

Blueprint and reality: Navi Mumbai, the city of the 21st century[☆]

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Abstract

Navi Mumbai, perhaps world's largest new town, was born with a specific purpose: to decongest Mumbai (previously Bombay) and become an alternative haven for the multitudes that throng Mumbai from different parts of India. Much has been written about this new town and its gigantic task. At different stages of growth, scholars and citizens have tried to assess the success rate of this metro-scale alternative. Not a chance-erected-chance-directed city, the concept originated as an outcome of intense brainstorming by highest-level think tank of Maharashtra state, which laid down the fundamental principles of metropolitan planning in India, and put it into practice. These pioneering principles found nourishment in the socialistic/liberal leaning of the rulers of post-independence era.

Three decades have passed since its inception. Meanwhile, a big event of our times, the globalisation phenomenon, has swept the world.

Looking back to evaluate the achievements of the city, this paper posits that success and failure of Navi Mumbai (previously New Bombay) cannot be evaluated in isolation from the ambient regional/metropolitan principles and practices and inherent trends. The paper posits that since the globalisation phenomenon has reached the Indian shores in 1991, there has been a gradual dissolution of the fundamental socio-politico-economic values and principles associated with the post-independence era. In Maharashtra, there has been a perceptible reversal in the regional/metropolitan planning principles and industrial policies in comparison to the trend that was set in the early 1960s. For Navi Mumbai, it has meant the dissolution of its very cause of existence. Many of its stated objectives are perhaps not relevant any more.

The paper postulates that both Mumbai and Navi Mumbai, in different degrees, are showing signs typical of a city with global aspirations. In a reversal of previous principles of decentralisation, a host of policies and initiatives are trying to restore Mumbai to its primate glory of the past, the ground realities notwithstanding. Contrary to the aspirations of the bygone era, Mumbai and Navi Mumbai are no longer complementary cities; they are competitors eyeing the global market. The success/failure of Navi Mumbai can be understood better in the context of this changed atmosphere, against fresh parameters.

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Introduction

With the dawn of the Soviet Socialist era in 1918, there were conscious efforts to ameliorate the disparities between large cities and backward villages. The state endeavoured, on the one hand, to contain the growth of the existing cities through strict control measures and on the other hand to equip backward areas with new economic engines. Industrial decentralisation and balanced regional development were used as major tools of economic reconstruction in the war-ravaged republic (Kopp, 1970).

The notable features of the era were:

- socialisation of land as a resource—all land belonged to the state;
- urban planning on a blank canvas;
- industrial decentralisation;
- planning for balanced regional development as opposed to single focus on any given city; and
- control of growth of primate cities.

In England, Ebenezer Howard in the early part of the 20th century (1902) brought about the movement of ‘garden city’ or new towns to counter the ills of London. These were private initiatives until well into the mid-century, when laws (1946) were passed to procure private land in bulk for new towns as a ‘public purpose’.

In the following section, we shall see how the Soviet principles of economic reconstruction and Howard’s principles of physical decentralisation were interwoven into a new idiom in urban planning and development while India was rising from the ashes of a colonial past.

Post-1947-India, akin to post-1918-Soviet Union, was going through a phase of nation-building based on liberal/socialistic socio-political values. Nehruvian principles of socialism, promoted industrial decentralisation on a large scale to bring about economic growth. The National Five-Year Plan model was adopted following the Soviet precedent. Production centres in the industrial sector, premier educational and research institutes were set up in relatively backward areas. The early 1960s saw economic regional planning develop as a tool for balanced development. Hand in hand, primacy of large cities was viewed as something to be curtailed through controls. In the Third Five-Year Plan (1961–1966), it was decided to lure industries away from cities with incentives. The new towns, as a discernible phenomenon in India, started with the decentralisation of industry. Durgapur, Bhilai, Bokaro are a few of about 100 new towns set up in independent India under the principle (Sivaramakrishnan, 1982).

Government-sponsored industry-oriented ‘urban centres’ or new towns were set up drawing from the economic principles of the Soviets. There was a constant overtone to develop them as model ‘employee townships’ especially in the public sector, with ideal levels of facilities. The physical principles had similarities with the ‘garden city’ concept of Ebenezer Howard. They were essentially oriented to be ‘self-contained’ in terms of jobs, amenities and housing, artificially limited in size and population. Many of them were established before the Third Five-Year Plan consolidated the industrial decentralisation principles.

How the stage was set for Navi Mumbai: Industrial decentralisation and metropolitan planning in Maharashtra—1955–1975

Amid the first decade of nation building and reconstruction, the state of Maharashtra was formed in May, 1960. In October 1960, a Board of Industrial Development was set up which later became the Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) in August 1962. Maharashtra was the first state to establish an industrial development corporation. It was also the first to pass legislation on urban and regional planning (Maharashtra Regional & Town Planning Act popularly known as the MR&TP Act 1966). In its first year of establishment MIDC came up with 14 industrial enclaves which were to be spread into interior areas. It installed potable water plants both for industrial and domestic use, which stabilized population near the

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