15th Finance Commission Challenge of Growth in Property Tax: An Assessment of Selected Smart Cities

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In India, funds are devolved to States by Centre through the Finance Commission constituted by the President of India under Article 280 of the Indian Constitution periodically. Lately, the 15th Finance Commission (FC) (2021-22 to 2025-26) (Wasdani, 2016) have been constituted, laying out various conditions under which funds are devolved to states and cities. Out of several conditions, two prime conditions imposed by the 15th Finance Commission related to Municipal Financial management are the timeliness of Published Annual Financial Statements (AFS), and the growth in property tax collection and its methodology of valuation. Conditions laid down by the 15th Finance Commission aim to create financial discipline in municipalities and make municipalities march towards financial sustainability. Growth in property tax exceeding the State Simple Average Growth Rate (SAGR) of the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) is a prime condition for leading cities towards Atmanirbhartha. Compliance with the conditions laid down by the 15th Finance Commission (FC) requires coordination, and consultation among multiple stakeholders at various levels of the government and administration, which can potentially lead to administrative delays.

The article aims to throw light on the challenges faced by municipalities on the field to meet the conditions laid down by the 15th FC for growth in the Property Tax on annual basis to claim grants through an analysis of selected smart cities. It will highlight the challenges faced in complying with municipal financial management conditions by municipalities. Municipalities must prepare themselves through suggested interventions in the paper to comply with municipal financial management conditions, especially those stipulated by the present and upcoming finance commissions.

Introduction

It is expected that in the next two decades under Viksit Bharat@2047, India's economic growth will improve manifold through an improved pace of urbanization to meet the demand of the projected increased urban population which may reach 600 million by 2031. This huge urban population will demand better infrastructure. Indeed, the situation resonates globally, especially in developing countries like Nigeria. The rapid increase in population in many urban areas has resulted in a substantial demand for high-quality public services and urban infrastructure facilities (Goodfellow and Owen, 2018). Thus, to meet the increased population demand for improved infrastructure, sustainable economic expansion and structural transformation are expected to take place in the future (Sivaramakrishnan, 2015). This increased infrastructure would require a lot of expenditure on its maintenance which needs to be met by municipalities from their limited internal revenue (Awasthi et al., 2021). *Due to limited own-source revenue, Indian cities are largely dependent on grants from the Central and State governments to meet their revenue expenditure needs* (Reserve Bank of India, 2022).

Article 243X of the Indian Constitution provides a mechanism whereby the center transfers funds to the state for its cities in the form of grants-in-aid as *Grants and Transfers.* To ensure financial robustness and promote the development of cities, finance commissions often allocate grants to states based on various factors such as area, population, and specific conditions aimed at encouraging urban development. Finance commissions determine the amount to be devolved to states based on their geographical size and population relative to other states. Apart from the normal parameters of geographical size and population size, past finance commissions have set aside some funds to foster competition among cities, that are released only upon meeting certain additional conditions besides basic ones. For example, the 14th FC provided that 20% of the funds would be given to cities as performance grants, provided they meet additional conditions such as increasing their own revenue and publishing audited AFS.

Over the past decade, India has witnessed various urban development initiatives aimed at transforming cities into Smarter or Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) or Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (Hriday) or Aspirational cities. These initiatives have included programs such as the Smart Cities Mission, AMRUT, HRIDAY, and the Aspirational Districts Program, among others. Despite the different names and focus areas of these initiatives, all cities in India face common challenges and require funding to deliver the functions mandated by the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992. These funds will be made available to cities through grants and internal revenue earned by the cities themselves. Compliance with the conditions laid down by finance commission is often a prerequisite for states and cities to access funds allocated by these commissions. While states and cities may not always willingly comply with these conditions, especially if they perceive them as burdensome or restrictive, they are typically compelled to do so to secure the necessary funding for their development priorities as more than 60% of the receipts of cities are from revenue grants and transfers (*Assessment of Municipal Finances of 15 Municipalities in Maharashtra*, 2013).

