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Can India turn its cities into engines of growth?

Bearing immense promise, Indian cities are ready to lead the charge in the nation's development. This Republic Day, we delve into how India can empower its cities to become agents of wide-ranging growth

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In all the years of India being a proud Republic, Indian cities have turned into cradles of urbanisation. They have made it possible for citizens to enjoy better lifestyles, bigger opportunities, and bolder aspirations. With almost 11 per cent of the total global urban population living in Indian cities, we're the second-largest urban system in the world, as

per a NITI Aayog report. What's more, although the cities cover only 3 per cent of the nation's land, they comprise 60 per cent of the country's GDP.

Commenting on the epochal urbanisation, Rutul Joshi, a senior associate professor at an institution focused on urban planning and architecture, notes, "In recent decades, cities have taken a rebirth to tap into their potential. The concentration of talent and industries in them has spurred economic growth and given people from underdeveloped regions the financial and social capital to move up in the world."

Nationwide infrastructure projects and initiatives such as Smart Cities Mission have passed the mantle of eco-

economic transformation to cities. Prabhakar Kumar, AVP of urban planning at an integrated urban development and infrastructure consultancy, highlights, "Cities with developed infrastructure and skilled workforce have attracted more investments and put innovation in the driving seat."

With over half of India slated to go urban in the approaching decades, cities can lead the nation into an era of growth.

ENSURING EQUITABLE GROWTH

Despite the wave of urbanisation, only limited top-tier cities have reaped the rewards of India's urban story. The regional disparity in urban development has also become quite pronounced, as revealed in the Ease of Living Index 2020 published by the Indian government. As such, how can India ensure the equitable development of cities across the board?

Kumar believes the answer lies in clear vision, specific goals and detailed action plans. "Well-defined measures such as promoting affordable housing, developing public spaces, improving energy efficiency, etc.,

are the need of the hour. Streamlined urban planning that enhances the quality of life and urban services while cutting costs is yet to be implemented on a large scale," he details.

Saswat Bandyopadhyay, an urban planning professional with 28 years of experience in this sector in South Asia, elaborates, "Indian cities are growing in an organic fashion. However, to harness their economic potential, we need a specialised enabling framework for every area that recognises the city's strengths, be it heritage and tourism or other special trades. A newer outlook towards cities which perceives them as functional enterprises is a must for promoting investments and economic productivity."

BECKONING A DIGITAL REVOLUTION

Bandyopadhyay avers that digitalisation can ease the journey of growth for cities. "Manual planning makes our cities inefficient. It's high time we harness our domestic IT talent to streamline data and simplify processes in taxation, property management and [other] areas," he says.

Right from NCR (National Capital Region) to MMR (Mumbai Metropolitan Region), expanding development into the peripheral tier 2 and 3 cities has reduced pressure on urban centres and paved the way for more opportunities in jobs, property ownership, etc. "Affordable housing in peri-urban areas provides a better standard of life away from the pollution and congestion. Hence, promoting housing options for low-income families in smaller cities will improve citywide infrastructure and encourage better avenues in education, healthcare, leisure and entertainment. This will also strengthen local communities, allow more job openings, and spur investment and development in the cities," remarks Pritam Chivukula, co-founder and director of a real estate development company.

REVIVAL AND RESILIENCE

While building the capacity of small towns, the degeneration of developed cities is often overlooked, believes Joshi. In a global liveability index, which analysed 173 cities,

Indian cities rank low—between 140 (Delhi) and 146 (Bengaluru). "There is a need to systematically rebuild and revive core city areas to accommodate more people. From freeing up ground area for public parks and green spaces to urban planning that incorporates social change, there's much that can be done," he mentions.

Samyak Jain, director of a

In recent decades, cities have taken a rebirth to tap into their potential. The concentration of talent and industries in them has spurred economic growth and given people from underdeveloped regions the financial and social capital to move up in the world. Nationwide infrastructure projects and initiatives have further passed the mantle of economic transformation to cities

real estate group, also agrees that redevelopment projects are a must to address the growing needs of urban India. He opines, "These projects can transform urban spaces and improve the lives of residents with upgraded transportation, sustainable spaces, better housing, transit-oriented development and more. However, careful planning and execution is a must to ensure that these projects are inclusive, equitable, and sustainable so that potential negative impacts such as displacement, loss of heritage, etc., are mitigated as much as possible."

Hence, cities need to prioritise QoI (quality infrastructure investments), wherein climate resilience and inclusivity are the underlying layers of every development project. "Without this, the economic advantages of development get depleted because our cities become inefficient with pollution, floods, etc. Climate resilience will empower our cities to bounce back from any strain and thrive in an uncertain future," concludes Bandyopadhyay.

As India heads towards a USD 5 trillion economy, cities must serve as engines of growth.

