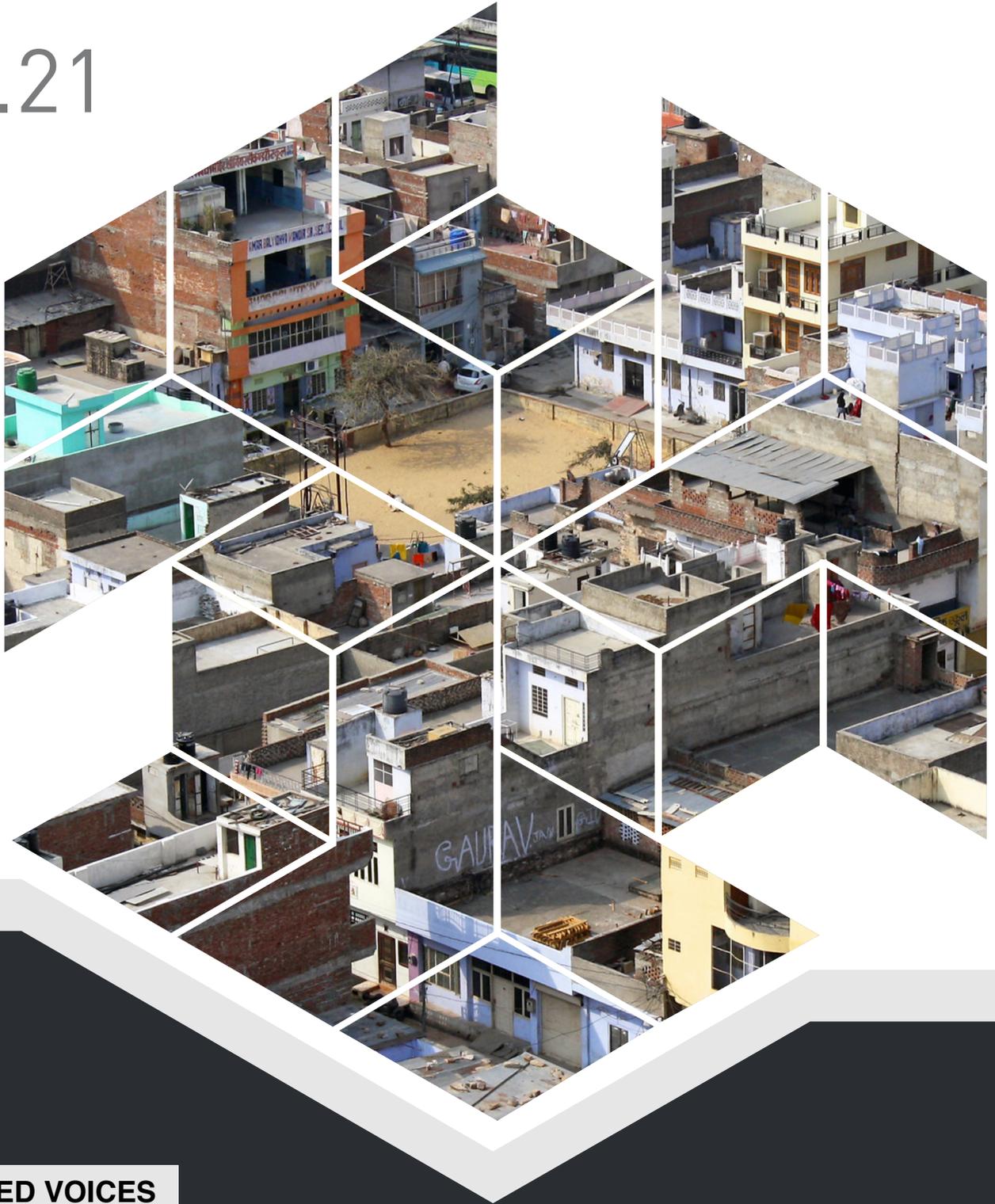


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Complexities of the Indian Urban Morphology: Its Effect on City Growth and Development

Asmita Jain

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Asmita Jain

ABSTRACT

The 21st century is the epitome of progress and growth. However, this growth is not merely economic growth but also a socio-political one. When the world is becoming more aware of change and new discourses redefining the boundaries of development, we need to focus on the underlying factors hindering growth and development in nations worldwide. In this direction, the following paper aims to explain the structure of urban settlements in India and their impact on India's development in lieu of its growing urbanisation. It tries to unfold the issues underlying the Indian urban morphology and the vast implications on the citizenry, society, and the nation. Finally, post identifying these obstacles, the paper aims to provide recommendations to overcome them and garner progress and development for India.

INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations (2019), the world population was at 770 crores as of mid-2019 and is constantly growing. India accounts for 17.8% of the total world population with its urban population skyrocketing in contrast to the rural one. Infact, the urban population worldwide grew dramatically from 75 crores in 1950 to 427 crores in 2019. Estimates suggest that by 2050, about 68.36% of the population will be living in urban areas (Kundu and Pandey 2020:13-49).

With the Indian urban population constituting about 11% of the world's urban population, the country is no stranger to this phenomenon. As of 2019, 34.47% of India's total population is urban and is continuously increasing (United Nations 2019).

Table 1: World and Indian Population Statistics

Total Population ¹ (2019)	
India	1,36,64,17,754
World	7,67,36,56,872
Urban Population ² (2019)	
India	47,10,31,528
World	4,27,43,38,412

Source: Analysis of data produced by World Bank (2009)

As countries strive for economic progress and social justice, there is a dire need to ensure high quality of living and constantly evolving environments to accommodate global citizens. In the 21st century, urbanisation is a catalyst for development and growth, elements which are essential for the progress of any nation.

Urbanisation is considered an optimistic display of a nation's growth and development. It involves the transition of population from rural to urban areas due to numerous socio-economic factors and the growing share of urban settlements in a nation's demography. The increased spatial distribution of urban areas such as cities, towns, and agglomerations coupled with the concentration of economic activities has led to an 'urban economy' era. Technological advancements, business opportunities, increased workforce requirements, better administrative and health services, and an overall better standard of living than rural ones dominate urban expanses.

¹ The total population comprises all residents regardless of legal status or citizenship, based on the de facto definition of population.

² Urban population refers to people living in urban areas as defined by national statistical offices. This data is based on World Bank population estimates and urban ratios from the United Nations World Urbanisation Prospects. Aggregation of urban and rural populations may not add up to the total population because of different country coverages.

Usually synonymous with development and progress, urbanisation acts as a melting pot of numerous cultures and traditions, giving rise to a robust socio-economic network among the population. It is also a connecting force between towns, villages, cities, and metropolitans, creating a network for growth and development. However, while urbanisation is significant for a nation's development, it can quickly turn into a chaotic affair if mismanaged and advanced in a frenzy. It can cause unnecessary pressure on the land, environmental degradation, economic burden on the country, and deterioration of quality of life for its citizens.

This paper aims to understand the complex nature of urbanisation in India and its effects on the socio-ecological development of the country and its citizens. It identifies policy gaps in the Indian urban morphology³ to enable a more holistic and well-rounded urban development plan for India.

CHAOTIC NATURE OF URBAN IN INDIA

To understand urbanisation and its effects on India, we first need to define an 'urban area'. India, in this respect, has a complex morphology of 'urban' explained in the next section. From a purely policy perspective, this measurement of 'urban' is of utmost importance because reliable management of urban areas guides equitable development of India and better policy formation for its citizens.

A Historical and Locational Context of Urban India

Historically, India has had a "top-heavy" urban structure (Shaban, Kourtit, and Nijkamp 2020: 2941). It implied that a few urban centres acted as powerhouses for a large population compared to small cities and towns. Certain port cities or industrial townships that became significant during the colonial era, owing to the British economic benefit, remain some of the biggest metropolitans till date. For instance, Kolkata and Mumbai served as centres of industrialisation and developed faster than other towns and neighbouring areas.

Nevertheless, new cities in independent India gained importance based on locational and developmental factors. A case in point is Delhi, which flourished as an urban centre due to its political and administrative significance. Chandigarh was also established as a planned city to cater to the growing population post the partition of British India in 1947.

