every place with a corporation, cantonment, municipality or notified town area is also termed urban. The growth in urbanisation has three specific components: (i) natural increase in population; (ii) net rural–urban migration; and (iii) the reclassification of settlements as urban areas.

The question remains how these cities or towns are governed and planned differently than rural areas? The long-term planning and management of a city is governed by its Master Plan that is made for twenty years. Many urban experts have criticized the practice of not following the Master Plan whole heartedly by development agencies and hence, allowing haphazard urbanisation. Almost every Indian city is victim of this practice. Another criticism of making these plans is not engaging citizens in the process. While there is a procedure to take into account the views and suggestions of citizens through public consultation, it remains elusive in practice.

Another major problem is lack of financial independence of urban local bodies which usually run the cities. The contribution of local governments' revenue to national GDP is less than one percent while in some European countries this figure touches 20 per cent or more. In the last seven decades, the major failure in urban management has been not being able to make urban local bodies financially independent.

MEGA CITY PROGRAMME

After India opened up its economy in 1992, the leadership in the nation knew that cities have to at the forefront of economic growth. The government of India launched the Mega City

> THE SUCCESS OF JNNURM IS STILL DEBATABLE AS MANY EXPERTS ARE OF THE VIEW THAT THE MISSION'S OUTCOMES WERE UNDERWHELMING. HOWEVER, THERE ARE CERTAIN EXAMPLES OF URBAN INNOVATIONS FROM INDIAN TOWNS AND CITIES WHICH CAME INTO EXISTENCE FROM THIS MISSION. THE BEGINNING OF E-GOVERNANCE SYSTEM AT LOCAL LEVEL WAS AN EXCELLENT OUTCOME THAT STARTED MAKING LIFE EASIER FOR CITIZENS. THERE WERE MANY PROJECTS FOR PROVIDING BASIC CIVIC SERVICES AND FACILITIES TO URBAN POOR INCLUDING SLUM REHABILITATION PROGRAMS WHICH BROUGHT ABOUT CHANGE IN THE LIVES OF MARGINALIZED URBAN CITIZENS. THE MISSION ALSO IMPROVED BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE IN TIER-II AND TIER-III CITIES LIKE BUS SERVICES AND UNDERGROUND SEWERAGE SYSTEM

Programme in 1993 for Infrastructure Development in five out of six Mega Cities—Bombay, Calcutta, Hyderabad, Bangalore, and Madras. It was part of the eighth five year plan and was discontinued in the 11th Five year plan.

The National Commission on Urbanisation formed in 1986 recommended in its report 'that . . . . Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay and Madras be declared as national cities and that a fund be created and administered through a specialised institution for the development of these cities." The NCU had recommended Rs. 500 crores for each of the cities which might be allocated during the 7th and 8th Five Year Plans for the purpose of infrastructural development.

The State Governments were to designate one institution as the coordinating and monitoring agency for the entire range of Mega City Project activities. The following agencies were chosen to be the nodal agencies for the respective cities: Bombay (Now Mumbai): Bombay Metropolitan Region Development Authority (BMRDA), Calcutta (now Kolkata): Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA), Madras: Madras Metropolitan Development Authority (MMDA) Hyderabad: Hyderabad

Urban Development Authority (HUDA), Bangalore: Karnataka Urban Infrastructure Development Finance Corporation (KUIDFC).

The Scheme aimed to prepare the local governments to use institutional finance and eventually market instruments like municipal bonds for their capital investment requirements. Of the total project cost, the Government of India and the State Government provided 25% each and the remaining 50% was to be raised from financial institutions by the implementing agencies.

The programme was envisioned to build global metropolises or like making Mumbai into a Shanghai. The project did build some infrastructure in the selected cities but it was not as envisioned while planning so. For example, the Scheme for Mumbai was being implemented in the urban core of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR). The areas covered under the scheme are Brihanmumbai, Navi Mumbai, Thane, Bhiwandi-Nizampur and Kalyan-Dombivali. The MMRDA is the nodal agency as well as one of the implementing agencies of the Scheme. The other implementing agencies were MCGM, MSRDC, BEST, CIDCO, TMC, KDMC, BNMC and NMMC.

Mega City Scheme Revolving Fund (MCSRF) had been set up in the MMRDA for channelising funds received from central and state governments. The Scheme had been implemented during the 8th, 9th and 10th Five year Plan periods. In all, 65 projects costing Rs. 1777.84 crores including 2 studies costing Rs. 1.62 crores were approved. Most of these projects under the programme included underpass construction, building sports complexes, road bridges, construction of crematorium, etc. but none of these projects changed the way city functions drastically. Similar was the case with other selected cities and it is believed that is why the scheme was discontinued. The scheme was poorly funded as per its objectives desired. The top-down flow of funds for building urban infrastructure is not sustainable that is why the government has thought of new model under Smart Cities Mission where they have been given a certain grant and been encouraged to generate funds for improving their services and infra.

According to the High Powered Expert Committee (HPEC) appointed by the Ministry of Urban Development (now Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs), which gave its recommendations to the Government in the year 2011, there is a requirement of investment in urban infrastructure to the tune of 39.2 lakh crore at 2009-2010 prices over the next 20 years.

JnNURM: LEARNING FROM THE MISSION

In accordance with the observations made in the 11th Five Year Plan about significance of infrastructure and urbanisation for driving India's growth and prosperity, the Government of India has launched the major urban policy initiative, the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). The Mission was a massive city-modernization scheme launched by the Government of India under Ministry of Urban Development. The mission was implemented during 2005-2014. It envisaged a total investment of over $20 billion over seven

THERE ARE CERTAIN EXAMPLES OF URBAN INNOVATIONS FROM INDIAN TOWNS AND CITIES WHICH CAME ABOUT IN EXISTENCE FROM JNNURM. THE BEGINNING OF E-GOVERNANCE SYSTEM AT LOCAL LEVEL WAS AN EXCELLENT OUTCOME THAT STARTED MAKING LIFE EASIER FOR CITIZENS. THERE WERE MANY PROJECTS FOR PROVIDING BASIC CIVIC SERVICES AND FACILITIES TO URBAN POOR INCLUDING SLUM REHABILITATION PROGRAMS WHICH BROUGHT ABOUT CHANGE IN THE LIVES OF MARGINALIZED URBAN CITIZENS. THE MISSION ALSO IMPROVED BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE IN TIER-II AND TIER-III CITIES LIKE BUS SERVICES AND UNDERGROUND SEWERAGE SYSTEM

years initially but later the scheme was extended.

According to a report published by the London School of Economics, the JnNURM framework contained three strands of policy: developing urban infrastructure and services (including for the urban poor), developing urban governance to support sustainable use of funding and encourage private sector involvement, and decentralization in line with the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act such that Municipalities (Urban Local Bodies or ULBs) constitute a properly empowered institution of local self-government equivalent to gram panchayats in rural areas. The initiative was successful in some of the states like Gujarat and Maharashtra where the state government was able to execute projects for which the grants was available. Many states could not utilize the money on offer.

The success of the mission is still debatable as many experts are of the view that the mission's outcomes were underwhelming. However, there are certain examples of urban innovations from Indian towns and cities which came into existence from this Mission. The beginning of e-governance system at local level was an excellent outcome that started making life easier for citizens. There were many projects for providing basic civic services and facilities to urban poor including slum rehabilitation programs which brought about change in the lives of marginalized urban citizens. The Mission also improved basic infrastructure in Tier-II and Tier-III cities like bus services and underground sewerage system.

A key aspect of the JNNURM design was the reform agenda intended to alter state and municipal practices. For example, the requirement for GIS property tax mapping is dependent on computers, trained staff and reliable electricity, not all of which may be present. The capacity building of municipal staff and workforce is still a work in progress.

NEW MISSION TO REJUVENATE URBAN SPACES

Government of India in the last couple of years has launched various urban missions to improve liveability of cities. Smart Cities Mission is one of the most popular ones.

Other policy initiatives to improve urban functioning include Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), Housing for All, Swachh Bharat Mission, National Urban Livelihood Mission, and Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY). Most of these missions are still being implemented so their impact on urban spaces of India cannot be measured effectively right now.

Urbanists and leaders know that the ongoing urban revolution in India throws a great opportunity for India for economic, social, and ecological transformation and to emerge as a developed country.

India will not just have to improve urban infrastructure and services in its cities but also have to make sure that cities are inclusive, sustainable and ready to provide adequate space to every section of society to prosper and grow. ■

GOVT'S NUDGE IN URBAN POLICY REFORMS CAN TRANSFORM INDIAN CITIES

India is yearning to become a 5-trillion dollar economy. All of us know that the dream cannot be fulfilled without making our cities world-class because cities are the biggest contributor to any country's GDP. The government has to learn from the urban policy reforms in the past and bring new reforms to suit the requirement of the day

Every Indian including the leaders of the nation wants Indian cities to become world-class and propel the nation's economic growth. Industrialization induced urbanization to provide jobs, business opportunities, infrastructure, amenities, and transport facilities resulting in overall economic development. Many cities have evolved but the population growth has burdened the cities by straining its limited resources and capacity to serve the citizens efficiently. But this want is not supported by the fiscal health of our urban local bodies. Since most of the municipal corporations in India are not financially well-off, there have been initiatives by the government of India to provide funds through grants, loans, etc. for improving civic infrastructure and services.

