

IT'S NOT JUST THE CITIES THAT NEED TO BE SMART



By
Rohit Shinkre,
Professor, Design Chair & Principal
Academy of Architecture (Unaided)



Dholera SIR Intelligent, Efficient, Connected and Robust Infrastructure

There is no doubt that Indian cities are suffering from several decades of mismanagement, lack of a holistic vision, planning and the subsequently infrastructure deficit. The last 3 decades have seen unprecedented era of urbanization reflecting various stages of economic and demographic transitions in

various parts of the country. The JNNURM of UPA 1 & 2 had already got some focus on urban issues but with limited impact on ground- perhaps a loss of intent between the various levels of government from the centre to the local. The 'good policy but poor implementation' syndrome that is generally characteristic of our

public administration.

Prime Minister Modi's '100 Smart Cities' has caught the imagination of many; citizens, social activists, professionals, developers, industrialists, environmentalist.... each seeing a different opportunity or calamity. Our urban future needs our urgent

attention; vigorous debate followed by clear policies and swift implementation.

Cities are inherently smart. They are the manifestation of the human creativity. They have been the cradle of the entire major human civilization. Democracy itself was born in the city-states of ancient Greece. Cities are an ancient human creation. They actually precede the modern Nation States and the centralized system of governance it implies. In India it is exactly this system that has crippled our cities to such an extent that we have to resuscitate their 'smartness'.

In my definition a smart city is quite simply one which supports the collective dynamism, creativity and resilience of its people. It is a place for building interdependent communities, for exchange of goods & services, for creation of ideas and knowledge. The job of the state is to plan, provide and sustain whatever is required for that to happen; power, water supply, food distribution, waste management, security, mobility, housing, education, health and healthcare, housing and of course telecommunications network. The State may or may not directly be involved in this but it should abide its basic responsibility to ensure quality and equity in what is provided.

'India lives in its villages' is one of Gandhiji's often quoted phrases. In 1947 of the 35 million Indians, 80% of India's population was rural and 80% India's economy was agricultural. Today still around 70% of population is rural but only 30% of the economy is agricultural. The inequity is a clear indication of the massive urban exodus of people in search of a viable livelihood, of education, of

healthcare, of a better life, of a future.

In this context the renewed focus on cities ushered by the 'smart cities' is absolutely welcome. But the images that are being projected are worrying. I would like to present of few pointers towards a more nuanced vision of our urban future.

Think local:

Local opportunities are the keys for towns and cities to flourish. These could be linked to natural resources, trade routes, traditions skills, industrial past, cultural practices and production, language, history, social condition, existing networks. Some of these may be missed out in a standardized top down vision of 'smart city'. This approach will also ensure a natural diversity in the economic activity and making it more resilient. Existing towns and cities have a lot going for them- upgrade those. New cities should link to an existing network, connect to an existing activity, and exploit an untapped potential or existing deficiency. Isolated "Greenfield" initiatives have little chance of success. The Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC) is an interesting example of a national initiative that will boost development of several existing and new urban poles responding to local opportunities.

Let time play a role:

However attractive it may seem we must avoid large 'cities' to be implemented in short periods. It may convince investors and advertisers but may not lead to the creation of sustainable cities. Cities evolve through an incredibly complex synthesis of environmental, social, cultural, political and economic facts and

events layered through long periods of history. Even with the best of intentions, it is impossible to replicate this complex synthesis. Projects implemented over a reasonable timeframe offer the possibility of course correction if planned cities are necessarily driven by more simplified agendas, exclusive perspectives and even vested interest of politicians, technocrats and developers / investors. The notoriously famous ghost cities of China and closer home the Hiranandani Palace Gardens; the abandoned towers off the Mumbai-Pune expressway amidst a landscape of farmlands and hamlets; are a testimony of how terribly wrong things can go.