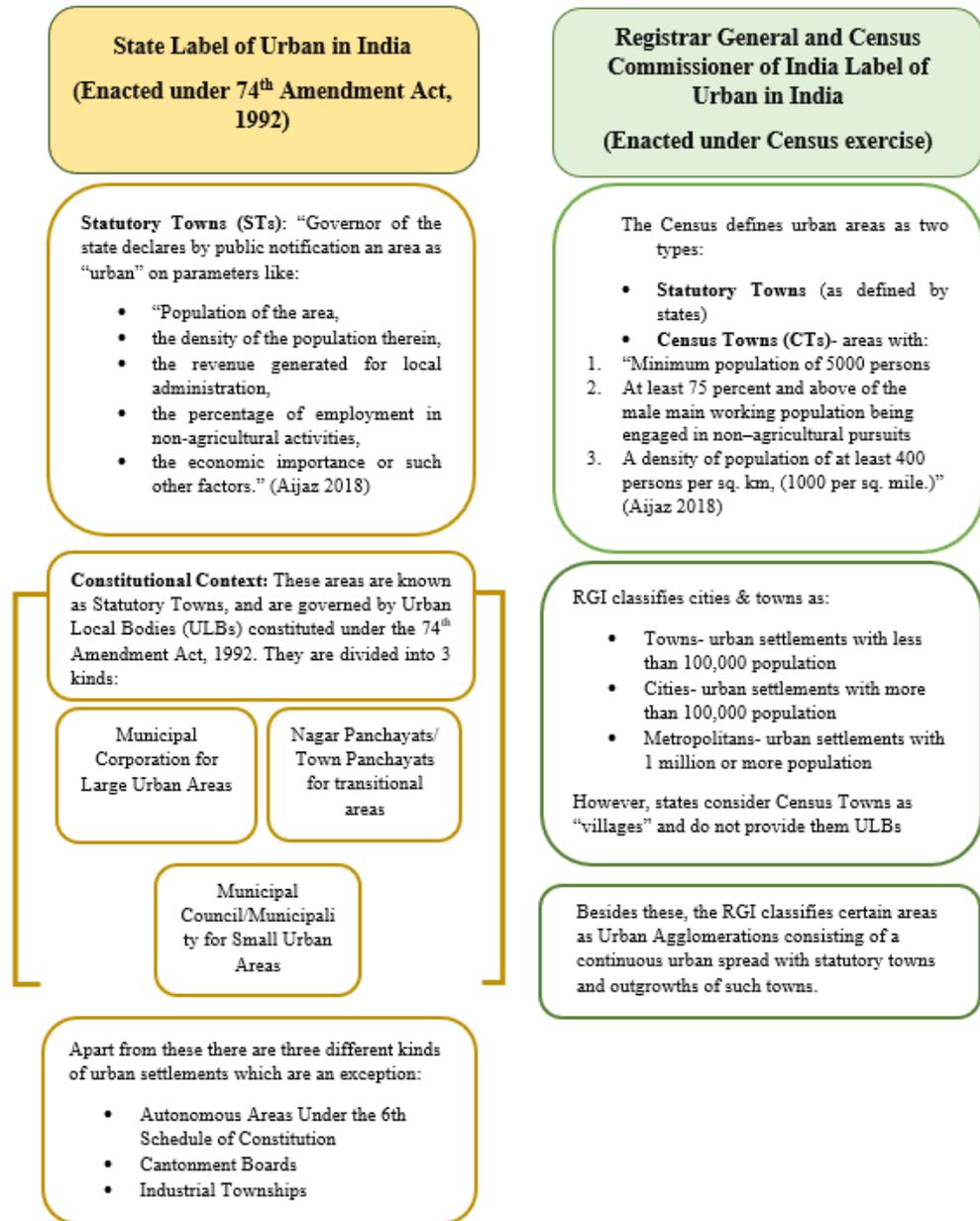
Explaining the 'Urban' Label in India

Defining an area as 'urban' in India is a complex process in many respects. The subject of urban development is a state subject in India, meaning the states have complete discretion over formulating their own urban policies and governance frameworks (Aijaz 2017). However, there exists not one but two methods to describe 'urban' in India. Firstly, via the State government and the Governor of the said state. Secondly, the National Census, a decennial exercise conducted

³ formation and patterns of urban structures and urban governance structures in India

under the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India [RGI] under the Ministry of Home Affairs provides a definition of ‘urban’ in India. The following chart explains the two labels of ‘urban’ in India:

Table 2: Explaining the ‘Urban’ Label in India



Source: Author provided

As of 2011, there were 4041 Statutory Towns [STs], 3892 Census Towns [CTs], 474 Urban Agglomerations and 981 Outgrowths in India (Census of India 2011). Thus, it provides us the following figures on the percentage of the urban population in India:

- 26.69% according to State Label
- 31.15% according to National Census Label

IDENTIFYING ISSUES IN THE CHAOTIC NATURE OF URBAN INDIA

The sole dissimilarities in definitions cause numerous issues in the Indian urban morphology. Differing and vague definitions create a chaotic environment for city growth and hamper organised development, leading to socio-economic and infrastructural problems in Indian cities and towns. Thus, enabling the development of a haphazardly arranged urban nation.

Studying the above chart (Table 2), one can identify the two widely varying labels of an 'urban area' in India. The former is at the discretion of State Administrations and the latter at the discretion of RGI. Both the definitions are not entirely objective or coherent in any way.

