

Episode - 44

Expanding Cities; Shrinking Lifelines

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Synopsis

This episode explores the consequences of increasing urbanization and reasons behind population explosion and possible solutions. Are cities capable of sustaining populations above a certain limit? Does the Diaspora leave its home only in search of a bright future? What fuels the migration from village to cities and from one country to another? If Global warming a contributory factor? Are we to blame for this need to escape, to migrate...this displacement? Is this migration or a forced displacement or uprooting? This episode takes a fresh look at this important topic.

Characters

Harihar: 50 years. Journalist. Editor

Sudha: 48 years. Harihar's wife

Dr Sweta: 48 years. Professor of Economics

Dr Arvind: 53 years. Professor of Environmental Sciences

Prof. Ranjit: 50 years. Professor of Zoology. Common friend.

Waiter

Noisy Marketplace.

Harihar: Well, all's done...let's go Sudha. You have purchased all you needed and the crowd is increasing too. Let's go. Sudha...Sudha...now where are you headed to?

Sudha: It'll take just a minute...there is a Sale going on. Bhaiya, how much is this bedsheet?

Harihar (Muttering to himself): I just don't understand why these Sales have to be organized...the crowds are unbearable...and to top it off they have these sales ever day! Uffff.

Ranjit: (Loud voice): Ah! That is the attraction of a Sale...next to it everything is pale.

Harihar: Who is it....? Ah! It's you Prof. Ranjit. I see that even you have not been able to resist the pull of the Sale...even teaching Zoology at the college could not keep you away. You have come running to answer the call of the Sale.

Ranjit: Not come running...I have been pulled here.

Laughter

Sweta: Oh ...me too!

Ranjit: Arre Dr Sweta...you too?

Sweta: Namaste Dr Ranjit. Namaste Harihar ji. Yes...yes...I have been pulled here too. My daughter is in 2nd year now and is interested in the ever-changing fashion. My son wants a new jacket...so, I have been pulled here.

Harihar: So you haven't been able to evade the pull of finance and economics even while teaching these in college.

Laughter

Ranjit: Ah! Like the two of us...but then where are they? The duo?

Sweta: Those two didnot come but they did tell their Papa about their choices...he has gone into this shop here.

Ranjit: Oh, so Prof. Arvind is here as well...his new book...what was the name...Expanding Cities; Shrinking Lifelines...wasnt it?

Sweta: Yes, Ranjit ji...that was the name.

Ranjit: I wonder why lives are shrinking as cities are expanding. Surely lives must expand along with expanding cities.

Sweta: You will have to ask Arvind that...Oh look, here he is.

Harihar: And Sudha is here as well. Sudha...did you get what you needed? Namaste Prof Arvind ji.

Arvind: Namaste Sudha ji, Namaste Hariharji. Namaste Prof. Ranjit ji.

Sudha: Namaste everyone. I was lucky to get almost everything I wanted...so why don't we stop somewhere for a sip and a bite?

Ranjit: That is an excellent idea from Sudha bhabi. Besides we have met after such a long time...we should spend some time together. Let's go.

Sweta: Yes, let's go. There is a nice restaurant nearby...let us go there for a session of chit-chat.

Arvind (laughingly): Yes...let's go.

Sound of the noisy market place fades. The ambience is that of a quiet restaurant. Soft background music.

Waiter: Sahib...what would you like to order? Dosa? Idli? Vada? Chowmein? Tea? Coffee?

Sudha: Four masala dosa and four coffees please. Is this Ok?

Ranjit: No Sudha bhahbi, please order three masala dosas and one choley bhaturey. Yeah! But Four coffees is fine.

Laughter

Sweta: Ranjit ji, you may place your question before Arvind now.

Arvind (perplexed): Question? For me? What question?

Harihar: It is just that Ranjit ji is rather curious about the title of your new book. Expanding Cities; Shrinking Lifelines.

Sudha: Expanding Cities; Shrinking Lifelines. Why should life shrink if cities expand? And the population is growing too...I must admit I have-not been able to grasp the meaning of the title.

