UNIT 39  PREDICAMENTS OF POST COLONIAL CITIES*

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39.1 INTRODUCTION

The departure of the British from India signalled a new start in many areas of national life. Cities, as centres of large populations and as potential sites of economic growth and employment opportunities, also attracted the attention of national leaders, though to a lesser extent than rural areas. On the one hand, basic urban amenities had to be provided for the existing urban centres, with the larger cities posing particular difficulties. On the other, new urban settlements had to be created, and older towns revived, in order to accommodate refugees and migrants and to set up new industries and commercial ventures. Thus, for instance, were created the industrial townships of Rourkela, Durgapur and later Bokaro; so too were the cities of Faridabad, Ghaziabad and Gurgaon improved to accommodate the fresh influx of people. This Unit focuses on the nature of this transformation in Indian cities, beginning from early post-independence years leading up to the contemporary transformation of our cities.

39.2 INDEPENDENCE/PARTITION AND RESETTLEMENT

In August 1947, India became independent/partitioned, accompanied by large scale violence in which neighbours and communities turned upon each other and millions had to cross newly minted borders under the fear of death and destruction. With this, a new urban life began in the shadow of death, as cities of residents and migrants became camps of refugees. This was especially true of Delhi, the national capital and of Calcutta, then India’s largest metropolis. Muslims from the rural hinterland were reported to be pouring into Delhi right through the summer of 1947 to escape the violence that they faced there, turning the city into a ‘refugee-istan’. Soon, many of them left for Pakistan even as Hindu and Sikh refugees found their footholds in the capital city of independent India. The emotional pain of partition and forced migration would find expression only much later. By contrast, its physical manifestations were evident from the very outset:

These refugees flooded Delhi, spreading themselves out wherever they could. They thronged in camps, schools, colleges, gurdwaras, dharamsalas, military barracks and gardens. They squatted on railway platforms, streets, pavements, and every conceivable

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space ... Houses in the old city ‘evacuated’ by Muslims were forcibly occupied by incoming refugees. Government officials also encountered difficulties in trying to remove various forms of unauthorized construction, encroachment and occupancy. (Dutta, 1986: 444)

1. Refugees, Purana Qila, Delhi, 1947

Source: The Manchester Guardian, 27 September 1947

2. Partition Exodus

In contrast to Delhi, the refugee migrants of Calcutta came not all at one go but in several different periods. The first group of 'old' migrants, consisting of slightly over 40 lakh people, were those who came to India from the former East Bengal in the period 1946-1958. Another wave of migrants came between 1958 and 1963 but seem to have been denied the status of refugees while a third wave of populations that so migrated between 1964 and 1971 were referred to as 'new migrants'. Some among the early migrants, especially those of the middle classes, had ties of occupation and kinship and tended to gravitate towards Calcutta, while the lower and scheduled castes preferred resettlement in villages and as these bhadralok migrants converged on the city, an already congested city faced an even more severe housing crisis.

The resettlement of these refugee populations was an immediate and urgent necessity, perhaps more so in Delhi than in Calcutta, where providing relief was the major preoccupation of the government, at least in the immediate post-Partition years. Official narratives emphasised the humanism of the Nehruvian state and the resilience of the refugee communities. Refugees were settled at Kingsway camp (at one time housing close to 30,000 people), Karol Bagh and Shahdara. By the end of 1950 close to 300,000 refugees had been housed, two-thirds in evacuated houses and close to a third in new constructions. Over a thousand plots were allotted to displaced persons to build their own houses. The rest were put up in temporary tenements.

Historians have shown that only those who could show that they had lost property were given land in Delhi, thus leaving the poor who had been forced to migrate in the cold. The official accounts stress successful rehabilitation; by contrast Ravinder Kaur emphasises the ‘austerity measures’ that were adopted towards displaced person’s colonies with refugees having to constantly negotiate with officials for space and quality accommodation. In Calcutta, an even greater uncertainty prevailed than in Delhi, with more persistent hopes of continual exchange of populations across the newly created borders and perhaps less emphasis on immediate reconstruction through state efforts. Instead, what developed were self-help initiatives to form either private colonies or colonies of squatter settlements, the latter ranging from the forcible occupation of barracks
and empty country villas by individual families to the collective takeover of private, government and wastelands.

