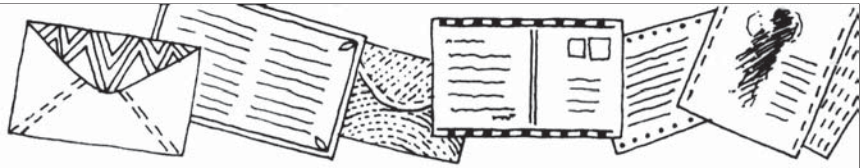


Democratising Urban Space

Mr. K C Shivaramakrishnan has ably analysed the situation of urban chaos and how the planning authorities in urban India have made a mess of the limited urban space (MANUSHI No 153). With the booming urbanisation that India is facing cities like New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bangalore have faced conflicting priorities for the efficient use of urban space. There is competition for the shrinking urban space between the real estate builders, Mahanagara Palikas which are democratically constituted bodies and win popular votes, Metropolitan Development Authorities with bureaucratic outlook and against democratisation of power and urban space and infrastructure needs of the growing cities as determined by the State.

The politicians decide the space required for the working class poor and the real estate builders who want to sell life style apartments. The metropolitan planners give priority to space for golf clubs, shopping malls and health clubs and spas. The poor want space for their livelihood. How do we allocate the shrinking urban space and to whom and for what purpose has never been agreed upon because our Urban Local bodies are defunct and the extra-constitutional bodies like the Delhi Development Authority and Bangalore Development Authority decide in the name of modernisation which is friendly to the global investors. The classic example is the case of Bangalore-Mysore Infrastructure Corridor which has been described as "Public Thievery" in the name of applying the principle of eminent domain for acquiring the private space(land) for public purposes like building roads and townships etc.

It is a shame that the Karnataka Government acquired far more land of poor farmers than what was required thus depriving the farmers of their means of livelihood. As the process



Readers' Responses

of globalisation picks up, the competing demands of various groups for urban space is going to be intense and we will end up witnessing in all our major cities what is now called the "Gurgaon syndrome"—reckless urbanization without any regulation and forcible occupation of urban space by the undeserving.

The Slum Improvement Boards in major cities believe in regularising the spaces encroached upon by the migrant poor without regard to the provision of basic services like schools and health centres which also claim urban space. How do we allocate this urban space and who will regulate the allotment of the urban space? Can the people trust the State? What should be the guiding principles for democratisation of the urban space? Who should get priority in this mad competition for urban space?

These are vital questions that have not been answered honestly by our urban planners. If we had honestly implemented the 74th Constitutional amendments empowering the Urban Local Bodies we could have at least heard the Municipal Ward level voices, including the voices of the urban poor in the slums. We have yet to see in our major cities strong Mayors like the New York Mayor Guliani or Bloomberg. Our cities are run by Chief Ministers and their bureaucratic cronies. The best principle for democratisation of the urban space is to follow the dictum 'Promote the greatest good of the greatest number'. At present our urban development policies are promoting the greatest good of the *smallest*

number leading to discontent and overall mismatch between demand and supply of urban space.

Manu N Kulkarni, Bangalore

New Attacks on Vendors

The street vendors are under fire again, this time under the guise of the new Food Safety Act. The Government does not have any provision for providing wholesome food to the disadvantaged. But with the new law in place, the health department officials all over India will subject the poor street vendors who sell food items to greater harassment and extortion under the guise of checking "unsafe foods."

Do the so-called 'high quality' hotels and restaurants provide non infected and safe food? They may be getting away with bribing the 'health inspectors. We hear of *pesti-colas*, infected chocolates, insects and lizards swimming in expensive bottled drinking water, etcetera.

These bigwigs get away with such acts but the poor vendors are projected as a health risk and subject to removals and clearance operations. This when experience tells us that street foods are far safer because they are freshly cooked under the public gaze.

Let us demand that fancy restaurants and hotels be subjected to thorough food audits. Those of us who have seen the insides of their kitchens know that the results would shock the nation.

It is time that all of us under MANUSHI's leadership take up the issue with the relevant ministries and departments of the Government.

S. Gopal, via email □