Problems start to arise primarily with the statutory definition of 'urban'. The first definition becomes entirely subjective to the state administration as urban development falls under the State List ⁴. Aijaz (2017) says:

“The definition is vague and offers scope to state bureaucracies to make arbitrary decisions about which areas/settlements are to be classified as ‘urban’ or ‘rural’, irrespective of whether or not they display urban or rural characteristics.”

State governments might solely pick up on characteristics like the area's population or population density in declaring an area as urban. It leads to uninformed or haphazard decisions without considering factors such as the amount of revenue generated for local administration, the proportion of people employed in non-agricultural activities, or the economic importance of an area. A fair assessment of all criteria is imperative in declaring an area as a large, small, or transitional urban area. However, Joshi and Pradhan (2018) found that only 15 states use one or more criteria mentioned above, and none of the states consider all the requirements to define an urban area (See Table 2). While population features as the first criteria for defining an urban area, the second most-mentioned norm after population is the non-agricultural workforce. Population density criterion and revenue criterion are only used for three and two states, respectively, whereas there is scarce mention of economic importance as a feature for declaring an area as 'urban'.

All states use population as the primary eligibility criteria to deem an expanse as 'urban'. As a result, there still exists massive variation in defining STs. For example, some states like Uttarakhand have STs with a population as low as 110 while others such as Andhra Pradesh have a population of approximately 30,000 (Aijaz 2017).

⁴ A list of 61 (Originally 66) items in 7th Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The respective state governments have exclusive power to legislate on matters relating to these items.

Moreover, state governments are arbitrary and subjective in establishing governance structures of these STs under the 74th Amendment Act⁵. The state government's declaration of an 'urban expanse' allows states to allocate different governance structures for different urban areas as per their own norms. An instance, Nagar Panchayat for an area in transition from rural to urban area, Municipal Council for smaller urban areas, and Municipal Corporation for larger urban areas. However, in reality, some states might not altogether define the criteria to determine the governance structures of these urban areas. An example is provided below in Table 3. States like Punjab or Kerala do not have any pre-requisite norms to define the governance structure in STs as opposed to Arunachal Pradesh or Haryana, which adhere to certain criteria for allocation of Urban Local Bodies [ULBs] to STs.

Table 3: Criteria for Urban Governance Structures in Various States

State	Lowest Population of Statutory Town	Population Size for Defining a Large Urban Area	Population Size for Defining a Small Urban Area	Population Size for Defining a Transitional Urban Area
Arunachal Pradesh ⁶	982 (Hawaii)	≥75,000	25,000-74,999	<25,000
Haryana	7,619 (Ateli)	>3,00,000	50,001-3,00,000	≤50,000
Punjab	2,744 (Sangat)	At the Governor's discretion as declared by public notification under government Acts or the Article 243Q ⁷ of the Indian Constitution.		
Kerala	20,510 (Guruvayoor)			

Source: Author provided analysis from Aijaz' (2017) and Joshi and Pradhan's (2018) data

Besides the state-designated label of STs, there exist CTs. As discussed earlier, the RGI categorises such 'towns' at its discretion, following a different set of criteria than the state. The definition of CTs considers population, population density, and only the 'male main' non-agricultural population. However, Rural

⁵ The State Legislatures are to decide which specific type of municipality will be constituted for a particular urban area. It provides for the constitution of 3 types of municipalities depending upon the size and area namely (i) Nagar Panchayat for an area in transition from rural to urban area, (ii) Municipal Council for smaller urban areas, and (iii) Municipal Corporation for larger urban areas.

⁶ The State Government may, by notification, determine different conditions to constitute some areas like hill area, pilgrim centre, tourist centre, mandi etc. as a municipal area.

⁷ 243Q. Constitution of Municipalities

(1) There shall be constituted in every State,

(a) a Nagar Panchayat (by whatever name called) for a transitional area, that is to say, an area in transition from a rural area to an urban area

(b) a Municipal Council for a smaller urban area; and

(c) a Municipal Corporation for a larger urban area, in accordance with the provisions of this Part: Provided that a Municipality under this clause may not be constituted in such urban area or part thereof as the Governor may, having regard to the size of the area and the municipal services being provided or proposed to be provided by an industrial establishment in that area and such other factors as he may deem fit, by public notification, specify to be an industrial township
(2) In this article, a transitional area, a smaller urban area or a larger urban area means such area as the Governor may, having regard to the population of the area, the density of the population therein, the revenue generated for local administration, the percentage of employment in non-agricultural activities, the economic importance or such other factors as he may deem fit, specify by public notification for the purposes of this part.

