The Lacuna in Urban Planning

> **This article is based on "Cities At Crossroads: A better blueprint for the city"** that appeared in The Indian Express on 31st July 2019. It talks about issues in urban planning that leads to the miserable state of Indian cities.

Metropolitan regions are the engines of growth and gateways to the national and global economies. As in 2016, the 300 largest metropolitan regions in the world contributed nearly 50% of the global GDP. According to this new United Nations estimates Delhi is projected to become the most populous city in the world around 2028 and India is expected to add the largest number of urban dwellers by 2050.

Over 34% of India's current population lives in urban areas, risen by 3% since 2011. By some estimates, India's urban population could increase to 814 million by 2050. And yet, **Indian cities** are driven by poverty and poor infrastructure, the primary reason for this is **lack of metropolitan planning,** which is not synchronized with development strategy.

Why are the issues in India's Urban planning?

- One primary problem is the **ambiguity in the definition of urban.**
  - The term **"metropolitan area"** is defined unambiguously in the Constitution as an area **having a population of over one million,** consisting of two or more municipalities or panchayats or other contiguous areas that may span over multiple districts.
  - The Central government considers a settlement as urban if it has an urban local government, a minimum population of 5,000; over 75% of its (male) population working in non-agricultural activities; and a population density of at least 400 per sq. km
  - **However, urban development comes under State governments,** with the Governor notifying an area as urban.
    - This notification leads to the creation of an urban local government or municipality, classifying the area as a "statutory town".

- - - Also, the Constitution provides considerable discretion to state governments in determining the administrative boundaries of metropolitan areas.
    - However, many States consider such "census towns" as rural and establish governance through a rural local government or panchayat.
  - With such ambiguity in the definition of the urban area, **it leads to a lack of synergy in urban policymaking.**
- **In India the urban planning and spatial planning (integrated land use and transport) are not integrated,** this leads to the significant deterioration in the quality of public services and ease of living.
- Metropolitan regions are being **created by default and not by design.**
  - Current urban centres are established without paying attention to the need to create a unified market, especially the labour market, which would forge strong economic linkages between the core city and the periphery.
- There are 53 urban agglomerations in India with a population of one million and above, but these agglomerations spread across various states.
  - With different rules and regulations regarding land, transport across the states, this severely affects infrastructure development.
- The **74th Amendment Act, 1992,** mandated the setting up of Metropolitan Planning Committees (MPC) in all metropolitan areas
  - These Draft Development Plans must be coordinated with spatial planning, sharing of resources, development of infrastructure and environmental conservation.
  - However, MPCs remained a non-starter as states showed little interest in their establishment.
  - There are **no examples of any MPC carrying through a Draft Development Plan** via state government approval, financing and implementation.
- There is a range of institutions such as municipalities, and other parastatals such as state water and sewerage Boards, due to these **overlapping functional jurisdictions,** they find little coordination amongst them.

Since there is no regional/metropolitan planning in India and metropolitan governance structures are fragmented, public transport and environmental conservation are in a poor state.

It is reflected on "Smart City' front, where over 90 'Smart Cities' have identified 2,864 projects, but only 148 projects are completed and over 70% of the projects still remain at various stages of preparation.

Way Forward

- **National urban policy framework 2018** seeks to rebuild Indian cities around clusters

of human capital, instead of considering them simply as an agglomeration of land use.
  - It is a welcome transition.
  - It also focuses on land policy reforms, granting urban local bodies the freedom to raise financing and enforce local land usage norms.
- **Transportation planning** plays a major role in ensuring sustainable and balanced regional development through inter-city and rural-urban connectivity.
  - The **Regional Rapid Transit System** planned for Delhi-NCR under the National Capital Regional Transport Corporation (NRCT) that can immensely improve connectivity between Delhi and far-flung areas such as Meerut, Alwar and Panipat, can spur economic growth in the region.
  - This transit-oriented development can lead not only to **decongesting growth centres** but also **strengthening labour markets** and **building rural-urban linkages.**
- The **"Ease of Living Index"** launched in September 2018 has been a transformative initiative of the urban ministry to help cities assess their liveability.
- India spends about $17 per capita annually on urban infrastructure projects, against a global benchmark of $100 and China's $116.
  - For providing financial autonomy to the cities the **potential of property tax** must be utilized.
  - Further **Municipal bonds** backed by sovereign guarantee must be floated by the large cities.
- The Union Cabinet has approved the creation of Rs 60,000-crore **National Urban Housing Fund** to finance the government's Housing for All programme, which aims to build 12 million affordable housing units in urban areas by 2022. This is a step in the right direction.
- The policy should be drafted that aims at tackling the rehabilitation and resettlement of **people living in slums.**
- The National Green Tribunal direction for carrying out the capacity assessment of ecologically sensitive and geologically fragile areas must be expedited.
- Finally, there is a need to **frame a systemic policy to deal with urban migration.**

- India has been among the fastest-growing economies in the world for more than two decades. This has brought about the structural transformation of the economy such that the share of agriculture in GDP has declined to 14% and that of services has increased to 58%. **But this structural transformation must involve spatial transformation.**

Drishti input

Indian urban centres are driven by poverty and poor infrastructure, the primary reason for this is lack of metropolitan planning, which is not synchronized with development strategy. Comment.