

Indian cities are crumbling. Here's how we can fix them

Traffic snarls, shoddy infra and public facilities are the result of neglecting civic bodies and underfunding the city core. With better planning and innovation at central, state and city levels, India can script a turnaround for its urban future



BY INVITATION
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The humongous set of challenges facing India's urbanisation efforts is well known. Crumbling infrastructure, gridlocked traffic, and shoddy public utility services are among the most talked-about. But such challenges can be overcome with sufficient will and determination for change. Here are some suggestions that can together re-energise our cities.

Govt spending on urban infrastructure needs to be expanded. While India has made commendable progress in expanding roads and railways in recent years, the World Bank recommends that it invest \$55 billion each year to meet its urban infrastructure needs, roughly double of what it currently spends. China invests a trillion dollars in infrastructure every year, and the bulk of its spending on urban infrastructure comes from local govt bodies.

The Centre needs to use its formidable financial and political clout to push states to implement the 74th Amendment to the Constitution (74th AC) in letter and spirit. The amendment, enacted in 1992, sought to bring about a major change in the functioning of urban local bodies (ULBs) by basically enjoining them to take charge of their own destinies. Unfortunately, very little additional empowerment of ULBs has been observed in the country so far. And this is the root cause of the urban malaise.

The next clear area for the Centre is to encourage the rapid adoption of municipal bonds to finance the capital requirements of ULBs. India's municipal expenditure as a percentage of GDP is 0.6%, compared with 4.5% in Poland, 5% in Brazil, and 6% in South Africa. Globally, municipal bonds are an established and major source of funding. In the US, for instance — where municipal bonds are lovingly called "Munis" — the current size of the municipal bond market is over \$3.8 trillion!

Two areas where state govts need to push implementation are (a) Industrial Smart Cities, and, (b) Unified Metropolitan Transport Authorities (UMTA).

On Aug 27, 2025, the Cabinet Committee on

Economic Affairs cleared public investment of Rs 28,602 crore to develop Industrial Smart Cities (ISCs) in six major industrial corridors across 10 states. The innovations in approach relating to these ISCs revolve around Plug and Play, Simultaneous Social Infra development, Smart Utilities, and inviting private players as co-developers.

Indian cities need to put commuters at the centre of their transportation decision-making, and for that, UMTA is an inescapable and urgent precondition. Many international cities cited as models for public transport have such overarching bodies to plan, execute, and run all aspects of urban mobility. These include the New York City Transit Authority, Transport for London, and Singapore's SBS Transit and SMRT. A unified transport authority will integrate all options through the prism of last-mile connectivity and efficient integration with each other. In 2006, the Central govt, through the ministry of urban development, released the National Urban Transport Policy (NUTP), which recommended the creation of a UMTA in all cities with a population of above 1 million.

At the city level, seven action-agenda items can rejuvenate urban living.

Ropeways For Mass Transit

Getting acclaim internationally is the new mass transit cable car service in the capital



city of Bogota in Colombia, which connects high points of two of the city's low-income neighbourhoods. It is able to transport 3,600 passengers per hour and benefits 700,000 residents who are now able to make a trip in 10 minutes that earlier took 60-90 minutes. In May 2022, bids were invited for the first ropeway project for city commuters in India — connecting Varanasi's Cantonment railway station and Godowlia Chowk.

Urban Mining

India generates an estimated 170 million tonnes of construction & demolition waste (C&DW) every year, according to the Building

Material Promotion Council. But the official recycling capacity is a meagre 6,500 tonnes per day — just about 1%. This is clearly unacceptable and cities need to set up C&DW reprocessing sites, whose end product will be usable building materials such as fine aggregate, coarse aggregate, bricks/blocks, tiles, paver blocks, kerbstones, and prefab slabs.

Cycling Tracks

There are two ways to increase cycle use: getting commuters who currently use motorised two-wheelers, and those who walk to work, to switch to using cycles. Indian cities are simply not friendly towards cycles. It is important that all future city plans include credible cycling tracks.



