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Lessons from the Past for Revitalizing Planning Practice in India*

Nithya V. Raman**

1. A crisis in urban planning

The profession of urban planning seems to have diminished even as cities today face ever more complex management challenges. In the last decade, cities have changed rapidly and planners are facing pressures they have not faced before: rapidly increasing demand from residents for more services accompanied by rapidly increasing inequality, poor performance of existing service provision agencies, and increased meddling in cities from the central government. However, an examination of recent Master Plans and City Development Plans, the latter written for the National Urban Renewal Mission, reveals that plans today lack any kind of coherent response to these new challenges, and are instead simply cobbled together from lists of projects collected from the various city departments and para-statal agencies that provide infrastructure and services for cities. Any solutions offered to existing problems tend to be fantastical — re-imagining Indian cities in the shape of Singapore, the existing problems of congestion and water scarcity solved with expensive and resource intensive Metrorails and desalination plants. Planners seem to lack a coherent vision on the goals and methods of intervention in urban areas.

Yet, it was not always this way. A few days ago, I learned of the death of Mr. G. Dattatri, the first Chief Planner of the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (then the MMDA). The

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outpouring of sadness for Dattatri's death came from all corners of the city — from his colleagues in city government and in the NGOs where he worked after his retirement, from people at UN Habitat, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and in Delhi with whom he had interacted during his tenure in the CMDA, from young people all over the city to whom he had given advice and guidance in their own work, and from leaders of slum based organizations and workers' movements whose efforts to make the city more inclusive he had supported over the years. Dattatri was an unusually active and well-respected planner, but the breadth of Dattatri's interests and interventions during his time with government only underscores the extent to which the profession of planning has become more limited since his time in government.The lack of planners today who share Dattatri's enthusiasm for engagement with the city is just one indication that the profession of planning is now facing a real crisis. Even as the "urban question" has come to the forefront of discussions in the public sphere in India, urban planners seem to have become less relevant for understanding and managing cities.

This paper is written as a first step towards understanding what we have lost in the profession of planning, and what we can learn from the past for the future. This piece hopes to lay the groundwork for looking more deeply into planning history as the first step in revitalizing today's professional practice. I argue in this piece that the history of urban planning in post-Independence India and its failures offers us some important lessons for contemporary planners for both our goals and our methods.

2. The institutionalization of planning as a practice in India

In the years before Independence, the profession of urban planning was just developing in Britain, and the limited activity around improving cities in India seems to have little to do with the practices that followed in the years after Independence. Most of the large-scale pre-independence planning interventions were made largely to benefit the British. New Delhi is the most well known, but large cantonment areas, hill stations, and fort areas were being built all over the city to enable the British to have distance from the native populations of cities, and

to create landscapes that reminded them of their home.[1] After the Housing and Town Planning Act was passed in Britain in 1909, Bombay and Madras also passed similar legislations.[2] In the 1920s, Mumbai, Nagpur, Delhi and other cities also set up Urban Improvement Trusts, which focused on aesthetic improvements, and executed projects like gardens and housing developments.The planner Patrick Geddes also visited India during this time, and wrote plans for many cities that tried to incorporate aesthetics with improvements to public health and the preservation of water sources. Geddes' plans were not implemented in any city, but he played an important role as an ambassador for planning, as someone who convinced others about the need for town planning in the country.

However, in the years following Independence, political leaders and international agencies closely engaged with the question of how the city should look in an independent India, especially Jawaharlal Nehru.[3] New towns were constructed, most famously in Chandigarh, but also in Bhubaneswar and Gandhinagar, and were meant to embody the spirit of the new country. The government also accommodated hundreds of thousands of migrants from Partition by building housing in cities like Delhi and Calcutta, building new towns in Punjab and refugee towns like Faridabad. Most importantly for the institutionalization of planning as a profession, a number of cities started to put together Master Plans for the first time with funding from the central government and a push from the Five Year Plans. The Second Five Year Plan (1956–61) mandated that Town and Country Planning legislations be enacted in all the states. It was during this period that Master Plans were created in the major cities, beginning with Delhi. The Third Five Year Plan saw a significant push for increased urban

[1] This was the period when planning was just beginning to come into its own as a profession even in Britain, and there were very few experts who could bring urban planning expertise to India.

[2] Town and Country Planning Organisation, *Urban and Regional Planning and Development in India*, New Delhi: Ministry of Urban Affairs and Employment, Government of India, 1996: 21.

