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CIVIL SERVICES ACHIEVERS' POINT

A ONE STOP SOLUTION FOR UPSC/APSC/SSC & BANKING

THE HINDU

EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

DATE - 2nd July, 2021

For Preliminary and Mains examination

(Also useful for APSC and other government examinations)

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EDITORIALS

- Envisioning the post-pandemic smart city (GS 2 – Smart Cities Mission)
- Relief and recompense (GS 2 – Government policies)
- Later than ever (GS 2 – Federalism)
- Delhi's lame duck Assembly (GS 2 – Federalism)

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ARTICLES

Envisioning the post-pandemic smart city

Context

- Six years ago, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government started a journey of urban development based on the belief that a select set of cities across the country could be 'transformed' and made smart, after they were chosen through a competition among the States.
- The Centre would support the chosen projects and others would learn from them. The idea of a transformation is indicated in BJP's manifesto for the 2014 election, where, in a reference to the squalor that has traditionally marked cities and towns, the party declared that they should "no longer remain a refection of poverty and bottlenecks.
- Rather they should become symbols of efficiency, speed and scale". This racy vision laid the foundation for a programme [to create 100 smart cities](#).

The general concept

- Globally, there is **no uniform definition of smart cities**, and the most common features of such urban spaces are derived from concepts in the global north.
- They generally have a **technocentric vision, with sensors everywhere, smart homes, high levels of connectivity, massive and ubiquitous data collection by various agencies, and a continuous flow of useful information to citizens.**
- All this, the reasoning goes, can help **governments allocate resources optimally and take timely decisions to raise efficiency and improve standards of living.**

Indian cities problems

Leadership through knowledge...

- India's cities have well-known

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- infrastructure deficits, inadequate water supply, waste management, sewerage and transport arrangements, high levels of pollution and, with climate change, frequent extremes of floods and drought.
- The answer to these, the **Smart Cities Mission**, has been fashioned as an amalgam of upgraded civic services and expensive showpiece projects in the chosen cities, with the investments heavily influenced by the Centre.

Now, a health focus

- Before a complete critique of the expensive programme could emerge, COVID-19 interrupted the lives of cities, confining people indoors for long periods, disrupting economic processes and paralysing vibrant urban life.
- As the pandemic peaked, thousands had to desperately look for emergency medical care in scarce health facilities, while the flashy smart developments built for leisure and shopping remained shuttered.
- Unsurprisingly, when the **Smart City Awards 2020** were declared recently, the **Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs** gave one component of the scheme, the **Integrated Command and Control Centres (ICCCs)**, a health focus.
- These centres, of which 70 are operational, functioned as “war rooms” for COVID-19, and, combined with “other smart infrastructure developed under the mission, helped cities in fighting the pandemic through information dissemination, improving communication, predictive analysis and supporting effective management”, it said.
- This is a remarkable image of efficiency, but it would seem incongruous with the lived reality in several States and the national capital during the second wave of the pandemic, as people struggled for information and access to medical care.
- Yet, one of the States that suffered severely, Uttar Pradesh, shot to the top for implementation metrics of the smart cities projects, apparently because it achieved more than what was envisaged in the centrally-supported schemes. It added its own set of ‘State smart cities’.
- The fact that U.P., a crucial BJP-ruled State scarred by the pandemic, is bound for elections next year must, of course, be treated as a coincidence. Indore and Surat jointly won top city-level awards, while Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu also won State awards.

Infrastructural convergence

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- Over the years, Smart Cities Mission projects converged with other infrastructure programmes such as **AMRUT, the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation, the PMAY (Urban), the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, for housing.**
- Some also get support from international agencies to **adopt best practices on mobility and transport, energy and reducing carbon emissions.**
- The latest official count shows that 5,924 Mission projects worth ₹1,78,500 crore have been tendered, indicating the scale of investments. This is in tune with some estimates that globally, 90% of urban development by mid-century will take place in developing countries.
- A focus on basic urban infrastructure prioritised by elected representatives was part of national policy since the Third Plan period (1961-66), although the focus shifted to smaller towns away from Bombay and Calcutta in the Fourth Plan (1969-74).
- After decades of slow experiments, the post-COVID-19 era will sharpen the question of how cities must evolve. The Danish urban design expert, Jan Gehl, who is averse to the idea of smart cities and “silly gimmicks”, speaks of the universal values of a city as one that is a meeting place of people, inviting them to spend time, walk, bike, and roam around public, semi-public or private gardens.
- Pedestrianisation over motorisation is also a marker of a good city.
- Although they try to accommodate some of these elements, India’s smart city plans cannot really aspire for a structural shift, in which the movement of people gets priority over vehicles.
- In fact, extending the green logic would imply a freeze on all diversion of wetlands and commons for any other development, creating **new urban gardens and water bodies**, and doing a **climate change audit** for every piece of infrastructure planned.
- A **green and blue city** would mean less destructive flooding, more water to harvest and lower peak temperatures — all of it at very little expense. Use for the commons Cities could be elegant, healthy and smart after the pandemic if they apportion the available road space for bicycles, which exemplify safe travel and can complement expanded public transport when commuters return in big numbers to bus and urban rail.
- This is consistent with the pan-city goals of the Smart City Mission, but requires State governments to take resolute action.
- Bicycles represent the ideal urban travel bubble and must be moved from the margins to the centre of policy. Pedestrianisation, biking and harmonious opportunities for street vending created by allocating more of the commons would also be fully democratic and address the criticism that smart city planning

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ignores the informality that marks India's urban spaces. This is valid for both cities being retrofitted with facilities and those being developed as greenfield sites.

