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CITY BLIGHTS

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A recent UN report on world population, authored by demographer

George Martine, presents an agonising picture of the pace and pattern of urbanisation in developing countries. But there is nothing in the report that, in essence, is not known. As early as 1976, at the first UN Conference on Habitat, held at Vancouver, which I had the privilege to address, I and a few others emphasised that the problems of urbanisation and growth of slums would continue to mount unless the political power-structure and economic order of the contemporary world were changed and the fundamental imbalances created by them redressed. Our voices were heard and admired in the corridors of the Conference but never acted upon. Instead, globalisation and

marketisation were allowed to run amok, gravely compounding the existing problems.

We will shortly witness a number of mega-cities of about eight million people or hyper-cities of 20 million or more. This super-urbanisation will be accompanied by super-impoverishment of the urban poor who could, by 2020, constitute as much as 50 per cent of the total population living in cities.

The pace of urbanisation has been striking. In 1950, there were 86 cities in the world with a population over one million; today there are 400, and by 2015, there will be at least 550. Cities have absorbed nearly two-third of the global population explosion since 1950 and are currently growing by a million babies and migrants each week. The present urban population is larger

than the total population of the world in 1960. The global countryside, meanwhile, has reached its maximum population (3.2 billion) and will begin to shrink after 2020. As a result, cities will account for all future population growths which are expected to peak at about 10 billion in 2050. What is most disconcerting, 90 per cent of this increase in urban population will occur in developing countries.

Housing this massive urban population, meeting its civic needs, social and cultural aspirations, and keeping its environment healthy will present to the human race one of the gravest challenges it has ever faced.

The conditions are already distressing in developing countries which have about a quarter of a million designated slum-settlements, with about one billion

inhabitants. Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Karachi and Dhaka alone have about 15,000 slum settlements, encompassing a population of about 20 million. The least developed countries have as many as 78% of their residents living in slums. By 2030, the slum population of the world is projected to touch the two billion mark.

Even now as many as 20 million urban children in developing countries die every year of chronic diarrhoeal diseases after drinking water badly contaminated with human and animal waste and about 600,000 persons lose their lives on account of indoor air pollution alone.

The enormity of the problem is known, so are the solutions. What is lacking is the motivation to change the direction of the fundamental forces that are shaping present day world. The United

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Nations and its agencies have singularly failed in this regard. They have not been able to either check income disparities or prevent the concentration of economic and political powers in the hands of a few countries. Today, about 20% of world population, mostly living in developed countries, have 86% of the world's Gross National Product, 82% of export market and 68% of foreign direct investment. As against this, the bottom 20% of the people, almost all living in developing countries, are compelled to live with an income of only \$1 a day. They have a 1% share of the world Gross Domestic Product, 1% of world export market and 1% of foreign direct investment.

All efforts made in the past to help the developing countries proved inadequate. Even the modest recommen-

dations made by the Pearson Commission (1961), Willy Brandt Commission (1980) and Brundtland Commission (1983) were not fully implemented.

The outcome of the much trumpeted United Nations Millennium Declarations, 2000, which "aims to significantly improve the lives of at least 100 million slum-dwellers by 2020," is not likely to be any different. In any case, this declaration attempts to ameliorate the lot of about one-tenth of the existing slum population, and that too by 2020, when the population would have touched 15 billion mark.

A vital question that has been raised and answered in my book, *Soul and Structure of Governance in India*, is, within the overall limitations of the international power-struc-

ture and its economic order, what the developing countries can themselves do to tackle the problem of rapid urbanisation and the consequent proliferation of slums. One of the suggestions made in the book is that a few migrant colonies, with organised layouts and basic amenities, should be set up every year and migrants allowed to move into these colonies by paying a nominal rent for the space allotted. It should also be laid down that in other new areas and estates to be developed by the public or private sector, at least 5% of the total land should be kept apart for meeting the accommodation needs of the migrants.

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