

**Working Paper***Book Review*

K.C. Sivaramakrishnan,
Re-visioning Indian Cities: The Urban Renewal Mission,
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Written by K.C. Sivaramakrishnan, visiting professor at the Centre for Policy Research from New Delhi, this book would be useful to anybody working on urban planning in India. Its main scope is to assess the implementation of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), the ambitious urban development project of the Government of India that was launched in 2005. The book focuses principally on the legislation issues of urban development and the process of the sharing of funds and powers between different levels of government.

Many points are discussed in the twelve chapters of the book. It begins with the historical background to the JNNURM and analyses the criteria used in the allocation of the funds among towns. The next two chapters focus on the way that urban poverty and mobility have been taken into account in the project. The empowerment of local bodies under a reform agenda, with a schedule of competences assigned to the Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), and other attempts to improve accountability are discussed in three chapters. However, this

decentralization of power to the ULBs, encountered many issues, such as reluctance on the part of some state governments to implement the devolution of power and their attempts to undermine these emerging authorities. Chapter 7 looks at the case of the District Planning Committee. Chapter 9 highlights the deficiencies of the project and points to the ambivalence of two objects of the mission: empowerment of local bodies and quick implementation of infrastructure projects. Finally, some examples are given to illustrate all the realities that are taken into account in the Mission. The last chapter sums up the main issues covered in the book and proposes some alternatives.

The inception and objectives of JNNURM

A brief history of urban development in India, which the first chapter presents, should help the reader to a better understanding of the background to the birth of the idea of the JNNURM. First introduced into India in 1974, urban development is a relatively new concept in this country. Delhi and Kolkata were the first cities where the government had made some interventions. These were followed by a great many different schemes to improve urban living conditions and infrastructure. It, however, became clear in the nineties that state-sponsored schemes were not the solution to the problems affecting the cities, and increased public participation has since become a cornerstone of urban development planning. Formally launched in 2005, the JNNURM is the largest programme of urban development ever set up in India, involving over Rs100 000 crore in investment, half of it being the Central Government's share. This enormous amount was supposed to serve as an incentive to the cities to adopt a reform agenda envisaged both as a prerequisite and a gauge for a self-governing system.

The Mission implied also a recognition of the cities as the motor of the India's growth. Nevertheless, the sole criterion in the allocation of funds was the size of the population of the cities involved and not their potential needs. This proviso has led to a concentration of the funds in the bigger cities and the bigger states, although they were not necessarily the ones with the more pressing needs. Besides, the strengthening of the principle of private-public partnerships has tilted the balance in favour of the metro cities, which attract private investments more easily than do the small and medium towns. From the mass of data available, it can be noted that while 72% of the allocation was utilized for water supply and drainage and sewerage projects, only 13% was available for roads and bridges.

This general introduction of the mission is followed by two chapters each focusing on a specific topic. One important objective of the mission was to improve the living conditions of the poor. The author is quite critical of the way the Government has been sloganeering unattainable goals for several decades. “Housing for all”, and “Slum free cities” have proved to be more in the nature of political announcements than effective projects. In 2004, the Ministry of Urban Development and Poverty Alleviation was split between the Minister of Urban Development (MoUD) and the Minister of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation. The author questions this split which hived off slum redevelopment from the MoUD despite that ministry being supposedly in charge of urban governance. Furthermore the hectic pace of liberalization that took place during the nineties contributed to favouring the high- and middle-income groups at the expense of the low-income groups. The author cites the example of the repeal of the Urban Land Ceiling Act, a piece of legislation under which surplus land and resources had been earmarked for housing for the low-income groups. For him such reform “are not conducive to the interests of the urban poor” (p. 93) and “there is no evidence to show that in the states where the Ceiling Act has been repealed, the land market has opened up” (p. 94)

One other topic particularly well developed is urban mobility which was taken into account by the MoUD in 1986. A multimodal system of transport was presented as the best available solution to the country’s transportation woes, and therefore one to encourage, a choice lent support by the Bus Rapid Transport System’s particularly impressive showing. Once again, the middle and higher income groups appear to have become the beneficiaries of this largesse with heavy investment flowing into flyovers and expanding road networks rather than into public transport. The unrestrained rise in the number of private vehicles in India, quite unlike the pattern in other developing countries, is bound to produce conflicts over space, no matter all the improvements in public transport systems.