According to a report by the World Bank in 2013, India's metropolitan areas have experienced stagnation because of inadequate investment in infrastructure and poor land management policies that have pushed business out of the urban cores. Large factories, call centers, and other office-based enterprises have been established beyond the municipal boundaries because of building height restrictions within the cities and special economic zones established in the peri-urban areas. This is very much visible even in the national capital Delhi where there is a restriction on building height or cap of three floors (G+3). The National Capital Region has been extending thus resulting in the growth of Gurugram, Noida, Greater Noida, Faridabad, and Ghaziabad. The report underlines that the rapid growth of metropolitan suburbs is a source of serious economic inefficiency because of the congestion and high transport costs (for firms and workers) that result from this extensive form of urban growth.

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON URBANIZATION

When India gained independence, there were only a few cities in the country. Kolkata, Delhi, Bombay, and Madras were the major ones and they contributed a sizeable chunk to national GDP. The economic trend continued but the quality of facilities in Indian cities remained poor.

The country's population grew four times between 1947 and 1986; from almost five crores to 20 crores. The growth of the urban population was way faster than the growth in the overall population that grew from 35 crores to 80 crores during the same period. In 1986, then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi formed a National Urbanisation Commission under the chairmanship of noted architect Charles Correa. MN Buch was the vice-chairman of the Commission and Naresh Nared was Member Secretary. Ashish Bose, Nilay Chaudhary, Xerxes Desai, B.G. Fernandez, Cyrus, Guzder, VK Pathak, Amit Sen, and Kirti Shah were the members.

It was observed that the potential of urban centers was not optimally utilized because of the mismanagement of urban services and infrastructure in cities. The main objective of constituting the

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President, AIILSG

Commission was to examine the whole gamut of urbanization and facilitate the formulation of policy that could set matters right in our cities.

The Commission submitted its recommendations in 1988. The most striking suggestion was to focus on building national priority and state priority cities based on their economic activities. The report also suggested that the focus should also be given to small and intermediate level towns to lessen the burden on metropolitan cities. The report also recommended that there should be effective land and spatial planning for ensuring necessary facilities for urban necessities. There was also a recommendation on improving the financial condition of urban local bodies by strengthening the taxation base, and allocation of more finances from the planning commission. There were certain other recommendations that were included in the following planning commission reports and other urban initiatives.

NATIONAL URBAN POLICY FRAMEWORK

The government of India has been relentlessly focusing on urban transformation. There have been several initiatives to address different urban issues by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs with tailored urban initiatives. One of them was formulating National Urban Policy Framework. According to the government, the National Urban Policy Framework (NUPF) outlines an integrated and coherent approach towards the future of urban planning in India. The NUPF is structured along two lines. Firstly, at the NUPF's core lie ten sutras or philosophical principles (see infographic). Secondly, the ten sutras are applied to ten functional areas of urban space and management. Within each functional area, the status quo and its challenges are analyzed, key priorities formulated, and specific possible action points suggested.

The plan also highlights that urban development is a state subject and has proposed provision for developing state-level urban policies based on the framework. The framework has touched upon almost every important aspect of urban development ranging from spatial planning, transport, urban governance, finance to management of civic services.

Taking a cue from the traditional evolution of cities in India, the NUPF suggests "to integrate it with economic and social and planning as well infrastructure, housing, and transport planning to create dynamic, entrepreneurial and inclusive master plans." The framework also suggests amending existing city systems by engaging the public. The NUPF suggests public engagement for amending master plans for better city management. For existing master plans, invite applications from the public once in two-years to amend or review them. For new master, plans issue new guidelines based on principles of comprehensive planning and climate considerations. Local Area-based Plans create a framework for enhancing the public spaces, and areas under roads by enabling the redevelopment of the existing built-up environment.

There are several areas where the Framework has suggested corrective changes to bring about positive changes in our cities and improve livability. I am quite hopeful that if cities and states in India can take advantage of the Framework to plan the future of our cities then our cities can become world-class and the nation can address the issue of urban mismanagement sooner than later. For this, the central and state governments would have to come on the same page to use the NUPF effectually. ■

RETHINKING CITIES IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC & AFTER

KUMAR DHANANJAY
Consulting Editor

It's time to rethink our approach for an inclusive future. Among others, COVID-19 has also exposed stress of underinvestment in our cities. This also provides an opportunity to kickstart a fairer, stronger, safer and cleaner country. By doing so, we can not only rebuild resilience to any future pandemics but to other risks such as climate change, extreme flood situation and ecosystem destruction

We don't know as yet, how long the pandemic is going to last but one thing is clear that this is an opportunity to set things right. I. We must find the courage and the vision to seize the moment for what it is- an opportunity to reset, to rethink the governance models for our cities. Indian cities are home to about 461 million people and contribute 63 percent of the GDP, yet they are at the frontline of this pandemic crisis. Mumbai, Chennai and Delhi alone have two thirds of all COVID positive cases. The images of makeshift hospitals in stadiums, clubs, and banquet halls are stark reminder of lack of health infrastructure even in our big cities, leave alone smaller towns and the hinterland. The population density in these cities has made it difficult to control the spread of the virus. That is why the COVID-19 crisis demands rethinking about Indian cities in particular.

STARK REALITY OF URBAN INEQUALITY

Let's look at some pointers of the stark reality of these times. India has 152-216 million people living in dense informal housing where access to piped water is often restricted. Given these dense living conditions it's impossible to stay in self-isolation and practise frequent hand washing or social distancing. Naina Lal Kidwai, Chair, FICCI Water Mission says 'access to clean piped water will make or break the best laid plans for tackling COVID-19.That's why the government must prioritise the basic needs of the most vulnerable, including improving drinking water and sanitation services. The FICCI Water Mission is focused on the reuse of waste water and grey water which deserves much attention as we look to conserve scarce resources'. She says that the urban poor have to risk their lives to survive. Food and nutrition are crucial for any individual. She adds 'It's time to rethink food and nutrition. Food insecurity is rapidly intensifying. India is home to 15.1 per cent of the world's undernourished population, causing informal workers to face impossible choices between risking contracting the virus or losing their income, housing, and sustenance. That's why the government must continue to provide legal entitlements for food and nutritional security and expand efforts to ensure food is available at affordable prices (or even free) for poorer families'.

There is a need for improved working and living conditions. It's time that policies and finances follow the people.

Thriving cities make a prosperous country; we need targeted emergency assistance now, to help communities weather this storm.Finance must also be targeted to restoring and rethinking cities after the pandemic.

SURVIVAL TAKES POLE POSITION

Till yesterday, countries across the world were chasing profits; the pandemic has changed it all. Today survival has taken precedence over economic gains and convenience. We have been debating and lamenting at the same time in which way we were taking our city designing. Traffic congestion, crowded communities, urban migration, pollution, dying rivers were all the result of our indifference and government's neglect of what needs to be done in so far as city planning was concerned. We kept ourselves preoccupied with the harsh demands of a life in the city. COVID-19 has suddenly changed our perception, and that too, drastically. Whether we like it or not, it is high time that we rethink our cities and do what is right in our cities.

Thomas Tim Orbos of McCourt School of Public Policy of Georgetown University says "the way we have lived in our cities ……we have become the biggest ally of the virus. Though there is that nonsensical theory about the virus being made in a lab and not in the seafood market in Wuhan, it nevertheless cannot be argued that the city—and it could have been any city globally—provided the conducive environment for hostile viruses to emerge and prosper.

As cities became the centers of commerce, urban density grew exponentially. People had to live close to where they work. And that does not only refer to those in the higher tiers of employment who bought the high-rise condos but more so the battalions in the blue-collar sector that crowded the many informal settlements in most cities. We had to feed them, hence, time and volume demand on food led to a lot of environmental damage". He further adds "transport had to address the unprecedented commuter demand, resulting in levels of pollution that has

made respiratory illnesses the leading cause of deaths worldwide.Our urban planners have been telling us to open up space and review the proper use of our lands. Part of this would be to strictly regulate commercial and industrial areas. All over the mega metropolis, pocket communities need to be self-sustainable. Places of work and community commerce are better to be within proximity of residences together with schools and health centers. As experienced during lockdowns, such a design would complement well the needed travel restrictions".

The call for rethinking our urban way of life in the wake of this pandemic cannot be ignored. It is not just for a sustainable quality of life we all desire, but more so for our survival.

PANDEMIC: A CRISIS OF THE CITY OR OF A CERTAIN KIND OF CITY?

There are many, including domain experts, who believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is not a crisis of the city, but the crisis of a certain kind of city, where decades of "market-oriented" policies have imposed severe limits on the public planning system – health care, food distribution, housing, transport, services – to respond meaningfully to the pandemic. The public sector because of decades of neglect and starved of resources has been robbed of inspiration, knowledge, and institutional ability to come up with progressive action. Social distancing in Indian cities, if not impossible, is a difficult task to achieve because of dense population. Take the example of Mumbai- it has a population density of 31,700 per square Km, one of the highest in the world. Some have argued phase-wise decongestion of the city without specifying how. It can only mean get rid of the poor, throw them out quickly. One fears that urban life after COVID-19 may well accelerate current trends: dispossession and segregation, unemployment and insecurity, intrusive personal surveillance, aggressive policing of physical and social boundaries, and gated enclaves for the rich to 'socially distance' themselves from the 'dangers' of urban life. Or,

perhaps, COVID-19 may teach different lessons, some good ones.

