Pune in 2020: A dream

Jayant V Narlikar

In the 1940s and 1950s when I visited Pune, I found it a sleepy little town compared to its big cousin 150 km to its west. Today's Pune bears no resemblance to that image: it is a bustling metropolis with traffic jams, pollution, shortages of civic amenities and other ills now so common to India's urban centres. The important question is: "Quo Vadis, Pune?"

"Where are you heading, Pune?"

Certainly as the nation prospers economically, its productivity grows and the urban incomes rises, the impact has to be borne by major cities. Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and Bangalore are already wilting under this phenomenon and it is not surprising that Pune, a city belonging to the next rung in the ladder should start feeling the pressure. The question is, would it wilt under the pressure? My nightmare is that it would and my dream is that it wouldn't.

What lies ahead in my nightmare? That Pune would go the way of Mumbai ...and nothing more need be said on that front since we have already witnessed the steady degradation of Mumbai over the last four decades. So let me concentrate on the dream.

The dream is that after this 'surprise attack' on its civic structure by new prosperity, Pune will get its wits together and plan a strategy to deal with the impact. It has a long educational tradition and a strong science-base which would help. The dream is that the municipal authorities along with architects and planners would have brainstorming sessions with present and future users of the city's amenities. These include representatives of RK Laxman's common man, vendors of various kinds, educationists, industries and other interest groups. And of course, green interests too.

Garden city

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In my dream I see a master plan emerging which addresses the current problems the city is facing. Protect the city's natural environment as existing today: its parks, waterways and hills. Change over to CNG for every motorised vehicle. Reduce traffic in the central parts of the city by heavy taxation of private vehicles, or by simply banning them. Instead replace the traffic by 'clean' public transport like monorails, electric minibuses, etc. Make certain parts of the old city a 'pedestrians only' area. Enforce civic sense amongst the citizens by strict control of traffic, including helmets for two-wheeler riders and seatbelts for three and four-wheeler ones. Yes, it is high time the auto-rikshaws also sported seat belts. Also provide rubbish boxes every 100 metres on the streets along with heavy penalties for littering public places. And find a way of enforcing the penalty without any escape route of bribing one's way out. This will be the hardest problem to solve.

I also see in the master plan a planned growth of housing and commercial buildings with public areas and parklands compulsorily made available wherever new construction comes up. So the outlying areas of Pune will have a beautiful green open environment.

Given the public will, all these steps are 'doable'. Some may be implementable immediately while some will take time, even several years, to put into effect. But with patience, Pune can transform itself not only into a livable city but also into a garden city. It can boast of clean pedestrian walkways along its rivers, a clean and efficient transport, a civic environment with minimum of litter, pollution within acceptable limits, planned and controlled growth of housing and commercial blocks, and many other attributes that go towards making a city beautiful.

Is this dream a Utopia or an achievable reality? I have seen several examples of urban renewal in Europe, the USA, South Africa and other places to make me optimistic. The example of transformation of Singapore is right at our doorstep. All these examples carry lessons in patience but dedication to the dream. Given these, how long will it take?

Yes this will take several years...shall we say by 2020?