Transport and urban governance in India

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ABSTRACT: Given the current projections of increase in urban population, India may not live in its villages for a long time to come. The pace of urbanisation is becoming inexorably fast and hence the need to strengthen urban governments. Provision of transport services needs a serious approach, beginning with strengthening the planning mechanism and creating the ability to finance the measures to be taken. It may not be necessary for the urban government to directly provide services but it should acquire the competence to act as a regulator in order to offer a given level of quality at rates, which are affordable. Empowerment in the administrative and political sense and viability in economic and financial terms are the minimum requirements in urban governance.

Résumé : Etant donné la croissance de population urbaine, l'Inde ne pourra pas longtemps vivre encore dans ses villages. L'urbanisation est inexorable, d'où découle le besoin de renforcer les autorités urbaines. Les services de transport nécessitent une approche sérieuse renforçant la planification et donnant les moyens de financer les mesures à prendre. Il n'est pas nécessaire pour les pouvoirs publics de gérer directement ces services mais ils doivent acquérir les compétences pour jouer leur rôle de régulateur

Since independence, a major refrain in economic and social discussion has been that India lives in its villages. Even while cities were growing, much of the migrating population still felt for their roots in villages and the mindset perhaps was that some day they can go back. It has only been in recent decades that the reality has sunk in that urban migration is almost irreversible and willingly or otherwise everyone who came will stay. This is not surprising. Urban areas, big or small, provide a living, however inadequate; they also provide anonymity and even a dignity in default to the poor. The middle class moralities of the village living are less pronounced in urban societies.

1 COMPLEXITIES OF URBAN GOVERNANCE

The inexorability of urban migration has brought in its wake a mixed bag of advantages and disadvantages. The health and educational facilities are far superior in urban areas. Cultivation of arts and culture requires a critical mass of people, which is absent in smaller communities. The variety of employment opportunities provides an exciting diversity, competition and creativity. The disadvantages begin with a greater stratification of the society and a more marked variation in income levels. At the same time public amenities such as provision of water, transportation, roads and sanitation, which may be optional in a village, become absolutely essential in urban life. And hence a qualitatively different approach for governance.

The 1972 changes in the legislative framework envisaged a decentralised administrative set-up mandating elections to local bodies. Committee after learned committee recommended greater decentralisation and empowering of the people so that they could put pressure on the system for better living. Since democracies respond to pressures rather than to needs it was hoped that empowerment would decentralise power and address the stark realities of living.

But this was not to be. The political and economic importance of cities is such that the political and bureaucratic systems which span larger geographical areas cannot be comfortable with the decentralisation that was meant to give urban areas their own say in governance. A chief minister, for instance, would not, for his own political reasons, like an au-

tonomous mayor of a city as this might shift the power base and create a threat to his own existence. It is therefore no wonder that the urban government has been made deliberately weaker so that it depends on the state for its existence. Inspite of various attempts, indeed, the mayors of Indian cities are titular heads. They are ceremonial, bereft of any authority.

At the same time the economics of urban areas are also in a parlous situation. Assessment, levy and collection of taxes are not only tardy but often corrupt and ineffective. Almost the entire revenue goes to meet a hefty wage bill. Urban dwellers tend to lose interest in elections since those elected have neither the power nor the vision to address basic issues of education, health, water supply and transportation. The impoverishment led to further centralisation at the state level and it suited the state-level politicians and bureaucrats even more.

2 THE TRANSPORT PERSPECTIVE

Lack of strong decision-making base has resulted in gaps, inadequacies and inefficiencies. Provision of transport has been a notable victim. Even in the most elitist of transport modes, one can see the poor response to local needs. One wonders why the domestic airports in Delhi or Mumbai should be separated by considerable distance while the runway itself is common. Even in the domestic airports arrivals and departures are artificially separated. The less one talks about other less glamorous modes the better. Inter-modal co-ordination (or even co-ordination within the same mode) is a far cry. This is the result of ignoring the point of view of the citizen as a traveller – and a consequence of decisions taken outside the city, by outsiders away from the scene with little regard for local needs. The inability of the local population or leadership to influence decisions affecting urban areas has taken its toll. If the facilities in Mumbai are being planned in Delhi it is not surprising that they do not satisfy people in Mumbai. Examples can be multiplied. But the main issue is empowerment and economic viability of urban areas themselves.

The case of transport systems in urban areas should be seen in this light. Railways have the arrogance that they are a world in themselves and routinely ignore the need for integrating with other modes of transport. Delhi's ring-railway and Calcutta's metro are classic examples. Buses are not allowed to come close to the railway stations or airports; taxis and other intermediate public transport are not allowed to connect bus stations. And all this happens as if passengers are slotted, permanently dedicated to one mode or the other. The fact that a journey from door-to-door is essentially multi-modal is merrily forgotten. This kind of *modal chauvinism* can only be sorted out by a strong urban government which will, either by a common ticketing system or through a mandate, integrate all modes and make modal transfers easy, quick and painless.

The test of urban governance depends upon the quality of life the city or town offers. Since transport is one of the prime determinants of quality of life, it is for the government to articulate the need for mobility and facilitate it through a mechanism of fares and subsidies. Since most of the urban authorities do not take much interest in improving the quality of mobility, transport operations remain outside the main concern of urban governments. While it is still possible to secure and promote transport services from both public and private sectors the responsibility for making mobility contribute to quality of life still rests with the urban government.

For this purpose it is necessary to establish a knowledge-based planning mechanism which regularly monitors the effectiveness of transport operations and fit them to suit overall needs of the urban areas. Today a structured planning base is absent even in organisations which operate transport services. The economic viability of transport operators and the need to prevent costs of inefficiency to be passed on to the commuter are an important aspect of urban governance.

Since transport is a derived demand, activities which require or demand transport facilities should be seen in the overall context of urban planning. The citizen is not a customer of the government in the normal business sense. The citizen is its master. It is for this reason that governments whether urban or rural should promote the cause of good living. The issue of empowerment arises in this context.

3 CONCLUSION

The need to strengthen and empower urban government is becoming more and more urgent since urban living is becoming more and more complex. Provision of transport services needs a serious approach, beginning with strengthening the planning mechanism and creating the ability to finance the measures to be taken. It may not be necessary for the urban government to directly provide services but it should acquire the competence to act as a regulator in order to offer a given level of quality at rates which are affordable. Empowerment in the administrative and political sense and viability in economic and financial terms are the minimum requirements in urban governance.