From the idea to the reality

While the entire schedule of competencies is supposed to have been transferred to the ULBs before implementation of the Mission’s objectives, in reality, such transfer has been linked to the historical background of local bodies in each state. Urban development is still a State subject and in many cities, town planning is performed by parastatal agencies. The projects provided by the JNNURM are mostly controlled by the state governments rather than by the ULBs themselves. For example, most of the water supply projects are implemented by

non-municipal agencies. It would have been interesting to identify the cultural or sociological factors that could have motivated these States' local bodies to be more involved than their counterparts in other states in the matter of town planning. Unfortunately, this question remains unanswered in the book. Furthermore, the outcomes are measured by monitoring agencies, but the author regrets that benefits to the public do not figure in their reports.

When a city is selected by the Mission, a Memorandum of Agreement is signed with the Central Government and the states. This agreement presupposes that the cities will fulfil the reform agenda and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act. Sivaramakrishnan criticizes the agreement in its present form because it does not specify a time limitation, and instead allows an extended time frame of seven years for fulfilment of the terms of that Act. This passive stance chosen by the Central Government leaves the matter to the discretion of the States, and appears inappropriate, given the size and scope of the JNNURM. Admittedly, there exist initiatives meant to implement the agenda, such as the Peer Experience and Reflective Learning, e-governance, or award for the cities. This toolkit is an attempt to strengthen the local bodies, but its efficacy has not been adequately assessed. The lack of urban governance was also perceived by P. Mukhopadhyay (2006) as more important than the lack of infrastructure for urban development.

The book then introduces two major issues that undermine the local government authorities. The first is the MLA scheme, which has found support in the trend of decisions by the courts, and which gives the MLAs strong power in their constituencies, strong enough to enable them to influence the municipal decisions. The second is the question of the monitoring agencies and the audited financial systems that do not have jurisdiction over the parastatal agencies. Such a state of affairs significantly lowers the level of accountability in urban planning. The critique of these aspects of the subject could have been more detailed and deeper because of their bearing on accountability. In a recent paper, for example Anoop Sadanandan (2012) explored how the decentralization process could be linked to the patronage networks, a scenario Sivaramakrishnan has not discussed. Chapter 10 introduces another idea to secure citizen participation, namely the setting up of technical advisory groups. These groups are supposed to work at the ward committee level and to try to ensure the continuity of the project, thanks to the citizens' involvement. However, Sivaramakrishnan concedes an *ex post facto* status for such groups because they would have been formed "four years afterward when most of the schemes have been sanctioned" (p. 153).

The last two chapters attempt an assessment of the implementation of the Mission with the help of some case studies. Concerning land issues, the author regrets that capitalization of land and real estate form the very core of urban management. During the Mission's term, the municipal domain in regard to land-use planning has been curtailed. The JNNURM worked out a compromise "by equating parastatal organizations with the ULBs rather than categorically states that it is the elected municipalities and corporation which would be given the central role" (p.160). So the parastatal organization domain has been seen to outstrip that of the ULBs. Some examples highlight the anomalies in the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, such as those apparent in the MLA scheme. Then again, even in the case where no industrial unit provides municipal services (as in Noida for instance), the industrial area do not fall under the municipal domain. All of this, and the reinforcement of the parastatal agencies, led the author to the question "How far is "urban" a political reality?" (p. 176).

The concluding chapter is tinged with unmistakable pessimism and scepticism as it carries out an audit of promise and performance to date, and recognizes the yawning chasm between the two. In the author's view, the "box-ticking" approach, currently evident in the Mission's operations, should be discarded, and urban management should focus more seriously than it has done up until now on the basic services to the urban poor, a stated aim of the Mission. Sharpening the irony of the situation is the fact that the ULBs' prerogatives have steadily eroded since the inception of the project. "Pleasing all has been the objective," the author laments on Page 194, even granting that many states have continued to regard cities as their wards. It is the author's conclusion that the JNNURM has remained a project rather than a policy answer.

The book gives an interesting perspective of the JNNURM from the conception of the Mission to an assessment of its outcomes. The legislative structure of the towns with the diverse public organizations involved in the town planning is well defined and the numerous annexes with detailed constitutional Acts should prove to be helpful. The top-down approach adopted, however, precludes a people-centred view of the Mission and its operations. A large part of the book is descriptive, but in places alternative views are offered, and generally constructive critiques become possible. While being critical of the JNNURM on solid grounds, nowhere does the author challenge the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, even when it is clear that its application in all the cities, and more particularly the small and the medium-sized ones, has appeared less than satisfactory. This apparent paradox could be explained by the fact that the author had been involved in the framing of the Act. Again, while

the metro cities have been well covered, with case studies, small and medium-sized towns have failed to receive comparable attention, a notable omission given that urban infrastructure development of small and medium-sized towns is one of the Mission's objectives. Finally, in another glaring omission, the work quotes very few academic papers, in a domain notably well documented, but the significant number of administrative sources used places the book in a strong legislative framework.

Reference

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