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My Fair City

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Abstract:

Urbanisation today in countries of the global south, fraught with challenges of low-middle income groups dominating the population, is emulating unsustainable, resource-intensive patterns of high-income countries. These are augmented by global mobility, globalisation of architecture, construction and design firms and globalisation of media and communication services. The sustainable development goals dictate the shared fate of humankind in the face of sustainability challenges, irrespective of the skewed balance in terms of resource availability, access and consumption. A double paradox that exists is the seemingly feasible game plan to make well-resourced cities of high-income countries more sustainable which remain plagued by issues of power relations and vested interests of stakeholders within them. On the other hand, some might say cities with widespread poverty, resource and service deficits can be considered easier to amend. Neither argument holds good since sustainability is a complex subject bearing triple characteristics- a normative aspiration, a state of being and the means of attaining that state.

Urban areas can therefore lead or lag the sustainability movement, but these can exist only when societies themselves are sustainable. The twin challenges of urban design are the building of new urban areas (alternatively known as cities to come) and new urban segments in growing cities while also redesigning old urban areas in accordance with the emerging principles of good practices of sustainability. India's resolve for net-zero carbon emissions by 2070 and leadership in the international solar alliance are catalysing conversations in the architecture community. A country braving natural disasters with unflinching regularity and simultaneously struggling to provide its marginalised millions with basic amenities, is a unique urban model. The context for sustainable public spaces is strong in a community-driven tight-knit society like India. However, as our cities aspire to morph into glass boxed high-rise urban skylines, these simpler vernacular public spaces lose prominence. Gated communities foster exclusion, disproportionate allocation of resources remains, and disorderly settlement patterns intensify.

Keywords:

Sustainable public spaces, Pandemic, Power play, Urban equity

Public spaces are the key drivers of urban growth, reflecting the indices of urban prosperity and economic growth (Cohen, 2018). With a UN Habitat prediction of 70% of the world's population living in cities by 2050, the growing concerns about sustainable urban models and sensitively designed public spaces cut across geographies. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, intend to direct policies towards inclusive, safe, accessible and green public spaces for everyone including women, children and the elderly (Public Space & Sustainable Urban Development, n.d.).

However, the unsettling reality for a young Indian girl like me, who travels across cities for work and learning, is the absolute absence of public places like the ones the SDGs discuss. While the UN website reflects some grim data and infographics on this landing page, the reality on ground is far worse.

Amidst the second wave of the global pandemic, I moved to and lived in two of India's top cities, Ahmedabad and New-Delhi. As an architect, seldom is our work tied to the desk and is restrictive in movement. I travelled within and beyond city limits to sites, to meet clients, to socialise and entertain. From sanitation to safety, my concerns were numerous. On construction sites, a portable toilet clean enough for women

is sadly a distant dream with a handful of women around. In smaller offices of design firms, washrooms are often shared by all genders which comes with its own hygiene issues. On roads, the story is no different. India is at the cusp of an economic growth average of 6-7% in the next couple of years and is showing no sign of recession unlike the US, UK and parts of Europe. But there remains a dark cloud looming large over issues of gender equality in the most basic amenities and can be substantiated by examples that an average working woman like me cites. The Sabarmati Riverfront, Ahmedabad is too dimly lit for evening walks alone. Public toilets on the streets of metropolitans like Bengaluru and Delhi are non-existent or defunct. Sustainable public spaces are not merely pointers in election manifestos, they are bare necessities.

If urban planning remains dependent on those who wield the power of the states, then the democratisation of public spaces is a distant dream.

Now is the cue for India to exhibit the power of its people and make community-driven urban planning a reality, keeping in mind its women. The UN remarks meekly that gender equality cannot be achieved by 2030, the timeline pushed further owing to the pandemic. But barring the unforeseen

pandemic, were we in a good place with the projected timeline? I watched from my office desks both the second and third wave of COVID, in Ahmedabad and Delhi, in that order, and have

noted similarities in the socio-economic fallout of the female gender. Traditionally caregivers, women found themselves looking after families while managing their work from home schedules. Pay disparity persisted, domestic violence doubled, and the pandemic amplified existing woes.

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URBANISATION TODAY

PUBLIC SPACES

URBAN EQUITY

CHALLENGES

NECESSITIES

RESOURCE AVAILABILITY LEAD OR LAG

POWER PLAY

INVISIBLE LINES

NORMATIVE ASPIRATION

SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES

MARGINALIZED

BASIC

AMENITIES

PANDEMIC

CITIES

EQUITY REDISTRIBUTION

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