

The Planned Chaos of Erode City

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Unsound Cities

Out of 100 big cities in India, 10 cities are in the State of Tamil Nadu (Chennai, Madurai, Coimbatore, Salem, Tiruchirappalli, Tirupur, Erode, Thirunalveli, Vellore and Thoothukkudi) in terms of population size with four lakhs and above. Tamil Nadu is the most urbanised state in the country. These cities are Tier I, Tier II and Tier III and have become rattled with many challenges and critical issues that were debated for decades. But few were piloted for plausibility in implementation and fixing the gaps to scale it up. In the last 25 years, hardly anything achieved in Tier I cities in Tamil Nadu substantially to showcase as “The Model” for Tier II & III cities and towns for implementing the so-called “Best Practices” on public civic deliverables. The age-old centralisation of power and control mechanisms are still a daunting factor to defeat the 18 delegated functions envisaged in the 74th Constitutional Amendments made in 1992 to strengthen urban local bodies.

However, in order to shackle the redundant decades-old challenges and critical issues of cities such as solid waste management, construction of toilets for individual houses/community, quality drinking water, hygiene and sanitation, sewerage management, protecting water streams from pollution, streamlining streets for all kind of people and not merely for mighty vehicles, Green Parks, streets lights, etc., there were few initiatives in the last five years mainly driven by the Government of India’s initiatives to identify ways and means to address by streamlining city governance structure with the aid of technology and institutional collaborations.

Tamil Nadu has 12 city corporations and 11 of them were included under the Smart City Mission of the Government of India in different stages between 2016 and 2018. How many cities in Tamil Nadu have taken effective measures to address the issues and challenges identified under the Smart City Mission or Swachh Bharat Mission? Hardly, except Chennai, all other cities are still at an early stage. Out of the total funds provided for the Smart Cities projects in Tamil Nadu (including the State Government share), the city corporations could only spend about 1 per cent in the last three years.

The officials openly recognised that most of the delays were mainly due to governance failure. And it was evident that there was no sign of urgency among top bureaucracy to get involved themselves to become a change-maker. Also, the capacity of city engineers and planners was unable to cope up with cutting edge solutions to align with the innovative ideas for planning and execution of projects.

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Erode city is situated in the western part of the state, a bustling industrial town with many competitive voluntary organisations working for social welfare amid high complexity in dealing with environmental degradation due to land, water, noise and air pollution. Unlike other cities in Tamil Nadu, Erode city had a huge opportunity for streamlining its governance systems to transform the civic deliverables in the last five years and scale it up for a sustainable model. But the city miserably failed to perform due to various reasons; some of them are highlighted below.

Critical Issues and Challenges Faced by Erode City

The core structural issues and challenges faced by the Erode City Corporation vary from adhering to its professionally studied city planning reports/documents, governance failure and rampant corruption at all levels of administration with or without political agent's interventions, although a good amount of resources was provided to study and plan for the future development of the city. These reports have recommended pertinent measures to improve the quality of services and facilities at par with other cities in India and abroad. Thus, one of the major issues long lingering with the Erode City Corporation is that it did not follow its well-planned city development projects identified through professional studies, backed with data and analysis of sound logic and reasoning. The following are the major studies and reports on city development:

- (i) City Development Report (City Corporate Plan to Business Plan), August, 2006**, submitted by the Department of Planning, School of Architect and Planning, Anna University, Chennai, had suggested improving the quality of drinking water supply, improvement in central bus stand, implementing underground drainage scheme, rejuvenation of Perumpallam canal, among others. This report warned that Vendipalayam solid waste dump-yard was not enough to handle the increase of solid waste in the near future. After this report's warning to find an alternative location for dumping, the city started dumping at the bank of Cauvery River. Now, about 7 acres are covered with legacy waste dump-yard wherein the corporation draws drinking water for the city through large size bore-well.
- (ii) City Development Plan for Expanded Erode City 2013** prepared by UMC Global, Urban Management Consultant, Ahmadabad, made several recommendations to improve the city's state-of-art facilities and services for traffic management by construction of flyovers at PS Park, Solar, Thindal, Sathy Road, pedestrian subways and foot over-bridges, footpaths, multi-level vehicles parking, model bus terminal, storm-water drains systems, rehabilitation of slums, rejuvenation of Kanirauvtharkulam, heritage tourism, etc. The city corporation did nothing in the above areas in the last few years.
- (iii) Erode Comprehensive Mobility Plan Report, 2014** submitted by M/s CDM Smith India Pvt Ltd, Bangalore, has recommended a long-term perspective plan for the entire mobility aspects of Erode city which will see a population growth of up to 9 lakhs by