Of course, not all cities were thus burdened. Bangalore and Madras seem to have felt little of the brutal churning that was the experience of the northern and eastern metropolises, Bombay a little more so. In some instances, dealing with urban chaos thus emerged as a prominent theme of nationalist urbanism. In other instances, redressing the inequities of the colonial city was the more prominent concern. Finally, there were attempts at fashioning new urban spaces in industrial townships and new capitals, which envisaged the creation of new kinds of citizens. In all instances, the burgeoning slum population and the blighted state of the traditional town was a primary cause of worry.

### 39.3 PRODUCING THE NEW URBAN CITIZEN

The various concerns – those relating to resettlement of refugees, those concerned with chaos and disorder and those focused on housing and other amenities – came together in a common discourse of a democratic city and the anxieties around the production of the model citizen who would take the nation forward. The influential *Delhi Improvement Trust Enquiry Committee Report* of 1951 noted that housing congestion was not only a causative factor in the spread of tuberculosis and other communicable diseases but also bred juvenile delinquency, accentuated the bitterness of class antagonisms and fostered social discontent. ‘Where honest toil can produce nothing but squalor’, it observed, ‘there need be no wonder that unsocial tempers rise.’ (Vol. I: 21) Industrial progress, the Planning Commission feared, would be more than offset by ‘serious social and other problems in urban areas’, unless there was adequate forethought and planning. Cramped, insanitary living quarters also made for discomfort of body and discontent of soul and thus accentuated bitterness. Om Prakash Agarwal, in his work on *Town Improvement Trusts in India* (1945) had written that when people of the same sex shared a room, the lack of privacy dragged ‘everyone down to the same level of squalor’, degrading children and adolescents. Slums acted on the health and habits of the people and ‘encouraged a lassitude of mind’ that reacted upon the body, ‘which hit people’s resisting power and thus encouraged immorality, intemperance, gambling and other rampant vices.’ Members of the post independence Parliament continued to draw attention to the dangers on living in such close intimacy as was imperative in the slum like conditions of many cities. ‘There is so much congestion in Harpul basti [in Delhi]’, one member pointed out, ‘that many families live in a single room. Father, mother, son, daughter-in-law, daughter, son-in-law are all huddled in the same room. Under the circumstances how on earth can a person maintain his health (*tandrusti*), preserve her shame (*sharm/haya*) or retain their morality.’ (Bhargava, 1955:1838) The Barve Committee Report on Greater Bombay similarly reported on large sections of working people being forced to live without the benefits of domestic life, ‘with all the inevitable effect of this deprivation on social vice.’ These were matters of some concern to the newly independent rulers of India. ‘Bad environment affects us all alike; we are choked, each one of us ... by the meanness and squalor which stretch their tentacles up-wards from the lives of our less fortunate fellow citizens. The slums hold us back; while they exist, the roots of our civilization are rotten and our corporate existence as a people diseased,’ noted the *Delhi Improvement Trust Enquiry Committee* report. (Vol. I, 1951:13) A city of slums was thus hardly the place ‘from which one could “fairly expect high ideals of citizenship to emanate”’. It was therefore in the interests of the newly independent State that high priority be given to housing in any scheme of national welfare, ‘bearing in mind in particular the requirements of the poorest sections of the population.’

The primary aim of city planning from this moment would be social welfare, and
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convenience and utility of largest number the main test of all city planning. What was at
stake was not merely a new built form but the forging of a new society. If slums were
the anti-thesis of a civic order, new planned housing projects and secure employment in
public sector works would be the corrective measure – these would be the sites where
the bulk of the subaltern urban population would be educated in the virtues of citizenship.
Community Development Programmes were set up, with a view to creating a new
urban leadership and to help communities take initiative to articulate their own needs –
social, cultural and economic – while setting up a beneficial relationship between residents
and local governments.

