Regional development in neo-liberal era: a missed opportunity for sustainable development

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Abstract: Over a century back, while commenting on the rapid urbanisation process in Europe, the great philosopher and sociologist in Marxist tradition, Lefebvre (1996, p.119) had stated that “the expanding city attacks the countryside, corrodes and dissolves it”. In Indian context, the above statement also comes to be true about the fate of city regions and their countryside. Lesser than a dozen cities in India, which grew under the colonial legacy, became the hub of economic activity, and their peripheries turned into ‘septic fringes’ [Giddens, (2001), p.589], crowded by poor migrants from all across deprived regions. The Indian Government, with limited resources and its priority elsewhere for tackling impoverishment of the countryside, by and large, ignored any systematic urban development. The opening up of Indian economy through market driven paradigm of growth has given further impetus to these cities, which are now competing to become ‘world class’ through their mega transformation. In the process, traditional systems of regional production and distribution are being re-organised or disintegrated under the present global era. In the process (under the ‘shining India’) what is the fate of thousands of ‘bazaar towns’ and their regions is the main focus of the present paper.

Keywords: regional development; agglomeration economies; sustainable development; Indian mega cities.


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1 Introduction

What had been common sense at the birth of development and regional economics became uncommon nonsense in this change (the global era) – Nigel Harris

Regional development has been a central theme of applied geography in India, though it is accepted as a multi-disciplinary phenomenon. It aims at integrating economic
development with spatial planning for regional distribution of its benefits to people all over. Or, as stated by Misra et al. (1978, p.12), a leading authority on the subject: “regional planning is an attempt at overall development of an area or region within the framework of national goals and objectives and integrates the economic, social and environmental aspects of development into a common whole”. The author of present paper, a sociologist by training, presents here an over-view of the debate on regional development and its outcome in the context of earlier euphoria in the ‘70s and ‘80s (of previous century) among Indian academia about regional development as a must and main agenda of planning process in India; its reflection in the Five Year Plan documents (in earlier decades of planning) within the Nehruvian era of optimism of such a development; the disillusionment of ‘80s caused due to stagnant economy, followed by a few islands of prosperity among the vast impoverished and backward regions; and finally the entry of neo-liberal paradigm of development taking shape through a few giant growth agglomerations of mega cities. The latter phase has its own logic of growth related to development of international markets and foreign investments in the country. In this context, ‘regional development’ more remains a political term [Harris, (2005), p.669] than a realistic agenda of growth. Though it does not deny the fact that some form of regional development, in States like Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Punjab, is taking shape more through these states’ own aggressing planning for industrial growth than an agenda for growth with distributive justice at national level. What are the implications of such a changing thrust of development to earlier goals of ‘regional planning’ for an integrated economic development with spatial planning and distribution of gains of development is the main focus of present paper. The linking of theme regional development to a ‘sustainable development’ is more seen, in the present paper, through an assumed direct relationship between the development with distributive justice (across the regions and sections of people) by sustaining natural resources, preserving the eco-footprints under influence of large Indian cities (and their regions) and creating a livable environment in small cities and towns. Such a development would not only enhance quality of life with equity of opportunities, but also assure the survival of future generations. To push this argument, a critique is made of the present ‘urban renewal’ through mega transformation of a few large cities, which is widening the gap between a minority of privileged people as inhabitants of these cities and a large majority living in over 4,000 small cities and towns within the country. The latter appear to be ‘written off’ under the influence of market driven economy under the new-liberal growth model. Finally, the present discussion carries more a sociological perspective, within the professional bias of present researcher.

2 Regional planning: the Euphoria of Nehruvian era

The Third National V Year Plan document presented a focused philosophy on the need of a planned but integrated development. It stated [in Misra et al., (1978), p.59]:

Development of regions and of the national economy as a whole has to be viewed as parts of a single process. The process of the national economy will be reflected in the rate of growth realized by different regions and, in turn, greater development of resources in the regions must contribute towards accelerating the rate of progress for the country as a whole….Balanced regional growth emerges eventually from a whole series of connected developments,
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many of which are of a long term character...Whatever the present shortcomings, the regions in the country should realize their potential for economic development and should attain levels of living not far removed from those of the nation as a whole.

The above goal of regional development with distributive justice was also stated in clear terms in the Industrial Policy Resolution of 1956 (ibid: p.60):

It is one of the aims of national planning to ensure that (basic) facilities (power, water supply and transport) are made available to areas which are at present lagging behind industrially or where there is greater need for providing better opportunities for employment, provided the location is otherwise suitable (Economic Development in Different Regions of India, Planning Commission).

