

A Job For The One Percent

The elite must help build better cities, in public interest and in their own interest

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The recent Bengaluru floods washed up the dirty linen of mismanagement and corruption on the shores of a crumbling city infrastructure. Yet,

no matter how quickly various governments build out physical public services, especially in urban India, the demand for it outstrips the supply. Be it roads and transport, electricity and water supply, hospitals, or universities.

There are simply not enough budgeted funds to provide and sustain adequate functional physical infrastructure at a per capita annual income of around \$2,000 and a tax-GDP ratio of around 11%.

It is very different when it comes to the public digital infrastructure. India has among the most sophisticated and widely accessed open, public digital goods and services in the world. Whether it is broadband, smartphones, or UPI, we have made enormous progress in creating new opportunities for all. How can we achieve the same for better physical access to mobility, housing, energy, health etc?

The elites of the *samaaj* and the *bazaar* have successfully created a thin slice of high-quality private infrastructure on top of this inadequate public infrastructure. And we continue to build that out at breakneck speed.

- Think of the high-tech facilities at our high-performing companies.
- Or the incredibly fancy malls in Delhi and Mumbai.



and cumulatively lost hundreds of crores.

This winter, sophisticated air filters will barely protect the most privileged in Delhi from the air pollution. Nor will expensive sedans and office buses smoothen the rocky rides on our potholed roads for the upper classes.

- Have the elite reached the end of our gilded private pier?
- Can private goods be sustainably built on a precarious public foundation?
- Or is there something that we the elite can do so that the base on which our private goods and services are built can

Much is asked of those to whom much is given. Plus, as the elite of east Bengaluru painfully experienced, if we point one finger at the government, three fingers are pointing back at us. Have we built our sprawling corporate campuses on flood plains?

- We can also support the many other civil society organisations working closely with local, state and Union governments to help implement the delivery of public goods and services, or to innovate on more inclusive urbanisation, including on dignified housing.
- Fully 42% of Mumbai lives in its slums and fast-growing cities like Bengaluru have similar numbers.

Radically, we can support more transparent taxation, so that the government can spend more on physical infrastructure and safety nets. It is time to shed the cynicism about the wastage of our tax rupees. The prospects in this country for ample wealth creation by a limited few are rather staggering. There is a strategic and a moral imperative to balance out this opportunity.

- The 2021 Niti Aayog report states that 65% of the 7,933 Indian urban settlements do not even have a master plan.
- India has one civil servant for 24,000 people while the UK has one for every 131 people.
- We can help bridge this vast gap of human resources by lending our time or by paying to increase state capacity.
- Like some highly successful corporate professionals, we can offer our time and talent to the different state policy outfits.
- Like some foundations have, we can fund project management units in government departments or pay for fellowships to support legislators at every level.

This is an urgent opportunity but

- Think of the luxe cars, private jets and gated mansions of the ultra-rich (full disclosure – I am an UHNI, and my home and cars are also somewhat fancy).
- So far, in India, not many seem to begrudge the wealthy their lifestyle and possessions.
- The majority remain optimistic about their own upward mobility.

Yet, we have recently seen that this is not a sustainable option even for the wealthy. While the pandemic created a new leveller, the Bengaluru flooding provided the most graphic example. The local ultra-rich could not escape a common fate

be stronger, not just for us but for all?

They say much is asked of those to whom much is given. Plus, as the elite of east Bengaluru painfully experienced, we cannot merely be consumers of good governance, we have to co-create it. If we point one finger at the government, are three fingers pointing back at ourselves?

- Have we built our sprawling corporate campuses on flood plains?
- Did we build or rent our homes using ecological prudence and after a thorough legal check?
- Or have we shrugged our shoulders once too often?

The good news is that we can easily

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take back some agency. There are so many opportunities.

- We can invest in the excellent think-tanks around India that conduct research and provide data and analytics for improved urban governance.
- We can donate to civic institutions working on water, climate change and disaster prevention and management, because these intertwine our fates ever more closely.

also just enlightened self-interest. Effective public infrastructure creates the secure foundation for everyone to build on top according to needs, capacities and desires.

Like it or not, floods, pandemics and air pollution put everyone in the same boat, even if some of us are in the upper deck private cabins. We will have to row together to steer away from the rising waters. Life jackets are under the seat. But the oars are right on top.

The writer is Chairperson, Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies Foundation. Her recent book is 'Samaaj, Sarkaar, Bazaar: A Citizen First Approach'