

*If Planning is Everything, maybe it's Nothing- India's Urban Planning Conundrum! Making a case for urgent Reforms in Urban Planning Framework in India*

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The recent draft Master Plan for Delhi 2041 has re-ignited the discussions about “ why plan cities” and the expected outcomes from such a statutory planning exercise. Even after 75 years of independence, many Indian cities are struggling to make urban planning work towards safe, inclusive, and resilient urban development. The culture of urban planning practice varies significantly from state to state, and many Indian cities are clearly struggling to publish a credible city plan. Like Delhi, several other Indian metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, and Kolkata are also struggling to notify a meaningful urban planning framework to guide their respective city development processes.

According to a TCPO survey, less than 100 out of 4041 statutory Indian cities had some form of statutory plans till 2018. The present state of urban planning in India evokes a sense of surprise, considering that, in 2011. India had a share of about 11% of the global urban population, living in its urban areas and the economic contributions from these urban areas were estimated to be contributing about 65% of the national economy!

This paper attempts to discuss the arguments presented “ for and against” the statutory form urban planning and whether India should abandon the process of statutory planning and finally, also attempts to make a case for national level urban planning reforms in India.

**Why Plan Cities?**

Globally, the process of urban planning has evolved as a long-term instrument towards management of urban growth, establishment of a spatial order and urban form, development of a framework for public goods and services within a planning boundary. Although urban planning ranks significantly among the various social movements that emerged in 20th cen-

ture, till date, a universally accepted definition has not been evolved.

Various nomenclatures and terminologies such as, Master Plan, Land Use Plan, Development plan etc. are generally used to explain the process of urban planning. India largely, has inherited the British culture of urban planning with its focus on managing land uses, development control regulations, design of built form and public realm.

However, “why and what” in urban planning, has remained as a subject of debate around the world. Various scholars have attempted to put forth profound arguments “*for and against urban planning*” (Klostermann, 1985) as well as criticisms, “*If everything is planning, may be its’ nothing!*” (Wildavsky, 1973) to explain the purpose of planning. In 2011, Tom Sanchez, a professor with Virginia Tech, examined the question of “what is planning” through analyzing a guide to undergraduate and the graduate school of urban and regional planning in US and listed at least 20 topics, based on their degree centrality and another 20, by their betweenness centrality.

### **India’s Urban Planning Conundrum**

The current urban planning regime in India is rooted in the British Town Planning act of 1947, which mainly focused on detailed Land Use Zoning. A Master Plan in India typically covers a time horizon of about 10- 20 years, presenting a road map from the present state of the city to its ideal end-state with spatial details in the terminal year, (Ahluwalia,2011). A typical statutory urban plan, thus a long-term proposal for urban land use and development control regulations.

These plans generally lack sound infrastructure proposals as well as a good road map towards resource mobilization. As a result, majority of these planning proposals remain un or under realized on the ground. In absence of viable infrastructure proposals in the statutory urban planning documents, various infrastructure sectoral plans such as, city water and sanitation, solid waste management, transport, urban renewal etc. had started emerging, independently. These sectoral proposals were often structured as independent reports, with limited land use and cross sectoral linkages.

Although a national guideline of Urban and Regional Development and Plan Formulation (URDPFI) guidelines of 2014 exists at the national level, however, the guideline is rarely followed or understood well by the state level implementation agencies. Urban development being a “state” subject in India, the culture and practice of “Master planning” varies significantly from state to state.

Considering the difficulties in implementation of planning proposals, the role of many state departments, mandated with the town planning function, are now engaged in building use permissions and enforcement rather the preparation of future sensitive planning proposals.

Since early 2000s, the strategic planning tools like City Development Strategies (CDS)

gradually started making inroads, followed by City Development Plans (CDPs) and Slum Free City Plans, Under the National Urban Renewal Mission (JnNURM). This trend continued with the recent Smart City Plans (SCPs), HRIDAY City Heritage Plans (CHPs), and City Mobility Plans (CMP).