The prevailing thought of the time, during the ‘60s and ‘70s, was no doubt influenced by Pandit Nehru’s dream about ‘modern’ India. In the words of Roy (1978, op.cit., p.255): ‘social welfare considerations in addition to the purely economic and technological ones impinged on the formulation and implementation of planning objectives in India’. Such a philosophy of development had great influence on a few leading geographers of the time. Ahmed (1993) recalls the great contribution to debate on regional development initiated by Moonis Raza (at the Centre for Studies of Regional Development, set up by him at JNU) in alliance with other leading scholars from India and (then) Soviet Russia (USSR), to name a few of them: Misra, Bhalla, Ahmed, Atiya Habib, Sundaram, Mathur, Mrinal Datta-Chaudhuri, Kundu and Bhatt. A few other centres emerged in the area at IIT, Kharagpur; University of Mysore; National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA); Town and Country Planning Organisation (TCPO); and so on. In eastern region of the country, Prakasa Rao and Learmonth contributed to the research on regional planning at the Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata. Thus, the relevance of regional development in the context of National Planning and its emerging trends became the main focus of these researchers. Bhat (2009) has very recently edited the ICSSR survey of advances in research, where he provides details of research on ‘regional development’, mainly carried out by Indian geographers.

A recall here of the goals set up by Five Year Plans, and various interventions towards regional development, within the overall thrust of sectoral planning at the national level and their implementation by respective state governments or concerned departments at central level, will set the agenda of present discussion. Furthering the debate on regional planning, as envisaged in the third V Year Plan document, Sundaram (1978), pp.73–74) observed:

The Fourth Plan makes a watershed in Indian Planning.... as it spelt out for the first time some distinct regional policies and took certain concrete steps towards balanced regional development.... A similar tone was echoed during the Fifth Plan.... the need of diffusion of growth of activity and employment at local levels.... These considerations led to the evolution of a definite “target area” and “target group” approach in planning. It was spelled out with emphasis during the Fifth Plan. The ingredients of this approach were: (a) An integrated allocation policy tilted in favour of backward States; (b) An incentive policy to attract investments in industrially backward regions and areas; (c) A sub-plan approach for some special problem areas (tribal areas); and (d) A social justice approach towards provision of minimum needs for disadvantaged areas.

Under the above approach, the Draft Fifth V Year Plan also envisaged the drawing up of integrated plans for the development of infrastructure in selected growth centres
(IDSMTs). Also, under ‘special area programmes’ the focus was on Hill Area Development Programmes, Tribal Area Development Programmes, Drought-Prone Area Programmes, and rural schemes for small farmers.

3 Outcome of regional development: lesser achievements and more disappointments

The outcome of these various schemes has been evaluated, from time to time, by several researchers [see, for instance, in addition to the earlier mentioned researchers, Lahiri (1972), Budhraja and Bhadouria (1987) and Tiwari, (1988)]. In fact, the limitations and relevance of a comprehensive regional development in a vast and poverty ridden society like India were well understood and spelt out not only by economists in the area but also by earlier stated experts on regional development. Misra (op.cit., 1978, pp.11–12), the leading expert in the area, stated the limitations of regional development within the overall philosophy of national development:

….the main dilemma has been how to achieve a balance between many sets of such seemingly conflicting considerations in the need for (i) national unity and regional identification, (ii) central efficiency and local initiatives, (iii) the development of resource regions and backward areas, (iv) urbanisation and rural development, (v) economic efficiency and social services, (vi) environmental quality and economic development; and (vii) political and geographic considerations in the delimitation of the region.

The above factors in various ways and degrees have been influencing the process of regional development all along the decades since Independence. There is appreciable and visible industrial growth in several sectors in the country. Productive capital has steadily grown and created a consumer market for those benefiting from the gains of development. This positive or rather brighter side of development unfortunately has a darker side, much more imposing, when it comes to ‘distributive justice’ of development. More confining the present discussion to regional development, two main and conflicting views can be identified. One view, in favour of the distributive justice, could well be expressed in the words of Kuklinski (1978, op.cit., pp.3–21) who, being a product of socialistic values of the Soviet Union, emphasised on the ‘integrated planning ideology’ in the context of acceptance of most general goals in the development of a given society, and secondly, the acceptance of some basic criteria, preferences and priorities which should be applied in all planning decisions (ibid: p.9). Thus, ideological substance and technological perfection, for him, go hand in hand. Accordingly, he re-called well-known conflict between ‘economic efficiency’ and ‘social equality’ in inter-regional allocation of funds.

The other view on regional planning in the context of national goal(s) of development essentially emerges from among economists who apprehend of achieving regional parities in gains of development, mainly due to the tendency of over-concentration and creation of capital (and therefore business) in a few centres of urban/industrial growth. As observed by Lefeber and M. Datta-Chaudhuri (1971, p.168):

…..manufacturers are in need of markets and rely on specialised labour, maintenance, power supply, municipal services, transportation and other facilities and linkages which, in general are available in adequate amounts only
in the larger and already established industrial cities and only to a lesser degree, if at all, in even sizeable market and administrative centres.

