

Analyzing the present conditions of the city of Kolkata in an attempt to make it more habitable

URBAN PLANNING

Strategy for a Livable & Sustainable Kolkata - Need for effective policies and urgent actions

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Kolkata is a city of contradictions. Chaos prevails all around you, and perhaps this chaos gives ideas for creation; development of many creative minds are stunted. About two decades ago an US Ambassador to India compared Kolkata to New York in the field of destruction and creation while speaking at a forum in Kolkata.

Kolkata has been showered with names, inspired by the city's beauty and grandeur at earlier times- 'A city of Palaces' and 'Second best city within the Commonwealth'.

However Geoffrey Moorhouse has not showered praises in his book "Calcutta: The city revealed"; he writes "The truth is that almost everything associated with Calcutta is highly unpleasant and nasty indeed. It is bracketed in the

India's largest cities has become a metropolis without the benefit of industrialization.

However, political leaders from the north of India were not charitable to Kolkata with their comments. Jawaharlal Nehru called Kolkata a "city of processions" and when his grandson Rajiv Gandhi called the city "a dying city". Kolkatans did not like their comments on their own much loved city, a people's city- a, city which led rest of India with its thoughts and actions prior to the independence of India.

However, since independence, the city overburdened with people moving in from erstwhile East Pakistan and Punjab and the city being deprived of financial support from the central government, its service and infrastructure deteriorated. The city was neglected

tasks that lie ahead of Kolkata's Mayor to make Kolkata a top class "livable city" in Asia. with arts, culture, parks and playgrounds. Singapore and Hong Kong are ahead of Kolkata as a livable and sustainable cities in Asia.

1. Change of city's image:

Kolkata can no longer live in its past images; it must build a new brand image highlighting its strength in technology- being the hub of the east, leading education centres; the nation's biggest commercial and trading centre and as well as nation's cultural hub and the biggest entertainment hub of the east. In the past two decades kolkata has made substantial development in social sector too; particularly; many new hospitals and educational institutions have come up in the city; apart-

"The truth is that almost everything associated with Calcutta is highly unpleasant and nasty indeed. It is bracketed in the Western mind with distant rumours of appalling disaster, riot and degradation"

Western mind with distant rumours of appalling disaster, riot and degradation". But in another page of this book he quotes praises on Calcutta showered by Indian civil servant recruit William Hunter, who writes "Imagine everything that is glorious in nature combined with all that is beautiful in Architecture".

William Bentinck, who ruled India from the Governor's House in Calcutta, said that Calcutta is the richest city that he had seen after London and "the spectacle altogether was most curious and magnificent I have met with".

Author and well known anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose in his article 'Calcutta - A Premature Metropolis' (Alfred A. Knoff, 1965) writes that one of

during the first 3 decades after independence and subsequently during the last 3 decades only a fraction of the money was invested in improving roads, transportation and services for a city of 10 million population in greater Kolkata. and rest of the money was diverted.

A visitor to London on his/ her return would find many similarities between London and Kolkata starting from roads, parks, Victorian architecture, Gothic Churches and business and commercial establishments. If an artist could brush away the pot holes from Kolkata's roads, shanties and hawkers from the pavements, and paint the old buildings, Kolkata could still be a top city Asia. Let us look closely at major

ments and as well as group housing for middle and lower income groups in the joint sector (public private partnership) have been constructed. Local government has improved living conditions in slums which are no longer unhygienic. These issues, economical development, employment opportunities and social progress, must be highlighted by the national and international media and the state government needs to act now.

However, being the biggest commercial and trading hub of the east; it provides job opportunities for the unskilled youth of the eastern region; they move to Kolkata and engage themselves in informal services or hawk and live on the pavements and in the pro-

cess cover the pavements with temporary shelters with plastic sheets, creating ugly visual images along some of the major roads of the city and such an image highlights poverty only. There is poverty in almost all major cities of the world, but the local authorities do not permit visual display of poverty; consequently the Mayor needs to act and remove visual poverty in all forms.

