

## Post-Elphinstone: Urban upgrade to smart governance

The “resilient Mumbai spirit” in the face of crisis has been lauded by many. But when crises keep occurring frequently, it is a sign that something has gone badly wrong with the city’s governance. The rush-hour [stampede at the city’s Elphinstone Road railway station](#) on Friday, in which 23 people died and many were injured, follows just after heavy rain and flooding last month that brought the city to a halt and also cost lives. How did we get here and what should be done?

### Elphinstone stampede: A question of responsibility

The area around the railway station has undergone a dramatic transformation over the years. A few decades ago, the area which comprised the neighbourhoods of Parel, Dadar and Prabhadevi was home to several of the city’s mills. Workers lived in chawls and colonies near the mills. As the textile and manufacturing industry declined and eventually died out within the city, this area saw the rise of services and commercial activity. This development, which involved the construction of high-rises for offices and residences, occurred without any adaptive response from the public authorities to address transportation challenges and ease the pressure on the existing transport infrastructure. The footfalls in surrounding railway stations, of those commuting to work in these areas, increased manifold exposing the woefully inadequate carrying capacity of bridges and stairways here. This is the same story in other parts of the city as they undergo a transformation in land use in response to changing economic activity. Similarly, the creation of the Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC), a planned business district in the middle of the city, has put pressure on railway stations that connect to the area. Commuters to these places are not from the city alone, with many of them residing in peri-urban areas, cities and towns within the Mumbai metropolitan region. Therefore, one may ask why the authorities have not been more responsive to the dynamic city.

A key reason is the [absence of coordination among the many public organisations undertaking various civic and infrastructure-related functions](#) in the city and metropolitan region. Besides the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, which is the urban local body providing basic amenities and discharging functions such as solid waste management and sanitation, there is the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority which creates regional plans and plans for special planning areas such as the BKC and implements various infrastructure projects; the Mumbai State Road Development Corporation that undertakes road projects; the Ministry of Railways whose parastatal organisations look after the suburban railway network; and the Mumbai Port Trust, currently planning the commercial development of a part of its land, among others. There is no joint formulation of transport plans in tandem with land use plans by these bodies. Ultimately, the obfuscation due to overlapping functions and jurisdictions undermines accountability.

The second is a lack of an adaptive and flexible planning process in response to the economic forces that drive demand for land and land use. Planning authorities typically prepare land use plans for a 20-year horizon and in the interim, any upgrading of transport infrastructure and new projects is undertaken in an ad hoc fashion by the respective organisations.

Coordination and cooperation among all public authorities concerned needs to take place not just in response to a crisis but as a regular and routine feature of the governance set-up. This requires a single coordinating agency. There are already certain provisions and studies that could aid the setting up of such an entity. The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act calls for establishing metropolitan planning committees (MPCs) for metropolitan regions. However, the experience of MPCs has been disappointing because of lack of autonomy, executive power, finances and functionaries.

Studies on metropolitan governance in India have recommended creating metropolitan councils entrusted with specific powers that are appointed democratically. Then there are other successful instances of transport planning and other functions being managed at the metropolitan level for regions such as London and New York that could be useful case studies. In reforming the governance system, the existing political incentives of public officials will have to be considered and necessary checks and accountability mechanisms put in place.

It is crucial that the agency have a clear functional mandate and adequate autonomous power for planning and decision making. Further, it should have jurisdiction over certain functions such as transport for the entire metropolitan region. Besides transit, other functions such as solid waste disposal and water supply, that require provisioning at a regional level, could be delineated to be undertaken by this agency. It needs to have representatives from other public organisations and domain experts from outside the public sphere. Finally, it needs to be accountable to citizens for the functions in the region. This could be done by having direct or indirect elections to appoint the political head for this agency.

The time for discussion has long passed; it is now time for action. Else Mumbai is destined to meet the same fate as the goose that laid the golden eggs.

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