- Can more of the commons be turned into farmers' markets, vending grounds and craft centres?
- None of this detracts from essential modernisation, such as deployment of multiple sensors to gauge air, noise and water pollution, provision of electronic delivery of citizen services, whether online or in a government office, intelligent public transport, expansion of renewable energy.
- Recovery of valuable materials from waste remains a lost opportunity even in the biggest cities.
- It would, however, mean a shift away from flyovers, underpasses and cheap parking lots that serve far fewer citizens. For citizens, real time control rooms can be meaningful only if they can have a good public dashboard of information.
- In COVID-19 times, this means access to health alerts, vaccinations, hospital beds and topical advice, rounded off with data on pollution, rainfall, congestion and so on.
- Democratising smart cities planning has to ensure every section of society has a voice in the process, and not merely those who have digital access. Pressure to frame projects, however, often cuts out many, and even elected representatives get short shrift.
- The Housing Ministry said last year that it had no plan to issue a report card for the 100 chosen smart cities, but was using the **Ease of Living Index** measured through a public perception survey. Such measurements can be heavily biased if they are not broad based.
- Quite tellingly, out of 32.2 lakh citizens in 111 cities who participated in a survey, the online channel which could be accessed through a QR code or website attracted 31,05,481 items of feedback.

Conclusion

- The pandemic has come as a remarkable opportunity to review the paradigm of smart cities, and to steer the course of hundreds of other towns that are not on the map.
- They should be helped to frame their plans around people and nature, to learn from mistakes and to avoid expensive technological solutionism.

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Relief and recompense

- It is a matter of relief and satisfaction that the Supreme Court has prodded the Union government to perform its statutory **duty of fixing a compensation for the families** of those who lost their kin to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The order comes close on the heels of a slew of directions on registering the country's vast unorganised workforce and its army of inter-State labourers on a national database and ensuring that none of them went hungry.
- On the issue of making an ex gratia payment to those affected by the pandemic, a notified disaster under the **Disaster Management Act**, the Centre initially took the untenable stand that it lacked the financial resources to compensate for every COVID-19 death.
- However, it later admitted that it was not the adequacy of resources that made it avoid any compensation, but rather its decision to prioritise expenditure in response to the pandemic. It is indeed true that unlike more frequent disasters such as cyclones, earthquakes and floods, a pandemic that has hit every country is not a one-time calamity, but an ongoing and prolonged phenomenon.
- However, the Court has rightly found that this was not reason enough for the Government to evade its duty to include **ex gratia assistance on account of loss of life in its guidelines for "minimum standards of relief" to those hit by the disaster**.
- The Court correctly did not fix a compensation amount for each death, leaving it to a policy decision by the **National Disaster Management Authority and the Centre**.
- In an earlier order, the Court dealt with the need for comprehensive registration of all inter-State and unorganised workers in the country.
- It is unfortunate that it needed a pandemic, and the resulting humanitarian, social and economic crisis for millions of workers, to give an impetus to the process.
- The Supreme Court, while disposing of suo motu proceedings on the miseries of migrant labourers, has now fixed a deadline of December 31 this year for all States and Union Territories to complete the process.
- The Centre has been given a deadline of July 31 to make available a portal for its National Database for Unorganised Workers (NDUW) project so that it may be used for registering unorganised workers across the country.

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- However, the Union government, which was directed to make such a common module available to the States as far back as in August 2018, claimed the work on developing the portal was affected due to the fallout of the pandemic.
- The Court has pulled up the Union Labour Ministry for its "apathy and lackadaisical attitude" and directed that the process of registration should begin by July 31.
- The verdicts open up the possibility that the inter-State and unorganised workers will at last be able to reap the benefits of welfare laws enacted for them. These interventions signify the rejuvenation and assertion of a court seen as somewhat reticent until recently.



