



Above: Paharganj Market, New Delhi. Credit: hadynyah via iStock/Getty Images Plus. Inset: Mayor Shelly Oberoi. Credit: Office of Mayor Oberoi.

With a population of nearly 33 million and growing, Delhi is the second-largest metropolitan area in the world after Tokyo—and on track to become number one. **Shelly Oberoi**, 39, was elected mayor of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), a governing body representing some 20 million of those people, in early 2023. Born in the capital city, Oberoi was named a vice president of the women's wing of the anti-corruption Aam Aadmi Party before becoming a ward city councilor in 2022. Oberoi, who had to run for the mayoral post several times due to parliamentary voting challenges, promised that “Delhi will be cleaned and transformed” in her tenure. She has been an assistant professor at Delhi University and Mumbai's Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies, and has authored several research papers on corporate social responsibility, global finance, and other topics.

Don't miss the *Mayor's Desk* book, coming this fall! See page 48 for details.

A New Deal in Delhi

ANTHONY FLINT: *You're the first mayor in a decade to oversee all of central city Delhi, after reunification of the municipal corporation there. What kind of governing challenges and opportunities come along with that?*

SHELLY OBEROI: Governing the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) after its unification has come along with a fair share of challenges and opportunities. On one hand, centralization of powers allows for streamlined decision-making, enhanced accountability, and improved collaboration across departments. While centralization allows for more efficiency, it also requires careful planning to ensure equitable distribution of resources to address the diverse needs of different areas within Delhi. Balancing these needs and optimizing resource allocation is a significant challenge that we are addressing at the moment. On the other hand, unification has also offered us an opportunity for policy alignment. With a unified municipal corporation, we can now align policies and regulations across all areas of Delhi. Policy alignment allows us to address issues such as education, property tax, and new initiatives in a coordinated manner, leading to more effective civil planning and development across the city. This enables consistent implementation of rules and regulations, creating a level playing field and ensuring fairness and transparency in governance.

AF: You said upon being elected that you would work “to make Delhi the city that it should have been”—what does that vision look like, and what are the biggest obstacles to achieving it?

SO: My vision for Delhi is based upon the Aam Aadmi Party's 10 guarantees, as announced by our National Convenor and Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. These guarantees reflect the aspirations of the people and prioritize the overall well-being of the city. We have envisioned a clean and beautiful Delhi, free from the blight of landfills, where waste management systems are streamlined and cleanliness is promoted throughout the city. We are establishing a culture of transparency and accountability, ensuring a corruption-free Municipal Corporation of Delhi. Our vision also includes providing a permanent solution to the problem of parking through efficient management systems and addressing the issue of stray animals with compassionate and sustainable measures. Moreover, we aim to have well-maintained roads that prioritize safety and smooth traffic flow, improving the overall commuting experience for residents.

The work of the Aam Aadmi Party's state government in Delhi is already talked about globally, particularly in the fields of education and healthcare. Chief Minister Kejriwal has administered revolutions in the landscape of India's public education and public health sectors. People have started believing that government facilities can be trusted, that they can offer them the equal standard of services for free that private facilities do at exorbitant prices.

Building on this momentum, we are working with a special focus on transforming schools and hospitals into centers of excellence. We are also enhancing parks across the city, creating green spaces for citizens to enjoy. In a welcome change, we are ensuring regular salaries for workers and offering them a better environment within the MCD to promote job security and build a motivated workforce. Simplifying the process of obtaining licenses for traders,

creating a welcoming business environment, and establishing designated vending zones for street vendors are also part of our vision.

However, we acknowledge the challenges posed by rapid urbanization, budgetary constraints, stakeholder engagement, and coordination among different agencies. By recognizing these challenges and proactively addressing them, we can work toward making Delhi the city it should have always been—a thriving, inclusive, and sustainable metropolis that residents can be proud to call home and, above all, the number-one capital of the world.

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Souvenir market at Delhi's Red Fort. Credit: PRABHASROY via iStock Editorial/Getty Images Plus.

Fighting a fire at the Ghazipur landfill in 2020. Leaders are removing waste from Delhi's three landfill sites. Credit: Pradeep Gaur via iStock Editorial/Getty Images Plus.



AF: *Regarding air quality—brought to international attention by such documentary films as All That Breathes—what are some short-term solutions? Please also comment on your approach regarding garbage and landfills. The two issues are related, in that the new waste-to-energy plant will seemingly help solve one problem while further contributing to air pollution.*

SO: Air quality is indeed a pressing concern for Delhi, and addressing it requires a multifaceted approach that incorporates both short-term and long-term solutions. However, air doesn't belong to any one geographical boundary; a lot of factors that arise in our neighboring states adversely impact Delhi. Thus, the challenge needs a concerted and coordinated approach from all stakeholders, including the central government and neighboring state governments.

The Delhi government is leading an extensive effort to reduce air pollution through its Summer and Winter Action Plans. The government accordingly decides upon short- and long-term solutions as part of these action plans, be it stopping dust pollution and industrial pollution, improving on solid waste management, or

conducting real-time source apportionment studies. Under these action plans, the MCD has been delegated the responsibility of keeping a check on the factors under its domain and maintaining vigils on smaller roads under its domain. The state government regularly convenes review meetings and the MCD has extended its unconditional support to help with these efforts. It is important to also note that due to these efforts, the air pollution levels in Delhi have already seen a welcome change.

As for garbage and landfills, we are actively working upon improving the city's solid waste management system by means of promoting waste segregation, installing Fixed Compactor Transfer Stations, and shutting down neighborhood garbage dump yards. We have also set a plan to eliminate the three garbage landfills of the city. Of this we are on track to completely clear off the Okhla landfill by the end of this year and the Bhalswa landfill by the first half of next year. These targets have been set by the state as part of a dedicated approach to clean the city, and Chief Minister Kejriwal has been monitoring the daily progress to further strengthen MCD's resolve toward this mission.

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AF: *Are there any policies in the works to address the city's notorious traffic congestion? How does that fit in with your overall plan to enhance infrastructure and make the city more resilient?*

SO: Traffic is mostly beyond the domain of the MCD. In Delhi, the municipal body only looks after minor roads and neighborhood lanes, whose upkeep we are working upon with utmost commitment ever since taking over the reins. Along with the help of our councilors and local citizens, we are identifying all such roads and lanes that need any sort of repair and ensuring that the task is dealt with. At the larger level, the Delhi government's Public Works Department and Transport Department are doing a great job of reducing traffic congestion in the city by upgrading the existing infrastructure, building new flyovers and underpasses, and introducing electric buses.

AF: *The Delhi metro area—with a population of nearly 33 million and growing by nearly 3 percent per year—seems to warrant a more centralized form of governance. Is there any chance of reform to allow mayors in India to manage their cities as leaders do in major cities in other parts of the world?*

SO: In principle, I do recognize the need for reforms that empower city leaders to effectively manage their cities, similar to the governance models observed in major cities around the world. However, the current governance structure in India has its limitations that we respect, and we prefer to mull about within our own landscape. In theory there is always a chance for reform and exploration of alternative models. We can explore enhancing the capacity of mayors and local authorities through training programs, knowledge sharing, and collaboration with international city management institutions that can equip them with the necessary skills and expertise to effectively lead and manage their cities. We can also promote collaborative governance models that involve active participation of citizens, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to facilitate better decision-making and ensure that the diverse interests and concerns of the city's residents are adequately represented. □

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With Delhi on track to become the world's largest metropolitan area, city leaders are encouraging more active citizen participation. Credit: PRABHASROY via iStock Editorial/Getty Images Plus.