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COMMENTARY

COVID-19: Urban Density's Poetic Justice

Nitin Pandit *

1. INTRODUCTION

Following centuries of pandemics and unplanned urbanization, Charles Dickens laid bare the physical filth and amoral inequities that beset English society in *Bleak House* in the nineteenth century. Thereafter, slow but steady improvements in science and sanitation have led to longer lives and greater prosperity in the western world, despite intermittent setbacks including wars, recessions, genocides, and pandemics. The concomitant growth in population and industry has resulted in individuals hoping that some day they too could add to the increasing globalization of filth and inequities by becoming part of the one percent. As for the accumulating warnings from Rachel Carson, the Club of Rome, climate change activists, collapsing ecosystems, and vanishing bees, we have sort of muddled through, till now.

Along came a bat, perhaps also a pangolin, and it rattled the entire apple cart where greed had become, in fact, *laissez-faire*. The vulnerabilities of human artifacts like governments, markets, and institutions were made visible by small edible lifeforms at a global scale. Oh, the inconvenience of it all, bringing back nightmares of other indiscriminate marauders like the Spanish Flu! Just when we had been lulled into slumber, having controlled SARS/MERS and restricted Ebola! We find it convenient to shift the blame to some meat markets (Paul and Vanak 2020) and go back to sleep over a Bob Dylan rant:¹

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¹ Bob Dylan, “When You Gonna Wake Up?”, in *Slow Train Coming*, 1979.

God don't make no promises that He don't keep
You got some big dreams, baby,
But in order to dream you gotta still be asleep

2. DENSITY v. SPRAWL

Since the energy crisis of the 1970s, urban planners have criticized American suburbia, or sprawl, as the quintessential indicator of profligate and individualistic consumption driven by inefficient use of energy. “Network effects” became the new buzzword, defined by high-density living and intense interactions among people. While increased energy efficiency provided tremendous benefits, total energy use skyrocketed through the convenience of consuming products and services that density provided. The tremendous economic growth that followed was fuelled by the convenience of urbanized consumption.

By March 2020, there was reason to worry because COVID-19 was clearly multiplying in the urban centres central to our economic growth and we were hosting it. As people are both vectors and victims, social distancing became the necessary band aid, but it went against the very grain of density—the primary measure and holy grail of design for urban planners. Coronavirus changed it all and started haunting urban planners when urban centres started seeing its rapid spread. “It’s about density,” said New York’s Governor Andrew Cuomo (Shoichet and Jones 2020), having seen first-hand how increased interactions in dense areas were convenient for people and also facilitated the rapid spread of COVID-19.

Stalwarts like Paul Krugman came to the defence, extolling the other virtues of urban density in New York (Krugman 2020), while influencers like Joel Kotkin highlighted how the urban sprawl in Los Angeles (Kotkin 2020) helped flatten the curve. One knows that all interventions against the virus are experimental and, therefore, suspect, even as inequities and the plight of the urban poor are exposed threadbare. So, premier thought leaders in city planning are moving quickly to retain their place in the sun by calling for polycentric or decentralized cities, offering patterns of smart density for the new normal (Zeljic 2020). The love affair with urban density is intense and not to be abandoned easily.

3. SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRES

In populous, rural, developing countries like India, city planners have quickly bought into the idea of dense cities as a solution to weakening rural livelihoods in line with western ideals of planning. Glorified rags-to-riches stories have masked over the abhorrent living conditions of the urban poor, and dense urbanization in slums fragmented by concrete towers have become the reality. The urban setting—devoid of the buffered protection that biodiversity offers—created the ideal conditions for the disaster that followed.

It took a virus to show that western urban planning solutions do not translate well to the Indian context (Lakshmi 2020), where millions of migrant workers in the slums of Mumbai and other megacities have been rendered vulnerable to the novel coronavirus and in the government lockdowns that followed. Urban planners in India continue to adopt western ideas centred on dense urban cores to facilitate transport and provision of other public services, accompanied tree planting (CNBC Sustainable Energy 2020). The overdue emphasis on constructing more parks in cities and building eco-friendly buildings (Mathews and Gupta 2020) may make the recommendations sound like old wine in a new bottle to the poor who are confronted with a life-and-death situation.

The city of Mumbai—fuelled over many decades by commerce and Bollywood—has become a dense centre that demands resources far beyond the capacity of natural systems. While defenders of the status quo are asking for more investments for the provision of basic urban systems that never got implemented (Pai 2020), one wonders why these rich and dense cities, engines of growth, have not made these provisions for so long. In fact, when provisions were made—as in the case of Mumbai—urban planners designed a substantial public transport system to move its poor efficiently to their jobs but neglected to provide basic amenities where they lived.

The theory goes that densely populated areas exhibit the network effect through increased interactions. However, they are also underserved areas as well as red zones for disease transmission in Mumbai for precisely the same reason. Network effects can have a positive impact on some parameters, but they are also a “thick interface” for negative vulnerabilities like COVID-19. This fact challenges the traditional urban planning mindset, where density-driven design is justified with rushed analysis (Fang and Wahba 2020) to ensure a continuous stream of investments. Political power also grows more concentrated with greater density, and, naturally, the powerful demand more resources for their constituencies. A classic vicious cycle sets in, driven by the suppliers of goods and services who strive to

feed the beast, which grows bigger in turn with what economists call a rebound effect.

Meanwhile, with the risks being borne largely by those in slums and the shanty towns of Mumbai, there is no reason why the vulnerable poor shouldn't be sceptical of who will benefit from the glistening portrayals of unlimited or smart urban density. Surely the affected urban poor can see through the edifice, which will last at most till the magic vaccine becomes available! They may also know that a reinvigorated return to the “old normal” will not change the behaviour of critical urban stakeholders such as the builder-developers, who are able to glide past most developmental and environmental norms through political patronage. With the risks of such virulent shocks transferred to the poor, one can hear the re-established old guard get comfortably numb again as they chant Jethro Tull’s ballad:²

Let's bungle in the jungle
Well, that's all right by me
I'm a tiger when I want love
But I'm a snake if we disagree

4. EPILOGUE

It is obvious there needs to be a better balance than what can be achieved by density-driven design alone (Gohil 2020). We will continue to debate solutions that are systemic, from *A Prosperous Way Down* (Odum and Odum 2008) to incremental ones through a series of lifestyle changes (Bhar 2020), but we cannot hide now that the vulnerability of our fundamental conception of a rapidly dense and urbanized planet is quite clear.

Meanwhile, some migrants, disenchanted by an urban system that has let them down, will remain in their villages to regain their dignity. Perhaps, as Italo Calvino notes, we will remain a part of the urban inferno (Calvino 1978) or become vigilant citizens. Or maybe some of us urbanites will enjoy the return of nature into our concrete jungles and reminisce a bit about “Daffodils”, a childhood favourite by William Wordsworth. But that’s a scenario that doesn’t fit into business-as-usual.

² Jethro Tull, “Bungle in the Jungle”, in *Bungle in the Jungle*, 1974.

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