



Envisioning the post-pandemic smart city

It is clear that the pathway for 'smart cities, and also other towns not on the map, needs to change.

Highlights:

1. 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.
2. All this, the reasoning goes, can help governments allocate resources optimally and take timely decisions to raise efficiency and improve standards of living.
3. 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.
4. The answer to these, the Smart Cities Mission, 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.

Now, a health focus

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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", it said.
4. 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.

Infrastructural convergence

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. This is in tune with some estimates that globally, 90% of urban development by mid-century will take place in developing countries.

Resilient and sustainable urban designs:

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.

Use for the commons

1. 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.

2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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?
5. None of this detracts from essential modernisation, such as the 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.
6. 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.

Putting citizens at the centre:

1. 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.
2. 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.

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.



Delhi's lame-duck Assembly

The GNCTD (Amendment) Act prohibits the exercise of free speech in the Assembly and its committees.

Highlights:

1. The Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD)(Amendment) Act, 2021 has been extensively criticised as a retrograde law that turns the clock back on representative democracy.
2. The bulk of criticism has been focused on the reduced autonomy of the elected government and the consequent vesting of several crucial powers in the unelected Lieutenant Governor, who is the representative of the Union government.
3. This is largely attributable to public consciousness of the regular skirmishes between the elected government and the Lieutenant Governor.
4. However, what deserves equal condemnation is the Act's assault on the functioning of Delhi's Legislative Assembly, which has been sought to be reduced to a lame duck.

A delicate balance

1. When the GNCTD Act was enacted in 1992, the Legislative Assembly was given the power to regulate its own procedure, as well as the conduct of its business. This was subject to very limited exceptions concerning financial matters and scrutiny over the Lieutenant Governor's discretionary role.
2. This sought to realise a delicate balance reflecting Delhi's unique constitutional position: neither full state nor a centrally governed Union Territory.
3. Now, Delhi's Assembly has no more functional independence worth its name. Its standards of procedure and conduct of business have been firmly tethered to that of the Lok Sabha, depriving Delhi's elected MLAs of an effective say in how their Assembly should be run.
4. Even more insidiously, the Amending Act prohibits the Assembly from making any rule enabling either itself or its committees to consider any issue concerned with "the day-to-day administration of the capital" or "conduct inquiries in relation to administrative decisions".



5. This is rounded off by providing that any rule made before the Amendment Act came into effect that runs counter to this formulation shall be void.
6. The most insidious impact of this shall be to the exercise of free speech in the Assembly and its committees. A situation where an elected Assembly is prohibited by law from discussing matters concerning the day-to-day administration of its own territory is one where it is dead on arrival.
7. How can the Assembly be expected to perform its most basic legislative function — that of holding the executive to account — if it cannot guarantee itself the ability to freely discuss the goings-on in the capital? What is the use of electing MLAs and endowing them with legislative privilege if they are unable to discuss the governance of the very constituents who elected them?

Impact on committees

1. A note of alarm must also be sounded for the effect on the functioning of the Assembly's committees. These committees are usually inured from the sound and fury of political theatre that pervades sittings of the whole Assembly.
2. Away from the glare of cameras, cooler heads usually prevail and important work gets done. Inquiries are conducted, witnesses and documents are examined, and reports on relevant issues are written.
3. The deliberations and inputs of committees often pave the way for intelligent legislative action. In a way, they act as the eyes and ears for the whole House, which has neither the time nor the expertise to scrutinise issues in depth.
4. It would be impossible for committees to perform this function without the power to conduct inquiries. It is true that many of these inquiries are bound to be broad-based and roving in nature, and may even lead to legislative dead ends.
5. But to pre-emptively injunct a committee from conducting an inquiry "in relation to the administrative decisions" (an extremely broad exception) completely negates the ability of committees to function effectively as the Assembly's advisors and agents. The quality of legislative work emanating from the Assembly is thus ultimately bound to suffer.

This clinical purge of its critical legislative functions has rendered the Delhi Assembly a 'legislature' in name only, unable both to articulate the concerns of the electorate and hold the political executive to account. Surely, Delhi's voters deserve better than that.