

Urban Planning and Development: The Indian Challenge



Posted by Dr. Shovan K. Saha in [Public Policy Advisory](#)

While it took 40 years for Urban India to reach 230 million, it will take only half this time to grow the next 250 million. The McKinsey Global Institute has termed this "India's urban awakening", which presents a massive challenge for urban planning. In their prediction, they will generate 70% of net new jobs by 2030. They will also produce more than 70% of GDP, and stimulate a four-fold increase in per capita incomes across the nation¹.

In 2011, about 377 million persons (31.4%) lived in nearly 8000 towns and cities; about half of which were without Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). About one-third of the population living in towns and cities were first generation urban dwellers. As in China, where the average income in the cities was \$1,000 a year against the rural yearly income of \$300, India too faces a demand and supply gap. This is not only for homes, but also water, sanitation, transport and communication services. This is in addition to access to facilities such as banking, shopping and more, which have continued to grow over the decades. Such gaps appear to be directly proportional to population size of cities. This gap between the urban and the rural has naturally led to mass immigration from the rural to the urban spaces. This resulted in various problems: the biggest being whether these urban spaces were equipped to accept so many new residents.

The Challenge

Urban planning on this front has been inadequate. Approximately only 25% or 2,000 of these towns and cities had Master Plans or Development Plans. These are land-use centric plans approved by the respective State legislatures, to be achieved over a period of 20 to 25 years. The first problem was that these Master Plans were poorly implemented due to fund scarcity. Secondly, detailed action strategies that evolved out of Master Plans were unavailable. The question is: will this remain a chronic problem, or will India rise to the challenge of more strategic urban planning? In the newly urbanized India of 2050 and beyond, the tax base for the national economy may grow significantly. This phenomenal GDP growth will in turn provide funds for improved urban planning.

By 2050, India is expected to graduate to an urban nation with approximately 900 million persons (or nearly 56% of India's population). This will bring India closer to 'developed' nations, where the distribution of population between urban and rural settlements have tended to stabilize at about 70% or more. The proportion of the first generation urban dwellers in 2050 could be similar to the 2011 scenario.

The History of Urban Planning in India

Looking back at history, Municipalities in India were only established in the early 19th century during colonial rule. The role of Municipalities in India has remained stable, frequently at the cost of quality of life of the citizens. During post independence era, significant official urban planning initiatives to undertake planned development of towns and cities include:

- Enactment of the Delhi Development Act 1957 leading to establishment of the Delhi Development Authority, followed by establishment of about 300 development authorities for as many cities.
- Launching of the national scheme such as IDSMT in the Sixth FYP (1980-85), intended to address critical development needs of small and medium towns.
- Publication of India's first urbanisation policy in 1988 by the National Commission on Urbanisation (NCU) chaired by Charles Correa. This document was the first to point out the inevitable leading role of cities in driving forward India's economy and the necessity of integrating spatial and economic development of its urban centres.
- Enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992 known as Panchayati Raj Act and Nagarpalika Act. These empowered elected representatives of Districts or ULB to undertake economic and spatial planned development of villages, towns and cities. But since land is a state subject, only some states adopted the acts, resulting in slowdowns on the implementation side.
- The 2005-JNNURM launched by the Government of India was the first initiative of its kind in terms of the scale of investment of USD 20 billion over a period of seven years. 65 cities were selected under this initiative.
- In June 2015, the Government of India initiated the 'Smart City Mission'. Its objective was to improve the conditions of 100 cities within five years with an approved investment of USD 15 billion. The Smart City Mission idea appears to be the most comprehensive in nature and serious in terms of intention.

The Apathetic Urban Indian

Three situations reflecting the state of mind and apathy of an average Indian who lives in a city:

1. Jatin Das' conclusion about contemporary Indian society, that "no one cares" based on the fate of his painting *Flying Apsara*, commissioned by Air India in 1991.
2. Axis Bank ATM experience. One bank worker sat on the floor inside the ATM cubicle and was having his lunch, laid around him. Another was readying the ATM for users waiting outside, floor strewn with bits of print outs. The queue of customers slowly grew. Minutes later, the second worker finished his job and joined his colleague sitting on the floor for lunch. Customers kept waiting till a third bank worker came and found the ATM ready for use but customers were unaware. She then ushered the waiting customer in.
3. On a busy city road, a helmetless motorcyclist met with an accident. Other citizens travelling on the same route steered and passed by him, laying helplessly.
4. The government of India is vigorously promoting the use of toilets as part of its Swachh Bharat (Clean India) programme. In a recently telecast documentary, the BBC interviewed a few villagers of North India (intended users of toilets). These villagers pointed out the advantages of open defecation, such as the need of a lota (can) rather than a bucketfull.

Effective Urban Planning must include Citizen Participation

The task of building a 'world class' urban India in a sustainable and planned manner is a tall order. This calls for a gigantic urban planning effort by the government which includes effective participation of its citizens. The government effort must consist of resource mobilization, revising the provisions of the enabling tools and providing opportunities to citizens. This will enhance their ability to utilize the relevant learning opportunities so their role may be part of the proposed 'inclusive' strategy of the mission.

The benchmarks of the Smart City Mission must be sensitive to regional/local contexts given the country's size and diversity. There is need to develop, carefully plan and visualize implementation and post implementation sustenance. Stable, complimentary roles need to be played by all stakeholders to complete this mission successfully.

Computerization is Crucial, but the Government Shouldn't Forget Apathetic Citizens

The Smart City Mission has launched many urban planning projects in selected cities. These focus on rapidly replacing operating and maintenance systems of the cities' services and amenities: from manual/semi-computerized to fully/predominantly computerized.

The Mission hardly recognizes the urgent need to drastically transform the attitude of the citizens from apathy to action alongside rural to urban. Therefore a huge scope remains to address this urban planning issue across all sizes/types of human settlements in India. Only through such initiatives can we therefore expect a smooth urbanization and the Smart City Mission to be successful.

To learn more about Athena's work on Smart Cities, read our blog entry on how we supported urban planning in Vellore, Tamil Nadu [here](#).

References:

1. <https://www.ft.com/content/9670af02-c50f-11d1-b785-00144feab49a>

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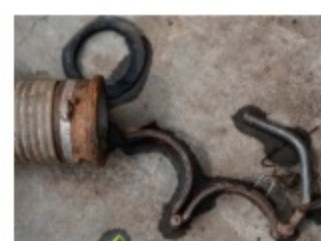
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