



# THE BURDEN OF URBAN APPEAL

This is an urban century. UN forecasts estimate that by 2030, more than 70 per cent of the world population will be living in urban areas. Historically, urbanisation has propelled the growth of national economies. Almost 75 per cent of the global economic production takes place in cities and it has lifted vast segments above the poverty line. However, urbanisation is accompanied by an unprecedented consumption of natural resources. In reality, cities account for just 3 per cent of land surface, house 50 per cent of human population, consume 75 per cent of resources but are responsible for two-thirds of energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. If countries such as India were to emulate the model of the developed world, a resource base as large as four Planet Earths would be necessary to support their growth. There is, therefore, an imperative need for a far more innovative and sustainable urbanisation.

Recent studies have highlighted that India will face an unprecedented scale of urbanisation with 350 million people moving to cities by 2030 and 700 million by 2050. During the last decade, India's urban population has increased by 32 per cent or 91 million people. The shortage of urban infrastructure has reached critical levels with severe shortage of water, sanitation and public transportation facilities. Despite clear trends that India is confronted by an unprecedented scale of urbanisation, its annual per capita expenditure on urban infrastructure is extremely meagre—a mere \$17 as compared to China's \$116 and UK's \$391. Government allocates its urban citizens one-sixth of the per capita spending allocated for rural spending. Our spending on urban poor is one-tenth of the rural poor.

The process of urbanisation is happening when India is passing through a window of demographic transition. The ageing of population in the US and Europe as well as the population getting younger in India is one of the most salient social and economic demographic phenomenons. These are revolutionary changes which bring huge social upheavals. A report by the National Council of Applied Economic Research has shown that income accruing to the middle class in India will rise to 47 per cent in 2025-26. The political constituency will shift dramatically and India's political debate will shift from caste to infrastructure, roads, metros and transit corridors.

India's key challenge is to create jobs for its young population. The manufacturing sector will have to play a critical role and its share in India's GDP must rise sharply from a mere 16 per cent to

25 per cent. A logical consequence of this will be the process of urbanisation and the shift of those disguisedly employed in agriculture to manufacturing. Since India is in an early phase of urban growth, it presents an opportunity to direct its future trajectory. Only through planned sustainable urbanisation can India manage the challenges of poverty reduction, economic growth, environmental sustainability and climate change. Its hitherto anti-urban bias can be turned into an advantage. Korea did this when it transformed from a poor agrarian economy to one of the world's leading economies—its urban population has increased fourfold from 21 per cent in 1950 to 81 per cent today.

There are some unique models of innovations in urban sustainability. They provide a learning lesson to India as it embarks on a process of rapid urbanisation. Singapore is a great example of water resource management. Because water is extremely scarce, rainwater is efficiently stored in reservoirs. All waste water is collected and the city has a separate drainage system for it. Waste water and drainage water are both recycled and put into the city's water supply. With several water tariff rates, Singapore has successfully managed to lower actual water demand while both its population and GDP have grown significantly. Many lessons revolve around public transport as the mode of transport for the city. Bogota built 400 km of bicycle paths used today by 350,000 cyclists. Curitiba's well-designed bus system serves most of the urban area, has reduced traffic congestion, fuel consumption and improved air quality. Yokohama has reduced waste by 38.7 per cent despite substantial addition in population. This reduction can be attributed to the city's success in raising public awareness of environmental issues and the active participation of citizens.

Today, digital technology can enable us to create intelligent and smart cities integrating public utilities across sectors. Since land, gas and water will be extremely scarce, we need to create cities which are compact, dense as well as vertical and evolve along mass transit corridors with efficient water and waste recycling systems.

As India continues to urbanise, it will face severe challenges. Embracing it in a planned, sustainable and smart manner can have a dramatic impact on the quality of life of the expected 700 million urban citizens. Indian cities can be the catalyst of investment, growth and job-creation.

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Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



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