



The Indian Journal for Research in Law and Management

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THE SMART CITIES MISSION

- By Gaurab Das

India's cities are at a turning point. Providing infrastructure, services, and habitable spaces has never been more challenging than it is now, as more than a third of India's population now resides in cities, and forecasts indicate that by 2036, approximately 600 million Indians will live in cities. In June 2015, the Government of India announced the Smart Cities Mission (SCM) with much hype. The mission's goal was to make 100 cities more "citizen-friendly and sustainable" through technology, strong urban design, and participatory government (MoHUA, 2015).

It was meant to be a game-changing program for urban redevelopment and retrofitting. More than ten years later, the mission has a mixed record. Some towns have adopted new technologies and improved their infrastructure, but concerns remain about unfinished projects, uneven results, and whether everyone is included.

This article examines the history, objectives, achievements, and challenges of the Smart Cities Mission, situating them within the broader context of discussions on modernizing and making Indian cities more livable.

Where It Came From And Why

The Smart Cities Mission was initiated because India is experiencing rapid growth. India's urban population increased by 91 million from 2001 to 2011, placing a significant strain on basic facilities, including housing, water supply, sanitation, and transportation (Chatterjee, 2019). The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) and AMRUT were two of the government's early urban programs. They focused on improving infrastructure and capacity.

The Smart Cities Mission, on the other hand, was a bigger step forward. The goal of the project was to connect digital technologies with area-based development (ABD) by calling cities "smart." The idea was that specific actions, such as redeveloping a ward, establishing integrated command centres, or utilizing e-governance platforms, could serve as lighthouses, demonstrating to the rest of the city how to do things right (MoHUA, 2015). The mission began when the concept of "smartness" became a popular term in city planning around the world. Cities like Barcelona, Singapore, and Amsterdam have been praised as leaders in digitally driven urbanism (Chakraborty, 2021).



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GOALS OF THE MISSION

Three main themes might be used to organise the mission's goals:

- Improving the core infrastructure means making sure that there is reliable water and energy, good sanitation, cheap housing, easy transportation, and green areas.
- Technology-enabled governance: Using ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools, sensors, and data-driven platforms like Integrated Command and Control Centres (ICCCs) to run city services in real time (Jha & Singh, 2020).
- Urbanisation that includes everyone and lasts encouraging varied land use, cheap transportation, green energy, and community involvement in planning. After consulting with numerous individuals, each city developed a Smart City Proposal (SCP) to achieve these objectives. These plans included both locally based development (such as retrofitting or redeveloping a specific zone or developing a greenfield area) and city-wide projects (like digital platforms for new traffic management, online complaint systems, or citywide waste tracking).

INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE AND FUNDING

The mission's unique institutional aspect is the establishment of Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) for every city. These SPVs, which were established as limited liability companies, were responsible for planning, funding, and executing projects. This strategy aimed to overcome the red tape that slows down typical municipal processes and provide professionals with more freedom (NIUA, 2022).

The funding concept consisted of three parts: the central government provided ₹500 crore to each city, the state government and urban local bodies matched that amount, and public-private partnerships (PPPs) were expected to bring in additional funds. By 2023, the total amount spent on the mission had exceeded ₹2 lakh crore, making it one of India's most ambitious urban programs (MoHUA, 2023).

SUCCESS Stories and Achievements

Although many have criticized it, the Smart Cities Mission has brought about tangible changes in numerous cities. MoHUA (2023) states that the mission's deadline marked the completion or initiation of more than 7,800 projects.



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Integrated Command and Control Centres (ICCCs): The development of ICCCs in more than 90 cities may be the most obvious success. These are like "nerve centres" for managing cities since they include CCTV surveillance, traffic signals, water supply monitoring, and emergency response. ICCCs played a crucial role during the COVID-19 pandemic in tracking cases, organizing health services, and disseminating information to the public (IISc, 2022).