MARKET-ORIENTED PLANNING

In the post liberalisation era the idea that has dominated the policy discourse is that markets should be allowed to determine every aspect of social life. Public utilities began to be privatised. Government started dismantling regulations for public health, environment, labour as they were seen as barriers to growth and prosperity. Public health and sanitation, that provided the justification for public intervention in the pre-liberalisation era, began to be seen as constraints on market activity.

Hussain Indorewala and Shweta Wagh of Kamla Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute of Architecture and Environmental Studies observe in an essay that 'as the private sector was handed over the responsibility of implementing plans and producing housing for the poor, public health regulations came under persistent attack. To 'incentivise' the private sector and to make urban development projects 'viable,' they were relaxed almost into non-existence. Once a regulator, the state was now a development enabler and promoter. Public goals could only be fulfilled by giving more incentives to developers. Since the authorities captured a slice of what developers produced (rehabilitation units, open space, built amenities) – to enlarge the slice, the cake had to grow. They further add 'the most conspicuous manifestation of this are the city's slum rehabilitation projects – that allowed developers to squeeze more people into smaller areas, pack buildings closer than ever before, and skirt providing common facilities to gain more land for construction. Health practitioners began to notice a high rate of infectious disease among the occupants of these buildings. Planning in Mumbai came full circle. What began as a means to forestall epidemic outbreaks and preserve public health, ironically, turned into its opposite: market-oriented 'planning' in post-liberalisation Mumbai made the city more vulnerable to public health crises.

Public stewardship was no longer the business of government. They had themselves – along with the developers they facilitated – become "speculators in human misery."

PLANNING OF A DIFFERENT KIND

Indian people have paid a heavy price in socio economic sphere because of the lockdown with countless people at the brink of starvation. Any city's ability to limit the damage from any crisis or disaster depends on popular control over decision making that should include the level of social equity, the quality of our public infrastructure, and the

responsiveness of our planning system. Indian cities are vulnerable because over the years their ability to anticipate, prepare and respond to any crisis have been consistently weakened. The lessons that we must draw from COVID-19 is that to recover from the present crisis and prepare for any possible future one, we must strengthen our public system rather than depending on private sector. No one can predict the next epidemic, flood or earthquake but we certainly cannot let market determine our fate.

The broken system needs to be fixed, and fixed on urgent basis. We must commit ourselves to promote public health, conserve and improve

natural systems, redistribute wealth and opportunity, and protect human populations from climate events. In the words of Indorewala and Wagh 'This would mean a well-funded public healthcare system and a universal Public Distribution System (PDS). It would mean investing in public transport and public housing. It would mean progressive climate action plans and conservation and restoration of eco-system services. It would mean job guarantee programmes and basic services. And much more'.

We risk almost everything if we don't make these commitments and good popular ideas even now. ■

GATED COLONIES – THE NEW TREND IN URBAN HOUSING

City planning has seen drastic changes throughout the history of India. While the Indus Valley Civilization saw walled cities, segregated between the rulers, the rich and the common people, modern city planning is largely dominated by 'gated colonies'. Both government and private gated colonies (GCs) can be seen sprouting up across a majority of the metropolises in Asia and the demand for new GCs is soaring

ASHLEY PAUL
Reporter

The early 21st century saw a massive rise in the number of gated colonies in India. This was mainly due to the various government schemes encouraging affordable housing for middle and low-income families. Between the sense of security and the concept of social segregation they offer, there are a lot of factors that need to be considered in order to trace their evolution and predict their effects on urban planning in the near future .

THE ORIGIN

Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, urban living conditions are thought to have improved drastically with the introduction of gated colonies in Indian cities. However, in order to track the origin of the concept of gates colonies/communities, we must look back to some of the world's oldest civilizations – the Indus Valley and the Egyptian Civilizations.

Both civilizations, although believed to have developed independently of each other, have striking similarities in the way their cities were designed. Both civilizations built cities surrounded on all sides by walls. Walls were also used to divide the city between the ruling class and the common people. This is where, many researchers believe, the concept of modern-day gated colonies has its roots.

Apart from acting as a fortress against invading armies, the walled cities also ensured that a segregation of the populace, based on economic or caste differences, also stayed intact.

HOW DID THEY HELP?

In order to know the reasons for the sudden rise in popularity of gated colonies, Urban Update spoke to Shubhagato Dasgupta, Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research. Dasgupta said, "One of the main advantages of a gated colony is its ability to keep the 'unwanted' elements of society away from the residents. Moreover, most gated colonies have high walls coupled with guards patrolling the society day and night, thereby providing a double layer of protection from crime and terrorism."

Apart from this, gated colonies also offer refined public amenities. While people living in old, unplanned localities suffer from poor civic amenities and a resident welfare system to address their problems, residents of most gated colonies enjoy door-step delivery of countless services and round-the-clock maintenance. This not only ensures ease of living for the residents but also guarantees that the services offered to them on a daily basis meet their standards of quality.

With the concept of gated colonies, the concept of 'private' public spaces has also gained prominence. According to Dasgupta, this is one of the most alluring services offered by a gated colony. Most colonies have parks, gyms, community centres and even a shopping complex, along with jogging and cycling tracks, within their premises. Thus, there is no requirement for the residents to leave the confines of their societies. "They can avoid travelling to different locations for different needs and can, instead, enjoy leisure in the confines of their societies," said Dasgupta.

A very dominant trait of human behaviour, according to a research paper titled "Gated Living: The Contemporary Residential Development in Indian Cities and its Spatial Implications", is our willingness to engage with people who have as many similar areas of interest as possible. This makes people more comfortable and increases their level of social interaction. This is the reason why India, throughout the early 21st century, saw a rise in the number of sector-specific gated colonies, for example: The Press Enclave in Saket, or the Dentists Colony in Dwarka. Residing in a society with people with similar traits (such as profession) gives a person a greater sense of comfort, equality and oneness.

HOW THEY HINDER URBAN GROWTH

Despite the fact that GCs have been in high demand since the early 2000s, they have been a reason for a drastic and uncontrolled change in the landscape of urban centres in India, including Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Bangalore and Chennai. According to Dasgupta, one of the most evident adverse effects of a GC is that it promotes social exclusion. Due to all the civic amenities it offers within its premises, it discourages people from stepping out of their societies. Thus, possible interaction between people from two different GCs is extremely rare.

Apart from hindering social interaction between wider groups of people, GCs also disable greater interaction of the people with public spaces outside their societies. Since they have access to parks, jogging tracks and gyms inside their societies, residents feel no need to use public open spaces built by the government. This not only puts these open spaces out of use but also damages the already broken public feedback system in cities. If no one uses the open spaces, no one will report their condition to the authorities and thus, they will remain either out of order or damaged and eventually be rendered useless.

The mere fact that societies take up a large area in order to set up all the amenities the builder plans to offer to its residents, the possibility of future development of that piece of land by the civic authorities is impossible. It also means that the absolute authority of the civic body inside the society is absent and thus, they cannot suggest changes, or improvements in the structure of the society. The civic bodies can only approve the building structure and see that they are built while following the building construction code. However, the layout of the society cannot be changed by them to better suit the needs of not only the residents but also of those living around the society.

The obvious changes that gated colonies have brought in the way people imagine urban living has been evident since long. However, experts are still debating the long term effects that these societies will have not only on urban living and lifestyle but also on urban landscapes and open spaces. ∎

TIME TO DISCUSS THE DRAFT RIVER MANAGEMENT BILL 2018

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The government of India in its Water Resources Ministry has prepared a draft bill to replace the River Boards Act of 1956 in order to take control of the management of inter-State river basins, reduce conflicts and foster cooperation for sustainable management of the river basins. It has rightly brought new perspectives to river basin management, which were not available in planning domain way back in 1956, however, it still falls short in recognising some real challenges our basins face. Further, its proposals are too idealistic, and devoid of political realities of the nation, thereby having every chance to fail like the 1956 Act. The draft bill remains a draft even after two years even as our rivers face growing problems.

WELCOME IDEA

At a time when many inter-state rivers are going through disputes between riparian states, there is an urgent need to plan river basins as ecological entities managed under participatory sustainable mechanisms. There is also an urgent need of basin states to establish "Peace and Cooperation Framework" to manage river basins and work together to conserve the rivers for the benefit of the communities of the basin and the rivers' own ecology. The River Boards Act 1956 was supposed to do something like this, but remained a Dead Letter. The growing conflicts around rivers certainly need active intervention by the centre. So, it's a welcome idea to bring in a law that would treat inter-state river basins as single entities and foster cooperation between all the riparian states for its conservation and management in socially inclusive and ecologically sustainable manner.

OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLE

The River Boards Act was enacted under Entry 56 of the Union List in the Constitution to enable the central government to create River Boards in consultation with the state governments. These Boards were supposed to advise governments on integrated development of inter-state river basins for optimum use of water by facilitating inter-sectoral cooperation. The Boards were supposed to aid cooperation between sectors of water use such as irrigation, drainage, flood control and hydro-electric power. The current draft Bill talks about the same and also aims at joint action plans and cooperation between states like the previous Act. Experts who have studied the River Boards Act have the opinion that the Act intended to prevent disputes by preparation of developmental plans with joint efforts of the riparian states but it has remained unimplemented because jurisdiction of the states is different from the area under river basins. There always remained apprehensions with regard to acceptability of apportionment of water. Further, until the enactment of the National Water Policy 1987, no priorities were set for water allocations among the various sectors of use. So, the centre's roles in taking control of prioritisation was also something that the states apprehended.

