It will take a city

If their potential is unlocked, 15 urban hubs can propel India's economy

- Amitabh Kant*

Cities are the engines of India's future growth, innovation, and job creation. Just 15 urban hubs contribute 30% of India's GDP. These fifteen cities alone – Mumbai, New Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Pune, Surat, Coimbatore, Noida/Greater Noida, Kochi, Gurugram, Vishakhapatnam, and Nagpur – will drive India's ability to become a 30 + trillion economy by 2047, facilitating an extra 1.5% of growth.

Yet, they do not get their due for being India's economic powerhouses. These cities face numerous challenges rooted in rapid, unplanned growth. Issues like extreme air pollution, urban flooding, water scarcity, lack of reliable internet connectivity, garbage, and slums are not just infrastructure problems; but a direct reflection of how these cities expanded without proper planning or strong urban governance. Additionally, they also remain unprepared for the climate crisis. Often land use decisions are made without adequate empirical assessments of their consequences like air pollution, generation of heat islands, impacts on natural drainage system, local ecology, land use efficiency, urban economy, and so on, eventually leading to long-term sustainability issues.

While cities like Bangkok, London, Dubai, and Singapore attract millions worldwide, Indian cities rarely feature as global destinations. How can we unlock their full potential and position them on the world map?

Clean Air for All | First, we must clean our cities' air. Approximately 42 of the 50 most polluted cities are in India. Vehicular emissions, construction dust, and biomass burning are primary culprits. Public transportation must be electrified at the earliest opportunity. Construction dust norms need to be implemented strictly. The Budget 2025-26 announced the creation of a Rs. 1 lakh crore Urban Challenge Fund – this can include a city-level grand challenge. Cities should be ranked and financial incentives disbursed based on performance.

Modernising Land Use | Second, solid waste management must be transformed. According to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), our cities produce upwards of 150,000 tonnes of solid waste daily, yet only a quarter is processed scientifically and sustainably. At the national level, India is estimated to generate about 62 million tonnes of municipal solid waste yearly, of which about 70% is collected, but only 30% is processed.

This is a failure of municipal governance. To fix it, state governments must build strong infrastructure—including purchasing vehicles for waste collection and transportation—and train staff to handle these tasks effectively. Municipal bodies should also empower communities through awareness campaigns involving residents and businesses. Clear policies and regulations that promote performance-based accountability are key. Ultimately, better regulation, community involvement, and capacity-building is the only way to transform waste management into a sustainable, circular system – one that experts say could unlock as much as $73.5 trillion annually by 2030 through a full embrace of the circular economy.

Indore's model has shown immense promise. Door-to-door segregated waste is transported in specialised vehicles to world-class waste processing plants. Wet waste is processed into bio-CNG. This model must be scaled up and applied nationwide.

24x7 Water Supply | Third, water stress is an urgent challenge. Nearly half of our rivers are polluted. In 2018, NITI Aayog predicted 40% of India's population would face water scarcity by 2030. Cities lose 40-50% of piped water in transmission, and poor water quality worsens health issues. Studies have also estimated that in cities, 40-50% of piped water is lost during transmission. Poor quality of water supply can also lead to health issues. In Indore, sewage leakages into waterbodies were plugged, leveraging GIS technology. Rainwater harvesting and reuse of treated water have turned Indore into India's first water-plus city.

Affordable Housing | Fourth, we must address the shortage of affordable housing in our cities. The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Knight Frank, estimate a

shortfall of 10 million affordable homes, expected to triple to 31 million by 2030. Informal settlements have proliferated, resulting in illegal colonies with inadequate infrastructure support, including water and sanitation. Increasing floor space index (FSI) and floor area ratio (FAR) growth will promote vertical growth. Density-related incentives are a potential solution too, as highlighted by the G20 India and OECD Report on Financing Cities of Tomorrow. Cities such as Sao Paolo and Tokyo have implemented such programmes, allowing developers to build higher, in exchange for contributions to social housing, green spaces, and transit infrastructure.

Decongesting Roads | India's urban potential remains trapped behind congested and overburdened city environments. According to the Boston Consulting Group, the average Indian city dweller spends 1.5-2 hours daily stuck in traffic, time lost that could be better used productively. Congestion also boosts emissions and pollution. To address this, we must prioritize investing in public transport, which means complementing ongoing metro projects with electrified last-mile solutions. Implementing congestion-based pricing and harnessing AI and IoT for smart traffic management can also optimise flows. But road discipline is equally crucial. Roads will only be free of traffic if citizens follow rules and drive responsibly.

Enhancing Digital Connectivity | While cities like Seoul, Singapore, and Hong Kong offer internet speeds exceeding 1 Gbps, India's average mobile internet speed is just around 100 Mbps—far lower than the 300-400 Mbps common in top Asian tech hubs. Despite over 660 million active internet users in India, nearly half the population remains offline or struggles with slow, unreliable speeds. To attract top global companies, multinational corporations setting up innovation centres, Global Capability Centres (GCCs), and R&D hubs here, India needs to dramatically upgrade its digital infrastructure—delivering lightning-fast, reliable internet that meets international benchmarks.

To do this, we need to expand high-speed broadband, 4G, and 5G across cities and rural areas. This requires cutting spectrum prices to attract investment, building extensive fibre-optic networks, and deploying 5G nationally for ultra-fast connectivity. Simplifying licensing and regulations will speed up infrastructure rollout; while incentivising private

investment and public-private partnerships will ensure our cities get world-class internet.

Greater Accountability and Transparency | Effective urban reform depends on decentralised planning, governance, and financing. Fragmented authority leads to inefficiency and poor accountability. NITI Aayog reports that India has just one planner for every 100,000 people, while developed nations have one for every 5,000–10,000. Most Indian cities lack proper master plans, leaving them heavily dependent on central and state funds. Full implementation of the 74th Constitutional Amendment must happen—along with increasing property tax collection, which is less than 0.2% of GDP. Digitising land records, using tech for surveillance and tax collection, and exploring land value capture (LVC) can help cities generate revenue. Higher FSI and FAR norms can be offered to developers in exchange for their investment in public infrastructure. Models like Hong Kong's land leasing and property revenue systems prove how leveraging land value can fund city growth. Once cities can raise their own revenues, they can tap into municipal bond markets—though only after completing planning and governance reforms.

Our cities carry centuries of history and should be world-class economic and cultural magnets. But without public spaces, cleanliness, connectivity, and mobility, that remains a distant dream. The steps outlined will make our cities cleaner, safer, more productive, and accessible. This must be paired with investments in walkable heritage zones and seamless urban experiences—where the government enables, and the private sector creates.

The next decade is beyond a doubt an "urban decade," and these fifteen cities must drive India's urban renaissance. Transforming these cities is an economic necessity. They will shape India's growth, global image and drive India's future prosperity. Without making them the finest cities in the world India will never become a 30+ trillion $ economy.

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