Area-Based Development: Cities like Bhubaneswar, Indore, and Pune improved their downtown districts by adding better pedestrian zones, solar street lights, smart water meters, and more useful public spaces. Indore has been named India's cleanest city multiple times due to its effective GPS-linked waste collection system (LiveMint, 2023).

Digital government and citizen services: Many cities made smartphone apps available for filing complaints, paying bills online, and getting real-time information about public transport. For example, people in Surat can view the real-time location of buses and access digital civic services all from one place.

Making places and public spaces: The streets of Pune, Udaipur, and Bhubaneswar were renovated to have bigger sidewalks, bike lanes, and open-air cultural venues. These changes made city life more lively and encouraged people to move around in a way that was good for the environment.

CRITIQUES AND SHORTCOMINGS

However, urban scientists, activists, and even government auditors have also strongly criticised the Smart Cities Mission.

Progress is not consistent: Some cities finished most of their projects, but many did not. Several projects were still not completed by the middle of 2023, which raised doubts about their progress and the accountability of those responsible (PTI, 2023).

Limited coverage: Because the goal focused on area-based development, changes were only made in tiny areas, sometimes only 2–5% of a city's overall area (Sharma, 2021). This method could lead to "islands of smartness" in neighbourhoods that are not getting any attention.

Exclusionary outcomes: Critics say that the SPV model puts efficiency ahead of democratic responsibility, which often leaves elected municipal councils out of the picture (Chatterjee, 2019). Smart infrastructure also works better in middle-class or business areas, whereas informal settlements often struggle to access basic services.



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Too much focus on technology: The mission occasionally downplayed the necessity of governance reform and citizen participation by calling digital solutions "smart." Academics argue that technology, lacking social inclusion, may exacerbate existing inequities (Jha & Singh, 2020).

Concerns about sustainability: Some projects, like big cement reconstructions or high-energy LED displays, make people worry about how they will affect the environment. Researchers have also noted a lack of a strong climate adaptation lens (Chakraborty, 2021).

DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW

People throughout the world have both praised and doubted the idea of smart cities. Cities like Singapore and Barcelona have demonstrated how digital technologies can facilitate easier transportation, energy management, and community engagement. However, they also faced issues with privacy and the surveillance of their data. India's Smart Cities Mission illustrates how these conflicts are unfolding globally: a desire to leverage the latest technology, yet cities often lack sufficient resources, and significant social disparities persist.

India's approach has focused more on infrastructure and digital command centres than on sustainability, as is the case with European innovative city concepts. This difference highlights the challenges of using global templates in Indian cities (Chakraborty, 2021).

WHAT WE LEARNT

The mission's mixed results teach us a lot about what India could do in the future when it comes to urban policies:

- Technology is not a magic bullet. Digital solutions should not replace strong government and citizen participation; instead, they should work in conjunction with them to enhance their effectiveness and efficiency.
- It is important that things can grow and include everyone. If you only focus on certain wards, you create an unfair situation. Future programs should adopt a comprehensive city-wide strategy that prioritizes the needs of vulnerable communities.
- It is important to make cities stronger. SPVs got over red tape, but real change can only happen if elected local governments in cities are given more power.
- Sustainability should be the primary focus. Climate resilience, affordable housing, and green infrastructure must be at the forefront of future city-making.



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The Smart Cities Mission remains one of the most ambitious experiments in India's history of urban policy. It raised city issues in national conversations, attracted significant investment, and established visible infrastructure and digital systems in several communities. However, it also brought to light the paradox of "smartness": that technology and showpiece projects may exist alongside ongoing exclusion and inequity. As India continues to grow, the true challenge is not to create pockets of smartness, but to ensure that all citizens, from those living in high-rises in Indore to those in slums in Bhubaneswar, benefit from modernization. The SCM has taught policymakers both good and bad things. It has reminded them that cities are not just machines to be improved, but living communities that need to be cared for with fairness, inclusion, and sustainability at their heart.

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