Smart City Guidelines provide access to capital markets as one of the sources of infrastructure financing Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA, 2015) which has been again provided as a municipal reform in AMRUT2.0 as cities have limited own revenues. The Smart City, AMRUT, and AMRUT 2.0 guidelines emphasize the need for municipalities to enhance their own-source revenue generation to service debt raised from the open market through municipal bonds (MoHUA, 2015). To achieve this, municipalities need to strengthen their financial management practices, including maintaining reliable financial statements. Property taxes are among the most important revenue sources for local governments across the world[1].The average collection from property taxes in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) group is about 1.1 percent of the National GDP, whereas for India, it is about 0.2 percent of the GDP, which is just one-sixth. In some OECD countries, such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, property tax collections form the bedrock of local government revenue and are taken as a percent of the GDP, i.e., about 3 percent. In Asia (Table 1), property tax is concentrated in a smaller number of high-income economies, such as those of Japan and the Republic of Korea (Awasthi et al., 2021).

[1] XV Finance Commission report (Page 33)

Table 1:Asia's Level of Property Tax Revenues Compared to India, 2015	
Country or Economy	**Property Tax/Gross Domestic Product**
Hong Kong SAR, China	3.3
Taiwan,China	2.3
Singapore	1.8
Kazakhstan	0.6
Kyrgyz Republic	0.5
Malaysia	0.5
Philippines	0.5
Nepal	0.4
Indonesia	0.3
India	0.2
Bangladesh	0
Bhutan	0

Source: ADB (Awasthi et al., 2021).

Property tax is a potential source of revenue generation by municipal/local governments, especially in developing countries, because it is economically efficient, easy to enforce, and difficult to avoid (Rosengard, 2012; Bahl and Martinez-Vazquez, 2007). This could be one of the reasons that most of the Government of India Guidelines in the past and present focus on the augmentation of only property taxes of cities *(Kumar & Goel, 2023).*

This situation underscores the urgent need for a critical examination of the existing disclosure practices of Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) and their validation on multiple parameters.

The objective to be achieved through this study is to assess the preparedness of selected smart cities to meet the challenges posed by the 15th Finance Commission regarding the growth in property tax collection through the analysis of selected smart cities' property tax collection in the past three years from 2021-22 to 2023-24.

Apart from the introductory section covering the study's objective, the article has been organized as follows:

- Data collection and methodology describing the sources used for data collection along with the period of analysis,
- Genesis of Central Finance Commissions which provides a brief overview of the historical evolution of central finance commissions in India with the conditions posed by the 15th Finance Commission,
- Analysis of Smart Cities' preparedness provides an overview of the strategies adopted by other states/ cities to meet the challenge of augmentation of property tax collection along with a detailed analysis of property tax growth of 10 selected smart cities for three years, and
- Lastly, the key findings of the analysis along with the proposed future interventions and strategies to address the challenges have been discussed.

The study is based on secondary sources. The data has been collected from published sources, and authors' *work experience in the municipal finance field. 10 smart cities data has been examined to assess whether selected smart cities are able to meet the challenges posed by the 15th Finance Commission related to growth in property tax collection on an annual basis or not, for the* past three years i.e., from 2021-22 to 2023-24 (Table 2).

Table 2: Selected Smart Cities

S.No	ULB Name	State
1	COIMBATORE	Tamil Nadu
2	MADURAI	
3	TIRUCHIRAPPALLI	
4	TIRUNELVELI	
5	TIRUPPUR	
6	VELLORE	
7	RANCHI	Jharkhand
8	PATNA	Bihar
9	BHILAI	Chhattisgarh
10	UDAIPUR	Rajasthan

Further, analysis has been done based on data from the research articles, reports of research agencies, and other online resources. By collating information from various sources, the study provides a detailed understanding of cities' preparedness to meet the challenges of the 15th FC regarding property tax growth.