However, despite prioritisation of uses in National Water Policy 1987 as well as subsequent water policies, the Act could not be implemented because of the same reasons and growing water scarcity. The 2012 National Water Policy, that is the current one, has tactfully avoided the prioritisation of water giving thereby ample scope to the water managers to fix priorities according to their wish. Another greater danger to water resources in the last few decades has come from growing recognition of water as a 'commodity'. Under these circumstances, the Basin Authorities as proposed by the draft Bill would plan things at will of the current incumbents and that means there is every possibility of the industrial houses and influential people getting preferred in allocations. The farmers, fisher folk and poor communities may be further deprived of their share of water. This may not only lead to disputes but also may not be agreeable to some riparian states at times of elections.

The draft Bill already puts 'environmental needs' after domestic, industrial and agricultural uses in its preliminary chapter. At a time when rivers are at severe distress due to degradation in their ecologies, ecological use should get a higher priority than industrial needs. If the draft Bill converts into a law without according this, it may not serve the purpose it aims to achieve.

CONTROL APPROACH WON'T WORK

The bill has also been criticised for promoting the control of central government at the cost of cooperative federalism. The bill calls for bring under control of the central government the regulation and development of inter-State rivers and river valleys to an extent that the states might not agree. Water is a state subject in the country and the central government has roles to play in case of disputes arising out of interstate

rivers. It is because of such reasons that the River Boards Act 1956 could not see the light of the day. Ignoring practicalities and current geo-political realities won't see the current bill succeed either.

There are also problems with the words "development" and "participation" as used in the bill. "Development" has been used more of a 'state controlled top-down planning to construct dams, barrages and other such activities that 'colonise' water and lead to more conflicts, inequitable distribution and injustice to the riparian communities directly dependent on the basin waters for their lives, livelihood and other such existential and related needs. "Development" thus cannot be a vague word. It needs to be defined in context of a River Basin, which this Bill must do.

In Chapter III, under the heading "Participation", the draft Bill says decisions of the Basin Authority shall be binding on the states even in case any basin State fails to participate. This defies the very objective of 'participation' and disputes the premise under which this Bill has been drafted. 'Participation' in its truest sense should be built in a participatory, consultative and transparent process followed in line with the spirit of 'cooperative federalism' in a democracy like India. It is needless to mention that the moment any Authority tries to exercise absolute powers without bothering to build consensus, conflicts will grow between the Authority and the respective states; and even between the various basin states.

I have my own doubts about how a River Basin Authority can surpass the elected government of a basin state. This seems practically impossible. If the draft Bill aims at building cooperation, then at any point of time the absence of a state in a particular decision making process should not be taken as an opportunity to override that state.

In case of Mahanadi river conflict between Odisha and Chhattisgarh, that I have been observing and studying from close corners, the Chief Minister of the lower riparian state (Odisha) rejected formation of a negotiation committee by the central government and did never participate in that committee meetings. The central government, that wanted to delay the formation of a Tribunal under Interstate River Water Dispute Act 1956 (ISRWD Act) could not convince Odisha to be part of this committee. The dialogue failed.

DEFINITIONS ARE IMPORTANT

I have already said how it is important to define "Development" in river basin contexts, which the draft Bill has not done yet. The draft surprisingly is silent on forests, mountains/hills as vital ecosystems that are integral part of the river basins and have a large role in keeping them alive. The draft Bill puts them all, I guess, under the term 'related resources' which leaves scope of misinterpretation and hence is something the draft needs to change.

In the Chapter II, in which the draft defines the terms, it says, "Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) means a process which promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources in a river basin, in order to optimize the river basin's resultant economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems."

The term 'vital ecosystems' needs to be extended to include the entire ecology of the river basin. 'Vital ecosystems' may be interpreted as a limited term and with scope of defining in a way as to incorporate only a few designated 'eco-zones' such as 'protected areas'. In reality, it is vital to maintain the ecological condition of the entire basin area. There should not be any compromise on the ecological systems that support (and in return get supported by the river), and where they have been compromised, must be restored/recharged/rejuvenated.

Here I would like to give example of the wetlands/surface water bodies. While most of them have not been designated as 'vital ecosystems' in government terminologies, their existence and proper maintenance are vital for the river basins. The Bill therefore needs to clearly define the River Basin Ecology and in concrete terms talk about its protection and rejuvenation. The National Water Policy says, "Encroachments and diversion of water bodies (like rivers, lakes, tanks, ponds, etc.) and drainage channels (irrigated area as well as urban area drainage) must not be allowed, and wherever it has taken place, it should be restored to the extent feasible and maintained properly."

The way our urban areas are now experiencing floods during monsoons (especially in extreme precipitation events) in want of natural sponges that such water bodies and green vegetative covers provide, it would be detrimental for the cause of river conservation to ignore the vital role they play in maintaining the river basin ecology.

We still don't know what the fate of this bill is. However, the country certainly needs a law to conserve the rivers as water commons in which communities must have the primary rights. Hope the bill, if it is finalised, will give sufficient time to the people for discussion and correction of the shortcomings. ∎

[The views expressed are the author's own. They do not purport to reflect the views of Urban Update.]

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AFTER 73RD & 74TH CAA

The 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1992, through which self-governance at local level was introduced in the form of a three-tier system of Panchayats at the village, intermediate and district levels and Municipalities in urban India, reserved one-third (33 per cent) seats for women both in reserved and unreserved categories and also in the offices of the chairpersons on rotation basis. These two amendments eased women's entry in politics and their empowerment as women got included in the governance and policy making process and there are lakhs of women who got elected to panchayats and municipalities due to the reservation

KASHISH DHAWAN
Reporter

People who were initially pessimistic about the inclusion of women in the position of power argued that women would be forced to serve as dummy candidates for their husbands or there will be a situation of proxy representation by any of their male family members and as a result women would be unable to exercise their powers. "There are many cases where women were controlled by men but in the majority of the cases they fought and asserted for their rights. There was and still is a need to extend the reservation to assemblies and the parliament to ensure a bigger role for women", says Shabhnam Hashmi, Indian Social Activist.

When the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were introduced, a very strong signal went out to the entire world from a developing country that not only equality of women but also justice for them is a key agenda of the nation. According to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, elected women representatives have to face many challenges in their line of work as it is a process of social change, and social change does not come about easily. The initial struggle was the lack of knowledge among the elected women about the Panchayati Raj Act and Rules, and also the factor of illiteracy. Other problems included the lack of expertise in political administration, gender prejudice from predominantly male staff who work in the system, restrictions around women's mobility, non-conducive work environments, and elected women being represented by their male relatives (as proxy or stand-in representatives) in all decision making processes.

"During a general assembly session last year on September 30, I got to know that 6 lakh women in our country are on the leadership positions in one role or the other in the villages, that means not only as sarpanch but also as Zila Panchayat Adhyaksh, this number is more than women population of many nations. But when the 73rd Amendment came, it was seen that out of 50 per cent women only 10-15 per cent women who strongly opposed but 35 per cent still had to act as a rubber stampfor their male family member. The transition phase for every situation has to come and it approximately came from 2005 to 2016, and in these years especially in 2014, 2015 and 2016 when there were panchayat elections in different states of India, it was found that approximately 25-28 per cent of the women had started to take a hold over their panchayat responsibility. This clearly indicates that the transition period is over, and women have now understood that if they have been elected to a position there are certain roles and responsibilities they need to fulfill towards that panchayat. Working in a panchayat is not only about infrastructure development but also about its an overall development.Especially in these times like of the coronavirus pandemic, the social empowerment, women empowerment are needed and financial aspects need to be taken care of and also a women who is in a leadership position is neededand can work against that lopsided system which doesn't allow the daughters and daughters-in-law to grow, to bring a better change in the society", says Bhakti Sharma, Sarpanch, Barkhedi Abdulla Village, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh.

There have been various steps taken by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj to address the problems faced by elected women representatives and to smoothen their functioning, including, the construction of gender-friendly infrastructure, such as panchayat ghars or panchayat offices equipped with toilets that women can use; a team of computer literate, accountants, and junior level engineers to help the elected women in the administration of their duties. Also capacity building and awareness programmes are conducted, not only for elected representatives, but also for government functionaries who work at the village, block, and district levels for the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Model guidelines, along with manuals for

the preparation of the Gram Panchayat Development Plans have been developed. These guidelines help elected women representatives to list their priorities and to formulate the village development plans accordingly. In partnership with the United Nations, The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has mobilized more than 100,000 elected women representatives, public officials, and grassroot workers across the six largest states in India using innovative tools and models such as the MahilaSabhas (Women's Forums).

Undoubtedly the 74th Amendment has also given women access to decision-making positions and has broadened the local democratic base, but it doesn't mean that it has improved their active participation in urban governance. There have been many challenges in the effective participation of the elected women representatives in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) including lack of political awareness and experience; male dominance in decision-making at party level; lack of knowledge about the municipal acts, rules and regulations; husband performing all the municipal functions of the elected women representatives and political interference in the functioning of ULBs. But over the years, the situation has improved and to a very large extent, the amendment has been successful in its role of empowering the women in our nation. The clear representation of this was the Uttar Pradesh Civic Polls 2017 where 7 women candidates were elected for 16 mayoral positions that is almost 50 per cent representation and Samyukta Bhatia became the first female mayor of Lucknow after 100 years and created history.

