



**International Journal of Human Rights and Constitutional Studies**

ISSN online: 2050-1048 - ISSN print: 2050-103X  
<https://www.inderscience.com/ijhrscs>

---

**Re-imagining, re-conceptualising and re-shaping cities in post-pandemic India: interpreting the urban space**

Koyel Basu

**DOI:** [10.1504/IJHRCS.2022.10045383](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJHRCS.2022.10045383)

**Article History:**

Received: 18 January 2022  
Accepted: 20 January 2022  
Published online: 13 December 2022

---

## Re-imagining, re-conceptualising and re-shaping cities in post-pandemic India: interpreting the urban space

---

Koyel Basu

Department of Political Science,  
Jangipur College,  
Jahangirpur, West Bengal, India  
and

Affiliated to: Kalyani University, India

Email: koyelbasuworldworld12@gmail.com

**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has busted the myth of the invincibility of globalisation. Borders are suddenly no longer that significant. Open spaces are becoming pertinent in urban reconstruction. At present, post-pandemic recovery is an important challenge globally. The need to develop modern urbanisation with planned cities that accommodate all sections of people is being universally acknowledged by experts. These cities need to be resilient, inclusive and sustainable. For cities to be sustainable, they need to utilise public spaces judiciously. The paper focuses on what makes cities sustainable in a post-pandemic world order and how India is navigating the challenges of urban reconstruction. The paper brings up the binary between public and private space and points out that wellness of individuals is very significant pointer in newly planned cities. The paper concludes that big cities are here to stay whatever be the predictions of naysayers.

**Keywords:** cities; urbanisation; urban space; sustainable; resilient; density; India.

**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Basu, K. (2023) 'Re-imagining, re-conceptualising and re-shaping cities in post-pandemic India: interpreting the urban space', *Int. J. Human Rights and Constitutional Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp.52–59.

**Biographical notes:** Koyel Basu is an Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science; Jangipur College affiliated to the Kalyani University. She graduated from Presidency College in Political Science in 2001, did her post-graduation in International Relations from Jadavpur University, and completed her Doctoral dissertation in 2015 on human rights and state politics in India. Her book titled *Human Rights and State Politics in India: Case Studies of West Bengal, Punjab and Assam (1970–2000)* was published by Authorspress, New Delhi, 2021. She is working as an Honorary Visiting Fellow of Nepal Institute of International Co-operation and Engagement, a leading apolitical think tank of the world.

---

## **1 Introduction**

As homes become the new sanctuaries amidst a raging bio-security crisis that forces us into an almost self-imposed exile, the cities that are at the heart of urban transformation demand quick adaptability and spatio-temporal alignment from its inhabitants. Not to say that pandemics are new and changed the landscapes of city life for the first time. The Bubonic plague in the 14th century Europe has changed the concept of public space in many ways. Besides, the Spanish Flu and the cholera devastated urban areas globally, including India where inadequate infrastructure exacerbated the damage (World Economic Forum, 2021). Cities that compose an inalienable part of urbanisation process have faced severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). Big cities for instance Hong Kong, Beijing, Toronto and Singapore were hit hard way back in 2003. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is novel because it has re-surfaced the fissures in the urbanisation process as in disaster response mechanism in these hubs of movement and business, in overcrowded spaces where mass gatherings are inevitable and yet need to be restricted, drainage and sanitation issues to be resolved, construction and archaic planning laws that continue unabated require overhauling. How cities across the world are preparing for the pandemic? Are they resilient to tackle and overcome this gargantuan crisis? How the urban space is being used to control the pandemic? Are new models of architecture necessary to address the politics of space? How does a sustainable city infrastructure look like? All these questions need to be addressed.

What can be understood after more than one and half years into this pandemic that cities require robust governance and health infrastructure, which are inextricably aligned to the pandemic response in the present scenario. As vaccination drives are rampant and on way to control an imminent third wave especially in India, a re-thinking of urban space is essential to build up a sustainable future-ready city life. In India, which is, teeming with a very dense population urbanists can fall prey to thinking density can be a huge bane and spell death knell of cities in this pandemic where social distancing norms are all to save lives. Nevertheless, cities are a boon and not always 'pits of disease' (Saunders, 2020) as describes by Saunders. They are a part of the solution if urban reforms agenda is implemented. If we rethink the use of public space to make living inclusive for the vulnerable, address structural inequalities for the poor especially the urban poor, embark on a growth that encompasses climate-resilient changes that is pandemic ready then cities can be open, collaborative and stop unnecessary contagion that infects and kills millions.

