

City and Village - revisited

- By Archana Tripathi

In one of his lesser known essays titled City and Village, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore has talked about how the city has evolved from the village and the need for a harmonious rather than exploitative relationship between the two. In many of his articles in Harijan and earlier in Navjivan, Mahatma Gandhi has also written extensively on his idea of an ideal village and how “independence must begin at the bottom with every village being a Republic or Panchayat with full powers”.

It is not surprising that Tagore and Gandhi, two of the most dominant and influential personalities of pre-independence India were also true ecologists and at least a part of their love for the rural sprung from the fact that they saw villages as more sustainable from ecological perspective. Both of them had raised alarm and cautioned against India blindly following the energy and resource intensive western patterns of production and consumption. And though the two differed on their concept of an ideal village, both acknowledged the need for a symbiotic rather than predatory relationship between the two.

Having worked in both cities and villages over the past many years, we at Saahas have also experienced some marked differences in setting up urban and rural solid waste management systems. With regard to urban solid waste management, we find that the bigger the city, the more are the number of stakeholders and more complex it is to arrive at an agreeable solution. Metros, in spite of being financially stronger and supported by best of administrative and technical talent have failed miserably in setting up scientific and holistic solid waste management systems. Bigger the city, more woeful is its collection and transportation system and bigger are its landfills. Our own success stories in large cities and metros are limited to layouts and localities which either have actively engaged citizen or residential societies which have more independence in handling their own waste.

In smaller cities, we have seen better outcomes. While building consensus is easier and we are mostly able to quickly demonstrate segregated collection and processing pilots, it is a struggle to make the system financially stable. This essentially requires charging service fee for waste management to which municipal corporations show significant resistance. Not a single ULB (Urban Local Body) from our project locations, has yet amended their by-laws to include provisions for collecting user fee from waste generators. This, in spite of the fact that the Solid Waste Management Rules 2016 recommend levying of user fees and more surprisingly, this is in spite of the residents willing to pay the waste collectors a service fee, having seen the benefits. Clearly, the will to bring about change is lacking in the Urban Local Bodies of these cities.

While it may come as a surprise to some, by and large our rural waste management programs have been more successful than those in the urban areas. Unlike ULBs, the Gram Panchayats have been far more willing to pass resolutions in the Gram Sabha about charging a user fee, and we have been able to successfully collect user fee in multiple small and big Gram Panchayats in Karnataka.

Similarly, setting up village level committees to monitor the program and achieving high levels of source segregation across the entire village has happened at much faster pace compared to that in urban areas with typically more educated gentry.

Tagore rightly compared the towns to a more evolved organism with specialised organs to carry out specific functions, while the village was like a lower form of life where the same set of cells carried out multiple functions. Why then, a city/town in spite of having well-structured, well-funded administrative bodies with trained and dedicated manpower, ably supported by technology is incapable of establishing sanitation systems, one of the most basic indicators of development? And in contrast, the village with only a couple of officials and a few elected representatives being responsible for all its development needs is seeing better adoption of sanitation systems?

The answer probably lies in the sense of **community ownership** which is typically higher in villages and mostly absent in the cities, more so in bigger cities. It is easier to convince people about what is good for the village with clearly visible and relatable outcomes. Having lower number of stakeholders in villages results in lesser conflicts and quicker decision making. In cities, the stakes are higher with multiple goal post for different stake holders. This is starkly visible in the form of waste mafia (the politician-contractor nexus) widely active in most of the large cities that resists any changes to the system of landfill and tipping fee.

Another possible explanation could be **greater accountability** inbuilt in the **self-governance** model of the Gram Panchayat, resulting in them working in a more effective manner compared to its urban counterpart, the Urban Local Bodies, who according to Ankur Bisen, the author of the book “Wasted” have had “a deformed birth”. In many states, Tamil Nadu being one of them, Urban Local Bodies elections have not taken place for many years. States like Kerala, where both the urban and rural local self-governance institutions are more empowered and accountable, have shown much better performance with regard to solid waste management in both rural areas and cities.

Maybe the solution for better managed waste management systems in the cities is to “put the village back into the city” as Gandhi had once said. This would mean setting up decentralized solutions with more control of the local ward committees and active engagement with citizens rather than large, centralized ones. Decentralized solutions lead to better visibility, community ownership and accountability. Ward Committees will need to be empowered and revitalized with greater citizen participation to make them work like Gram Sabhas.

In the past few decades as the city landfills began to overflow, the waste moved to villages and many villages had to bear the brunt of it with polluted air, water and soil. Villages too have been generating significant quantity of plastic waste now which they are unable to transport back for recycling to cities as the cost are prohibitive due to smaller volumes. As a result, it often gets burnt locally. With the health impacts of unscientific waste disposal being visible to all, be it in villages or in the cities, it is time to explore collaboration between the two. The biodegradable waste can be composted in the fields of the farmers in the village and in return the city can take care of the plastic waste, sanitary waste and other such items from villages that require safe large-scale facilities.

Our work in both urban and rural areas has shown that the problem of waste cannot be solved by only technology and infrastructure. Community engagement that drives responsible behaviour by the citizen and greater accountability from the administration, is the most critical success factor, in urban or rural areas.