39.4 A NEW IMPETUS TO URBAN PLANNING

Democratic city spaces that were also functionally efficient could not, however, be built
by good intentions alone. These needed technical expertise. Such expertise had not
entirely been absent in colonial cities, but the emphasis then had been on sanitarians and
engineers. Now, the practitioners of these disciplines were to be subordinated to those
trained in physical planning and land-use economics. Large scale comprehensive land-
use planning and appropriate zoning strategies thus emerged as key urban strategies for
building a distinctive postcolonial city. Planning offered ‘a dream site for the new nation
state, incorporating cosmopolitan virtues, internationalism, and an openness to new
design’, writes Ravi Sundaram. (Sundaram, 2011) This was not merely a promise of
‘improvement’ but of a new beginning. ‘We are talking of construction, not
reconstruction’, wrote Mulk Raj Anand in the opening issue of the journal MARG
appropriately titled Planning and Dreaming. A similar emphasis obtained in the Trust
Enquiry Committee Report which suggested a different approach to urban improvement
than had been the case in the colonial period, to be based on a civic survey and a
Master Plan. The necessary political space for the exercise of authority of the
professional planner was also created. Parliamentarians argued that as people’s
representatives, the burden of outlining the desired growth path was theirs. Having
suffered bureaucratic developments through the Improvement Trusts they were in no
mood to be subordinated to the Planner. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Minister for Health
and in-charge of urban developments at this point of time, deferred to this sentiment
and suggested that planning must be subordinated to legislative power, though not fully
subsumed by it. Politics could not be avoided, but the appropriate relationship between
the political class and the professional planner had to be clearly spelt out: ‘Non-officials
do not understand anything about town planning … But any plan that will come now
will come before this committee on which there are plenty of non-official members.
They can study it and make any suggestions. But the actual planning for a town or an
urban area must be done by town planners.’ (Kaur, 1955:1890) Professional planners
felt they were in the best position to deliver the promise of a positive urban imaginary.
Many Indian leaders, planners felt, were indifferent to the city, if not anti-urban. Their
hearts were in the villages that they considered ethically superior to the city and far
more habitable. The city could be tolerated, but there was neither a creative conception
of it nor a sense of identification with it. Urban dwellers thus had to be educated into the
art of city building by the planning experts. Most Indian residents too, planners argued,
lacked a sense of identification with the city, requiring special educational efforts in the
form of media campaigns and local meetings to help them to identify with the plans
made for them, and take pride in their cities.

The plans that followed had twin aims, on the one hand to improve conditions of existing
settlements and on the other, to reorganise the city spatially to make a rational and
enforceable separation between spaces of residence and those of commerce and
industry. The former required demolition and reconstruction; the latter necessitated the adoption of zoning principles. For possibly a decade or more after independence/partition, newly elected people’s representatives insisted that demolition, relocation or any other improvement measure ought to derive their rationale solely from the extent to which they could provide better living conditions to the poorest segments of the urban society. Displacement, most were agreed, must be temporary in nature and allow for the return of original dwellers to better houses in the former slum areas. There was consensus too on providing alternative accommodation and livelihood opportunities before effecting any displacement. Prime Minister Nehru endorsed the proposition at the highest level: ‘The real difficulty is the lack of accommodation for those who live in the slums at present. We have to provide housing for them before we can ask them to vacate.’ His government remained committed that they would not remove slum dwellers until there was alternative accommodation which would enable them to continue to earn their livelihood. But this would not be easy. In the West ‘the social conscience that demanded slum elimination’ had emerged after a large build up of capital and resources, whereas in India, the moral, social and political pressure preceded ‘the buildup of resources to permit of the massive attack required.’ So there would be practical limits, with Rajkumari Amrit Kaur noting that ‘even with the best of desire to re-house all those persons on the land which is reclaimed after these slums are cleared, all these various people cannot be re-housed in the same area, because it cannot be a slum then if all of them could be re-housed there. So a certain amount of shifting is inherent in the situation.’ The most ambitious and theoretically sophisticated Master Plan drawn up was for Delhi which became law on September 1, 1962. A few years later, the influential journal MARG published articles on ‘Planning for Bombay’ by some of the leading architects of the city, carrying forward the ideas for the city contained in Master Plan in Outline (1947) and Report of the Study Group on Greater Bombay (1961). Indeed, planning was undertaken at a feverish pace, so that within a decade of the preparation of the Delhi Master Plan, Central and State Town and Country Planning organisations had prepared Master Plans for as many as 372 towns and cities in the country. Some remained focused on planning for the city alone; others argued for Town and Country Planning that would include a wider region. More importantly, guiding planning principles including ideas of ‘optimum population’ and ‘dispersal’ both continued to find resonance.