## **2 Healthy city**

Cities are dense conglomerates of constant social interactions with teeming millions travelling back and forth making them bustle with activities. What is a healthy city and how does it encourage habitable living conditions? A healthy city is one that continually creates and improves physical and social environments. It expands community resources that enable people to mutually support each other in performing all functions of life. Moreover, cities in whatever form they exist, in whichever part of the world, were hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. And not only denser cities have been easy targets of the disease. Comparatively less dense ones have also been affected. The pandemic has

proved the onset of the reversal of globalisation is not a distant destination. India has put forth an image in front of the world where cities have come up with their vulnerabilities. This was witnessed when millions of helpless hapless migrants who lost jobs and shelter in their urban settlements started travelling by foot to return to their native villages without food and water during suddenly announced nationwide lockdown. Many died on the way too. Thus, the pandemic pointed out the inadequacies of cities to give shelter to these labouring masses who bore the brunt as frontrunners in coping up with the spread of this harmful virus.

The pandemic pointed out the paradox of globalisation and laid bare the botched up ever neglected urban/city planning especially in developing countries like India. As pandemic demanded quarantines, keeping oneself locked up in homes, travel management, judicious use of public transport, the demand for open spaces in cities became an ultimate priority. Overcrowded areas were meant to be avoided. Even now, when we see the threat of new variants less looming in the horizon, the importance of open spaces cannot be discouraged. Many cities still prohibit or restrict mass gatherings, as they are hugely detrimental for humans in the present crisis. Therefore, cities as pool of urban population, where about 4 billion people of the world live and by 2050 about 68% of the world's population (UN, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018) will be living need complete transformation – new urban reforms in planning, design, architecture, accommodation and management of its open spaces. And cities are not only about dynamic productive life that bring people together but it is about reforming urban governance, improving space management and wellness of individuals (Broudehoux, 2021).

### 3 Crisis-ready cities

The wellness of individuals – how can it be developed in the midst of a pandemic? The cities must be 'crisis-ready' (Veil, 2020). That means they need a pandemic preparedness map as suggested by Katz and Muggah (2020). Urban planning needs to be revamped. Absence of open living spaces have exacerbated the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. And it is not new, how open green spaces with pedestrians, parks and boulevards are important and how they have helped to mitigate the problem of transmission in case of contagious diseases. Cities that are planned and organised well provide not only better networks for mobility but are a source of wellness. Sara Jensen Carr, a professor of architecture in America who wrote his famous book, *The Topography of Wellness* chronicled six health crises throughout US history and how these diseases influence and changed US urban landscape (Arntsen, 2019).

History is witness to the idea that proved the test of time that there is a very positive relationship between sprawling urban landscapes and well-being of people. Though the late Canadian historian William McNeill has called them 'population sumps'<sup>1</sup> (until the 19th century), they have been our safest bet for survival. Therefore by the end of the 19th century the need to push for urban design and planning by changing building architecture and keeping significant outdoor areas for fresh air and sunlight. This continued until middle of 20th century. In present 21st century with significant digital revolution and growing scale of jobs performed from remote locations with raging pandemic as we witness it now, the trend of redesigning open spaces to make living more utilitarian and affordable cutting the risk of disease spread has gained huge following. In India,

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's clarion call for a re-imagining of urban planning and development to make cities and towns healthy and liveable (Sharma, 2020) after COVID-19 reflects the urgency to look into overcrowded dilapidated urban buildings and poor infrastructure in cities that have intensified the spread of the virus. At the Bloomberg New Economy Forum, he emphasised resetting the mind-sets, processes and practices for safe urban living. He also acknowledged that governments do little for the working millions.