Conditions by Finance Commissions: Genesis

Finance commissions are constitutionally empowered bodies as per Article 280 of The Indian Constitution[2]. This is a common fact that a major issue arises when funds need to be apportioned to cities as there shall be some rationale mechanism in place for the distribution of funds to avoid randomness and biased allocation. The private sector uses Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), Multilateral agencies like the World Bank

[2] XVth FC covered 6 years (2020-2026) unlike other FCs and issued two reports one for 2020-21 and another one for 2021-26. (due to COVID)

use Disbursement Linked Indicators (DLIs), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) uses a performance incentives mechanism. The finance commission plays the role of avoiding randomness in fund distribution, a task they have been performing for many years. The *FC recommendations cover three main aspects: vertical devolution which identifies State's share in the divisible pool of central taxes; horizontal devolution which allocates resources among states based on fiscal need and capacity, and grant-in-aid (Wasdani, 2016).*

Over the years, for the first to the fifteenth FC, various recommendations have been provided by FCs which have led to fiscal augmentation, financial discipline, and overall growth of the economy. A key recommendation for municipal financial management includes achieving a collection of 90% of property tax against the target, ensuring growth in own revenue compared to the previous year, and ensuring the timely availability of audited annual accounts. (*14 Finance Commission Performance Grant Scheme and Its Qualifying Indicators 14FC Grants- Background*, 2018).

- Lately, the recommendations of the 15th FC have highlighted the need for a revolution in the area of municipal financial management to augment municipal finance by making growth in property tax as a mandatory criteria and providing a timeline for the submission of published annual accounts. The shift towards providing growth in the collection of property tax as a condition in the 15th FC rather than the collection of the 90% target as a condition in the earlier FC is a much-needed reform. Previously, many states' cities claimed grants by proving that 90% collection has been done against annual target set for the property tax. Despite achieving a collection rate of 90% of the target revenue, many urban local bodies (ULBs) continue to face deficits and struggle to meet their revenue expenses. In this backdrop, the 15th FC conditions have taken necessary steps for strengthening one of the core components of its own revenue i.e., property tax by requiring states to move to a capital value method of valuation and to ensure annual growth in the collection of property tax surpassing the Simple Annual Growth Rate (SAGR) of State Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) (Expert Committe by GOI, 2016).
- Operational guidelines[3] for the implementation of recommendations on Urban Local Bodies grants, as detailed in Chapter 7 of the Fifteenth Finance Commission Report states that by 2022-23: Property tax floor rates shall be notified and a copy of the notification needs to be submitted by the state while claiming the first installment for the year 2022-23.

Table 3: Past Finance Commissions

Finance Commission	Year of establishment	Chairman	Operational duration
First	1951	K. C. Neogy	1952–57
Second	1956	K. Santhanam	1957–62
Third	1960	A. K. Chanda	1962–66
Fourth	1964	P. V. Rajamannar	1966–69
Fifth	1968	Mahaveer Tyagi	1969–74
Sixth	1972	K. Brahmananda Reddy	1974–79
Seventh	1977	J. M. Shelat	1979–84
Eighth	1983	Y. B. Chavan	1984–89
Ninth	1987	N. K. P. Salve	1989–95
Tenth	1992	K. C. Pant	1995–00
Eleventh	1998	A. M. Khusro	2000–05
Twelfth	2002	C. Rangarajan	2005–10
Thirteenth	2007	Dr. Vijay L. Kelkar	2010–15
Fourteenth	2013	Dr. Y. V Reddy	2015–20
Fifteenth	2017	N. K. Singh	2020-26[2]

Source: https://fincomindia.nic.in/

[3] Issued on 28.07.2021

- **From 2023-24 onwards:** Collection of Property taxes shall increase in tandem with the growth rate of the state's own GSDP over the most recent five years.

As per the GO order dated 31st December 2023, the sixteenth Finance Commission has been constituted to provide recommendations for the devolution of funds for five years, starting from 2026-27 onwards. Thus, states and cities should gear up their system to meet the present challenges posed by the 15th FC and future challenges that may be laid down by the proposed 16th FC.

Analysis

70% of the Indian Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) have reported an increase in the collection of property tax in 2022-23 as compared to the fiscal year 2021-22.[4] However, in the coming years after 2022-23, (ULBs) that can meet the conditions set by the 15th Finance Commission (15FC) for property tax collection growth exceeding the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) growth rate will be limited. This limitation would arise primarily because many ULBs achieved this condition in 2022-23 through one-time measures, such as one-time settlement or amnesty schemes for arrear collection, rather than through institutional changes like transitioning to capital value-based systems. (Refer to Table 4).

