In India, the City of Pune Takes the Lead in Making Space for Transit and People

By Nashwa Nashaud, ITDP India

Pune is a flourishing green city of 6.5 million people in the western state of Maharashtra, a few hours from Mumbai. Since 2007, the city has set ambitious goals for a sustainable future, and 10 years out, there are big on-the-ground changes. In 2016, Pune was selected as one of 20 “Lighthouse Cities” under the nationwide urban renewal program, the Smart Cities Mission, setting an example for other Indian cities to follow.

In 2015, the city launched the Rainbow bus rapid transit (BRT) system promised in 2007. Today, the corridor runs 39 kilometers, serving 120,000 people per day. It has high-quality and best-practice design features, and has brought more than 12 percent of its ridership from other modes, primarily private cars. “Mass rapid transit is the most efficient way to transport large numbers of people around a city and is therefore essential for development,” says Commissioner Kunal Kumar of the Pune Municipal Corporation. “To improve accessibility and service, the city’s budget for 2016–17 and 2017–18 provides for extension by an additional 21km and retrofitting of existing BRT.” With massive investments proposed to expand the system through these city budgets, the Rainbow BRT network is expected to almost double in size and service an additional 48 kilometers by 2018.

Pune has also devoted significant resources to making its streets people-friendly. In 2009, under the JNNURM Mission city-modernization scheme, Pune began improving connectivity by creating a better network of roads equipped with infrastructure for non-motorized transport (NMT), such as footpaths and cycle tracks. The improved usage of these streets by pedestrians and cyclists sparked interest among decision-makers and officials to undertake similar street projects that would cater to the needs of all road users by developing a Complete Streets network.

“Streets are important public spaces that should be designed to respond to the various functions that they host, beyond being mere conduits for vehicles,” Kumar said. “The Pune Municipal Corporation is committed to an agenda of sustainable development of the city, and good street designs are of critical importance in this effort. We thus decided to embark on the Pune Streets program to make Pune a model city for complete streets and one of the pioneering few Indian cities in this field,” he explained.

Under this program, a street network of 100 kilometers has been identified for redesign. Thinking ahead to ensure integration and quality, the city, with ITDP India’s assistance, empaneled four nationally acclaimed design firms and allocated each 25 kilometers from the network. ITDP developed the scope of work for the designers and is part of the committee to periodically review the designs.

The first phase of construction has begun with Jangli Maharaj Road, a busy 1.5 km-long street being redesigned by Oasis Designs, Inc. A 300-meter stretch along this street now sports a cycle track and a much wider footpath, made possible by streamlining the old haphazard parking. Green spaces serve as buffers to segregate the two modes of walking and cycling. “The design now celebrates the newly created public realm, giving people clear and buffered walking and cycling, and also incorporates outdoor seating areas for people to have a quick lunch, play areas for kids, and many seats for people to sit and enjoy the urban life of Pune,” explained Sujata Hingorani, principal landscape architect and partner, Oasis Designs, Inc.

Better signage and street lighting are other features that collectively make JM Road a stellar example of street design in the country.
These dedicated efforts toward improving the quality of urban life for its citizens resulted in several accolades for Pune, including its selection as a Smart City. Among other initiatives, 27 kilometers of streets have been identified for redesign as Complete Streets in the Area-Based Development (ABD) area as part of the Smart City proposal, along with 18 kilometers of street retrofitting. In keeping with the city’s model of high-quality design, the 27km network encompassing three neighborhoods has been allotted to the designers.

One of the key objectives of the Smart Cities mission is to engage the community in the urban renewal process at all stages. One such important event in Pune was the seven-day trial run of the proposed pedestrian plaza in Aundh, a neighborhood bustling with activity and people reclaiming streets. Showing residents on the ground what their neighborhood could be helped convince the shopkeepers to agree to merge shop frontage with footpaths. The first segment of the bustling D.P. Road in Aundh has already been remodeled under this proposal. The footpath was widened by merging the frontage of the shops that line the stretch with the sidewalk. Before work began, city officials and designers engaged actively with the shopkeepers to explain the significance of a wide and good pedestrian pathway with respect to their sales. “I could have never imagined taking a walk on this road earlier,” said a local resident using the path. “Nowadays, I spend most of my evenings after work here, enjoying this active street. The chaos is no more; I can now walk and shop to my heart’s fill!”

In addition to creating high-quality footpaths, Pune is intent on improving its cycling infrastructure. The Pune Bicycle Plan, a masterplan for the construction of a 100-kilometer cycle-track network, has been drafted with technical support from ITDP and published for public opinion. To improve last-mile connectivity, a public bicycle-sharing system has been proposed with 7,900 stations and 7,000 cycles. Furthermore, the regional streets on the periphery of the city are being redesigned into cycle-safe streets with funds from the state government.

Backing these design changes in the city are institutional reforms that help enhance the capacity of the government. A dedicated Street Design team of urban designers and planners will oversee general maintenance and design of streets in addition to designing neighborhood streets. The pedestrian policy adopted by the city, which now guides the development of high-quality pedestrian infrastructure, envisions Pune as a haven for those on foot. Most importantly, the Pune Municipal Corporation, with technical assistance from ITDP, has developed a unique set of Urban Street Design Guidelines that prioritize walking and cycling, leaving no doubt of Pune’s direction of development. While the city is rolling out these changes, the state of Maharashtra has encouraged all its cities to prioritize public transit and nonmotorized transit. According to this policy, walking, cycling, and public transport will account for at least 80 percent of all trips by 2027.

Pune is inspiring many cities in India to take measures for sustainability and equity. Nashik has hired urban design firms for its proposed Complete Streets network of 50 kilometers; Chennai is keen on expanding its complete streets into a network and setting up a BRT system, learning from Pune’s journey so far. The future of this journey looks bright and green for all of India, having already transformed people’s lives for the better in Pune, with a promise of more across the whole country.