Urban areas have become the epicentre of the pandemic with 90% of reported cases of the world coming from there (UN Policy Brief, 2020). At least the data showed large spikes and rapid transmissions in Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai and Chennai. It was an inevitable outcome of densification. People were unable to practice social distancing norms, which had always been a vibrant strategy to resist and arrest the disease spread. Clearly, cities 'are not as they were before' (The Hindu, 2020). They require a reset plan for reconstruction. He said it was time cities were made to work for people. What does that mean? He amplified – "Can we not build sustainable cities? It has been our endeavour in India to build urban centres, which have the amenities of cities but the spirit of villages. Technologies helped us continue our work during the COVID-19 pandemic" (The Hindustan Times, 2020).

#### **4 Sustainability**

What are sustainable cities? Sustainable cities are resilient cities. Sustainable cities are more planned and less dense taking less land than needed with affordable housing. As United Nations Development Programme, in its report "A new urban paradigm: pathways to sustainable development", "If we get urban development right, cities can be centres of creating jobs, promoting social inclusion and protecting local ecosystems. Cities, when planned and managed well, are engines of national economic growth, social prosperity and environmental sustainability..." (IPCIG, 2016). The present Indian government embarked on the smart cities project after electoral victory way back in 2014 when the vision was for a programme to create 100 smart cities. Over the years, the smart cities project converged with other infrastructure programs for urban planning like AMRUT, the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation, the PMAY, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana for housing. However, the Third Plan (1961–1966) and the Fourth Plan (1969–1974) addressed the questions of basic urban infrastructure; they were slow experiments and not unravelled in a big way (Ananthkrishnan, 2021).

#### **5 Indian cities**

The problem of Indian cities is that these are more about movement of people than that of vehicles. In addition, COVID-19 had restricted the movement of these people so when they return to prior state of mobility inextricably connected to city life, how to redesign their movement to further arrest virus spread amongst the unvaccinated and inoculated people? Resilience is the key to survival. A top-down approach will not do which supports infrastructural development by creating shopping malls and markets. What are resilient cities? Resilient cities address underlying socio-economic inequalities and

vulnerabilities, leverage data for urban planning and adopt climate investment measures. Cities have been highlighted in UN's Sustainable Development Goal as Agenda 11 as key to future. It says, "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable by 2030" (UN Sustainable Development Goals, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/cities/>).

## **6 Resilience**

City resilience reflects the overall "capacity of a city (individuals, communities, institutions, businesses and systems) to survive, adapt and thrive no matter what kind of chronic stresses or acute shocks they experience" (The Rockefeller Foundation, 2013). The City Resilience Index, developed by Arup provides a comprehensive, technically robust, globally applicable basis for measuring city resilience. It describes the capacities of cities to function so that the people living and working in the cities – particularly the poor and the vulnerable survive and thrive no matter what stresses and shocks they encounter. Resilience is a term that emerged in the 1970s in the field of ecology. It meant the capacity of a system to withstand pressures in the face of hazardous disruptions. In the 21st century with the inroads of infectious diseases and now the COVID-19 pandemic, this index that measures city resilience through various indices have become very significant.

India has unique problems that set it apart from other countries round the world but when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, it suffered no less than other developed nations, which have been equally devastated by the unrelenting virus. Therefore, the frailties of Indian cities came to the forefront during the pandemic. The fragilities of existing infrastructure and urban planning are exposed. Lessons learned in the past epidemics are noteworthy by cities. For example, the late 19th century plague outbreak in Bombay (now Mumbai) led to the creation of the City Improvement Trust in 1898 (World Economic Forum, 2021). The Trust was set up for the cleaning of the unhygienic areas in the city and improve living conditions in low-income areas.

## **7 Density is not always vulnerability**

Today, urban planning is a different ballgame altogether. It demands decentralised delegated powers, which needs to be entrusted in local governance to manage the housing sector, sewerage, sanitation, water supply and providing accessible inoculation to city dwellers and those living at their outskirts. The conventional approach of planners will not work at all. We need flexible plans. We should not fall into the trap of densification as a reaction to the pandemic. Indeed dense cities spread the virus but it is not always so. Therefore, the argument that dense cities are hotbed of infectious diseases is misleading. Singapore, Seoul and Sanghai, though densely populated have outperformed sparsely populated cities in combating the virus spread. Even the World Bank's research on urban geography (The World Development Report, 2009) has found that the three Ds – higher density, shorter distance and fewer divisions provide better market integration and they are indispensable prerequisites for development. From the point of view of potential public health emergencies, these three Ds need to be managed carefully without upending the lives of millions. This is urban resilience. The characteristics of this resilience

constitutes well-designed institutions of cities, high quality infrastructure and effective interventions. All these components make cities stronger against the spread of infectious diseases.

