ABSTRACT

India is emerging as an economy to be reckoned with, in the present global scenario. It is poised for tremendous growth to which the contribution of the cities is important. However, Indian cities also face several urban challenges in the urbanization and development process. High costs of housing and office spaces, shortage of critical infrastructure, service deficiencies including erratic water and power supply, inadequate transportation systems and rapidly deteriorating urban environment have been construed, taking a toll on people’s health and productivity and also diminishing their Quality of Life (QOL) according to the report of the World Bank. Thus, the concern for QOL has gained greater significance in the recent time and there is widespread acceptance that there is a need for serious introspection about the QOL of the people and look for future options.

QOL is a broad multi-dimensional concept defined in numerous ways. The concept of QOL may be simpler to recognize than to comprehend. There can be any number of issues which could be brought under its domain and therefore, made it extremely difficult to define comprehensively. The Treasury Board of Canada points that ‘there does not appear to be one generally accepted definition of QOL in the extensive literature generated in this subject over the years’. The literature confirm that there is no universally agreed definition for QOL. Further, it is observed that ‘providing a coherent and robust definition of the concept remains problematic’. However, all definitions while attempting to define QOL, focus its attention towards the peoples’ well-being, or development or satisfaction. QOL is synonymously referred in the literature through the terms like life satisfaction, general well-being, human welfare, and human development.
Three major types of QOL definitions are observed in the literature i) general or global definitions, ii) definitions which break the concept down into a series of component parts or dimensions and iii) definitions that focus on only one or two of the component parts recognized in the former type of definitions. In this research, it was proposed to identify certain components which would define QOL, as the focus of the research is towards the QOL perceptions of a wider audience over variety of issues.

The concept applicability to the planning exercise could be identified, in three ways – firstly as a Policy Guide, secondly as a Planning Tool and thirdly as a Resource Allocation Model. Despite the potential, the planning profession has been slow to embrace the QOL concept. Literature shows that evaluation of the urban QOL has been an important aspect of the research concerning the contemporary city, and pioneering studies in this field have been conducted by researchers in western nations. The literature also finds that documented research on QOL in the Asian region has been scare and infrequent.

The literature on QOL suggested that the foundation of the planner’s approach to QOL measurement is citizen participation. It adds that experts should not presume to dictate the QOL for residents. In this context, this research approach proposes to assess QOL through public perception and Chennai city is considered for the case study as it is one of the important cities in India. It is the fourth largest metropolitan city in India contributing significantly to the national economy. The broad aim of the research is to impress upon the need to consider QOL assessment as a tool for urban development. Accordingly the research objectives are set as, i) to assess the peoples’ perception of the QOL and investigate the local experience and the trends in QOL ii) to assess the public perception over the importance of various QOL dimensions, ratings of the features relating to the dimensions and their implication over QOL and iii) to find out to what extent the policies,
programmes and projects conceived by various Government agencies are addressing issues related to QOL either directly or indirectly.

This research considers QOL as a measure, comprising of both personal and urban features. Further, it assesses QOL as a measure of satisfaction based on certain QOL dimensions. The literature also supports such an understanding of the concept and measurement. The level of satisfaction is influenced by the personal value system and integrating these notions a ‘Conceptual Model’ of QOL is conceived for the research. A set of twelve QOL dimensions reflecting the personal and urban features have also been drawn in a systematic and scientific manner including the conduct of a pilot study. The identified QOL dimensions are i) Economic characteristics, ii) Health, iii) Environment, iv) Safety, v) Education, vi) Personal & Family, vii) Community, viii) Traffic & Transportation, ix) Housing, x) Recreation & Leisure, xi) Basic Services, and xii) Shopping & Utilities.

In a similar manner a set of 24 indictors relating to the above 12 dimensions were identified and the peoples’ satisfaction ratings were received in a 3-point scale of ‘highly satisfied’, ‘satisfied’ and ‘dissatisfied’. Based on a suitable methodology, for each respondent ‘QOL dimensional scores’ and also an overall Quality of Life Index were derived.

