

The Urban Scene Needs Cleansing. But is it Absolutely Essential?

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Abstract

A distinct feature of human evolution is the settlement pattern. It stands testimony to progress, especially, the urban settlement. At present, globalization is what has drastically changed the face of our urban settlements. Communication has become easier, competition in the market has increased, employment demand and commute has escalated, not to mention the ever increasing pressure on urban infrastructure. All this has had direct impact on the urban aesthetics and if we stop and observe awhile, we can definitely say the picture is not a pretty one.

India is a developing country, gradually making her way to emerge as a Superpower. In the last sixty-odd years, we have come a long way from telegraph poles to cell phone towers on buildings. Palatial bungalows made way for high vertical housing, densely built. The rivers now resemble a steady flow of toxic fluid with filth on the banks. Tree lined avenues have disappeared with traffic clogged roads in their place. The cityline is not picturesque anymore with unsightly banners and neon lights marring the view.

While proposals keep coming for beautification of urban elements, every step taken in this area will cost the Government a fortune as is seen in the Ganges riverbank beautification in Kolkata. The pilot project is to cost the State Tourism department an estimated Rs.36 crore. (Bhaskar, 2011) For a country with a teeming population with 25% of its population still below poverty line, the question arises whether it is important to prioritize aesthetics over providing the basic amenities to the population. The need of the hour is development over aesthetics. For a country like India which wishes to progress while learning from her past, improving aesthetics drastically is not a simple task. It involves conservation of past monuments, glory and sentiments while gradually introducing the new age. This will require time, effort towards this sector and money, neither of which the country can afford to spend

on when there are millions of mouths to be fed and job opportunities to be provided. Therefore, one should take a gradual approach to rectifying the urban scenery as this will be beneficial for progress and development which is highly essential for the country at the moment.

Keywords:

Urban, aesthetics, India, transport, globalization, chain reaction, development

The Beginning:

1947. The birth of an independent country, India. Every five year plan drawn by our forefathers, to the latest ruling political parties, targeted towards the economy, schematic planning and usage of resources and building the infrastructure. Yet, even today, as we are in the midst of the Eleventh five-year plan, 25% of India's population lives below the poverty line. As we plod along at snail's pace on the highway, we are intimidated by humungous hoardings! Crumbling buildings, piled garbage, huge towers placed precariously on mountain edges, unplanned roads, high rise buildings sprouting out of ill-conceived places... looking around, all we find is a major shortage of space and no regard for hygiene.

At present, we are engulfed in a worldwide phenomenon called globalization. Mass migration and globalization have created new cultural geographies in world cities. Increasingly, contemporary Indian societies are moving away from anything that is vaguely traditional in the blind dash towards their own interpretation of the western world. For example, what is being paraded as sophisticated international style in advertisements of the multi-storeyed houses, they actually are not more than boxes, glass, neon lights, etc. While these kinds of materials and styles have their own function and aesthetic quality, they are being used in any and every kind of buildings, spaces, from interiors of houses to the facade of a stadium!

Because of our uncritical acceptance of anything western, architecture in India has become insensitive to India's rich

history and diversity (geographical or cultural). A house in Tamil Nadu is same as that in Assam or Rajasthan. The architecture of India today demands adaptation to newer habits and living pattern.

Globalization has let off a chain of reactions which has in a very interesting way, led to the current urban aesthetic scenario.

The Chain Reaction:

The positive impact of globalization is the way it has broadened people's outlook, increased opportunities and has, through the power of telecommunication, brought the world a lot closer. Countries came closer, adopted each other's cultures and technology. Preference for parathas for breakfast in India gave way to burgers at McDonalds. As technology has progressed, our needs have increased leading to an increase in products in the market. As products increased, competition in the market shot up. This led to more research and workforce necessary in the industries. Employment opportunities rose.

Elsewhere, in the rural areas, the people suffered due to erratic climatic patterns. Subsistence agriculture prevailed and many lost their lands owing to non-repayment of debt. Sighting employment opportunities in the urban areas, they migrated to the cities. Unable to afford housing, they set up illegal chawls. While some progressed, the unemployed people set up their own stalls, leading to the informal sector.

Meanwhile, competition in the market increased manifold. Advertising became



desperate measures to salvage the industries. Hoardings were put up unscrupulously at every possible nook and corner. If the roads were not already bustling with traffic, even the upward view got blocked by hoardings hanging from buildings, temporary ones at the sides of the roads or being stuck to the wipers of the car.