Ranjit: That is exactly what I was wondering too, Sudha bhabhi. Now, Arvind ji you are an Environmentalist and a good author too...so explain please how expanding cities or urbanization is impacting lives and sustainability.

Slight laughter

Arvind: Think of it in this way Ranjit ji. The cities are growing but the villages are diminishing.

Ranjit: So shouldn't the cities grow? And if that is your argument then the title of your book should have been Expanding Cities Diminishing Villages.

Arvind (laughingly): Actually you are not wrong. However, the rate at which the people are migrating to the cities is worrisome because the resources of the cities are limited. So the urban lifestyle is under immense pressure. Don't you think that the expansion of cities, rapid urbanization has led to erosion in the standards of living, that there has been a waning of warmth in inter-personal relationships, in a definite decline in the feeling of brotherhood? What I mean is that the very basis of what constitutes life is slowly eroding...being degraded...disappearing?

Sudha (light-heartedly): Arvind bhai sahib. I have just concluded a fierce financial negotiation with the shop keeper and my dear brain cannot take such difficult ideas unless you simplify them.

Arvind (laughs): Sudhaji, A major fact came to light in 2007 or thereabouts when it was revealed that more people are living under urban conditions than in rural. The 2014 survey revealed that about 54 per cent of the global population now lives in towns and cities. This figure is expected to reach 66 per cent by 2050.

Harihar: Well Arvind ji, the rural population moves to urban areas in search of better livelihood and opportunities and lifestyle. We have done the same. What is wrong with it?

Arvind: No, Harihar ji, I am not suggesting that there is anything wrong with this. The global patterns of migration...be it because of change in rainfall patterns because of climate change, or because of increased desertification or because of war....well...in some way or the other we are responsible...our policies...are to blame. We came to urban areas because we wanted to –that was a voluntary decision...not because we were pushed into making this choice.

Ranjit: Pushed into making this choice...how?

Sweta: Like you were pushed into visiting the market today...just like that.

Sudha: What do you mean?

Arvind: Well, since we have some time on hand till our dosas arrive, let me explain at leisure.

Harihar: I must tell you that I have written a newspaper article on the socio-economic issues emanating from urbanization.

Sweta: Yes, I know. Arvind gave me the clipping to read. And I thought you wrote correctly about how cities expand.

Sudha: Well, how **do** cities expand?

Ranjit: Harihar ji, you wrote an entire article on this topic but did not give it to Sudha Bhabi to read!

Arvind: It is common isn't it to undervalue those nearest to us?

Laughter

Sweta: Sudha, Arvind has argued that there are three main reasons behind urbanization. First is when people from rural areas head towards urban areas or even migration through international borders. And then, the migratory patterns that leads to expansion linking adjoining districts with the nearby major town.

Sudha: Like it is happening with Delhi.

Ranjit: Yes, Sudha bhabhi. This pattern is the same for every large town or city...Sweta ji what is the third focal point?

Sweta: That is the natural increment of numbers with each generation.

Harihar: Sweta ji, I had raised a question too. In my article I had questioned if the cities could sustain such an enormous population load. I had asked if the cities in poor and developing nations have resources sufficient enough to meet the requirements of a large migrant population.

Arvind: Yes indeed, Harihar ji. You had raised these questions and in a way, it is this that formed the basis of the title of my book. If we take developing nations into consideration, the increase in urbanization is because of movement from rural areas into urban ones. According to an estimate by UN-Habitat globally about 30 lakh people migrate every week to urban areas. In cities such as Sydney, London and New York, migrants make up about 35 per cent of the population.

Sweta: The proportion of migrant population in Brussels and Dubai is more than half of the population.

Sudha: So you mean the proportion of migrant population in Dubai and Brussels is more than 50 per cent!

Sweta: Yes, Sudha.

Arvind: According to the World Migration Report published in 2015, this mass migration is widely overlooked even though there is global concern about urbanization. The challenges include providing service such as clean water and health services for the growing migrant population.

Harihar: Well, that is natural enough. When there is a mass exodus towards cities from villages and people flock to cities in search of better conditions or better livelihood...it is only natural that the city's resources will be stretched thin.

Arvind: And what about the demands that the original urban population makes?

