

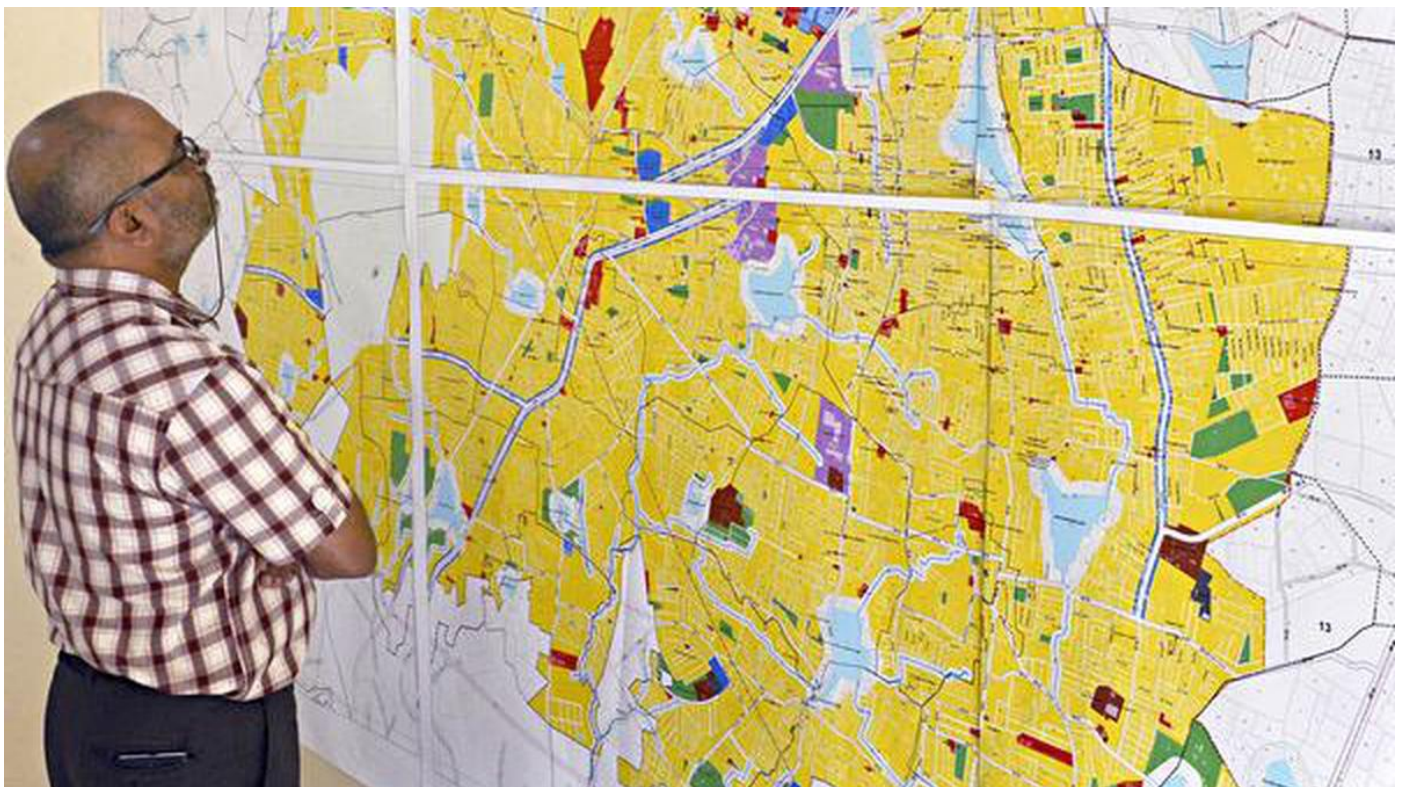
The master plan and the slaves

Master Plans may not be the panacea. India must reimagine spatial planning to address the growing and emerging governance challenges of urbanisation

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A visitor looks at the Bangalore Development Authority's Master Plan–2031 map displayed at a BDA shopping complex in Bengaluru. File | Photo Credit: The Hindu

Amitabh Kant, India's G20 Sherpa, stressed at a recent Urban-20 City Sherpas' meet that a master plan is crucial for any city to manage urbanisation. There have been similar calls in the past. Are master plans really a panacea?

