

‘Cities will power growth’

— Isher Judge Ahluwalia

Chairperson, High Powered Expert Committee on Urban Infrastructure



ISHER JUDGE AHLUWALIA, CHAIRPERSON OF THE think tank Icrier, chaired the High Powered Expert Committee on urban infrastructure. After labouring for nearly two years, the panel has submitted its recommendations to urban development minister Kamal Nath. Ahluwalia talks to *BW*'s Gurbir Singh about the problems of satellite towns, and how to make our cities more liveable. Excerpts:

Q: In the future, do satellite cities still have a place in urban planning?

A: It depends on various factors, especially transport and housing. If these are provided in metropolitan planning in satellite cities, they become feasible. On the other hand, you can have independent, regional hubs, like what Dewas is to Indore.

Q: How do you evaluate key satellite cities such as Navi Mumbai and Gurgaon?

A: Navi Mumbai had got quite a few things right. We were impressed by the quality of governance, and the waste-water treatment system. Gurgaon, on the other hand, is more

haphazard where basic tenets have not been met. For satellite cities, public-private partnership works if risks are assigned. But there are problems if the government does not know the risks they are transferring to the private sector.

Q: Most whine about the rash growth of cities. But your report sees them as founts of energy.

A: Generation of wealth is increasingly dependent on the knowledge industry, and more and more cities have become repositories of knowledge and technology. Without cities, growth will not happen. But we should think of cities and their hinterland as one continuum. It is a mistake to highlight the rural-urban divide, as it is an artificial divide.

Q: You see governance as a core issue. How can this be addressed?

A: We need municipalities and corporations with secure sources of revenue, local bodies that can guarantee money is well spent, and that are accountable to the people. They must become market-worthy, be able to raise money through market bonds. Then they will have money to spend on, say, an efficient water delivery mechanism, and not depend on some state government Jal Board. Autonomy is a big problem dogging the governance of cities. Central and state governments don't allow decentralisation of local bodies as they think "where will they get their capital from?" But without reforming city government, how will we build cities? It is not a problem of money, but of systems and governance.

Q: Did you come across municipalities that have performed exceptionally well?

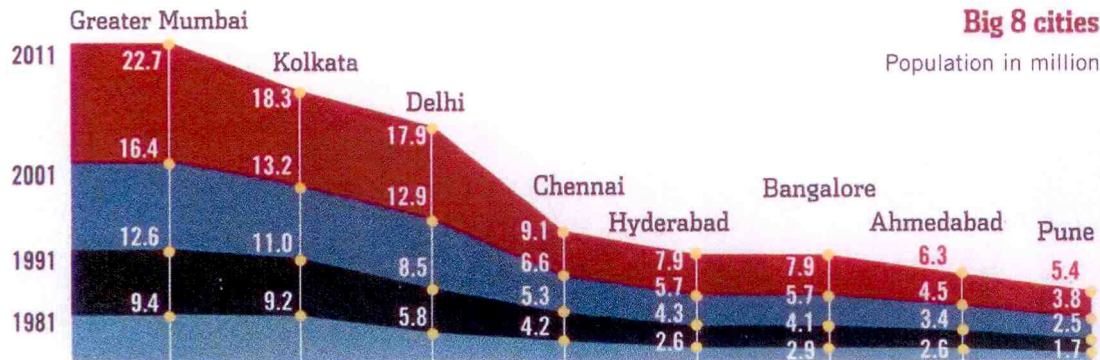
A: Yes, we found Hubli, Dharwar and Gulbarga in Karnataka handling their drinking water supply networks very well. The experiment of Gorai, a suburb of Mumbai, turned out to be extremely successful. Gorai spent Rs 50 crore in putting its waste disposal system in place, and in turn earned Rs 70 crore in carbon credits.

Q: You have proposed an investment of Rs 39.2 lakh crore for urban infrastructure development over the next 20 years. Where will the money come from?

A: From devolution of taxes, from state government allocation, from property tax reforms. We have also proposed a reformed JNNURM or New Improved (NI) JNNURM. We want it to be inclusive of all cities, not just the current 65. And it should be programme-oriented and not project-based as it is now.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF URBANISATION

