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URBAN TALK



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Time to build the road to success

INDIA is becoming increasingly urban. The overall growth rates of Indian cities, though not as dramatic as initially predicted, are still the highest in the world. Over the last 20 years, the average annual increase in population of the two biggest urban centres — Delhi and Mumbai — has been over 4%. The two cities combine their exceptional growth with an absolute size that today puts them among the 10 largest cities in the world. By 2020, it is suggested that Mumbai would exceed Tokyo as the world's most populous city.

With these staggering rates of ever-increasing urban populations and activity, it is inevitable that the physical structure of the city would lag behind. For urban India, the infrastructure shortage is well documented and generally seen as a major weakness, particularly when compared to Chinese cities. The need to address big challenges such as providing

fresh water, housing, electricity, sewage treatment and mobility is self-evident. However, the required action should not simply imply a faster delivery of more and more hardware but rather a sensible differentiation between various kinds of infrastructures and a thorough understanding of how they relate to the overall development of the city.

Transport infrastructure, in particular, must be given special consideration. It is arguably the biggest decisive factor in shaping the overall form of a city. And more than other urban systems, transport directly involves people, making it deeply intrinsic and often as much of an end in itself. The transport struggle is ubiquitous in most cities. So is the common belief that more infrastructure will sort it out. Little thought is given to the overall objective of providing greater access beyond the movement of goods and people.

Initially, cities promised high levels of

ideas and product exchange by creating greater proximity. In doing so, they became a transport solution themselves, one based on the principle of avoiding transport or at least reducing its necessity.

In Mumbai, 55% of the population walks to work. Most of them are able to reach their workplace within 15 minutes. Unfortunately, the current focus on building road infrastructure not only neglects these efficiencies but destroys them. Furthermore, rather than efficient transport, it is motorisation that seems to have become the objective itself. Otherwise it would be patently obvious that bus rapid transit systems, offering mobility for 20,000 persons per hour, should be given priority over traffic lanes with cars barely moving 1,500 persons with the same space available.

More problematic than infrastructure, lagging behind the dynamic growth of Indian cities is the delay in

constructing a democratic perspective of the city's future. This collective vision needs to bring together the various components of development while recognising interrelationships and cross-dependencies. It will have to include ideas about the shape of the city coupled with long-term mobility strategies that address social and environmental sustainability. The city of \$200 per barrel oil differs greatly from that of \$50. So does a city that reorganises the enormous external costs of motorisation ranging from road accidents and pollution to the disastrous effects on public space and urban life. For the future, it is crucial to identify those processes and organisational structures that recognise the city in its entirety. For India, this is a one-time opportunity to come up with a strategy that improves the standard of living in cities while maintaining their valuable compact urban form.