

## **A Hearing on 2021**

**Hazards Centre  
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On Monday, a day after Gandhi Jayanti, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), in its usual cloak-and-dagger fashion, sneaked a “public hearing” into town. Almost six months ago, on April 8, the DDA had posted its Draft Master Plan 2021 for Delhi on its website and invited public comments and suggestions by July 7. More than 20,000 organisations and individuals had sent in their criticisms but there was no public response from DDA. Consequently citizens from all over the city were targeting October 6 for demanding transparency from the planners, when DDA decided to smuggle in this “hearing”. DDA officials claimed only 6,000 comments had been received, no summary was provided of these comments, notice was very conveniently given over the weekend to selected individuals and organisations, there was no publicly available list of who had been invited, it was not clear on what basis the selections had been made, and the media was carefully excluded from the entire event.

As it turned out, the huge majority of those invited consisted of office bearers of resident welfare associations (RWAs) and trader and manufacturer associations, whose competing interests dominated the day’s presentations. The RWAs were uniformly concerned about the proposal to ratify mixed-use planning in residential areas and the subsequent commercialisation of their “posh” colonies. They fearfully anticipated that this would increase the noise, traffic congestion, crime, and insecurity in their neighbourhoods and make them unliveable. The trader and manufacturer associations, on the other hand, demanded more opportunities for commerce, for regularisation of their markets, and for removal of restrictions in the Master Plan to enable them to manufacture goods and provide services all over the city. However, neither of them ventured further to examine why rampant commercialisation was, in fact, intruding into residential areas.

The answer to that lay within the Plan document itself. Thus, for instance, according to the Development Code, there should be 46 District Centres in the city but actual provision has been made for only half that number. Similarly, of the required 23 wholesale markets, only 18 have been identified, and a dozen of these have been downgraded to the sub-city level. No new industrial units are to be permitted within the National Capital Territory (NCT) and all the non-conforming ones are to be relocated outside the NCT. And the Draft Plan only mentions 4 additional District Courts and 4 sites in the Urban Extension for government offices. If adequate space is, therefore, not being allocated for offices, shops, markets, service and manufacturing units, where will entrepreneurs set these up, how will the city’s needs be met, and what will happen to the urban economy? Clearly, the Plan, by its very design, only leaves scope for illegal “commercialisation” and “unauthorised” use of land for these very purposes.

The one issue that both resident as well trader associations appeared to be in agreement on was that of “encroachment”. They complained vociferously of the slums that disfigured their areas, of the ensuing unsanitary and anti-social conditions, and the fear of theft, crime and disturbance. But, once again, they did not care to examine what was at the root of the emergence of slums. Thus, the Master Plan 2021 uses the authority of the 2001 Census to claim that of the 25.5 lakh families in Delhi, 24.5 have

houses and, hence, DDA needs to provide only 1 lakh more domestic units for the current population and another 20 lakh up to 2021. In this manner DDA blithely ignores the fact that over 14 lakh families currently live in slums and unauthorised colonies – all of whom have been declared as “encroachers” by no less an authority than the Supreme Court of India. DDA also glosses over the fact that in the last 20 years it has been able to provide only 5.6 lakh houses as against the required 16.2. Thus, both the Plan provisions as well as its likely implementation contain the seeds of further “encroachment” and illegalisation.

Apart from traffic congestion, civic services and utilities did not figure in the hearing. This was unfortunate, because this is the backbone of the city and the Master Plan is deliciously vague about these aspects. 280 lakh trips are projected for 2021, and of these only 20% are supposed to be by private transport, but, apart from the Metro, there is no mention of any other form of public transport. There are no provisions for pedestrians and cyclists either. Clearly, therefore, the planners envisage the private car as the primary mover of commuters in the future. Similarly, it has been spelt out that 8800 megawatts of power, 1840 million gallons per day of water, and 11,100 hectares of land for solid waste disposal, will be required by 2021, but there is no detail of where all these will come from. Both residents and traders did not appear to be concerned about these vital issues during the hearing.

In any case, at best, these associations represent only 20% of the population of the city. The remaining 80%, which consists of the lower middle-class and the urban working poor, were given short shrift during the hearing. Right towards the fag end, when the traders and residents had had their say and left, and the hall was virtually empty, did the Convenor of the DDA panel call upon the “others” to depose. These others consisted of representatives of women and children, workers and vendors, cyclists and pedestrians, slum dwellers and residents of unauthorised colonies, and they offered detailed critiques and powerful suggestions on all the above issues. The substance of their argument was “cut your coat according to your cloth”. They pointed the way towards full employment, equitable distribution of resources, and sustainable development. But the panel was in little mood to listen, interrupting frequently asking speakers to “be brief”, and shuffling papers and whispering amongst themselves in their anxiety to be done for the day.

The presence of the panel itself violated most of the democratic norms spelt out in the Constitution of India. Thus, according to the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment, planning is the preserve of the decentralised local urban bodies. DDA has no business any more in making a Master Plan and then asking citizens to comment. It should be the other way around, with citizens groups making local plans and DDA assembling all of them together into a cohesive whole. Even if DDA is presenting a final document for extensive public discussion, adequate public notice has to be given to all parties through appropriate media, and DDA cannot constitute a panel of its own officers to judge its own case. By proceeding in the manner that it has done DDA has maintained its role as “master” and reduced all citizens to supplicants. The tragedy is that, in the deliberately manufactured din over an illusory world-class city, this complete mockery of democracy is being facilitated by the courts, the administration, the media, and the elite of the city.

[1153 words]