Table 4 indicates that these schemes may result in a temporary boost in revenue collection, but they do not address the underlying issues related to tax compliance, valuation methodologies, and revenue sustainability. Similarly, some states have taken the initiative by bringing major changes in the rates of property taxation; the state of Tamil Nadu issued orders (G.O. (Ms) No. 52, dated 30.03.2022[5]) to levy property tax at the rates indicated below w.e.f. 01.04.2022 which would increase the property tax from residential and non-residential property by 50%-100% based on the category and area of Households (HH). Furthermore, in Tamil Nadu, to meet the 15th FC condition of increased collection of Property Tax by State GSDP, the clause of auto increase was inserted which states that an annual increase of 6% or SAGR of the State's GSDP for the past five years, whichever is higher, is to be effected from FY 2022-23 onwards.

The structural change in property tax valuation implemented by states like Jharkhand, transitioning from the Annual Rental Value (ARV) method to the Capital Value method based on circle rates through notification of separate floor rates for residential and non-residential properties, represents a significant reform aimed at improving the accuracy, transparency, and efficiency of property tax assessment and collection. The migration to the Capital Value method allows ULBs to update property tax demands more frequently, typically every two years, in line with the changes in circle rates determined by the Land Revenue Department.

In this section, the author aims to analyze the trends in the collection of property tax for ten selected smart cities, as presented in Table 5 and Table 6. To assess the growth in property tax revenue, GSDP and SAGR rates have been computed, following the guidelines provided by the MoHUA.

- GSDP for FY 17-18(Y1); FY18-19(Y2); FY19-20(Y3); FY20-21(Y4); FY21-22(Y5) & FY22-23(Y6) has been considered.

Table 4: Amnesty Schemes by States/Cities in the recent past years from 2020-21 to 2022-23

#	Name of State/City	Amnesty Provision
1	DELHI	SAMRIDHI (2022-23)
2	GREATER HYDERABAD MUNICIPAL CORPORATION(GHMC)	ONE-TIME SETTLEMENT (OTS) SCHEME, 2022-23.
3	PUNE MUNICIPAL CORPORATION	AMNESTY SCHEME 2021-2022

Source: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/ https://www.deccanchronicle.com/ https://www.pmc.gov.in/en/amnesty-scheme- 2021-2022-recovery-property-tax-arrears

4 https://indianexpress.com/article
5 https://www.tnurbantree.tn.gov.in/

- Simple Average Growth Rate (SAGR) = {[(GSDP Y2-GSDP Y1)/ GSDP Y1} + {(GSDP Y3-GSDP Y2)/ GSDP Y2] + [(GSDP Y4-GSDP Y3)/ GSDP Y3] + [(GSDP Y5-GSDP Y4)/ GSDP Y4] + [(GSDP Y6-GSDP Y5)/ GSDP Y5]}*100

Source: MoHUA

To calculate the SAGR, the following steps are to be followed: (Refer to Table 5)

- Subtract the GSDP of the previous year from the GSDP of the current year.
- Divide the result by the GSDP of the previous year.
- Repeat this process for each consecutive year, spanning the desired period of five years.
- Take the average of these annual growth rates to determine the SAGR.

These rates provide an average of the increased GSDP observed over the past five years, offering insights into the financial performance of selected smart cities in terms of property tax collection.

- To Illustrate: The average GSDP for the State of Tamil Nadu has been computed below:

Using SAGR for ten smart cities covering the States of Tamil Nadu (6), Jharkhand (1), Rajasthan (1), Chhattisgarh (1) and Bihar (1)[6], property tax collection for the past three years has been analysed in Table 6:

- Based on Table 6, it's evident that 9 selected cities out of 10 (Bhilai) were able to meet the 15th Finance Commission (FC) conditions for growth in Property Tax in the fiscal year 2022-23, compared to FY 2021-22.
- In Rajasthan, this was achieved through the application of District Level Committee (DLC) rates, similar to circle rates. In Jharkhand, the government transitioned from ARV to capital value for property valuation in 2022-23. Additionally, the Tamil Nadu Government implemented a taxation rate and valuation rate increase, resulting in higher property tax collection in fiscal year 2022-23.
- *However, Chattisgarh did not undergo any such reforms, and no schemes like amnesty were introduced, consequently failing to meet the 15th FC conditions in the fiscal year 2022-23.*
- In the fiscal year 2023-24, apart from Udaipur and Ranchi, none of the cities were able to achieve the collection target set by the 15th Finance Commission (FC).
- Bhilai, in the fiscal year 2022-23, had a property tax collection lower than the target set by the 15th Finance Commission (15FC). However, in the subsequent fiscal year, 2023-24, Bhilai was able to achieve the collection target set by the 15th FC. This achievement was facilitated by the lower base of property tax collection in the previous year, which allowed Bhilai to meet the target in the following year. In this case, because Bhilai's collection in 2022-23 was below the target, it had room to achieve growth in the subsequent year, ultimately meeting the 15th FC collection target in 2023-24.

Conclusion

Through this paper, the author aims to emphasize the necessity for adopting sustainable options to transition the method of property tax valuation to guidance value or circle rates, as mandated by the 15th Finance Commission (FC) and AMRUT 2.0 along with other measures required to improve assessment and reduce underassessment for growth in the collection of property tax.

a) **Migration to capital value Method**: The method of property tax assessment in Jharkhand and Rajasthan has been linked to circle rates. This will help Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in these states to potentially

Table 5: Statement Showing SAGR for the State of Tamil Nadu (Rs. in Lakhs)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Heads	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23 (Estimate)	SAGR(%)
GSDP (Current Price) (RBI Report on GSDP)	146505091	163020915	174314396	180823943	20,65,43,628	24,84,80,700	
		11%	7%	4%	14%	20%	11.29%

Source: https://www.rbi.org.in

6 SAGR-Tamil Nadu(11.30%), Jharkhand(8.4%), Rajasthan(10.02%),Chhattisgarh(10.30%) and Bihar(9.85%)

Table 6: Statement showing an analysis of Property Tax collection Growth in the past Three Years for 10 selected smart cities-Rs in Crores

		2021-22		2022-23		2023-24
S.No	ULB Name	Property Tax Collection	Target as per the 15th FC for FY 2022-23	Property Tax Collection	Target as per the 15th FC for FY 2023-24	Property Tax Collection
		(1)	(2)=1*(1+SAGR)6	(3)	(4)=4*(1+SAGR)6	(5)
1	COIMBATORE	229.37	255.75	433.89	483.78	391.63
2	MADURAI	117.86	131.41	199.46	222.39	209.85
3	TIRUCHIRAPPALLI	73.20	81.62	119.87	133.65	116.46
4	TIRUNELVELI	29.75	33.17	50.78	56.62	47.57
5	TIRUPPUR	63.20	70.47	101.23	112.87	98.38
6	VELLORE	20.10	22.41	41.59	46.37	41.56
7	RANCHI	58.50	63.47	66.50	72.15	71.50
8	PATNA	76.40	83.93	89.10	97.88	81.50
9	BHILAI	34.52	38.08	31.56	34.81	36.77
10	UDAIPUR	10.41	11.49	11.50	12.70	15.31

Source: DCB of Variosu States/Cities

Note: Red color denotes cities unable to meet the target in 2023-24

avoid issues in meeting the conditions of property tax growth set by the 15th Finance Commission (15FC). As circle rates increase over time due to market appreciation or other factors, property tax assessments will automatically adjust accordingly. This link creates a mechanism for regular growth in property tax revenue for ULBs. As circle rates rise, the demand for property tax increases proportionally, leading to higher property tax collections without the need for manual adjustments or interventions. *Migration to capital value method in 2011–12 in Mumbai yielded a significant one-time increase in property tax revenue by more than 50%. Detailed studies suggest considerable potential revenue gains from moving to a system that reflects market values (Lall and Deichmann 2006).* It's noteworthy that Jharkhand has achieved remarkable and sustainable growth in the collection of property tax, primarily attributed to the migration to capital value-based assessment starting from the fiscal year 2022-23. This transition to a new assessment methodology has likely contributed to improved accuracy and fairness in property tax assessments, resulting in increased revenue collection for the state. This successful implementation underscores the importance of adopting innovative approaches to enhance revenue generation and promote sustainable financial growth at the local level (Kumar & Goel, 2023)