Local Bodies [RLBs]/panchayats govern the CTs mentioned above, since states do not provide them with an 'urban' label. Despite that, the decennial Census considers the CTs as 'urban' areas.

Conclusively, there exist two inconsistencies in defining STs. The first one is the state's subjectivity and the second one is an unclear municipalisation structure, and non-acceptance of CTs as official urban areas by state governments. As a result, there exists a massive inconsistency in the development and infrastructure of different municipalities varying not just from state to state but also district to district.

IMPLICATION OF THE HAPHAZARD INDIAN URBAN MORPHOLOGY

The Dearth of Infrastructural Development

Due to irregular demarcation of the urban expanses in India, numerous issues crop up, hindering the progress of people and the nation. It acts as a chain of events that deteriorates the overall standard of living for the people of India. By way of law, panchayats or rural bodies govern CTs, which may cause mismanagement of such towns. Infrastructural gaps such as lack of sanitation facilities, civic amenities run rampant in these areas.

For instance, Samanta (2014: 55-62) highlights the Singur town of West Bengal, which was declared a CT in 1981. It serves as a connecting point between the Kolkata metropolitan area and the agricultural hinterland. Singur connects to other major settlements like Hooghly and Burdwan via ten railway stations and Kolkata-Durgapur (National Highway 2). Three gram panchayats govern it, facilitated with funds from central and state governments. However, due to limited financial autonomy and inclusion, sanitation, water supply, and roads are lacking in Singur. Moreover, the population of Singur has been underreported by not counting the populace of the Singur agglomeration. Consequently, the state fails to recognise it as an ST despite the increasing rate of urbanisation and significant shift from agricultural to a tertiary based occupational structure.

Socio-Economic Setbacks

Due to infrastructural issues, there exists a lack of higher educational institutes in rural areas, which causes a reduction in the number of women with access to higher education. The UGC defines Gross Enrolment Ratio [GER] as "gross measure that includes all enrolled in higher education proportionate to the population in the relevant age group, 18-23 years." (University Grants Commission 2008). The same highlights that higher education has a stark rural-urban divide: with rural GER at 8.1% compared to urban GER at 21.8%, female rural GER percentage is as low as 4.7% compared to female urban GER percentage of 19.6% (ibid).

Table 4: Gross Enrolment Ratio by Social Groups for States and UTs, Census 2001

States /Union Territories	Total/Rural/Urban	All Population			Non Scheduled Population			Scheduled Tribes			Scheduled Castes		
		Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
India	Total	12.4	15.3	9.2	14.0	16.8	10.7	6.8	9.5	4.2	7.5	10.3	4.5
	Rural	8.1	11.3	4.7	9.1	12.4	5.5	5.2	7.6	2.8	5.6	8.4	2.6
	Urban	21.8	23.7	19.6	23.0	24.7	20.9	21.3	24.9	17.4	13.7	16.3	10.8

Source: University Grants Commission (2008)

Table 5: Literacy Rates in Post Independent India

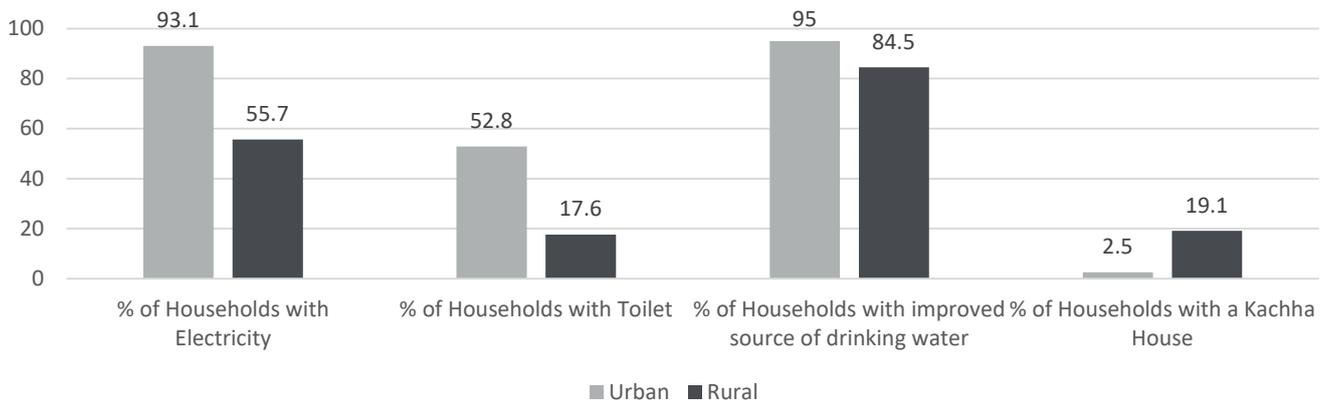
Year	Urban			Rural			Combined		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
1951	4.87	19.02	12.1	22.33	45.6	34.59	8.86	27.15	18.32
1961	10.1	34.3	22.5	40.5	66	54.4	15.35	40.4	28.31
1971	15.5	48.6	27.9	48.8	69.8	60.2	21.97	45.96	34.45
1981	21.7	49.6	36	56.3	76.7	67.2	29.76	56.38	43.57
1991	30.17	56.96	36	64.05	81.09	67.2	39.29	64.13	52.21
2001	46.17	71.4	59.4	73.2	86.7	80.3	53.67	75.26	64.83
2011	58.75	78.57	67.8	79.92	89.67	84.1	65.46	82.14	74.04
% Increase in 2011 over 2001	26%	10%	14%	9%	3%	5%	22%	9%	14%

