

Book Review

Foraging an Audacious City: *A Participatory Perspective*

Gautam Deb, 2021, Dasgupta & Company Private Limited, Kolkata; pp. 190, ₹ 700, Hardcover

Mahalaya Chatterjee¹

Planned cities started in Britain with the Garden City movement. The main idea was to build cities with limited population with sufficient amenities and environmental considerations to do away with the ills of Industrial Revolution, with squalor, filth and chimney smoke. It was taken to a different height by the former Soviet Union. They built new cities to accommodate industry, academic institutions and sometimes agriculture. The same model was followed by other East European countries in the socialist block (especially Poland) and even China (in the fifties of the last century). The government or its subsidiaries were the main force behind the construction of such a planned township. Of course, they had their counterparts in the capitalist countries, but they were generally built by the land developers with private initiatives. India also had some instances of planned townships in the colonial period, especially by mining companies and plantations. But it was in the post-independence India that planned townships came into existence mainly to serve three purposes: i) industry: steel townships like Bokaro, Bhilai, Durgapur; ii) administration: starting with Chandigarh and Bhubaneswar followed by Gandhinagar and Dispur; iii) refugee resettlement and metropolitan extension: towns like Yamunanagar and Nilokheri in the western part, Kalyani in the eastern part. And that were the golden days of Nehruvian planning. In West Bengal, Durgapur and Kalyani were constructed in late fifties of the last century. In the sixties, a part of the Salt Lake in the eastern part of the city of Kolkata was filled up with clay from River Hooghly and the Salt Lake City (presently Bidhannagar) was planned mainly to decongest Kolkata. And the port city of Haldia at the downstream of River Hooghly served as an auxiliary port in mid-sixties. After that, there was no more attempt to build any other planned city in the state. After the Left front government assumed power, its urbanization policy was based on decentralization. There was conscious attempt to decrease the primacy of Kolkata and other urban areas in Kolkata Metropolitan Area. The budget allocation for non-KMA municipalities were increased considerably and the urban local bodies (ULBs) were strengthened with technical and other manpower. Regular elections were held to encourage participatory democracy. However, with opening up of the economy in the nineties, there was

¹ Professor, Centre for Urban Economic Studies, Calcutta University. Email: mahalayac@hotmail.com

again a pressure to increase the supply of housing for the neo-middle class. Gautam Deb was the minister for housing at that time. West Bengal Housing Board was constructing saleable housing units in different parts of West Bengal on its own effort. With the winds of liberalization, it ventured into a public-private partnership (PPP) model with some leading realtors of the state. But of course, that was not adequate. One evening, while returning from Basirhat (his electoral constituency in eastern part of North Twenty-Four Parganas) he took a route from the Dum Dum Airport which was through an almost barren stretch of land and the only light was that of Bidyut Bhaban, the headquarters of West Bengal State Electricity Board in central part of Bidhannagar. And there was a spark in his mind to build up a township there. This book is a description of constructing the city - Newtown Kolkata.

It must be noted that the book is not an academic discourse. Of the twelve chapters, the first provides an autobiography of the writer, his transformation from a student leader to a minister in the Fourth Left Front Government. And the second is about the urban situation in West Bengal in the early nineties. Other ten chapters are about conceptualizing the Newtown, identifying the problems and finding the solutions for them. The first hurdle was to get the land, and the process followed here was buying land from the owners at market price and at the same time rehabilitating the people there. The young people were encouraged for alternative means of livelihood, especially setting up small enterprises. Secondly, the efforts of the government may encourage the landsharks in the surrounding area and the resultant push in land price along with haphazard construction would massacre the whole idea of planned township. So, a parastatal Bhangar-Rajarhat Development Authority was created to control the land use and development in the neighboring area. Thirdly, there was a conscious effort to not overburden the government exchequer and public-private partnership was the preferred model for big housing projects. Cooperative ownership of land was encouraged (of course, there were some plots for individual ownership). Fourthly, ideologically people at the lower rung of the ladder were the focus of planning. So, EWS housing was given the priority. People from the adjoining villages were involved in the process through formation of Neighbourhood Development Committee. Fifthly, the city was built for new the millennium and the infrastructure especially the fibre cable network was planned accordingly. Non-renewable energy like solar power was given priority.

Landfilling was done by raising sludge from the fisheries of East Calcutta Wetlands, which was a synergic method to help the fisheries. The irrigation department was involved for constructing a drainage system which also involved nearby Bagjola and Keshtopur canals. Even at one point it was thought that the Keshtopur canal will be utilized for drinking water and transportation by fiber glass boats. It did not materialize, but that is a different story. Another novel plan was to build up a self-sustaining solid waste management system, which would recycle the land periodically. The foundation stone of the New Town (then called New Calcutta) was laid by the then Chief Minister Jyoti Basu on June 1, 1995. West Bengal Housing Board was initially in charge of the project but later West Bengal Housing and

Infrastructure Development Corporation (HIDCO) was formed to carry on the task. New Kolkata Development Authority was also constituted to provide amenities and services. The major arterial road and the water bodies were constructed and land plots began to be allocated through lotteries. And thus, came up the audacious city of 'New Town'. With the change of guard in West Bengal, some of the conceived projects did not materialize as the priorities changed with the new government.

If one looks at the book critically, there may be a number of shortcomings. The author is writing in first person, he mentions names of peoples who have helped him. There should have been a short note about them. Chronology is not maintained which confuses the reader. To the general reader, some portions may seem like agenda of a political party. Of course, the passion with which the book is written would allow a critical introspection of the process and their consequences. The plus point of the book is the documentation of the birth of a planned township by government initiative, may be one of the last one of the genres. It serves as an important resource to anyone who is interested to know about city formation in general, and about Kolkata in particular.