

Postcard from Tamil Nadu, Southern India

Smarter Urbanisation and Rapid Growth

I have just come back from my fourth visit in as many years to Southern India. My main aim was to take forward the URBED Trust's project to help SCAD ([Social Change and Development](#)) and to visit some historic attractions in Tamil Nadu. However, I was also struck by the huge untapped potential for rebuilding historic trade links to the benefit of both countries. The Indian economy is growing at 7% a year, and with only 30% of the population living in urban areas, the big question is how to manage growth. There are great places to visit where white tourists are rarely seen, superb cuisine, and a generally peaceful and friendly attitude in a country where English is the second language, and signs in English abound.

Now the UK has to look beyond Europe after Brexit for trading partners, surely doing more business with one of the world's largest and fastest growing economies has to make sense? Both countries face surprisingly similar challenges, from upgrading worn-out infrastructure and building homes on a much larger scale to equipping young people with the skills needed in a global economy. Both countries have been far too centralised, and need to encourage initiatives that engage local communities. Having spoken to a range of local experts, from senior civil servants to urbanists and heritage practitioners, as well as students and staff at SCAD's engineering colleges and business schools, seven ideas emerged.

Quality not quantity

Rapid growth is simply not sustainable in the long-term if it reinforces inequalities and keeps the rural poor trapped. As in the UK, affordable new homes are vital. Yet while mega cities such as Chennai (formerly Madras) attract most investment, the potential of the Third Tier or Metro cities is being ignored. High tech companies in IT are lured to new business parks on the edge. Sprawling suburbs with high-rise towers that promise 'smart lifestyles' are eroding valuable marshlands and paddy fields.

With rising levels of car ownership (a third of India's motor industry is located around Chennai), congestion, air quality and stress are becoming insufferable. Pedestrians and cyclists are treated like 'third class citizens' in a world where reinforced concrete seems to rule, and the caste system still prevails. Indian cities need to learn from both the mistakes and the achievements of mid-sized European cities, for example in building quality new suburbs where children can walk or cycle safely to school, and people know their neighbours. Premier Modi's programme for **100 Smart Cities** has put urbanism on the national agenda, but has not resolved the issue of implementation, and how to overcome resistance from conservative interests, such as small traders. Demonstration projects that offer ordinary people better options will therefore be vital.

Smarter travel options

Tackling congestion offers a major opportunity to make cities work better for all. An article in *The Hindu* of February 25th commented '*Haphazard real estate development and rent seeking is leading to a prohibitive cost of living. ..Public transport in Mumbai needs a complete overhaul ... and has not modernised in its fleet in decades. The water supply continues to be diverted from lower and middle-income group localities to skyscrapers. Instead of investing in public transport, thus reducing the density of private vehicles, almost every transport policy at the city and State levels encourages private ownership*'.

The situation in Tamil Nadu is equally poor. Buses are extensively used for travel between towns, but are over-crowded and suffer from a poor image. With houses along both sides of the main roads, there is rarely enough space for bus lanes. In Chennai, suburban rail services have been boosted by new elevated Metro lines, but only a small part of the city is served. Motorbikes are the popular option, adding to noise and confusion, as electric bikes have yet to be taken up.

Considerable public investment has gone into improving road surfaces on main roads and motorways once renowned for potholes. But as cities grow, they will lose their appeal unless parking controls are introduced, and better use is made of local rail if only to improve air quality and make getting around easier. The railways have been losing freight traffic, and with little suburban traffic they depend on long 20 coach trains that run on electrified lines from end to end of Southern India. The stations are grand and orderly places, but are missing out on the potential for local traffic. As in the UK, large amounts of land owned by Indian railways are awaiting development, which would help provide the funding needed for integrated transport solutions.

Civic pride

Despite isolated achievements, for example conserving superb monuments and temples, Tamil Nadu's heritage is rapidly disappearing. Even in Pondicherry, where the French Quarter has been lovingly restored and is kept scrupulously clean, some 1,000 listed buildings have been lost in the last decade in the much larger Tamil Quarter. Expanding families are pulling down old homes to make space for new apartments, and dilapidated buildings are said to be a result of unresolved legal disputes. The streets are full, and rubbish piles up in neglected corners for lack of municipal care and personal responsibility.

What [INTACH](#) (which stands for the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) has achieved in Pondicherry since 1984 is credited to the employment of a team of 15 in a relatively compact city. There is also now a strategic plan for the city's future. Undoubtedly you need a critical mass of effort before a difference is visible, but a start could be made elsewhere by employing people to keep the streets 'cleaner and greener'. We saw fine mansions crumbling around Chettinad, where one has been turned into a superb hotel, with few signs of local action. Perhaps an Indian version of the National Trust is required to take over historic buildings before it is too late?

Healthier living

People are living longer, and large hospitals abound, including the fine new hospital SCAD has built South of Tirunelveli with help from the Irish government. But rates of infant mortality are still appalling. In part this may be due to poor sanitation and drinking water. It is also blamed on fumes from cooking in poorly ventilated village houses. On one of our train trips we enjoyed meeting some American artists who have developed and are selling a much safer and better stove. The more sedentary life for town dwellers is also encouraging obesity, and problems in later life such as diabetes.

