

From slum dwellings to new towns

All levels of planners have to be involved if urban blight is to give way to better lifestyles

More than a century ago, in 1902, Ebenezer Howard wrote a little book – *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* – which later became a household name amongst architects and town planners of the 20th century. Howard explained how the organically growing slums of the previous century could be replaced with new planned garden cities and towns. Though it took a few years for his ideas to gain acceptance, the results of the reforms which he envisaged then began to show results in a few decades, and 60 years later, in 1962, Phillippe Maguire recorded the transformation in Britain in another little book – *From Tree Dwellings to New Towns*.

In a manner of speaking, we in India seem to be in a similar situation today – the symptoms are similar to those a century ago, but the malaises are similar.

Take for instance, the entrances to our cities and towns. Whether we come in by train, or by road, often even by air, we are welcomed by ugly slums, garbage dumps, open field toilets, and a host of other blemishes on an otherwise peaceful rural setting. Our

traditional feudal cities had more organized planning – the Darwazas of the old cities, built at vantage points along the city wall welcomed the traveler to the city. Delhi, Jaipur, and many other old cities are visible examples. But now, 60 years after Independence, we have regressed into allowing these features to be replaced by organic slum dwellings.

Mapping growth

Even in a world of GIS, new cartographic satellites, digital maps etc, the periphery of our cities are unclear – surrounded by mushrooming slums, unplanned urban development and a fuzzy disorderly growth not very different from the rural areas surrounding them.

Go deeper into the real rural areas, and we have another problem: there is an absolute lack of professional planning or architectural design input in our villages. Though one can argue that this is another symptom of a poor economy, it is a sad truth that our rural areas have received almost no attention of physical planners. Rural homes do not have

basic comforts, are almost always just rudimentary weather shelters, and have very little sanitation and water supply systems. While there is some improvement in the richer states, most rural communities have achieved whatever little progress we see by a hit-and-trial, saw-this-in-town transfer of technology.

Rural housing is not a common university subject; nor is there any push from government towards this issue – rural housing is far from the agenda which one

resource – a recourse we need to preserve carefully. Simply put, we should be building new towns on lands which are not agriculturally productive – nor replace crop producing lands with mushrooming extensions of towns and cities. This is not a new concept – the Italians built their towns and villages on outcrops of rocky mountains which could not support crops – new towns need to be developed with careful planning of physical and energy infrastructure, and need not be

aries. On a parallel track, work needs to be done on planning new towns after locating the right lands for them. The process involves all levels of planners – both economic and physical, and cannot be done in isolation of social researchers and community planners.

Our National Housing Policy is also flawed and needs a rethink – we talk only of numbers of housing units, and of acres of lands under construction, not of community planning, nor of home building; nor of building sustainable economies.

The thoughts of Ebenezer Howard and Phillip Maguire are not new – the only difference is that we are facing the same problems in India which Britain faced about a century later.

The professionals and the intellect required to solve the problems of our living and built environment are available – both for our urban and our rural communities. What we need is vision, wisdom and a political will to look into the future.

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reads in the economic press.

While fiscal planning for infrastructure is a hot topic, physical planning is not.

Another major malaise is our lack of a policy for building new towns. In a densely populated country like ours (as compared to other parts of the globe), we need to recognise that land is an irreplaceable, non-renewable

on the spinal transportation corridors of the country. The corridors shall need constant upgradation and change, thus the need to leave the lands around them uncluttered.

As a start, we need to define and restrict the peripheries of our towns and cities, so that urban renewal can start within those bound-