Source: Kumar, Reddy, and Sathish (2020)

An analysis of the Indian literacy rates shows that the percentage increase in the literacy rates in urban India between the 2001 Census and 2011 Census is 14% which is way higher than the mere 5% increase in rural India (Kumar, Reddy, and Sathish 2020).

Additionally, health and well-being indicators such as infant mortality rate [IMR] and population's access to essential services depict a similar story. The average IMR as of 2008-10 was 54.7 in rural India compared to IMR of 34.7 in urban India, citing a massive gap in rural and urban healthcare. There also exists a rural-urban divide in the well-being of the population as the rural population is devoid of basic amenities like drinking water and electricity, shown in Table 6 (ibid: 21863-21867).

Table 6: Access to Basic Services (in %)



Source: Kumar, Reddy, and Sathish (2020)

Bureaucratic and Political Hurdles: A Strangulation of People’s Aspirations

Political hurdles and bureaucratic incompetence can also cause developmental deficits and socio-economic impediments. States might be reluctant to identify urban areas as ‘urban’ and instead label them as rural for multiple reasons. Samanta (2014: 55-62) highlights that both

“Sivaramakrishnan et al (2005) and Denis and Marius-Gnanou (2011) note that many settlements with a population of more than 10,000 inhabitants, despite having characteristics of urban areas, were not classified as urban in the 2001 Census.”

Similarly, an analysis of the 2011 Census by the Jana (2015) describes how more than 10% of India’s population resides in “grey” settlements—areas which can be declared urban based on their characteristics but continue to be labelled as rural and governed by RLBs. For instance, the Barhampur village in Bihar has a population of over 10,000 and yet continues to be labelled as a rural area. Fear of loss of local political power by state governments due to a different electoral process might obstruct the attainment of urban status.⁸ Additionally, there exist other factors that state governments might feel can cause additional burden on them. These factors can be higher taxes in urban areas, stricter infrastructural development norms, fewer government grants or subsidies given to urban regions, and an increased-unwanted inflow of people to urban areas.

This causes a considerable mismatch between the aspirations of local citizens for progress and the selfish motives of self-seeking bureaucratic and political entities. Social exclusion and spatial isolation of such regions might cause the populace of these regions to feel inadequate, hampering their social standing and contributing to psychological stress.

⁸ Rural politics is generally centred around caste, class or religion, heavily influenced by local intermediaries and is focused on establishing a three-tier Panchayati Raj system. However, urban politics might not necessarily be garnered around caste, class or religion, rules out local intermediaries and has an election process very different from the rural one.

ISSUES OF PRE-EXISTING CONTEMPORARY URBAN GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

The contribution of urban areas to India's GDP compared to rural areas is substantially higher, and government and foreign direct investments [FDI] in urban areas might be more augmented than rural ones. For instance, the Smart Cities Mission and Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission [JNNURM] significantly improve the technology, transport, and inculcate modernisation in pre-existing significant towns and cities of urban India. However, this by no means dilutes the need of reforming urban governance in India itself.

Besides infrastructural and developmental impediments caused by the urban-rural dichotomy, there is a lack of uniformity regarding urban local governments' power structure. Unlike RLBs, ULBs consist of Mayors (Heads of Municipal Corporations) responsible for local urban governance. However, in most states, they are elected indirectly (except six states)⁹, making them mere de-jure heads of local government, without any absolute power. The primary power rests with the State-appointed Municipal Commissioner giving the state government more control over ULBs than necessary.