Migration led to an increase in population. The telecom revolution that was taking place, had taken a new turn. The mobile phone, once thought to be leisure for the upper class, became easily affordable to the masses. India is the world's 2nd largest wireless network with 525.1 million mobile users. The number of users of the telecom service increased, leading to an increase in the telecom density. New telephone wires had to be put up in the most aesthetically unsuitable places to meet the connectivity requirements.

With the increase in population, the population of commuters, home-to-work has increased. The following is a comparative study of the metropolises.

Public transport in the Delhi metropolis includes the Delhi Metro, the Delhi Transport Corporation bus system, autos and taxis. With the introduction of Delhi Metro, a rail-based mass rapid transit system, rail-based transit systems have gained ground. However, buses continue to be the most popular means of transportation for intra-city travel; they cater to about 60% of the total commuting requirements.

Mumbai has a challenging transport demand. With more than 10 million daily passenger trips (48 percent by rail, 44 percent private vehicle), Mumbai has become a hub of mass transportation systems but the demand keeps growing, creating new constraints on capacity augmentation of existing networks. Due to the city's geographical constraints, the road and rail infrastructure development could not keep the pace with the growing demand over the last decades. Inadequate road network is slowing down the traffic causing chronic road congestion and environmental pollution. Suburban rail traffic increased 600 percent while capacity only increased 230 percent.

The Conclusion:

Beautification is not a simple process. It requires a huge expenditure which will go in planning, materials, landscaping, workforce and the process of work. Beautification is a completely superficial process as it does not benefit the people in any direct way unless it is functionally beneficial.

The Government of Maharashtra by the

end of year 2003 approved the Mumbai Urban Infrastructure Project (MUIP) as a supplementary project to the Mumbai Transport Project (MUTP) in order to provide basic infrastructure facilities for the City of Mumbai. The Mumbai Task Force appointed by the Govt. of Maharashtra to oversee the development of Mumbai felt the urgent need for refurbishment of Marine Drive so as to make it an icon of Mumbai. The objective of the project was to refurbish and revamp the Marine Drive as an important public place through improvements based on integrated design approach, involving planning, designing and conservation inputs for convenient and efficient pedestrian movement, provisions of parking spaces, paving, landscape, street furniture and signage, and other measures required to conserve and enhance the Art Deco character of this waterfront. The estimated cost of the project is Rs. 27.21 crores and completion cost of works is Rs. 20.00 crores. (Authority, 2008)

In a developing country like India, most of the budget focuses on the basic

amenities. While China is busy creating super-cities, India is still struggling with the basic problems of water and electricity. India takes two years to build a flyover; in the same time China will build thousands of kilometres of highways.

BBMP, the administrative body of Bangalore has proposed LCD screens at major traffic nodes in the city. This has been proposed for advertisement and entertainment purposes. Comparisons have been drawn with Times Square, New York and roads in Singapore. But, does this suit the Indian road?(<http://bangalorebuzz.blogspot.in/>, 2008)

We tend to compare our cities to the developed cities over the world. But we do not take into consideration, the steps taken in that direction. Let us take for example, our neighbour, China. Slums get razed and people get relocated outside the city without any prior notice. Taxes have to be paid in order to visit another city. According to the World Bank, 16 out of world's 20 most-polluted cities in the world are in China. Implementing strict pollution norms does not come cheap. It is much more convenient on the other hand, to be lax on the pollution front and invest

in infrastructure and building skyscrapers instead. In order to revamp cities, one will need to shift people, raze structures; inequality will be on the rise hike taxes... in short, curtail the fundamental rights of citizens. Is this acceptable to citizens of a free country like ours? (Saraf, 2008)

Our country is one which works on pollution levels, protection of fundamental rights, fighting inequality etc. Our population increases exponentially, but the land area remains the same. Traffic increases, but the road widths are the same. Some elements of urbanization such as telephone towers cannot be tampered with as relocating them will affect functioning. Alternative

transportation has to be planned if commuting population increases as compared to existing transport systems.

In such cases, the planning authorities are forced to comply with workable options. Aesthetics cannot be prioritized. Preserving the past is necessary which is done with the help of conservation architects. But looking into the future, abrupt changes will not do us any good. Any change that has to be brought out should be gradual and should not affect the citizens adversely. The fact that our country functions by coping with our diverse needs and providing us while preserving our rights is commendable. Let us be gradual in our approach.

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