

## Revitalising Our Municipal Management

**F**rom Uttarakhand to Kashmir, from Mumbai to Chennai it is the same story everywhere in India. And given the ferocity and fury of nature in the wake of the anthropogenic apocalyptic climate changes on display across the world, there are strong apprehensions that the frequency of such devastations and catastrophes shall only increase with time. It has been aeons by now when the problems associated with man's iterated adventures with nature were first identified and documented for the policy makers to sit up and take notice. The policy makers across the world have actually sat up, taken notice but the exercise does not seem to have gone much beyond diletantism.

Actually, the action of the Comity of Nations never matched the alarming natural challenges in the offing. While the developmental devils supped at the high table mouthing nostrums from the rostrums, the nature continued wreaking havoc, reminding us of the impending dangers owing to a moronic and mercenary civilisational existence informed by unbridled consumerism and sinful greed. And when Mother Nature reminds us of her power, the human civilisation meekly surrenders, appearing humbled and powerless with a renewed vow to mend ways to bring its lifestyle in sync with nature. However, more often than not, it's back to the square one soon thereafter.

And the picture is definitely not at all hunky dory back home in the sub-continental entity called India where democratic populism has often landed us in developmental nihilism. The scenario is actually unspeakably horrendous in our ever expanding urban lebensraum. The criminal disregards for municipal rules and popular bid to cut corners have left our urban infrastructures and services in 'shambolic shambles'. This is why the proverbial chinks in our urban planning armour get exposed with increasing regularity. A little more than average downpour or excessive precipitation leaves our sewerage system gasping for breath. A clogged drainage system of colonial vintage is a pronounced feature of our municipal ontology.

Very few municipal authorities have really bothered to go for a thorough revamp and renovation of these infrastructures to be better equipped to carry and handle the extra load generated in the wake of increased demographic activities. The drainage system in most of

our towns is either choked or has been blocked due to encroachments by human habitations over the same. The hapless people encroaching upon these drains, nullahs or sewage system too lead a sub-human life and any plan to refurbish and overhaul our extant drainage and sewerage system can't be carried out without also factoring a suitable resettlement and rehabilitation policy for these people. In fact, ingenious ways could be found to restore and revitalise them without the actual need for resettlement and rehabilitation of these people in good number of cases.

The municipal drainage system is in crying need of urgent attention and planned intervention without which we shall continue to be testimony to the kind of natural destruction as is regularly on display in many of our cities. A cognate problem is that of a well-oiled solid waste management plan without which our municipal drains and sewerage shall continue to be choked and dysfunctional. The ubiquitous practice of throwing garbage onto the streets, roads and drains have often seen these garbage and municipal waste finding their place in our sewerage system thereby choking them to the extent of becoming one of the prime reasons for inundating our towns and cities during heavy rainfall. And when the same system fails to respond to an untimely deluge caused by excessive precipitation, we start finding fault with our civil authorities. While our urban planners and authorities are definitely accountable for the municipal mess, we as citizens are equally culpable.

We, as a society, not only refuse to pay for many of the municipal services including solid waste collection but we also love to clear our house onto our roads or drains. We continue to conveniently look the other way till the crisis knocks at our door. We need to understand and appreciate that as social animals, we do have to be conscious to our social responsibilities and shoulder the same by cooperating with the authorities to find common solutions to our common problems to better manage the 'common goods'. Otherwise, we shall continue to experience negative externalities like the outbreak of dreaded diseases like 'swine flu', dengue, malaria, plague, floods, etc. Cosmetic tinkering with these real municipal challenges would only amount to tilting at the windmills like the fictional Don Quixote. Let's accept the inevitable and have a well-thought out solid and liquid waste management system suitably synchronised with our larger objectives of better health and sanitation for all.

An important diagnosis as made in the aftermath of recent natural catastrophes in Uttarakhand, Kashmir, Mumbai or Chennai is the urgent need to strictly enforce the building rules and norms. It remains a fact that these rules are often violated or compromised in most of our cities. Ideally, every city or town should have customised building rules and norms which ought to be strictly enforced. But more often than not, they are often honoured in breach. And as the scale and extent of violation is humongous, the authorities either wink at them or go out of the way to regularise the same against a cost. Rarely are these buildings pulled down and even at all they are, they are done conveniently with a motive. It is this criminal penchant for populism that saw the dance of death in Uttarakhand and Kashmir recently when natural disaster a la Biblical deluge struck them.

Again, it is the same violation of building rules that result in regular occurrence of fire accidents in our cities. The stipulated fire norms and rules are seldom followed. The violation

of these rules could be attributed to populism, venality, politics, poor enforcement, lack of manpower or lack of a well-structured oversight mechanism. The usual excuse of dearth of resource and manpower could very well be overcome if the same is outsourced. Some duly identified agencies with well-established credentials need to be identified across the country by all the municipal authorities to expedite the clearance of pending applications for building and fire plans. They could also be roped in for enforcement activities under pre-laid terms and conditions the violation whereof should result in exemplary punishment. As they would share the authority, they should also be made to share the responsibility for any accident with respect to a building collapse, fire break-out or such other incidents as may stem therefrom.

Clean water supply, better connectivity, better health services, efficient and effective mass transport system, improved air quality, unsnarled traffic, better security and surveillance and various such issues need synergised attention and interventions of these authorities. Better and timely service delivery with better information technology interface would not only result in superior services, but shall also help these bodies in generating the desired revenues for themselves. The subsidies and freebies, as granted by these authorities, should be appropriately targeted and ought not to be indiscriminately available to anyone and everyone. One just hopes that our municipal authorities don't just keep waiting like the Panglossian Mr. Micawber, as in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, for better things to turn up on their own. As they say, it is always advisable to build an ark before the deluge actually happens rather than awaiting the actual calamity and catastrophe to nudge them out of slumber.

### Salient Points

- When Mother Nature reminds us of her power, the human civilisation meekly surrenders.
- The picture is definitely not good in India where democratic populism has often landed us in developmental nihilism.
- The criminal disregard for municipal rules has left our urban infrastructures in shambles.
- A little more than average precipitation leaves our sewerage system gasping for breath as it has been blocked due to encroachments by human habitations.
- A cognate problem is that of a better solid waste management plan.
- Our society does not pay adequately for municipal services but we also love to clear our house onto our roads or drains.
- We are experiencing negative externalities like the outbreak of dreaded diseases like 'swine flu', etc.
- The violation of building rules and norms could be attributed to populism, politics, poor enforcement, lack of manpower or lack of a well-structured oversight mechanism, etc.
- Agencies with well-established credentials need to be identified across the country to expedite the clearance of pending applications for building and fire plans.
- The subsidies and freebies given by these authorities should be appropriately targeted.

### Glossary

**Ferocity:** savage fierceness

**Apocalyptic:** predicting or presaging imminent disaster and total or universal destruction

**Iterated:** to utter again or repeatedly

**Aeons:** one of a class of powers or beings conceived as emanating from the Supreme Being and performing various functions in the operations of the universe

**Dilettante:** a person who takes up an art, activity, or subject merely for amusement

**Moronic:** a person who is notably stupid

**Horrendous:** horrible

**Lebensraum:** any additional space needed in order to act

**Shambolic:** messy

**Shambles:** any scene of destruction

**Wink:** to close and open one or both eyes quickly

**Deluge:** flood

**Unsnarled:** to bring out of a snarled condition

**Ark:** a place of protection or security