Writing of the prospects for new towns, S. G. Barve pointed out that while it would be irrational or even unfeasible to arbitrarily limit the population of any metropolitan city to a particular size, a great deal was needed to ‘retard’ this population drive towards the metropolitan centers through a policy of industrial decentralisation. ‘Numerous well chosen and well dispersed “centers of growth”, he wrote, ‘must be selected at suitable townships and industrial development decentralised over them by the provision of infrastructural facilities as well as other promotional measures.’ (Barve, 1966:24) Others such as Robey Lal talked of planning on a human scale, urban development as an area with a boundary, the determinants of the area being the technology available for ensuring limited travel time (not exceeding 20 minutes to work and commercial areas), housing related to needs of the occupants and minimum water, power and sanitary services. Consequently, the first goal of planning was envisaged as the balanced urban development of industry, housing, education and health services in smaller towns, away from existing large metropolis, achieved through the use of studies to determine the limits of urban growth for optimum development. On the other hand, M. N. Buch ruled out dictatorial policies for preventing migration from centers of starvation to centers of potential employment, while simultaneously emphasising the role of middle level towns in absorbing such migrants.
There were more radical dissenting voices too. ‘We forget’, Asok Mitra wrote, ‘that no vital city in any part of the world will agree to limits being set to its growth. For, no sooner does the city cease to grow, that it begins to stagnate and decay.’ (Mitra, 1966:11) It was the vitality of the city that made it attractive, Mitra argued, squalor and filth notwithstanding. Similarly Ashish Bose: ‘From time to time, recommendations are made that the migration to the cities must be curbed. This stems from the philosophy that rural migrants by swarming in the city ruin everything…This is a very perverse argument which is really based on a ‘colonial’ view of urbanization which looks upon cities as the exclusive preserve of the rulers, the rich and the supporting middle classes with the paraphernalia of the service sector. If the city people wish to have fresh air and a nice clean environment, they must pay for it.’ (Bose, 1973:15)

### 39.5 CRITIQUES OF PLANNING

By the middle of the next decade, things had begun to veer away from the script prepared by planners, as cities grew in ways which were not foreseen, and began to trump all planned conceptions. In Delhi, for instance, planners had imagined the city as evolving into a balanced, harmonious unit, but the city soon imploded from within and stubbornly resisted being ordered within the zoning grids. Some have seen this as a critical failure of ‘implementation’. For instance, Gita Dewan Verma has written of the ‘great terrain robbery’ that is entirely a consequence of the misplaced humaneness of those who would speak in the name of the slums, rather than uphold the logic of a Plan; of those who demand ‘progressive’ planning in place of the old-fashioned Plan. For Verma, all that is desirable is already contained in the Master Plan and only its correct implementation can ensure that an orderly and sanitary city is created rather than a chaotic and anarchic one.

There were others who saw zoning and planning as foreign ideas, ill-suited to the Indian city, a critique that was largely developed by planners themselves. John A. Hansman, advising the Government of West Bengal on behalf of the Ford Foundation, thus wrote that control of private development was extremely difficult to enforce under prevailing Indian conditions and at any rate was unimportant. Indian cities, he argued, had as a rule a mixed pattern of land use and ‘it would be very difficult to secure public understanding and support of zoning ordinance.’ Further, a shared use of urban space for residence and household industries was critical for the livelihood of many. Mixed activities, such as shops and residences in the same space, may indeed be a blessing in what was basically a ‘pedestrian movement system’. Controls may work with industries that damaged the environment through noise, smoke or odour and in the case of traffic generating activities, but his overall advice remained that ‘town planners in India should leave zoning to the foreigners who invented it and concentrate instead on the stimulation and coordination of direct public investments in the nation’s growing towns and cities.’

A decade later, the mid-term review of the Delhi Master Plan also noted that some of its assumptions were at odds with the realities of the city: ‘As things stand, a substantial proportion of economic activities in the city are in unorganised sector and are carried out in a manner not amenable to the typically western planning approach based on a complete segregation of Land Uses. It will be long before this segment of the economy is completely eliminated (if at all), it is only reasonable to make for appropriate adjustments in Land Uses consistent with felt needs.’

