Let there be LIGHT

You walk down the city roads in the evening and wonder why it's all dark and gloomy, despite all the streetlights being on. Nothing wrong with your eyesight. It's just that streetlights in the city are maintained poorly, are damaged and many need replacement.

That was the unanimous opinion of Professor Warren Julian, Dean, Faculty of Architecture, Design and Planning, University of Sydney and Reg Wilson of the lighting consultancy firm, Lighting Analysis and Design.

Julian and Wilson were at the MIT Lighting Research Academy as part of a city beautification programme.

"Many streetlights in the city are damaged, not cleaned and in a general state of poor maintenance," says Julian. "While I haven't had the time to see exactly what technology is in use, I suspect it's not up to the mark. But even with whatever is in place, it's important that the equipment is well-maintained. First clean up all that you have because that would be more cost-effective than just pulling out everything and replacing it."

And while beautification was the plan, both agree that Pune has lots of cleaning up to do before the aesthetic aspect becomes a consideration. Says Wilson, "The city has major traffic problems, there are more people than footpaths and even those are blocked by pedestrians." Julian concurs. "I happened to be travelling on a tree-lined road just close by and I thought, if the shops (hawkers) were removed, the roads cleaned up, the footpath given back to the pedestrians, that particular road could have been lit up like a beautiful French boulevard. That, however, needs political will."

The city's natural beauty has not escaped Wilson. "I was told that there are advertising billboards that cover them. Pune's a nice city, it's not huge like Mumbai or Delhi, and can be sold very well. But some things need to change."

One of the reasons for the poor state of lighting on public roads is the lack of expert and independent advice, says Julian. "Government people, local government authorities mostly, listen to manufacturers (of lighting equipment). Well, these people have obvious commercial interests and the only advice that they will give is 'buy this thing we make'. What is needed is expert, independent advice."

On the challenge of lighting up roads, Wilson says, "Lighting is a very expensive proposition and hence there is a need for more efficient streetlight fittings. What I have seen here is, to be honest, unsatisfactory. The spacings, the uniformity, the equipment, the maintenance, all need to be upgraded to standard. The most important issue is safety."

Wilson further illustrates the safety point. "Most lighting is designed with the younger person as a standard user. Well, glare is a really big issue for senior citizens, especially in public areas like roads. Senior citizens are a lot more susceptible to glare and it's small things like these that are often not considered."

Wilson is on the board of directors of the International Dark-Sky Association (IDA). For us Indians, who struggle with extremes of lights and darkness, the IDA mission statement might sound Utopian, yet it does appeal. It states their purpose is "to preserve and protect the night-time environment and our heritage of dark skies through quality outdoor lighting." Says Wilson, "Lighting has to be practical, aesthetic and environmentally friendly. I work for the National Observatory in Australia where such issues are very important."