



Re-structuring Urban Galaxies

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When we see the map of India, we realise a unique characteristic – there is a hierarchical network of dots of varied sizes with names of large metropolises, cities, and towns. They appear like ‘urban galaxies’ – with naturally developed scales between entities, interconnected and located within easy reach. Further exploration suggests that these networks have their unique lifestyles, unique pattern of habitat based on local resources, climate, and available characteristics of land. The connections and the spread of the developments appear like a ‘biological’ growth, with adaptation, mutation and replication after a certain growth tipping point that are essential for sustenance and preservation. These multi-nodal conglomerates expand infinitely absorbing smaller entities on the way and obliterating their strengths.

There is a great talk nowadays about sustainable development in Indian cities and towns. However, we need to understand this fully and see how these goals can trigger other developments without harming the region or the lifestyle. For me, sustainability ensures long-lasting development without becoming unduly centralised—similar to a biological order, therefore, we should consider a way that replicates and triggers the creation of another similar or mutated unit. For example, an elephant or a human being, or even an ant, after maturity, does not grow beyond its ‘ultimate’ size— if it does, it automatically gets destroyed, succumbing to external pressures by internal failure. I am reminded of the large dinosaurs of the Jurassic Age.

Likewise, we need to review our present mega-cities and metropolises. By improving their infrastructure, we will surely improve their functioning, but we may not upgrade the quality of life. Besides, due to our development focus of concentrating around one place/city, all the institutions and employment opportunities, we are denuding the smaller towns in the region of their small-scale crafts and industries, and encouraging migration and

overburdening the mega-cities— which will eventually get crushed under their own burden of management, complexity, and affordability. Expansion means larger distances, and more time and energy to commute for living, working, or cultivating the mind and the spirit.

Expanding mega-cities today can only afford to sell branded and mass-produced goods to greater numbers, which needs larger centralised production centres, industrial complexes, the greater network of transport facilities, large



Wide panoramic view of Mumbai city

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Aerial view of Bengaluru

multi-storeyed complexes on prime lands, relying on larger banking systems with higher interest rates, finally resulting in our colossal agglomerations like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru that are struggling with their size and yet think that they have to rely on it, and depend overly on exhaustible resources— oil, water, land, human energies that keep getting expensive while the quality of life keeps dropping. Needless to say, as against ‘small is beautiful’ we are then talking of ‘bigger is better’, and only looking towards the West who have traversed this path, for their approval and funding.

When we see the map of India, we realise a unique characteristic – there is a hierarchical network of dots of varied sizes with names of large metropolises, cities, and towns. They appear like ‘urban galaxies’ – with naturally developed scales between entities, interconnected and located within easy reach. There are necessarily empty tracts between entities, and then we see shorter movements linked by locally-developed transport systems, with many pedestrians, bicycles, animal carts, and few accessible points to heavy motorised traffic. I would call it organically developed interdependent habitats.

Further exploration suggests that these networks had their unique lifestyles, and unique patterns of habitat based on

