

INFRASTRUCTURE

A Vision For Telangana: Drawing Up A Citizen-Centric Development Plan

by Swati Kamal - Dec 31, 2018, 2:16 pm



Karuna Gopal at the Vision Hyderabad 2030 document release in Hyderabad.

Snapshot

- Hyderabad needs a collective vision, not just master plans, with citizen's aspiration incorporated into it.
- Karuna Gopal, in an interview to Swarajya, says how BJP's Vision Hyderabad 2030 plan will help go about this.

With great public admiration comes great responsibility. The K Chandrashekar Rao (KCR)-K T Rama Rao (KTR) team is back firmly in Hyderabad, having swept the assembly elections earlier this month. KTR, in particular, has been at the helm of Telangana's progress and performance, with Hyderabad being the obvious showcase-city.

In July 2018, as minister for Municipal Administration and Urban Development, Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) working president KTR had said, five years hence, Telangana will have more people living in cities and towns than in its rural areas, thanks to migration. Already, 20 per cent of the state's population is concentrated in the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) area. This calls for urgent steps to address potential infrastructure challenges.

Recently, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) initiative resulted in a Vision Hyderabad 2030 document that was released in Hyderabad. This was a result of the state BJP's efforts to prepare a manifesto for urban Telangana.



Karuna Gopal

The task was entrusted to Karuna Gopal, president of Foundation for Futuristic Cities, a think tank that has influenced urban transformation in India for over a decade. Gopal was involved in the design of the 100 Smart Cities Mission, and her international exposure has helped in giving inputs for smart governance.

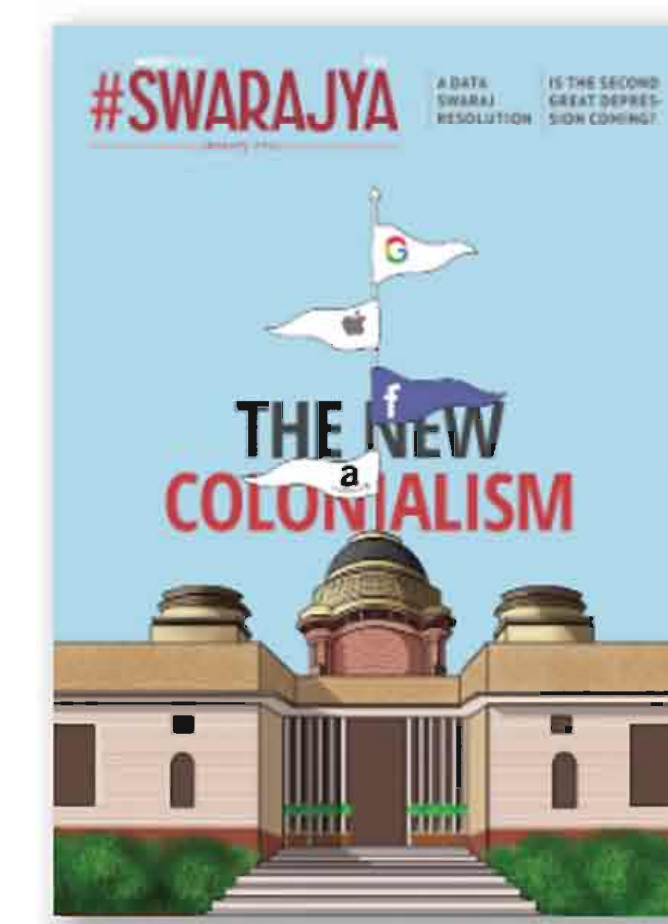
She spoke to *Swarajya* about Vision Hyderabad 2030, and the approach that is needed to tackle the mess Hyderabad is in.

Was the Vision Hyderabad 2030 mainly an agenda that the BJP was looking at, if it came to power?

First of all, we wanted to show that BJP is visionary and thinks differently. Normally, a 'vision' would be drafted only after a political party comes to power. But we showed that even while in the electoral fray, you can articulate one! By drafting a vision and releasing it before the elections, in a way we educated the citizens of Hyderabad on how the city can be shaped - how a vision gives the contours of development, after engaging with citizens.

