

With rains shattering its Shanghai dreams, Mumbai — and the entire country — need to consider the importance of proper physical planning

Whatever happened to planning?

The recent disaster in Mumbai has received a deluge of press coverage — both in print as well as electronic media. Suddenly, people were made aware of the existence of the Mahim Creek and the invisible river, which shot into prominence because their condition was the centre point to the fate of Mumbai. Now a creek just in name, Mahim creek was where the Mithi river flowed into the sea. It is known now, in retrospect, that as more and more land was reclaimed at this point, to make way for accommodating the metropolis' ever-burgeoning population, an environmental catastrophe was in the making. But the issue is no longer a local one. Buried among all the debris is the issue of a larger malaise of physical planning institutions, which have almost disappeared.

Five decades ago, the Central Government had created the Town and Country Planning Organization, commonly abbreviated as the TCPO. Its mandate was to set norms and standards for physical planning, at both the town- and country-planning levels. It is ironic that town and country planning found no mention in our country's original Constitution, and that the only term used to describe this vital aspect of physical planning is the word 'colonisation'. Colonisation was meant, as one can only assume now some 60 years later, as the act of creating colonies for people to live in. This one word is indicative of lack of vision or foresight. Land, and colonisation, is a state subject, and the Constitution tends to



Heavy price: Scant attention paid to proper regional planning resulted in widespread devastation in the city

limit the Central Government's role in this vital, yet limited resource. Eventually, the TCPO slowly decayed into an almost invisible entity. The TCPO today is a dead organization, which has practically no role to play in the country's development process.

Planning has been smothered by an economy driven by real-estate economics and politics

That regional planning was relegated to the background has resulted in the mess in Mumbai. Rivers emerge from their respective watershed areas, collecting water and flowing downstream. Rivers and drainage issues are not local issues — depending on the geography, they may be state-wide or even inter-state watersheds — and need a larger canvas of regional physical planning.

In other countries, such as in the UK, for example, regional planning — also termed as country planning — is done at the macro level, and with visions that transcend beyond narrow town-level realities and requirements. Even then town planning must mesh into the overall regional plan, keeping geographical factors in mind. Factors including drainage, riverbeds, watersheds, and their consequent flows into the sea, are all part of the larger ambit of such country planning.

If one were to try searching for the regional country plan of the land around Mumbai, chances are that one would find none. That is, no hydrological calculations and no country planning drawings would be available. In all probability, there are no drawings that show how development should be executed.

The fact is that many aspects of town and country planning are neglected. Slowly, one can see even the vocabulary disappearing. Today's lingo consists of colonies, estates, villas, gar-

denias, and such micro-level marketing sounds. The larger physical planning issues, of greater significance, are in danger of becoming extinct.

We live in the age of satellites and computers, and we have the requisite skills and know-how to very quickly develop and perhaps even publish hazard maps. These maps could be similar to those depicting earthquake zones, showing physical hazards of flood plains and the like.



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Town and country planning is a complex subject, which entails a knowledge of geography, sociology, as well as a host of other technical skills. Unfortunately, it has been smothered by an economy driven by real-estate economics and politics.

On the other hand, there is hype about rural markets, rural infrastructure, among others. Even though Singa-

pore is a tiny state, it has a Ministry for National Development. In all of Europe, town and country planning is a concept that precedes any development at the local level.

The Mumbai deluge is only the first warning signal for a system that is decaying rapidly. South Mumbai, planned by the British, and surrounded on all three sides with the same high tide as in North Mumbai, survived the deluge remarkably well. On the other hand, the horrors of unplanned development in post-independence North Mumbai — developed without a larger country or regional plan in place — got submerged in misery.

The excuses offered by the city's political masters, that the disaster was a result of a day that witnessed excessive rainfall, hold no water. Mumbai's woes began not in the sea but on land.

This was perhaps the only disaster in a shore city that began from the mainland. It was caused simply because the city has seen unchecked urban growth and so its natural features, which otherwise would have mitigated the effects, could not co-exist with the exploding population. Mangroves were destroyed to create the Bandra-Kurla reclamation area, and the drainage routes of the Mithi river were blocked by indiscriminate construction.

What it reflects is a complete failure of town and country planning. Though it is an issue of immense significance to the city, it should also prompt a look by the relevant authorities and by the people themselves all over the country.

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