A master plan is an instrument of governance for urban local bodies (ULBs). It has recently received extensive attention in national policy discussions, and rightly so. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has recommended that master plans in cities should be revisited for the improved governance of cities. The National Mission for

Clean Ganga has been advocating such a step to protect urban water bodies; yet, the idea has not advanced beyond exhortations. Why? Much needs to be understood, for the scholarship on master plans is puzzlingly shallow.

Statutory and spatial

The renewed focus on the concept of a master plan is to be welcomed. But few acknowledge its distinct status as the sole statutory instrument of governance. Many plans to improve sanitation, infrastructure and social inclusion are dependent on particular programmes, but these are at best ephemeral and incremental as they are centrally funded. The discourse tends to blur this distinction and, as a result, obscures the significance of the master plan as the instrument of governance. A further complication is that the master plan is an archaic concept whose sales-pitch is more spectacular than its performance. There are at least four reasons for this.

First, the master plan instrument is dated. The concept, configuration and rationalities of this instrument as well as the institutional structures surrounding it are conceived by template legislations drafted in the 1950s. These were then replicated by States as laws of town planning. These conceptions do not accommodate later sensibilities, such as the imperatives of environmental protection that can be linked to 1974 when the Water Act was enacted. While this is a central legislation focused on industrial pollution, the legal and institutional frame of the master plan remained unchanged with its archaic conceptions of land development for urban service rationalities.

Second, a master plan is simply a spatial plan of land-use allocation supported by bye-laws and development control regulations. Thus, it essentially embodies a spatial vision for cities.

Third, this spatial vision is at the core of institutional structures, cultures and practices of ULBs. The edifice of urban governance is built around this spatial vision and provision of urban services. The ULBs are cultivated and shaped by the agenda of regulating spatial growth and remain slaves to these ideas and conceptions. As a result, the demands imposed on them by the new visions (of programmatic plans) suffer. These incapacities and tensions often manifest in a multitude of specialist institutional responses – the most recent being outsourced project management units. These responses are often driven by short-term goals and political expediencies. Ideally, these arrangements should lead, but do not necessarily, to the transformation of urban institutional cultures.

Fourth, the statutory and spatial nature of the master plan can pose constraints on the programmatic plans, especially the spatially associated ones such as the plans for protection of water bodies. Most water-body related projects negotiate the challenges of encroachment of floodplains as encroachments in ex-post. So, should the instrument of master plan be reimagined to accommodate these emerging demands and sensibilities of urban governance?

Close to 65% of India's urban settlements do not have master plans, according to NITI Aayog. A quick perusal of related laws reveals that there is no set criteria for mandating a spatial plan to regulate urban growth. The approach is ad-hoc, to be notified by State governments. For a variety of reasons — primarily lack of human and financial resources — such notifications of mandatory spatial plans are delayed. Town planners end up dealing with most urban governance challenges as fait accompli. The encroachments on floodplains are an example.

Reimagine spatial planning

Therefore, urban planning in India must be reimagined urgently. How? First, we must acknowledge that the master plan instrument may be limited by its archaic conceptions and entrenched institutional cultures. To assume that it would serve the expanded scope of urban governance is far-fetched and can be self-defeating. Second, there is no need to go far for lessons to do this. Indian cities offer enough experiences to learn from. For instance, many States have tried supplementing the inadequacies of the master plan with innovative bye-laws. Much of this experimental and experiential understanding is, however, dispersed, and is restricted to the domain of praxis. The scholarship has not done well to translate it to inform policy-thinking. Third, the incapacities in urban planning and governance highlighted by the 2021 report of the NITI Aayog must receive priority. And it should begin with an elevated attention to the spatial (town) planning profession and education.

The era of planetary urbanisation brings spatial planning into sharp focus, and calls for reimagining the spatial planning framework in India. Recent moves such as Gati Shakti and Model Rural Transformation Acts are a reflection of this growing demand. But these are too feeble, remote and limited. The Centre must work with the States to reconsider the spatial planning framework in India.

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