

## **It's time to revisit, rethink, reshape Indian cities**

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*75 years post-independence, India's hasn't remained a land of villages, it has witnessed widespread urbanisation. Future of India set to be written in its 8000-odd urban centres.*

### **Urbanisation - a key driver of economic growth**

India has been among the fastest growing economies in the world for close to 2 decades and aspires to be amongst the top 3 largest economies of the world by 2047, which marks 100<sup>th</sup> year of the country's independence. The National Commission on Population estimated in 2019, that the population of India is expected to increase from 1,211 million to 1,518 million during 2011-2036. The urban growth is expected to contribute over 73% of the rise in the total population. United Nations has projected that by 2050, India would be 50% urbanized. The country is set to reach a turning point in its journey of economic transformation when for the first time half of its population would reside in cities.

Cities occupy just about 3 percent of country's land but contribute over 70 percent of GDP. This indicates the level of economic productivity that they tend to offer. However, they have not received adequate attention towards their functionality and liveability before 2015. The government has recently been taking massive initiatives for providing basics like water supply, sanitation to each household as well as bringing technology to solve the urban problems. The government is now aiming at complete saturation in the next phase of schemes like AMRUT and Swachh Bharat Mission and housing for all. These interventions will have immense impact at the grassroot levels. Sustenance of their impact of such interventions depends at the capacity to plan for future at the grass root levels.

### **Complexities and challenges- call for reforms**

Instances like extreme air pollution, urban flooding, water scarcity/droughts, and their consequent losses are not just a reflection of infrastructural shortcomings in the cities but the way the cities have grown without adequate planning and strong urban governance system. Often the land use decisions are made without adequate empirical assessment 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.

Urban India is mired with several complexities. A foundational challenge is the way we define what is 'urban' and what is 'rural' in India. As of now, out of 7933 towns that are counted as urban, almost half have status of Census Towns and they continue to be governed as rural entities. And therefore, India has become vulnerable to unplanned urbanization. Urbanisation in India, seems massively unacknowledged and untapped.

Next complexity is that even those ‘urban’ settlements that have a status of ‘statutory towns’ do not grow necessarily in a planned manner. About 52% of statutory towns in India lack any kind of master plan. Most of the focus of planned development tends towards the metropolitan cities or Class 1 towns. The small and medium sized towns are the ones that need equal attention of the States. The Class II, III and IV towns together make up 26% of the total population in the country and contribute a share of over 44.2% to the total urban area in the country. Interestingly, the population of Class V and VI towns had soared by 90% and 151% respectively during 2001-2011 while the Class I towns had a modest growth rate of 35% in the same time period. Such towns serve as intermediaries in the rural-urban continuum. Owing to capacity deficits, they do not receive adequate attention. However, if they develop unguided, they will need higher expenditure for corrective measures and infrastructural provision.

Urban land is valuable, however, most of the ULBs do not have a complete know how of the value of their assets. A pervasive issue is the lack of adequate capacity of the urban local bodies in taking innovative measures for uplifting their financial limitations. They also fall short of collecting sufficient property taxes in terms of its rates and coverage.

### **‘Decade of action’**

Cities are in a phase of constant evolution. They are not just drivers of economic growth, but are magnets of global knowledge exchanges, and a playground for innovation. It is time to breakthrough from the orthodox thinking of city planning that emerges and ends at the principle of restrictive land use plans.

For India to accomplish SDG- 2030s and the New Urban Agenda, we have to re-visit, re-think and reshape the way we plan and manage our settlements and the connecting networks among them. We need to think of cities as markets, places of co-existence of cultures and generator of employment opportunities. The natural environments within them and surrounding them need to be protected. Essentially, Indian cities would need a compact structure built on the back of cost-efficient public transport infrastructure that ensures last mile connectivity.

Human resource is critical to strengthen the urban planning capacity in the country. Over 12,000 posts for town planners are required in the State town and country planning departments. Existing town planners specialise in giving permission for building construction rather than undertaking sustainable planning for city’s growth and evolution. Most of them lack knowledge of public transport oriented development.

Going forward, there is a need to build massive capacities in the country so that cities can realise the fruits of urbanisation and generate an economic momentum towards USD 5 trillion economy. In this spirit, many vicious cycles need to be broken and plugged with reforms in urban planning, management and finance as also elaborated in the recently released NITI Aayog’s report on ‘Reforms in Urban Planning Capacity in India’.

In a short to medium term, domestic private sector companies need to be nourished and built so that we start generating solutions for India from Indian minds that are well aware of the organic growth and culture of the settlements in the country. Start-ups need to be mentored and encouraged to bridge the gap between innovations and urban problems. Technology needs

to be made mainstay in urban planning education to ensure integrated urban planning. India should be able to build its soft power in the urban planning domain by end of 2030. Citizens must be made a partner in city making by generating awareness about urban planning processes amongst them and their elected leaders.

The State governments need to gear up for opening a new chapter in their history of development. A ‘ State urbanisation strategy’ is the first step forward for every State to move forward. Such a policy must be able to stitch together the imperatives of all sectoral policies from industry and tourism to agriculture and environment. Unless such integration happens, coherence between spatial and economic policy would remain unconquered. We also need enlightened city leadership to make cities centres of growth and for ensuring that they are liveable and inclusive.

The next decade is beyond a doubt an ‘urban decade’ and the present decade, therefore, has to be a decade for ‘robust planning and action’.

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