The old city met with the most debilitating fate, where ‘the percolation of all kinds of noxious activities and trades in areas once meant for noble and graceful living’ had long continued. This was true not only of Delhi, but of several older urban cores in Hyderabad and Patna, where the walled city increasingly began to be blighted. The highly advanced
countries of the West, where the town-planners had acquired their professional expertise, S. S. H. Jhabvala wrote, could afford high cost housing and community amenities, but there was no money in India either for parks or for an adequate number of schools and hospitals. A. G. K. Menon considered ‘satellite towns’ and ‘green belts’ to be imported solutions, perhaps inevitable given that the writings on the subject was dominated by foreign scholars, but nonetheless for that reason too, requiring far greater effort in ‘finding our own solutions to our own problems’. The ‘natural’ Indian city, Jai Sen proposed, was one that was simultaneously rural and urban, with the majority of the people in these ‘rural’ cities of Asia involved in service and small industry, making these very different from the heavy-industry based cities of the West that had evolved under very different conditions. And yet, planners and policy-makers, he argued, continued to draw their lessons from those cities, and tried to remake Indian cities in those terms, and in so doing, were doomed to failure.

At issue too was the nature of the built form itself. The planner in India, M. N. Buch pointed out, had to take into account the fact that the space would be filled largely by jhuggies, which, for years to come, would continue to be the symbol of human habitation in the country. Charles Correa offered examples of densely packed, low rise housing that could be found in Indian villages, in Casbahs of Algiers, in cities such as Jaipur, Tokyo and London, the last being the most human and livable of all the great metropolises in the world. I. K. Gujral too joined in, promoting low-rise, high-density patterns of growth in place of ‘high-rise’ solutions. For Jagmohan, the conscious and sub-conscious adoption of the western model of settlement was ruinous and smacked of ‘fake modernity’. Instead of modern multi-storied buildings made of steel and cement, housing for the urban poor required the use of local materials – thatch, mud, wood and brick – and the construction carried out largely by the inhabitant himself, providing shelter, but also, air, light, pure water and greenery, thus building ‘real and natural’ settlements rather than settlements that were artificial and imposed from above.

However, not all were convinced. As one commentator wrote in the context of Bombay:

The other evening an internationally renowned Bombay architect-cum-city planner told a TV audience in all seriousness that he thought it a pity that so much cement and steel was being wasted on housing for the low income groups … low income housing ought to be made of low cost material like coir-matting. Perhaps, he forgot that his hopes are already facts. Most low-income housing is built of things like matting, scrounged squares of tin, and bits of cardboard. The only trouble is, it gets washed away every monsoon and lets in the slush, the dust, the damp, the heat, the early morning chill during the rest of the year. (‘Cosmopolitan City’, EPW, 1972: 2275)

### 39.6 SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE CITY

As critics debated the urban question through the late 1960s and early 1970s, urban policy tended to become increasingly inhospitable to the poorer and more vulnerable sections of the society. A host of social and political movements developed in response. For much of the 1950s and 1960s, as Partha Chatterjee has pointed out in the context of Calcutta, the urban elites who had been active in the nationalist movement provided moral and social leadership to the neighborhood which emerged as an important site of cross-class associations, even if dominated by the upper and middle classes. In Bangalore, the Gokhale Institute of Public Affairs studied by Janaki Nair and in Bombay, the Save Bombay Committee and other similar institutions that feature in Gyan Prakash’s Mumbai Fables, sought to provide similar pedagogical and civic leadership. These initiatives seem to have reached their limits by the next decade, when a variety of social movements gained prominence, some specifically addressing urban issues, and others taking on a larger national canvas. Writing of feminist movements of the period thus,
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Raka Ray reveals the emergence of a strong Maoist politics in Hyderabad, struggles against issues of sexual harassment and safe contraception in Bombay, and a more ‘pragmatic’ set of interventions in Calcutta, centered on issues of literacy, wage employment, water and electricity. Anti-price rise movements were another prominent field of political activity, often in alliance with trade unions and feminist movements. And in cities across India, especially in Patna and Ahmadabad, movements for the ‘reconstruction’ of India, with huge participation of students and the youth, heralded important changes in the national political scene. Working class movements too expanded in scale, covering not only the larger cities, but also smaller urban centers such as Faridabad and Ghaziabad.