Wherever there is a woman Corporator, Mayor or a Zila Panchayat Member, the tendency of women approaching them is greater as they get a better platform to share their grievances and in that particular area all the women also get empowered. When I was a chairperson of Standing Committee of South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC), at times there were decisions to be made on women and children related issues specially and as a woman candidate there was a better understanding of the subject so could take policy-making decisions on them.Whenever there is a woman candidate involved in the policymaking, decision making process, she works on its better execution as she herself has faced those situations or problems. Once a female candidate wins an election, in the span of 5 years she does get to know about the administration, her constitutional rights and doher job on her own and there is no one who is working on her behalf. Women participation in our country and other South Asian countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Maldives has been there but they couldn't get a chance in elective politics because of the lack of reservation. And after the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment, women are getting representation in elective politics and they are becoming a part of policy-making process and today the success rate of these amendments is 75 per cent, said Shikha Rai, Councillor, Greater Kailash.

According to UN Women's Progress of World's Women: Access to Justice, 2011-12, On an average, women hold only 7 pe rcent of ministerial positions and 15 per cent in national parliaments in all the 9 countries of the South Asia region. In countries like Iran and Sri Lanka – women have as low as 3 per cent and 6 per cent share respectively, in ministerial positions and 3 per cent and 5 per cent share respectively of women in parliament. In India, they have a share of 10 per cent and 11 per cent respectively in ministerial positions and the national parliament. Women have been facing obstacles to their political participation all over the world but there are various success stories where women have become the change maker. ∎

CASE STUDY OF CHHAVI RAJAWAT, FORMER SARPANCH, SODA VILLAGE, JAIPUR, RAJASTHAN

Rajawat, is the first woman Sarpanch (elected head) with an MBA and the youngest Sarpanch in India, serving the village called Soda in Rajasthan since 2010. She had quit her career in the corporate sector to become the sarpanch of her ancestral village in Rajasthan at the age of 30. She used to visit the village to spend time with her grandfather, Brigadier Raghubir Singh, who held the position of a Sarpanch for three terms until 1990. In 2010, the situation completely turned around, when Soda was hit by a severe drought and the agricultural village which depends majorly on monsoon continued to face difficulty.

The groundwater had become unfit for consumption and was causing several health hazards in both children and adults and a few villagers approached her. It was then Rajawat decided to take over the charge and created a well-thought-out strategy that covered areas like water, sanitation, electricity and roads. With her experience in corporate sector, she could partner with the right stakeholders to get the job done. From construction of toilets to electricity supplies to proper roads to proper schooling facilities for female students, she made sure that the villagers led a healthy and quality life. She also got the State Bank of India to open a branch in Soda to make sure everyone in the village had a bank account. It was done with an objective to promote financial literacy in the village and make people self-sufficient. She also convinced corporates like Mahindra & Mahindra, as well as Coca-Cola to work on some projects to uplift the village. Under her dynamic leadership, Soda completely transformed from being called a backward village to now a 'model village'.

KASHISH DHAWAN
Reporter

UNSUNG HEROES
DURING COVID TIMES

As the world fights an unprecedented health crisis due to the Coronavirus pandemic, its ravaging effect has taken a toll on the world economy, individuals, businesses, and education sector. It is so widespread that it has affected all spheres of public and private life and is very likely that it will increase poverty and inequality globally. But during these times there are millions of health care workers, police officials, and others who are on the frontline, working compassionately in preventing and managing COVID-19.

Similar to the works of these frontline warriors, there are a number of unsung heroes in India and around the world who have been working dedicatedly for the society and for humanity. These unsung heroes are those who are rising above concerns for their own health and safety and are fighting to bring lives back to normal. These are our everyday warriors who are restoring humanity's faith by coming up with novel ideas and in this article, Urban Update elaborates on the works of these unsung heroes from providing lifesaving equipments to equal educational opportunity to all the students and also got in touch with some of these heroes.

CLASSES THROUGH LOUDSPEAKERS IN JHARKHAND

With 1.2 billion children out of schools due to COVID-19 pandemic, the existing learning crisis has now become even more divisive and deep, as there are disparities in access to technology and material to continue studies. According to UNICEF data, in 71 countries around the globe, less than half the population has internet access. Nearly three-quarters of governments in 127 countries are using online mediums to deliver education during this time as it has become the new normal. But this crisis has not shaken the determination of teachers in Jharkhand from educating the students.

Shyam Kishore Singh Gandhi, the principal of Upgraded Middle School in Bankathi village in Dumka district, Jharkhand found a way to teach his 246 students amidst the lockdown. Gandhi

in conversation with Urban Update said that online classes as an option was not successful as out of those 246 students, only 42 had the facility of smartphones at their homes and none of them was able to open the links given as study material.

After discussing the situation with all the seven school teachers, they came up with an innovative idea of installing loudspeakers on trees and walls across the village so that students can access the content and attend the classes from different locations.

These classes have been successfully going on since April 22nd and students are taught on a daily basis for 2 hours. The classes begin at 10am with a song to spread awareness about the novel coronavirus and then the teachers teach the students over a microphone about various subjects while students make notes from wherever they are attending the class. The students attend classes sitting apart from each other, maintaining social distancing.

On a question of how the doubts and queries of students are addressed, Gandhi said that he along with other school teachers do constant monitoring of the students so that they can side by side clear their doubts and also queries can be sent over mobile phone which are addressed in the class next day. He added that the initiative was s upported and appreciated by all the villagers. Five girls and a boy along with women and elders also came forward to join the initiative and help in the smooth functioning of the classes.

While talking about the effectiveness of these innovative classes, he said that the students are taking interest in the classes and are benefitted from these classes as there are face to face interactions with the students and also the syllabus is being covered at a good pace. He added that they have also conducted an exam of the students to assess their learning from these offline classes and found that 85 per cent of them achieved a good score pointing towards the success of this initiative.

Gandhi said that the initiative has taken a shape of Jan Abhiyan and got huge support and appreciation from the State Government, NITI Aayog, and District Commissioner. He added that District Commissioner wrote to the District Education Officer to make sure that the teachers and principals of other schools in the district follow the Bankathi Village Model and resume the classes of the students keeping all safety and precautionary measures from coronavirus in mind.

BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION WITH COVID-19 PATIENTS

People around the world celebrate their birthdays in their own different ways. During these times, Iqbal Singh Bhatti, president of Urre-Dawn, a French NGO, celebrated his 65th birthday with two hospitalized COVID patients on the spot. Bhatti while talking to Urban Update said that he has been working tirelessly since the very first day of the lockdown and had posted on his social media that if any Indian in Paris has symptoms of coronavirus, they may contact him immediately. He said that since March 24, he has helped 39 Indian boys from different cities who had COVID-19 symptoms by taking them to their nearest hospital for checkup, testing with complete safety and precautionary measures and attended to all their needs and comforts.

Bhatti added that on June 18, he celebrated his 65th birthday with two of those admitted patients who were in coma for three months and on ventilator fighting for their lives ever since they got admitted but are now on the road to recovery. When asked about financial support, he said that "I do have an association but since the corona outbreak I have been doing everything on my own as the other members didn't come out of their houses because of fear. I am less concerned about the finances as I am doing all these only for humanity".

Bhatti mentioned that he has been helping people from the Indian community in Paris who were either handicapped or had no one to look after them by taking them to the hospitals, doing last rites, cremation prayers and has sent 172 dead bodies to India since 2003. And has also been bringing back ashes of the deceased to their families in India.■

Shyam Kishore Singh Gandhi
Principal, Upgraded Middle School in Bankathi village Jharkhand

Iqbal Singh Bhatti
President of Urre-Dawn French NGO

COVID-19 – THE ULTIMATE SOURCE OF PARANOIA

The COVID-19 pandemic was initially perceived as only a threat to people with weak physical immunity. However, after more than 12.42 million people worldwide have tested coronavirus positive, researchers, scientists and doctors are finally turning their attention towards the mental and psychological effects of COVID-19

ASHLEY PAUL
Reporter

COVID-19 has brought with itself a wide variety of changes in a range of aspects of human life. It has not only informed us of our lack of preparedness in handling a pandemic but has also highlighted how weak our public health infrastructure is. Even the world's richest country – the United States of America, has so far failed to control the virus spread. Along with this, COVID-19 has also brought with it a string of new social practices and has changed the way how most people behave socially. This, however, is not necessarily a good thing.

Social distancing, wearing masks, home and institutional quarantine are some of the most commonly practiced social norms to fight the novel coronavirus. However, such practices, and the fear of the virus itself, have also brought with them a wave of paranoia. This has been affecting people across the globe almost simultaneously with COVID. Gripping the general public, a fear psychosis, triggered by the suddenly changed social conditions and the onset of the 'new normal', has been devastating to the mental health of different sections of the society.

According to Dr Soumitra Pathare, Director, Centre for Mental Health Law and Policy, Indian Law Society, different sections of the society are hit by a wave of paranoia during the violent spread of COVID-19 at different intervals.

PEOPLE WITH PRE-EXISTING MENTAL CONDITIONS

These are usually the first ones to be affected by a sudden change in their social environment. As they are already suffering from a mental condition, irrespective of its severity, they are the most vulnerable to mental and psychological effects of a pandemic the size of COVID-19. Moreover, while governments are busy devoting and rerouting all available medical resources to fight the ongoing pandemic, the medical needs of this group of people are usually given the least priority. The situation is worse in a country like India where, according to the findings of a countrywide National Mental Health Survey 2015-16 by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences (NIMHANS), nearly 150 million Indians need active mental health care interventions while fewer than 30 million are seeking this support.

CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

This is usually the last section that is expected to be affected by mental/psychological stress. However, according to DrPathare, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when both school and college education have been disrupted, children and teenagers have been affected drastically. In India, while students in class 10 and 12 are stressed due to the vagueness of the schedule of their remaining board examinations, others, mainly those from economically weaker sections, are stressed due to unavailability of technology to connect with their teachers and continue their

studies. Moreover, the inability to meet friends, go out and explore their surroundings has also taken a toll on many.

THE UNEMPLOYED AND BUSINESS OWNERS

According to the International Monetary Fund, India's gross domestic product (GDP) is predicted to contract by 4.5 per cent in the ongoing financial year. A contraction in the GDP means huge losses to businesses and a consequent economic effect on the services sector. This later converts into a higher rate of unemployment which, according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), soared to a record 27.11 per cent high in May 2020. All these factors together put considerable stress on all adults in the country, whether self-employed or a business owner.

All of the above sections continuously face stress due to the reasons mentioned. Apart from this, COVID-19 has also become the reason for the formation of a social stigma, one which tends to make people fear the disease more than they should. While this makes the public more alert towards the dangers of contracting COVID-19, it also harms the mental health of those infected by the disease. Being away from their family and friends during quarantine is stressful as it is. Coupled with negative reactions and inappropriate behaviour, surviving and getting treated for the disease is made even more difficult. The social stigma and the altered conditions in all aspects of human life due to COVID-19 has led to a pronounced presence of paranoia in the people. This has not only affected how well people perceive the disease, but is also responsible for the less-than-satisfactory performance of a number of government measures to arrest the spread of COVID-19.

Its most evident effect has been on the lockdown measures. Even though the initial stages of the lockdown seemed to be implemented perfectly, soon, governments were required to use force and fines to keep people indoors for their own safety. One of the

COVID-19 HAS ALSO BECOME THE REASON FOR THE FORMATION OF A SOCIAL STIGMA, ONE WHICH TENDS TO MAKE PEOPLE FEAR THE DISEASE MORE THAN THEY SHOULD. WHILE THIS MAKES THE PUBLIC MORE ALERT TOWARDS THE DANGERS OF CONTRACTING COVID-19, IT ALSO HARMS THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THOSE INFECTED BY THE DISEASE. BEING AWAY FROM THEIR FAMILY AND FRIENDS DURING QUARANTINE IS STRESSFUL AS IT IS. BUT, COUPLED WITH NEGATIVE REACTIONS AND INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR, SURVIVING AND GETTING TREATED FOR THE DISEASE IS MADE EVEN MORE DIFFICULT

main reasons for this was the system of information relay to the public. While some sources said that the one-day long 'Janata Curfew' launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 22 was enough to extinguish the presence of coronavirus in the country, scientists and researchers called it a 'test phase' for a much longer lockdown. Although this seems harmless, it led to a lot of confusion among the citizens. This was repeated again during the PM's 'thaalibajao appeal'. All of this eventually resulted in confusion amongst the people regarding the reasons for these initiatives, thereby adding to the widespread paranoia.

A similar change in public response to COVID-19 testing was also seen due to the prevalent social stigma attached to the disease. While people were encouraged to get tested, a large number of them still found it uncomfortable because of the fear of public reaction to testing positive and the false quarantine stories being spread around.

On Wednesday, March 18, a COVID patient jumped off the Super Speciality Building of Safdarjung Hospital in Delhi and died. According to doctor incharge of the said patient, this was a direct and one of the first results of the prevailing fear psychosis in the people. According to a study titled 'Aggregated COVID-19 suicide incidences in India: Fear of COVID-19 infection is the prominent causative factor' published in the journal 'Psychiatry Research', a total of 72 suicide cases due to fear of COVID-19 were reported from March to May 2020 in India. Thus, the paranoia caused by COVID-19 started showing its effects almost instantly after the virus hit the country.

Despite all this, Dr Pathare added, the effects of a fear psychosis caused by a pandemic do not become uncontrollable until six to seven months after the disease spread began. Therefore, the central and the state governments still have time to control the paranoia of the public in relation to COVID-19 before suicides rates and the number of people with mental strain and disorders start soaring. ■

Discussing capacity of Indian cities in the post pandemic world

COVID-19 pandemic has hit the world at an unprecedented time. India has tried its best to fight this health emergency and control the situation. Cities are at the forefront of this and their capacity building at the ground level is the key to normalcy. Post pandemic problems are new and they need serious discussion to come up with an effective solution

All India Institute of Local Self-Government, in collaboration with United Cities and Local Governments – Asia Pacific (UCLG ASPAC) and Urban Update, organised a total of three webinars in the month of July as part of its E-Dialogues series. Throughout the three webinars, a range of daunting questions about contemporary urban issues were asked and efforts were made to find answers.

The eighth edition of the Webinar series was based on the topic "Flood, Thirst: Water management in crisis?" Through the Webinar, Urban Update aimed to put together a panel with all-round knowledge of water management in India and the problems it faces. Thus, the panel consisted of Ranjan Panda, Convenor, Combat Climate Change Network, India; Raman VR, Head of Policy, WaterAid India; Swami Shivanand Saraswati, Founder President, Matri Sadan; and Amla Ruia, Chairperson, Aakar Charitable Trust. The session was moderated by Kumar Dhananjay, Consulting Editor, Urban Update.

Dhananjay introduced the theme of the Webinar by stating how the world is witnessing unusual events in regions not so distant or different from one another. "While Chennai is facing a drought like situation, Mumbai is drowning in heavy rains and subsequent floods. This peculiar situation is prevailing in countries across the world and the most common reason for this is a poor water management system," said Dhananjay.

To take the discussion forward, Dhananjay invited Ranjan Panda as the first speaker. He began by saying that a number of water researchers, activists and on-ground workers have been sounding alarm bells about the challenges that water, as a resource, in India is facing. However, these warnings have been mostly falling on deaf ears as the authorities continue to turn a blind eye to the problems at hand. In addition to this, the issue of climate change has been in the limelight since the late 20th century. Although the Government of India has taken initiatives to tackle this problem, the success has not been satisfactory. "Although we have been talking about climate change and its effects since years, we have failed to take appropriate actions to stop it. This, coupled with the absence of an integrated approach in water management in India, is responsible for the establishment of a stark division between the people who have and do not have access to water," said Panda. He added that although water conservation is the need of the hour, providing supply of water to every household is equally, if not more important. "Countless people die of water scarcity in India. Planned use of water for different purposes is one of the fastest way of saving as much water as we possibly can."

Raman VR was the next to speak. He began by saying that the problem of water management in India is a 'mixed syndrome'. While quoting an example from the time he was an expert for a committee of the Government of Uttar Pradesh, Raman said that governments are also unaware of how they are destroying rivers, lakes and ponds, and what they can do to repair it. He said, "Initiatives like the Jal Shakti Abhiyan, launched in 2019, was a flagship water conservation awareness program. However, it ended up becoming a competition between different districts. The real essence of the program was lost and people barely learnt anything. Thus, apart from problems in drafting policies related to water, their implementation and operationalisaion is also faulty." He concluded by saying that until governments and policy makers understand that merely drafting policies on paper is insufficient, no real change will take place in the condition of water quality in India.

Swami Shivanand, while quoting a verse from the Rig Veda, said that whenever mankind disrupts the natural state of things, there is always a disaster. "A river, from its start to its end, must flow uninterrupted. Construction of dams, canals and tributaries of rivers, only disrupts their flow and makes them unstable, leading to their pollution and complete destruction," he said. He added, "The flow of River Ganga in Haridwar has

mostly been controlled by check dams. Civic authorities also throw untreated sewage and sludge into the river, thereby polluting it further." The absence of proper, scientific planning of dams and reservoirs, canals and tributaries of rivers in India also has a huge role to play in the ironic occurrences of droughts and floods. Moreover, policy makers have stopped paying attention to the advice of the experts, engineers and activists while taking decision related to water. Being driven mostly by profits and the interests of their supporters, politicians often end up making disastrous decision, which may have short or long term effects on India's water resource.

While concurring with what Swami Shivanand said, Amla Ruia added that we must start acting on conserving water on all fronts immediately. Constant construction of cemented structures, along with unregulated drawing of ground water by individuals and the absence of water harvesting systems across the country, are responsible for the depletion of the ground water table and the pollution of surface water. "Moreover, felling of trees and razing wetlands causes the soil to dry up. This stops the surface from absorbing the surface water to replenish the ground water table. Construction of large check dams, which stops the natural flow of river water, has also wreaked havoc. Instead, constructing multiple small check dams fulfills the same requirements

without the additional problems," said Ruia. In addition to this, she suggested that the government must work on spreading awareness in both rural and urban areas in the country on the need to save water and use it judiciously. "If the people do not understand the importance and urgency of water conservation, any number of policies of the government will continue to fail.

Dhananjay concluded the session by saying that lack of a proactive response from the people, the inability of the government to approach the issue of water management with an integrated plan and the ignorance of the general public towards the deteriorating condition of water resources across India, are all collectively responsible for the degradation of water. Unless we all come together and try to find solutions to the problem fast, the future of water in India remains dark.

