Improving Governance Is Key In Addressing The Urbanization Challenges Of The Next Two Decades

Urbanization is one of the biggest challenges facing India right now, and is expected to get even more challenging in the next two decades. The urban population percentage has been growing steadily, and in some large states like Maharashtra, it is already approaching the halfway mark. India is no longer a 'predominantly rural' country.(According to 2011 census - India's overall urban population percentage stood at 32% in 2011, while Maharashtra's urban population was at 45%).

Urban centers are the engines of growth and job creation. This has also meant a growing migration from the rural regions to the urban regions. Urban infrastructure and governance have clearly not kept pace with this growth.

Heading into the next decade, the urbanization challenge could represent itself as a great opportunity, or a great potential disaster for the country. There is a long list of improvements needed across multiple areas, in order to address the urbanization challenge. Quite of a few of these start with the fundamental issues of governance and infrastructure. This paper will focus on the governance issues.

The governance area improvements need to look at strategic areas like creation of new cities, creating a 'City CEO', setting up regional development authorities, etc. The tactical areas include improvements in the processes and execution of our local civic bodies.

1.Creation of new cities and metro regions:

There is a need for a top-down policy to encourage the establishment and growth of new cities and metro areas. Today, majority of the urban growth seems to be stuck with the top-10, top-20 cities and urban regions. China has been able to develop 100 metro regions over the past 2-3 decades.

In order to facilitate this development, we need to look at:

Land Acquisition Issues

Financial and other incentives for businesses and institutions to locate to these small cities

Exploring other job creation opportunities for these new cities – tourism, education, etc.

Road Connectivity:

One specific suggestion is this area, which will aid in creation of newer cities, as well as help in the infrastructure of many of the existing ones is: 'The new 'Golden Quadrilateral' Network 2030'.

The 'Golden Quadrilateral' project of the NDA1 government created a good road infrastructure, connecting the four major cities. However, we need to now upgrade this to the next level. While work has already begun on the Mumbai – Ahmedabad Bullet Train, and the Mumbai – Delhi Expressway, we need to expand this further.

We need to aim for a new 'Golden Quadrilateral' project for 2030, that includes connecting all the four major cities by expressways and bullet trains. In addition, we need to develop another 3-4 corridors as well (e.g. Mumbai – Kolkata, Delhi – Bengaluru, Pune – Hyderabad). This seems ambitious right now, however note that China has already built a road and high-speed rail network, much bigger than this.

Air Connectivity (UDAAN is a good step in this direction to connect smaller cities)

New Airports:

A new push is needed in airport development for small and big cities. With the growing air-traffic, our top-10 cities need multiple airports. (This is necessary since our existing airports can't be expanded further to add more runways).

2. Strategic Governance Issues at City Level

Our urban regions (metro areas, cities, towns) don't enjoy a 'real autonomy' compared to such regions elsewhere in the world. The 'ownership' of a municipal corporation is split between a state government appointed commissioner, and the people's representatives (corporators and mayor). The city police and some other agencies report up to the state as well. This issue has been discussed for a long time at various levels, and there have been some legislations around it as well.However, more progress is needed in this area (both – in full implementation of the existing legislations, and further policy changes).

We need to move to a 'single authority' ownership for the city. This could involve a directly elected mayor (or a mayor elected by the corporators).

Similarly, larger metro areas (which could include multiple municipal corporations) also need a single overall authority (Regional Development Authority) to manage.

Township governance: Today, many of our larger cities have many large private gated 'townships' – some expanding into 100s of acres. Yet, there are some grey areas in governance of these townships. This issue is important as we are going to see many more such entities coming up in the next decade.

Smart City Mission Project:

The idea of the 'Smart City Mission' is a good, but it needs stronger implementation. As discussed earlier in 'Governance' section – we need clear ownership and accountability for this. Implementing the Smart City Projects through yet another separate organization (different from the Municipal Corporation) may not be a great idea. It makes the already 'distributed' governance structure, further complicated.

3. Governance at Metro Region Level (Regional Development Authorities)

As discussed in the previous section, our municipal corporations need greater autonomy. Similarly, regional development authorities (like MMRDA, PMRDA) also need more autonomy. We need a better definition of the 'regional development authority' model – and it needs to be shared across metro areas; instead of reinventing it all the time.

Also, it is necessary to clearly define the touch-points, and areas of work, and avoid overlaps between the regional development authority, and the municipal corporations. Certain services such as public transportation maybe managed better at the regional development authority level. However, majority of the services should reside with the municipal corporations.

4. Improvement in Tactical Governance (at the city level)

At a tactical level, there is a critical need to improve the governance at all operational levels. A culture of 'service levels', 'quality (in design and work)' like in any private organization, needs to be implemented. Local ward offices and central municipal offices need to function like 'private organizations' that are 'customer focused'.

