

UNLEASHING THE POTENTIAL OF URBAN INDIA

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

The Global Metro Monitor 2018 reports that 36% of employment growth and 67% of GDP growth were contributed by the 300 largest global metros, with those in emerging economies outperforming those in advanced economies. Metropolitan areas concentrate and accelerate wealth as these are agglomerations of scale that concentrate higher-level economic functions. Nine Indian metros feature in the top 150 ranks of the economic performance index. By 2030, India will have 71 metropolitan cities, of which seven would have a population of more than 10 million. Clearly metropolises are going to be a key feature of India's urbanisation and will play a crucial role in fuelling growth.

Article 243P(c) of the Constitution defines 'metropolitan areas' as those having "population of ten lakhs [a million] or more, comprised in one or more districts and consisting of two or more municipalities/panchayats/ other contiguous areas, specified by the governor through public notification to be a metropolitan area". It recognises metropolitan areas as multi-municipal and multi-district entities. It mandates the formation of a Metropolitan Planning Committee (MPC) for preparing draft development plans, considering common interests between local authorities, objectives and priorities set by Central and State governments, and investments likely to be made in the area by various agencies. To ensure the democratic character of the MPC, it is mandated that at least two-thirds of the members of the committee must be elected by and from among the elected members of the municipalities and chairpersons of the panchayats in the metropolitan area, proportionate to the ratio of their respective populations. The size and manner of filling such seats are left to the State's discretion.

MPCs were expected to lay frameworks for metropolitan governance, but on the ground they do not exist in most cases. Janaagraha's Annual Survey of India's City-Systems (ASICS) 2018 found that only nine out of 18 cities mandated to form MPCs have constituted them. Where constituted, their functionality is questionable, with the limited role of local elected representatives raising further questions on democratic decentralisation. Thus, the provision for an MPC has not introduced robust governance of metropolises, as the metropolises continue to be a collection of parastatals and local bodies in an entirely fragmented architecture.

The U.K. has rolled out 'City Deals', an agreement between the Union government and a city economic region, modelled on a 'competition policy style' approach. The city economic region is represented by a 'combined authority'. This is a statutory body set up through national legislation that enables a group of two or more councils to collaborate decisions, and which is steered by a directly elected Mayor. This is to further democratise and incentivise local authorities to collaborate and reduce fragmented governance, drive economic prosperity, job growth, etc. 'City Deals' move from budget silos and promote 'economic growth budget' across regions. The U.K. has established nine such combined authorities. Australia adopted a regional governance model along these lines in 2016 and has signed four City Deals till date. Meanwhile, China is envisioning 19 seamlessly connected super city clusters.

India, however, is yet to begin the discourse on a governance framework for the future of its metropolises. It is yet to recognise that disaster management, mobility, housing, climate change, etc. transcend municipal boundaries and require regional-level solutions. The World Bank notes that despite the emergence of smaller towns, the underlying character of India's urbanisation is "metropolitan", with towns emerging within the proximity of existing cities.

It is time India envisions the opportunities and challenges from a 'city' level to 'city-region' level. The Central government must create a platform to build consensus among State governments. Perhaps, the Greater Bengaluru Governance Bill, 2018, drafted by the Expert Committee for Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike Restructuring, could offer direction. It proposes for a Greater Bengaluru Authority headed by a directly elected Mayor, responsible for the overall planning of Greater Bengaluru with powers for inter-agency coordination and administration of major infrastructural projects across the urban local bodies within the area. However, this Bill is yet to see the light of day.

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