Sudha: Crime increases.

Sweta: Correct Sudha. But it is not just crime. The problems also arise when there is not enough water, electricity and other resources for everyone.

Ranjit: Yes, I agree with your argument. See, just a couple of decades back when houses were designed for the middle-income groups... just one small garage... adequate enough to house a scooter was considered sufficient for every family. Now every family has 2 or 3 cars each. And when the family is at home, the parked cars create such congestion that the poor vegetable vendor cannot trundle his little cart down the road. Increase in population does bring its share of woe.

Sweta: Ranjit ji, there is an embargo on using tubewells to draw groundwater but I dare say every house has its own pump...and the net result is dwindling ground water reserves.

Sudha: What about the pilfering of electricity? And how expensive everything has become...of course this is to be expected when there are too many hungry mouths to feed and not enough food.

Waiter: Sahib. Dosa. Cholle Bhature.

Sudha: Yes...please serve the Cholle Bhature here and the dosas to the others....some more sambhar, please. Yes, thank you. That's perfect.

Ranjit: Correctly observed Sudha Bhabhi... too many hungry mouths to feed and not enough food. Like the prices go up in cities when demand is high. Of course that is the market-reality. And when Delhi-ites demand dosas they drive up the prices but then, the quality is excellent.

All laugh.

Harihar: Ranjit ji, the entire world is worried about the global trend of migration from rural areas to urban areas. A UN survey of all 193 UN member states found that 80 per cent had policies to reduce rural to urban migration. The question is should we aim to meet people's aspirations or should we put a stop to migration?

Arvind: Harihar ji, you said that people move from villages to cities in their quest for better conditions. Is this wholly true?

Sudha: What other factors could be there?

Ranjit: Yes, people move from villages to towns and cities in search for better conditions....a better life. That is why they are called migrants.

Arvind: I think in most cases they are not migrants but displaced people.

Ranjit (**startled tones**): Displaced? Why displaced? Did someone force them to leave? Someone who ventures out to actualize a dream or aspirations cannot be called displaced.

Arvind: What if my 20 acre farmland cannot be irrigated because climate change has disrupted rainfall patterns or if the crops that do ultimately grow turn out sickly and are decimated by pests? What would you call a once prosperous farmer forced to work as a labourer in the city? Would you not call him a displaced person? Is this not displacement?

Ranjit: What sort of displacement would this be?

Sweta: This is displacement due to climate-change.

Harihar: This is environmental disaster.

Arvind: Yes Harihar ji. And you must realize that villages sustain not just agriculture but other means of livelihood too. For example, handicrafts, weaving, value-addition to crops are all supported. But see... no rains means no crops. No crops means no cash. No cash means no purchase....not just no purchase but all transactions come to a grinding halt. So there is no work. And under the circumstances, how is life to be sustained? Hence displacement from original location!

Ranjit: Well the blame for non-arrival of rains has to be shared globally...global warming.

Sweta: You are right Ranjit ji. But who is acknowledging the fact? Neither citizens nor the global community. Take cities such as Delhi for example. People here

use about 250 litres water per head daily but luxury hotels use up to 500 litres per head on a daily basis...and there is no water for irrigation. So resources are city-centric. No wonder people are rushing to cities.

Sudha: But this is not right. I mean it is not a sustainable practice. Every sector; every community has a role to play in the development of the nation. I remember reading that villages are not just the units of productivity but custodians of art and culture. Vacating villages to expand cities can only end in anarchy.

Harihar: Rightly observed, Sudha. But Arvind ji, sustainable development entails that people not be uprooted and all administrative and governmental advantages be made available to them near where they are settled.

Arvind: Harihar, you are so right! When a person is displaced it is not just a physical or geographical change. It entails great mental trauma as well. Imagine changing the simple rural life for the rural rat race that encourages selfish, self-centred thoughts...it is not easy. Then dreams die. Hope fades and life....well...

Ranjit: And that is why you say expanding cities; shrinking lives.

Sweta: Yes Ranjit ji. If we focus only on developing our cities and forget to involve the far flung areas and villages, then it is not sustainable development that we are talking about. Such practices will bring us to the brink of anarchy, famine and precipitate the death of inter-personal relationships.