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Later than ever

Context

- The **Union Territory of Puducherry** has finally got a **Council of Ministers**.
- It has taken almost two months after the Assembly election results, and 50 days since the assumption of office by N. Rangasamy as Chief Minister, for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to get five nominees sworn in as Ministers, three from his party, the All India N.R. Congress (AINRC), and two from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).
- What makes **Puducherry's first NDA Ministry** stand out from the earlier coalition ministries is the inordinate delay in its formation despite there being a pre-poll alliance.
- The impact of the deadly second wave of the pandemic did not add any sense of urgency to the parties to thrash out their differences. But there could be more trouble to come.
- Portfolios have not been allocated to the five Ministers who were sworn in on Sunday. The Chief Minister's illness was not the only obvious reason for the delay in cabinet formation; there were also differences between the partners and within the BJP local unit.
- The central government too appeared to have supported the Chief Minister's not-so-enthusiastic response to the local BJP unit's demand for the post of Deputy Chief Minister as it did not create any such post.
- However, the BJP, which has nine MLAs in the Assembly, including three nominated legislators, is tasting power for the first time in the Union Territory; the party has also got the post of Assembly Speaker.
- For all the delay, those involved in the Cabinet formation, including Mr. Rangasamy, deserve credit for the social balance in the Council of Ministers, which has three former Ministers, two representatives of Scheduled Castes and a woman.
- There is a strong possibility that the two parties would continue to have differences over the implementation of their manifestos, the key one being the AINRC's emphasis on Statehood which the national party is silent on.
- The territorial administration is not in the pink of health as far as its finances are concerned.

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- According to the Budget for 2020-21, debt servicing accounts for about 18% of the revenue expenditure of the administration annually, in addition to salaries and pensions constituting around 35% and power purchase, 17%.
- Under such circumstances, it is not hard to guess how many of the goodies promised by the two parties would translate into reality.
- Instead of committing itself to many new measures, the Council of Ministers should ensure that existing welfare schemes, including social security pension to age group-wise beneficiaries, are well implemented.
- The Centre should also be empathetic and provide a package by waiving "legacy loans", those taken about 15 years ago. Mr. Rangasamy and Ministers should ensure corruption-free and quality administration, instead of engaging in political bickering.

Delhi's lame duck Assembly

Context

- The Government of **National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD)(Amendment) Act, 2021** has been extensively criticised as a retrograde law that turns the clock back on representative democracy.
- The bulk of criticism has been focused on the reduced autonomy of the elected government and the consequent vesting of several crucial powers in the unelected Lieutenant Governor, who is the representative of the Union government.
- This is largely attributable to public consciousness of the regular skirmishes between the elected government and the Lieutenant Governor.
- However, what deserves equal condemnation is the Act's assault on the functioning of Delhi's Legislative Assembly, which has been sought to be reduced to a lame duck.

A delicate balance

- When the GNCTD Act was **enacted in 1992**, the **Legislative Assembly was given the power to regulate its own procedure, as well as the conduct of its business.**
- This was subject to very limited exceptions concerning financial matters and scrutiny over the **Lieutenant Governor's discretionary role.**

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- This sought to realise a delicate balance reflecting Delhi's unique constitutional position: neither full state nor a centrally governed Union Territory. However, the Amendment Act drives a coach and horses through this scheme.
- Now, Delhi's Assembly has no more functional independence worth its name. Its standards of procedure and conduct of business have been firmly tethered to that of the Lok Sabha, depriving Delhi's elected MLAs of an effective say in how their Assembly should be run.
- Even more insidiously, the **Amending Act prohibits the Assembly from making any rule enabling either itself or its committees to consider any issue concerned with "the day-to-day administration of the capital" or "conduct inquiries in relation to administrative decisions"**.
- This is rounded off by providing that any rule made before the Amendment Act came into effect that runs counter to this formulation shall be void. The most insidious impact of this shall be to the exercise of free speech in the Assembly and its committees.
- A situation where an elected Assembly is prohibited by law from discussing matters concerning the day-to-day administration of its own territory is one where it is dead on arrival.
- How can the Assembly be expected to perform its most basic legislative function — that of holding the executive to account — if it cannot guarantee itself the ability to freely discuss the goings on in the capital?
- What is the use of electing MLAs and endowing them with legislative privilege if they are unable to discuss the governance of the very constituents who elected them?

Impact on committees

- A note of alarm must also be sounded for the effect on the functioning of the Assembly's committees.
- These committees are usually inured from the sound and fury of political theatre that pervade sittings of the whole Assembly.
- Away from the glare of cameras, cooler heads usually prevail and important work gets done. Inquiries are conducted, witnesses and documents are examined, and reports on relevant issues are written.
- The deliberations and inputs of committees often pave the way for intelligent legislative action. In a way, they act as the eyes and ears for the whole House, which has neither the time nor the expertise to scrutinise issues in depth.
- It would be impossible for committees to perform this function without the power to conduct inquiries. It is true that many of these inquiries are bound to be broad-based and roving in nature, and may even lead to legislative dead ends.

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- But to pre-emptively inunct a committee from conducting an inquiry “in relation to the administrative decisions” (an extremely broad exception) completely negates the ability of committees to function effectively as the Assembly’s advisors and agents.
- The quality of legislative work emanating from the Assembly is thus ultimately bound to suffer. This clinical purge of its critical legislative functions has rendered the Delhi Assembly a ‘legislature’ in name only, unable both to articulate the concerns of the electorate and hold the political executive to account. Surely, Delhi’s voters deserve better than that.



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