

Seminar on Slum Free Cities: Berkeley 27-28 April 2012

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This paper titled “**Slum Free Cities : A pronouncement or a policy?**” begins with the assertion that a slum free city as a concept is flawed. Since advent of urbanisation the confines and the peripheries of a city have seen both included and excluded peoples. Whatever the dominant purpose of the city, be it divine or royal there was always the distinction.

It is the post industrial city which gave a definitive and strong connotation to the word slum. Cities like Manchester are an eloquent testimony. The paper gives a historical account of the major cities of India during the colonial period i.e. Calcutta, Bombay and Madras indicating how city growth and slum growth were concurrent.

After independence, the initial response to the slum issue was one of anger, most vocally expressed by the otherwise liberal Jawaharlal Nehru. Starting from the First Five Year Plan covering the period from 1951 to 56 successive plans have alternated between clearance and redevelopment of slum areas and relocation. During the Second Plan a scheme providing small plots of 1000 to 1200 sft in area with limited quantities of building materials and a separate washing platform and latrine for each family was provided. This scheme known as the “open developed plot” was particularly useful for Delhi facing significant influx of refugees in the wake of partition. The Fourth Five Year plan marked a clear shift from clearance to environmental improvement of slums. The Bustee Improvement Scheme launched in Calcutta around this period helped in getting some acceptance for this idea.

The paper provides some details about the objectives of the much criticized Urban Land Ceiling and Regulation Act of 1976 which happened during the Fifth Five Year Plan period. Notwithstanding all the criticism mainly on grounds of market economics and distortions, the fact remains that the objective was to conserve urban land as a scarce resource and make its availability as equitable as possible. Unfortunately the

objectives of the Act disappeared through the loophole provision of exemption and dishonest implementation in many states. It may be noted the Act still survives in a fashion in West Bengal.

Subsequent plan periods did not contribute any new schemes. On the contrary the existing schemes were rechristened. In essence the Government of India withdrew from the scene leaving it to the States to fashion their own schemes. The paper provides an account of what happened in the cities of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. Bombay tried just about every possible scheme from demolition, clearance, redevelopment in situ, relocation elsewhere, slum upgradation, sites and services, area development and so on. Each programme raised different expectations but each was caught in contestations of different kinds, the most frequent being the one between the slum and real estate developer. Dharavi is the most celebrated example of the slum holding out against all plans for its redevelopment but other slums have not been that fortunate.

In the case of Chennai clearance and redevelopment have been the preferred alternatives. There was a brief interregnum when the World Bank persuaded the Tamil Nadu government to take up an extensive programme of slum upgradation as well as sites and services including the grant of tenure. Notwithstanding the limited success of the project soon after its completion, authorities reverted to removal and redevelopment. Researchers point out that redevelopment in the same location depended on the political complexion of the slum community. The DMK government would undertake in situ rehousing for a slum community it politically favoured but relocation in a distant location for others which did not. This pattern was repeated by ADMK government as well. In recent years removal and relocation at considerable distances have been wide spread.

In the case of Calcutta after the initial phase of the Bustee Improvement Programme there has not been much activity. The World Bank assistance continued and under a basic Urban Services project, improvement of services continued but there have been no significant project based on displacement or a general scheme of removal and redevelopment.

Rajiv Gandhi's enthusiasm for "maximum decentralisation and maximum devolution" which resulted later in the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments gave a stimulus to the discourse on poverty alleviation but it did not bring about any significant new programmes to address urban poverty. The Correa Commission had made a number of recommendations to deal with urban poverty on a wide front such as employment generation, income enhancement, shelter upgradation etc. The unintended consequences of Rajiv Gandhi's Rs.100 crore grants Bombay are known. After Rajiv Gandhi, the country lumbered along the tortuous course of economic stress, structural reforms and liberalization. For much of the 90s urban poverty remained the staple of seminars and scholars. The Ministry of Urban Development itself was bifurcated and a separate Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation created. The wisdom of this move is still being questioned and even the Planning Commission in its mid term appraisal of the Eleventh Five Year Plan has stated this be a retrograde step.

When the JNNURM was launched with much fanfare as something that would alter the destinies of the cities, the Mission out lay had to be split among the two ministries; one was the urban infrastructure and governance component handled by the Ministry of Urban Development and the other was basic services for urban poor to be administered by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation. As a component the BSUP under JNNURM continued with the construction of tenements. As of December 2011, it is reported about 525 thousands tenements have been completed and 347 thousand occupied.

The Rajiv Awas Yojana and the slum free city, some Cynics may argued, is an effort by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation to make a début on the stage at a scale matching the sister ministry. The guidelines for this programme as available repeats some of the earlier premises including reservation of 25% developed land for housing and urban poor. The programme also hopes to incentivise the private sector and housing finance institutions. The programme also wants to place reliance on city governments notwithstanding their virtual exclusion or minimal involvement in the JNNURM so far. It is also not clear whether the time honoured parastatals like housing boards and slum clearance boards which have endured many political changes will yield ground to municipal bodies.

As of now the Rajiv Awas Yojana and the Slum Free city is an interesting collection of promises awaiting performance. It if succeeds even to a limited extent in multiple objectives, it will have marked a major departure from past practice and can therefore be heralded as a policy. If not, it will only be yet another scheme in the long catalogue the country has witnessed.
