

## Book Review

### Cities in Transition

*Tikender Singh Panwar, 2022, Dr Arjun Kumar, IMPRI Impact and Policy Research Institute; pp. 114, ₹ 799, Paperback*

Romi Khosla<sup>1</sup>

Despite this deep crisis closing in on almost all the cities across the country's urban landscape, many believe that a New India is just coming around the corner, which will be sprinkled with the paradises of smart cities. Whilst some others fear the uncertainty of the future of our normal cities as they decline and decay from neglect. For those waiting for the future urban paradise, they will understand, in time, that the so-called era of smart cities is simply a mirage that has been foisted onto all of us so that we can continue to stay and wait for the good times in the crumbling cities to keep land values at a buoyant level for the developers. Then there are still others, whom we should not forget, who attend seminars and write extensively about how they have broader and larger visions about urban India and how our current domestic urban crisis and neglect belongs to an old way of thinking about cities and how a new era of urbanization is dawning with digital decentralization and how, as the old cities decay, their place will be taken by the formation of new orders of digitized settlements that will spread across the 19<sup>th</sup>-century urban landscape. This vision applies not only to India but also to the rest of the urbanized world.

Unfortunately, our dreams of a rosy future have been halted in their tracks by the timing of the pandemic that has crystalized even more fears about our cities. It has resulted in uncertainty that has entangled our urban livelihoods, hopes for prosperity, and faith in our future, resulting in a certain amount of pessimism about our future urban prospects. This book, which earlier last year had been available only in the Kindle edition, is now published in the printed format so that a wider range of readers can access it readily from the hard copy version. It looks at that knotted and confused urban future of ours. The author maintains that it is not the smart cities that seem to be coming our way.

On the contrary, a cluster of unpredictable events, such as mass migrations and unaffordable medical expenses, have been let loose by governments that decide and control our cities' fate. These negative trends are complicated to reverse. Urban history tends to unwind in the direction the rulers choose to let loose into peoples' lives. As a result, it is almost certain that we will soon come to a historical place, from where, since we are unprepared, we could face a future of natural and social disasters that will twist our collective urban lives and make it challenging to overcome the risks to survive the century. The forces that continue to complicate the lives of the poor are not being let loose by some isolated black villain.

---

<sup>1</sup> Indian architect who received a B.A. in economics from the University of Cambridge, and qualified as an architect at the Architectural Association, London.  
Email: romikhosla1@gmail.com

These forces are controlled by the elite, who work to divide our cities into enclaves that will safeguard their privileged ways of life. Outside these enclaves, most of our urban population continues to gradually eke out their lives by tolerating the impossible odds while the socio-economic deterioration continues. It's a deterioration in our humanity, social responsibilities, and ethics which ignores the lives of the urban poor and the importance of nature in our cities.

In this book, Tikender Panwar has explored many issues through several chapters illustrating how we could act and realize new possibilities for survival, despite the overwhelming negative trends set in motion by urban city managers' indifferent and callous policies. He has suggested radical changes in many sectors of urban governance in our existing urban cities and ways to clean up the mess while safeguarding our precarious democracy. He suggests, for instance, that the way to move forward can begin simply making a beginning by implementing the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment. He is no outsider lecturing to us from some remote academic high tower. Panwar is a war horse who has been in the midst of the battles that are being fought to improve and reverse the conditions and lives of our urban citizens who have been marginalized by the "capital first, not human beings first approach" that has been the priority of almost all our governments since Independence.

For Panwar, the city is the hub for participating in a nation's growth potential and dynamic energy. However, as he explains, if all the energy of that force is hijacked by the prosperous in the city, then a majority of the city gets forced to live a marginal life. Urban issues are incredibly complex to deal with simplistically, and almost thirty chapters have been devoted to describing that immense complexity. For Panwar, no magic wand can set the record of many years of abusing the urban poor in one instance. He has outlined multiple initiatives that need to be taken to begin restoring human dignity and lives in our cities. For the convenience of the readers, he has explained, in the Preface, how these complex issues dealt within each chapter can be grouped around some key clusters for taking initiatives such as reforming the administration and management of cities, restructuring the myopic systems of urban planning currently being carried out by experts who are ignorant of the actual human conditions of the marginalized and unauthorized residents, preventing the drifting away in the quality of life in our cities as they slide far away from the Sustainable Development Goals that meet the requisite international standards. He also shows us the ridiculous gap that exists between the actual administration of our cities and its wishful policies and the absence of implementation of those policies. It is almost as if the government announces policies in the air with no intention or funds to implement those high-sounding policies.