[3] Kalia, Ravi, "Modernism, modernization and post-colonial India: A reflective essay", *Planning Perspectives,* 21 April (2006): 133.

planning. It provided central funding to create Master Plans in 61 Class I and Class II size cities in the country. State-level town and country planning organizations were also encouraged.[4]

The Town and Country Planning Organization (TCPO), founded in 1962, was created as an apex body to provide technical assistance in the form of model laws and research to the central government and to states.[5] The TCPO drew up model Town and Country Planning Acts and Regional Planning Acts that were the basis for much state legislation.[6] States that passed town planning legislation came up with a variety of institutional arrangements to put together plans for their cities. Larger cities had their own town planning departments, but in smaller towns that did not have a local planning authority or the capacity to prepare their own plans, the state-level town planning authority prepared master plans on behalf of municipal councils. In some cities, especially in the larger ones, separate development authorities were formed under the control of the state government, and by 1983, there were at least 60 development authorities in the country.

The push for more urban planning was successful. By 1995, all the states except Arunachal Pradesh and the Union Territories had adopted town-planning legislation,[7] and over 1,000 cities had created Master Plans or Development Plans throughout the country.[8]

3. Plan failures: Cumbersome processes and misshapen institutions

Unfortunately, these plans largely failed to achieve their objectives and to meet their stated obligations of infrastructure creation and service provision standards. Instead, cities grew organically, informally, and often illegally. There are two broad reasons for why planning agencies and plans failed to manage growth in cities. Firstly, the processes set up for planners to control urban space were extremely cumbersome.

[4] Town and Country Planning Organisation, 24–5.
[5] Meeting with J. B. Kshirsagar, Chief Planner, Town and Country Planning Organization, 19 November 2008.
[6] Town and Country Planning Organisation, 84.
[7] Town and Country Planning Organisation, 84.
[8] Town and Country Planning Organisation, 47.

They led to extensive corruption and extreme delays in implementing state obligations for developing land and infrastructure, and provided limited means to planners to monitor and address plan violations. Secondly, the relationship between state governments and city governments also created institutional structures that limited the power of city planning agencies. In smaller towns, plans were often written by state-level planning agencies, and in larger cities, development authorities were created to report directly to state government, which limited their efficacy. State governments also created para-statal agencies that took over many municipal functions leaving elected councilors, city bureaucracies, and planning agencies with very little power. State governments also seem to have deliberately de-fanged planning agencies by not providing them adequate funds and resources to create plans.

In larger cities with functioning planning agencies, there were two primary means through which planning departments were supposed to control urban space: controlling building approvals and developing new land for the city, but in practice, neither of these processes succeeded in taming Indian cities. Planning agencies wrote Master Plans, and then were supposed to create detailed development plans for each local area on the basis of the Master Plan. Plan approvals for any construction would be given on the basis of these detailed development plans. These processes were extremely slow — in Chennai, detailed development plans had not even been drawn up for all areas of the city under the 1976 Master Plan before the next draft Master Plan was published in 2007![9] There also seems to be near universal agreement that the process of obtaining building clearances and permits was far too complicated all over the country.[10] For example, one report

[9] According to A. Srivathsan, when the new draft master plan was published, only 56 of the 96 detailed development plans had then been written. From A. Srivathsan, "Many questions remain unanswered", *The Hindu,* 17 April 2007.

[10] Vijay Risbud, a Planning Commissioner from the Delhi Development Authority, suggested to me during our interview that building bye-laws should only specify the building's envelope — i.e., its height and plot coverage — which can be monitored easily from the outside, instead of specifying details such as the placement of stairs and internal building construction requirements which are infinitely more difficult to monitor.

found that under the Punjab Apartment and Property Regulation Act, 1995, 13 sets of the shajra plan, location plan, survey plan, layout plan, service plan, and a plan showing cross sections of roads for colony development needed to be submitted to the Punjab Urban Development Authority, which were then distributed to 10 different authorities to get approvals, each of which were subject to delays.[11] Such requirements were common across India, and these regulatory hurdles also provided numerous opportunities for graft for individuals working in planning agencies. Licensing fees for developments were also extremely high, giving residents and builders big incentives to build illegally, and pay off planning agency inspectors.