Coupled with these, more common problems of lack of devolution of funds, state intervention in local elections cause an overall setback to the complete autonomy of municipalities and ULBs. The provisions of the 12th Schedule¹⁰ that a state government should devolve to ULBs do not entrust ULBs with transportation or housing in urban areas, which can be an added problem to the power dynamics of ULBs.

In addition to this, the growing induction of parastatal agencies to take over the work of local government has led to municipalities being mere facilitators for the maintenance of a city. A case in point is Bangalore, where parastatal agencies such as Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board perform the municipal function of water supply and sewerage. Besides this, Bangalore Metro

⁹ Bihar, Haryana, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand

¹⁰ Subjects under the 12th Schedule (Article 243W)

1. Urban planning including town planning.
2. Regulation of land-use and construction of buildings.
3. Planning for economic and social development.
4. Roads and bridges.
5. Water supply for domestic, industrial and commercial purposes.
6. Public health, sanitation conservancy and solid waste management.
7. Fire services.
8. Urban forestry protection of the environment. and promotion of ecological aspects.
9. Safeguarding the interests of weaker sections of society, including the handicapped and mentally retarded.
10. Slum improvement and upgradation.
11. Urban poverty alleviation.
12. Provision of urban amenities and facilities such as parks, gardens, play-grounds.
13. Promotion of cultural, educational and aesthetic aspects.
14. Burials and burial grounds; cremations, cremation grounds and electric crematoriums.
15. Cattle ponds; prevention of cruelty to animals.
16. Vital statistics including registration of births and deaths.
17. Public amenities including street lighting, parking lots, bus stops and public conveniences.
18. Regulation of slaughterhouses and tanneries.

Rail Corporation Limited, a joint venture of the Government of India and the Government of Karnataka handling the Metro transportation, is among many other Special Purpose Vehicles suffocating the powers and resources of the ULB and making them unaccountable and laid back.

These irregularities cause wide depoliticisation and disempowerment of the ULBs, leaving them at the mercy of union and state governments, hampering the overall development of the state and nation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusively, the chaotic overlapping of definitions of an urban area, coupled with mismanagement of the structure of urban areas in India, leads to not just unstable but uneven urbanisation, which eventually might not be entirely beneficial (Jha 2018). The incongruity in labelling urban areas as ‘urban’ accompanied by on-ground policy issues may hamper equitable growth among Indian cities and towns. It leads to the pre-existing urban areas being more crowded and congested and causes rural expanses to be underdeveloped. To resolve the issues mentioned above, the following policy recommendations can be considered:

Concerned organisations can take a phase-wise approach to find solutions to each problem caused due to the complexity of the Indian urban morphology. Firstly, uniformity among state and national criteria for declaring a place as an ‘urban area’ is urgently required. Other ways of measuring the urban can also be considered, such as the Agglomeration Index¹¹ provided by Uchida and Nelson (2009) and endorsed by the World Bank. Quantifying criteria for declaring an urban area needs to be undertaken with a set structure of urban classification to decrease overlapping jurisdictions of state and central government to help seal policy gaps on this subject matter.

The second phase can consist of setting up a committee of experts and policymakers to assess the status of pre-existing CTs and their ability to attain a constitutional ‘statutory’/urban status. In addition to this, usage of the norm ‘male main’ non-agricultural population is also a concern. In the 21st century, excluding women from the non-agricultural workforce also represents a strong gender bias towards men. It might hinder egalitarian policymaking by state governments. Hence, a revision of this particular criteria is also necessary.

In the third and final phase, State governments could map all the urban expanses under the guidance and watch of the earlier committee of experts and policymakers, per a new and uniform criterion. Additionally, the employment

¹¹ “Agglomeration Index is based on three factors: population density, the size of the population in a “large” urban centre, and travel time to that urban centre. Each factor used in the index is based on the conceptual framework of agglomeration economies. The index does not define what is urban per se—it does not incorporate urban characteristics such as political status and the presence of particular services or activities. Instead, the index creates globally a definition of settlement concentration that could be used to conduct cross-country comparative analyses. The accessibility of this measure lends itself easily to the study of concepts such as agglomeration rents in urban areas, market “thickness”, and the travel distance to such a market with many workers and consumers.”

of trained municipal cadres at the local urban level can also be assumed. As the urban centres act as dynamos of growth and progress, they need to be overlooked by city development and growth personnel. They would work as planners for the urban areas to facilitate growth and strengthen the urban governance structures.

