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Envisioning Sharing Cities in India

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Abstract

India is one of the most rapidly urbanizing countries globally and is also among the least sustainable countries in the world. The resulting major urban issues include over-exploitation of resources and highly unsustainable and excessively consumption-based lifestyles of the people. The need of the hour is a sustainable urban transformation of Indian cities, and one such way of doing that is the concept of 'Sharing Cities'. The paper attempts to analyze what the concept of 'Sharing Cities' — quite popular in the developed nations of the world, is and tries to envision it in the Indian context. It tries to investigate if India has the infrastructure, community cooperation, participation and other major aspects to enable sharing cities in the country. The paper also assesses the perceptions of the Indian population through an online survey, taking millennials as the target group as they happen to be the major sharing economy consumers and participants according to various studies done worldwide and the results declared some contrasting observations worth noting. Recommendations are provided in the end, on how to strengthen and make the prevalent sharing economy more inclusive that can ultimately steer India towards the path of sustainability.

Keywords: *Sharing Economy, Sharing Cities, Sustainability, India, Millennials, community cooperation.*

1.0 Introduction

The last few decades have seen accelerating attention paid to the relationship between urban areas and sustainability at the international levels. However, the role of cities in global economic development, as well as their contribution to social and environmental conditions, has gained more attention recently (*UN-Habitat, 2008*). Their importance as metropolitan areas is expected to grow soon at an increasing rate.

With currently half of the world's population residing in cities and rapid urbanization taking place, unsustainable consumption-based lifestyles along with large scale environmental problems are doomed to happen. The stark reality of rapid urbanization and economic development is quite visible in the world's urban spaces today in the name of environmental degradation, inadequate urban infrastructure, traffic congestion, and a lack of basic services like water supply and sanitation. Maintaining economic growth while creating sustainable, livable cities for all is the biggest urban challenge facing the world cities today. The need of the hour is

sustainable urban transformation, focusing on effectively directing urban development towards ambitious sustainability goals.

One way of sustainable urban transformation is the recently emerged concept of 'The Sharing City' that combines the perks of Sharing Economy and Collaborative Consumption with urban development and community building. The sharing economy, over the last couple of years, has gained global recognition and has been widely discussed, debated, and matured to the present day (*Owyang et al., 2013*). The 'sharing cities' started in the year 2012 when Seoul declared its intent to pursue sharing economy strategies. Other cities, including Amsterdam, Boulder, and Rio de Janeiro, then followed to implement the same strategies to face major contemporary urban challenges of resource depletion and rapid urbanization (*Salvia et al., 2019*).

Sharing cities make use of (often smart) technologies to connect a larger number of users to idling assets to be 'shared' by a wider population. Assets that are typically shared within this trend include vehicles and rides, bedrooms and accommodation, as well as tools and competencies (*Salvia et al., 2019*).

India happens to be one of the most rapidly urbanizing developing nations of the world. The driving force behind urbanization is, without any doubt, economic growth, but unfortunately, this growth is largely unplanned and unsustainable. The Indian economy has displayed mounting acceptance to the sharing economy in transport, hospitality, and co-working space segments despite being in its budding phase. In India, the sharing economy business model evolved with the inception of Uber's operation in the Indian markets. The business gained acceptance due to increased internet and mobile access coupled with people's enthusiasm to try-out with new things (*EY, 2015*).

This paper attempts to analyze and tries to envision the sharing city concept in the context of India and will argue that this particular concept can prove to be significant to produce sustainable cities in the country, given the scarcity of resources and the huge population of India. It will attempt to explore its central research question—"Does India have the essential infrastructure and community cooperation backed by strong local governance to implement the sharing cities practices in the country? What are the hurdles and obstacles that are stopping India to produce 'Sharing Cities' in its premises?"

1.1 Methodology

The study has employed both primary and secondary sources for the study on Sharing Cities. In terms of secondary sources, several journal articles, research papers and grey literature were referred to understand the concept in-depth and its application in the global and Indian context. Several sharing practices were touched upon to cite relevant examples for the study. To get a first-hand perspective of how the young generation understands sustainability and employs sharing practices in day to day life, a short questionnaire on an online platform was circulated to people between the age group of 18 to 26 with 80 received responses over a span of 24 hours. This cohort typically represents young college-going students or working individuals at the beginning of their careers.

