

ENVISIONING THE POST-PANDEMIC SMART CITY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Government policies & interventions for development in various Sectors and issues arising out of their design & implementation incl. Housing

Six years ago, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government started a journey of urban development based on the belief that a select set of cities across the country could be 'transformed' and made smart, after they were chosen through a competition among the States. The Centre would support the chosen projects and others would learn from them.

The idea of a transformation is indicated in [BJP's manifesto for the 2014 election](#), where, in a reference to the squalor that has traditionally marked cities and towns, the party declared that they should "no longer remain a reflection of poverty and bottlenecks. Rather they should become symbols of efficiency, speed and scale". This racy vision laid the foundation for a programme to create 100 smart cities.

COVID-19 gives us a chance to make our cities better: PM Modi

Globally, there is no uniform definition of smart cities, and the most common features of such urban spaces are derived from concepts in the global north. They generally have a technocentric vision, with sensors everywhere, smart homes, high levels of connectivity, massive and ubiquitous data collection by various agencies, and a continuous flow of useful information to citizens. All this, the reasoning goes, can help governments allocate resources optimally and take timely decisions to raise efficiency and improve standards of living.

India's cities have well-known infrastructure deficits, inadequate water supply, waste management, sewerage and transport arrangements, high levels of pollution and, with climate change, frequent extremes of floods and drought. The answer to these, the Smart Cities Mission (<https://smartcities.gov.in/>), has been fashioned as an amalgam of upgraded civic services and expensive showpiece projects in the chosen cities, with the investments heavily influenced by the Centre.

Before a complete critique of the expensive programme could emerge, COVID-19 interrupted the lives of cities, confining people indoors for long periods, disrupting economic processes and paralysing vibrant urban life. As the pandemic peaked, thousands had to desperately look for emergency medical care in scarce health facilities, while the flashy smart developments built for leisure and shopping remained shuttered.

Hardly smart about urban health care

Unsurprisingly, when the Smart City Awards 2020 were declared recently, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs gave one component of the scheme, the Integrated Command and Control Centres (ICCCs), a health focus. These centres, of which 70 are operational, functioned as "war rooms" for COVID-19, and, combined with "other smart infrastructure developed under the mission, helped cities in fighting the pandemic through information dissemination, improving communication, predictive analysis and supporting effective management" (<https://bit.ly/3hmZZE0>), it said.

This is a remarkable image of efficiency, but it would seem incongruous with the lived reality in several States and the national capital during the second wave of the pandemic, as people struggled for information and access to medical care. Yet, one of the States that suffered severely, Uttar Pradesh, shot to the top for implementation metrics of the smart cities projects

(<https://bit.ly/3yaBbFX>), apparently because it achieved more than what was envisaged in the centrally-supported schemes. It added its own set of 'State smart cities'. The fact that U.P., a crucial BJP-ruled State scarred by the pandemic, is bound for elections next year must, of course, be treated as a coincidence. Indore and Surat jointly won top city-level awards, while Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu also won State awards.

Push for pedalling during pandemic

Over the years, Smart Cities Mission projects converged with other infrastructure programmes such as AMRUT, the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation, the PMAY (Urban), the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, for housing. Some also get support from international agencies to adopt best practices on mobility and transport, energy and reducing carbon emissions. The latest official count shows that 5,924 Mission projects worth 1,78,500 crore have been tendered, indicating the scale of investments. This is in tune with some estimates that globally, 90% of urban development by mid-century will take place in developing countries.

A focus on basic urban infrastructure prioritised by elected representatives was part of national policy since the Third Plan period (1961-66), although the focus shifted to smaller towns away from Bombay and Calcutta in the Fourth Plan (1969-74). After decades of slow experiments, the post-COVID-19 era will sharpen the question of how cities must evolve.

Editorial | [Reinventing cities: On urban planning and disease spread](#)

The Danish urban design expert, Jan Gehl, who is averse to the idea of smart cities and "silly gimmicks", speaks of the universal values of a city as one that is a meeting place of people, inviting them to spend time, walk, bike, and roam around public, semi-public or private gardens. Pedestrianisation over motorisation is also a marker of a good city.

Although they try to accommodate some of these elements, India's smart city plans cannot really aspire for a structural shift, in which the movement of people gets priority over vehicles. In fact, extending the green logic would imply a freeze on all diversion of wetlands and commons for any other development, creating new urban gardens and water bodies, and doing a climate change audit for every piece of infrastructure planned. A green and blue city would mean less destructive flooding, more water to harvest and lower peak temperatures — all of it at very little expense.

Cities could be elegant, healthy and smart after the pandemic if they apportion the available road space for bicycles, which exemplify safe travel and can complement expanded public transport when commuters return in big numbers to bus and urban rail. This is consistent with the pan-city goals of the Smart City Mission, but requires State governments to take resolute action. Bicycles represent the ideal urban travel bubble and must be moved from the margins to the centre of policy.

The COVID-19 crisis as a metropolitan battle

Pedestrianisation, biking and harmonious opportunities for street vending created by allocating more of the commons would also be fully democratic and address the criticism that smart city planning ignores the informality that marks India's urban spaces. This is valid for both cities being retrofitted with facilities and those being developed as greenfield sites. Can more of the commons be turned into farmers' markets, vending grounds and craft centres?

None of this detracts from essential modernisation, such as deployment of multiple sensors to gauge air, noise and water pollution, provision of electronic delivery of citizen services, whether

online or in a government office, intelligent public transport, expansion of renewable energy. Recovery of valuable materials from waste remains a lost opportunity even in the biggest cities. It would, however, mean a shift away from flyovers, underpasses and cheap parking lots that serve far fewer citizens.

For citizens, real time control rooms can be meaningful only if they can have a good public dashboard of information. In COVID-19 times, this means access to health alerts, vaccinations, hospital beds and topical advice, rounded off with data on pollution, rainfall, congestion and so on.

Democratising smart cities planning has to ensure every section of society has a voice in the process, and not merely those who have digital access. Pressure to frame projects, however, often cuts out many, and even elected representatives get short shrift.

The Housing Ministry said last year that it had no plan to issue a report card for the 100 chosen smart cities, but was using the Ease of Living Index measured through a public perception survey. Such measurements can be heavily biased if they are not broad based. Quite tellingly, out of 32.2 lakh citizens in 111 cities who participated in a survey, the online channel which could be accessed through a QR code or website attracted 31,05,481 items of feedback (<https://bit.ly/3xmSIQE> and <https://bit.ly/3hIVkSR>).

The pandemic has come as a remarkable opportunity to review the paradigm of smart cities, and to steer the course of hundreds of other towns that are not on the map. They should be helped to frame their plans around people and nature, to learn from mistakes and to avoid expensive technological solutionism.

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