

BHOPAL MASTER PLAN DRAFT: GOOD RIDDANCE TO BAD RUBBISH

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The Bhopal development plan for 2021 whose draft, thankfully, was rejected by chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, suffered from a whole series of disastrous prescriptions which would have destroyed the city of lakes. Nowhere did the plan say why had it been formulated and what were its objectives. How can this have been called a plan at all when it failed to make any statement about what plans aims to achieve? The first master plan of Delhi began with the statement that its purpose was to achieve the harmonious growth of Delhi. What had the Bhopal plan sought to achieve?

The Madhya Pradesh Town and Country Planning Act, 1973, provides in section 17 what a development plan of a city must cover. In MP, master plans are legally termed development plans, and this is the term I shall use in this article. A development plan naturally has to begin with prescribing land use, including residential, industrial, commercial, agricultural, recreational, etc. uses, as also land reservations for public institutions and offices. The plan must cover transport termini, public utilities such as water supply, drainage, sewerage, power, telecommunication, etc. The plan must have regulations for zoning, land development and construction parameters and architectural controls and measures for preventing any natural disaster, protecting the environment and general cleanliness of the city. Landscaping, preservation of natural areas and conservation and protection of heritage zones and buildings have to form an integral part of the plan.

The plan has to go further. Land use planning is not an abstract exercise, because the manner in which land is used affects everything else in the city. For example, if infrastructure is planned to serve a certain size of population and if through change of land use population numbers and

densities change, the entire infrastructure network will go haywire. If land use planning is done without logic, then the city's shape, size, livability, etc. will change. Land use planning and strict development controls can give us a city which conforms to predetermined development norms. Skewed land use planning, on the other hand, can destroy the very fabric of the city.

Ultimately why do we make a city plan? Before the planning exercise begins there must be a picture of the future city before us, to achieve which we use planning as the instrument. For example, how do we envisage Bhopal in the future? Will it be an industrial city? Will its forte be the service sector and if so, will government predominate or will it be the private sector? Is Bhopal to develop as a major educational hub and thus become substantially a knowledge city? What is to be the employment profile of Bhopal? After all if infrastructure is built it has to be maintained and for this purpose the citizens should be able to afford to pay for maintenance. This will not be possible unless the employment profile of Bhopal pushes the economy upwards, with wide ranging employment opportunities, so that the average citizen can afford to pay for the services.

Depending on the answers we give ourselves about the future city profile, we can use land use planning as a major tool to achieve the desired results. Therefore, the logic of land use planning and the future of the city that we might plan are intimately interrelated.

Every city has its own signature. For example, the island cities of Bombay and Manhattan in New York, because of limited land space and high demand for commercial space, have preferred a vertical signature. Washington, New Delhi, Bhopal, Canberra and Ottawa have opted for a relatively horizontal signature intersperse with large green spaces. In Bhopal we have the lakes which divide the city into segments for which the hills also have a role. A vertical profile would be entirely inappropriate for Bhopal and, therefore, we have to shun skyscrapers. The beauty of Bhopal lies in its hills and lakes, its forests and the easy merging of the built environment into the natural landscape. Tall buildings would completely destroy the landscape of Bhopal.

In Bhopal's draft development plan, there was virtually no attempt to safeguard and enhance the very landscape features which give Bhopal its

unique character. Instead of protecting the Upper Lake and treating the catchment in a manner in which the feeder rivers will once again begin to flow, the plan attempts to commercialise a whole strip of land from **Lalghati to Bhainsakhedi**. This strip represents the ridge line between the Betwa and Halali catchments, and is an important feeder of the Upper Lake. Commercialization of this strip would have immediately affected the inflow into the Lake and caused further deterioration. I offer this an example because the plan, far from protecting the lake, was its enemy. This can be multiplied any number of times to show how environmentally inimical it was.

Land speculators and businessmen looking for quick profit bought vast chunks of agricultural land on the outskirts of Bhopal in every direction. By putting up some sort of educational institution these people hope that having got cheap land, they at some stage will be able to commercialise it and make huge profits. Even though there is no linkage between the infrastructure plan and the sites of these institutions, undoubtedly the property owners will bring pressure to extend infrastructure. If a road is built under these circumstances, it will be tantamount to encouraging ribbon development in which unscrupulous individuals can earn profits, but the city fabric is destroyed. What sort of planning is this that instead of first prescribing land use, one changes land use to public and semi-public after one is presented with a fait accompli?

North and south Bhopal are separated by the Upper and Lower Lakes, with only two highly overcrowded links through Kamala Park and Retghat plus Pul Pukhta. The plan contains no provision for alternative routes to connect south Bhopal to what lies north of Retghat. How can this be called a plan? The plan provides for commercialisation of every street more than 24-metres wide. What about water supply, drainage, and sewerage when re-densification occurs? What about the garden character of this city? A plan which wants to convert residential Bhopal into the kind of horror one sees in towns such as Baroda certainly cannot be called a plan.

I can write reams on the utter absurdities of the Bhopal Plan, but I have neither time nor space. Instead we must all get together now to ensure that the new draft plan which is prepared for Bhopal provides us a theme, a dream, and a clear statement of what we expect to achieve from

a development plan. My services are available, absolutely free of cost, to help in the process of planning.