## 8 Mumbai model

Now the question arises can density be an insurmountable problem for Indian cities to combat the virus? Not necessarily. The Dharavi Model adopted by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) has been a success story in checking the spread in densely populated slums of Mumbai through ‘chasing the virus’ (Bavadam, 2020) strategy adopted by the administration to break the chain of transmission. The uncompromising protocols adopted in Dharavi and Worli in outskirts of Mumbai were instrumental in containing the virus. This strategy was such a stupendous success that the Mumbai administration even shared the model with the Philippines Government (News18, 2021).

Cities are windows for a revamped urban transformation and as Prime Minister Narendra Modi said last year in the Bloomberg Economy Forum that COVID-19 pandemic gives us an opportunity to rejuvenate our cities. Not only better housing projects, flexible work environments and cleaner air make them sustainable but use of technology and establishing a wide network for common citizens (as work from home increases) will make city-level administration seamless in the end. He emphasised on the need for ‘historic reconstruction efforts’<sup>2</sup> as happened after World War in Europe. He asked to draw lessons from such reconstruction work. Actually, he stressed on holistic efforts in redrawing the city infrastructure. Strengthening infrastructure goes hand in hand with upgradation of digital tools to serve citizens and enhance the care economy since we are much into telemedicine nowadays. This propels the onset of a post-pandemic order that is equipped to stave off further health crises that might befall us. The key tool in understanding a pandemic resistant resilient sustainable world order where healthy cities can thrive is recognising the importance of urban space. It can meet people’s basic needs. It is a living environment for people to breathe into healthy life. At the same time, space is a closely guarded category. This public-private binary of space is another element and careful balancing of both is a key ingredient for a successful sustainable city in post-pandemic era.

## 9 Conclusions

An integrated approach is necessary in the post-pandemic world to rebuild a better life. Cities are at the crux of it. Cities are not dying. In fact, far from it. As Dr. McNeill wrote in *Plagues and Peoples*, that by the end of the 19th century, “for the first time since cities have come into existence almost five thousand years previously, the world’s urban populations became capable of maintaining themselves and even increasing” (Saunders, 2020). Cities are very much living entities and meeting point for people. They are confluence of cosmopolitan cultures and vortex of social interactions. Indian cities have been able to survive the COVID-19 pandemic and well on its way of urban transformation. They can sense, defend, respond and recover from any unseeingly obtrusive disaster. They need to be liveable and inclusive for the rich as well as the poor,

for the urban poor as well as the rural poor and stride up against social decline, economic collapse and environmental damage. To borrow the quote from the famous playwright William Shakespeare from Hamlet, Act 3 Scene 1, cities can withstand the “slings and arrows of an outrageous fortune.”

