VIEWPOINT

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The Future of India's Streets: From National Challenge to State-Led Transformations



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> The National Challenge has proven that Indian cities can build pilots quickly. The harder question is whether the institutions needed to sustain and scale them can be built too.

In 2020, India attempted an ambitious National Challenge, comprising two programmes aimed at developing Healthy Streets for people—instead of vehicles—across more than 100 cities simultaneously.[1]

Led by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) under India's Smart Cities Mission, with technical support from ITDP India, the two programmes—Cycles4Change and Streets4People—set out to help cities redesign and build street networks that offer continuous, safe and enjoyable walking and cycling infrastructure, in support of the Healthy Streets vision. Their ambition was not only about developing the streets, but also the institutions that would keep building them long after the national spotlight moved on.

Four years on, the Challenge has delivered substantial results: hundreds of kilometres of new footpaths and cycle tracks across 48 cities that residents now use and treat as their own, alongside dozens of newly-established city-level institutions that can scale this work. Its legacy, however, is uneven—many cities that had built pilot networks have struggled to carry on the efforts once the initial funding and focus ended. Only a handful of cities continue to build on the vision.

This article examines what made the Challenge work, where it succeeded, why and where momentum stalled, and what that means for the governance reforms that India needs. Executing the projects under the Challenge proved to be the easier part. The harder test, and what this article turns to next, is whether India can set a mandate, secure funds and build sustainable institutions beyond the Challenge itself. This means less reliance on the national government's ability to mobilise a hundred cities into readiness within a span of time, and more on the state governments' ability to create systems that embed Healthy Streets as the norm, beyond timelines.

Before the Challenge: A Familiar Pattern of Vehicle-Centric Thinking

India's own policy had pointed the way long before 2020: the 2006 National Urban Transport Policy stated that urban mobility should move people, not vehicles.[2] Yet the default civic response remained vehicle-centric, such as road widening and flyovers. The consequences were visible: poor road safety, worsening congestion and deteriorating air quality. A handful of cities—Chennai, Bengaluru and Pune—broke from this pattern early on. Working closely with external technical partners and local champions, they adopted non-motorised transport policies and invested in walkable networks. But they were the exceptions rather than the norm.



Kohima took a bold step and transformed the Old NST parking lot (left) into a vibrant community space for pedestrians, cyclists and food vendors (right) by adding pop-up curbside seating, colourful paint markings and planters. To invite citizens from different communities, the city hosted a four-day street carnival in this new pop-up public space.
Image: ITDP India

How the Challenge Model of Creating Healthy Streets Unfolded

Since 2015, India's Smart Cities Mission has been providing around 100 cities with national funding for a menu of eligible project types to support area-based development. The Challenge plugged into this framework.

The timing coincided with the pandemic, when cities worldwide were testing tactical urbanism—quick, low-cost changes to street space that could be rolled out without months of planning. The National Challenge drew on this spirit, incorporating a Test-Learn-Scale methodology: cities would pilot temporary interventions with paint, cones and planters, before committing capital to permanent infrastructure. This lowered the cost of failure and public resistance to change, offering many tier two and tier three cities a low-risk way to experiment with what could work.

Cities were evaluated across three pillars: Action (on-ground infrastructure), Foundation (institutions such as policies, design cells and interdepartmental committees), and Communication (citizen engagement). Infrastructure alone rarely survives without the other two. A street with no maintenance budget tends to erode; one where residents haven't been brought along tends to draw resistance; and one with no policy behind it stays just that, a single street, never a network.

The Challenge ran over two seasons, each featuring two stages. In Season 1, over 100 cities participated in both programmes. In Stage 1, most cities piloted temporary interventions. The strongest performers then advanced to Stage 2 which saw the conversion of pilots into permanent infrastructure, adoption of policies, and setting up of interdepartmental committees. At this point, the two programmes merged into a single Healthy Streets push.

Adopting Season 1's two-stage format, Season 2 saw 53 more cities participate in the Challenge—they included new entrants, and others from Season 1 that were given a second chance to test pilots with more guidance.

What the Challenges Delivered

By the time the Challenge wound down in 2024, the results were substantial. Between March 2022 and June 2023 alone, 48 cities built more than 350 km of footpaths and 220 km of cycle tracks, with a further 1,400 km underway.



A cyclist seen using the newly demarcated cycle track in New Town Kolkata. The city began its India Cycles4Change journey by rolling out a city-wide public bicycle-sharing system with 500 cycles and implementing a network of cycle tracks.
Image: ITDP India

The institutional scaffolding kept pace. Thirty-three cities set up Healthy Streets interdepartmental committees, 15 adopted formal policies, and 19 completed three-year action plans.

Communication ran alongside this: over 60,000 residents were surveyed, and 150,000 people took part in on-ground events.

Two cities illustrate the extent of programme roll-out on the ground.

Kohima, a small hill city in Nagaland, had to solve a problem few other Challenge cities faced: convincing residents that cycling on steep slopes could be safe. It built a training arena and ran workshops to teach hill-gradient cycling, backed by regular events. Its push to turn three former parking areas into plazas for its 1.8 km walkable street project drew support from a wide coalition of local institutions. There were more cyclists on Kohima's streets during this period than ever before.