Many of the features of these struggles – the link between the countryside and the workers, the importance of the neighbourhood for carrying out struggles at the site of the factory, and that of the link between formalised industrial sector workers and the mass of organised labour – described by historians as characteristic of the colonial city, continued to remain a feature of the post colonial struggles. Caste-based movements, especially of Dalit groups in western and southern India, made similar strategic use of the neighborhood settlements as sites of protest, while also struggling to gain greater access to public spaces. They also grew more radical, with the Dalit Panthers of Bombay (1972) especially gaining national prominence. Movements which were more parochial and gave expression to the ‘sons of the soil’ argument, such as the Shiv Sena in Bombay, begun in 1966, gained political prominence in poor and middle class neighbourhoods through an engagement with everyday issues.

The responses of the state to the new social movements varied over time. It had been possible in the 1960s to be relatively sanguine about the challenges being posed, but by the next decade a more authoritarian response emerged. On the fateful day of 19th April 1976, women, men and children at Turkman Gate in Delhi faced the onslaught of an Emergency police bent upon ridding the city of the ‘encroachers’ on government land and resettling them elsewhere; some died, many more were subjected to extreme violence. In the ensuing clash between those who laid historic claims to this space and those who were bent upon beautifying the city by getting rid of the poor, a new lexicon emerged, one in which questions of law began to take precedence over those of justice, in which ‘encroachment’ began to take precedence over ‘disease and darkness’; in which the improvement of slums would not be about the residents of those spaces but about ensuring that the rest of the city came to no harm on their account.

This was one response to the crisis of the city or, indeed a more general crisis of democracy itself, through the brutal suppression of subaltern voices and the forced redrawing of the existing spatial arrangements, with a new discourse of (il)legality, and (il)legitimate state violence taking centre stage. However, in the years that followed, there was another response to the breakdown of liberal urbanism, with the State intervening through a process of accommodation, extending ‘exemptions’ without formalising the demands for basic needs. From the 1970s, and into the 1980s, as Partha Chatterjee points out, the logic of electoral mobilisation, on the one hand, and of welfare distribution on the other, set up the terrain of what he characterises as ‘political society’, to distinguish it from the more conventional understandings of ‘civil society’ in which citizens were guaranteed their rights through law. The State, he argues, well recognised that many of the spaces and practices of the urban poor were illegal; yet it could hardly expect that they turn into proper citizens before such basic needs as housing, water, electricity and transport had been provided to them. In order to achieve this, without fundamentally weakening the Rule of Property and of Rights, it thus enunciated various policies that were carefully calibrated to extend some facilities without allowing them to be translated as matters of legal entitlements.
For a decade or so after, it seemed as if the excesses of the Emergency would yield to policies favouring accommodation of the poor and the vulnerable. Very soon, however, it became evident that the risks faced by low income groups would from now on be translated into the environmental burdens posed by the poor. The environmental question was posed as early as the 1970s when the Prime Minister inaugurated the first meeting of the National Committee on Environmental Planning on April 12, 1972. The effort was aimed at familiar domains of forests and wildlife, but also at the city, though not all were yet convinced of the importance to be attached to this. One commentator asked whether the National Committee on Environmental Planning plan would reorganise services such as water supply, water treatment, sewage disposal, sanitation etc.? Would it spend large resources on managing industrial and radioactive wastes, planning rapid urban transportation and superfine highways, as did similar bodies in the affluent world? A piece on ‘Cosmopolitan Bombay’ took ‘clever, modern, scientific socialists of the Raj’ to task: ‘some of them are now profoundly concerned about the pollution of “our” air and water, when many people get no water, polluted or unpolluted.’ On the other hand, the Report of the International Panel of Experts appointed by the Secretary-General of the UN Conference on the Human Environment argued in favour of location based solutions: ‘Pollution emanating from industrial development represents more of a potential than an actual threat at this time in many developing countries …By taking sensible decisions on the location of industries and their waste disposal … they can avoid some of the worst environmental problems that have arisen in connection with industrial pollution.’ Many in India concurred, though in a more circumspect manner. To the extent that anti-pollution measures could be built into industrial development without additional cost, S. B. Mukherjee of Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation argued, it might be a good idea to pay some heed to this problem. But except in such circumstances, ‘let us temporarily accept the possibility of smoke nuisance, gas nuisance and noise nuisance, because attempts to eradicate them will add to the cost of industrial output … when at a future date we will have augmented our national income sufficiently, we can use part of that income for adopting anti-pollution measures and restoring ecological balance.’ (Mukherjee, 1975:24) The question, as with much else, was of finance, and the issue was posed fairly starkly – industry, even if it came with environment pollution.