People arriving at the airport, Indians from other cities and foreigners as they drive in to the city from Park Street rotary and move by Nirmal Hriday, with shanties on the edge of the road, or drive through Phulbagan, Kakurgachi they witness series of ugly bamboo structures covered with plastic sheets spoiling the visual image of the streets and giving a totally wrong image of the city. Steps should be taken to relocate these informal shops and shelters from the pavements to a suitable location and give a cleaner image to the city.

A month back BBC reported that in one of the round-about on the roads of London, protestors were camping in tents, but with the court's order in hand the local administration removed them. Discipline and complying with the law is very much essential for the migrants as well as for the locals. Police and administration must not look the other way to save their skin.

2) Improvement of Roads. Water supply & other Services:

It is unfortunate for the people of Kolkata that the conditions of roads, services and infrastructure during the last 30 years were neglected, in spite of the fact that central fund was provided.

However improvement of some of the inner city roads have been carried out, but they are not annually maintained; after each monsoon, pot holes and cracks on road surface occur and

again the city is burdened with broken road surfaces which are difficult to drive on.

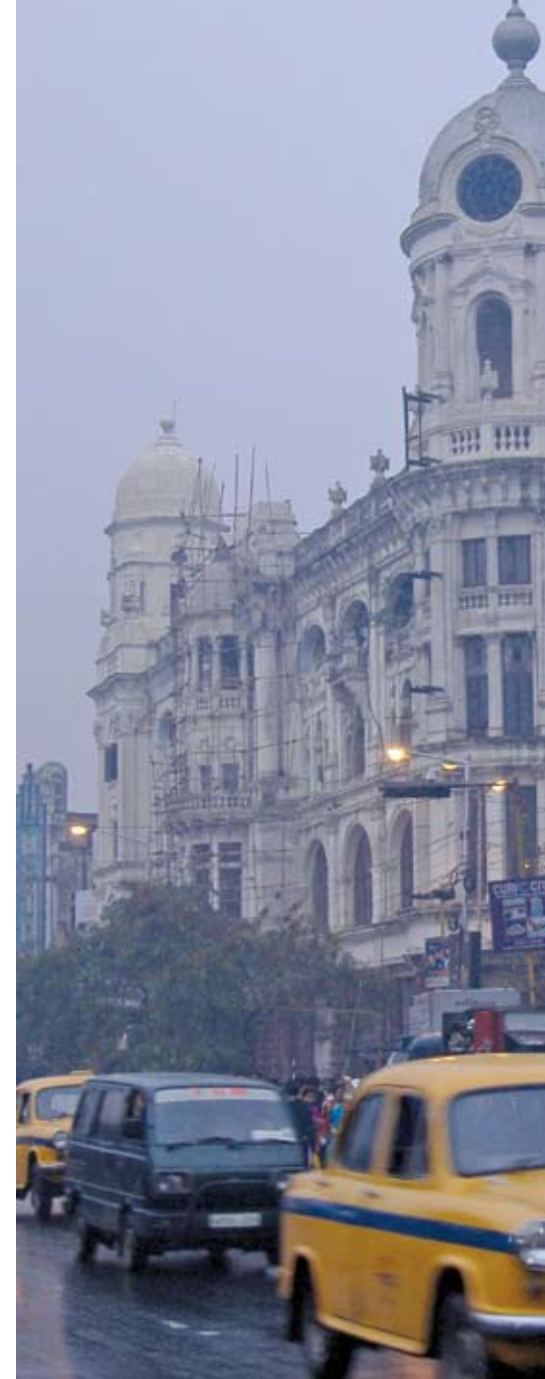
But the worst roads are on the fringe of inner city, and such major roads as Circular Garden Reach Road, Taratala Road, Diamond Harbour Road in the south and parts of BT road, APC Road on the north and the roads beyond E.M. By-pass and near Kalikapore and R.N.Tagore Cardiac Research Institute along the east.

Poor maintenance of roads affects traffic flow, wastes fuel and creates chaos in the daily life. KMS says it maintain and repair roads and other utility departments, CESC, telephone dig up roads and take no step for their repair: Coordination between different departments is very much essential.

It has been also observed that just before Puja repair work is carried out quickly in order to please the public; most of these repair work is done poorly. And do not even last 6 months. What is required is that one should plan in advance and complete repairing of roads during 3rd and 4th quarter (October to March) in order to avoid monsoon. Strict supervision is essential; but frequently supervision is not done.