We did not expect to come to power as the BJP needs a lot of strengthening in Telangana, but it doesn't mean we stop dreaming...

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What was the thinking behind the vision?

Vision Hyderabad 2030 stemmed from a desire to see Hyderabad develop holistically. While drafting the urban manifesto, I did not want it to be a mere 'desk job', and conducted several thematic round tables – on environment, economy, women, disabled, senior citizens, art and culture, etc, ensuring we had a good mix of experts, stakeholders from all sections of society and also from all geographical areas of Hyderabad.

In fact, it was touching to see that some people who we could not contact, actually volunteering to email their inputs, and also many congratulatory mails, as citizens felt that for the first time they were being 'included' in city planning. I even received emails from the US, Dubai, Singapore, and other places, praising our effort. Apparently, a 'collective vision' has a great power to inspire participation!

We saw city requirements through the lens of all stakeholders, and we then superimposed scientific assessment of the requirements and come out with a manifesto. Our manifesto had 63 main items or promises, which became the base document for the vision.

The vision is different from the manifesto; if manifesto says 'BJP will do all these...'; the vision gives us the freedom to say why we want to do this. Like, in the manifesto we say we will provide access to the disabled – in transportation, buildings, etc, but in the vision we elevated this to a higher goal of making our city 'inclusive'.

How would you rate Hyderabad's progress in the last four years?

Dismal – no true, wholesome progress. Instead of proper planning and foresight, there have been cosmetic changes and knee-jerk reactions. For instance, traffic jams, water stagnation and flooding are all old stories in Hyderabad. So, instead of spending Rs 1,000 crore on regular road maintenance, can't the civic body strengthen the storm-water network, construct rainwater harvesting pits at identified locations, and make minor changes in road designs, to provide relief to commuters?

When TRS formed the government in 2014, I expected that they will articulate a vision for Hyderabad – for two reasons:

One, Hyderabad suffered a great set back because of the Telangana agitation and needed a fresh assessment of what needs to be done.

Two, the city happens to contribute almost two-thirds of the state's gross domestic product (GDP). One would also assume that such a city would be shaped into a wholesome metropolitan city, for better livability.

But TRS just went for cosmetic changes: a few beautification efforts here and there but no strategic or long-term plans were articulated. In fact, even the efforts around the dying Musi river, the city's life-line, were more for beautification rather than rejuvenation – until the high court pulled them up for a more comprehensive solution. The state government just continued capitalising on the 'great legacy' of the city.

Many of their claims need to be examined and some myths need to be shattered. Like, they say they are encouraging startups and creating an ecosystem for innovation. KTR, who was the urban minister till recently, marketed Hyderabad globally using the T-HUB story, which he claimed was his baby. But, what people should know is that the Incubation Center (which was later named T-HUB) was mooted and incorporated into the IT policy only after a few of us on the CM advisory council had demanded it. It was conceived again in 2010, when K Rosaiah was chief minister.

In fact, at that time we had also envisioned a 'research and innovation council' that is again passed off as TRS effort. Even the metro rail was approved during the same time with an investment of \$1 billion; thanks to this government, the cost escalated to \$3 billion because of time- and cost-overruns and repeated route changes plans.

The only big-ticket plan was SRDP (strategic road development plan) project. The fact is that SRDP will prove to be a disaster for the KBR Park, which is located between two elevated points and essentially acts like a thick saddle between the cliffs. Such ridges act as watersheds, connecting two catchment areas and also support the ecology within. The SRDP is a threat to all this. An expansive lung space will be disturbed if the state government goes ahead with the felling of thousands of trees around the KBR Park, and also Hyderabad's highest surviving ridge. That is the reason there are continuous protests against it. SRDP violates all norms of environmental protection, and comes close to being a 'sustainability and resilience destruction plan', rather.

How is what you suggest in the vision document, different from the current thinking, and methods?

I believe that this vision will work primarily because it has a 'collective' outlook. It was prepared after several multi-stakeholder consultations, with special attention on the four sections of society whose voice has never been heard in city development plans so far – women, senior citizens, disabled and the urban poor.

