Civic problems of Kolkata

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Abstract:

The evolving process of urbanization is associated with multiple difficulties of which civic problem stands at the forefront. In daily life, due to the dearth of civic awareness and initiatives on several grounds, a sense of deprivation arose among the citizenry. Kolkata being one of the oldest cities in India has been facing the enormous pressure of urbanization coupled with an accelerating amount of expectation. Amidst this, the prevalence of certain specific glitches beyond the scale of tolerance fuels the grievance of citizens as a whole. Slum issue and pollution have appeared as two of the most concerning matters that need continuous attention to get addressed.

This particular paper aims to fathom the content and level of civic problems of Kolkata with a special focus on issues of slums and pollution. How the citizens are getting affected and what policies have been taken on the part of the administrators to resolve the issue have been discussed in detail. A call for people-centric policy, the requirement of insight in matters of policy formulation and implementation process was realized. Simultaneously the question stands up about the role and responsibility of the citizens in mitigating the daily hazards. The State and its administration can bring fruitful results only when the masses also become aware of their activities. How the collaboration of people-centric governance and rule-abiding citizens yield positive results is the matter of investigation of this paper.

Key Words: Urban Life, Civic problems, Policy, Ignorance, Self-awareness

'The City of Joy', 'The Living City'- since her birth Calcutta or Kolkata has acquired these allegorical feathers on her crown. The former British capital deserves a particular mention whenever one talks of urban life in India. In today's globalizing world as a metropolitan city, Kolkata has generated more and more expectations for her well-wishers. Expectation means something better or moving towards progress but one has to keep in mind that no progress can be done without rectifying the present errors. Thus while thinking of Kolkata as a global city one has to emphasize the current problems that have stood as impediments on the way of development. None other than civic problems demand a special mention in this context because among various types of problems civic problem is such a thing which a citizen faces regularly. Therefore special focus needs to be given to the civic problems of Kolkata with special reference to the slum and pollution problem in the city. The dictionary defines the word 'civic' as relating to, or derived from, a city or citizen; relating to man as a member of society or civil affairs. To put it simply, civic problem means those hazards which are related to city life or urban life. It is quite natural that if a city becomes big her problems will also escalate instantaneously. Kolkata as a metropolitan city is no exception but the

level of civic problem in this heritage city is reaching unanticipated heights. Starting from famous 'bandh culture' to lack of entrepreneurship-the list will become lengthy but blindly pointing out problems will not bring any solution, rather one has to be careful while preparing the content. Highlights will be on those issues which are the root of other problems. Two such issues are- the problem of slums and pollution in Kolkata. A detailed study on them will reveal that these issues have snowballing effects on other things like health, cleanliness, good environment which are prerequisites for living a decent life.

On slum issue to start with, Kolkata has probably the largest number of footpath dwellers and the most extensive slums of any city in the world. The slums of Kolkata can be divided into three groups: the older ones, up to 150 years old, in the heart of the city, are associated with early urbanization. The second group dates from the 1940s and 1950s and emerged as an outcome of industrialization-based rural-urban migration, locating themselves around industrial sites and near infra-structural arteries. The third group came into being after the independence of India and took vacant urban lands and areas along roads, canals, and on marginal lands. In 2001, 1.5 million people, or one-third of Kolkata's population, lived in 2011 registered and 3500 unregistered slums. The 1956 Slum Act defines slums as 'those areas where buildings are in any respect unfit for human habitation'. Slums grew rapidly in Kolkata because the city was the hub of all commercial activities from the British period and cheap labor was necessary for all sorts of industrial and commercial activities. Workers from surrounding areas came and get concentrated in the city to taste their fate, gradually space problems occurred due to this over-concentration of the population which resulted in the development of inestimable slums. There is a host of different slum categories, primarily divided into two categories: 1.Registered slums or bustees- these slums are recognized by the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC) based on land title; since 1980, they have been taken over by the CMC for letting/lease to slum dwellers and 2. Unregistered slums- this comprises slums on the land encroaching settlements. The bustee type generally has some form of secure tenure or ownership rights based on land rent or lease, with structures built by the slum dwellers, or house rental/lease of structures built by third parties. Tenure security is, in principle, not available to the unregistered land encroaching settlements on roadsides (jhupri), along canals (khaldhar), or on another vacant land (udbastu). It is envisaged that the number of urban poor will increase considerably shortly due to natural growth and in-migration, combined with a lack of well planned and long-term intervention strategies. Slums were always seen as a matter of negligence and revulsion. From common people to policymakers none felt the need to improve the unhealthy condition in which they live rather civic people are eager to support the eviction programme of bastibasis or slum dwellers. These poverty-stricken people among whom a large section belong to the BPL category are often marked as a source of disease, root cause of unhygienic atmosphere, and a black spot on the beauty of the city. Surprisingly, even the administration is not much anxious about the unhealthy condition of the slum dwellers. The increasing number of slums has now raised the eyebrows of the policymakers as the city is facing space trouble at an alarming scale along with other problems regarding slums. Over the decade population concentration in the city has only moved upward. After independence during the '70s-'80s, a decentralization process occurred concerning jobs and settlement as people started moving to the suburbs because of the growth of new industries and other work scopes. Salt Lake, Kalyani, Haldia can be cited as examples of the new area with potentialities. But this trend did not last long as re-centralization emerged holding hands with liberalization and globalization process. The new type of work culture, the temptation of leading a sophisticated urban life dragged people towards the city. The proper step was needed to

