**Understanding the ordinary**

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A comprehensive understanding of the life of a ‘commoner’ and the means and methods of people’s upward social mobility is mandatory for urban planning. For reasons well-understood, city planners and the planning process inadvertently go tangentially when it comes to comprehensively comprehending the daily lives of a majority of would-be consumers of the outputs of the planning process.

The tyranny of urgency, the conflicting paradigms of city planning, the preconceived notions of planners, and the role of planners as private consultants are a few parameters that may influence the desire and the level of interest in this particular area.

It is quite necessary to understand how low-income groups earn their livelihood and procure essential services in the urban circuit. Life, in totality, cannot be understood by excluding the majority. A segment of society cannot be left alone just because they are not well-off. And if they are left at where they are, they would further go down. But this downslide happens until a certain period, because, later, their pain grows too much and starts reflecting as ‘societal ills’.

Radicals are of the opinion that in the age of neo-liberalism and with the prevalence of ruthless markets and manipulated democracy, our planning institutions have lost sight of these people and their realities. However, it is also true that ordinary people are reinventing governance and provisioning on their termsThe commons is rising as a serious and practical alternative to the ineffective state.

From the prespective of urban planning, the major premise for the push to understand the lives of low-income groups comes from the inequality associated with low income: these people have meagre resources and are unable to use the available services with ease, as compared to people from middle- and high-income groups – the interclass differences not discounted. So, how can city planning make the plans all inclusive and effectively operational?

Upward social mobility is what dictates and directs the lives of urban dwellers. One of the prime factors that stump upward social mobility is the absence of land tenure security, which, unfortunately, is the case for a majority of people. Conservation with noted architect and town planners informs that social mobility is much more evident in settlements with a diverse ethnic mix than settlements inhabited by homogenous communities, though the latter negotiates with the government better than the former.

The biggest ‘tragedy of the commons’ is that they are understood – if at all – with preconceived notions. The theoretical and class bias of academics and decision-makers tainted their understanding about those seen as the ‘commoners’. It’s a simple process that to understand a city, it is absolutely necessary to understand how its people live their lives. A well-designed tool of in-depth qualitative interviews can find out their outlook on life and their aspirations, views and current status. It is important to learn why they do the work they do; what is a happy life for them; and through what methods they procure essential services such as water, cooking fuel, electricity, transport, health and education.

It is equally essential to learn how they entertain themselves and through what sources, and what they would want to change about all of these things. These and other such queries define the very basic framework that could be implemented across gender and age strata. For instance, the elderly could be asked about the things they appreciate about their current conditions and what things they want to change for the betterment of future generations. Resorting to the basics is the key in the much-desired understanding of the everyday life of ordinary folk. This is mandatory as for these people each day brings another episode of cultural struggle.

Those seen as the ‘commoners’ build a city – and they do it by themselves. The real challenge is whether academics, politicians, planners and decision-makers can learn to ‘see’ them and, more importantly, realise that no city can be understood by one single image: imagery as developed by market forces.

Most of the times, city planning rarely gives any attention to ordinary people. This understanding will have huge policy implications and help to understand the city from the perspective of those who build the city and are the major users (in numbers) of its services. It also helps understand the use of city land in functional terms in different time zones. For instance, it has been pointed out that cities are not understood in its nocturnal functions: for example, the nocturnal life of Karachi is driven by actors who are different from its day-time movers and shakers.

Karachi, like other South Asian cities, is run by the poor, commanded by the elite and planned by middle-class professionals. The three classes have conflicting perceptions about the city and its operational enterprises. To negotiate and navigate among the often divergent perspectives, one has to prioritise the understanding of people who are running the city: its poor communities.

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