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**BW SMARTCITIES**

"Smart Cities are not built overnight. We are in for the long haul."

*After putting Pune as a model city on the forefront of the Government's Smart City Mission, Kunal Kumar has embarked on the new role of Mission Director, Smart Cities, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India and is sparing no effort in making the mission a successful one. In an exclusive interview with Manish Arora of BW Smart Cities, Kumar talks about how the humble beginning has been made, the fundamental challenges and the role of technology in making the lives of citizens easy. Excerpts from the interview:-*



14 August, 2018 by [Manish Arora](#)

**What is the current progress of the Smart Cities Mission?**

It has been more than 3 years since the launch of the Mission on 25th June 2015. 100 cities have been selected in 4 rounds with Shillong being the 100th city to be selected in June, 2018. 95 cities have formed their SPVs and almost 70+ cities have got their consultancy teams in place. Cities selected in the first 3 rounds are in various stages of project

implementation. It takes about 18 months to set up governance of the SPV, hire requisite human resources, get consultancy teams in place and prepare detailed project reports. In cities which have completed these 18 months post selection, grounding of projects has started. Numerically, the total number of projects under Smart Cities Mission are around 5110 costing about 2.05 lakh crores. About 35,000 crores worth of projects are either completed or are under implementation. Projects worth another 20,000 crores have been tendered. Most of the projects are innovative and/or are happening in our country for the very first time. For example, there were no Command and Control Centres before and now there are 10 all over the country, close to 50 would get operational by December 2019. Most cities are actively working on areas like urban spaces, Solar Energy, Safety, Public Transport, Complete Streets, improved Citizen Services and so on. I think 3 years is a very short time to evaluate a Mission of such magnitude because of its complexity and the need for inculcation of progressive paradigms of urban thinking. There is a lot of effort being put in at multiple levels and the results going forward are going to be transformational, to say the least.

**As you have been on ground when you were Municipal Commissioner of Pune which is amongst the Top cities under Smart Cities Mission, what has been your experience so far, what were the challenges and how did you overcome those challenges?**

The question “What the City needs” is defined by the needs of its citizens. Citizen centricity is the hallmark of the Smart Cities Mission. Smart Cities are built around people. The voice of people in every city will be different because every city has a different set of problems. The most important challenge is to understand that voice. Most of us are in the rush to do things but, we need to stop and listen and then perform.

Once we have answered the “What”, we need to figure out “How” do we address those challenges? Let us say a city needs solution to its mobility issues. Even good city managers and CEOs need to know how they should go about it. They need to work both at the strategy level wherein it fits the fundamentals of good transport planning as well as the tactical level where the focus has to be on how to get things done despite the existence of discordant views on ground. So, they have to create local solutions but also keep global learnings in mind. That is the intellectual challenge, the challenge of capacity that needs resolution.

The pace of urbanization is only going to increase going forward. Time to perform is short and therefore a challenge. Finance is one of the most fundamental challenges to be resolved. The importance of financial strength in service delivery cannot be exaggerated and cities which demonstrate this strength will surge ahead of the pack in the long run. Land acquisition and inter-departmental coordination amongst various Government departments are key challenges. The alignment of multiple Government departments on a city’s smart city vision, resolution of cognitive challenges to inculcation of latest technologies are critical challenges too. Evolution of solution to complex problems of fast-urbanizing cities requires a lot of skill and expertise.

**We have been talking about 10 cities which have got the command and control centres, what has been the impact according to you?**

Command and Control Centres in different cities are at different maturity levels. 11 have become operational. Each of the cities is trying its best to raise the bar for every new center that comes up. Crime reduction, public transport management, City's water management and waste-water infrastructure, monitoring of solid-waste management work, monitoring of environmental pollution, prompt Incident management, efficient emergency response and many more tasks have become easier because of these centres. Pune, Bhopal, Naya Raipur, Ahmedabad, Surat, Kakinada, Nagpur, Rajkot, Vadodara, Vishakhapatnam and Ujjain have already established their centres. These centres use latest technologies, require robust information architecture, citizen use cases study and coordinated action between departments. We should, hence, be proud of the work which has happened so far in such a short time. Such infrastructure needs time to mature and I am sure with time we will see even better centres and they will then become the real nerve centres of the cities which we want them to be. Their real test is very simple- How do they impact the lives of citizens? Do they help resolve their key issues? If yes, to what extent?

**When we talk about the grievance system and data, how much is being done in the field of data security and cyber security?**

For all the Command and Control Centres and ICT applications data security is one of the most important elements. All tenders that have been issued have this element built into them. We at the national level are close to finalizing the standards for various layers of the ICT infrastructure behind such initiatives. Security is a very important component of that work.

**How important is AI, ML, IOT and Blockchain in terms of adoption of Smart Cities?**

Each of these technologies have a role and each of them are going to be important pieces of the puzzle going forward. From urban planning to intelligent mobility solutions to peer-to-peer energy solutions, all such sectors can benefit from these technologies. Machine learning can help predict environmental outcomes. Drones can help in emergency response and also in survey and fact finding. Electric vehicles are going to be key areas of work going forward. Blockchain has a lot of potential for transforming the way Government builds trust on various platforms with its citizens. There are myriad functions like birth and death records, land registration, medical records, payments etc. which can use Blockchain as a technology. IoT is critical in the sensing layer for all Command and Control centres. Ultimately, we have to realize that technology, no matter of which kind, is not an end in itself. It is only one of the means to the end. The end is of course ease of living for citizens. Cities, more than ever before, have an opportunity to leverage technology towards this goal.

**You have joined as the mission director of smart cities mission, how has the journey been so far?**

I have taken over at the helm of the mission just over a month ago. It is a matter of pride for me, a huge challenge and hence a terrific opportunity. I see my role more as a mission facilitator than a Director. We have to work in teams with the cities, various stakeholders, industry, academia, partner agencies in a manner so that we can harness their strengths towards our goal of improving ease of living for India's urban citizens. In the last month

alone, I have interacted with 34 cities in person. It has been great listening to them, to understand the good work they are doing and to be able to help them in whichever way I and my team at Delhi can. Smart Cities are not built overnight. We are in for the long haul. Expectations are high. Action on ground cannot proceed at the speed with which we imagine things in mind. A good beginning has been made though. I have full confidence that the Smart Cities Mission will make a very positive contribution in solving India's urbanization challenge going forward. It is a great honour for me personally to be leading from the front.

