

Hindi heartland needs an urban revolution

To reduce outward migration, cities in UP and Bihar must turn into growth engines. Municipalities have a key role to play

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Over the last month, the world saw a unique spectacle in India's Hindi heartland as tens of millions of people across India and the world, gathered at Kumbh in Prayagraj. Organising Kumbh is unique feat in urban planning and management. Yet, will this impressive organisational ability be translated into improving the quality of Indian cities?

This question of urban growth and planning shall be central to India's development policy over the coming decades. Here's why.

Prayagraj or Allahabad is no ordinary city. It lies at the heart of India symbolised by the confluence of India's two mighty North Indian rivers — Ganga and Yamuna. Before the time of the Buddha, the region formed the Vatsa mahajanpada, flanked by other influential mahajanpadas such as Kashi, Kosala, Magadha and Panchala. Even during the British rule, the city was the heart of India's freedom struggle and literary renaissance. Yet, the city couldn't keep up with the progress of rest of India, and could symbolically represent the decline of the the entire Hindi speaking region.

Metropolis vacuum

The Hindi speaking provinces: Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh (MP) together make a population close to half a billion. Historically, the region's fertile plains supported important cosmopolitan cities of the world, like Kashi and Patliputra. Just over a hundred years ago, four of the 10 largest cities (Lucknow, Banares, Kanpur and Agra), and eight of the 20 largest cities in India (+ Allahabad, Patna, Bareilly and Meerut) were in the region (1911 census). But today, the region suffers from a "metropolis vacuum", because it has no major metropolitan agglomeration to

attract talent and investments. The six largest cities of India, — Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad — all lie outside of this Hindi heartland. The other new upcoming urban centres such as Pune, Ahmedabad, and Surat also lie outside of the region.

Among the 10 largest cities none are in the region, while only five cities (Lucknow, Kanpur, Indore, Bhopal and Patna) belong in the top 20 (2011 census). The glaring absence of a major metropolitan centre in the region has forced young people to migrate from the small towns and move to other cities in the West and the South.

Firing from all cylinders

After liberalisation, while growth in the south and the west took off and cities such as Bengaluru and Hyderabad found spectacular success, leaving behind the Hindi heartland. However, it cannot be left out any longer.

Today, India needs sustained double digit economic growth, to fulfil the aspirations of its highly ambitious and very young population. To achieve such growth the Hindi heartland needs to become an engine of growth too. Lopsided regional growth centred in the South and the West cannot lift the whole country. Can such growth happen in the absence of a metropolitan anchor in the Hindi heartland?

Beyond the central government, State governments and even more so, the local mayors and their municipal councils, are key players in shaping the direction of India's development. If the Hindi heartland is to grow, it needs local governments that appreciate the centrality of cities in economic growth.

Recently, India has made plans to develop industrial corridors connecting its major cities. At the same time, it has also focused its efforts on the smart city mission which develops special local or-



A file picture of devotees arriving at Sangam during the Kumbh Mela festival in Prayagraj AFF

ganisations (called "Special Purpose Vehicles") that has the authority to "plan, appraise, approve, release funds, implement, manage, operate, monitor and evaluate the Smart City development projects" (Smart City Mission 2018).

This is an exciting innovation, as it fixes accountability and improves urban governance by empowering local administrations (CEOs). Yet, more needs to be done.

Fixing urban governance

Currently, Indian cities suffer from severe handicaps due to poor urban governance (Janagraha ASICS 2017). Cities around the world, from London to Chicago have influential mayors, and residents hold them responsible if the city fails to function well.

While CEO-led special purpose

vehicles are a welcome step of the Smart City Mission, ideally Indian cities need empowered mayors and municipal councils, which should be the primary executive and legislative authority on matters related to their city's funding, development and management.

Today, when heavy rain clogs cities like Patna, who is to be held accountable? The government of Bihar which represents a hundred million people, or a local mayor? The answer to this question should be clear, so that we can stop passing the buck.

With correct urban governance, unique events such as the Kumbh can catalyse growth in the hosting cities. An influx of development projects, funds and media attention, can be the timely impetus a city like Allahabad needs.

Allahabad and its neighbour, Varanasi, should have been a major economic agglomeration

already, attracting young migrants from around the country and the world to its many universities and organisations.

Alas, this is not the case. But now promotion of urban centres in the Hindi heartland (like Lucknow-Kanpur region, Allahabad-Varanasi region, Patna region) needs to be done with utmost urgency. Targeted steps to rejuvenate cities of Hindi heartland are a win-win for all stakeholders in India's growth. If metropolitan cities can emerge in the region, it will relieve the migratory pressures many growing cities like Bengaluru are facing today.

Here is the bottom-line: Of the 1.35 billion people of India, about half a billion cannot be left behind. So, India's Hindi heartland needs an urban revolution.

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