Where once children expected to look after their ageing parents, they now often live many miles away. Mobile phones may bring some people together, but as in the UK there is a threat of increasing isolation. Cinemas have been redeveloped, and there are not enough spaces for casual meetings. New suburban apartment blocks built without streets have little sense of community, despite all the developers' promises.

New settlements and eco houses

Yet there are already some inspiring alternative models for a more sustainable way forward. Bangalore used to pride itself on being India's Garden City, though is now suffering from poor air quality. Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala, has many fine houses built by British architect Laurie Baker who developed ways to keep homes cool and beautiful through cross ventilation, and his ideas are being applied to slum renewal. Less than ten miles north of Pondicherry, we visited [Auroville](#), a utopian community established for people from all over the world to live in harmony. Unfortunately some 50 years on it only houses some 2,500 whereas its founder, known as The Mother, wanted it to grow to 50,000 residents. The site is dominated by a grand edifice near an excellent visitor centre, but the casual visitor gets little idea of how people actually live.

A former Board member told us that despite the high ideals and arrangements for local governance with many Working Groups and an organisation based on 'intuitive intelligence', there had been conflicts, both with the existing villages and between different parts of the new community. Visionary architects had built homes for themselves, but the masterplan was largely unfulfilled. Within the Green Belt, less than half the land is owned by the Foundation (*Auroville: a dream takes shape, 2016*). The new settlement has not generated enough income for incomers to satisfy their demands.

Innovation with sun-baked bricks using rammed earth and a little lime, and extensive tree planting have turned what was once desert into a garden setting. But limits on private ownership and an 'economy based on exchange of services' have also made it harder to fulfil the community's original aspirations. The foreign pavilions have never been funded. The Earth Institute and Centre for Scientific Research have not yet influenced the mainstream of construction and development, nor is the experiment as well-known as it should be, though much can be learned through the website (www.auroville.org).

Smarter urbanisation and enterprise development

As in the UK, it is not enough to send every child to school, or for degrees to provide the way into good jobs. In some areas, children leave school still not being able to read or converse properly. There is no lack of ambition, but graduates lack practical experience in questioning established ways. Also there are simply not enough engineering or IT jobs to employ the many who graduate. While there is plenty of work to be done in creating 'smarter cities' local authority politicians are not trusted, or are seen to be 'money grabbing'.

In judging the many short-listed entries for SCAD's *URBED Trust Award 2017*, I was struck by the deep enthusiasm for recording and promoting the attractions of Tirunelveli, a large historic area ignored by British travel guides, included producing a powerful leaflet. Working in groups to prepare presentations gives students the experience and confidence needed for later life, and can generate fresh ideas. For example students in a water-starved area proposed a campaign in schools to promote greater awareness of the many ways to save water. Others showed how to use waste materials, such as fly ash from thermal power stations, to reduce dependence on energy intensive concrete.

Yet students have to move hundreds of miles in search of jobs in the big cities, while local opportunities are missing. The exciting and innovative products exhibited by SCAD's electronics students show how much potential is waiting to be tapped. Premier Modi's programme for **100 Smart Cities** has certainly got people talking about urbanism, but India is still too reliant on imported products and ideas. So 'smarter urbanisation' should involve not just inventing, but marketing products such as 'safer stoves' or 'waterless toilets' that can give poorer people better lives in expanding towns and cities, and open up new opportunities for SMEs.

Achieving better results through Social Change and Development (SCAD)

Is there another way forward? SCAD, a group of colleges set in a 'garden' environment in towns linked by bus routes and railway lines, works with over 500 villages and 2,500 women's groups. It has pioneered sustainable development practices such as bio-digestion and wind turbines. SCAD's visionary founder, Dr Cletus Babu, sees great potential in enabling those moving upwards to get access to better housing and education while retaining the traditional family and community values of village life.

The URBED Trust is therefore supporting SCAD's initiative to design and build 'Eco Homes' that do not use concrete and that conserve energy and water, and I was pleased to meet our local project manager, Dr Angelina Ajisha, who teaches civil engineering, as well as other members of the SCAD team. As in the UK, there is still far too little understanding of how to turn visions into reality. So the web site we have created for the project (www.smarterurbanisation.org) will offer a set of tools and information that can be used to educate staff and students. It should also help build links between those who want to channel the tides of rapid growth into sustainable development.



A host of historic monuments and temples such as Malipuram could attract more visitors to Tamil Nadu.



Traffic in towns needs taming so that pedestrians and cyclists have priority.



Heritage is under threat in towns around Chettinad.



A 'heritage walk' in Pondicherry shows how streets can be transformed.



Some of the challenges faced: water tanks running dry, apartments that encroach on marshland and paddy fields and new villages unable to cope with waste.



Laurie Baker has shown how to build sustainable and attractive small houses in Trivandrum.



Auroville has not achieved as much as its founder wanted.



SCAD's founder wants to build homes that ordinary people can afford. The Gandhi quote on the right articulates one of their aspirations.



SCAD students are generating original ideas for products.



The URBED Trust Award recognised presentations put together by groups of students.