

A 15-minute post-Covid city

DH deccanherald.com/opinion/a-15-minute-post-covid-city-921111.html

November 29, 2020

DH



DECCAN HERALD

Harini Nagendra,

- NOV 29 2020, 00:19 IST
- UPDATED: NOV 29 2020, 01:06 IST

As multiple vaccines move closer to the finish line, the possibility of an end seems finally to be in sight. Year 2020 has been defined by the pandemic, a true annus horribilis. But it has also been a time when the more fortunate have been able to slow down, to work from home, to spend more time with their family, and less time on the road. It would be a sad pity to waste this time of reflection and dive straight back into the hectic, unhealthy frenzy of modern urban life.

The C40 Cities, a coalition of cities across the world that includes a few Indian cities – Jaipur, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai and Namma Bengaluru – has an ambitious plan for post-Covid economic recovery in a manner that is more sustainable, climate-friendly and healthy. A key part of this plan is a move towards '15-minute cities'. This follows the idea that each city should be designed as a mix of self-sufficient neighbourhoods. Within each

neighbourhood, at a distance of 15 minutes travel by foot, cycle or bus, people should be able to shop for basic necessities, take and pick up their children from school, visit parks and outdoor spaces, go to the local doctor, and – most importantly – get from home to office.

A number of city mayors – prominent amongst them Anne Hidalgo, the Mayor of Paris – have taken the lead on this idea. The city of Paris created 650 km of pop-up cycle lanes which were used in peak Covid-times by people seeking to avoid metro and bus travel. They now plan to make those lanes that people have shown that they prefer the most, i.e. the lanes with maximum cycle traffic, permanent. Along with this, Paris will reduce traffic speeds in cycle-friendly areas to keep the cyclists safe.

Paris has also come up with a number of innovative ways to create new public spaces in a crowded city. They have planted trees in 41 large school grounds, opening them to the public after school hours as parks and sports grounds. Inspired by similar experiments, the C40 cities network seeks to create different approaches to public planning that encourage the development of liveable neighbourhoods, allowing the flexible use of spaces – just in the way they have created pop-up cycle lanes and converted schools into multi-use areas.

Does this seem impossible for Indian cities? Perhaps. The C40 website shows that Bengaluru, along with Jaipur, is a ‘currently inactive’ member of the coalition. I can’t imagine that Delhi NCR is doing much to transform its urban spaces to make them more liveable, given the soaring levels of air pollution witnessed this winter.

But if we look at this another way, much seems possible. Across Indian cities, 60% of all trips are made on foot or cycle, for short distances less than 5 km. Our cities are already 15-minute cities! Especially so for women, most of whom move around the city on foot, as data shows. We don’t realise this because the men and women who make up the 15-minute city are the urban poor, or from low-income families. Just as they are invisible to us, so are they invisible in our plans. Indian cities spend close to half of their transport budget on road-widening and planning for cars, and long commutes. Yet only 15% of the people in our cities use motorised transport. Bengaluru is one of the worst cities in this regard, with very little spent on making roads safe places for women, children and the elderly to walk. It is no wonder that this city is an inactive member of the C40 coalition!

This is a time for serious redesign. Indian cities are much better than European cities in the fact that they are already mixed neighbourhood, residential plus commercial spaces. But we need to plan for the majority of the residents we have, not in ways that will return our city back to a place of choked roads and polluted air.