b) **PPP based Revenue sharing Model**: Furthermore, as highlighted in the 15th Finance Commission Report, the Public Private Partnership (PPP)-based revenue-sharing model with Project Management Units (PMUs) represents a commendable initiative by the Government of Jharkhand to address the challenges posed by limited skilled staff and the issue of the 3Us (unassessed, under-assessed, and unpaid properties). This successful model may serve as a valuable example for other states or cities facing similar issues of limited tax collectors, encouraging them to adopt similar PPP-based revenue-sharing models.

c) **Professionals Engagement**: Taking action against defaulters for non-payment of taxes and underassessment may involve legal procedures which involve a lot of steps and compliances to be followed by the state or city like getting the Statement of Facts ready, serving of notices, taking action like freezing of bank accounts, and attachment of property. Thus, the state or city shall engage professionals covering Urban Planner, Chartered Accountants etc. to enable the State/City to implement interventions relating to 3Us (unassessed, under-assessed, and unpaid). *Like the states of Tamil Nadu and Jharkhand, the state can appoint a Project Management Unit (PMU) at the state level which helps to implement interventions relating to 3Us.*

d) **GIS mapping:** As part of the AMRUT toolkit, implementing GIS mapping of households can be a significant reform measure for states to improve property tax assessment and collection. GIS mapping allows for systematically identifying and mapping households within a jurisdiction. By geo-tagging properties, authorities can identify households not assessed for property tax purposes. This helps in expanding the tax base by bringing previously unassessed households into the system. GIS mapping provides a spatial perspective that enables authorities to assess properties more accurately. By overlaying property boundaries with various data layers such as land use, infrastructure, and socioeconomic indicators, authorities can identify discrepancies in property assessments. This helps in detecting properties that are under-assessed or misclassified, leading to potential revenue enhancements.

   - *In summary, GIS mapping of households offers a holistic approach to property tax administration by addressing the challenges of low assessment and collection. By leveraging spatial data analytics, authorities can identify unassessed households, detect under-assessment, improve assessment accuracy, enhance compliance, and make data-driven decisions to optimize revenue collection from property taxes.*

e) **Integration with State Departments and other utilities:** Lastly, integrating the property tax database with other relevant departmental databases and utilities may be imperative to enhance assessment accuracy and subsequently improve property tax collection. This integration could streamline data management processes and facilitate better coordination among various departments, leading to more effective tax assessment and collection mechanisms. Integrating property tax assessments with electricity bill payments to ensure accurate categorization of properties based on usage will be a strategic move that can be adopted by the state. This integration can help prevent under-assessment of properties, particularly those misclassified as residential when they are, in fact, being used for commercial purposes. By linking property tax records with electricity bill payments, authorities can access information about the type of electricity meter associated with each property. Residential properties typically have residential meters, while commercial properties have commercial meters. The integration can set up automated triggers that flag properties with discrepancies between their assessed usage for property tax purposes and their actual usage as indicated by their electricity meter type. For instance, if a property with a commercial meter is classified as residential for property tax assessment purposes, the system can automatically flag this as a potential under-assessment. Once discrepancies are identified through the automated triggers, appropriate enforcement actions can be taken by the authorities. This may include reassessing the property to reflect its actual usage, adjusting property tax rates accordingly, and potentially levying fines or penalties for underpayment or misrepresentation.

   Ensuring accurate property tax assessments can lead to increased revenue for the state and local governments. Properties that were previously under-assessed due to misclassification would now contribute their fair share of property taxes based on their actual usage.

Thus, implementing the measures outlined can indeed contribute significantly to helping states and cities meet the conditions set forth by the 15th Finance Commission (FC). Meeting the conditions of the 15th FC is crucial for accessing financial support and resources, which in turn can drive progress and development at the local level ensuring better service delivery.

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