Cities…to be or not to be… smart!

Smart Cities!??! What's a smart city? Oh that's what is a smart city! Why do we need Smart cities? We don't need smart cities…period!

This is the sequence of discussion that has transpired in our country over the past one year, ever since the ten year old Government departed and a new Government was formed at the center. The policy makers of the new Government decided to promote developments in 100 cities and to make them smart! Smart you may ask how? The Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India, sums the key features of a Smart City as

"…the intersect between competitiveness, Capital and Sustainability. The smart cities should be able to provide good infrastructure such as water, sanitation, reliable utility services, health care; attract investments; transparent processes that make it easy to run a commercial activities; simple and on line processes for obtaining approvals, and various citizen centric services to make citizens feel safe and happy."

In brief the smart cities development is just an initiative to get these chosen 100 cities more close to the idea of cities in the developed world. Where in keeping with the current requirements the emphasis would be more on the use of Information and Communication Technology to keep a track and record all databases. I laud our Government to finally realizing the urgent need and taking the project on war footing.

The current pace of urbanization of settlements in India has brought to fore a number of issues which need to be identified and addressed for efficient and smooth functioning of the settlements.

Consider the following facts, between 2001 &2011 Indian cities and towns added 91 million people, while agricultural areas added 90.4 million people. The population of India as per the Census of India, 2011 is 1.21 billion.

The level of urbanization increased from 27.81% in 2001 Census to 31.16% in 2011 Census.

Let us understand what exactly these figures imply. Urbanization may be understood as the increase in population of settlements with simultaneous decrease in the population employed in Agricultural pursuits. So basically the rural nature or the agricultural backdrop of India is slowly giving way to more people being employed in non-Agricultural pursuits including various industries and service sector.

The population growth of the India as per the Census of India is provided below for understanding the dynamics of the population growth in the country.

Year	Total	Rural	Urban
1901	238,396,327	212,544,454	25,851,873
1911	**252,093,390**	**226,151,757**	**25,941,633**
1921	251,321,213	223,235,043	28,086,170
1931	278,977,238	245,521,249	33,455,989
1941	318,660,580	274,507,283	44,153,297
1951	**361,088,090**	**298,644,381**	**62,443,709**
1961	439,234,771	360,298,168	78,936,603
1971	548,159,652	439,045,675	109,113,977
1981	683,329,097	523,866,550	159,462,547

1991	846,302,688	628,691,676	217,611,012
2001	1,028,737,436	742,490,639	286,119,689
2011	**1,210,000,000**	**833,000,000**	**377,000,000**

The figures above show that the total population has increased over 4.5 times while the urban population has increased 14.5 times in the last century since 1911. In the post-independence scenario the total population has increased 3.35 times while the urban population has become six times of what existed in 1951!

As per the census of India 2011, the number of towns has gone up from 5161 in 2001 to 7935 in 2011 an increase of 2774 settlements.

The aforementioned facts and figures show the level of urbanization in the country, its growth and expanse during the past century.

This shift of occupation of the people of a settlement, state and country leads to several systemic changes in the contemporary society including aspects like economy, finance, politics, accessibility, and the environmental. This also affects the existing social setup, the standard of living and the quality of life of the people due to changes economies of scale.

The Government bodies starting from grass root level to the national and international level are trying to ensure a certain standard of living for their people and due to this change in occupation structure of the Government also needs to update infrastructure and technology base to meet the requirements of the people at large.

Thus the vision to make digital archives, to promote use of information and communication technology to bring about further transparency and accountability in the entire system of the Government, must be seen as a harbinger of good days to come. Not only will it enhance public participation but will also help curb instances of corruption and prejudices.

According to the concept note available at www.indiansmartcities.in "The Prime Minister has a vision of developing 'one hundred Smart Cities', as satellite towns of larger cities and by modernizing the existing mid-sized cities." There are a few factors that undermine the entire project for instance the project is being taken up in just hundred odd settlements of the total 4041 statutory towns and 3897 other census towns. Secondly satellite towns to existing settlements will be treated as smart cities and the entire document is silent on the implications of the project on the existing settlement and its other outgrowths. The question arises whether this will not foster ghettos and the negligence cause further decay of rest of the settlement

The concept note of the smart cities is an elaborate document that provides the features of the smart city leaving nothing to the imagination; There are however a few specifics that seem to have been overlooked in the current project. First being the land procurement of the Smart city, which under the current Right to Fair Compensation and transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 shall be a cumbersome and costly process. Secondly the note mentions among the precedent conditions to attain smart city status, the towns needs to have an existing master plan or one that is likely to be approved shortly and have a validity of at least 10 years, so will the smart satellite town be located outside the notified urban area and will changes be made to the master plan in force? The size of the smart city in terms of area is the third point on which the note is silent.

Smart cities (smart for us, livable cities for the rest of the world) are the need of the hour but not as few as hundred, all the settlements need to be made smart and it is not an impossible target. The first step in this direction should be preparation of digital archives of all information available with the Government Offices. This will ensure availability of data to everyone and bring finger touch access to one and all. Installation of Bio- metric machines in any and all Government institutions be it an office or a school; thus ensuring 100% attendance and also keeping a tab of the persons entering the premises helping in keeping the middlemen out. The next step would be the preparation of geographically referenced maps containing plot level details, land marks and information about the utilities as well. This

may then be associated with the demographic, administrative, topographic data along with any and all proposals for the settlement. These maps will not only provide a strong management system to the local authorities but will also strengthen inter- departmental cooperation since all will have a common platform. All this information needs to be made available to the people in the form GPS base maps which may inform them the shortest routes to their destination and also inform locations of heavy traffic, maintenance and projects underway.   The information associated with the map will help the authorities to locate the gaps in demand and supply of services thus promoting justified spatial allocation of departmental funds while also assisting the layman to file complaint online. Monitoring of projects and review of plans will also be made easy with the help of such maps.

Not only will the use of technology assist in making the cities smarter but keep a tab on biased decisions, petty corruption and tardy attitude of both the Government and the public.

There have been various critiques of the Smart City concept and its adaptation in India. A major section of these critics insist that such intervention on the part of the Government will widen the divide between the haves and the have- not's but do we deprive one son of ours to study Law in Harvard if the other is a wrestler. We provide for their basic education and equal opportunities to realize their potential, Don't we? Hence both our rural and urban settlements need to be strengthened with the use of information technology to provide for a better future for both.

… Apala Misra (Director Phoenix Planning Studioz)