For some other commentators the choice between environment and development was a false one. What was needed were different combinations of the two, subject to two constraints: an ‘outer limit’ avoiding development paths that would put human survival itself at risk, and an ‘inner limit’ defined by poverty levels and basic human needs for survival below which concern for environment could not be pushed.

By the middle of the 1990s the environmental question was no longer marginal but instead gained a new salience, often through the intervention of the Supreme Court. Together, the limit of the political resolution to questions of urban ‘failures’ led to greater emphasis on the issue of illegality and the informalisation of urban spaces. When operating in conjunction, the consequence has been the simultaneous extension of the body of rights and the creation of new insecurities for the urban poor. On the one hand the Supreme Court has argued that ‘Article 21 protects the right to life as a fundamental right. Enjoyment of life… including [the right to live] with human dignity encompasses within its ambit, the protection and preservation of environment, ecological balance free from pollution of air and water, sanitation, without which life cannot be enjoyed.’
On the other, the persistent presence of slum populations no longer evokes the automatic protection of the Court or the State. If anything, there are increasing instances where the illegality of slums and the aesthetic dislike of their apparent filth has become the pretext for their demolition. From Operation Sunshine in Calcutta to the relocation of the population living on the margins of the Yamuna in Delhi, slum politics in the 1990s has been characterised more by dislocation than reconstruction. On the other hand, new groups have emerged that once again evoke the neighborhood as the unit of politics and governance, though in this instance reflecting more the aspirations of the middle and upper classes. Resident Welfare Associations thus play an increasingly important role in cities such as Mumbai and Delhi, while larger civic formations such as CIVIC, BATF and ABIDE have gained prominence in Bangalore.

39.8 SUMMARY

The Unit has shown there was unanimity among nationalist leaders in the wake of independence that cities should be more equitable and just, and that cities would provide employment opportunities and housing benefits to all and which, in general, would be open and hospitable both to the elite and to the poor. However, even at that time, things had been harsher for squatters, those who happened to be illegal occupants of land, and those for whom there were far fewer guarantees of security than for the ordinary slum dweller: ‘when people build huts in unauthorized manner and spread dirt/disease in the city’, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur then observed, ‘it becomes very difficult for the New Delhi municipal committee to allow them to continue to live there.’ Not surprisingly, eviction of the poor from squatter settlements was a periodic feature of all the large cities of India even in the 1950s and 1960s. There is little denying, however, that since then the emphasis on legality has grown to a much larger extent, possibly even to the extent where the balance between law and justice that was characteristic of an earlier era has been lost, leading several scholars to refer to the gentrification of Indian cities, especially its large metropolises.

None of this, however, has deterred the migration of those desirous of creating better opportunities for themselves, leaving rural areas for urban ones, or moving from one urban area to another. They can no longer assert a confident right to the city, for they may well be on the wrong side of law in terms of their habitations. They continue, however to make efforts at obtaining some tenuous legal hold on a plot of land in the city, through fragmentary claims based on ration cards or names on electoral rolls that attest to their continual presence in a particular place. And when that fails, they engage in other negotiations, forcing the ‘slum question’ to be articulated through a series of shifting strategies—rights, when recognisable; exceptions, when negotiable; regularisation, when possible. The politics of the city, caught between formal plans and informal settlements/activities, between legal tenures and illegal habitations, between the elite desire for order and the subaltern need for amenities and opportunities, thus signals a new, more uncertain, urban future. It may still be possible that radical assertions from below may reclaim the city in the interests of all its residents, including those of the most vulnerable; it is equally possible that instead of the traditional walled cities we may increasingly encounter ‘world cities’ that are dotted with gated communities that resolutely keep their various proximate populations in distant, perhaps even confrontational, relationships.

39.9 EXERCISES

1) In what ways were cities altered in the wake of the partition crisis?
2) What were the urban pressures that emerged in the immediate post-independence decades, and how were they met?

3) What types of land use planning and zoning strategies were adopted as part of key urban strategies in post-colonial cities?

4) Discuss the critiques of planning strategies adopted in contemporary cities.

5) What impact did the ‘environmental burdens’ issue have on industrialisation and housing after the 1970s?

6) Do you think that the spurt in social and political movements in post-independence India was linked to poor urban planning?

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