E-DIALOGUES 9.0

The ninth edition of the E-Dialogues series was based on the topic "Urban Environment and Biodiversity in Post Pandemic World". Through the Webinar, Urban Update tried to assess how resilient Indian cities are in times of the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has underlined the importance of a healthy urban environment that in turn can provide better living conditions to citizens.As part of the Webinar, Urban Update invited Prof Harini Nagendra, Professor, Sustainability, Azim Premji University; Keya Acharya, President, Forum of Environmental Journalists in India (FEJI); R. Sreenivasa Murthy, Member Secretary, MP State Biodiversity Board and Prarthana Borah, India Director, Clean Air Asia. The session was moderated by Abhishek Pandey, Editor, Urban Update and Abhilash Khandekar, Senior Journalist.

Pandey introduced the topic and said that we all know that cities are the worst affected by this pandemic and if we see in India majority of the cases are reported from our big cities whether we talk about Mumbai, Delhi or any other city. This pandemic has exposed the problems and issues of our

urban governance and planning. We have our wildlife on streets whether we talk about Indian cities or European cities. So, have we taken the space of the wildlife or there is some problem in our urban planning because of which we are not able to balance development and environment.

Abhliash pointed out that increasingly because of smart cities, metros, various urbanization programs, even in C category cities like Bhopal and others there is a massive cut in the trees. He noted that citizens have a role in trying to relate with the natural resources whether it be wetland or parks. He questioned that in the cities, are the city planners be it municipal commissioners or encroachers in the position to do anything else than construction as plantation of trees or creating gardens doesn't seem to be a part of their agenda.

The first to speak was Keya who began by saying that we have had a rapid rate of urbanization everywhere and but we can't just sit in our homes, stop our cars and think that the nature is healing, air pollution is lessened, wildlife has come out on roads, birds are visible. We have to be able to figure out how to balance development and environment.

The environmental issues that our cities are facing already existed but now during the COVID-19, these challenges have come into stark focus. Air pollution levels have dropped significantly during lockdown because of reduced vehicular transmissions. However, it is not that we can manage without transportation post COVID-19, so the point is we have to figure out what should be done. Keya concluded by saying that we have to learn from the crisis and push and see that these environmental issues are taken seriously by our policy administrators, policies are discussed, and steps are taken to implement these policies.

The next speaker, Mr. Murthy, pointed out that there is a need for political and bureaucratic vision for any issue to be addressed. He raised a question as to why government can't bring a strict law to put a cap on the population of area. Murthy quoted the example of Allahabad Kumbh Mela that happens in India and is known to have the highest human density for a month or more than a month to explain the civic burden a city suffers just to address electricity, water, sewage disposal and everything together. Along with water management, air pollution management and waste segregation are among the issues which need to be addressed. He finally said that our development should be sustainable with respect to ecological perspective.

Prarthana, who was invited next, pointed out that if we look back at the situation of the last 3 months in terms of pollution, the levels are going down, which is a positive outcome of the pandemic and there is one thing that we have realized that it is possible to have blue skies and cleaner air. Prarthana mentioned that Clean Air Asia did a study in Delhi which looked at the lockdown period and it was found that there were days like March 20th, 2020 when the air quality index(AQI) was below 50 which is something in an Indian context was considered not achievable. She added that we need to question ourselves as to why is it that we have not discussed the whole green cover in that area which has been protecting us better than in other areas. She concluded by saying that it is very important to balance the right kind of biodiversity when we are looking at an urban space and we need to talk to the specialists to discuss key issues like invasive species, wrong species and how it can actually do more harm than good.

Prof Harini noted that as academics or people doing research on biodiversity, we need to engage with people who usually don't pay attention to these environmental issues. She mentioned that they have found a hook to make people understand the reason that nature is needed in a city, trees or healthy water systems, is that the impact it has on an individual's health both mental and physical. "I conducted a study with undergraduate students in 2006-07 on roads across Bangalore, to measure pollution on the stretch of roads with trees and without trees. There were dramatic differences because the suspended particulate matter, nitrous dioxide, sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, all of these reduced substantially, locally in that area that has trees. This is important to know because they determine the street culture or the life of a city", Prof Harini said. If one thinks of Indian cities, they are growing extremely fast and after living in a city for about 5 to 7 years, you start feeling that it is yours and, in this context, nature plays an important role. She concluded by saying that unless we move away from tree blindness or environment blindness and see that there are beautiful spots of nature, we are not going to care about our city or pressurize the government to take any action.

E-DIALOGUES 10.0

The tenth edition of the Webinar series titled "E-Dialogues" was conducted on the topic "NEP 2020 – Does it raise more questions than answers and solutions?" Although a lot of the new policy aims at making progressive changes in the Indian education system, a clear plan to implement these changes appears to be missing. There have been responses from across the society, be it educationists, policy makers, teachers' bodies, student activists and other educational institutions. To bring together the viewpoints of all the stakeholders, Urban Update invited Prof Subrata Mukherjee (Retd), Department of Political Science, University of Delhi; VS Pandey, Former Secretary, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India; Ambarish Rai, National Convenor, Right to Education Forum; N Sai Balaji, National President, All India Students Association; Prof Ashutosh Kumar, Associate Professor, Department of Hindi, University of Delhi; and Prof Ravi Kumar, Department of Sociology, South Asian University. The session was moderated by Kumar Dhananjay, Consulting Editor, Urban Update.

Dhananjay introduced the theme of the Webinar by stating that the

NEP has been introduced after 34 years. Although there are strong views regarding the Policy on both sides, it is still unclear if the Policy is a solution or does it give rise to more problems. To bring to light the opinion of the panelists, Dhananjay invited Prof Subrata Mukherjee.

Prof Mukherjee began by saying that after 34 years, the overhaul of the old education policy was inevitable. "The NEP covers the entire education system in India, from pre-school to PhD, thus making it a revolutionary policy, bringing with it new ideas in the education sector. While the Policy resumes the exam structure and nullifies the automatic promotion system in schools, it does not make enough increments in the education sector's share of the GDP," said Mukherjee. He added that a decentralized approach to education, along with the issue of the caste system, has been left out from the Policy as well.

VS Pandey began by saying that like the Education Policy of 1986, what is written on paper is drastically different from what happens on ground. "Although the policy of 1986 aimed that 25 per cent of students in India must have vocational education by 2000, the real numbers were as low as 2-3 per cent.

Similar was the case with expansion of educational services which the government was largely unsuccessful in achieving. According to me, the problem of the education sector is that the policy makers take into account the needs of the management, teachers and the politicians, but not of the students," said Pandey. Moreover, absence of flexibility in education is also a drawback for students in India.

Stating that the NEP does not mention about the Right to Education (RTE), Ambarish Rai said that only 12.6 per cent schools in India follow the RTE protocol of the Government of India while only 52 per cent schools have access to toilets, drinking water and hand-wash facilities. "Thus, the government must focus on why the Indian education sector has so many infrastructural gaps despite the presence of the RTE Act since 2009. As long as the government does not find the root of the problems, it will be unable to make any positive changes in the education sector through the NEP," said Rai. He added that the lack of a uniform approach in universalizing education in India is also a very big problem.

N Sai Balaji stated that the NEP promotes 'graded inequality' in the education sector in India. He quoted the example of the provision of teaching in regional languages in schools till class 8. Saying that the government failed to mention if English will be taught in private schools or not, Balaji said that this will lead to the formation of two sets of students – those who speak and those who do not speak English. "It is obvious that those who speak English will be students whose parents can afford private education. Eventually, being fluent in English will also give them an upper hand in college admissions and job interviews. This clearly leaves out the socially and economically backward sections of the society," said Balaji.

Prof Ashutosh Kumar talked about the push towards online education that the NEP has introduced and said that although it is a good initiative, education is not just about books and exams but is a culture. "It is a way of understanding our conscience and our thoughts, which is impossible to achieve through online education," said Kumar. Moreover, the education infrastructure in India lacks far behind the demand. Kumar said, "The 'graded inequality' that Balaji talked about is even more pronounced when apart from government and private schools, international educational institutions are added to the structure. In the presence of such a backward infrastructure, pushing online education may not be successful at all."

Prof Ravi Kumar, while mentioning that the previous governments have not been able to fully implement even the old education policy, said that there is a continuity in the approach of the government towards the education sector. He said, "This uniform approach stems from the capitalist nature of the state. A capitalist government will never prefer nationalization of education, health and other essential sectors but will try to structure them in order to generate profit for both the government and private entities. The NEP also 'commodifies' education in India and promotes the pre-existing problems instead of removing them."

Dhananjay concluded the session by saying that although most people are already calling it the 'National Exclusion Policy', we can only hope that it does not lead to further fragmentation of the education sector on the lines of social or economic backwardness, promote graded inequality, do nothing to improve infrastructure and make the Indian education sector worse off than it previously was. ■

AN ARCHITECT & A CITY!

ABHILASH KHANDEKAR
Senior Journalist

Chandigarh is known to be one of the most well-planned cities of independent of India. And, also the first planned city. Soon after India got freed from British rule, the then Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru wanted a new capital for Punjab state, as its original capital (Lahore) had gone to Pakistan.

Those who have visited Chandigarh, love it's open expanse, clinically divided residential sectors, it's large open green areas, city center and museum complex, to just name a few. Very few cities in India, or in the world, are famously known with their architects. After Delhi (Edwin Lutyens), it is Chandigarh which is instantly known for its creator - Frenchman Le Corbusier (a pseudonym) the world renowned urbanist and planner.