In contrast, Rondinelli (1983, p.381) highlights the relevance of regional integration of economic development in Third World countries. For him, ‘the argument for developing small urban centres is based on the theory that widespread economic growth is facilitated by the emergence of an articulated and integrated settlement system of towns and cities of different sizes and functions that are large enough and diversified enough to serve not only their own residents but also those in surrounding rural areas’. He (ibid: p.381) recalls that ‘many economists (have) argued that in developing countries where capital is scarce, the highest rate of returns from investment are achieved in the larger cities’. However, ‘the vast size to which some primate cities were growing in the developing world was not economically efficient’.

For Rondinelli (ibid: p.381), ‘most of the research on optimal city size at which marginal social benefits equal marginal social costs – has been inconclusive. According to him (ibid: p.382), ‘a wide range of processing, commercial, service and small scale manufacturing activities can be efficiently located in secondary cities and small market towns’.

The dilemma of logic of business for efficient use of limited resources on one hand, and spreading gains of development to backward regions on the other, is well captured by Harris (2005, p.669) in these words: “In terms of theorisation about economic development and regions….regionalism was always more a political – concerned with the power of the state – than an economic concept, add that there has always been a close and confusing interweaving of the two. However, globalisation has, I think, steadily separated the two”.

Before focusing on the relevance of regional development in the present global era, it would be useful to recall here the outcome of over three decades’ national planning and its region-based interventions, both through the central and state level strategies and approaches. Though several researchers in the area have highlighted the disappointing outcome for various reasons, a more subtle assessment is presented by Ahmed (op.cit., 1993, p.7):

Some of the key constraints towards achieving a balanced growth and social justice are too obvious to be stated: an enormous population with an alarmingly high growth rate; social-cultural and ethno-lingual diversities of a high order; inequalities in the concentration and ownership of land; disparities in the distribution of natural resources and the degree of their exploitation; varied levels of technology, gaps in the diffusion of new technologies and the associated modernising process; persistence of the dual economy with the conflicting objectives to the immediate political interests of parties or individuals at the top….The Indian experience in development planning leads one to the inevitable conclusion that the lag between planning objectives and achievements flows from some deeper malady of the social system itself. The development effort has failed to produce both continuous and spatially homogenous economic growth as well as equity in the distribution of development gains.

Ahmed (ibid: pp.12–13) foresees no possibility of regional (and spatial) distribution of productive resources mainly due to ‘the lag between planning objectives and their outcome, given the deeper malady of social system itself in the country’. For him, “the present economic scenario will further worsen the social inequality. In a fiercely competitive world of today only the strong will succeed. Population growth will
neutralise the gains of development likely to percolate to the lower strata of society. Massive migrations to the large urban centres will upset the goals of urban development. Within the cities an elitist section of population will grab all available opportunities, pushing the poor into the mire of indigence and squalor. The political initiative will be seized by the affluent classes who will divide the national cake according to their will”.

These observations of A. Ahmed are realistic and bold enough on many counts. He admits the lack of distribution of resources – both across the regions and the people, but is also realistic about the population explosion in the country which is bound to add to existing disparities and competition for mere survival. In fact, in India, one is considered to be a reactionary theorist if he or she raises the issue of population explosion vis-à-vis productive resources and their distribution. Ahmed also rightly points out the politics of opportunism which would benefit only the ruling and privileged classes. Significantly enough, if the above observations of Ahmed were relevant at the time of his writing (in the ‘90s), the same are more relevant in today’s context when the thrust of ‘market driven economy’ in India is getting linked to the global forces of (capitalist) development.

Roy [op.cit. in Misra, (1978), p.256], a leading political scientist, has also examined ‘regional planning’ in the context of national development and its outcome. He was pragmatic in accepting (in the late ‘70s) that ‘a grand design for economic and social development which ten years ago appeared within our grasp, now seems quite unattainable’….For him (ibid: p.263), ‘the political rulers have unrestrainedly indulged in raising the aspirations of the people which they are not in a position to satisfy in the short run’. Like several other researchers, Roy (ibid: pp.265–266) also believes that “apart from the faulty conception and strategy of planning, the performance in the area of planned development has not only been meagre but has also reinforced old disparities and created new ones….a vicious circle has been created which, instead of tackling effectively the mess faulty planning has created, goes on adding more and more mess without any clear solution in sight”.

Roy is of the view (ibid: p.267) that “the planning objectives and process must be intimately linked up with people’s needs and aspirations as well as the resource endowments in a particular area….The predominance of nation must give way to area planning which takes into consideration the differential historical experiences, resource endowment and growth potentials. Emphasis should be based on creating employment opportunities right where people have been traditionally living”.

These valuable solutions suggested for development through decentralisation and in relation to peoples’ (and their regions’) needs appear to be totally lost in the present era of centralised growth through mega agglomerations.

