

Ecology and the 'Just City'

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Harini Nagendra prides herself on barking up all trees, right and wrong
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COVID-19 has shown us how unequal our cities are. In a way that is hard to ignore. Workers were turned out on the streets across India, and we read horrific stories of their suffering, even death. Stories of injustice flooded in from across the world. In Singapore, the government seemingly forgot about its migrant workers, living in cramped unsanitary conditions – until an outbreak brought public attention to their problems. In many parts of Africa, migrant workers who lost their jobs overseas returned home, facing income loss and starvation. In the US, Hispanics and Latin Americans were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, forced to keep working in low-income jobs, exposed to high risk while suffering from low nutrition and chronic ill-health.

The richest countries – the US, UK, Italy and Spain – were worst-hit. Closer to home, our financial capital, Mumbai, and administrative capital and power centre, Delhi, have been most impacted. COVID-19 was initially called a “disease of the rich”, brought in by those who lived, worked and holidayed outside India. The virus steadily made its way to low income neighbourhoods, becoming a disease of the poor. Areas like the slums of Mumbai faced the brunt of infection. When over 1,400 people share a single toilet, social and physical distancing are abstract concepts, impossible to implement.

Cities are inter-linked places, where rich and poor co-exist, interdependent on each other. We cannot plan for a strong city, resilient to current and future disasters, unless we do so in a way that helps all its residents. As the tragic events of the past weeks have shown us, our current ways of city planning are not just insufficient in times of crisis. They are immoral and unjust. We have violated basic fundamental human rights in building our cities. How can we do better?

There is much that needs to be done. Job security, health insurance, a better public health system, well-implemented labour laws, more accessible food rations, universal public income – these are some of the important changes we need to make. But ecology has been left out of many of these discussions.

Ecology shapes the unequal city in fundamental ways. The poor live in slums, shacks, tents with leaky roofs: exposed to smoke-filled air, polluted lakes, garbage dumps and dengue-carrying mosquitoes.

How do we redesign the city to make ecology part of the solution, rather than the problem?

We could provide urban employment through the aggressive planting of “green infrastructure” – more trees in public spaces, including parks, lakes, streets, slums, anganwadis, schools and college campuses. We can expand edible gardens in the city, planting fruiting trees like mango, jamun, jackfruit and tamarind, edible trees like the drumstick and agase, and wild weeds and soppus which people can add to their diet. Jobs can be provided as we clean up our polluted kaluves or canals, re-converting them from the drains and sewers that they have become, back to flowing streams that carry clean water. People can walk and bike alongside these canals, reducing the need to take the car or motorbike, and helping provide safer means of transport in COVID-19 times.

People from all walks of life must be able to access spaces of nature: women and men, rich and poor, old and young. This provides stress relief, exercise, and mental and physical health: most important in times of crisis, such as we face today.

While emerging from the lockdown, we need to think of different ways to stimulate our economy: ways that also address inequality and injustice. Ecology plays an essential role in such new approaches. Do we have the boldness of imagination to take the plunge?

NEXT STORY



Jyoti Punwani,

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