Building world-class cities

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Karuna Gopal

Q:Can you outline what has gone wrong with our urban administration and the cities, particularly the metros, which are in such a mess today?

Indian cities are no longer livable and the reasons are complex and layered. The top visible layer is rapid in-migration into cities, unplanned growth, inadequate investments in infrastructure both soft and hard, capacity and capability gaps in civic agencies and lack of mechanisms for citizen partnership.

Go a little deeper and you will see reactive plans, poor enforcement, planning agencies disconnected with implementing agencies, data asymmetry and reliability, planning as well as politics.

More deeper you go and you will see the systemic problems. The metropolitan governance framework in India has fragmented institutional responsibilities making consensus impossible. It is a product of outdated municipal laws. Each city has anywhere between 15 and 30 agencies dealing with city management. These agencies have ambiguous role definitions, overlapping jurisdictions, budgetary and staff deficits.

A macro perspective will give the actual loss to the nation caused by poor management of cities … consider this:

Indian cities, just like most cities around the world, are products of globalization, industrialization and urbanization. As economic cooperation between nations has increased due to globalization, there is more economic activity in cities, which has attracted more people from rural areas. There is a direct correlation between urbanization and economic development of nations. This is what we call the URBAN ADVANTAGE. Unfortunately, India is not capitalizing on this phenomenon. A city that is well prepared can maximize it's potential by utilizing the talent of migrants for economic development. And here lies the big difference between India and other countries. When most world cities have prospered due to the urban advantage, Indian cities have crumbled! It's a shame that Indian policy makers have viewed urbanization with apprehension, fear and skepticism. As a result our cities were not prepared to deal with the onslaught of rapid urbanization. The investments remained the same, infrastructure remained the same just as the capability and capacity of municipal corporations water utilities and urban development authorities. Technology to build smart and sustainable cities is available aplenty but we don't have the capacity to absorb technology!

Indian cities have been contributing close to 60% of the GDP and almost 85% of the tax revenues and predictions are that the GDP contribution will go up to 70% by 2012. Urban transformation is an economic necessity for India and it's time our policy makers got their act right.

Q: What role can civil society play in such a movement?

I strongly believe that in India we have to co-create cities. The government, private sector and civil society together have to architect their growth. All world cities were built on a healthy partnership between the government and citizens. Cities become vulnerable if citizens stay out of the game. Tell me, can any business house succeed if the city itself fails?

Q: Can the tier-2 and tier-3 cities, at least, be saved from going the way of the metros?

Yes very much!! Last year, I was addressing a World Conference on Indian cities and happened to mention that JNNURM did not impact the cities as envisaged because there were flaws in its design. I said that it was 'reactive' and speaks of 'renewal' & 'rejuvenation' instead of envisioning.

Just after a month the Planning Commission called it a failure! I think we should have courage to confront issues and look at problems squarely in the eye. I am happy to see that now the GOI is coming out with a new and improved version of JNNURM with a special focus on tier 2 towns. Let's hope we as a country are better equipped now to deal with cities and their planned growth.

Q: According to the UN World Urbanization Prospects, some 600 million people in India will shift to cities from the villages in less than a decade. In such a scenario, can we stand up to this challenge and ensure that there is no breakdown in the civic services?

We are already experiencing a breakdown in services. We can tide over difficulties if we do the following. It's no wish list but a Hobson's choice for Indian cities:

We need a vision not just a master plan. All stakeholders have to participate in governance. It's not enough to just send bureaucrats and politicians on best practice tours. We should attempt implementing these. We need private investments in all areas of service. Show me where are PPPs in water supply, sanitation and sewerage? If PPPs are restricted to just swanky airports flyovers and roads how can we have equitable growth and development?

Let me summarize:

Most world cities have visions, which are different from spatial master plans. Tell me how many cities in India have a well articulated vision? A vision that speaks of outcomes – health, environment, economic development, employement, etc? None!

In my last trip to Washington DC I saw that a comprehensive technology solution to integrate all city departments was being implemented. The city requested citizens to build the software – We at my organization (Foundation for Futuristic Cities) developed 21 solutions for a livable city through participation from almost 100 organizations in Hyderabad and the govt. is struggling to have these implemented! A small country like Croatia tucked away in eastern Europe is more ahead of us in technology absorption! There is very little INNOVATION in our cities. We believe in mega plans and mammoth programs. Not many know the intent or outcome of those.

Let me talk about the "Greater Cities" phenomenon. Greater Cities have greater vulnerability! I was interviewed by the media when Hyderabad became 'greater' in 2007, swelling from 165 sq km to 625 sq km. I said that it's very important to quickly do administrative restructuring, re-engineer processes, re-skill staff and engage citizens, prioritize and invest on infrastructure. We are yet to see all that even after 4 years and the city became 800 km and the plans became bigger!

Q: Can we have one role model sustainable city in the country which can be a mirror to our administrators and politicians.

This was my suggestion when I was speaking at a Smart City conference in New Delhi organised by the CII. I suggested that NCR (the National Capital Region) should build a sustainable smart city that will be a model for the entire nation. The Delhi-Mumbai industrial corridor has a plan for five smart cities but this is in partnership with the Govt of Japan and after the recent devastation in Japan I foresee the project experiencing delays. What better place than NCR that has a plan drafted way back in 1962 for building small cities around Delhi?