4 The IDSMTs and their failure

The above scenario is further reinforced by the disappointing outcome of a few government interventions in the direction. As stated earlier, a scheme of ‘integrated development of small and medium towns’ (IDSMT) was initiated by central government during the Sixth V Year Plan (1980 to 1985). The scheme continued till the Ninth V Year Plan. It identified 235 towns for development which were below the population of one lakh each. Initially, a sum of Rs.200 cr. was allocated for the scheme. The outcome of IDSMT has been evaluated by a couple of researchers or organisations. [see Kosambi, (1994), pp.83–84]. These several evaluations highlighted the single fact
that the scheme (IDSMT) by and large failed in achieving its objectives. The key factors for its failure are not very difficult to recall here: absence of thorough pre-scheme surveys for assessing potential to growth among the identified towns; matching grants from states lost or delayed in red-tape; inadequacy or absence of skills (technical or otherwise) with implementing local government agencies; over-focus on a few ‘mass cities’ resulting in lack of interest among investors to move business to remote areas; mismatch in central plan directed sectoral growths and set goals for the IDSMTs; and highly inadequate grants made available for achieving any significant impact in the target areas.

4.1 Other initiatives

As mentioned earlier, specific schemes meant for a few backward areas like the tribal populated regions, drought prone areas and hill regions received benefits of special plan grants which led to their improvement to some extent [see, for instance, Tiwari (1988), Budhraja and Bhadouria (1987), Lahiri (1975) and Bhargava (undated)].

The National Commission on Urbanisation, which was set up by Government of India in 1986, well highlighted the prevailing regional imbalances and therefore the need of dispersing economic growth to the backward regions. The Commission identified 538 ‘small and medium towns’ (SMTs) as ‘generators of economic momentum’ (called GEM towns). The Commission [see National Commission, (1987), p.36] observed:

There are 538 towns with a population of less than half a million each growing faster than the national average of 46 per cent in the decade 1971-81, and they are well distributed throughout the country. These are the towns where industry and trade are creating new wealth and where, with the seeding of a little capital, the wealth itself can be multiplied many times to create a large number of dynamic new towns.

Disappointingly, nothing came out of these valuable recommendations. Coincidently, the country under the grip of financial crisis and economic stagnation for over two decades was set to enter (in the ‘90s) into a new phase of ‘economic restructuring’ which took up the task of revival of economy through urban renewal (in a few mega cities) and concentrating business and growth in their agglomeration economies. This new thrust of market driven economy (to be discussed later) virtually sidelined the issue of ‘growth with distributive justice’. Alternatively, the onus of developing regions with a balanced growth was left to respective states through attracting investment by providing incentives and conducive environment for a rapid growth. This created further centralisation of investment and growth in a few (already) developing regions of a few states. Thus, states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Punjab on one hand showed higher and rapid economic growth, on the other, their development was concentrated in a few economic agglomerations, that is, a few of their mega cities and their peripheries benefiting from such an uneven growth. Also, the states particularly Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Punjab, by creating a favourable environment for investment and industrial growth through various incentives to business groups and also by creating relatively better infrastructure, have not only succeeded in rapid urban/industrial growth but have also, to some extent, taken the growth to small cities and even towns.

In spite of a few such efforts, the towns and small cities across the country, more so in several backward states, show a very poor living conditions and stagnant economic opportunities. This is In spite of the fact that these small cities and towns play very crucial role in serving their hinterlands and in the process draw resources for their own
A more often quoted statement of Kundu et al. (1999, pp.1893–1906), who has been spearheading the cause of S&MTs, and highlighted the status of poor basic services and therefore quality of life, is re-produced here for depicting their poor quality of life:

According to the 1991 Census data, the percentage of households having all the three amenities (toilets, electricity and drinking water) in Class III, IV and V towns (with population between 5000 and 50,000) is about 30 per cent, while that for Class I cities (more than 100,000 population), it is twice as large….It may be argued that only a handful of large cities with reasonably strong economic base would benefit from the opportunity opening up owing to the constitutional (74th) Amendment. A few of these cities would possibly be able to introduce certain new taxes….it seems unlikely that the small and medium towns would be able to benefit in a similar fashion….More specifically, the state governments and para-statal institutions did not exhibit sensitivity in favour of small and medium towns.

A recent evaluation about the “Poverty, Levels of Living and Employment Structure in the Small and Medium Size Towns” in States of Punjab, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh [see, CSO Project of Institute for Human Development, (undated), pp.1–13] brings out more the darker side of status of these towns than their bright future. The study which covered the period 1987–1988 to 1990–2000, observed (ibid: p.10):

The ….analysis shows that in all regards, that is with respect to various dimensions of development, there is significant disparity across different size class of urban centres. In fact, level of development in urban centres is very much a function of the size of the urban centre. This is true for all the states in India, where the small and medium towns are at a greater disadvantage as compared to the large cities and particularly with regards to the metropolitan cities. And the gap between the metropolitan cities and the small towns is quite large with regards to all aspects of development.

