The Message from Morbi Tragedy

Why in news?

The Morbi tragedy raises several questions about urban governance and the issues faced by our cities, particularly small cities.

What is the Morbi Tragedy about?

- The 140-year old suspension bridge over Machchhu River in Morbi town was an iconic structure and a tourist spot.
- The Gujarat Tourism called it an “engineering marvel” of the colonial era.
- The Morbi civic body decided to hand it over to a private party to operate and manage.
- The bridge underwent renovation and was opened, allegedly without informing civic authorities and without due structural fitness clearances.
- The bridge snapped at the middle with about 300 visitors standing on it, plunging them into the river.

What does this incident signify?

- Nearly 40% of India’s population lives in urban areas.
- India has seen a top-heavy urban structure, with more urban density in the metropolitan cities.
- In the past decade, Class II towns also witnessed an increase in population due to migration along with big Class I cities.
- The Morbi tragedy gives rise to a question - Do our cities have enough infrastructure, manpower, and resources to become agents of change?
- The conditions of municipal offices, the point of contact for citizens, reflect the functioning of the services delivered by these institutions.

What lessons need to be learnt from this episode?

- **Need for experts** - A separate cadre of municipal managers should be set up in states to recruit domain experts as well municipal generalists with an incentive-based compensation system.
- **Budgeting** - There is a need to standardise the making of city budgets with inputs from citizens and manage budgets at the ward level.
- **Finance** - Own sources of revenue that empower the city to choose the strategic area of expenditure, growth, and development needs to be explored.
- The underutilization of finances need to be addressed.
- **Smart tech** - Within smart cities, a few initiatives like Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) and Integrated Command and Control Centre (ICCC) should be

made mandatory across all cities.

- **Citizen participation** - Much of the load on the city government for on-site monitoring can be resolved by participatory monitoring by citizens.
- **Overhaul the procurement** - The procurement process for small cities needs big-time overhauling.
- Tendering contract design and capacity building of municipal staff are areas that should be taken seriously.
- **Redesigning the municipal offices** - The municipal offices need to be redesigned and retrofitted to reflect the missions they implement.
- As the big cities brace with the challenges of urbanisation, small cities equally need to be strengthened and equipped with infrastructure, manpower, funds and finances to make the most out of urbanisation.

References

1. The Indian Express | The message from Morbi tragedy
2. The Hindu Businessline | Morbi tragedy — a morbid systemic failure

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