

Individual dedication can overcome rigid constraints

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The seemingly impossible has happened lately. Traffic flow has improved substantially on the Hebbal Flyover (HF) in Bangalore, which is the northern gateway to the city. At this spot, the city's large and only ring road cuts across National Highway 7 (NH7), which connects Kashmir to Kanyakumari, passing through the city.

All traffic to and from Bangalore to every place in the north of the city and rest of the country—from Kempe Gowda International Airport, the city's northern suburbs, nearby towns like Chikaballabur, Anantpur and their hinterland to everything beyond, like Hyderabad, Nagpur, Bhopal and Delhi—passes across that flyover. The cross-cutting ring road has its own heavy traffic.

I don't know the numbers on the increase in the flyover's traffic density over the past 10 years, but I have been driving over it regularly since 2006; I have witnessed a spiralling mess... until recently. After the current airport was inaugurated in June 2008, traffic increased steadily. A few years ago, the suburbs leading to the airport caught the attention of property developers, which led to explosive growth that continues unabated. Before 2008, it used to take me less than a minute to cross the flyover in a car at 8am. By October 2022, it was taking about 20 minutes at that same time. Now, it takes 2-5 minutes.

How has this improvement happened within a few weeks without any new road loops or underpasses having been built?

Sensible and thoughtful traffic management. Part of the traffic flowing in from the north has been diverted to another loop of the flyover; truck traffic has been stopped for two hours during peak traffic time; buses are not allowed to stop anywhere other than designated bus stops; and some other smaller measures have reduced the congestion significantly without changes in infrastructure. Basically, there has been an application of mind on how to sort out the mess within the same constrained capacity. Adding capacity will take a few years. In the meantime, thoughtful solutions have brought significant change for the better.

The improvement in traffic in the city is not only at the Hebbal flyover; while it's the most dramatic there, it is also noticeable in other parts. This seems to have happened because the state administration, right from the very top, committed itself to addressing the global infamy of the city's traffic and took action. Appointing competent officers in relevant

roles, for example, and giving them a clear mandate, empowering them and sending a message to all stakeholders that they are committed to making improvements. Thereafter, officers went about their jobs with urgency and method.

Undoubtedly, all this could have been done any time in the past 10 years, but it was not. Also, such actions are no substitute for good public transport and high-quality infrastructure that needs to be planned well ahead to prevent such problems to begin with. But this story also demonstrates that whatever may be your constraints, a commitment to improving and following through with actions can change things significantly. This basic principle is applicable to almost all situations in public systems or even other sorts of organizations.

Let's take the example of education. The National Education Policy 2020 has laid out the architecture for substantial improvements in our education system. However, we know that the implementation of the policy will take years and will inevitably be patchy. But significant improvement in education can happen alongside without waiting for all these policy changes to unfold.

Lest we see the teacher and her role as a special case, the same is equally true at every level within the education system. One can see sharp differences on the quality of schools across blocks or talukas. This is an outcome of a competent block education officer performing her role well while facing the same constraints as the neighbouring block.

In the past 20-odd years, we would have worked with over a 100 principal secretaries of education in different states. There have been at least 10 who during their tenure ensured that significant improvements happened. Another 10 to 20 tried and did a reasonable job. And all of them operated within the same set of political compulsions, funding constraints and poor governance cultures.

Thoughtful action and problem-solving within existing constraints can make a meaningful difference not only in the sphere of public governance, or the social sector, but also across the entire range of organizations from business to research.

We do need to make deep structural changes in almost all aspects of our society, but we must not undervalue the relevance and need for our trying to improve whatever we can within our sphere of influence.

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