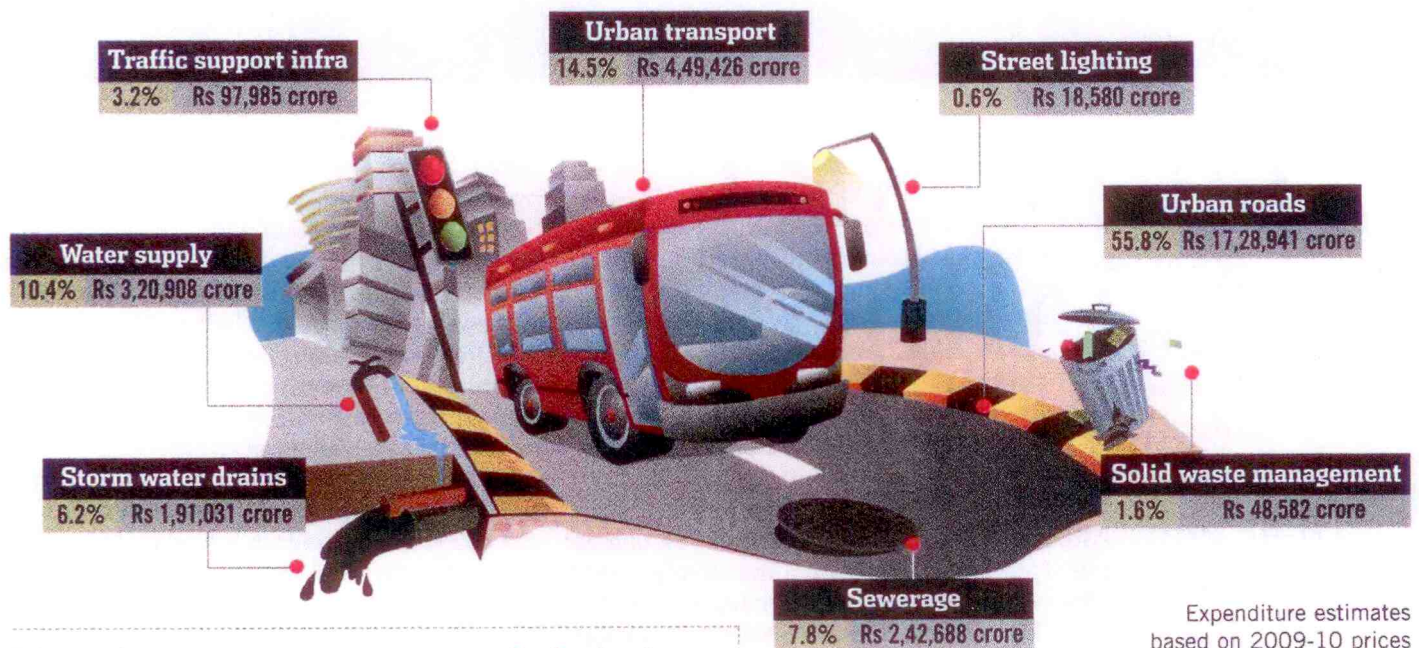
The report of the expert committee on urbanisation highlights some interesting trends about Indian cities



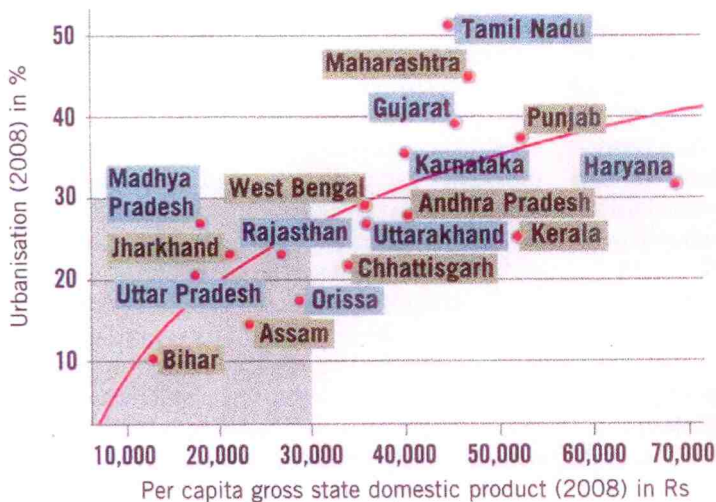
Urbanisation ranking

1. Tamil Nadu
2. Maharashtra
3. Gujarat
4. Punjab
5. Karnataka
6. Haryana
7. West Bengal
8. Andhra Pradesh

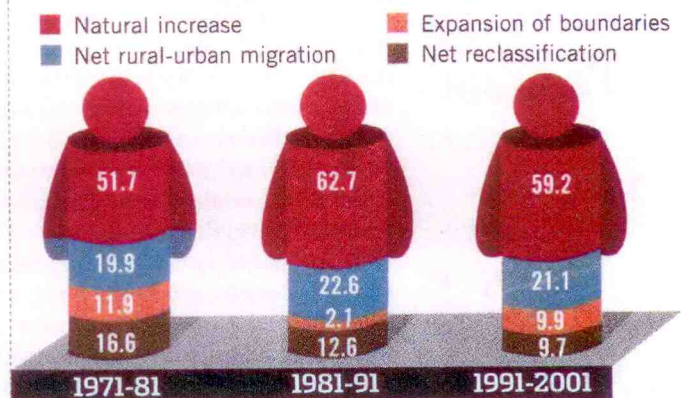
Road and transport account for a lion's share of a city's capital expenditure



Bihar is the worst in per capita income and urbanisation



How the urban population is growing



Figures in per cent

Source: Report on Indian Urban Infrastructure of the High-Powered Expert Committee