

## Urban Chaos and Cultivated Status quoism

The last ten months have witnessed unusually severe natural calamities affecting the sub-continent. The tsunami of December 2004, the Mumbai floods of July this year, and the recent Muzaffarabad earthquake have caused great devastation. But these disasters have a silver lining for India. Our administration did respond with some vigour and alacrity compared with the littoral states of the Indian ocean, US authorities in the wake of hurricane Katrina, and Pakistan officials now. The moribund governance apparatus, often accused of long periods of slumber interspersed only with regular extortion activity, has shown signs of life and utility.

However, the administrative response is mostly short-lived and limited to temporary relief and at times rehabilitation. Historically, natural disasters spurred human progress through technological and institutional innovation. But in India we seem to treat these calamities with our customary fatalism and quickly revert to business as usual. But that would be the real tragedy. Take Mumbai city for instance. It is true that the 1000mm rainfall on one day was quite extraordinary. But Mumbai is surrounded by sea on all sides, and is above sea level. Therefore, no matter what the rainfall, the city should not be under water. Clearly, the city planners and rulers have bungled for decades. Until now, most Mumbaikars were not even aware that river Meithi flows through the city! The heavy floods had washed off the filth and sewage for the first time in decades, and the river started flowing. With 63 percent of the people living in appalling conditions in slums and mass migration, criminal neglect of city planning and regulation allowing choking of drains and water courses led to the wholly preventable disaster.

In many ways Mumbai's challenges are a reflection of India's crisis. Abject poverty and despair in remote rural areas are forcing people to flee to Mumbai. Now the problems of land management, housing, drainage, transport and civic amenities are so gargantuan that sometimes it is easy to give up all hope. Politicians who see people as vote banks, and not as living, pulsating human beings with dreams and aspirations, are always ready to resort to cheap populism. Problems become crises, and eventually end up in disasters.

While Mumbai faces probably the greatest urban challenge east of Suez, the problem is not unique. Most of our cities are bursting at the seams. Despite the cliché that India lives in her villages, a quiet demographic revolution is transforming the urban landscape. Over 300 million people – larger than US population – live in our cities and towns. In states like Tamil Nadu, where in situ urbanization (villages and small towns growing, instead of large migration to big cities) is predominant, urbanization now is close to 50%. The whole Kerala state

is urbanized. Elsewhere cities are growing fast, some small and medium towns recording 8 – 10% annual population growth. We can no longer ignore our cities. The villages and towns are organically connected, and have to be seen as a whole.

The answers to our urban challenges are self-evident. The need for massive investments in infrastructure – transport, water, drainage, sewerage, housing – is well-recognized. President Kalam rightly talks of creating urban amenities in rural areas to promote value addition, wealth creation and employment generation locally. Technocrats like Himanshu Parikh have been advocating comprehensive survey of natural water courses, and redesigning water supply, sewerage, drainage and roads to follow them. Biman Patel and his colleagues argue for better urban planning and low cost transport solutions. Konkan railways has been developing better technologies for urban mass transport. Swathi and Ramesh Ramanathan of Janaagraha have been championing people's participation and urban governance reform. All these approaches are vital and need to be integrated.

The heart of the matter, however, lies in governance. Take Shanghai city. The local government controls everything from transport and water supply to policing and the international airport. London city Mayor Livingstone, elected as an independent when Tony Blair denied him Labour nomination, controls all facets of the city including fire services and police. The awesome power and responsibilities of Mayor Giuliani or his successor Bloomberg in New York are well-known. Even in Pakistan, not a day passes without the national papers reporting decisions of the Nazim of a city and his council. All across the world, in countries rich or poor, democracies or authoritarian states, urban governments are empowered and integrated.

Contrast this with our cities. How many of us know the names of the Mayors of any of our cities? Who in our cities stands for the whole city, instead of a small territory? Which agency really is responsible for the whole city's future. Each activity – water supply, sewerage, transport, housing, roads, urban planning etc – is parceled out to a separate parastatal in most of our great cities. There results are predictable. The right hand does not know what the left hand does, and we have a classic system of alibis, with everybody having power to make our lives miserable, and none being accountable. And where are the tax payers and citizens in all this, except as victims of extortion and long-suffering subjects.

The July devastation of Mumbai should serve as a wake-up call, and lead to urban governance reforms. First, let us have direct election of Mayors to represent all and exercise the authority derived from the whole city. And such elected Mayor and the city council should be truly empowered to take all decisions, not the unelected officials. Second, ensure the creation of the elected Metropolitan Planning Committees in each city, with Mayor as chairperson and effective powers and responsibilities now exercised by myriad agencies. Article

243-ZE of the Constitution mandates it, but is observed in the breach. Third, create a ward committee for each corporator's division under the corporator's chairmanship, with members elected from each polling station area. Entrust the ward committee with local tasks – garbage clearance, street lighting, local roads and drains, schools and health centers, and transfer the relevant personnel and a share of the local taxes collected. The poorer areas can get all the local taxes, and the richer localities will share a part of the revenue, thus establishing a link between taxes and services, and giving power to stake-holders. Finally, create instruments of accountability including an independent ombudsman, citizen's charters with penalties for non-delivery, effective right to information, and a fund-based accounting system. Our cities will then be transformed into glorious centers of civilization and prosperity.

Cultivated status quoism, fatalism, feigned shock and horror when disaster strikes, and business as usual after public attention shifts have become our natural responses. It is time we actually woke up and acted to save our cities.

***Jayaprakash Narayan***

The author is the Coordinator of Lok Satta movement, and VOTEINDIA – a national campaign for political reforms; Email: [loksatta@satyam.net.in](mailto:loksatta@satyam.net.in); [info@voteindia.org](mailto:info@voteindia.org); Url: [www.loksatta.org](http://www.loksatta.org); Url: [www.voteindia.org](http://www.voteindia.org)