Planning agencies were also supposed to develop land and infrastructure to accommodate the burgeoning city population according to the dictates of the Master Plan. Delhi was unique in that the Delhi Development Authority acquired far more land than in other cities. But in all cities, acquired land was supposed to be provided with infrastructure, and then leased or sold to private developers and cooperative societies to build residential areas. In many cities, the city itself was supposed to develop industrial areas. Unfortunately, the process of acquiring land and providing infrastructure was extremely cumbersome. In Delhi, large swathes of land remained frozen, caught up in land disputes and bureaucratic delays.[12] In other cities, the planning agency was simply unable to acquire the required land. Cities failed to meet their stated obligations in the plan for urgent needs like low-cost land with services for new migrants or industrial estates and commercial complexes.

This resulted in large-scale plan violations, both by the rich and the poor. In 2005, 1,609 unauthorized colonies existed in Delhi, accommodating 2.5 million people, about 20% of the city at the time.[13] The Municipal Corporation of Delhi told the Supreme Court in 2006

[11] Johari, Gopal and Anu Sikka, "Unauthorized Construction in the Punjab: Myth or Reality?", *ITPI Journal* 4:4 (2007): 53.
[12] Vidhani, Meena, "Implications of Regularisation of Unauthorized Colonies in Delhi", *ITPI Journal*, 2: 4 (2005): 30.
[13] Vidhani, 29.

that 70% of Delhi buildings violate the plan in some way.[14] Delhi made significant efforts to give teeth to the Master Plan by passing laws restricting the sale and transfer of lands that were in the process of being acquired by the DDA in the 1972 Delhi Land (Restrictions on Transfer) Act, but individuals and developers found ways to skirt these restrictions.[15] Chennai did not acquire land on the same scale, but similar levels of unauthorized construction took place there as well. One former employee of the development authority suggested that 300,000 structures in Chennai out of approximately 800,000 Census houses were illegal,[16] and a larger percentage were semi-legal, i.e., they were on land owned by the house-owner, but the construction still violated building or zoning codes in some way.

Planning agencies often have very minimal staff for enforcement of planning laws, so widespread monitoring of the city is difficult. But even when illegal constructions are identified, a development authority or planning agency only has two options to deal with them: either regularization or demolition. Demolition is an extreme step that the development authority is reluctant to take, especially since demolition often brings with it powerful political opponents.[17] Instead, planning agencies often "regularize" illegalities, meaning that they grant post-facto planning approvals to illegal constructions after residents pay a fine.The Delhi planning authority has periodically regularized its unauthorized colonies, including more than 900. Madhya Pradesh regularized 2 million illegal homes in 1984 on an "as-is-where-is" basis.[18] The power of the development authorities to censure illegal builders has also been severely compromised by the power of the government to overrule demolition orders through Executive or Government

[14] Ghertner, Asher, "City information", Message to Nithya V. Raman, 17/03/2011, E-mail.

[15] Vidhani, 30.

[16] Menezes, Louis, "Address to audience", Workshop on Land Rights and Evictions in Chennai, Unorganized Workers' Federation, Raja Annamalaipuram, Chennai, July, 2007. Speech. These numbers are based on Chennai Corporation before its expansion in 2011.

[17] Sekar, S.P., HOD, Department of Planning, Anna University, Personal Interview, 3/11/2008.

[18] "Report of the National Commission on Urbanisation", Vol. II. Part III. New Delhi: Ministry of Urban Development, August 1988: 118.

Orders, which has happened frequently in Tamil Nadu.[19] Continued post-facto regularization and interventions through government orders provided even bigger incentives for city residents to build first, and legalize later, and decreased the already limited power of planning agencies to control city development.

The relationship between the state government and cities also created institutional structures that significantly reduced the power of planners and planning agencies. In smaller towns and cities that lacked planning capacity, plans were often written by state-level agencies. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, the Town Planning Department served as an advisory to the state government on all planning matters, as well as providing assistance to 114 municipalities throughout the state through its seven Regional Offices (each headed by a qualified urban planner) and three Survey Units, used to collect data for plan preparation. Since these plans were sanctioned by the state government rather than by the cities and towns themselves, they had little relationship to the local elected council and bureaucrats.[20] Similarly in Tamil Nadu, there is a state-level Town Planning Department that prepares Master Plans for 87 Local Planning Authorities, at the sanction of the government.[21] In response to the complexity of urban sector problems in larger cities, state governments created development authorities for planning purposes, more than 60 of which existed in the country by 1983. These were large-scale bodies that remained under the control of the state governments, that had little or no relationship to the existing elected Corporation Councils or agencies. A Planning Commission task force on urban development found that development authorities were "typically not responsive to local needs and conditions because they are essentially unrepresentative in character",[22] but development

[19] Sekar, S.P., Personal Interview, 3/11/2008.