arrange settlements for these huge sections of people. Like 'Aladin's magic lamp' Kolkata saw the speedy growth of flat culture here and there. Many times this happened at the cost of eviction of slum dwellers from different places. This situation brought another trouble. Globalization and liberalization have given birth to various industries both large and small in size, in which often cheap daily labour is required. This has enhanced the scope of income for the poor section of the society. Besides this, unskilled labourers have engaged themselves with daily works like rickshaw pulling, load-carrying, etc. When these people are driven out by Government for the sake of providing shelter to the educated skilled section in the name of construction of 'housing estates or complex' without arranging any rehabilitation scheme for them (slum dwellers) the situation takes a worse form. First, one can see anger, grievance, and protest on the part of slum dwellers most of which goes in vain and the ultimate result is the encroachment of footpaths as an alternative shelter. This encroachment is often tagged as illegal and it creates a daily disturbance for the common people. Pavement dwellers do not find enough space to walk as the footpath has already become the private property of the hawkers and thanks to the vote bank policy of political parties which acts as a legal seal on this illegal encroachment. Slum Dweller's encroachment endeavor has added spice to this complex situation. The irony is that while political parties, 'Netas' all are very sensitive to the case of Hawkers but on the question of slum dwellers we find a different character of them. This is mainly because slum dwellers do not have voter identity cards, ration cards and therefore they are not falling under the voter category. They do not even have a permanent address. The administration does not feel the need to provide the necessities of life (like access to pure drinking water, proper sanitation facility) and proper education so that they can rise from this ugly living style. During any mega event in the city maybe it is any type of sports event or visit of dignitaries, the administration becomes industrious to hide the shame of slums by either moving them from here to there or covering up the slums with banners and clothes. Whenever the question of arranging a settlement for them comes to the forefront the Government tries to avoid the issue by giving excuses for the non-availability of land. In 1987 a proposal had been made by the Mayor's advisory council for the Calcutta Metropolitan Corporation (CMC) to charge the city's 60,000 pavement dwellers a daily rent of rupees one. But it did not give any right to the slum dwellers to claim the right of permanent occupation. It was also said that they could be evicted at any time in the public interest. This policy came under criticism as many people thought marked this process as nothing but the introduction of 'Goonda Raj' as the government's eye is only on money-making from the marginal sections without any redress of their suffering. It is often noticed that the government is declaring housing plans for the poor at a cheaper rate but when the time comes for allotment nepotism, patronage win the battle. Therefore the question of security of slum dwellers who live in footpaths, under the flyover, on the railway platforms remains unresolved. The only ray of hope is that today in the era of human development some initiatives have been taken by different NGOs to sort out the problems of slum dwellers and the Government is willingly or unwillingly joining hands with them in these initiatives. Most NGOs are facilitating organizations, which have been proven to be capable of organizing development programmes with both local and/or donor funding. They demonstrate vastly different skills and capacities in a range of sectors including community development, women's development, child care facilities, vocational training, physical slum improvement, and housing. It would be a violation of truth if we say that the Government has never taken any step for the betterment of the life of slum dwellers but the efforts suffered from lack of tenacity and thus failed to achieve the target. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Indian government had a policy of 'no slums cities'. This warranted forceful resettlement and rehabilitation of slum dwellers. However, this didn't

help in making cities slums-free. Then the Government started implementing slum upgrade programmes under which infrastructure development was encouraged. Since 1972 the Government of India initiated a programme called Environmental Improvement of Urban Slums under which priority to drinking water and sanitation was given. Again in 1996, the government initiated the National Slum Development Programme with substantial fund allocation. It had a specified focus on providing drinking water and community toilets. After spending close to Rs3,100 crore in nine years, it was discontinued. Now day Human rights activists are taking initiatives to look after the basic needs of slum dwellers so that malnutrition, the spread of disease due to proper sanitation facility, etc can be avoided and the city can get back a healthy and hygienic life. All these ventures are heartily welcome but most importantly what is needed is a continuous effort rather than sporadic and short-lived enthusiasm. Slum-dwellers are the victim of an evil triangle that is poverty, ignorance, and disease, only when these demons will be killed one can imagine the magical image of the city.

