Smart city begins with sustainability

TNN | Feb 6, 2015, 01.25AM IST

GURGAON: Since the new government took office last May, there has been much talk about smart cities. Nine months after the prime minister revealed his ambition to build 100 smart cities across India, it's an idea that is still very much in gestation.

'Smart urbanisation' was the subject under discussion at a conference organised by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), at a five-star hotel in the city. It was a topical conversation considering that India is not new to urban nightmares, with 30% area now urbanized.

Speakers held forth on stepping stones to 'smart' infrastructure, on the framework for 'smart' governance, and on 'smart' mobility and transport. What most seemed to agree on was that thinking and planning needed to get 'smart' before India can start building smart cities.

But what is a 'smart' city? Deepak Mantri, senior manager, SPML Infra Ltd, described it as a place where 'sustainable economic development contributes to a high quality of life'. Trishul Palekar, senior transport planner-highways and transportation, Atkins India, felt 'sustainable' was more important than 'smart' when it comes to designing the cities of tomorrow. Sonali Rastogi, co-founder of urban designers and architects Morphogenesis, agreed. "Before smart comes sustainability." She also posed a question: "Why would you not want to be smart?

"A thousand years ago, people were smart.'Smart' was there before technology. Smart buildings have been around for ages, and they're still around." Sustainability and tradition, she insisted, aren't mutually exclusive, and India has more answers to her urban challenges than many might be willing to admit.

N S N Murty, associate director and leader, smart cities, PricewaterhouseCoopers Pvt Ltd, said that it's not all about cities. "Let's not focus just on the city, let's focus on urbanization everywhere." He spoke about 'livability' (infrastructure), 'livelihood' (jobs), and 'life' (residential complexes) in the context of Gurgaon, a city that is the very picture of civic chaos only because her development has been topsy-turvy. "Here, 'life' came first, then 'livability'."

Gaurang Pandya, managing director, Carrier Air-conditioning and Refrigeration Ltd, decried the lack of planning behind many an infrastructure project in Gurgaon. "We're

building without any strategy. We have to build the right infrastructure, invest in the right areas."

Gautam Narayan, associate director-urban, CRISIL Risk and Infrastructure Solutions Ltd, said smart cities cannot be built if infrastructure, capacity and financing is "inadequate". "We're trying to move to smart cities while dealing with such challenges."

Meanwhile, Samhita Sharma, head of strategy and marketing, Honeywell India, expressed the feelings of many when she said that ultimately it is execution and delivery that are the keys to the success of any project. "No matter how much you strategize or plan, it's how you do it."

And it should be done right the first time, asserted Rastogi of Morphogenesis. The point emphasised was that any growth would be futile without sustainability; growth must be economically, culturally and politically sustainable. Above all, it must be sustainable. Certainly, the conference gave all present plenty to chew on.