[20] Town and Country Planning Organization, 107. Conversations with officials like J.B. Kshirsagar in the Town and Country Planning Organization confirm this hunch, but they were not able to provide me any specific examples.

[21] Town and Country Planning Organization, 275.

[22] Task Forces on Housing and Urban Development, "Management of Urban Development", New Delhi: Planning Commission, Government of India, 1983: 11. The Task Force also cautioned that the need for these development authorities should be examined in each municipality, and they were only justified in cases where there were several municipal jurisdictions adjoining one another, and an umbrella authority was needed.

authorities also often lacked the power required to push the city government to act on plan provisions.

Urban local bodies also steadily began to lose control over service provision, giving city-level planning departments even less leverage to implement plan provisions. Because cities proved to lack the capacity to provide adequate water, sanitation and other services, state governments began to create para-statal agencies which took over service provision, and remained under state government control. These agencies did not report to the city, and there were also no processes of institutionalized communication between the planning authorities and the para-statals. Most of the time, such communication simply did not take place,[23] which meant that development of service provision infrastructure routinely took place without any connection to the existing physical plan,[24] rendering plans essentially meaningless. The central government funded National Urban Renewal Mission further intensified this problem because infrastructure projects were approved by Central government ministries who did not base their approvals on existing Master Plans.[25]

State governments also made it difficult for planning agencies to function effectively. Master Plan proposals themselves did not have any budgetary allocation — only if the relevant department for a project in the Master Plan was able to prepare a detailed project report and secure budgetary support, would a proposal in the Master Plan actually take place.[26] But para-statal agencies were very powerful, and most refused to take direction from the planning departments. Planning departments were so powerless that at a 1997 meeting of planners organized by the Town and Country Planning Organization on the failure

[23] Sekar, S.P., Personal Interview, 3/11/2008.

[24] According to one report, there were no efforts made by sectoral agencies to "translate sectoral objectives in spatial terms". In A. K. Vinodia and Y. P. Singh, "Factors Affecting Performance of Development Plans in India", *ITPI Journal* 5:2 (2008): 26.

[25] In most cities, project approvals were not even based on the City Development Plans that were written for the JNNURM. They were based largely on central government priorities for funding.

[26] Vinodhia et al., 26.

of Master Plans, planners had as one of their chief recommendations "a request to the government to release base maps of the city to planning agencies", which they were refusing to do on security grounds.[27]

4. Salvaging lessons from the early plans

Clearly, the methods that urban planners have used for managing cities have failed. But are there no lessons to be learned from the history of planning practice in India? Delhi's was the first Master Plan to be written in the country, and the first Delhi Master Plan, written to cover the years from 1961 – 1981, is still an exciting document to read today. It was an ambitious plan, one that attempted to remake the existing city to meet future challenges. Unlike today's plans, Delhi's first Master Plan also had a strong focus on improving conditions for workers, especially low-income industrial workers.

Unlike the British plans for the city, this plan considered both Old and New Delhi within its ambit. It identified the following problems with the city: haphazard growth to the south and west, an acute shortage of housing and 50,000 households currently living in *bastis* or slums, no relationship between housing and work resulting in long commutes for workers, a lack of a cheap public transport system, industry located haphazardly all over the city, and an undesirable mixing of land uses everywhere.

To address some of these problems, the Master Plan proposed the concept of developing six ring towns around Delhi, all of which would be self-contained in terms of work and residences to deflect some of the population that would be otherwise coming to Delhi, and to enable these towns to grow in a planned manner.[28] Work was the key factor to enable the proper growth of all of these ring towns — and the plan identified a certain amount of land that would be required in each to build industrial estates and government administrative centers, which would provide the bulk of jobs to people.[29]

[27] Town and Country Planning Organization, "Failure of Master Planning", Proceedings of meeting held in 1997 obtained from TCPO office by author.
[28] Delhi Development Authority, *Master Plan for Delhi*, New Delhi: Government of India, 1962: 1.
[29] Delhi Development Authority, 2–3.

The plan dwelt in detail on the question of workplaces and where they would be located and how they would be encouraged. Delhi itself was considered not to have enough water for large-scale industry, and only "flatted" or multi-storied factories in selected areas were planned that would house certain industries without excessive pollution. There were also ambitious plans to build housing for all residents then living in slums — tenements were to be constructed, and to prevent squatting in the future, areas of the city were to be earmarked for migrants to settle in an orderly fashion.[30] The land use plan within the city was organized by the principle of 'decentralized work centers' so that workers could live close to their places of employment: indeed, the stated goal was to enable workers to be in walking distance of their workplaces. Eleven locations were suggested for the multi-storied factories, which the planners hoped would attract all the small industries that operated in commercial areas.[31] A further seven sites were suggested for selected intensive industries, which could be practiced in Delhi, but which would be unsuitable for placement near residential areas,[32] a total of 18 government sanctioned sites planned for industrial activity in the city.