Thus, in terms of quality of life, opportunities for growth and basic dignity of life, small cities and towns appear to have no future in the present India. Other than routined government jobs in institutional sets up, like local self governments, region-based administrative services, low profile educational and health institutions, and routined trade and services, there are no attractive growth potentials for skilled or non-skilled man-power. As discussed above, even the basic amenities like water, transport and electricity are in a very poor condition or somehow being managed by para-statal bodies. Though the modern means of media like television, mobile phones and (basic) computer education have reached a majority of these settlements, the same have more raised aspirations (and therefore the feeling of deprivation and uncertainty) among their youths who do not have adequate outlets for achieving a better life status. Those a few who excel in their educational and skill achievements, rush to large cities for better avenues.

The basic issue is almost the absence of institutional sets up for retaining skilled man power through attracting economic opportunities. Most pathetic is the irregular electric supply to these small cities and towns, which not only makes the life of their inhabitants difficult and frustrating but also creates low momentum for any economic growth for a possible reversed migration from large cities to these settlements. One can see with ones own eyes, groups of youths from all across the classes more disorganised (and even criminalised) than living a purposeful and dignified life.

These small cities and towns of today’s India are really ‘children of lesser god’, with hardly any rights and privileges for offering a dignified and meaningful life to their inhabitants. Their ‘citiness’ and ‘urbanity’ are a non-issue before the ‘shining India’,
where the privileged and the neo-rich classes (minus the squalors) in a few mega cities are now competing for a ‘world class’ city life. The ‘right to city’ (Harvey, 2008) is a highly divided reality in urban India.

5 Mega cities: emerging centres of agglomeration economies

In Indian situation, historically, a few cities which served colonial interests of trade and administration (prior to India’s Independence in 1947) emerged as the growth engines or primate cities for their regions, leaving behind hundreds of medium cities and towns, which, though neglected, served as ‘bazaar’ towns for their regions and countryside. The rapid urbanisation in last 20 years or so in the country coincides with the liberalisation of its economy under the market-driven global agenda. In 2001, 35 million-plus cities in the country sheltered a staggering 107.88 millions of people, with an average of three million persons in each of these cities [Sharma and Shaban, (2006), p.21]. This phenomenal growth of ‘mass cities’ has led to over-concentration of economic activity on one hand and vast inequalities within their populations, through growing slum populations, on the other. According to an estimate, during 2003 to 2004, the top eight million-plus cities of India accounted for 36.1% of the total bank deposits in the country, 51.4% of the formal bank credit and 33.3% of the total equity (the FDI) (ibid: p.28). Such is the background of less than a dozen mega cities in command and control of capital and its direction of use, against the total no. of 4,368 cities and towns in India (Census of India, 2001).

This over-concentration of urban (and industrial) economy in a few mega cities and their satellite towns (urban agglomerations) is well brought out by Sita and Bhagat (2007, p.59). For them, ‘the overwhelming functional dominance of these cities is out-of-all proportion to their numbers’. They further observe (ibid: pp.63–68):

The fast growing metro of Faridabad has emerged adjacent to Delhi along with Meerut. Surat and Pune (near Mumbai) are also growing fast....Two clusters of metropolitan dominance are clearly emerging, centered around the cores of Mumbai and Delhi....The growth in Delhi UA is primarily due to the Census towns that have shown extremely high growth rates in 1991–2001. Ghaziabad, Loni, Noida, Faridabad, Gurgaon and Bahadurgarh also experienced higher growth than the Delhi UA.

The growth rate in Chennai UA is primarily due to numerous satellite towns, namely Abattur, Avadi, Tiruvottiyur, etc.

The satellite towns of Mumbai UA, that is, Thane, Kalyan-Dombivli, Ulhasnagar, Mira-Bhayandar and Navi Mumbai (all now municipal corporations) have growth rates (1991-2001) varying as 20.03, 47.42, 196.29 and 128.76 per cent; while the Gr. Mumbai UA showed a growth rate of 29.94 per cent. Bangalore UA’s constituted towns’ growth is amazing, with the Dasarahalli, Bhatarayanapura, Mahadevapura, and Yelahanka showing a growth rate (1991-2001) of 567.97, 902.17, 440.66 and 85.49 per cent respectively.

Likewise, the constituent towns of Hyderabad UA show a growth rate for the above period, varying between 55 per cent to over 100 per cent.