1.2 Limitations

1. Due to the paucity of time and COVID-19 situation, the study could not conduct in-depth interviews with the millennials and other age groups, which in the authors' understanding could have given a more nuanced picture of the idea of sustainability and sharing among people and government officials in cities.
2. Sharing Cities is a concept from the developed countries, not much research could be found from the middle and low-income countries, including India.

2.0 Sharing Cities Paving Way for Sustainable and Just Cities

The future of the world is going to be driven by urban growth with an increased amount of urban challenges. The situation remains grim for the developing world, considering the fact that developing countries Nigeria and Pakistan would become major population contributors in the world by 2050, with India being the most populous among all (*McCarthy, 2017*). Third world countries are going to face a massive population relying on the limited number of resources available, leading to the increased social, economic and environmental crisis.

Addressing such issues that are likely in the coming times, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was signed by all United Nations Member States in 2015, coming together to achieve 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 aims to promise sustainable cities and communities by 2030 and one of the ways of achieving this, as argued by the paper, is by employing the concept of Sharing Cities.

2.1 The Emergence of Sharing Cities

Before dwelling into the concept of Sharing Cities, it is worthwhile to understand two other concepts that are foundational to the idea of sharing cities:

1. *Sharing Economy*- Matofska defines it as a socio-economic ecosystem built around the sharing of human and physical resources. It includes the shared creation, production, distribution, trade and consumption of goods and services by different people and organisations (*Długosz-Stroetges, 2014, p. 9*).
2. *Access Economy*- Ede (2014) defines access economy as one that seeks to “minimise the demand for materials”, and focuses on designing systems that facilitate more efficient, cost-effective, and in many cases, community-enhancing ways of enabling people to meet their needs by tapping what is already available and leveraging idle resource (*Długosz-Stroetges, 2014, p. 10*).

Both the concepts are aligning to collective consumption and co-production with more focus on making use of what is already existing in the economy for the benefit of all, which can lead to optimum utilization of resources available. The concept of Sharing Cities, which happens to be a recent concept brought in only in the 21st century and flag born by Seoul, applies the aforementioned economic concepts within the urban context to meet urban challenges, thereby leading to the use of resources sustainably, benefiting the present city dwellers along with the generations to come. Although there is no universally accepted definition of what a Sharing City is, its focus of shaping a city which is dominated by commoning practices is unique and significant towards creating sustainable cities. As per Agyeman et al. (2013), sharing practices are gaining importance in the world because they present an excellent opportunity to redistribute goods, services or experiences while reducing the negative impacts of urbanization in a world dominated by materialism (*Długosz-Stroetges, 2014, p. 10*). Cities that can take advantage of platforms available for collaborative consumption will tap into vast new opportunities to create jobs, attract talent, promote local investment and community-building, and offer a healthier place to live (World Economic Forum, 2013).

3.0 What Enables a Sharing City?

To share goods, food, transportation, services, money and space (*Owyang, 2014*), the enablers of a Sharing City includes the involvement of 4 major aspects:

1. **Information, Communication and Technology-** A small Whatsapp neighbourhood group in Utrecht, the Netherlands where neighbours used to share meal amongst each other gave rise to an online platform called “Share Your Meal” which enables people to share a delicious meal in their neighbourhoods, a sustainable practice that does not lead to leftover food wastage and is extremely useful for those who want to avail home-cooked meals. Such is the power of technology, specifically the internet, to bring communities together and build sharing platforms. Technology is beyond geographical distance and can disseminate information on a much faster rate, hence being one of the enablers of a Sharing City. It leads to sharing resources, goods and services at a large scale with convenience. (*Dlugosz-Stroetges, 2014, p. 12*)
2. **Governance at the local level-** Political will at the city level is of great significance to create effective sharing practices. At times cities may become overwhelmed by the number of startups promoting sharing practices, and while they compete for space and market share (*Palm et al., 2019*), maintaining the democratised sharing practices by the local governments is an important aspect that must not be taken lightly. Seoul, South Korea happens to be one of the most successful examples of Sharing Cities and is particularly known for the Seoul Metropolitan Government to declare Sharing City as a new city paradigm.
3. **Market-** The market becomes an important factor in creating demand and supply for startups that promote sharing practices at the city level. Markets focusing on redistribution, recycling and reuse of goods and services can lead to sustainable consumerism.
4. **Community-** Sharing takes place by the community, within the community and for the community. It tends to build trust, collaboration and communication among strangers leading to social integration. Agyeman (2014), states that sharing practices lead to social justice in a city as it can naturally shift cultural values and norms towards trust and collaboration when it is done with equity and justice. (*Dlugosz-Stroetges, 2014, p. 13*)