Another major issue of concern is Pollution which is taking a dangerous shape not only in Kolkata but all over the World. The dramatic change in atmosphere, growing level of heat, tear in ozone lair all are fruits of this devil- 'pollution'. Though it is a matter of global concern still Kolkata has justified reason to get scared. According to the recent statistics Kolkata has upstaged Delhi as the air pollution capital in India accounting for more deaths due to lung cancer and heart attack than the capital city. Pollution can be classified into several segments like air pollution, water pollution, noise pollution, etc. Needless to say each of them is harmful to the people. Our focus will be on levels of pollution in the city, their impact on citizens, and the role of Government or administration in contesting this problem. To start with air pollution has become a real threat to the common people with the growth of urbanization. Huge traffic is the main reason for such pollution. An ongoing global air pollution study by the US-based National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has found that carbon monoxide emitted by cars combine with nitrogen dioxide present in the city atmosphere to cause serious damage to human lungs. More than 18 persons per one lakh people in Kolkata fall victim to lung cancer every year compared to the next highest 13 per one lakh in Delhi, according to environmental scientist and advisor of Chittaranjan National Cancer Institute (CNCI), Twisha Lahiri. CNCI scientists maintain that more than seven in 10 people here suffer from various kinds of respiratory disorders, including children as well as elderly people. Lahiri said roadside hawkers, shop owners, traffic policemen, auto-rickshaw drivers, rickshaw-pullers, and others who spend long hours on the road are the most vulnerable. The scientists said children mainly suffer from breathing difficulties like asthma while elderly people are victims of lung cancer. The story of pollution does not stop here. Another type of pollution that is interrelated with air pollution is noise pollution. .According to a definition- 'noise pollution is excessive, displeasing human, animal or machine-created environmental noise that disrupts the activity or balance of human or animal life.' For air pollution one can blame all sorts of unexamined old vehicles but in making noise pollution successful both the old and the new vehicles are equally enthusiastic. Though the Pollution Control Board has declared 65 decibels as the upper limit of making noise, unfortunately, neither the 'civic' nor the 'un civic' people have taken any initiative to maintain this rule. It can be said exception has become the rule in Kolkata in making noise. Based on International Regulation, The Central Pollution Control Board has designated permissible noise levels for each functional zone viz, residential, commercial, industrial, and sensitive. The permissible limit has been fixed based on weighted decibels at each of the four zones. Though such permissible limits have been recommended yet for Kolkata sound levels exceed the permissible level for each functional zone

with the only exception of industrial areas. Though vehicular traffic is less in Kolkata compared to other cities they are ill-maintained with outdated engine design. The defective road network, congestion, erratic driving habits, and slow-moving traffic add to the noise level. The unrestrained growth of small machine tool workshops, car repair shops, etc adds to the noise pollution in many residential areas. Besides this during any festivals especially at the time of Dewali sound crackers add new flavor to pollution. Noise health effects are both health and behavioral. This unwanted sound can damage physiological and psychological health. Noise pollution can cause annoyance and aggression, hypertension, high-stress levels, tinnitus, hearing loss, sleep disturbances, and other harmful effects. Furthermore, stress and hypertension are the leading causes of health problems, whereas tinnitus can lead to forgetfulness, severe depression, and at times panic attacks. The story will remain incomplete without a proper reference to water and soil pollution. These two types of pollution mainly happen due to the mixing of poisonous elements from different industries in the soil and water. Unaware or intentional activities of common people are also responsible for this. People often throw their domestic garbage in the local pond, lake without thinking or caring for its after-effects. Immersion of Idols in the Ganges has become a religious right. The level of pollution in groundwater mainly increases because of unplanned and whimsical use of it by promoters or owners of housing complex through powerful pumps. These greedy people are always busy making a profit from commercial activities and thus give the least importance to the issue of public health and social interest. Different types of waste and chemicals are also contaminating groundwater. From several surveys and reports, it is evident that in some areas dirking water has turned into poison due to the presence of arsenic on a dangerous scale. Soil or land pollution is also a matter of concern Around 10 percent of solid waste generated in the city comprises non-biodegradable materials that mix with the soil and turn the area infertile. A large part of the city may have been rendered unfit for vegetation and will not support plantation unless steps are taken to revive the tracts, thanks to the hazardous wastes being dumped unchecked. As much as 2,600 tonnes of solid waste is generated in the city every day, out of which around 200 tonnes is littered. A substantial part of this uncollected waste comprises non-biodegradable substances like plastic, electronic waste, batteries, metal cans, glass, paper, medicine foils, and construction waste. 'Dhapa' can be used as a perfect instance of soil pollution. Dhapa is a locality on the eastern fringes of Kolkata, India. The area consists of landfill sites where the solid wastes of the city of Kolkata are dumped. "Garbage farming" is encouraged in the landfill sites. Nearly half of the requirement for vegetables in the city comes from this fertile area. At least 340 garbage dumpers carrying over 3,300 metric tonnes of solid waste is dumped at Dhapa every day. This has created immense pressure on the city's only dumping ground. Due to huge pressure, this dumping ground is shrinking rapidly and the issue of environmental degradation by open-air garbage dumping is raised. During heavy shower the garbage dumped locally and temporarily across the city before being deported at Dhapa enters into the drainage system and chokes the conduits as well as floating in the logged water spreads pollution and health hazards.

