



URBAN GOVERNANCE DIALOGUE

Transforming Urban Governance

May 2026

PRAJA.ORG
MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK

STRENGTHENING URBAN LEADERSHIP FOR EFFECTIVE LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Over the past two decades, **Praja Foundation** has been working towards **strengthening accountable governance**. It undertakes **data-driven research** on **civic issues** to **inform** citizens, the media, and government administrations. Praja also works closely with **Elected Representatives** (ERs) to equip them to address **inefficiencies** in work processes, bridge information gaps, and **mobilise corrective advocacy for change**.

Praja Foundation launched the **Leadership Programme** on **29th January 2026**, a first-of-its-kind initiative bringing together **24 urban leaders** from **11 cities** across **5 states** and **Delhi NCT** for structured, experiential learning, advisory support, and long-term engagement to build resilient and inclusive cities. **Following the first meet at Hyderabad and online engagement sessions**, the **cohort reconvened in Mumbai from 22nd to 25th April** for hands-on learning in Design Thinking, an exposure visit to the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) headquarters and Municipal D-Ward, and the development of their Individual Action Plans.



Leadership Programme | Cohort 1

Day 1 - 22nd April, 2026

The day began with **revisiting key learnings** from the previous meeting in Hyderabad, along with reflections from the three online sessions on Leadership for Urban Governance, Town Planning Practices in India, and Sustainable Cities and Climate Change. This was followed by an **Introduction to Design Thinking by Hetal Mundra**.



Introduction to Design Thinking | Hetal Mundra, Community Architect, riidl (Research Innovation Incubation Design Labs), Somaiya Vidyavihar University:

The session provided a brief overview of design thinking, focusing on how empathy and user understanding form the foundation of effective problem-solving, and how insights are translated into ideas and solutions.



Activity:

Participants engaged in an empathy walk, pairing up to better understand each other's experiences and motivations. This was followed by a wallet design exercise that encouraged creative and out-of-the-box thinking. The session concluded with a group interview activity, where participants explored key challenges and potential solutions through shared perspectives.

Day 2 - 23rd April, 2026



The day began with a recap of key learnings from Day 1, followed by a briefing on the upcoming exposure visit to the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) headquarters and the Municipal D-Ward scheduled for the next day.



Group Activity:

Participants continued their design thinking journey through a group activity where they worked in teams to create a future-facing “Samachar Patra” set in the year 2036. The exercise encouraged them to draw on previous insights and challenges to build a compelling vision of the future, combining storytelling with actionable ideas and solutions.

Group Presentations:

The day concluded with team presentations, where participants showcased their “Samachar Patra,” highlighting their envisioned outcomes and the approaches proposed to achieve them.

Fireside Chat

A fireside chat was hosted in the evening featuring **Gautam Chatterjee**, IAS (Retd.) and Former Chairperson of the Maharashtra Real Estate Regulatory Authority (MahaRERA); **Vidyadhar Phatak**, Former Principal Chief of the Town and Country Planning Division at the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA); and **Prashant Pisolkar**, Former Municipal Chief Auditor of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC).



The session brought together diverse perspectives on urban governance, city planning, and municipal finance. Participants engaged enthusiastically with the panelists, gaining valuable insights into the complexities of managing rapidly growing cities, the importance of transparent financial systems, and the need for stronger urban planning frameworks to build resilient and citizen-centric cities in India.

Networking Dinner

Post the session, a networking dinner was organised, providing Urban Leaders with an opportunity to interact closely with urban experts, policymakers, administrators, and practitioners. The setting encouraged meaningful conversations, exchange of experiences, and discussions on innovative approaches to urban governance, fiscal management, and sustainable city development.



Day 3 - 24th April, 2026

The day was dedicated to exposure visits, offering participants first-hand insights into urban governance in practice.

Exposure Visit: BMC Headquarters | Praja Team

The exposure visit to the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) headquarters offered participants a unique opportunity to understand the functioning of one of India's most resource-intensive and influential municipal corporations. Through interactions with various departments and officials, participants gained insights into the scale, coordination, and institutional systems required to manage a city like Mumbai. The visit to the Disaster Management department, interactions with the Municipal Secretary, observation of decades of preserved administrative records, and a meeting with the mayor together provided participants with a deeper understanding of City Governance, leadership, and the complexities involved in running a megacity.



Exposure Visit: Municipal D-Ward | Praja Team

The exposure visits to the D-Ward office helped participants understand how city governance functions at the ward level and how local administrations respond to day-to-day civic challenges. For many participants, the visit highlighted the importance of decentralised governance and demonstrated how ward-level administration plays a critical role in addressing citizen concerns and ensuring effective city management.

Day 4 - 25th April, 2026 Preparation and Presentation of Individual Action Plans

The day began with a reflection on key learnings from the exposure visits, helping participants connect on-ground insights with their broader understanding of urban governance.

Activity: Individual Action Plan Development | Praja Team

Participants worked on developing city-specific action plans by identifying key urban issues in their respective cities and applying design thinking principles to define root causes, stakeholders, and intervention strategies. The exercise focused on building practical, actionable plans with clear short-term and long-term steps, resources, and implementation approaches, aimed at guiding future research and advocacy support over the coming months.



Urban Leaders while preparing their Individual Action Plans



Group Sharing and Presentations | Praja Team

The day concluded with participants presenting their action plans to peers, enabling collaborative learning through feedback, insights, and shared experiences. This exchange helped refine their approaches and strengthen the overall impact of their proposed interventions.



The four days were largely activity-driven, placing participants at the centre of the learning process and encouraging active engagement and reflection. Through hands-on exercises and peer exchanges, participants connected concepts with real-world urban governance challenges while drawing from their own experiences. The programme fostered a collaborative environment, enabling participants to share insights, discuss constraints, and refine their ideas-leading to greater clarity and ownership of their action plans.

Day 4 - 25th April, 2026 Network Weaving – A Web of Shared Learning



As the programme drew to a close, participants came together for a closing activity that reflected the spirit of these four months. A ball of thick thread was passed across the circle as each person shared what they had carried away, learnings from the sessions, insights from each other's experiences, and wisdom gathered across the journey.

With every toss, the thread travelled across participants from 11 cities and different states, and what formed at the centre was a web woven entirely by the group itself, a quiet but powerful reminder that the knowledge built here did not belong to any one person, but to all of them together, and to the peer network they will continue to grow long after.



WAY FORWARD

We are delighted to have had the opportunity to bring together a cohort of some of the most enthusiastic and passionate Urban Leaders from across the country and equip them with the knowledge, perspectives, and tools required to translate the vision of better cities into a lived reality for citizens. As we conclude the second meet of the Leadership Programme, we look forward to strengthening this growing network of urban changemakers and supporting their journey towards building more inclusive, resilient, and citizen-centric cities in India.



As part of the Leadership Programme, Urban Leaders will continue to receive advisory support for 8 months after the initial four months of blended learning engagement. The support cadence includes structured calls per month, research and advocacy support, expert mentoring, knowledge products, peer-to-peer engagement through Praja's ecosystem network. Participants will also receive continued support post 12 months through online and in-person check-ins, along with opportunities for cross-cohort learning.

We would appreciate your views and feedback based on the information shared above. Please feel free to reach out to us at info@praja.org.



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