Proper design of roads is essential to have good quality roads. Roads must have proper slope/ grade so that storm water drains off after each shower, otherwise water logging is there and roads get damaged, which frequently happen in Kolkata. The E.M. By-pass has water drainage problem; Southern Avenue has drainage problems and water logging takes place on many roads of the city.

Water-logging and flooding of roads takes place for many reasons, but the main reasons are- poor slope for water to run off; clogging of storm water outlet gully traps by plastic bags and solid



wastes. In many areas drainage pipes are unable to carry excess storm water, may be because drains are silted or they have not been designed for present outflow of storm water; it may be also that pumping stations are not working in order. KMC should ensure that Behala and adjoining areas as well as the Lake Town and adjoining areas do not remain flooded for days.

The Trinomul Municipal Board is yet to treat this matter of water logging of



“Imagine everything that is glorious in nature combined with all that is beautiful in Architecture”

table water must be made available in the shortest possible time.

It is recorded that during 2006-07, KMC has commissioned a number of water treatment plants cum pumping station and among them the prominent ones are- at Watgunge-Khidirpore areas and at Bib Bagan (Bib Bagan – D.C Dey Road area).

KMC's on-going projects are for setting up a 15 million gallon water treatment plant at Garden Reach Works and Dhapa Water Treatment Plant. More water treatment plants are in planning stage. It is expected water supply will improve.

Moreover, it is seen daily that a huge quantity of water is wasted from the water outlets on public roads and streets all over the city. There are thousands of non-residents who do not pay any tax, but uses water; and those who are engaged as service providers during the day, use water outlets for bathing and washing clothes and utensils without paying any tax. This wastage of filtered water costs the tax payers dearly. One can think of erecting stalls “To Pay and Bathe” where floating population can pay and take shower.

Solid waste management is another important area where the city needs to do much planning and development work. On an average the city generates about 2,500 tons of solid waste and majority of it is dumped in Dhapa land fill.

This is an area where the new board has to find more efficient ways to collect solid ways and recycle them. Solid

wastes should be collected from the city during 6 to 8 in the morning, before the rush hour traffic and pedestrians crowd the streets.

More facilities are to be created for re-cycling of wastes and for separation of wastes at source in 3 categories- re-cycle-able materials, organic materials and trash, and then these can be dispatched to respective plants Local low income residents can be engaged to separate the garbage and provide them with ration coupons/ travel coupons as incentive. . . Intensive recycling of garbage is now followed in many countries, and by this process land required for garbage dumping is much reduced. Singapore already recycles 75% of its solid waste and in a decade all solid waste will be re-cycled; no land-fill would be required.

3) Tax collection, Water Tax and Power to raise money:

KMC's major source of earning is from collection of property tax. There are major problems in property tax collection; starting from households paying less taxes, some paying more taxes, other paying no tax annually; corruption within the department and its staff members who solicit speed money from the house owners in lieu of reducing their property tax and annually still prevail; this causes loss of crores of rupees to the KMC.

The proposed Unit Area Tax system will rationalize tax on households and is expected that fair tax will enable the house owners to pay the tax. However,

roads in a war footing since the monsoon is on and already whenever there is heavy shower, roads have been flooded. Though so far there has not been prolong shower within the city. There should be a special team to check on water outlets, pumps and other facilities daily; but this is not happening.

Augmentation of water supply is another important area where one has to give priority. The added municipalities do not get adequate water and po-

“More facilities are to be created for re-cycling of wastes and for separation of wastes at source”

it looks it will take time to implement UAT as reported in the papers. It is for the best interest of the KMC and the home owners that Unit Area Tax is implemented by the new KMC board without any delay.

However, the issue of water tax has become a major issue since it was promised that Water Tax will not be imposed before election and it is still not implemented. However, the KMC has to repay the loan it has taken from the Asian Development Bank for water augmentation programme for the city; so if Water Tax is not imposed, then KMC will have to arrange fund from other sources to repay the loan.

