

A MATTER OF PEOPLE

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Mumbai means different areas for different people and many citizens are only dimly aware that it ranks as a megacity with more than 10 million inhabitants. This is partly because Greater Mumbai, the city proper, occupies 438 km² yet is often confused with the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, which is almost ten times bigger (4,355 km²) and includes the outlying townships of Kalyan and Thane, which are 1 million-plus cities in their own right.

There is confusion, too, over the population and, as a corollary, the extent of migration. Many experts conjure up images of a city bursting at the seams, yet more than two decades ago, an authoritative study for the Planning Commission, led by Rakesh Mohan, showed that India's urban growth is in fact not rapid when compared to the international developing country standards of Africa and Latin America. Soon after, the National Commission on Urbanisation, headed by Charles Correa, reiterated this and noted that unlike many other South and South-East Asian countries, India's urban growth was evenly spread throughout the country. In the highly urbanised state of Maharashtra, the cities of Pune, Nashik and Nagpur are growing far faster than Mumbai. This is partly because India, unlike many of its neighbours, does not have a primate city.

Political parties and some NGOs have raised the spectre of hordes of migrants pouring into Mumbai but the truth has been different. People do not stream into Mumbai because of its bright lights; they come for jobs, not homes, and they live in far worse conditions once they get here. According to the International Institute of Population Studies, only 480 people – not families, as is commonly mistaken – come into the city every day. According to the last census in 2001, Greater Mumbai had a population of just under 12 million; thus it has presumably a population of somewhere close to 15 or 16 million now. Migra-

tion as a proportion of the total population is also declining. In the 1970s, the proportion of migrants was close to 70 per cent with a natural increase of 30 per cent. The proportions have now reversed. This is no surprise, considering that formal employment in the city is declining, with the closure of mills, chemical factories and even some multinational industries.

While the rate of growth may not be dramatic, size does matter. The outlying areas of the metropolitan region are expanding faster than the core, especially the 100 km² of the island city. According to the Washington-based Population Institute, the metropolitan region in 2020 will be the world's most populous at 28.5 million, with Tokyo trailing at 27.3 million.

Whatever direction Mumbai takes will have a bearing on the future of cities in developing countries. This is partly due to its sheer size, but also its diversity, its specific problems (housing and transport being two of the most pressing) and, not least, the democratic framework in which it functions. There is a sharp contrast with China in general and Shanghai in particular, with which it is frequently compared, with regards to the last issue.

Yet to project Mumbai as a 'world-class city' turns a blind eye to its priorities, mainly the overwhelming poverty of its citizens. One must remember that India, despite its nearly two-digit GDP growth, is home to the largest number of poor people in the world. And there is no city in the country with as large a proportion of its residents living in slums, officially put at 54 per cent or nearly 6.5 million people in Greater Mumbai.

A second problem is the astronomical price of real estate, especially for commercial space, in the two central business districts of Nariman Point and the Bandra-Kurla Complex (BKC). Recent reports about

Nariman Point losing out to its competitors in the north and the impending real-estate boom on mill land in midtown Mumbai must be understood in conjunction with the fact that in upmarket areas, a single-bedroom flat is virtually impossible to find. Indeed, Mumbai has the unique distinction of possessing less than one acre of open space for every thousand people, while the norm is (4 acres) (or 0.016 km²).

Dharavi, said to be Asia's largest slum, lies cheek-by-jowl with the Bandra-Kurla complex and has attracted nearly 80 real estate giants in the redevelopment bid for the Rs.9,250 crore (US\$234.65 million) 0.4 km², new high-rise township. This negates the rationale of resettlement, because it ignores Dharavi as a work-cum-living space. As one of the most intensive recycling centres in the county, residents in Dharavi use their homes to sort and sew in addition to hundreds of other occupations. With the redevelopment scheme currently proposed, they will likely be unable to afford the monthly maintenance charges in the new high-rise redevelopment and will instead sell out to move to another slum colony.

In effect, Dharavi's squatted-upon land will be privatised and gentrified. All this has a bearing on the governance of Mumbai. There have been calls to establish Mumbai as a separate city-state – a la Singapore – seceded from the rest of Maharashtra, not to mention India. Although appropriating a larger share of the income and corporate taxes paid in the city, this would be dangerous because it militates against the very essence of the democratic process. This apart, the collection of direct taxes is disproportionately high because head-offices of companies with nation-wide operations are based in the city (although the amount of personal tax evaded may form a large proportion of the revenue). The object should be to bring about a more cohesive integration of Mumbai into Maharashtra – so that, for instance, some Rs 15,000 crores (US\$378.8 million) are not spent on road projects in the city but diverted to irrigation and other schemes in Vidarbha and other depressed regions where farmers have been committing suicide in recent years.

The call for a CEO for Mumbai should also be treated with caution. Mumbai is not a corporate entity which lends itself to better corporate governance but a highly variegated and diverse city. As any Municipal Com-

missioner will testify, there are pulls and pressures at every move from political parties which are represented in the corporation. The city could certainly be run better and there is no reason why a hands-on mayor cannot be elected to do the job, as is the case in New York and London. Doing so might also address the allegation that the constituency of the state government is in rural areas with ministers treating Mumbai as a cash cow; for although Maharashtra, like the rest of India, is still a predominantly rural society, it should be administered in a more comprehensive, rather than exclusionary, way.

Executives of US companies with a market cap of over US\$1 trillion recently held a closed-door meeting in New York with their Indian counterparts. The agenda was to make Mumbai a major financial centre, yet the dilemma in projecting Mumbai as a world-class city excludes people from this process. In the demonisation of slum dwellers, sought to be disenfranchised by politicians and community leaders, decision-makers posit a 'them' versus 'us' dichotomy. However, if the homeless are a majority, they surely deserve to be accorded a priority in planning.

Public transport is an illustrative case-in-point. In this mega city, more people use public transport than anywhere else in the world. Only 4.7 per cent of commuters use private motorised transport, 7 per cent use taxis and auto rickshaws and an overwhelming majority, 39 per cent, use public transport. World Bank studies show that on top of that as many as 56.3 per cent walk or cycle to work; an appropriately high number given that more than half the population lives in slums and close to 70 per cent of all Mumbai-ikars occupy just one room. This compares to a total of 81 per cent of public transport users in Tokyo.

The Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi has shown that a car requires 23 m² to park, including the space needed for entry and exit. Since Delhi has as many car users (920,723 registered) as the rest of the three metro system users put together, it estimates that the physical space occupied by cars equals that of the capital's slum dwellers. Since Mumbai's squatters occupy only 9 per cent of the city's area, it would be interesting to know what proportion is occupied by cars. More importantly, one wonders which is a bigger nuisance? And who are vilified in the public discourse?

Mumbai can opt for inclusive growth. It can also go the way of several other megacities by creating high-rise enclaves for the rich and powerful, surrounded by a mass of poor and powerless citizens. One hopes the Urban Age India conference raises some of these fundamental issues.

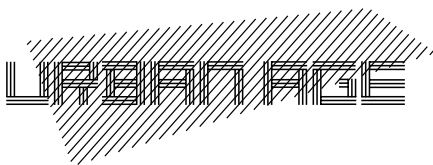
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