PPP is no magic remedy:

There is much expected from the Public-Private Partnership or PPP model. Obviously cities cannot develop without private investment but great cities need time and businesses today do not look beyond the fiscal year or sometimes the fiscal quarter. Cities are primarily a social and cultural asset before being a 'real-estate' phenomenon. Real estate is often the last window dressing for a financial crisis- we saw that in Japan in the early 90's and again in 2008 in the US and Europe. We must learn our lessons and build what we need and not just what we 'can' sell. A badly negotiated PPP framework will tend to reverse the priorities and reduce the entire scope of the city to a real estate coup to trap middle-class investors as we see with the numerous townships in the MMR, in NCR, around Pune, Bangalore, or just be a land-grab exercise like the many SEZs that never took-off.

No borrowed identity:

The Singapore, Dubai, Hong Kong

imagery that is peddled as the epitome of urbanization is frightening. Cities are a cultural phenomenon as well and India is a millenary urban civilization. We cannot just import a ready idea of urbanity from somewhere. There are certainly lessons to be learnt from the global community but we cannot escape the effort of projecting our own visions for our urban future. Even within India; different regions will have to define their visions in response to its environmental, socio-economic and cultural specificities. E.g. Navi Mumbai is not a model to be replicated elsewhere though there may be some positives to replicate.

Critical look at 'Infrastructure':

It is clear that there is a severe infrastructure deficit in all our cities. Basic amenities, civic services, welfare- we have giant steps to take across board. Our priorities must match ground realities and address difficulties of citizens not seek positive appraisal from international rating agencies. The declining westerners' economies are all too ready to sell us things they have but which we do not necessarily need. A good example is the humungous expenditure on the sea-link and the new international airport in Mumbai where 7.2 million commuters ride the local trains daily in abject inhuman condition. The same investment in local transit systems would have had a far greater economic impact.

Cities for people and communities:

A city is basically made by its people. Listen to citizens before listening to expert consultants whose advice may at times favour vested interests of large corporations and not necessarily

that of our cities. Technocrats are happy to please the politicians' penchant for 'bigness'. We are aware of high-visibility projects that can be positively projected as 'infrastructure development' during elections. How else can one explain that certain cities, like Chennai, are planning for a Metro rail when storm water drainage system or even a basic public transport system is woefully deficient? Or that so many cities want new Airports but hardly any have announced projects for better railway stations or bus-stands. Let us remember at all times that the biggest asset of any city is its people, they run the businesses that you want to attract and for cities to attract the best talent they have to offer the best quality of life to families. This means a large spectrum of things concerning not only the work-life but also about leisure; from walk able footpaths, safe public realm, recreation, mobility to affordable and quality housing, education and healthcare.

Administrative reform now:

Provision of infrastructure alone without reform of administration and governance will only compound our problems. The same structure that is incapable of managing the current deficient infrastructure will be in no position to manage a new improved one. We have archaic procedures and laws, that date from the era when we were 'ruled' by a colonial power which did not trust us and not 'governed' by a government we have elected. They need to be reviewed or totally scrapped. Cities must embrace e-governance and techno-tools to streamline procedures for transparency, convenience and accountability. There is also a serious issue on uncoordinated

functioning between various government agencies. Development of the Mumbai Metropolitan region involves the various Municipal Corporations and their subsidiary services, MMRDA, CIDCO, MUTP, WR, CR, MSRDC, MPT, Mumbai Metro... the need for a consensual Regional Plan is obvious ... But there is non. Nobody knows where we are heading even broadly.

The techno-tool trap:

IT majors have already lined-up with smart city plans. Certainly resource planning, management of administrative procedures and records, system optimization, revenue collection, traffic management, disaster management etc. must explore cutting edge IT and allied intelligent technologies for e-governance. But we must not confuse these to be the solution of our problems- these are tools to achieve our ends and will remain only that. It is for us to articulate what the ends would be. That articulation cannot come packaged from IT companies or management consultants- it will come from research and critical analysis of grassroot data.

Let's remain frugal; small IS beautiful:

We have a lot to learn from the global community and also a lot to teach; frugality is one of those things. We do not need to repeat the mistake of the developed nations. The whole planet is suffering from their excesses. We must now examine all 'soft' engineering options and only if these are found wanting go for 'heavy' engineering ones. For example cities should seriously examine if a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system would cater to their needs before rushing to the metro.

