How to seed smart cities

Govt should consider using new institutions to seed smart cities, says Sanjeev Sanyal

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In his Budget speech, Arun Jaitley reiterated the NDA Government's plan to build a hundred 'smart cities', presumably by upgrading and expanding existing towns and raising a few new urban centres. The finance minister also announced five new IITs, as many IIMs and four AIIMS-pattern institutions. Fine proposals except these will be seen as separate, mutually exclusive projects during implementation. That would be a pity, for these are inextricably linked. Universities, for instance, are critical to making cities successful. It is almost impossible to imagine Boston, US, without Harvard, MIT and other institutions clustered in and around the Boston-Cambridge area. In Britain, Oxford and Cambridge are vibrant towns largely because they host the two famous universities. Indeed, many global cities such as London and New York would be much diminished without LSE, LBS, Columbia University, NYU.

Rather than being walled off from the rest of the two cities, these institutions are an integral part of their urban ecosystems.

Newly successful cities such as Singapore too have invested heavily in universities, think tanks and research institutes, not just as centres for intellectual activity but as part of the wider urban ecosystem. Indeed, when the country's government planned the Singapore Management University, it set it up in the middle of the city. The city benefits from the "urban buzz" brought by young people while the university profits from being close to state and corporate institutions. Contrast this with Indian planners' idea of academic institutions: merely places for teaching students that have little direct link with the daily functioning of the city. This is so because they see town projects as mechanical silos and do not think in terms of organic ecosystems. Thus, universities built after Independence were housed in sealed-off campuses, often in remote places, that discourage interaction with the city. Modelled on a socialist-era factory township, their walls continue to isolate them socially and intellectually even where the cities have expanded to surround them. This is why Kanpur and Kharagpur benefit little from being home to a prestigious institution like an IIT. Even in Delhi and Mumbai, IITs are closed worlds. Before Independence, on the other hand, universities were seen as part of the urban fabric. The colleges of Bombay and Calcutta were built into the city much like those of London. Allahabad and Aligarh were driven largely by their vibrant universities, much like Oxford and Cambridge.

Whenever I ask Indian officials and planners about 'smart cities', I get a laundry list of hardware infrastructure that is needed: state-of-the-art public transportation, smart power grids and so on.

This is indeed important, but it overlooks the fact that cities are ultimately about people, not buildings. Successful cities are those that can cluster human capital and encourage innovation, creativity and exchange of ideas. To be 'smart', therefore, cities need both hardware and software. Universities are an essential part of this software. This is why great cities of the past-Athens, Florence, Constantinople, Rome, Alexandria, Ujjain, Varanasi- were almost always also great intellectual centres. They attracted talent, encouraged the churn of ideas and triggered innovation. Translated in modern terms, universities do not just attract young people to cities but provide venues for conferences, seminars, cultural and sporting events enabling human interaction that makes for lively urban clusters.

Now that the Government has announced its intention to build new academic institutes, the focus will likely be on getting large tracts of land and constructing standalone buildings. If anything, success will be measured by how much land has been acquired. This is wasteful, and not just at one level. First, this approach requires unnecessary acquisition of productive farm and forest land. Why do we need hundreds of acres to educate a few thousand students? As Jaitley would know, his alma mater, Shri Ram College of Commerce, runs one of India's top colleges on just 17 acres. There are many top-notch institutions around the world that operate from much less. Second, a standalone institute requires the creation of expensive infrastructure in isolated locations, including staff housing, convocation halls, seminar rooms and so

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on. But, how often will the convocation hall be used? In a city location, these facilities would have added to the overall urban infrastructure. Moreover, such remote campuses are inconsiderate of the social and career needs of the families of the faculty and staff, a major constraint to finding good faculty. We can't envision universities as industrial-era factory townships where wives stay at home and children study in the company school. Finally, and most damagingly from an urban perspective, these isolated campuses are unable to add to the ecosystem. Students come and they leave, so human capital does not accumulate in the host city.

The Government should, therefore, consider using new institutions to seed the 'smart cities'. This would mean weaving new IITs, IIMs and AIIMSs into the surrounding urban fabric. This may look messy on a master plan drawing board but, on the ground, it would create cities that are vibrant and, indeed, smart.

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