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Inclusive cities and special children

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Talking about inclusive cities has become fashionable today. It appears that conclaves and round tables on urban issues cannot be driven without this thematic session finding a niche place in the entire discussion campaign. Social inclusion is thus a feature in the meetings of the World Urban Forum, (designated by the U.N. General assembly as an advisory body that functions as a think tank to encourage debate and discussion on challenges posed by urbanisation), or the recently concluded Summit of Asia Society's Asia 21 Young Leaders at Singapore or the SACOSAN III Summit held in Delhi. If social inclusion is all about reducing inequalities between the least advantaged groups and the rest of society by closing the opportunity gap, are all aspects of social exclusion discussed at these forums?

High apathy

In India, how many cities have included the so-called "Special" in their development plans? Can any city boast of sign boards, caution notices specially designed for them? They need to be escorted everywhere and protected at every step. When persuaded by a local NGO, the Chennai Municipal Corporation made available special play equipment in a park. No other city proactively took measures to ensure that this group leads their lives without being dehumanised. By not providing facilities, that make them live with dignity aren't our Indian cities practising social exclusion?

The WHO estimated that 10 per cent of the world's population suffers from disabilities. Extending the logic, nearly 100 million in India are disabled. Though the first systematic census in India was taken way back in 1872, India included the disabled only in the 2001 Census! Government apathy apart, lack of awareness about disability, its various manifestations, myths and misconceptions places a bigger burden on the disabled and their kin. Pervasive Developmental Disorder includes Autism, and a good percentage of autistics are savants and geniuses. While Dyslexics and Autistics get labeled as "retarded", celebrities like Farah Khan go on air and say that movie critics are 'retarded' because they did not rate her film

high!! We hear the word retarded that is used very loosely even by educated professionals in their speeches. Is it humour or lack of humaneness?

Capable but confined

Not many realise that potential national resources are being locked up at homes fearing social ridicule. Research at Oxford speaks of “Genius genes in Autistic children “and other cognitive studies pronounced that geniuses like Einstein, Oscar Wilde, Bill Gates are on the Autistic spectrum. Just as parents confess that they hide the problem, teachers admit that these special children get bullied at schools. Here’s a case of Capable but Denied Potential not translating into performance.

The London School of Economics, in a recent study, estimated that the U.S. will have an economic burden of \$ 410 billion if the mentally challenged are not empowered. India has its own share of economic Cost of Inaction. Collective action by city authorities, schools, the ministry of social justice and corporate groups becomes imperative if we want to have inclusive cities. They can conceive mechanisms, forge viable partnerships and push this agenda of social inclusion forward. The corporate sector is parking its funds in adult literacy, primary education, women and gender related issues; we are yet to see a well-worked out programme in this much neglected area.

Concentrating on this aspect of inclusion can reduce social tensions created by inequity. The active participation and ownership of the relatives of this marginalised group is critical to drive the growth agenda of the city.

The Jawaharlal National Urban Renewal Mission is the flagship programme of the Indian government aimed at infusing life into cities. The identified 63 Mission Cities can include this agenda in a small way to inspire faith in the people. Inclusion aside, for the time being, can we at least talk of Tolerant Cities ?