The strategies that will be distilled out of this vision document will be city-centric, people-centric with maximum emphasis on collaboration. City-centricity is very important. Hyderabad's unique requirements have to be factored in, and people have to be at the core when infrastructure and services are being planned.

Perhaps, the most striking feature of our vision is our focus on the 'science of city'. Normally, decisions are taken without instituting scientific studies. We want to rectify that. We believe in data, visualisation software, data modelling tools for forecasting. No city in India has used data-modelling to predict what will happen to the climate resilience, for instance, if 10 lakh people were to migrate to the city.

Can you give us an idea of the urgency to tackle problems related to urbanisation?

Urbanisation is dynamic and it's happening even as we sit and speak now. India is experiencing rapid influx of migrants into its cities and we can expect this trend to continue for a few more decades. If the entire India is just 32-per cent urbanised, Telangana is close to 50 per cent.

And this urbanisation has to be planned for. We can't allow it to happen without preparation, as there will then rise housing problems, poor air quality, traffic congestion and depleting natural resources. Any city has to be proactive – forecast growth and prepare for it; else we will end up having more slums, poor services and crumbling infrastructure.

What are some of the red flags in Hyderabad's urbanisation story, as it stands today?

The city has seen just lopsided growth. Only certain parts of it like the new city, Gachibowli areas have shown growth. The focus has been on economic development mostly, without providing infrastructure that matches the growth.

This has been proved by a technical study called HIGS INDEX – that measured hazards, infrastructure, governance and social development. In all the surveyed cities in India, Hyderabad ranks very low on HIGS. Do I need say more?

Can you please spell out some priority areas in the urbanisation of Hyderabad?

Environment needs utmost attention. Some hard facts about Hyderabad are: Today, most heart attacks in the city are because of air pollution; many neurological diseases are because of noise pollution; fertility in women and virility in men are being directly impacted by climate change vulnerability of this city.

Childhood obesity is because of the poor city design; autism is because of mercury and lead contamination in water, and slum-dwellers' 'lifestyle diseases' are sadly not because of their lifestyle, but because of lack of civic amenities.

Should there be a roadmap or is it possible to work on all simultaneously?

Yes. The government can make a Gantt chart (a type of bar chart that illustrates a project schedule) and work parallels on all aspects of development against time lines.

How important is it to involve people in the process? What are some areas where they can be involved?

Cities have to be co-created. Citizens have to truly partner in the governance of a city. The government, the private sector and civil society, together have to architect a city's growth. All world cities were built on a healthy partnership between the government and citizens.

In fact, today, the world is talking about not just citizen-centric but citizen-led infrastructure design. Providing 'universal infrastructure' - where not just the able-bodied but also every differently-abled person, every senior citizen, every child enjoys the city equally - has become the norm around the world. Hyderabad has a long way to go.

Any comments on the progress of other urban centres like Warangal and Karimnagar?

These towns have been classified as 'urban' based of their population and economic activity, and not because of their true urban characteristics; they are quite rural in amenities and culture. A lot has to be done in both places.

Is financing an issue? How should government go about the funding the urbanisation process?

Financing is not an issue at all for urban infrastructure. For instance, take Hyderabad. GHMC is a rich corporation and the city contributes much to the state exchequer. It is just that the priorities and the will to do things have to be in place. Small things like filling potholes, repairing drains, cleaning *naalas* are also not being done.

Anything else you'd like to add as good advice?

Hyderabad needs a vision. Not just master plans, which are mere spatial plans. Vision should necessarily articulate economic development, and environmental and equity outcomes for Hyderabad. It also has to be a collective vision, with every citizen's aspiration in some form incorporated into it.

Hyderabad needs transparent governance too. The city has to deploy technology tools like 'sentiment analysis' to get a feedback on governance. The city's environmental resilience should be preserved using 'data modelling' tools. Hyderabad cannot be run on archaic methods when sophisticated tools for forecasting scenarios and taking decisions are available.

Swati Kamal is a columnist for Swarajya.

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