

Master Plan of Delhi 2021: A case for the Marginalized and Shelterless

In the political storm and the consequent dust created on the release of the 'Guidelines for the Master Plan of Delhi 2021', several more important issues are likely to get sunk into insignificance. The document opens up with our massive metropolis becoming home for millions of uninvited people arriving in search of jobs and opportunities. It does not refer to the phenomenal population growth of Delhi from 4.1 lakh in 1911 to 134.2 lakh in 1991, to the present day 14 million. Huge areas have allegedly developed in complete violation of the Master Plan creating major strain on the planners and the service providers. While referring to the slums, JJ clusters and the growth of unauthorized colonies, it also does not mention the harsh reality that such unauthorized inhabitants of the NCT Delhi are already in the majority, nearly 52% of the population.

The problem is loud and clear- can we afford to overlook the 4 million slum dwellers living under sub-human conditions and rest of the ill-provided and marginalised population living in poor unauthorized and the resettlement colonies, a euphemism for slums? There is no doubt that these settlements were created by the colonizers and the land mafia, guided by extremely selfish motives and nefarious designs while being patronized by the politicians with their eyes fixed on vote banks and petty gains. The more clever among the poor migrants were able to carve out small residential and commercial space for themselves while getting settled in the city. The innocent variety, at least 8-10 lakhs, not necessarily the lesser hard working citizens, ended up becoming the shelterless, masquerading all over the city as homeless and unorganized labour- vendors, hawkers, rickshaw and cart pullers, construction workers and daily wage earners of multiple hues.

The 'Guidelines' refer to large scale acquisition and disposal of land under the two previous Master Plans, but they do not mention the unfairly sky rocketing prices despite the availability of 1483 sq mt. of space in Delhi, more than any other big city in the country, nearly two and half times more than Mumbai. Given the hikes in DDA land prices and the built up property, and practically no protection given to the government owned lands in the city, encroachments and unauthorized occupation had to occur.

The alternative approach with due consideration in the interest of the poor migrants, regularization of colonies, and the so-called 'judicious mix of relocation and in-situ development' is being welcomed by many. Perhaps, the new planning process may result, as being promised, in creating proper 'roads and streets, parks, drinking water, sewage and waste disposal, schools, colleges, medical and community facilities'. However, for a change, the politicians, planners, administrators and the service providers must primarily focus on the poor and the marginalised in the city.

It is also the time to remind the architects of the Master Plan 2021 about the wishful thinking and commitments made in the previous Master Plans. In case, as it is being appreciated, shelter is the basic feature of the city planning, the meaning of shelter given in 1990 Master Plan should hold good. **'Shelter** (as defined) is **space**, sufficient for household activities, **physical-infrastructure** with water, electricity, liquid and solid waste disposal, **social infrastructure**, education, health, recreational and other facilities, **location** in relation to transportation to the work place and education and other facilities.,

Besides, ‘protection from elements, housing provides access to sanitation, health, education, and other welfare services and income-earning opportunities leading to higher productivity and earnings for low-income families. The previous Master Plan also found strong relationship between employment and social services and needs for social change in the interest of women and children, besides creating literacy and public distribution system etc.

None of these pious thoughts are reflected in the guidelines but, presumably, they will figure in the actual Master Plan. Since, during presentations made and a recent workshop participated by all concerned, the leaders and planners have already appreciated the need to incorporate these features in more concrete terms this time, they need to be reminded of certain facts once again. The Master Plan under formulation will appropriately respond to multiple national and international commitments, such as, 1998 National Housing and Habitat Policy, Draft National Slum Policy, besides the 1996 Habitat Agenda, UN Declaration and the Right to Adequate Housing and Secure tenure. 10th Plan approach paper and other policy documents while acknowledging the low level of urbanization (27.8%) provide framework to house the poor, through a definite program of Urban Poverty Alleviation and Slum Task Force, in-situ slum upgradation programs, creating socio-economic opportunities and, last but not least, 90% of the housing for the Economically Weaker Sections and Low Income Groups.

None of these happened in the previous Master Plans, except the government being forced to create the slum – like resettlement colonies and other habitations for the relocated poor. The lack of priority for the poor and marginalised is obvious in Delhi landscape with just about 4000 hectares (out of 70,000 hectares area in the Master Plan) occupied by the 35-40 lakh slum population. Similarly, the (only) scheme of Shelter and sanitation for Footpath Dwellers being implemented by the Ministry of UD & Poverty Alleviation has accessed only 5 lakh out of nearly 100 million slum and destitute population in country's urban centers. The MCD has created night shelters, but the said scheme has not been opted at all by the city government and the Master planners DDA have chosen not to create a single shelter, having defined the same so beautifully.