In the ‘shining India’ (under the market-driven economic growth), a strong advocacy is emerging among the planners and other growth-agents for the market efficiency and cost
effectiveness by pushing the agenda of growth through ‘viable’ urban agglomeration economies. As observed by Kundu and Bhatia (1995):

There is an advocacy for market efficiency and re-structuring of the existing institutional system for urban economic development….Implicitly this supports the process of emergence of a few global cities linked with the national and international markets, often at the cost of small and medium towns. Also, it amounts to outright dismissal of the strength of local level institutions in the smaller towns….Indeed many of these towns have played a healthy role in the development of their regional economy. Unfortunately, the growth potentials of these towns are being ignored or underplayed in the present perspective of globalization….A strong lobby is emerging, particularly in large cities; pleading for vigorous implementation of management solutions…..This pro-liberalisation perspective would enable the larger cities to corner much of the advantage from the system.

The future agenda of urban planners appears to further compound the concentration of population and economic activity in these growth engines (Banerjee-Guha, 2009). It is projected (and accordingly the planning process initiated) that in next 10 to 15 years, the population of Gr. Mumbai UA and the Delhi UA would reach around 25 millions each. In order to give boost to the real estate even beyond Navi Mumbai, another floating road (across the sea) of around 22 kms at the current prices of Rs. 9,000 crs. is proposed which would connect the Nava Shiva (in Navi Mumbai) to Shewri (in Mumbai City) [Sharma, (2010), p.81]. Preparations are already on for a new airport to be located in Navi Mumbai. It is therefore not surprising that the planners are pushing forth further concentration of population in Mumbai Metropolitan Region by creating another mega city at Panvel, adjacent to Navi Mumbai. It would deplete thousands acres of agricultural lands in the process. The metro project in Mumbai, linking Varsova-Ghatkopar-Mankhurd has already begun, at an estimated cost of Rs.19000 crs., though the transport experts in the city, like Sudhir Badani, estimate the final cost of the project four times higher than the estimated one by Maharashtra Government.

The scenario of future growth of Delhi UA is mind-boggling. The Delhi-planners (the DDA) have conceived five ‘mega cities’ within the national capital of India, for housing another 73 lakh people. According to the news (The Hindustan Times, Mumbai Edition, Jan. 8, 2008): “These mega cities have been planned to accommodate 60 percent of the 230 lakh population by 2021. The DDA Board has cleared the draft zonal plans, which provides for these mega cities”. Given such a thrust, the future growth of other (main) economic hubs like Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad and Pune would not lag behind.

There are no research studies available to ascertain the implications of such over-growing urban agglomerations to the regions under their influence. The extent of resources (natural or otherwise) being appropriated from far distant regions for sustaining fast growing consumer cultures of these mega cities, is not researched. For instance, Delhi UA now gets water from the Tehri Dam, over 150 km away from the city. Mumbai UA is appropriating water from far areas at the cost of diversion of such water meant for irrigation and drinking in rural areas of the region. Moreover, this all is happening in a country where over a half of the population, mainly in rural areas, is still struggling for ‘food security’. And lastly, what is the relevance of such a growth to over 4,000 cities and towns spread all across the country? The following and the last section of this paper looks at the fate of these cities and towns, and therefore, the agenda of regional development.
6 Regional development: an abandoned agenda (?)

The Nehruvian era created hopes of national development with distributive justice. It created an optimism for developing various regions by bringing gains of development to the people who suffered prolonged impoverishment under earlier dynastic and then colonial rules. The sectoral planning was given shape, mainly for creating productive assets through Five Year Plans. The regional distribution of growth and its benefits were expected to reach all parts of the society through efforts of various states, under the support and guidance from central government.

Against all these goals, the logistics of business, influenced by externalities of economies and cost effective factors, led to over-concentration of urban and industrial activities in a few growth oriented large cities which had attained importance since the colonial rule. The hope of percolation of business and therefore development gains to various regions of the country soon got belied. There emerged a few states leading in industrial (and urban) growth, with or without dispersal of economies to various parts of their territories. States like Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Punjab have shown evidence towards agglomeration economies concentrating in a few mega cities and also relatively dispersed economies to various sub-regions. In contrast, Maharashtra, (now) Delhi State, Karnataka or Andhra Pradesh witness more and more concentration towards agglomeration economies in a few of their mega cities. The rest of a majority of states are still industrially backward and struggling to bring development to their people.

7 Protecting eco-systems of regions under influence of mega cities: need for sustainable development

As stated in the beginning of present paper, the linking of theme regional development to a ‘sustainable development’ is more seen through an assumed direct relationship between the development with distributive justice (across the regions and sections of people) by sustaining natural resources, preserving the eco-footprints of large Indian cities and creating livable environment in small cities and towns. Such a development would not only enhance the quality of life with equity of opportunities, but also sustain natural resources for survival of future generations. It is also inherent in the above assumption that mere dispersal of economic activity from large agglomerations to small cities and towns would not automatically assure a ‘sustainable’ regional development. It would require selective use of natural resources and environmental management at regional level for achieving such a goal.

