

Editor's Note

Much of northern India's urban infrastructure found itself drowning in a flood of woes, making the case for timely policy interventions even stronger. It is coincidental that The Infravision Foundation's focus has been on urban matters of late. Work began in earnest on two major urban infrastructure policies, on the kind of public transport each city requires, and the fare that needs to be fixed to encourage ridership. Keep reading for more on this and other topics.

The Quarterly Meeting

Is there enough butter to spread on the infrastructure toast?

We began the first quarterly meeting of The Infravision Foundation on July 2, 2023, with this provocative question. Founder and Managing Trustee Vinayak Chatterjee asked a panel of experts whether investment in social infrastructure has been neglected at the altar of core infrastructure. The answers were surprisingly varied. PK Sinha, Trustee, member of our Council of Advisors and former Cabinet Secretary, said the Budget allocations of Rs 2 lakh crore in health and education compared to Rs 10 lakh crore in core infrastructure were proof enough of the Government's priorities while Rajnish Kumar, member of our Council of Advisors and former chairman of the State Bank of India, said a developing economy like India had no choice but to focus on core infrastructure first and then follow up with social. Ashish Dhawan, philanthropist, said the investment in core infrastructure needs to be higher than in health and education because a higher GDP leads to a better Human Development Index. Urbanist Jagan Shah spoke of the needs of cash-strapped urban infrastructure. The interventions from the floor contributed to the rich debate. Amarjeet Sinha, member, Public Enterprises Selection Board, talked of the multiplier effect of educating the girl child, giving the example of East Asia where investment in human capital was supported by a proactive state. Former NASSCOM president Kiran Karnik posited the question: do we need more highways or i-ways? We have made great progress on highways but not on high-speed connectivity and information transfer. This needs to change, he said. The focus needs to shift urgently to educating the users of infrastructure.



(From left) Jagan Shah, Ashish Dhawan, Rajnish Kumar, PK Sinha, Vinayak Chatterjee

Wise Advice

Day two of the quarterly meeting, July 3, 2023, was a period of intense learning and quick unlearning for The Infravision Foundation team. From a reimagining of the InfraShakti mandate of advocacy to branding the policy intervention, and from diversifying funding to sticking to programme management, the discussion was wide and in depth. We discussed research ideas and our fund-raising strategies. Our next quarterly meeting is on October 7.



Surety Bonds Goes up for Debate

Can surety bonds be a viable alternative to bank guarantees in infrastructure financing? The Government has declared them so, but there are few takers for the insurance product. It's a policy intervention that The Infravision Foundation has given considerable thought to. After the white paper by Prof Manoj Mohan, Prof Vidhu Shekhar and Manali Pathak of the SP Jain Institute of Management and Research, supervised by Supratim Sarkar, the Foundation will be organising a National Summit in Mumbai under the auspices of CII, on the advantages of surety bonds where the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India Chairman Debasish Panda will be interacting with key stakeholders such as insurance companies, brokers and construction companies. See you there!



Welcome Aboard

Soumya Ghosh

Group Chief Economic Adviser, State Bank of India, joins The Infravision Foundation as a Distinguished Fellow

City On The Move

Does every city need a metro? Can every city afford a metro? The Infravision Foundation is not above asking uncomfortable questions especially when it comes to the country's civic issues. It commissioned a research paper by Prof Geetam Tiwari of IIT Delhi which will be formally launched this month. Watch out for a series of events to discuss this in Delhi with the National Institute of Urban Affairs as co-host.



Water, water everywhere

India's first water bodies census was done earlier in the year and it was something that caught our eye. There were interesting revelations. Of the 2.4 million water bodies in the country, more than half are privately owned, one of every six water bodies is lying in disuse, only one in 10 water bodies in the country has water fit for drinking or other domestic uses and 40,000 are encroached upon. That got us thinking. What was the data telling us about possible policy interventions? We met Debashree Mukherjee, Secretary, Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, Ministry of Jal Shakti, and discussed a study to provide more insights. Since rejuvenating and recharging water bodies is a key part of mitigating the risks of climate change, you will be hearing more from us on this. The former chairman of the National Mission for Clean Ganga, Rajiv Ranjan Mishra, will be closely involved in the study.



Piloting Change



Work began in earnest on the rooftop solar programme, The Infravision Foundation's research paper, which recommended it as a poverty alleviation tool. TIF COO Nitin Zamre went to Hazaribagh in Jharkhand at the invitation of MP Jayant Sinha with a team from Feedback Foundation and PSP Smart Rooftop Solar. The team visited three villages in Sadar block of the district to shortlist the ideal location for implementing a pilot. The team spoke extensively to the stakeholders – district and block level administrators, Panchayat level administrators and families there.

We will work on closing a few loose ends and hope to get the implementation going soon. As Zamre told us: "There is nothing more fulfilling than seeing your idea taking shape on the ground."

Coming Up

- A report on making metro systems in urban India financially viable by Prof Sandip Chakrabarti of IIM Ahmedabad.
- A white paper on a detailed sustainability ratings mechanism for infrastructure projects on the basis of environmental and social Key Performance Indicators by Envint Services LLP.
- An investigation by Prof Gopal Naik of IIM Bangalore of the status of warehousing in the country despite a series of institutional reforms and what more needs to be done.

Big News of the Month

India has a serious data problem, according to the country's former chief statistician Pronab Sen, who was quoted in Bloomberg saying "We have programmes for people below the poverty line but we don't know the number of poor people." Many government surveys are based on data that is a decade-old and many consumption categories do not exist. This was echoed by member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council Bibek Debroy who wrote a column with Aditya Sinha saying "Our tools for understanding and managing our economic reality are grossly inadequate." The consumer expenditure survey and the Census have not been updated since 2011. The number of field investigators is stagnant and has been supplemented by poorly trained contractors. The government kickstarted a consumer expenditure survey in 2022 but it won't feed into GDP or Consumer Price Index metrics for another two years forcing analysts to rely on indicators such as air traffic and fuel demand instead of reliable information indicators.

Infrastructure@Literature

What infrastructure do you provide to people who live on and by the tide? In Amitav Ghosh's magnificent but tragic *The Hungry Tide* (2019), a story of two outsiders brings us close to one of the world's most fragile ecosystems, the Sundarbans, which is home to the tide people. Even as they live with the ferocity of nature, they must contend with outside experts who question their impact on the forests and its animals. As one of the protagonists says:

"Every day, sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? No one could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil." It is a question that continues to bedevil development experts everywhere.



TIF@TheMedia

Small modular reactors are the need of the hour, says Vinayak Chatterjee. Speaking to BQ Prime, he noted the buzz around small modular reactors with NITI Aayog's white paper as well as the mention in the joint statement by US President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As Chatterjee pointed out, India has the best scientific minds and the technological knowhow to manufacture and manage the reactors. There is also considerable conversation around the PPP model in this area as India moves towards its promise of net zero emissions by 2070. Currently India has planned for only 20,000 megawatts of nuclear energy. It will need to ramp up significantly if its big push for renewables has to bear fruit.



Editor: Kaveree Bamzai

Find me @9810707314,
Email: Kaveree.bamzai@theinfravisionfoundation.org;

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