

INDIA'S URBAN SHIFT

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If the Urban Age is an investigation that marks the transformation of the world from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban one, it's a transition that has not yet fully occurred in India. In time it will happen in India too. India today still has a rural majority, even as the world as a whole has shifted in the other direction. But, like China, India has a profound interest in maintaining its rural hinterland. Both countries are vast, and their populations account for a third of humanity. They have both, in their own ways, started to emerge from underdevelopment and have been forced to question with more or less enthusiasm some of the fundamentals of the political creeds on which their societies are based. Indian democracy and its legal system are always spoken of as the country's two key advantages in its increasingly overt competition with China. But these can be seen as handicaps as well as advantages.

China does not want to see its cities overwhelmed, and forbids free internal movement. India's constitution guarantees it, even if the Gandhian ideology on which Indian independence was founded displayed a profound antipathy towards the idea of the city. India was to be rooted instead in the self-sufficiency of village life. It was an antipathy which easily merged with the English horror at the industrial city. The attitudes that India's Oxbridge-educated elite picked up, at first hand in some cases from Ruskin and Morris, about cities could be represented as alien creations that left incomers reduced to squalor.

Many of India's big cities indeed have colonial roots: Calcutta, or Kolkata as it is now called, also has European foundations. Nationalist unrest drove the British to move their Imperial capital out of Calcutta and Bengal to a new site on the edges of the ancient city of Delhi in a simultaneous search for a more peaceful setting and a symbolic claim to rooting itself in Indian tradition. And it was post-colonial partition

that saw the tragic population exchanges that crowded Delhi and Mumbai with refugees from Pakistan.

India now has a hierarchy of cities spread across the country, with Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore the most dynamic, and experiencing the most rapid growth, while Kolkata struggles to find a wider role. But even in Mumbai, the heart of India's financial sector, 65 per cent of employment is in the informal sector, as opposed to 83 per cent in the country as a whole.

Through the long years of India's command and control economy, its cities appeared as frozen in time as the elderly Ambassador cars built with production lines shipped from Britain. Liberalisation has ushered in an Indian middle class, attracting back the non-resident Indians, the educated diaspora, who have made their money in Silicon Valley and the Gulf, creating a potential economic superpower. Establishing fast food outlets and shopping malls – with attempts to introduce supermarkets resisted in some states by violent protests – India has begun to explore liberal market approaches to city infrastructure. And with these first results now visible, it is questioning their effectiveness.

The new India is impatient with the things that don't work in its cities: the traffic jams, the shortcomings of infrastructure, the bureaucracy. It wants to see big changes and has invested in huge projects like Delhi's new metro system. Like China, India is finding new ways of doing things that involve profound political shifts. Even Kolkata, with its long and proud tradition as the centre of Indian Marxism and literary intellectuals, has begun to experiment with market forces. But while China is able to ignore or suppress dissent, when Bengal's farmers protested against the Special Economic Zones declared to support the industrialists wanting factories to build a 1-lakh (US\$2,500) people's car, the state government had to change its

mind. Bangalore and Delhi have also struggled with attempts at liberalising their approaches to planning work effectively.

Alone among Indian cities, Kolkata has made real steps towards a genuine locally centred civic government, rather than remaining entirely in the hands of a state with a vast rural hinterland. But India's administrative complexities and its overlapping systems of state, city and federal power, mean for example that Mumbai's city government found it impossible to introduce the plan of vaccinations for all newcomers. It planned to set up reception centres at their point of entry: the railway stations in the city. But it could not do it. The city was simply unable to conclude a legally binding agreement with India's nationally-owned railway administration about the level of rent to be paid for the use of railway land. It's a nicety that is hard to conceive of in the context of China's ruthless subjugation of all other interests to state power. When it comes to something like vaccination in stations, what the party wants, the party ensures that it gets.

For all its recurring episodes of inter-communal violence, Mumbai is a city with the ethnic, and religious diversity of a true world city. Its roots go back to the successive waves of European colonisation of India. The Portuguese handed over the cluster of islands and fishing villages that constituted Bombay to the British crown in the eighteenth century. The 20,000 inhabitants of that time have swollen to an estimated 18 million in the region today, as a port became successively a mill town, a railway hub, a financial centre, and a world centre for the cinema industry. Its architectural expression ranges from the hallucinogenic translation of high-Victorian gothic from England to the subcontinent of the Chhatrapati terminal, designed by F. W. Stevens, with the swagger of St Pancras, to the Gate of India, to in more recent times, the lyrical restraint of Charles Correa's careful synthesis of modernism with India's climate and social conditions. But these are the sharp focus landmarks in the daunting world of Mumbai's slums and hostels geared towards single male migrants and the huge red-light areas that cater for them.

In Bangalore, rapid success has brought with it the problems of affluence. Endless commutes in India's Silicon Valley are encouraging its big IT employ-

ers to think about mixing housing with industry to achieve a more decentralised city that could help them run their businesses more efficiently. But the experience of privatised new towns here, as in Delhi, has not been encouraging. Privatised house building, based on a mirage of Southern California that is so attractive to India's affluent classes, has too often stopped at the apartment complex gate, and offered no pavement, and no transport links that can allow surrounding settlements the access that they need to provide service jobs.

In Mumbai, a city in which water and power are erratic, in which the suburban railway network is so overcrowded that commuters who fall off the trains are killed every day, the private sector has been asked to create alternative forms of settlements that can provide solutions. All this is occurring in a highly centralised political context where, even though the councillors of Mumbai's Municipal Corporation are locally elected, the state still holds ultimate control.

Other liberal attempts to deal with Mumbai's chronic overcrowding, its constrained site and continuing attraction to rural migrants have also been questioned, including the issue of the city's 300,000 street vendors, of whom just a few thousand are licensed.

Yet of the 12 million residents of Greater Mumbai, almost 6.5 million live in slums. Mumbai's slums are of two kinds: the authorised, for which the municipal authority has a responsibility to provide basic services, and the unauthorised, which are subject to demolition, and for which there is no duty for the city to provide power or water. There are impossible densities, 80,000 people per km² in Dharavi, the largest of the slums. Authorised slums are outnumbered by the 60 per cent that are illegal. Some of the illegals rely on unauthorised standpipes, and a few have no water at all.

Mumbai is the city that inspired Sukhetu Mehta's Maximum City. It is a city unlike any other. One that offers more lessons to the world, even as it vigorously looks for ways to put India's newfound economic power to work to find its own solutions to the challenges threatening to overwhelm it.

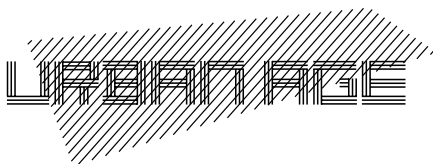
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