

Best Way to Beat Pollution Let every Indian City get a 'Central Park'

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If you look down from a plane over midtown Manhattan (New York), you'll see that the geometric disembowelling of the city's centre is so severe it looks like a surgical incision from which concrete has been deftly cut away. In Central Park the ground is so lush, rock escarpments so rough, and forests so densely wooded, their containment within the surrounding 60-storeyed buildings lends a strange manic intrusion to the rectangle of green. For a place so hyperactive in manmade construction, nature has been made equally overpowering—a place of extremes.

To offset the adverse effects of pollution and overpopulation, similar forms of extreme opposites need to be practised in Indian cities. They are the densest, most heavily populated conglomerations in the world. Only Tokyo has the higher population, and Hong Kong a greater density; there however, air quality, vehicle numbers, and industrial effluents are kept in check by stringent norms and innumerable regulations. Indian municipal authorities are incapable of legislating urban anti-pollution norms, nor is the city resident likely to follow them if they were ever to come into effect. In view of this growing complacency in enacting ideas on public health, the city needs an effective natural barrier.

With tree cover in most Indian cities depleting by almost 20% over the last decade, greening them is no longer a civic, but an environmental imperative. The tendency to litter the city with useless decorative roundabouts, vacant lawns, grassy berms and paved plazas contributes nothing to the well-being of the resident. There is little need for parks when pollution levels don't allow their use. To increase the vegetation in the city's densest and most visible pockets of habitation, the transformation of inactive public space into biological reserves should be implemented without delay. Moreover, for such an initiative to be truly effective it must take place—like New York's Central Park—in the most public arenas of the city.

Like most cities in the world, the Indian city is organised in cohesive centres and radiating laterals: commerce and legislature at the centre, and a linear organisation along rivers. An action plan should take ten of the country's biggest, most polluted towns and germinate precise markers in each.

In Delhi, it could begin along the mile-long acreage at the Central Vista below the Secretariat, with a circular plantation at Connaught Place, and elongated greening on the banks

of the Yamuna. A concern for both visibility and centrality would do the same with Bengaluru's Brigade Road and the adjacent maidan; another forest in the arc of Mumbai's Marine Drive and the commercial stretch from Colaba to Churchgate. Ahmedabad's Sabarmati, cutting through the heart of the city, would similarly gain from a forest along its concrete embankments. So too, around the lakes in Chandigarh and Bhopal.

The greening has to become quite literally a forest of primeval order. Not the regulated rows of conscious plantations, but a graded value of plant and tree cover that naturally inhabits local ecology—an ancient archaic wood, with a rich undergrowth of plant and insect life that overwhelms and creates its own impenetrable biology. (What to say of the added advantages of increased ground percolation and water retention.) If it happens, it would require municipal governments to take no action on curbing vehicles, no switching to biofuels, no need to get more electric buses or improve public transportation or act on illegal industries, or in fact make any of the serious concessions that inconvenience the public. Nature would be called upon to act on behalf of government and citizens.

Only recently Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev initiated the idea of greening the banks of Indian rivers—an attempt to increase water flow and preserve embankments. The gargantuan task was presented to Prime Minister Modi. A project of such heroic dimensions obviously needs careful deliberation before it is implemented. The making of city forests, however, can be done immediately by municipal decision, and its effects felt within a few seasons. The bigger problem would be logistical and bureaucratic. Greening comes under the department of forests; roads and highways is a separate bureau, public works, another. To forge unlikely alliances between departments may be the only way to enact a civic transformation.

Sadly, the Indian city is not known for adopting original ideas: the BRT was of Colombian origin, Metro's tunnel technology was Swiss, the electric car, Japanese. The city's current tenuous state of survival, and a history of Western hand-me-downs itself, now must force radical positions and imaginative Indian solutions. With an apathetic public and an indifferent government, the only hope lies in nature providing its own answer.