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Decongest Mumbai and allow it to survive, thrive

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MUMBAI: Mumbai's greatest problem is its population.

A website, www.worldatlas.com lists the 50 cities with the highest population density.
In this list, Mumbai just misses a medal, standing 5th in the world, with a population of 1.25 crores, spread over 603 sq km with a population density of 32,303 per sq km. Paris is 34th with a density of 20,753. Delhi is 40th with a density of 19,944. New York and London do not fall in this list.

A high population and a substantial population density, of course, have their own advantages, in terms of greater business and income, choices available, culture, diversity etc. People flock to cities, and there is urbanisation taking place everywhere.
Of course, there are problems and disadvantages too.

The impossibly crowded trains – each of those travelling in them during peak hours deserves an award! And yet they are so dependable and so essential. The high cost of real estate. The fact that such a large segment of the population lives in slums. The shortage of schools and colleges and, of course, the lack of playgrounds and entertainment space.

And the laws and regulations, too, contribute to this. While the tenancy law protects many, it hurts others, and leads to conflicts and tensions which find their way to, and clog the Courts, and this law hampers the natural

evolution and development of the city.

So much of Mumbai consists of leasehold land, with the government and government bodies being the main lessors. But the policies being followed need consistency and clarity. The state government announced a Scheme for conversion of leasehold land and Class II land to freehold land. There were not many takers because the cost was rather high, but more than that, many societies were concerned that if some members want to convert and others can't or don't want to pay the price, then what would happen?

The bigger issue for land in Mumbai, however, is that while on the one hand the state government has a policy for conversion, other bodies, such as BMC, MHADA, SRA and the Mumbai Port Trust, which are very substantial land holders, do not have such a policy.

Delhi effectively converted DDA property to freehold. All government bodies should have a consistent policy and permit conversion.

There are also other issues such as old land tenures, such as "toka" tenure, and while some of these have been abolished, others remain and cause uncertainty and litigation.

Another aspect is the recent increase in FSI and the amount of construction going on. This too will increase the density of the population and the burden on the infrastructure.

Then, we come to the slums. The website of the SRA, the Slum Rehabilitation Authority, itself states, "The pace of urbanization has left far behind the efforts and initiative of planners, local bodies, housing authorities and formal real estate developers in providing affordable housing to a large number of its residents. Today, as a result, about 50% of its residents spread over around 2,397 slum clusters live in unhygienic, deplorable, unsafe huts or shanties called slums. These slums have come up on private lands, state government lands, municipal corporation lands, Central government lands and housing board lands,"

The Maharashtra Slum Areas law was promulgated in 1971, i.e. more than 50 years ago, and good work has been

done but the problem is so enormous that this has to be tackled on a war footing, for the benefit of this huge number of residents of our dear city.

The Coastal Road will, at an individual level, help commuters. But could the amount of Rs 12,000 crore or so being spent on this, and so much more being spent on other projects, have been utilised differently? From a macro point of view, perhaps it could have been used in a manner that would affect many more lives for the better, and create new cities, rather than merely saving us 20 or 30 minutes on a journey.

Urban development has come to mean the further or more intensive development of existing urban areas, rather than the creation of new urban areas.

So, the existing problems are many, and all of these have to be attended to, but the mantra, the guiding principle, should be DECONGEST, DECONGEST, DECONGEST!

This has to be done not by preventing people from entering Mumbai and not by decreasing Mumbai's attractiveness, but by creating alternatives which attract people.

These alternatives have been created to some extent by CIDCO in Navi Mumbai, and by private parties in the form of the huge development in and around Andheri, which carries the name of Lokhandwalla, and Powai, developed by Hiranandani.

But we need many more new cities, which will have very good business opportunities, a high quality of life, infrastructure, transport, sanitation, medical and education facilities.

Mumbai is a collection of islands. Alibag is the part of the mainland which is closest to south Mumbai. This has the promise of being able to attract many more people, as do many other parts of Maharashtra.

But the government has to take the lead in the Master Planning – of having multiple cities of a smaller size and

density which can exist independently of each other and contain all facilities required for a higher quality of life without requiring a daily inter-city commute.

Let's treat as our basis, a planned city of a population of 1,00,000 and a density of 5,000 persons per sq km.

Multiple locations like this should be identified, all across Maharashtra, and good power and water supply, and facilities for work, and residence, schools and colleges, hospitals, playgrounds etc should be made available. The basic infrastructure should be created, or at least planned, and the private enterprise should take over. The emphasis must be on a high quality of life for everyone. Housing should be affordable, rental (without the protection of rent control) and with the assurance of immediately getting back your premises, should be encouraged.

Trusts should be encouraged to construct buildings and let out flats and get a reasonable return, with safety. There are so many people who want to help and participate in a good cause, without too many regulations and restrictions.

At Oslo Airport, some years ago, I was amazed to see the airport officials moving around on scooters, like the ones children play with! This gave them so much speed and mobility and bicycles should be part of the ecologically friendly infrastructure.

I have also always been very impressed with the statement of Gustav Petro, Mayor of Bogota, who said, "A developed country is not a place where the poor have cars. It's where the rich use public transportation."

And this is what we need across the board, not only that some people should have access to good schools and colleges and healthcare and sporting facilities - it should be everyone!

And that is my wish for Mumbai and its environs, urbanization to the extent required, clean hygienic cities with all kinds of facilities, available to all!

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