A detailed discussion of eco-systems and their interface with human settlements in India would be an exercise in itself beyond the scope of present paper. Instead, a few relevant ecological issues, in the context of rapidly growing mega cities in India and their impact on eco-systems of the regions under their influence, are presented here. The need of ‘environmental’ management, given the present trend of over concentration of population and resources in these cities, or in context of sustainable approach to urban settlements, is highlighted. Thus, the discourse on present trend of urban renewal of a few mega cities threatening the eco-systems of various regions under their influence is briefly discussed into three parts:
the general ‘green’ discourse in Indian context

rapidly deteriorating urban environment due to present ‘market driven’ thrust on
development, and finally

the need of sustainable development through a balanced regional approach for
achieving much desired harmony between the nature and the human settlements.

A fierce debate has emerged among the experts, policy makers and environmental
activists on the possible threat of global warming to the survival of mother-earth and
therefore bio-species, more so the human beings. According to estimates [see, for
instance, Banerjee, (2005), p.232], global warming has the potential to destroy 35% of
the world’s territorial habitats. The Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)
that current state of knowledge now points towards a discernible human influence on
global climate….It is likely that changes of this magnitude and rapidity could pose
serious problems for many natural and managed eco-systems, as well as important
economic sectors such as agriculture and water resources. It is therefore not surprising
that a strong lobby of activists and environmentalists has emerged internationally or
within India, questioning the very model of development. Roy (2007, p.528) calls it ‘the
political economy of production for greed’. Eminent intellectuals like M.S. Swaminathan,
Vandana Shiva, Madhav Gadgil, Ramachandra Guha, Medha Patkar, late Anil Agarwal
and even the judiciary have been spearheading the cause of survival of people in harmony
with nature and their environment. The discourse on ‘green’ in India is sharpening
day-by-day, so also are the ‘economic forces of production and consumption under the
market driven economy’ becoming more assertive.

Under the emerging threat to ecological systems due to a few mega cities turning into
agglomeration economies and, in the process, virtually sucking their regions (in terms of
natural resources, other physical resources, skills and opportunities), there has emerged
literature [see, for instance, Singh (2008), Rangarajan (2007), Prakasam and Bhagat
(2009), Singh (1996), and Banerjee (2005)] highlighting such a state of affairs. Within
these cities, environmental problems – air pollution, over-use of water resources, climate
change, resource degradation, use of peripheries as sinks for solid and human waste
disposal, depletion and contamination of water are emerging as some of the common
issues. They are eroding the ‘carrying capacities of these rapidly growing mass cities in
terms of the finite capacity or the limitation of the natural environment both as reservoir
of resources to support human consumption and as a sink to assimilate the residuals and
the wastes’ (Singh, p.35). For instance, Shaban (2008, pp.107–134) provides ample data
on the rapidly growing cities disturbing fragile eco-systems of their regions and sucking
resources for their ‘consumer’ inhabitants from far reaching areas. According to Shaban
(ibid: p.122):

In 1994–95 twenty three metro cities generated over 9000 MLD of sewage of
which 60 per cent was generated in four mega cities (Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata
and Chennai) alone. Of the total waste water generated in four metros, only 30
per cent is treated before disposal. Thus, the untreated waste water eventually
finds its way into fresh water resources (rivers, lakes and ground water) and
coastal waters [Planning Commission, 2002 (122)]. The gravity of the situation
can be understood from the fact that in Mumbai about 8 million kg. of human
wastes are thrown into coastal water everyday. Similarly, about 5 million kg.
and 2.5 million kg. of human wastes are buried underground or discharged into
rivers in Delhi and Kolkata, respectively.
The air pollution due to vehicular traffic is emerging a major threat to these cities’ environment and quality of life. According to Shaban (ibid: p.128): 'the registered vehicles in 2002 in some major cities were: Delhi: 3.86 million, Mumbai: 1.07 million, Bangalore: 1.68 million, and Chennai: 1.36 million. The emission loads (tones per day) were therefore as high as 1046.30, 659.57 and 304.47 in Cities of Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore, respectively.

According to a report (2003) by Tata Energy Research Institute (TERI) [quoted by Ghosh (2009), p.65]: The water requirement of major water consuming industries such as agro-based, refineries, petrochemicals, fertilisers has grown 40 times but these are not yet treating the huge waste water generated. Indoor and outdoor air pollution result in almost 2.5 million premature deaths. The total sewage generation from the urban centres has grown six times in the last 50 years.

A more damaging information on the levels of pollution created by industrial sector (organised or unorganised) in the National Capital Region (NCR) is presented by Kundu (2008, pp.609–668):

A survey conducted by the Delhi Pollution Control Board (DPCB) reported as many as 137,000 industrial (all sizes) units operating in Delhi in 1996; of these 1.2 lakh units were located within residential and non-conforming areas – many of these were polluting in nature and emitted hazardous and toxic-effluents and gases. A survey conducted by the National Groundwater Commission in 1999–2000 revealed that underground water in the city region was polluted carrying toxic chemicals and other metal particles in many parts of the NCT.