The book ‘Sharing Cities-Activating the Urban Commons’ mentions 11 core principles of a Sharing City- *solidarity; distributed agriculture; civic amenity abundance; co-designed solution for common needs; transformation over transaction; local control and global cooperation; impact through scaling and replicating practices; cross-sector collaborations for hybrid solutions; empathy for all; Competitive advantage through quality of life, distinctiveness and security, and building and fighting for Sharing Cities (Gorenflo, 2018).*

4.0 Sharing Cities: The Indian Context

- The sharing economy in the ‘Developing Countries’:

Most literature relating to the sharing economy is focused on its operation in highly developed countries, where the consumer base is saturated with ‘idle assets’ that can be shared and used more effectively as well as earn money. The potential to shift from ‘asset-heavy’ ownership to ‘asset-light’ access is offered by the sharing economy so that consumers can choose to rent goods when they need them or pay for a service. However, in low or middle-income countries the sharing economy is a different proposition. Sharing or renting assets may enable access to people who have not previously been able to afford them. New consumers may choose to pay for access in the first instance and avoid ownership, thereby making an important contribution to sustainable development (*Retamal, 2017*).

The key benefits of the sharing economy in developing countries proposed by commentators include: improving the sustainability of consumption, enabling entrepreneurship and development and assisting with regulation.

- The Indian Landscape:

India has predominantly possessed the culture of sharing which has bound people together. However, even with the changing times and increasing acceptance of westernized thinking and individualistic living, India tends to retain sharing practices in several forms. Despite being in its nascent stage, Indian economy displays an enthusiastic acceptance to the sharing economy concept with various sharing initiatives already prevalent in Indian cities, the most prominent examples being Uber and Ola in the transportation sector that connects a large number of consumers with the nearby drivers willing to drive them to their destinations. There are many emerging car-pooling, bike-sharing and rental initiatives in the urban areas which along with

being convenient and prominent in Indian cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Jaipur, Pune among various others, promotes efficiency and sustainability. These ride-sharing platforms have undoubtedly transformed city transport.

Not only the transportation sector but sharing initiatives in the hospitality sector also known as the peer to peer accommodation are growing at a faster rate. Some of the platforms in India displaying this phenomenon are OYO rooms, Airbnb and Stayzilla. 'Home-stay' is another term quite popular in India which allows travellers to stay in shared accommodations (*Kaushal, 2018, p. 8*). These new businesses related to the sharing economy gained acceptance due to increased internet and mobile access combined with people's enthusiasm to try-out with new things.

Several large and small scale NGOs and startups promote the donation of clothes of all kinds for people who are in need. Wall of Kindness in Visakhapatnam, Clothes Box Foundation in Maharashtra, Haryana, Odisha and Jharkhand and Share at Doorstep in Bengaluru are a few of such organizations. (*City Speaks, n.d., & Raja, 2019*) Another interesting project from Visakhapatnam called Sharing is Caring where the city has established public refrigerators where people can store their leftover food that is later distributed among those in need. (*City Speak, n.d.*)

This being said, what can be concluded is that large scale sharing practices are already prevalent in India at its budding phase and the adoption of sharing platforms has been encouraging.