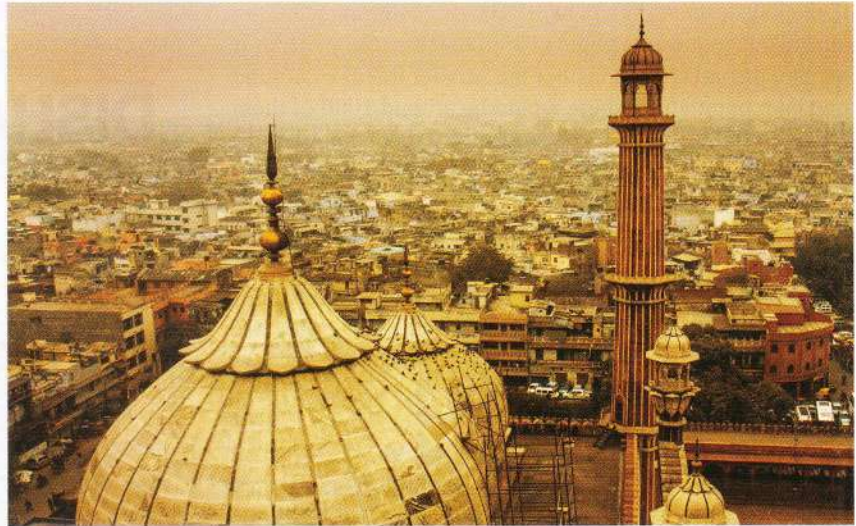
local resources, climate, and availability characteristics of the land. Sharing these common renewable resources, (and here I must include human energies), and sustaining within its available means, each place has its unique quiet lifestyle, development of agriculture, different crafts, and cultural values. This lent a close-knit character and easy communication. The use of time and energy and family life was linked to the 24-hour cycle and the seasons. Smaller towns developed organically and over time extended their homes, created shops, schools, and public places to become smaller towns, and act as nerve centres.

On studying closely, there are further important lessons for our planning today. Planning is not merely physical growth, but also spiritual and cultural growth, all hinged on the availability of resources. Visiting several towns and cities in different parts of India, one notices the unique and regionally-connected lifestyle and virtuous skills of the local population. They could only do this by decentralisation and by allowing self-discovery for the human energy to find particular avenues of exploration within the regional context of resources and values. Such amalgamation also expressed unity amidst diversity as if to weave the region holistically. The connections and the spread of the

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developments appear like a 'biological' growth, with adaptation, mutation, and replication after a certain growth tipping point that is essential for sustenance and preservation. We must look at multi-nodal conglomerates, and not the single-large banyan trees that can expand infinitely, absorbing smaller entities on the way and obliterating their strengths.

There was always respect for the natural network of important water bodies with a water supply and irrigation systems, and the forests and animal life. Non-motorised transport encouraged greener, quieter, and less polluted habitats. If one notices further, there was always a hierarchy for open spaces at every level where people would interact. Everyday, each member of the community would spend a good part of their time in these areas (at their levels), and every once in a while, together on larger scales to celebrate festive occasions. Second, studies reveal that each area had specific culturally-oriented rules which defined their needs and regulated the consumption of resources for that purpose. Similarly, daily, weekly, monthly and seasonal markets suggest a very different notion of 'economies of scale', both for production and consumption. One never exceeds the other and they are always in balance. Our present understanding of the term 'economies of scale' is in fact excessively profit-driven and completely inverts such a relationship, with different implications on demand-supply, gestation, pricing, storage, and logistics.