While searching a (sustainable) solution to the rapidly growing mega-city of Hyderabad, Ramachandran (2008, p.271) cautions against the over-concentration of population in the city. For her, of the 20.5 million persons living in urban areas of Andhra Pradesh, 5.53 million live in Hyderabad alone. Small scale unorganised industries are causing pollution hazards in residential areas. Musli River has been turned into a drainage. Thus, for her, industrilisation process has been rapid and unplanned due to which soil, air, water pollution is rampant (ibid: pp.282–283). Accordingly, proper planning and strict implementation of urban development programme is essential to maintain sustainable development.

Such a rapid decline of physical environment in the rapidly growing mega cities, and turning their regions under influence as eco-footprints for their sprawl, is against any principles of sustainable development. Even a city like Lucknow – rapidly growing in population due to its being a primate city in the region and also a state capital city, shows all symptoms of imbalance with its eco-systems [Jain, (2008), pp.222–224]. The city is perpetually into the grip of water crisis. The unplanned and uncontrolled extraction of ground water and disposal of effluents and sewage has disturbed the hydrological balance leading to the decline and contamination of the water table. It is contaminated with fluoride and nitrite and is unfit for drinking without treatment.

Such a state of affairs of the rapidly growing mega cities in the country raises the issue of their sustainability and, in the process, serious threats to their fragile eco-systems. Their appropriation of resources from far-areas, more so fetching water from sources meant for irrigation, and utilising the lands at periphery as sinks of waste generated in the city, are bound to disturb/deplete their eco-footprints [Sita and Roy, (2009), pp.183–186]. Therefore, the need of their sustainable development, in the context of their carrying capacity, is much desirable. However, in terms of development-planning of these cities, the scenario appears to be bleak. In words of Singh (1996, p.35): “The
very concept of carrying capacity based planning is new in India, not to speak of the availability of tools and techniques to operationalise the carrying capacity based urban and regional planning, and to develop a methodology to operationalise such a planning approach cannot be more useful and timely.

It is in the above context that, in the beginning of this section, it was stressed that mere decentralisation of economic activity and dispersal of population from presently fast growing mega cities would not automatically achieve a sustainable development at regional level, by diverting resources to small cities and towns. A properly planned and ecologically sustainable paradigm of growth can only achieve such a goal, otherwise it is going to be the ‘business as usual’ [Revi, (2007), p.467]. In this context, the observations of Castells and Ohmae (quoted by Revi, ibid: p.459) seem to be more optimistic: “...the future of the 21st century lies with a network of regions centred on small Tier-II million cities, with low resource footprints supported by distributed power, transportation and IT infrastructure”.

8 Conclusions

The on-set of market driven economy due to the opening up of Indian economy in the ‘90s to transnational business and investment has drastically altered the thrust of earlier decades’ goal of development with distributive justice. Today, a dozen of mega cities in the country are in command and control of capitalist formations. The mind-boggling investment (mainly through the debt financing) in these cities for creating high class infrastructure and elite class development, and for turning them into ‘world class’ cities, has led to over-concentration of growth into a few agglomeration economies. Though confronted with the squalors and vast informal economies, these cities provide a privileged status and life opportunities to the emerging rich and dominant class of citizens. On the other hand, they pose serious threats to their eco-systems.

Given this scenario of ‘shining India’ with widening disparities among a few privileged vis-à-vis the majority of deprived Indians living in thousands of small cities, towns and countryside, what is the relevance of ‘regional development’ which during the ‘70s and ‘80s had become an euphoria among the researchers and the planners? The fact remains that, today, during the global era, small cities and towns have turned into the ‘children of lesser god’. These are being by-passed or co-opted into the ‘metropolitisation’ of Indian economy. Their ‘citiness’ and ‘urbanity’ are a ‘non-issue’ before the ‘shining India’, where the privileged and the neo-rich classes (minus the squalors) in a few mega cities are competing for a ‘world class’ city life. The ‘right to city’ (Harvey, 2008) is a highly divided reality in today’s urban India.

The regional development, if happening in some parts of India, is mainly due to pro-active efforts of a few states to bring business and investment in their territories. Otherwise, the logic of business prevails where to invest or not. It is inevitable, given the fact that ‘the national framework for the combination of land, labour and capital has been radically weakened’ [Harris, (2005), p.673]. Or, to put it into the words of great Marxist thinker, Lefebvre (1996, p.119) on the role of city: “…the expanding city attacks the countryside, corrodes and dissolves it”. In the present context, the ‘region’ confronts such a situation under the global era. The gravity of such a situation is manifested through a serious threat to the eco-systems (including the footprints) due to rapidly growing large
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cities. Such a development is not sustainable, given the scenario that by 2050, over a half of Indian population is likely to be living in urban human settlements.

References