Moving on to the concept of 'Sharing cities' in particular, as discussed in the previous section, there are 4 major aspects that enable and create a 'Sharing City': Technology, Local governance, Community and market.

4.1 'The Sharing City Model' of the West in an Indian landscape:

With more than half a billion internet subscribers, India is one of the largest and fastest-growing markets for digital consumers as they have strongly embraced digital technologies (Kaka et al., 2020). As explained by Arvind Singhatiya,(2020) Vice-President, Corporate affairs, Ola Cabs:

"Demographics and smartphone penetration are key drivers that are accelerating the adoption and usage of the sharing economy at this point. India, in the coming year, will be the world's second-largest smartphone and mobile internet market pushing the US to the third place."

Despite these positive signs displayed by the Indian community towards Technology and innovation, India's digital divide remains huge as according to Financial Express, more than 400 million people don't have access to the internet. The spatial digital and gender divide is also huge with internet density in peri-urban areas lower than in urban areas and far fewer women have access to smartphones than men, respectively. Hence, the technology that plays one of the most important roles in enabling a sharing city, may act as an obstacle in the proper implementation of the sharing initiative in the Indian cities.

1. **Local Governance:** According to the research done in Sharing cities of Amsterdam, Berlin, Guttenberg, London, Malmo, and San Francisco by IIIIEE, Lund University. It is possible to define five principal mechanisms in which municipalities govern the sharing economy: Regulating, self-governing, providing, enabling, and collaborating. Each of these mechanisms includes several governance roles through which municipalities engage with and shape the sharing economy in cities in the European countries. However, India lacks when it comes to having empowered municipal governance. To throw light on the reduced role of local governance in taking forward sharing practices in Indian cities, Smart City Mission's interventions can be taken as an example. There are more vehicles than people in Pune. For a 35-lakh population, 36.2 vehicles are registered under the Regional Traffic Office MH-12 (India Today, 2018). Over 500 cars and two-wheelers are registered every day in Pune (PMC,2016). To solve this issue, the Smart City Mission has been focusing its efforts towards sustainable modes of transport, i.e. increased commute by cycle and a well-connected public transportation system. However, the Smart City Mission Guidelines state that the 'rights and obligations' of the local municipality are to be transferred to the Special Purpose Vehicles, where decision making is entrusted with the bureaucrats and state representatives, shifting away power from local democratic institutions. (*Anand et al., 2018*) As a result of this Pune has not been successful till date in its endeavour of creating a bike commute system that is shared by all citizens. Apart from the re-centralization of power with the state representatives, another big shortcoming of the local governments in India is the lack of human resources to manage the assets created. Municipal Governments have traditionally not paid as much attention to Operations & Management of infrastructure established as they have to asset creation (*SAAP Odisha, 2018*), which is largely due to not having enough workforce. A huge issue

with the bike-sharing infrastructure is the lack of its maintenance on the part of the local government (*Welanker, 2019*).

2. **Community participation** is key behind the successful operation of the sharing cities concept. Unless and until the people living in the city are ready to share and collaborate, efficient and sustainable resource usage will remain a distant dream. Assets that are typically shared within this concept of Sharing Cities include clothing, vehicles and rides, bedrooms and accommodation, as well as tools and competencies. In India, as discussed above, some sharing initiatives are prevalent in the transport and accommodation sector, but sharing personal products (such as one's own home, car and clothes) which the owner is using currently is still negligible when compared to the West. Idling capacity -which refers to the fact that most of our assets and possessions stay idle most of the time-, is still not utilized in India hence leaving us with inefficient usage of our possessions.

According to a large body of research (Singapore Tourism Board (STB), 2014), Millennials will soon come to dominate the workplace, shape the future of organizations, and exponentially increase their purchasing power (*Millennials, Sharing Economy and Tourism: The Case of Seoul | Emerald Insight, 2018*). A PWC study of the sharing economy conducted among American consumers in December 2014 showed the typical shared economy consumer is between 18 and 24 years of age (*Karabell, 2017*). Looking at this research, a survey was conducted for this study using the online platform to understand the perceptions of Indian Millennial population on the concept of 'Sharing' with a sample size being 80.