Even with housing, the focus was on the poor city resident. Higher population densities were proposed around the work centers of government and industry, and lower densities planned for the city's outskirts so as not to strain the municipal service network.[33] The plan did not propose large-scale clearance and resettlement for even the densest part of the city — Shahjahanabad. The plan instead proposed a thoughtful means of increasing municipal services in that area by taking over small vacant plots and providing much needed community facilities at a lower standard than in the rest of the city.[34] Some resettlement was proposed for other parts of the city, but the plan emphasized that all areas of the city were to be mixed income, and there was to be no isolation of large communities of the poor, nor any

[30] Delhi Development Authority, 6.
[31] Delhi Development Authority, 17.
[32] Delhi Development Authority, 21.
[33] Delhi Development Authority, 22.
[34] Delhi Development Authority, 23.

resettlement of low-income communities away from industrial areas where they could find work.

Chennai's plan, written in 1967, followed in Delhi's footsteps. The plan begins with a similar listing of the city's problems, saying that "everywhere we could see the subordination of public interest to private interest".[35] The plan also explicitly states that it follows the model of Delhi saying, "the basic objectives of any plan have been well defined by the planners for Delhi while drawing up their report on the Draft Master Plan for Delhi… what applies to Delhi applies to Madras as well and for that matter to any city".[36] These objectives were listed as "first and foremost, the best possible location of employment centres and housing facilities, in such a way as to make employee housing both accessible to such centres and also protected from any deleterious influences that might derive from [them]… and to ensure the location of employment centres which are in places accessible to needed facilities and services".[37] The second objective was the "elimination of slums and squatting and provision of adequate decent housing and related community facilities".[38]

Both plans were based on extensive surveys — in the case of Chennai, a land and building use survey, a traffic and transportation survey, housing survey, socio-economic survey, demographic studies, and other special surveys and studies including one that counted the number of industrial workers that traveled to and from the city for work, and even the number of day scholars at educational institutions that came from outside of the city. In Delhi, the Delhi Development Authority had assistance from the Town and Country Planning Organization and from consultants from the Ford Foundation in preparing and executing a series of surveys, which provided the basis on which the plan was written.

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[35] Directorate of Town Planning, *Madras Interim Plan: An extract of proposals for land use and development*, Chennai: Government of Tamil Nadu, 1967: 4.
[36] Directorate of Town Planning, 5.
[37] Directorate of Town Planning, 6.
[38] Directorate of Town Planning, 6.

Reading the plans, it is clear that these early Master Plans in post-Independence were extremely ambitious in their visions for the city. They were plans that emerged from collaborations between American and Indian planners, social scientists, and bureaucrats, and were thoughtful responses to a new environment for urban planning. They relied on significant government intervention as the method to achieve their goals, and their recommendations were based on extensive data collection. And they were also tightly focused on the question of work, particularly that of industrial work.

Conclusion: Rethinking planning practice

For the reasons detailed above, these early plans largely failed to achieve their goals, but these early plans did represent something new in planning practice, a departure from pre-Independence interventions into Indian cities. As a contemporary planning practitioner, what is exciting about reading these plans is their inclusive vision for the city, and their focus on the low-income worker as the primary object of planning. Today's plans seem to be missing this focus, and today's planners also seem to lack this clarity in their practice on the goals of urban planning interventions.

I say this as a planner working in India but who was trained in the West, where theorists like Paul Davidoff are required reading for every planner. Davidoff, who wrote during the time of the civil rights movement in the US, argued convincingly that the role of planners was to represent the voice of minorities and vulnerable communities within a government that was likely to trample on their rights. No similar literature about the profession of planning is to be found in India, and there are no contemporary debates about the professional values of a planner or the goals of urban planning interventions. Yet, without this kind of debate, the profession of planning in India may be on its way to obsolescence. We need to once again find the public spirit that animated early planners like Mr. Dattatri to engage with the city so deeply. Only then, will the profession of planning be revitalized. By looking to the early plans but also understanding their failures, today's planners can begin to fashion an ethically grounded practice of planning that is also realistic in its approach.