Also, recognizing the importance of planning and development measures of the government in enhancing the QOL of the citizens in a gradual and systematic manner, a detailed study was undertaken about the development initiatives undertaken in the Chennai city during the past. The focus of these efforts was analyzed to draw inferences about the QOL perceptions of the people in the context of development initiatives undertaken by the government. The peoples’ perception survey was conducted in two of the administrative wards of Chennai City namely Santhome and Velachery. Appropriate sampling techniques were used and in total, responses from 224 residents were recorded from the two case study areas. The data were
compiled, analysed and subjected to statistical testing for drawing the inferences. The gist of important findings and recommendations are as follows:

Till Independence, the development perspective was more on settlements and not extending towards improvements in socio-economic characteristics of the people. It took nearly two to three decades for creating the required systems, tools and mechanism for physical development planning. Improvements in QOL have been attempted through spatial and non-spatial planning measures. However, attempts towards integration of these plans have remained limited, and therefore the issue of QOL does not get fully addressed. Urbanization on the whole is not guided by any comprehensive policy and consequently the urban growth independent of carrying capacity, propels a range of urban issues which are addressed on ad hoc basis. All along plan preparation had been contextual or as an act of accomplishment of mandatory requirements. Attempts to improve QOL have been sporadic and neither been systematic nor sequential. Also, there had been inordinate delays between the two important stages in the planning process namely ‘preparation of the plan’ and ‘implementation of the plan’. Planning attempts and development initiatives have generally solved the problems of the past to a larger extent and the problems of the present to the limited extent. But the scale of efforts has been inadequate to offer solution on a long term basis.

Area Plans or the Detailed Development Plans (DDP) poses the capacity to enhance the physical quality and functional efficiency of the external environment, but such plans are not made available for the entire city, and even where the plans are prepared they do not get implemented. The plan preparation process does not provide much opportunity for public hearing or participation at any stage. Also, it was found that the public do not have the inclination to come forward and involve themselves in public welfare activities, a prime reason for lack of dynamism in plan implementation. The
public perception survey finds QOL more as local phenomena, constantly
influenced by the micro level external issues and personal life conditions.
However, planning is not supported by micro level inputs and hence resource
allocation could not be effective fully in enhancing the QOL.

The Survey respondents considered nine out of twelve QOL
dimensions as ‘highly important’ or ‘important’. The interactions with the
people revealed that the continual state of well-being and the ability to derive
comfort and pleasure creates a sense of satisfaction among the people which
also to be construed as a definition of QOL. In one of the case study ward
Santhome 66 per cent of the respondents were satisfied or highly satisfied in
life, and in the other case study ward Velachery the respective percentage was
74. A little over 60 per cent respondents in both places considered, their
neighborhoods as ‘above average’ or as ‘one of the best places’ to live. The
top five dimensions to be rated as ‘highly important’ by the respondents in
both case study areas are Health, Education, Economic characteristics,
Housing, and Basic Services. In eight of the twelve dimensions, the average
dimensional score of the Santhome respondents were higher than Velachery
respondents. However, this much of variation in dimensional scores were not
reflected in the life satisfaction scores which shows the resilience of the
people and also confirms that the value system plays a role in determination
of the satisfaction.

The average QOLI of the respondents in Santhome was 63 and for
Velachery it was 57. The QOLI showed a notable correlation (between ±
0.50 to ± 0.75) with three of the twelve dimensions namely Health, Housing
and Personal & Family at both the places. These are to be conceived as
‘Primary Dimensions’ very critical in determination of QOL.

Statistical tests for independence showed that QOL is independent
of ‘Family Size’ and ‘Age’ at both places Santhome and Velachery. It brings
out the fact that family size and the age factor are not detrimental to QOL as it
is perceived by many. The tests also showed that QOL is dependent on ‘Education’ and ‘Income’ at both places. The pattern of correlation between the QOL dimensions was found not similar between the two case study areas, Santhome & Velachery. Similar QOL studies across several wards / areas would be meaningful in deriving a prototype QOL model for Chennai, which can be used to estimate the measure of QOL for varying degrees of inputs. The research draws suitable recommendations to strengthen the development mechanism in an attempt to improve the QOL of the citizens.

The QOL study though may appear simple, had to pass through greater difficulties in execution. The problems emanates from the simple understanding of the concept, and defining the same in the research perspective. The conduct of public perception surveys had been a real challenge, with not very encouraging response rates from the public. In order to understand the QOL expressions of the people in relation to their value system and their socio-economic and demographic background it was necessary for the researcher to conduct the QOL surveys in person with all the respondents.

The successful completion of the study has helped to identify the dimensions considered as important in the perceptions of the people and also has brought out the interrelationships of the dimensions. Similarities and dissimilarities were seen between the two case study places in terms of development status as well the QOL perceptions. The research understands the QOL perception in the context of urban development process and concludes that the urban planning initiatives have contributed towards enhancing the QOL in varying degree of success and to have greater impact of the planning efforts, the spatial and social planning initiatives at the micro level need to get integrated and dovetailed to the resources for implementation, with the participation of the public at every stage of the planning.