Regional Officers, Ward Officers, Asst. Commissioners should all have clear ownership over specific areas – and should take proactive view on addressing local issues (e.g. garbage, signage, traffic, water, etc.). Process improvement initiatives (like SPC, Six Sigma) need to be implemented to continuously improve processes across the organization.

4.Public Transportation Infrastructure

For many of our cities (e.g. Pune), transportation / traffic will be rated as the top priority issue, in the minds of many citizens. Bad planning and implementation of infrastructure, lack of good public

transportation – and bad enforcement of basic traffic rules & discipline, over many decades have created a big mess in our cities.

For the next decade, there is a critical need to improve the quality and quantity of public transport in our urban areas.

There is need to establish transportation mobility plans for next 10-20-30 years, with goals for improving percentage of people using public transport.

From a governance perspective, it is necessary to constitute a single urban transportation authority for each urban area. Depending on the size of the city, this could be at the city level, or at the regional development authority level. Today, we find regional-rail, metro-rail, bus-service, etc… all reporting up to different organizations. This needs to change. A single organization should own all these different modes, and provide a 'seamless' interface and connectivity to the riders. (Single ticketing, synchronized routing, etc.). The metro rail network is important, but not a substitute for the bus network. The 'BRT' experiment has not been too successful in many cities. A long hard look is essential before pouring more money into this system. Instead, it maybe worthwhile to further strengthen the basic bus service first.

A complete multi-modal public transportation system should provide a combination of regional rail, metro-rail, bus transit, ride-sharing, and other public transit options. The mobility plan should include the expansion needed in the metro rail and bus networks.

Cities need to be incentivized to adopt more and more electric buses. A stretch goal for 2030 could be to convert cities to 100% electric buses.

Most of our cities today do a poor job of network and route/frequency planning for bus service. This needs to evaluated at regular intervals and appropriate changes made as required.

Once good public transportation is in place, a gradual dis-incentive structure for private vehicles needs to be implemented as well (enhanced parking charges, congestion charges, vehicle taxes, fuel taxes, etc.). Similarly, a city level incentive structure for electric vehicles needs to be implemented.

5. Traffic Infrastructure

Most of our urban areas are short on basic road capacity. Even with enhanced public transport, there is still a need for more roads, given the huge shortfall we are facing. We cannot create new land – hence there is a need to explore elevated roads, tunnels, underground roads, etc. Given the acute shortage of land – special focus needs to be devoted to tunnelling and underground corridors.

Each urban area should have a good ring-road infrastructure. The ring-roads will help in distributing development along the periphery, instead of concentrating it in already dense city centers. Depending on the size of the city and urban metro region, one or multiple ring-roads maybe required.

In many congested areas of our cities, parking should not be free. A clear premium on road usage should be calculated, and charged for parking (including variable pricing depending upon the time of the day, day of the week, special events, etc.). Public Parking should be a 'Privilege' – not a 'Right'. The money collected from public parking can be a good source of revenue for our cities.

6. Traffic Enforcement Infrastructure

Enforcement of basic traffic rules is one of our biggest challenges in urban transportation. Without proper enforcement, no amount of new infrastructure or public transport assets would help.

The traffic police and municipal corporation need to significantly upgrade their law enforcement capabilities through better processes, technology and man-power. One of the issues related to traffic police also falls into the overall 'Police Reform' discussion, which has been around for a few decades. This is a key issue. Our traffic and overall police setup is still stuck in a decades old world.

From governance perspective, traffic and local police need to have some reporting into the city authority. This will also help in addressing the resourcing issue (e.g. Today, Pune has over 4 million vehicles and less than 1,500 traffic police personnel).

The 'Motor Vehicle Act' which is under discussions right now, should provide more flexibility to cities to set up their own fines, penalties, etc.

Municipal Authorities need to work in close coordination with the Traffic Police and address encroachment issues on roads, footpaths, which cause traffic issues.

7. Water Infrastructure

Water is going to be one of the biggest challenges for our cities in the next 10-20-30 years. Some cities face a real danger of running out of water by 2030.

A master plan for water demand/supply/distribution for the next 10-20-30 years should be prepared by all cities.

Metering of water is absolutely necessary. Need a clear roadmap for 100% water-metering implementation. Water charges should be based on usage, and not as a flat fee.

Significant investments are needed to upgrade aging (leaking) water distribution infrastructure in our cities.

A clear allocation of water from the supply sources (dams) needs to be provided. Where possible, cities need dedicated source of water (their own dams, e.g. Mumbai).

Every city needs a recycling plan for water (including grey water, etc.). All new buildings should have mandatory recycling systems in place.

There is a need for clear policies regarding urban ground water management.

Sewage Water Processing – Every city must set a clear goal and a time-bound roadmap to hit 100% sewage water processing.

Conclusion

Improvements in urban governance are critical to sustain the rapid urbanization that is happening in India right now.

Urban governance issues dealing with city (or overall urban region) management, transportation and infrastructure management, and water & garbage management need immediate attention.