4) Making Kolkata Livable and Sustainable:

Very often the people of Kolkata who have traveled abroad and return to this city compare Kolkata with Singapore or Hong Kong. Why can't Kolkata be like them? They often forget that Kolkata's population is about twice that of Singapore and Hong Kong, and area-wise too, Kolkata is much bigger (Kolkata Municipal Corporation covers an area of 71 Sq. Mile, while the Kolkata Urban Agglomeration covers an area of 676 Sq. Mile). Moreover and investment in roads and services is much less than Singapore & Hong Kong.

Kolkata Municipal Corporation has population of around 5 million and Kolkata Urban Agglomeration has

population of 13 million as in 2006-07 and by 2015 the population is likely to be 15 million. Where as Singapore has population of less than 4 million; and Hong Kong may be lesser. Kolkata Urban Agglomeration will be on of the 10 big metropolitan cities of the world. Population pressure and lack of investment in services and infrastructure are the primary reasons for city's decay. The city requires monumental investment and implementation on war footing; there is scope for involvement of the private sector here.

Only during the last 3 years the central government has provided funds to the major cities in India under Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). to improve roads services and infrastructure. However, progress of work is slow in most cities, particularly in Kolkata; efforts must be made to complete the works of all roads, services and then maintain them; maintenance is very essential.

However in order to make Kolkata Livable and Sustainable, the Kolkata Municipal Corporation in collaboration with other utility and service providers must initiate steps on the following areas:-

To substantially reduce air pollution within the city. Kolkata is said to be the most polluted city in India. Automobiles are one of the biggest polluters. Annually thousands of new cars are added and level of Carbon dioxide rises. KMC must be in close dia-



logue with the West Bengal Pollution Control Board, Motor Vehicle Department and Kolkata Police to coordinate their pollution test system, since now each body carries out tests in its own way and causes harassment to the vehicle owners.

One must encourage the use of fuel efficient vehicles. KMC needs to introduce vehicle congestion pricing for those traveling to congested parts of



cities (BBD Bag/ Esplanade) and bring in laws to permit use of vehicles on alternative days. Singapore and Beijing have introduced such laws and have found them to be successful.

Checking of pollution of vehicles must be carried out scientifically and vehicle owners must not be harassed. Recent drive by the Motor Vehicle Department to arbitrarily take photographs of running vehicles and

dispatching letters to owners, where readings taken by a machine located at a distance, indicate car's exhaust's Carbon Dioxide level is higher than the minimum permissible level and a case is initiated against the alleged defaulter. The present system is a total harassment for the vehicle owners and when the concerned officer was given suggestions to operate efficiently, he declined.

a) All efforts must be made for people to use public transport; metro must acquire modern cars and the latest equipment in order to make traveling comfortable and in short time. Efficient operation of metro can reduce air pollution by 10 to 15%. Proper inter-connection between different routes is essential. Proposed expansion of new routes must be carried out systematically and technical problems must be given top priority.

b) Operation of bus within the city must be efficient and pollution free; energy efficient buses must be used and partial fleet of buses can be operated by electricity to reduce pollution. Already actions have been taken to remove the old buses and new buses are plying on the road under JNNURM projects; though some of the private bus owners agreed to purchase new buses, other operators are reluctant to buy these vehicles since they are expensive and they will not be able to repay the loan; here the state government must advise the banks to provide loan.

c) Local autos (three wheelers) have been compelled by the High Court's order to turn green and use LNG fuel. However there are very few fuel stations supplying LNG, and consequently autos are wasting a lot of time and money

to get gas; the government oil companies must come up with more gas stations or else public will suffer. Very recent reports said land is a problem for erecting new LNG pumps and war of words is continuing between the state government and oil companies while public suffer.

iii) Solid waste management within the city continues to be inadequate and inefficient.