Nagpur built its work around data rather than convention. Before designing anything, it surveyed 15,000 residents to understand what stopped them from walking or cycling—their inputs helped shape the plan, including the Resident Welfare Associations' choice of pilot neighbourhoods. This data also backed the city's biggest move: a ₹66 crore (approximately S$11.6 million at the time of inception) project converting a 6 km highway stretch into a pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly corridor. A Healthy Streets Design Cell was eventually constituted to anchor the programme and support the city's plans to scale further.

After the Challenge: The Emerging Patterns

When the National Challenge ended in January 2024, three things went with it: the clear direction and structure to keep prioritising streets, the Smart Cities Mission funding, and its technical support.

Without these, the resulting outcomes have been mixed. Some cities dissolved the city-level institutions they had built and reverted to funding what they always had—the carriageway. In a handful of cities, work continued because external stakeholders stayed in the relationship that the Challenge started. In cities such as Gurugram and Kochi, technical partners kept engaging with city agencies, with funding from the cities' own budgets rather than any national scheme. But the scale hasn't matched what's



A scene from Pimpri Chinchwad's Linear Garden, where the pilot has turned into a project prioritising network-level transformation at scale. Pimpri Chinchwad has developed a city-wide Harit Setu Master Plan to connect green spaces and create walking- and cycling-friendly neighbourhoods in the city.
Image: ITDP India

needed: without a central vision guiding them, the pace depends on what each partnership alone can sustain.

The pattern that began to emerge was one that owed nothing to the Challenge itself: a small number of states started to set their own direction. Uttar Pradesh's CM-GRIDS scheme, launched in 2023 with a budget of ₹500 crore (approximately S$92.5 million at the time of launch), showed what this can look like: a state-wide vision for "complete streets" supported by a new dedicated agency—the Urban Road Infrastructure Development Agency (URIDA)—for planning, monitoring and maintaining the network. Uttar Pradesh remains the exception rather than the rule: of India's 28 states, only a few have taken this kind of independent action so far.

India's Two New Levers

In 2026, two developments presented India with a new opportunity. The first was the Supreme Court's ruling that walking on a safe footpath is a fundamental right, under Article 19(1)(d)—read with Article 21, this gives pedestrian rights explicit priority over vehicular movement. Streets are no longer a discretionary choice for a city or state. The second was MoHUA's new Urban Challenge Fund (UCF) which offers cities financing across a wide range of eligible urban investments—including streets and footpaths.[3]

Of the two, the mandate is what's genuinely new; India has had funding channels for urban infrastructure before. But a mandate needs money behind it to become a footpath, and the UCF is where that money can come from. What happens next depends on what states and cities do with both.

States Must Take the Mantle from Central Government

The National Challenge has proven that Indian cities—given the right method and enough pressure—can build pilots quickly, across strikingly different urban typologies. It also revealed something quieter: pressure applied from the top over a fixed time may deliver quick results, but the larger vision may not sustain.

The next generation of reform needs to address this. Putting in place the mandate, funding and institutions dedicated to building good streets—so that they are a norm regardless of who occupies the commissioner's office or where



Photo from a capacity development workshop site visit hosted for the cities as part of the national challenges.
Image: ITDP India

the next ad-hoc grant comes from—is key. That work cannot be led from the national capital alone, nor depend on individual champions within city governments. It has to be embedded in state-level governance—and 2026 has handed states an opening: the national mandate now exists, together with funding from the UCF. The final step now is for states to choose to use these deliberately.

Three linked moves would do it. To implement the Supreme Court's mandate, states now need to adopt acts or rules embedding walking as a fundamental right and establish minimum standards of safe pedestrian infrastructure as a baseline for any street to be built or redeveloped. Pairing that mandate with a dedicated share of UCF money, alongside state and city funds, will ensure that cities have a funded channel to act on, not an unfunded obligation. And they need to build their own institutions—technical cells and interdepartmental monitoring bodies—to provide guidance and ensure continuity in the face of leadership change and engineer transfers.

Do this, and the next decade could look very different from the last. The Challenge proved that a pilot can work on a single street or in a single neighbourhood. What India needs to build is the machinery to scale a pilot into a neighbourhood-wide network, and a neighbourhood network into a citywide one. India's top court has now made the right to walk safely explicit. But whether that right acquires the institutional structure it deserves will depend on whether India's states are willing to do what the National Challenge could not: persevere until every Indian street is a healthy street.

[1] Healthy Streets refers to ITDP India's framework for designing streets that prioritise walking, cycling and access to public transport over private vehicles, encompassing both physical infrastructure and the institutional conditions needed to sustain it.

[2] Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, National Urban Transport Policy https://www.mohua.gov.in/static/uploads/2025/10/0da700a8b86f2faee310bd49592ee99a.pdf

[3] PIB Delhi, "Cabinet approves Rs. One Lakh Crore Urban Challenge Fund to Drive Market-Led Urban Transformation", Press Release, 14 February 2026, https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage. aspx?PRID=2227986&reg=3&lang=2