The importance of this book lies in the advocacy of a range of suggestions and solutions that are particularly relevant for researchers and policymakers in government who are otherwise seen rushing from one job posting to another, taking charge of our cities momentarily without adequate knowledge of our urban centers. The author has made their job of getting briefed much easier. They can turn to the book and gain a broad 'bird's eye view' of their responsibilities for urban management and steer toward the directions in which the solutions lie. While studying the book, they will also get a trusted and well-researched understanding of the urban issues and problems under their charge.

Panwar, having been in the thick of urban governance, has been the Deputy Mayor of a city that was once the summer hub of the British administration in India.

He describes situations and solutions that have come from his own experience rather than from being derived from some book published abroad or a manual of urban management drawn up by some international agency. Any person reading this book and actively engaged in urban management or administration will immediately recognize, with a sense of familiarity, the way Panwar has identified the complex elements that combine and remain unresolved and continue to perpetuate the series of unresolved crises in urban management. Panwar is not in the business of making theories about our urban situation. He has practical experience, and the problems he has identified in the book come from that experienced background. In our country, it is common for us to find a person who has actively engaged in the urban management of town areas and is mentally equipped to analyze and dissect problems to guide and frame policy issues. Only some urban managers have the intellect and skill to study and analyze problems, using real-life experiences, in the way Panwar has done in the book. This makes his writing all the more valuable for all those in urban management who need an overall and broader view of their problems.

By identifying so many real problems, Panwar has shown that there is a commonality to all our urban problems because they are all rooted in the system of governance common to all cities of our country. At the root of the system is disdain for the poor and a reluctance to improve their essential quality of life, almost as if the caste system is the guide to urban management priorities. Urban problems in our cities are systemic and not limited to just a particular cluster of diverse problems unique to each city. Whether the city is located on the banks of the Ganges or high up in the Himalayas, there are common systemic problems resulting from indifferent management of urban affairs and a neglect of the lives of the underprivileged. Of course, each city has unique problems influenced by its location and social context.

However, during the last few decades, the effort to manage any of our cities properly and for the benefit of its citizens has been deteriorating as politicians have increasingly begun to regard a city as their kingdom to bolster their petty searches for more power.

This political interference in the management of the master planning of the city has resulted in many honest urban managers becoming powerless to do their work. So they seek transfer from their posts instead. It is a vicious circle that has resulted in the problems that Panwar has extensively dealt with in his book. The most serious of such issues, in each of our cities and metros, is the downward slide and slippery shifting towards our towns turning from being good places to live into nasty playing fields where bullying builders and their customers - the wealthy elite, play games with the poor by gambling vast fortunes into urban redevelopment in the high-value parts of the city and suburbs. This is the victor's hedge against inflation. Vast numbers of unoccupied luxurious dwellings, clustered into built-up towers that store wealth, are situated amid idyllic landscapes and golf courses. The winning players of the game are all waiting for the value of the apartments to rise before offloading them to wealthy customers.

Indeed, the city has become the best hedge against inflation rather than being a place where the lives of all its citizens can improve and move towards prosperity. The accompanying polarisation that has resulted from such speculative-centered development amid all our cities has resulted in the bulk of the urban population being disenfranchised and ignored. Panwar has given us valuable insights into the texture of the daily problems faced by the disenfranchised and deprived citizens of the urban centers of India. More important is the underlying warning implicit in Panwar's analysis that we do not have the luxury of time to fix our urban problems.

In participating in the neglect of millions of our citizens, by being indifferent to their suffering and plight and not sharing the fruit of urban prosperity with all the urban citizens, the future of our cities will be very dark and dangerous. Governments must refrain from buying time by distributing water connections and gas connections to the urban poor. The poor need to become shareholders of any urban prosperity and need good governance. For that to happen, we need to read the suggestions within each chapter of the book.