Voluntary Land Pooling

A group of 120 farmers pooled around 400 acres of their ancestral land on the fringes of Pune city and proposed the rather revolutionary idea that they would together develop 'Magarpatta City', an innovative mixed-use township. The Pune Municipal Corporation — first shocked out of its wits — ultimately bowed to the power of the idea and the passion of its proponents. In an epochal meeting in 1993, all the landowners contributed their land to a development company and accepted the principle of proportion-

ate shareholding.

The rest is history.

With glistening office-blocks ringed around a central parkland, the radiating concentric circles have housing environs and residential communes with a 'walk-to-work' philosophy. Enhancing 'quality of life' are world-class sporting facilities, gyms, shopping, and entertainment. Few would guess, looking at the state-of-the-art development, that a farming community achieved all this on its own. This is now a ready template for other cities.

EV Charging

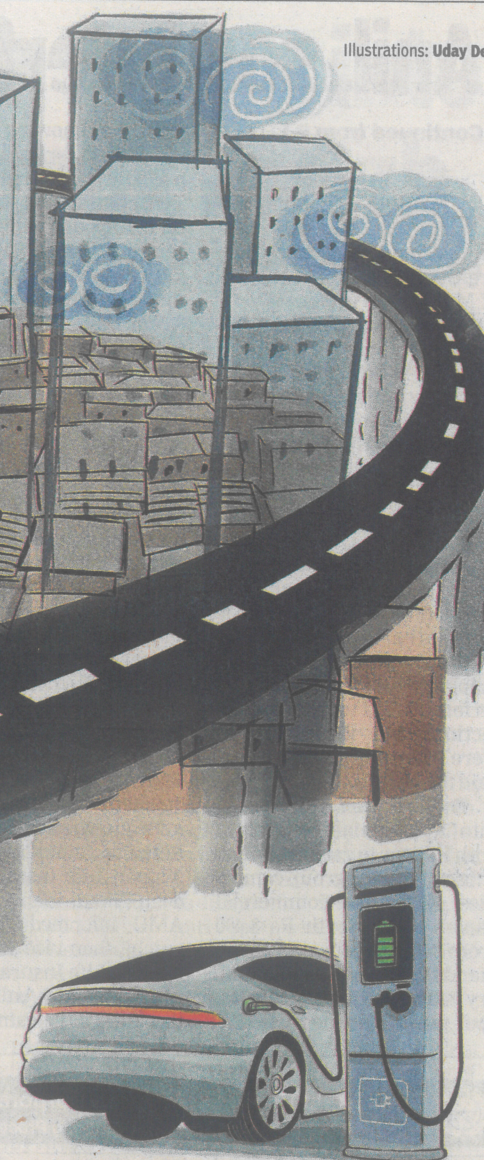
New e-vehicle sales are expected to account for 30% of private car demand, 70% for commercial cars, 40% for buses, and 80% for two- and three-wheelers by 2030.

As of Feb 2024, there were approximately 25,000 public charging stations for all vehicles in the country, but around 12,100 were reportedly non-functional. Contrast this with the national network of 70,000-odd fuel stations.

Cities need to install EV charging facilities at every available opportunity.

PPPs in Urban Utilities

Cities need to make the extra effort to attract private capital in a variety of capex options. Part of the investment could be relatively easy to mobilise. These would relate to real-estate projects like multi-level car parking facil-



Illustrations: Uday Deb

ities and vertical space commercialisation over bus depots, fire stations, and other public installations. The next batch, largely made up of transportation solutions — LRT/MRT, dedicated bus corridors, flyovers, subways, and ring-roads — fall in a much higher level of difficulty. Where PPP is going to be the hardest to come by will be water supply, sewerage, sanitation, and power distribution. Even in some of these difficult areas, some cities have demonstrated the will — Delhi, Mumbai, and Chandigarh in electricity distribution; and Tirupur on water. Newer concepts like Land Value Capture need to be adopted.

Redeveloping Slum Areas

The national attention that the Dharavi Slum Rehabilitation programme in Mumbai is receiving has indeed given a fillip to the movement for moving aggressively on this agenda. If a project as mammoth and as sensitive as Dharavi can move ahead, every city must now develop plans to totally eradicate slums in a professionally correct manner.

Together, this clutch of initiatives and innovations has the power to dramatically enhance the quality of life in our towns and cities.

The author is an infrastructure expert, and the founder & managing trustee of The Infravision Foundation

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