In many areas within the city garbage is not collected daily and allowed to decay and pollute the air that people breathe. Daily collection of solid waste must be made from all wards of the city and the counselors of each ward must verify this. Moreover, people must be educated to produce less waste and packaging companies must be told to use recycle-able materials. Re-cycling of solid waste after separating the trash must be done in a bigger scale in order to reduce land required for land-fill so that in 10 years land required will be reduced to 1/10th the present large tracts of land. Such a program requires collaboration between the citizens, packaging industries, retailers and the local municipalities.

v) Energy Efficient industries are to be allowed in industrial belts; and energy efficiency must be introduced from the planning stage of industries and check must be carried out during operation. Preference should be given to IT and ITES industries.

vi) Energy Efficient Buildings: It is said that the buildings within cities consume 16 to 20% of total electricity consumed by the city. This energy consumed can be reduced if the buildings are made energy efficient by using energy efficient



electrical fittings and fixtures in existing buildings. Moreover new buildings designed and constructed following Green Building Council's specifications and also using renewable energy (solar/wind) would be certified under different category, as 'Platinum'/ 'Gold' or 'silver' building. In order to encourage builders and developers to construct green buildings, property tax incentives could be provided so that more builders build energy efficient buildings.

LEARNING FROM OTHER CITIES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (HOW TO MAKE CITIES LIVABLE).

1. Beijing plans to become green and global city by 2050. What are the city's plans?

Beijing is working hard to become more energy efficient and eco-friendly against all odds. Beijing is experiencing explosion in cars that is contributing to increasing in carbon emission. In the earlier decade 60% of people used bicycles and today it is 30%. Chinese authorities have restricted

people to use cars on alternate days and on other days to use bicycles or motor powered bicycle cabs; they expect this system would reduce carbon emission. Chinese authorities are considering make Beijing's Central Business District (CBD) 'global city' which attracts about 180,000 people in to it daily and will cover 84 square kilometer with high quality buildings, offices, commercial and entertainment center; while the 'old city' would remain represented by beautiful and historic Forbidden city. In the new city there will be green park covering 100 acres to absorb carbon dioxide emitted by vehicles. More roads will be built in this CBD and along with energy efficient cars and public transportation system (sub-way), it is expected carbon dioxide level will be reduced.

2. Curitiba in Brazil;

Curitiba is medium size city in Brazil with a population of about 3 million. It is now known as the Ecological city. However about 3 decades ago the city's pollution level was rising and transportation system was not efficient.

The City Planning and Architecture departments of the city then developed master plan linked to land use and zoning. After implementation of the detail plan, based on the master plan, including good roads and transportation system over last 3 decades. the city's pollution level has reduced and people from all over the world visit this green city. The city has achieved green city status because it has a very efficient bus transit system; efficient solid waste management system and the Mayor involved in city's development projects.

The lessons which other cities can learn from Curitiba are as follows:

(i) People can be moved faster on dedi-

cated bus routes, if the routes are coordinated with buses on other routes and if the roads are not congested. Curitiba solved the problem of moving people by efficient bus system and not constructing expensive sub-way. (ii) To purchase ticket at the bus stops before entering the bus and (iii) to have a single fare for all destinations within the city for the day. These measures would reduce running time for buses, halt times and in turn would reduce carbon emission. (iv) Efficient recycling of solid waste by involving local unemployed people to segregate garbage and provide them with coupons for food or travel as an incentive.

Kolkata, with its metro, more than 1,500 buses, on an average plying on the road, has a struggling time moving people (on an average about 200,000 people) to their destination; moreover buses cannot move beyond a speed

of 20 to 25 KM per hour because of congestion on road, which the Traffic Police are unable manage. From all reports in the papers and studies made, it has been established that poor management of vehicular traffic (including autos) is responsible for slow and irregular traffic operation in the city; congestion delays journey and creates more air pollution.

Encroachment on pavements by hawkers compels pedestrians to move on to the road carriage-way and this in turn slows down speed of vehicles; that is why buses and cars cannot move faster on the roads. It has been reported by city planners that Traffic Police is totally responsible for poor traffic operation and management. Of course one must not forget traffic police permits trucks to ply on roads during 'no entry' time in lieu of speed money and encourages further con-

gestion; they also allow autos to park at major street corners and create chaos, besides hawkers encroaching on the pavements.

The new municipal board can make Kolkata a livable and sustainable city for healthy living, hassle free movement by safe transport with good roads, adequate water, reduced level of pollution and cultural facilities along with more parks, playgrounds and a good convention centre for organizing annual book show, music and dance performances. Can the citizens of kolkata expect a livable kolkata within next 2 years from the new Mayor? ■

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