Besides this, increased usage of E-governance mechanisms for greater inclusion of locals into the decision-making process and creation of aware civil societies, that identify issues with parastatal agencies, is imperative. An increased accountability of municipal administration using a bottom-up approach can also benefit all urban expanses in India. Furthermore, programs like the National Urban Policy Framework, mandated under the UN-Habitat programme, should be refined and implemented as policy guidelines for Indian urban development instead of solely being a theoretical framework. Such a framework significantly recognises urban development as a subject matter and promotes individual State plans for urban growth with necessary support from the Union government.

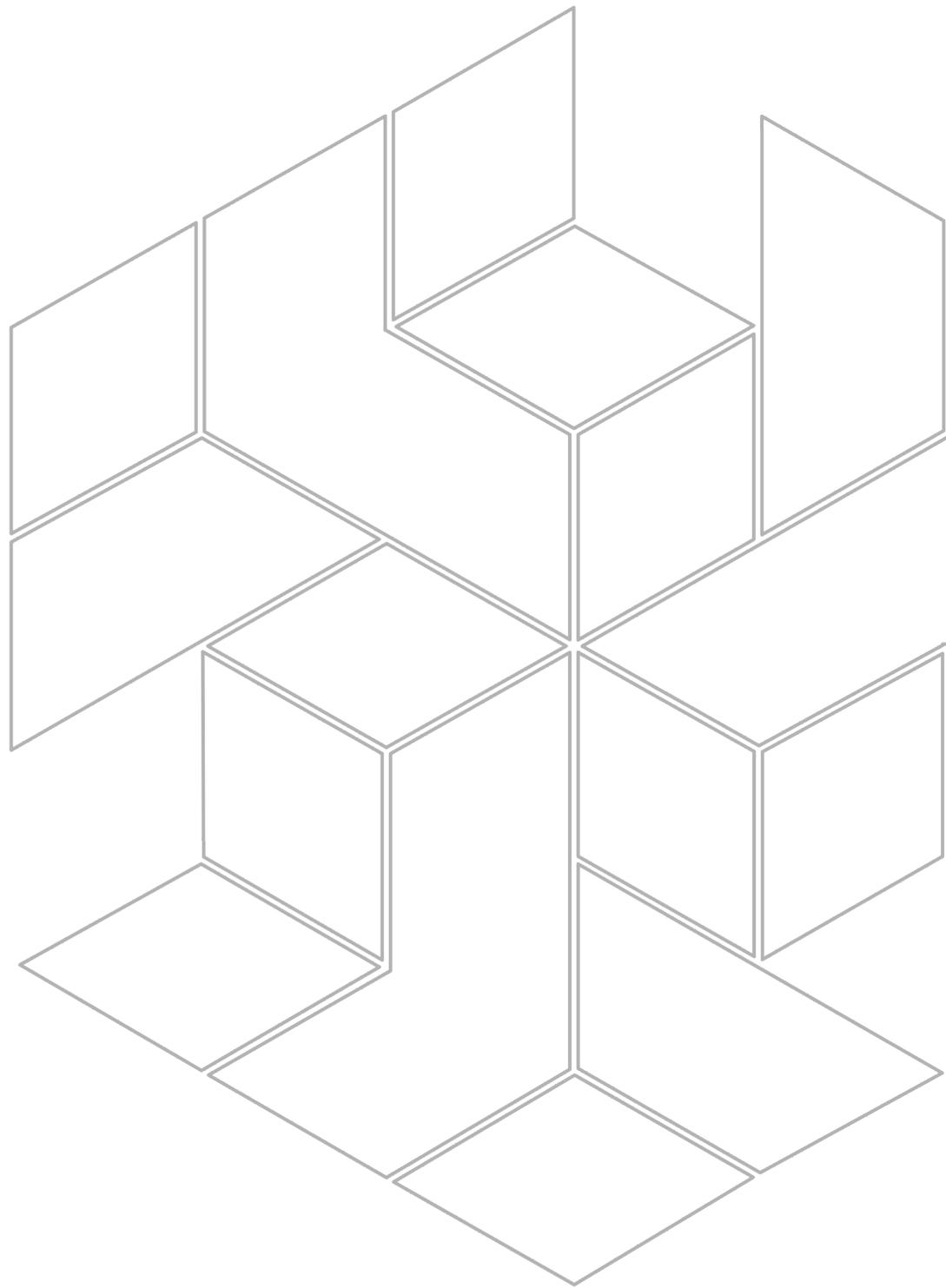
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