2045. The report has strategically summarised the importance of the National Transport Policy while planning for long-term urban mobility plans for Erode city and its suburban areas like Soolar, Perundurai, Chithode, etc. and city's future demand for non-motorised transport systems, vehicle parking management, traffic management, freight management, modern bus shelters with passenger and eco-friendly features, etc. The report recommended several measures to address the issues in a futuristic perspective. But the city corporation did not bother to implement them in the last few years. Even the public and some of the active social welfare organisations also did not bother to understand the importance of the above report's recommendations.

- (iv) **Slum Free City Action Plan, 2016**, aimed to become slum-free by 2023, is only on paper. Slums are place for politicians to play their vote bank politics time and again. About 10 per cent of people live in slums in Erode city with absolutely poor hygiene and sanitation. They are used as vote bank by offering freebies and only provided with essential needs like voter ID, water, electricity, ration cards, Aadhaar cards, etc.
- (v) **Erode City Sanitation Plan Report, March, 2016** prepared by Boom HR Solution, Erode. This report was commissioned by the Corporation after 8 years of urging by the Union Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India's National Urban Sanitation Policy which emphasised that all cities in India should have its plan of action for improving urban hygiene and sanitation. However, on the ground, the development efforts to achieve the sanitation plans of the City Corporation were near zero. Indeed, this report was not widely discussed in any public forum.
- (vi) **Erode Smart City Initiatives Reports, 2015** prepared by ICRA Management Consulting Services, Chennai. The citizen's engagement surveys indicated two top priorities for the city—clean and green city with open space and environment-friendly and pollution-free city. But the initiatives which are being undertaken under the Smart City projects sanctioned in the priority appear to be not in the interest of the public at large.

Status of Major Schemes and Programmes

Despite the several structural lacunas of Erode City Corporation, the following major schemes and programmes of the Government of India and the State of Tamil Nadu were provided for improving the essential services to the residents of the city; but the results were disappointing in many ways.

(1) Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) was launched in June 2015 by the Government of India with aims to provide basic civic amenities like water supply, sewerage, urban transport and parks to improve the quality of life of all. Under this scheme, Erode City took up the Ooratchikottai Drinking Water Supply Project. **A total project cost of `484.45 crore was approved in 2016–17. Out of the total project cost, the Government of India provided `242.23 crore, share of the Government of Tamil Nadu is ` 96.89 crore and share of Erode City Corporation is ` 145.33 crore**, which the Corporation is funding from Smart City Projects fund, which is again provided by the Government of India. The Larsen & Toubro (L&T) company got the

order a couple of years ago for the construction of pipelines to supply the drinking water from a place called Ooratchikottai nearby Bhavani to Erode city due to huge groundwater pollution in the city and on the banks of Cauvery River. The efforts to bring the Ooratchikottai Drinking Water Project practically took more than a decade. Besides, about seven public parks were created in Erode City through AMRUT Scheme for green space coverage with recreation activities for children.

(2) Swachh Bharat Mission was launched by the Government of India in October 2014 to make urban India free from open defecation by the construction of community and individual toilets and for achieving complete scientific management of municipal solid waste in 4,041 statutory towns in the country and massive awareness about the importance of hygiene and sanitation to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. **About 3,554 individual house toilets were identified to be constructed in Erode city. But the Erode City Corporation took more than 4 years to complete the construction of 3,554 toilets.**

- a) Under the Swachh Bharath Abhiyan, `8,000per household was provided for the construction of individual toilets for households those lacked one. A total of 3,554 individual toilets (`28.43 crore, approximately) were supposed to be constructed in Erode city, but it took more than 4 years to construct these toilets due to the corruption involving middlemen. Out of `8,000per toilet, the Government of India provided `4,000, the Government of Tamil Nadu and City Corporation provided each `2,000 respectively. While the money from the Central Government went to the beneficiaries, the State and local body share went to middlemen. According to Erode Smart City Proposals, **about 17.5 per cent of the households are without toilet facilities. The discharge of sewage into storm water drainage is almost common in the city.**¹

(3) Under Smart City Mission, the Government of India has selected 99 Indian cities to transform them into livable cities through the state-of-art infrastructure development by adopting smart solutions of technology aids. Erode City was selected in the 4th Round of Smart City Challenge (January 2018) for the transformation of the City into a model eco-friendly city with sustainability as the main pillars of growth, using its intrinsic strength of being a business destination for Agro-based and Textiles Industrial hub. **Erode Smart City projects have been estimated at a cost of `1,543.52 crore covering 16 wards (out of 60 wards) in the core area of the city that have been taken for Area-based Development. An amount of `934.94 crore has been sanctioned for 17 projects by the Government.**²It took six months to form the Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) of Erode Smart City Limited with independent directors from Industry experts and city planners.

