

InConversation

Smart Cities are as much about infra as about citizens

Cities are projected to be the primary growth drivers of the economy in coming years. But most of the Indian cities are overcrowded and their infrastructure overstretched to cope with the needs of growing population. The Modi government has launched ambitious projects to rejuvenate existing cities even as new urban centres are proposed on the North-East and North-West corridors.

Pradeep Misra, CMD, REPL (Rudrabhishek Enterprises Pvt Ltd), a leading urban planner and infrastructure consultant, shares his views on Smart City mission and urban development. Excerpts:

What are Smart Cities all about?

A lot of new investment was expected to pour into such projects. But now it turns out states are passing off existing projects as Smart City projects. What is your take on that?

See, it has always been so. States tend to restructure their existing projects to secure central government funding. So it would not be surprising if states are doing so under Smart City Mission. Smart City Mission is a positive thing. Infrastructure will improve in 100 cities that are to be taken up for rejuvenation under the Smart City Mission. When that happens, it would act as a catalyst for other cities. So overall, Smart City projects will have a positive effect on urban infrastructure.

In what ways, Smart Cities will be different from traditional urban infrastructure?

Smart City is not an alien concept. The purpose of the Smart Cities is to optimise infrastructure to match with the requirements of the population. If citizens can lead their lives in a hassle-free manner, then a city is called a Smart City.

Do you think not only existing cities should be rejuvenated but new ones too be developed under the Mission?

Some new cities have come up on their own and some have been developed by governments. Ghaziabad was not there before 30 years but it has now become a city. Noida was just a village of Ghaziabad tehsil then. But now Noida has overtaken Ghaziabad in importance. Urban development happens only under two situations – first, when there is a big city that acts as a magnet and the other, when development is induced through development of some mega project. Delhi is a magnet that attracts investment and it is an example of the first model.

The other scenario in which development happens is when some big power plant or refinery is set up at a place that spurs development of urban infrastructure in the area. For example, along the North-east and north-west corridors being built with Japanese help, several large urban centres are proposed.

If we look back at the 1947-2000 period of our country, we find that



Pradeep Misra, CMD, REPL (Rudrabhishek Enterprises Pvt Ltd)

the government focus was mostly on villages due to the political necessity of keeping in good humour rural population which was large in size. Because of this village-centric approach, urban centres got ignored. Existing infrastructure built by the Britishers in cities were meant for a certain population and had a certain life. Not surprising if these cities have become overcrowded.

India has planned massive investment in urban infrastructure. What do you think are challenges in undertaking development?

The biggest challenge is our legal set-up. Due to socialist mindset of our country, there are lots of challenges in infrastructure development. For any large scale infrastructure development, we need support from both the central and state government. Certain issues are central government issues, certain issues are state government issues. In

a number of cases, their policies are not in alignment.

The second concern is inconsistency in policy. Our governments take policy decision and people move on that. But when half of the work is completed, policy is relooked at by the government or by court or by media trial. Policy is again reworked. Credibility of policy is a big question mark on arrival of big investment. There is a sudden change in policy.

Policy decisions taken by the government over the last 50 years


have been overturned, relooked or challenged. Most of the policies were either scrapped or amended. So there is a big question mark over the sanctity of the policy.

Government has eased conditions for foreign direct investment inflows into real estate. What do you think will be its impact on the sector?

FDI norms for the real estate sector were never so liberal. Permission has been allowed for foreign fund inflows

even into those projects which are otherwise not FDI-compliant. Hopefully results should be good. Policy change is a kind of revolution, which was not expected. In India, our cities are overburdened by population. If services are delivered to users in a hassle-free manner, then it is a smart city.

Security concerns are electronically managed. Infrastructure is optimised to cater to the requirement of population. Smart cities are as much about infrastructure as about citizens.

There is no fund shortage for smart city projects. World situation too is favourable as no other major economy is doing as well as India. If investors do not get return, they will never invest. If investors are unable to get their money out, then also they will not bring money. Municipalities in India are not groomed to handle large-sized infrastructure projects. Municipalities will never take unpopular decisions. 

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