

India needs smart urbanisation

Over 34% of India's current population lives in urban areas, rising by 3% since 2011. | Photo Credit: [Getty Images](#)

Residents of Bhavanpur, a village about 15 km outside Ahmedabad, have been protesting against their inclusion in the city's urban area by the local urban development authority. Similar protests have been observed in villages elsewhere in Gujarat. It's a strange trend, the fruits of urban development seemingly rejected. Meanwhile, pollution in India's urban areas seems to have sparked off a reverse migration. Farmers from Haryana who had migrated to Delhi and Gurugram for work to escape an agricultural crisis are increasingly going back to their farms during winter, unable to take the toxic pollution. And it's not just big cities. India's urbanisation template is clearly ripe for change.

Over 34% of India's current population lives in urban areas, rising by 3% since 2011. More importantly, while existing large urban agglomerations (those with a population above 50 lakh) have remained mostly constant in number since 2005, smaller clusters have risen significantly (from 34 to 50 clusters with 10-50 lakh population). By some estimates, India's urban population could increase to 814 million by 2050. And yet, cities look and feel downtrodden, riven with poverty and poor infrastructure, with little semblance of urban planning. With an increase in urban population will come rising demands for basic services such as clean water, public transportation, sewage treatment and housing.

Meanwhile, on the 'Smart City' front, while over 90 'Smart Cities' have identified 2,864 projects, India lags on implementation, with about 148 projects completed and over 70% still at various stages of preparation. Finally, there is still an outstanding shortage of over 10 million affordable houses (despite the government taking encouraging steps to incentivise their construction). The annually recurring instances of floods in Mumbai, dengue in Delhi and lakes on fire in Bengaluru paint a grim picture. While work continues, admittedly slowly, on the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor project and the bullet train, urban India's challenges remain manifold.

One primary problem is that of the definition of what's urban. Urban development comes under State governments, with the Governor notifying an area as urban based on parameters such as population, density, revenue generated for the local administration and percentage employed in non-agricultural activities. This notification leads to the creation of an urban local government or municipality, classifying the area as a "statutory town". With such a vague definition, discretionary decisions yield a wide variance in what is considered a town. The Central government considers a settlement as urban if it has a urban local government, a minimum population of 5,000; over 75% of its (male) population working in non-agricultural activities; and a population density of at least 400 per sq. km. However, many States consider such "census towns" as rural, and establish governance through a rural local government or panchayat. Consider the case of Dabgram, in West Bengal's Jalpaiguri district, which is classified only as a "census town", while having a population more than 120,000 and located just 3 km from Siliguri.

Another issue is the low level of urban infrastructure investment and capacity building. India spends about \$17 per capita annually on urban infrastructure projects, against a global benchmark of \$100 and China's \$116. Governments have come and gone, announcing a variety of schemes, the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission included, but implementation has been mostly inadequate, with exploration of financing options limited as well. For example, Jaipur and Bengaluru collect only 5-20% of their potential property tax — how can urban local bodies be sustainable without enforcing this? Meanwhile, urban institutions also suffer from a shortage of skilled people.

Finally, there needs to be a systemic policy to deal with urban migration. Internal migration in India is very closely linked to urban transitions, with such migration helping reduce poverty or prevent households from slipping into it. Urban migration is not viewed positively in India, with policies often bluntly seeking to reduce rural to urban migration. Preventing such migration can be counterproductive — it would be better to have policies and programmes in place to facilitate the integration of migrants into the local urban fabric, and building city plans with a regular migration forecast assumed. Lowering the cost of migration, along with eliminating discrimination against migrants, while protecting their rights will help raise development across the board. Consider Delhi. While historically, urban policy sought to limit urban migration, this is now changing with a focus on revitalising cities nearby such as Meerut, building transport links and connectivity.

Our urban policymakers also need to be cognisant of the historical context of our urban development. Our cities have been witness to multiple transitions over the last century, with barely any time to recover and adapt — the British creation of three metropolitan port cities, combined with the rollout of the railway network, transformed India's urban landscape, relegating erstwhile prominent Mughal-era towns such as Surat and Patna into provincial backwaters. The creation of hill stations in northern India and the advent of the plantation economy, along with industrial townships (such as Jamshedpur) transformed trading networks. Finally, the creation of cantonments and civil lines areas, along with railway stations, in our major cities led to the haphazard growth of urban areas away from bazaars and towards railway terminals. Transforming them into neatly organised urban spaces will not be easy.

Perhaps we need a different model of urbanisation. The announcement of a new urbanisation policy that seeks to rebuild Indian cities around clusters of human capital, instead of considering them simply as an agglomeration of land use, is a welcome transition. We need to empower our cities, with a focus on land policy reforms, granting urban local bodies the freedom to raise financing and enforce local land usage norms. For an India to shine, the transformation of its cities is necessary.

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