



LIFE TO GET 'SMARTER'

BY KARUNA GOPAL

P Prime Minister Modi's 100-smart-cities vision is being viewed with both amazement and amusement. Though globally smart cities are seen as harbingers of economic prosperity and social inclusion, India as a nation is yet to be convinced.

Needless to say that building smart cities here is akin to wielding a double-edged sword where accuracy and balance are more important than power. The essential rules of context, posture and footwork will have to be understood.

LATE MOVER ADVANTAGE

Contextually there couldn't be a better time than now to embark on this smart journey. Today India enjoys the "late mover advantage".

In the last decade, cities around the world resorted to smart technologies to withstand the onslaught of industrialisation, urbanisation and motorisation. Thanks to thousands of such smart projects, technologies evolved rapidly and their costs decreased just as rapidly. Thankfully for us, the world became a "test bed" for smart tools and as such transformed into a multi-billion dollar R&D laboratory that India can draw from. Now India has access to this global repository of knowledge, mature technologies, governance frameworks and international benchmarks.

The contextual setting is perfect. But the fundamental question remains — Are smart cities necessary for India?

A SMART POSTURE

India, a "reluctant urbaniser",

missed the late Nineties East Asian Miracle ride to prosperity. India's pro-village posture left her out of the dream run. Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Malaysia and Singapore urbanised in a planned manner, recording double-digit growth.

There is a global consensus today that sustainable urbanisation and economic progress are like conjoined twins — co-existing and creating prosperity. To achieve sustainable urbanisation India has no option but to take recourse to smart technologies. Here's why.

Indian metros like Delhi, Hyderabad and Bengaluru have violated the sustainable design principles and have become large unwieldy sprawls with crumbling infrastructure. Smart technologies and smart decisions are required to retrofit them. A large urban sprawl can be "shrunk" with public transportation but only smart technologies can manage electricity, water consumption and crime. Even as some of us decry technology, somewhere in India, a smart solution for either traffic or water supply is being implemented. At an unprecedented pace and invisible to the naked eye, smart solutions are penetrating the urban ecosystem. Given this context, India's posture should be "Smart is necessary and it is for sustainability and equitable growth".

SMART FOOTWORK

Cities can become smart only if many hearts resonate to the vision, many minds meditate on solutions and many hands shape the contours of development. Needless to say "co-creation and innovation" should fuel this smart journey of India. But the very concept of a smart city is draped in layers of mystery and the "smart" landscape is littered with jargon, myths

and misconceptions.

India should plan a national outreach programme demystifying the concept of a smart city. This programme should engage all the citizens. Stakeholder participation is critical for achieving smartness; in fact, the failure of UPA's JNNURM is largely attributable to this. India should set up a "Smart City Research



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Institute" on the lines of the "Future Cities Catapult" of the UK. Apart from cutting-edge research on Cloud, IOT, ubiquitous connectivity, open standards and interoperability, it should turn into a "transit home" for customising solutions borrowed from around the world.

The BIGDATA Institute planned by the GOI, should specifically do research on crime, transportation and smart grid analytics while "fusion centres" for data-sharing among the federal, state and city have to be honed on the lines of US fusion centres.

The biggest pain point in the Indian urban context is sub-optimal capacities at the city level. To address this, two quick actions have to be taken. Indian subject matter experts should comb and cull value from the sea of available knowledge and the "Urban Institute of India (UII)" should quickly announce nationwide training based on that content.

The urban ministry should create a few technology consortia that cities can engage immediately. Home-grown Indian IT players have to be part of these consortia.

Smart procurement is necessary as our cities do not have the wherewithal to select the best vendors from a bunch of aggressive technology players. Among other things, "urbanisation" that infuses economic vitality into villages should be embedded into this smart city game plan.

Shaping smart cities is a heady combination of the "Science of City" and the "art of visionary leadership". Little wonder there is pervasive hope about India's futuristic growth.

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