This little book, though titled 'Architectural Guide', is actually a precise introduction of the beautiful city as seen by the author who is a well known architect in his own stride. I have always believed Chandigarh was the first 'Smart City' that was built much before such a concept was introduced anywhere.

The best part of the book is that it has included pictures of some of the best public buildings of the city along with their detailed drawings and small perspective plans to provide readers with much more insights of the particular structure. Normally what happens in our cities that the ordinary citizens, or even students of architecture do not much bother about important buildings and the men who conceived the same. In a way, they remain aloof from their own city and its history. Such a book, thus, enlightens them and virtually opens up their third eye that should notice the smaller details of cement-brick-mortar structures which they see daily while going out to offices or market places or to a friend's house.

In this way, Bloomsbury Publishers have done a good job of launching a series of 'Indian Architectural Travel Guides' focusing on cities in the manner which Prakash has written. Of course, I have so far been able to lay hand on only this book. They have brought out similar books on Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Varanasi, Delhi and Old Goa.

So the author tells us the curious story of how Corbusier came into the picture at the last moment to design the city. He was not the first choice of Punjab Government officials. Upon reading initial pages of this book, the reader gets to know how fast official decisions used to be taken in those days by bureaucrats even in hunting foreign architects.

The draft agenda to create the city as "Garden City"--christened ' Chandigarh' because of a temple close by--was prepared by AL Fletcher, Kerala cadre Indian Civil Services Officer on special duty to the Punjab Government. Based on his readings of the post-war English New Towns around London and the writings of Ebenezer Howard and Lewis Mumford, Fletcher proposed that the new capital should be a small administrative town nestled in a green landscape. P N Thapar (also ICS) as the chief administrator and P L Verma, as the chief engineer, were entrusted with the task of realising this vision in 1949. Due to some differences among them, Fletcher left the project but Verma and Thapar remained devoted to the cause of Chandigarh to the very end of their lives. The author tells us about American planner Albert Mayer who was working with Nehru in Uttar Pradesh on the task of creating 'Modern Villages'. "His background in the United States, however, was as a Garden City-influenced town planner which was of course also the profile that had been developed for the new city of Chandigarh by AL Fletcher. And so naturally, Nehru asked Mayer to prepare master plan for Chandigarh."

Although, Mayer was essentially obsessed with his rural development schemes at this time, he accepted the Chandigarh job. The prestige associated with the project would have been an attraction, in particularly for the New
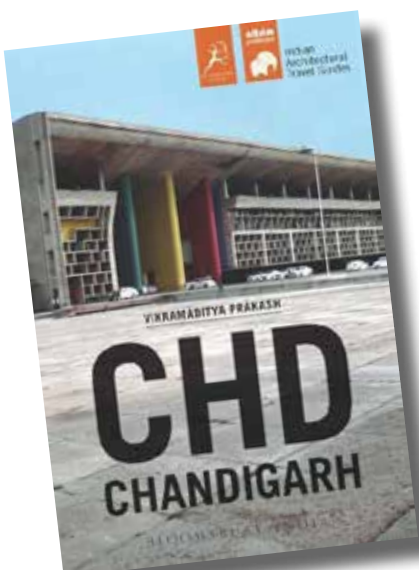
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York-based colleagues that he brought with him to work on the plan-Lewis Mumford and Clarence Stein amongst them-who were in competition with European modernists led by Le Corbusier. The author adds, since the team was largely made of planners with little building design experience, Matthew Nowicki, a stylish and talented young Polish architect, was brought in by them as junior partner to design the signature buildings of state and to help outline the housing and other public buildings.

Unfortunately, Nowicki died in August 1950 in an air crash in Egypt. To keep the project momentum going, Thapar and Verma immediately set off for Europe to look for a replacement for Nowicki, and found it in the London-based husband-wife team of Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew. Fry and Drew had been working in Africa that time in climates similar to those in north India and had developed a specialisation in 'tropical architecture'. But Drew suggested the name of Le Corbusier to Thapar and Verma whose offer Corbusier had refused earlier. But Drew persuaded them to let her accompany them down to Paris to ask him again. The world famous

modernist of that time was interested to design signature buildings for the State of Punjab but was not keen to shift his base to Chandigarh from Paris to work as a salaried employee of the Punjab government. According to the book, a way out was found and his cousin and former partner Pierre Jeanneret was asked to take up the contract. Corbusier agreed to coordinate with Jeanneret from Paris. That is how he, Fry and Drew moved to Chandigarh on a three-year renewable contract as salaried employees and Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret was his original name) was appointed by Thapar and Verma as the architectural advisor to Punjab government to design the first planned city after independence.

The author enlightens readers by saying that the idea of the top bureaucrats to insist on moving the foreign architects to India was to help train a body of Indian architects and planners in that process, for the future. That was the vision of Indian bureaucrats some 70 years ago. Sadly, we rarely find this element of long term vision for India, in today's bureaucracy!

MN Sharma, Anant R Prabhawalkar, Aditya Prakash, JS Dethe, Jeet Lal Malhotra, BP Mathur were among

those Indian planners and architects who got trained in city planning under the tutelage of the four-five top foreign architects, led by Corbusier. Their contributions (and creations) to the city have also been acknowledged by including their names in the small book-cum-guide.

The city, inaugurated in 1966, was planned in two phases--Sectors 1 to 30 in the first phase, (a total of 29 sectors as sector 13 and 14 were merged to make room for an extra large sector for the university) and second phase of 31-47 sectors started in 1970. Based on Corbusier's basic concept diagram, the master plan was developed by Jeanneret, Fry and Drew with Indian architects Dethe, Lamba and Prabhawalkar in toe.

Corbusier's core plan consisted of the government buildings (Assembly, High Court, Secretariat), fourteen categories of housing based on the salary and rank of the employee--starting with the Governor and ending in the peons-a university, a museum complex, a library and several technical training institutes. To this, the infrastructural facilities and commercial properties were added as the planners felt they were necessary to complete it as an administrative town.

In 1954, Fry and Drew left Chandigarh as their contracts were not renewed but Jeanneret stayed on as chief architect of the city and adopted Chandigarh as his home. Corbusier visited Chandigarh 23 times from Paris, though he was not paid for the second of the trips.

The author has given many itineraries in the sufficiently illustrated book for curious visitors to see the city sector-wise, through his architectural eyes. "I have tried to communicate the architectural culture of this city (Chandigarh) that once was," he says.

I feel this is a good book for architectural students and planners as well as laymen who are interested in history of cities, such as Chandigarh. ◾

(The writer is a senior journalist who writes on the environment, politics and urbanisation. He can be contacted on Tweeter @Abhikhandekar1 and on email-kabhilash59@gmail.com)

Urban art needs renewed vision in Indian cities

The aesthetics of Indian cities are generally looked after by the municipal corporations and development agencies. The aesthetic plan of the city keeps changing with the change of mayors, commissioners and district magistrate at the local level. There is a need to reimagine the ways how do we build our cities aesthetically appealing

ASHOK WANKHADE
Managing Editor

Delhi, the national capital, is the only city or a state that has a functioning Urban Art Commission. The Commission was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1973 to "advise the Government of India in the matter of preserving, developing and maintaining the aesthetic quality of urban and environmental design within Delhi and to provide advice and guidance to any local body in respect of any project of building operations or engineering operations or any development proposal which affects or is like to affect the skyline or the aesthetic quality of the surroundings or any public amenity provided therein". The other such commission in Bengaluru wound up in 2002. The commission in Delhi has lost its relevance over a period of time because of not being able to guide how the city should maintain its aesthetic value and conserve its heritage. Some erstwhile members have criticized the functioning of the Commission by underlining the problems in approval system of projects and also the advisory role of the Commission. They have stated in public forums that there is no visible impact of having an Urban Art Commission in the national capital, considering the haphazard development.

This becomes more important if we trace how this Commission came about in 1974. The major kicking off point was sprouting of high rise building in Central Delhi that was a low-rise garden city. The area around Connaught place witnessed the development of high-rise buildings.

URBAN HERITAGE

We are aware that every city has its own culture and heritage. This should reflect in its planning and architecture. Right now, the cities are being built based on the 'technical approval' by development agencies and corporations. There is no conversation on how can we keep the heritage and culture of the city alive in its infrastructure.

Narayani Gupta, a former member of the Commission, has written in one of her articles that in the early 1970s when Patwant Singh, an architect, suggested an independent Commission, he was drawing on a very successful precedent, namely the setting up of the New York City Art Commission in 1898. She further wrote, "The New York Art Commission was created at the ideal moment – when New York, with Chicago, was building the first skyscrapers, when the nature of urban transport was being changed by the motor car, when the Muckrakers were writing scathing critiques of the urban slums that were the flip side of big business, when the US, under Theodore Roosevelt, was flexing its muscles. The Commission, with a modified name, still plays an important role in the development of New York."

DUAC has weakened over the years and failed to deliver for the purpose it was created. There is a need to give teeth to the commission and make an example for other cities and states to replicate the model. DUAC was to conserve the low-rise character of the city and also conserve its forest cover but the way governments have gone about projects in Sarojini Nagar, Netaji Subhash Nagar and East Kidwai Nagar. Their role seems irrelevant in ensuring the aesthetic quotient of the city.

We can re-think of having functioning, robust art commissions in every state. and their system needs innovative and strategic tweaking to make sure that their presence is felt not only by the architects and planners but also by the general public. ■

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