

ISAS Brief

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Development Blues in Urban India: Failure of Accountability-Responsibility Mechanism

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Cities have emerged as the backbone of economies all over the world, with their contributions to overall employment and growth, well above that of agrarian and rural societies. There are many factors which determine urban competitiveness, both at the national and the international level. The interplay of structural economic changes and geo-political developments, combined with domestic economic policy changes, sectoral contributions to growth and demographic changes, determine the competitiveness of urban areas in any country.

An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report on urban competitiveness for various urban regions lists out factors such as policy integration, public-private cooperation, human and capital development for the success of urban areas. India is one of the emerging mega urban regions, even though the rate of growth of urbanisation is well below the potential level. Cities like Bangalore, Mumbai, Chennai, Chandigarh, and the national state capital, Delhi, have emerged as vital centres of economic growth. These cities have exploited their human capital and business ventures in order to gain domestic and foreign investments. But the infrastructure, quality of life, law enforcements, and civic discipline in these cities have a long way to go to meet even minimum standards, especially when compared to a city state like Singapore. Recently, Singapore's Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew, stated that corruption-free governance, a sound legal framework and judiciary have helped propel Singapore to become one of the most efficient places in Asia. These are the very factors that are incomplete in the Indian urban milieu. A comparison between Singapore and India might not be appropriate due to various factors but invaluable lessons can be drawn from the experience of this city state.

The communication gap between Indian administrative mechanisms and end users is very evident in India, especially when it comes to transportation policies and their implementation in urban areas. The recent statements made by the Delhi Chief Minister about people not following rules when crossing roads, as a response to another accident involving the 'killer' Blue Line buses, comes across as a last ditch attempt to defend the inefficient transport link in the capital. The issue now is not to demand the stoppage of the privately-operated Blue Line buses but to enforce stricter regulations to make them safe and effective. Suspension of these CNG-operated buses would prove to be costly for commuters and the government.

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Traffic management and the Blue Line buses were stated as the top priority of Delhi's Police Chief, Y. S. Dadwal, in July 2007. But the long list of mishaps involving these buses reveal a structureless owner-contractor operation mechanism with no accountability-responsibility hierarchy in place. Eventually, the Blue Line buses are going to be phased out in Delhi but there is no evidence that a better and safe alternative has been planned.

The Indian Urban Development Minister recently released a report prepared by Ernst and Young, in which Delhi, followed by Mumbai, emerged as the top two cities amongst 48 Indian cities. These rankings were based on 57 parameters, including health, infrastructure, transportation system, and the contribution of labour force to the economic growth. In the Urban Governance Index, Navi Mumbai emerged as the top city, followed by Delhi. It is true that Delhi has witnessed improvements in its infrastructure set-up over the past few years. In spite of this, many cases of law and order failure in the major Indian cities are reported frequently, with Delhi and Mumbai hogging the limelight.

The most important issues that have come to the forefront are the condition and the management of cities in India. The decentralisation of urban governance and management, introduced by a constitutional amendment in the early 1990s, led to the introduction of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission by the Indian government in 2005. It was meant to generate a performance-based mechanism for states through the implementation of best practices in the development of urban centres and the decentralisation of funds to municipal offices by the states. This was introduced by the United Progressive Alliance government along with many schemes for rural India. Based on the official reports filed by the Ministry of Urban Development, the appraisal process of the City Development Plans has been carried out by the nominated institutions, including the National Institute of Urban Affairs and the Indian Institute of Management. The response of only a single state government (Andhra Pradesh) has been shown on records.

In the assessment mechanism for the allocation of funds, the factors under the category of urban transport that should require greater attention are the implementation of traffic rules and regulations, and the contribution of the Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) to improve the moral standards of people and, most importantly, of the administrative police. The expansion of road width and augmentation of pedestrian facilities are very important factors. But the responsibility of the government to inculcate a sense of discipline in people should be included in the process of assessment. Increasing parking spaces or improving energy efficiency is important but guiding the people to use the facilities allotted is even more important. It is not a very comforting sight to witness policemen in uniform not respecting the traffic rules. Neither is it good to see educated middle class Indians doing the same. The rules are in place but they are not implemented by both administrators and end users in the strict manner that they should be. The vital link is really a two-way communication process. Governance has to be effective in order to evoke sufficient response from the citizens, even if it involves strict authoritarian measures. The priority here should be to coin efficient rules-based inclusive governance rather than vote bank politics.

The central government uses its state counterparts who in turn use the decentralised structure to disperse functions and finances. The functions, responsibility and accountability mechanisms allotted to the ULBs and their rural counterparts should be communicated to the people. This is a necessary function of any democracy. Neither the government nor the people can independently be held accountable for the fault lines in a nation's functioning.

Recently, the Indian states competed with each other to reward players of the Indian cricket team after a cricket World Cup victory. However, when it comes to competition to implement developmental issues, primary health care, water/sanitation, schooling and local economic development, it is very hard to find such an attitude among states. And such issues are key to tackling poverty and improving social conditions or even city management. According to the Indian constitution, urban issues and education are both under state jurisdiction, with the central government playing only an advisory role. If states can produce a cricketer to represent a World Cup winning squad, is it not possible for states to place effective enforcement mechanisms for its citizenry?

Many motivating factors for improvement are available from elsewhere; notable among them are the urban greening schemes in Singapore and Malaysia, the decentralised participation of municipalities in Bulgaria, and the Singapore fine system for non-obeying of rules and regulations. Lessons drawn from a few success stories prescribe the recipe of corruption free governance, effective legal system and inculcation of civic discipline, in order to design and sustain a notable urban environment.

What is needed in India is greater accountability and responsibility on the part of the central and state governments as well as much resolve and commitment to address the issues at hand. This is, no doubt, a mammoth task. However, it will become an even bigger challenge, if not addressed now. Considering the fact that the automobile industry is one of the leading drivers of India's manufacturing growth, an analysis of the political economy of the transport system is very important. Whether the government intends to keep increasing the length of roads without regulating the vehicular traffic or it will place greater emphasis be laid on public transport system is an important question to be addressed. Also, public-private partnerships are important for the development of adequate infrastructure facilities but the failure to regulate private operators will definitely cause many problems for the Indian government and the public, as in the case of Blue Line buses in Delhi. The National Urban Transport policy, which was recently approved by the Cabinet, is a positive step in resolving these issues. Urban policy is definitely a state subject, but a uniform national urban policy might provide the states with a template to plan their urban future.

The effective functioning of the facilities provided by the government can be achieved only with the help of stricter enforcement and stricter adherence to rules. Therefore, a holistic approach is required in the formulation and implementation of urban policies in India. Furthermore, it is an important and necessary task if India wants to seriously stake a claim as one of the leading economic players in the international arena.

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