The primary data collected showed that only 53.8% of the sample population was aware of 'sharing' being a sustainable practice. This shows that the concept of sharing as a sustainable practice is growing but at the same time, comparatively, is new to the millennial Indian population. More than half of the sample population (56.3%) wanted to rent clothing from online stores like Myntra, instead of buying a new one. Thrift stores are also preferred. This shows that the level of awareness among the sample population about different sharing practices is on a rise. People are getting aware of this new concept of a sharing 'economy'. But it is worth noticing that 43.8% of the population chose to buy new products immediately when they needed them. Different Perspectives of the millennial population reveals that the idea of individualism is persisting in our country.

Ownership of resources as a result of the rising purchasing power of people in India due to better living standards is leading to an outburst in first-hand purchases of commodities. But with awareness and concerns about sustainable practices, and with increasing technology and innovation, it can be hoped that this individualistic approach might change in the near future.

One of the most innovative sharing city initiatives was the ‘Smart Map’ that was started in Gothenburg by the non-profit association Collaborative Economy. The Smart Map is a digital map that encourages community, new meetings and access to ownership. Instead of buying everything, one can also rent, share, exchange, borrow, give and receive. On the Smart Map, there is a wide variety of sharing initiatives. To give an example, it is said that a drill is only used for 15 minutes during its service life. So the smart map can facilitate the communication of a person who owns a drill with a person who wants to borrow it and hence he can avoid the purchase of a new one.

To understand the perception of the Indian Millennials on this concept, the primary survey conducted, revealed some contrasting results. As high as 67.5 % of the sample millennial population wanted to rent personal goods like cars, bikes, clothes and tools, but only 43% of the population was comfortable in sharing their goods mentioned above. This shows the consumer behaviour where they want to rent things directly from the people but are sceptical when it comes to sharing their possessions.

According to Financial Express (2015), Vardhman Jain of iRentShare feels that, “India is right now focused on online consumption and e-commerce players are providing great deals to attract users. Once the consumption phase is over, people would like to share their goods.” He also adds that, “One of the positive developments is that people are noticing the start-ups in the sector. The growth is slow, but we are positive about the future because, eventually, the sharing of goods makes complete sense. And people will realise it once they get some support regarding verification, insurance and safety of their goods.”

One of the prerequisites for any form of sharing, whether it is to use another’s accommodation, car or even small goods, is ‘Trust’. For people to take part in the sharing initiatives enthusiastically, it is important to overcome the trust issue that they face when one engages with

anonymous others. Hence, the well-known sharing platforms like Airbnb and OYO with proper rating systems and reviews from millions of other users, are more used by the consumers rather than Couch-surfing and the 'Home-stays' with anonymous identities.

But, this concept of sharing cities is a lot more complex to understand in an Indian context as the judgement to whether to participate in sharing initiative or not, is clouded by other social aspects like religion, class, caste, etc. There are high chances of some of the concerns arising like 'whether the person I am lending or borrowing my goods from, might not have a similar economic background or might be from a lower caste' and hence discouraging sharing practices.

5.0 Recommendations

1. Bridging the Digital Divide

As discussed above, technology, particularly the internet is an important aspect for sharing practices to succeed and scale to a larger level. In the pandemic era when education and work have gone online, the internet has become a necessity. Digital access and literacy remain a challenge for Indian cities. In another report by IAMAI (2017), in urban India, the ratio of mobile internet users stands at 40 per cent and 60 per cent for women and men respectively (Irshad, 2020), which means that a large number of urban residents still either can not access or afford internet. In order to promote online sharing practices, efforts should be made to make the internet easily available to all sections of society.

Though the internet is an enabler of Sharing Cities, such practices should not be based completely on technological solutionism. Many times they are only serving a fraction of the society, leaving the under-privileged deprived. Uber, in theory, a ride-sharing company helping cut congestion, is turning into a luxury taxi company serving the global footloose elite. Airbnb, the couch-surfing website designed to personalise travel, overlooks the growing use of its platform by landlords buying up property for the purpose and thus enabling gentrification. (Agyeman, 2014) Both the examples call for the need to look beyond technological solutionism and harness grassroots level sharing practices at the neighbourhood scale, to begin with.