¹City-wide Concept Plan for Erode City, October2015.

<http://erodecorporation.gov.in/pdf/Report%20on%20City%20wide%20Concept%20Plan.pdf>.

²Policy Note of Municipal Administration and Water Supply Department—2018–

19.Government of Tamil Nadu,

p130.http://cms.tn.gov.in/sites/default/files/documents/maws_e_pn_2018_19.pdf.

(4) Denmark's Royal Danish Embassy (New Delhi) Report on Erode Smart City, 2016, as Partner for Erode Smart City Initiatives to assist with resources. The report estimated to fund **`234.38 crore (223 DKK million)** for water bodies' restoration of Canals and Cauvery River projects, **`83.03 crore (79 DKK million)** for renewable energy source development projects and **`465.62 crore (443 DKK million)** for integrated road design with non-motorised transport facilities across the city. The Royal Danish Embassy, New Delhi, had urged the Erode City Corporation to take action *at an early stage in the Smart City process* to enable and partner with companies from Denmark to invest in Erode on the above-mentioned areas for development. However, the steps taken to engage with the Danish Embassy are not known. It was also evident that the bureaucracy of the Corporation did not show any interest to engage the firms from Denmark for improving the facilities and services.

(5) Under Urban Governance (Model City) Component 2017–2022, which is The World Bank Funded Projects for urban transformation with sound governance management, Erode city has been included as one of three cities in Tamil Nadu; the other two cities are Vellore and Hosur. **The Model City project aims to improve Urban Management in four vital areas such as City Governance Empowerment and its organisational capacity development, to carry out Spatial/Development Planning of city limit, Sustainable Finances and e-Governance, and Public Disclosure.**

All of the above areas are extremely important to streamline the entire governance system of Erode City Corporation to make it more transparent and accountable to all its actions. **The Government of Tamil Nadu has allocated `153.24 crore for the achievement of the above objectives by 2021–2022. The State Government has already provided `25.54 crore to Erode City Corporation in the year 2016–2017.** But the action plan and activities carried out by the Erode City Corporation were suspicious. The Erode City Corporation has recently issued terms of reference selecting the **Paneerselvam Park Area including Market and Periyar Nagar for the preparation of Urban Design Improvement** for urban governance management. But practically nothing substantially was witnessed on the ground.

(6) Underground Sewerage Project, an initiative of the Government of Tamil Nadu with funding from the Government of India and The World Bank, is being implemented with more than eight years of the delayed timeline. The project aims to provide an underground sewerage scheme to the Erode City Corporation by the construction of Sewer line, HSC, Manhole, Pumping main, Pumping station & Sewage Treatment Plant with 50.55 MLD per day capacity. The project was commissioned in July 2014 and it was supposed to be completed by January 2017. The total project cost approved was **`255.81 crore**. However, it is not clear even today whether the plant has been made operational or not, and whether all the planned sewerage lines were completed or not. The time-bound project monitoring systems have not been followed to assess the gaps and fix them appropriately. This project has been badly mismanaged in terms of the contract with private companies for nearly a decade with unfettered interferences of political agents both for rent-seeking and diluting the governance systems.

Conclusion

As revealed by several reports and documents mentioned above, the Erode City Corporation is not firm on any of the core issues highlighted in the reports with the urgency to take concrete efforts to address these in a time-bound manner. When the new projects were announced, the city administration behaved in an autocratic manner and did not engage with any stakeholders for public participation to give suggestions, feedback for formulations of projects and implementation with the check and balance systems. It did not engage any non-governmental organisations which are working independently, helped them to identify some of the core projects and supported with resources to improve the civic infrastructure facilities and services. Unless the civic governance systems are fixed with reasonable transparency for public engagements, the people's aspirations to have ease of living with world-class city eco-systems will not be achieved in the near future. It will remain a distant dream of our world vis-à-vis their world.

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Views expressed are personal and need not reflect or represent the views of Centre for Public Policy Research

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