

RE-IMAGINING DELHI

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies incl. Migration & Smart Cities

Notwithstanding the importance of the rural sector, it is the cities and towns, where citizens' daily travails in terms of *pani, bijli, sadak*, housing, schooling, healthcare and sanitation play out, that extensively impact the public's perception of a government's performance. While the annual inundation of cities, daily loss of lives on roads, and frequent infernos highlight dysfunctional civic and municipal governance, the failure to create zones, which results in thickets of illegal buildings and structures, as revealed in the 'sealing' overdrive in Delhi, shows how the rot runs deep.

Urban problems are not urban in isolation; they are national problems. Cities are in need of duly empowered municipalities and institutional systems and processes for closely coordinated and accountable agencies that can deliver in areas such as sanitation, health, education, mobility and housing.

With a plethora of elected and other agencies, the governance structure for Delhi is in need of a drastic remake. In addition to 272 councillors in three municipalities, 70 MLAs, and seven MPs, there is the New Delhi Municipal Council for the cloistered Lutyens' zone, and the Cantonment Board, not to talk of the Union government controlling land and policing. Too many intervening institutions, often with overlapping jurisdictions and sometimes contradictory goals, make for suboptimal outcomes.

The mega-scale migration is Delhi's special challenge. Migration has steadily risen over the decades. With people pouring into the city and cars on to roads, the outlook for the environment looks grim. Delhi generates over 5,000 tonnes of refuse every day. In a way, Delhi is hailed as the country's pampered child. Its annual per capita income of 3.29 lakh (2017-18), which is almost thrice the national average. According to the 2011 Census, of a total of 3.34 million households in Delhi, 3.31 million had electricity, 2.62 million had safe drinking water, and 2.99 million had toilet facilities. Even so, the city has more than 200,000 homeless people and almost half of its population is in slums and unauthorised colonies.

High wages with little accountability for actual service delivery make public sector agencies an obvious target for patronage hiring. It also results in massive over-staffing. We need privatisation of civic delivery services like cleaning of roads and drains.

Conservancy services deserve a senior-level exclusive administration. Waste management demands professionalism and technology. The use of biotechnology should help in the treatment and disposal of waste; information technology in city planning and service delivery options; energy saving and cleaner technologies in urban transport; and high-tech, low-cost materials in building and housing. Technology can be used to implement user-based charges for access to roads, electricity and water. Economies of scale can be achieved by sharing service areas such as billing and tariff collections, cable laying and maintenance.

China envisions three big urban clusters — along the Pearl River, the Yangtze River, and the Beijing-Tianjin corridor — each with 50 million people or more. The National Capital Region, aiming to relieve pressure on Delhi, needs to be similarly treated as a Common Economic Zone, with a rationalised inter-State tax structure, uniform financial/banking services, telecom facilities and power supply, an integrated education and health policy, rail and road transport network, water supply and drainage system.

It is not a case of a lack of funds, but of governance and delivery. In most cities, municipalities are viewed as dens of corruption and inaction. Inspectors do not inspect, they only extort. A structured, mandatory inspection system is necessary for effective delivery. Councillors and commissioners don't regularly move around their wards; they remain inaccessible to people.

Owing to its great importance for national reconstruction and countrywide impact, especially for India's large cities — Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bengaluru — the real catalyst for reimagining the NCR needs to be the Union government. A compact, less diffused and pruned structure will hopefully usher in a promising paradigm of urban management that is worthy of being replicated across the country. The primary need is for the delivery apparatus to be transformed. The city needs to first address its basic problems before it dreams of striding towards the goal of being really *swachh* and 'smart'.

The writer is former Managing Director, Container Corporation of India

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