## References

- Ananthkrishnan, G. (2021) *Envisioning the Post-Pandemic Smart City*, The Hindu, 2 July [online] <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/envisioning-the-postpandemic-smart-city/article35086839.ece> (accessed 24 September 2021; 11:38 PM).
- Arntsen, E. (2019) *Six Epidemics from American History Show How Urban Design Affects Our Health*, Boston Real Estate Times, 9 August [online] <https://bostonrealestatetimes.com/six-epidemics-from-american-history-show-howurban-design-affects-our-health/> (accessed 24 September 2021; 5:50 PM).
- Bavadam, L. (2020) *On the Mend*, Frontline, 17 July [online] <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/article31930825.ece> (accessed 25 September 2021; 12:21 AM).
- Broudehoux, A.M. (2021) *Post-Pandemic Cities Can Permanently Reclaim Public Spaces as Gathering Places*, The Conversation, 4 January [online] <https://theconversation.com/post-pandemic-cities-can-permanently-reclaim-publicspaces-as-gathering-places-150729> (accessed 24 September 2021; 5:13 PM).
- Diefendorf, J.M. (1989) ‘Urban reconstruction in Europe after post World War II’, *Urban Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp.128–143 (accessed 25 September 2021).
- IPCIG (2016) *A New Urban Paradigm: Pathways to Sustainable Development*, UNDP Report, December, Vol. 13, No. 3, p.6 [online] [https://ipcig.org/pub/eng/PIF37\\_A\\_new\\_urban\\_paradigm\\_pathways\\_to\\_sustainable\\_development.pdf](https://ipcig.org/pub/eng/PIF37_A_new_urban_paradigm_pathways_to_sustainable_development.pdf) (accessed 24 September 2021).
- Katz, R. and Muggah, R. (2020) *How Cities Around the World Are Handling COVID-19 – And Why We Need to Measure Their Preparedness*, World Economic Forum, 17 March [online] <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/how-shouldcities-prepare-for-coronavirus-pandemics/> (accessed 23 September 2021).
- Katz, R., Mookherji, S., Kaminski, M. et al. (2012) ‘Urban governance of disease’, *Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 2, pp.135–147 [online] <https://www.mdpi.com/20763387/2/2/135/htm> (accessed 3 February 2022).
- News18 (2021) *Philippines to Follow BMC’s ‘Chase the Virus’ Dharavi Model to Arrest Coronavirus Spread*, 18 August [online] <https://www.news18.com/news/india/philippines-to-follow-bmcs-dharavi-modelchase-the-virus-to-contain-covid-19-spread-2798741.html> (accessed 25 September 2021).
- The Rockefeller Foundation (2013) *The City Resilience Index* [online] <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/city-resilience-index-2/> (accessed 24 September 2021).
- Saunders, D. (2020) *Run from the Hills: In a Pandemic, Big Cities are Islands of Safety*, The Globe and Mail, 17 March [online] <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-run-from-the-hills-in-apandemic-big-cities-are-islands-of-safety/> (accessed 25 September 2021).
- Sharma, D. (2020) *PM Modi Seeks Funding to Build Smarter Indian Cities Post COVID-19 Pandemic*, The Hindustan Times, 17 November [online] <https://www.hindustantimes.com/business-news/pm-modi-seeks-funding-to-buildsmarter-indian-cities-post-covid-19-pandemic/storyLn9qGeNGTsqWIAKpRH0YyM.html> (accessed 24 September 2021).
- The Hindu (2020) *Reinventing Cities: On Urban Planning and Disease Spread*, Editorial, 19 November [online] <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/reinventingcities-the-hindu-editorial-on-urban-planning-and-diseasespread/article33127571.ece> (accessed 25 September 2021).

- The Hindustan Times (2020) *COVID-19 Shows Our Cities are Vulnerable, Says PM Modi at Bloomberg New Economy Forum*, 17 November [online] <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pm-modi-addresses-bloomberg-new-economy-forum-talks-about-covid-19-impact-on-businesses/storyB2NevUu0V5spuFfeUkLjUK.html> (accessed 22 September 2021).
- The World Development Report (2009) *Reshaping Economic Geography*, World Bank [online] [file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/WDR%202009%20-%20English%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/WDR%202009%20-%20English%20(1).pdf) (accessed 25 September 2021).
- UN Policy Brief (2020) *COVID-19 in an Urban World*, July [online] [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg\\_policy\\_brief\\_covid\\_urban\\_world\\_july\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid_urban_world_july_2020.pdf) (accessed 24 September 2021).
- UN Sustainable Development Goals [online] <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/cities/> (accessed 24 September 2021).
- UN, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2018) *68 Percent of World Population Projected to Live in Urban Areas by 2050, Says UN* [online] <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-ofworld-urbanization-prospects.html> (accessed 24 September 2021).
- Veil, P. (2020) *Post-Pandemic Cities*, Project Syndicate, 16 April [online] <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/urban-design-must-emphasizesecurity-and-resilience-by-patricia-veil-2020-04> (accessed 24 September 2021).
- World Economic Forum (2021) *Indian Cities in the Post-Pandemic World*, White Paper, January, p.6 [online] [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Indian\\_Cities\\_in\\_the\\_Post\\_Pandemic\\_World\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Indian_Cities_in_the_Post_Pandemic_World_2020.pdf) (accessed 24 September 2021).