These infrastructure focused strategic planning instruments generally have their planning horizons, ranging from 5-7 years and are assured of funding from the national missions. Due to their linkage with the national funding, these instruments gained popularity with the sub national and urban local bodies as well as with the international development sector agencies and banks. Added to this development, some of the new missions like Indian Smart Cities Mission has opened its door for a series of urban placemaking and tactical urbanism proposals in many of its mission cities. With this growing popularity of strategic and tactical urban development projects, the overall relevance of long term statutory urban planning being debated in India today, even though some states like Gujarat has been able to implement its statutory plans effectively.

However, without an appropriate spatial planning framework, there has been a steady realization that, the direct investment in capital infrastructure assets are not sustainable without linking them with the city land use and property tax data. These emerging concerns are further exacerbated due to their inability to leverage the opportunity of land value capturing from the newly created infrastructure corridors. The ongoing Covid-19 Crisis and concerns around climate change also have brought back the attention on the statutory form of urban planning in India.

### **What are key challenges of statutory Urban Planning process in India?**

Various scholars such as Roy (2009), Ahluwalia (2011) have expressed their concerns about the issues of urban land market, poverty, equity and informality. A quick review by the author highlighted some of the key barriers, as under :

- Absence of an enabling national framework responding to the rapid urban transformation
- Unclear hierarchy of spatial Planning from Plot level to neighborhood to zonal to city to regional level planning scales and details
- Distorted urban land policies, real estate markets and clarity in land titles
- Spatial planning response to urban economy, poverty, informality, and environmental sustainability
- Weak Institutional capacities to prepare, implement and monitor Master plans
- Lack of application of digital tools and technologies in Plan making, Stakeholder outreach and engagement and monitoring processes
- Link between Planning, Financing and Project Implementation
- Institutional clutter at the city level with Urban development authority, municipal cor-

poration, and town planning departments

· Outdates, text based, rules and regulations often have pervasive outcomes on ground

As an outcome, many of these statutory urban plans are often subjected to diverse comments and feedbacks from the civil society actors, some of which do not fall under the purview of the statutory planning process. Further, these land use planning proposals and regulations are subjected to regular political interferences. This vicious, political economy of urban land markets and urban planning are often on display in many cities in India and have led to this present state of urban planning conundrum.

### **Should India Discard the Process of Urban Planning?**

Considering the ongoing conundrums, many critics and experts argue that, India should discard this statutory process of statutory urban planning, considering their inability to respond to rapid changes, uncertainties in the macro-economic environment and other externalities. Added to this, there is a steadily growing narrative around the global cities, that these cities have already discarded their statutory planning processes. However, a deeper probing reveals that these cities have not only retained their statutory urban planning, they have actually strengthened their spatial planning culture by evolving a diverse sets of planning tools to deal with various challenges such as disaster risks, poverty, economy and climate resilience.

The urban planning culture of Singapore could be a good reference point for these urban planning experts in India, who often attempts to attribute the spectacular transformation of this city nation duty the absence of a master planning framework! On the contrary, Singapore's urban planning framework, today, is a great example of how a good spatial planning framework could strike a balance between the economic development goals and building resilience in cities.

### **Making a case for Urban Planning Reforms in India**

Various future climate change scenarios such as RCP 4.5, major Indian cities are expected to have increased exposure to multi hazard and compound risks due to the climatic variabilities and change, under the moderate climate scenario during 2020-2039. From the experiences of various global cities, the statutory form urban planning has evolved as one of the important tools for managing urban growth, creating a framework for public goods and services and building resilience against the uncertainties of climate change. A good urban planning framework, thus, has become imperative for making urban habitats, safe, inclusive, and resilient.

Acknowledging the role of cities in shaping the future economic and sustainability trajectories of India, a series of urgent reforms are required to transform the culture urban planning in India. Even though the subject of urban planning is a state subject in India, considering its significance in national development, a national level charter on Sustainable Urban Planning and formation of a new authority combing, the functions of urban, regional and infrastructure

planning like Singapore, could be ensure transformative changes at various levels.

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