Smart Cities...best bet for rejuvenating urban India

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'Smart Cities' has of late become a buzz word. Six months after announcements, the very concept itself is in draft stage, as of March 2015. The 2014-15 budget had provided Rs.7,000 crores for 100 Smart Cities of which only Rs.924 crores was reported as spent. In 2015–16, only Rs.143 crores has been allocated (apparently assumes states will contribute a higher share).

However, what does a 'Smart City' mean to people living in such a city? This is yet to be outlined and understood by any. These days so many seminars, conferences, etc are being held in the name of Smart Cities. Of some six invitations that I received in the last three months for such meets, I attended two but I am no wiser today. So much verbose yet not clarity on what such city implies to common citizen!

So what is it all about? It obviously does not mean use of newer technologies or use of smart devices or leveraging turnover opportunities for entrepreneurs. Idea of Smart Cities have to be all of them and much more and many more stakeholders have to be part of such an exercise and beneficiaries. It is a process. Not all cities, or even some could become smart in one go or with one resolve or with one time initiatives.

A city to become smart has to go through a transition in the mindset of people of the city, in their life styles, in the very governance and also in the paradigm of the institutions, public and private. It has to be an inclusive endeavor not an elitist exercise.

Theoretically "Smart City" envisions use of network as the platform to transform physical communities to connected communities running on networked information. It is much more than the ICT deployed, rather it is ICT solutions that go into making of the city and turning it smart for its citizens. Technology will be embedded into the city to deliver improved and reliable urban services. Key elements involved in Smart City include smart governance, smart citizens, smart infrastructure, smart healthcare, etc. Some of the solutions specially to be covered include energy management, waste management, water and waste management solutions, traffic management, environmental solutions, etc.

A proof of pudding in this case, is experiences of people and enriching of quality of life. What difference Smart City has made in the lives of its people? How distinct their life style has become? Is the quality of living different than before and from others which have not yet become smart? Obviously, all this is possible with changes in the organizations, functioning of institutions, and in the political culture.

However, if more is merrier, becomes a popular norm; is it possible to realize the benefits of city adopting high end technologies? In today's context newer technologies are essential to make cities smart, but not sufficient. Mobile connectivity is an opportunity. Shifting to led bulbs is good. More parking lots for more automobiles is an easy solution. These however cannot be bench mark for a Smart City. The concept of Smart Cities have to be evolved as per local socio, political, economic and cultural factors.

Quantitative criteria cannot be avoided but without qualitative concerns built into and ensured, this concept of Smart City could end up to be a yet another missed opportunity. Priorities as to immediate benefits vs. concern for sustainable future is a factor. Populistic view that political parties are often preoccupied with could be misleading to sustain the idea of smartness. Particularly since cities have elected bodies. For example, in municipal elections recently political parties have spent a thousand crores to win the election despite hardly having money to pay salaries of employees. But they advocated building flyovers and the like, despite that garbage on the streets was not cleared and drainage system remained incomplete. Then there are countervailing forces even that deter smart features. For example, if high liquor consumption is what the Government promotes, and also sale of more and more automobiles year after year such a way that city has more cars than people, how soon can such a city could be

expected to be smart? Similarly, city governments trying to generate revenue with more attention drawing bill boards on its roads, as if not aware of increasing road accidents. And, if public parks, ponds and such resources in cities slowly disappear for whatever reason, can they expect to become smart? If the cities get divided into developed pockets or schools with air conditioned class rooms and one with no basic infrastructure and so on - how soon can we expect such cities become smart and also sustain themselves?

Even more, how will Smart Cities shape up without visible political, accountable, sovereign powers and Mayors with reasonable tenure (in most states it is one year)? Cities have been reduced to subservient entities with frequent postponement of municipal elections and diversion of functions to remotely managed officials. Focus of cities has shifted from services to land resources and projects with special allocations. Project orientation, not policies to ensure continuity and sustainability, has become the concern. On the other, cities are experiencing dissatisfaction of citizens with public services and narrowing space for citizen participation, as if citizens no longer own their city. No wonder then the earlier "green" field approach has hardly resulted in outcomes. Cities are fast becoming centers of grief on account of mounting transport, garbage, and security hazards. There are at least a dozen such basic public services which a

household require and tries to avail once or more in a year with varied experience. These have to be the priority concerns of a Smart City.

However, all this does not mean that we should not take initiatives towards making our cities, Smart.   Citizens have to also feel so for their city to become Smart. What is being suggested is that parallel to such measures, several more initiatives and correctives are called for to ensure desired outcomes of Smart Cities. Smart City cannot be taken as a project rather it should be taken up in a mission mode, under a policy regime for paradigm shift in priorities, practices of institutions and behavioral change of people, including of ever increasing migrants. Apart from changes in physical features, basic public services required by citizens have to be ensured with regularity and without citizen indulging in corruption or requiring contact of some middle men.

Digitalization of these various public services, stake holders and physical spaces in each case is a prerequisite for proceeding to building Smart Cities. The Government has announced plans to digitalize basic public services in the country by 2018. If in three years that target could be achieved, it enhances scope for a city to become Smart. Although e- seva, Bhoomi and the like, in cities as in Hyderabad and Bengaluru are now more than a decade old and much talked about. But how many other cities have so far adopted such programs? Thousands of crores have gone into these pet topic of

e-governance for some years and yet, huge gaps exists between allocations for e-governance and the benefits to citizens. Connectivity, another essential feature, does not come simply because the number of mobile phones in a city are as many as its people. Installing cameras all over the city by itself does not improve security or help prevent crime. Scanners and sensors, without health hazard and intrusion into privacy, are the other components for Smart City, as the other ICT measures are. Skills among citizens to avail these various technologies and to cope with such measures is an essential prerequisite to sustain Smart Cities.

Quality of life and living conditions particularly air, water and standards of food marketed, apart from access to other basic public services, are first order priorities where distinct differences are visible in Smart Cities. Adapting fabulous high technologies without restrains on transportation will not reduce emission levels, without which life style cannot be any better. Both should happen simultaneously. Eventually, it is determined leaderships and responsible organisations, together with skilled and active civil society, that makes cities distinct and smart. Modi Government has the mandate to push through and pursue the process but not without linking digital India, e-governance and the ambitious e-panchayat programmes.

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