2. Empowering the Local Government

Since Sharing Cities is a concept confined within the urban context, the local government's role is extremely important. As discussed before, it happens to be one of the most crucial enablers of sharing practices. Internationally, many city governments have made agreements with organizations promoting sharing practices by renting them space and agreeing upon the type of work that will take place in that space. Parking lots is one of the best examples of this. Such organizations are provided with the parking lot spaces where they can carry out their operations at night when these lots are empty. City governments act as investors by literally investing in these organizations and gaining returns from them in the form of services (CitySpeaks). If the city governments of India are empowered enough, such initiatives can lead to redefining public services, infrastructure and civic engagement. (World Economic Forum, 2013)

Many city governments are unaware of the Sharing City concept and even if they are aware, they are unsure as to how to navigate such practices in the city. (World Economic Forum, 2013, p. 12) India happens to be a part of this case, hence, a national level policy/program is required to be formulated, that can be adopted by the city levels in their localized contexts. Also, with schemes like Smart City Mission in place, the empowerment of the local level governance is a much-needed step to be taken to lead towards a sustainable city.

3. Empowering Citizen Participation in such Practices

It can be said that the fact that the sharing economy promotes sustainability and efficiency, is not enough of an incentive for people to participate in the initiative. If the question of what drives people to participate in a sharing economy is analyzed from a realistic perspective, it can result in the increased participation of people.

Such aspects that encourage people's participation may be in the form of infrastructure development that is inclusive in nature, incentives in the form of lucrative deals and mutual trust and cooperation promotion. Some mechanisms that help build up trust in sharing economy practices are Rating and review structures, government endorsements and regulation to increase the accountability of such initiatives.

4. Awareness

Although the sharing economy is gaining popularity in India with each passing day, it is still at a nascent level. Hence, awareness must be spread among the masses about the perks and benefits of this kind of an economy. There is a need for this task to be handled by the local urban authorities as well as, it should be promoted at a national level as an Urban Transformation Policy undertaken by the government of India as being done for the Smart City Mission. Ultimately, transforming Indian cities into efficient sustainable cities is a national mission to be undertaken by all with Community-Government cooperation.

5. Building an Inclusive Sharing Economy

It can be observed that sharing economy initiatives are centred around middle and higher-income groups of the society. To make it more inclusive, the focus should be given to pro-poor sharing economy with interventions like:

- The sharing economy is largely based on technology and hence interventions to support accessible and affordable technology platforms should be undertaken to enable a large number of people from all economic backgrounds to easily access and participate in the sharing initiatives.
- Instead of English language which is largely used in the online platforms, efforts should be made to make it language friendly with communication done in different languages as it makes it discriminatory for those who can't speak English.
- Development of platform cooperatives, sharing businesses and peer to peer platforms that target community needs or specific social issues.
- Interventions could help by setting minimum wages for freelance workers, facilitating worker access to social security and training, promoting business standards for inclusiveness and setting sustainability guidelines for businesses. (*Retamal, 2017*).

6.0 Conclusion

One of the Sustainable Goals to be met by 2030 is that of providing the world with sustainable cities and communities. This paper attempted to present the concept of Sharing Cities as a concept that can lead to sustainable practices within the urban areas, leading to the mutual benefit of the citizens, government and the environment. To gain an insight of how the millennials understand sustainability and sharing in cities, a short close-ended survey was circulated which showcases that at present people have a preliminary understanding of sharing and that they are happy to rent commodities and services but are unsure in sharing their own possessions. The study gave an insight into the current sharing initiatives being practised in India such as the large multinational corporations like Uber, Furlenco and Airbnb initiatives from a policy perspective like bike-sharing-systems in Indian cities. After dwelling into the Indian landscape and its shortcomings in creating successful sharing practices, several recommendations on generating awareness about the concept; making practices inclusive; catering to the digital divide and moving beyond technological solutionism and empowerment of local governments and community are discussed as factors that can pave the way for Indian cities to become sharing-friendly and sustainable.

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