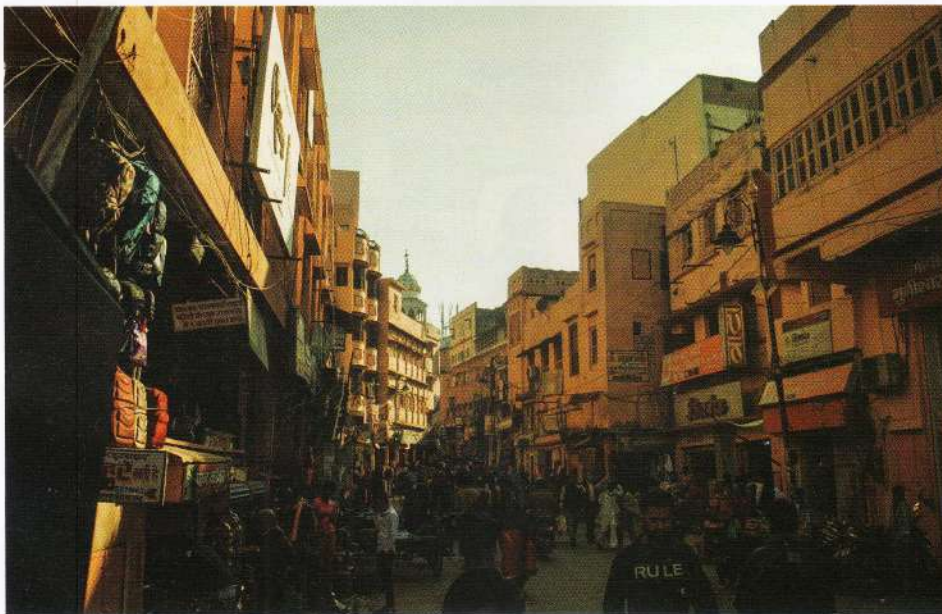


High-angle view of old Delhi skyline

'Appropriateness' therefore, has been a virtue that has guided scales and life-fulfilling characteristics of each habitat in India. This is the secret of their survival over centuries, in spite of floods and famine. If I can sum it up: it is a transformation of scarce resources into multiple alternative uses expressing a deliberate attempt to design relatively small, capital-saving, environment-friendly techniques of using all the resources including human energy. Also, this could not have been possible without an equally appropriate funding strategy and here we find the traditional way of joint share-holding with responsibility. We can find examples of this in our most successful cooperative movements, for e.g., in the milk sector like Amul in Gujarat, in the farming sector in different developments in Punjab. Co-operative partnerships like what developed between the owners and

Majoor Mahajans, in the initial growth of the textile mill city of Ahmedabad, can revitalise employment income and generate wealth for the citizens. This is a true stake of the citizens, not centralisation through a transfer of responsibility to few leaders or managers, but shared responsibility.

We need to 'miniaturise' our cities, make them more compact. One of the ways is to think of them as 'walkable cities.' It is possible to conceive all aspects of one's life from living to working to most basic education and recreation within a half-hour walk. Public transport can



A glimpse of the streets of Varanasi

then play a crucial role here, but the original planning also needs to have been conceived holistically. Instead, if we like the galaxies, consider the smaller towns of around one lakh population (there would be around 1000 of them all over India, between 50,000 and 2 lakh population) as growth centres and develop them as magnets, other villages and smaller habitations will have the chance to learn, earn and develop without sacrificing their time and energy in communication and travel – preferring to stay nearby our parental region means enrichment in a community for family and individual life. If guilds are formed in every small town, they, in turn, will become magnets, saving large infrastructural costs and leading to open quiet and walkable towns where every citizen will have pride in sharing the richness. In addition, there can be a natural movement of cultural groups, cooperative craft shows and their exhibits, and small science exhibitions that will give the locals a chance to learn and improve their environment and lifestyle. Similar to traditional towns and villages, we will once again be proud to invent and re-create local regional ethos expressed in their habitat and lifestyles.

Gandhiji's charkha was an ingenious single solution involving every family member in their different free times, but also being socially productive and culturally relevant. The internet in our times can similarly play that role. A single connection shared by the family can use our individual free time and convert it to independent productive use while also connecting us globally and helping us grow as persons. This can be global and local and at the same time, learning and growing all the time while being self-reliant, and spending energy to travel only when most imperative. Smaller renewable energy solutions can easily cater to such smaller needs.

Economist EF Schumacher reminds us that along with producing goods and services, we must develop our gifts and skills, and collaborate with and serve others, to liberate us from our inborn egocentricity. With this, there also has to be a cognisance of the 'flows' of nature, and that man is only a part of these larger flows. There has to be sharing with the other life forms and in the same way amongst humans. Micro-financing and sharing a frugal multi-functional attitude to life and lifestyles has sustained the countryside and hinterland over centuries. There has to be a deliberate desire to develop relatively small, simple, capital saving and environmentally non-violent (friendly) clusters. Should we not revisit how our ancestors created their own independent world and created the wealth in town planning and architecture, products that we boast of as our heritage? Can we confidently say that our future generations will feel the same with our mega-cities? Should we not instead of only visiting museums and old cities, 'be' a part of and create a new avant-garde urbanism – a 'new heritage'?


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