Harihar: I understand your message Arvindji. We are neglecting the fundamental basis of life...you know sharing, conserving and showing compassion.

Sudha: This brings to mind Gandhiji's famous words which I have heard being repeated quite a few times. He used to say, "The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed." Today we have almost destroyed the environment and are blaming the Sales and the crowds...when we are the real culprits.

Ranjit: Yes, Sudha bhabhi, conservation of the environment...its security...it is our responsibility. Yet look we do not segregate waste in the green and blue dustbins. We insist on throwing garbage just about anywhere that takes our

fancy. We do not protest when we see garbage being burnt. We simply focus on getting by any how...as long as our interest is served we are fine with it. So whose fault is it? Only ours isn't it?

Arvind: So right, Ranjit ji. But there are avenues that are still open. Global warming is a problem I admit but there are ways to combat it...no one will be a migrant if he or she gets all amenities at home.

Harihar: It is important that employment is available near a person's home...so that a respectable life can be lived.

Sweta: We need to re-evaluate the environmental issues and look for new solutions. We need to restore self-confidence and self-sustainability to our villages. We have to stop the cities from becoming engorged and engulfing villages.

Sudha: Yes Sweta, life in cities is exorbitant. And is it possible to accommodate the huge population within its confines? And anyway it is still agriculture that is the largest single source of employment.

Arvind: Right Sudha ji. We have to understand the value of labour. We have to realize that the world's resources are finite. Wasting it means that we are digging a pit for ourselves. It is imperative that the natural resources be distributed equitably and to do this we need to share equally, the fruits of advanced science and technology.

Harihar: So correct, Arvind ji. Poverty in the world is keeping pace with increase in global prosperity. We really need to deploy policies to end biting poverty. One major reason behind human migration and displacement is war. Young people around the world are demanding a change in established social set-ups in which everyone has equal access to a decent and sustainable lifestyle. 80 per cent of all resources should not remain sequestered to a handful of privileged people.

Waiter: Sir, coffee.

Ranjit: Thank you, bhaiya. You have served it at just the right time...and the dosas were excellent too. Arvind ji...I admit desertification is on the rise and wars

are becoming more and more fierce...but at the end of the day, it is we humans who are to be blamed.

Sweta: Yes, Ranjit ji. The quest for self-respect, security and a better future lies at the roots of a person's migration. And this has been happening since the advent of mankind. Human development has been a result of such practices.

Harihar: Yes Sweta but today, excessive greed and market-forces have resulted in wealth or money taking precedence over everything. People have started to believe that wealth is the fount of happiness...whereas it is excessive attachment to material wealth that is the root cause of unhappiness.

Arvind: Harihar ji, as a journalist you understand all the facts. Look, I am talking about a meaningful change...the existence of cities is less necessary than the existence of villages...and the continued existence of villages is as important as those of our woods and forests.

Ranjit: I understand now...migration, deportation or displacement have shaped humanity. It is a serious issue but I can see that we have migrated to this restaurant in search of excellent coffee. And my family members migrate to the market place at least three times a week...so aren't urban attractions such as these reasons enough for people to migrate to cities?

Laughter.

Sudha: Ranjit ji, Think of it in this way...the cool village breeze, the fresh fragrance of gur being made, the sigh of the yoked oxen, the potter's wheel shaping a pot, the dust kicked up by the hooves of cows returning at dusk, the wonderful aroma of daal and roti being cooked on an open fire, unadulterated ghee...and unadulterated love...cannot these rural attractions make us want to reverse the trend and migrate to the villages?

Sweta: Well said, Sudha. It is indeed time to save our villages and forests and initiate reverse migration...that is the movement from cities to villages.

Sudha: (Laughingly) Sudha spoke about unadulterated love...and that is the key. If we put villages and forests first in all our policies, then I am sure the situation will reverse in not me at all.

Ranjit: Yes I agree Harihar ji. If life has to be sustained. If relationships are to be saved. If love has to flourish...we really need to make sure we act such that there is unity and inclusion in all we do.

Laughter