Now the most vital question comes- what is the solution to these problems? What steps the Government or administration is taking to combat such nuisances of pollution? There is no ready-made answer available. In most of the cases, apathy on the administrative side is keenly visible. From air to water pollution everywhere the ' let it go' attitude of the Govt has hurt people. Over the years hundreds of rules and regulations have been made only to keep them locked in the paper. Politicians, leaders are busy winning loyalty by giving undue patronage to different classes. In recent years the Judiciary has come forward with verdicts to fight pollution of different kinds. In

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2009 The Calcutta High Court has declared that polluting two-stroke autos cannot ply in Kolkata, not even if they have converted to LPG. Previously Calcutta High Court banned book fairs on the ground of Maidan to prevent yearly pollution in the heart of the city. Despite protests, agitations the goal of making a pollution-free city in the above two cases became more or less successful. It would be an oversimplification to say that Govt has performed the role of the spectator in all the cases of pollution. Today Govt has to perform its task under the pressure of civil society which is composed of intellectual citizens who are aware of their well beings and rights. Therefore the main duty of government has become the welfare of the masses. For example, every year the city suffers from water-logged conditions during monsoon mainly because of the chocked drainage system and this happens due to the use and abuse of plastic which is non-biodegradable and thus a major root of pollution. The government has become conscious of this major problem and announced a ban on the use of plastic bags. Though the rate of success of this programme is under question still it is a welcome decision. Another vital decision that has been taken by the Judiciary and supported by the Government is to ban commercial vehicles which are of 15 years old on the ground of pollution. The government along with several institutions and NGO's is taking steps to prevent pollution. During festive seasons City Police and volunteers are performing an active role in controlling noise pollution levels or in cleaning up the rivers after immersion of Idols. Thus we can expect a constructive picture from these initiatives.

One thing we have to remember while focusing on the civic problems of our near and dear city Kolkata. It is easy to blame someone for misdeeds done by him or her but a proper understanding of the reason behind such misdeed would help to resolve the problem more efficiently. While dragging Kolkata at the palisade for such civic troubles one has to consider her colonial inheritance and unplanned growth the legacy of which is upsetting Kolkata even today. Our Colonial rulers were not very much interested to develop the conditions of suburbs as their main place of attraction was the city which was full of commercial-industrial potentialities. The outskirts and her residents never enjoyed the fruits of development and though this trend has changed a little bit after independence still the main city has taken the upper hand in all aspects of her neighboring areas. Poor people were forced to lead a stressful life with access denied to basic needs. Industrialization which is the mother of pollution is the gift given by the profit-making Colonial rulers who for the sake of earning more and more benefit never gave much attention to the health and hygiene of the colonized people. In this context, it is also true that only raising fingers against predecessors or the past could not bring any solution. Freedom comes with expectation and it is the responsibility of citizens to perform their duty properly. In the 21st century where democracy, individualism, human rights, and development have come to the forefront, one conventional idea remains at the top of the priority list- 'self-awareness'. Today we can raise our protest against the inactivity of Governments, corruption of leaders very easily via social networking sites on the internet, by giving burning lectures on the media or participating in agitation organized by civil society but we can easily demand a plastic bag from the shopkeeper after shopping, can daily ride in two-stroke autos, can religiously follow the norm of throwing flowers, idols in the Ganges can intentionally overlook the pains of the slum dwellers. We can only expect without doing anything. We have fully utilized and still utilizing our fundamental right of freedom of speech and expression by making a century of criticisms. Perhaps this is another aspect of individual freedom. The time has come for us to stand in front of the mirror of conscience and to ignite our mind with the dedication of making a new identity of ours where the action will be louder than words. Only then do we have the right to dream of a paradise named Kolkata- the city of joy.

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