

# TOO MANY INDIAN CITIES FLOOD EVERY MONSOON. WE MUST NURTURE URBAN ECOSYSTEMS

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies incl. Migration & Smart Cities

People being rescued in fishing boats during the floods in Chennai in December 2015. | Photo Credit: [Shaju John](#)

Countless poets and lovers have declaimed over the ages that Venice is not just a city; it's a living dream. By that same measure, irreverent others would hold that during the monsoons in India, its cities are more than just cities; they are lived nightmares. Venice's waterways are celebrated the world over and hordes of tourists descend on the city every year. In contrast, the streets of India's cities become reluctant rivers at the mere hint of rain.

There's a colloquial saying in Kolkata that every time a frog wets its pants, the city goes under water. The same goes for Mumbai, India's shining commercial capital. A few hours of rain and the shine is smudged by knee-deep water. Chennai, which did not experience large-scale waterlogging even a couple of decades ago, has drastically changed since the debilitating floods of 2015.

Flooding in the country's cities is due to poor planning and a wilful neglect of urban ecosystems. Besides inconvenience caused to citizens, it has serious economic dimensions. Poor urban planning can cause a country to lose as much as 3% of its GDP every year, [according to a report](#) by the United Nations Environment Programme.

## Population explosion

India has been rapidly urbanising since Independence. In 1950, just about 17% of the population lived in cities. Today, more than a third lives in urban areas. There are now more than 300 cities in India, according to Census 2011 data, of which some 50 host more than a million people. Three of the world's 10 largest cities, Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, as well as three of the world's fastest growing cities, Ghaziabad, Surat and Faridabad, are in India.

Part of the problem is population explosion. Chandigarh, one of the most beautiful and well-planned cities in the country, was meant to house half a million people, but more than million and a half live there now. Last year in August, torrential rain caused widespread floods in the city. In July this year, Bhubaneswar, another leafy, well-planned city with broad avenues, went under water due to extreme rainfall. It's no wonder that the flooding in haphazardly growing cities like Ghaziabad and Surat is even worse.

But more than the increasing number of people, ecologists and planners say the problem of urban flooding is man-made, because not enough attention is paid to local ecosystems and natural drainage. In this, the insatiable greed for real estate, often in connivance with city officials, is squarely to blame.

In Bengaluru, rapid, unplanned urban expansion has ensured that barely a handful of its interconnected lakes still survive, robbing the city of its capacity of natural storm water drainage.

The same can be said of Chennai. The degradation of Ennore creek has increased flood risk in the northern parts of the metropolis, and the constant draining of the Pallikaranai marshes

makes waterlogging inevitable in its southern stretches. Add the fact that global warming has made rainfall more erratic and intense in South Asia, and the problem almost seems intractable.

### Short and intense

As the effects of climate change become evident, short bursts of intense rainfall are expected to become more common across India, not sparing its cities, [latest research](#) shows. Researchers say urban flooding results from two factors — permeable soil surfaces being replaced by impermeable concrete floors due to rapid urbanisation, and the strong link between increase in urban rainfall extremes and temperature.

In such a scenario, it's more important than ever that we pay immediate attention to more prudent urban planning that takes in to account the ecological dimensions of our expanding cities before it's too late. The Indian government is in the midst of framing a national urban policy. It must ensure that urban planning is ecology and people-centric rather than only providing engineering solutions.

City governance is woefully inadequate in our country. The [annual survey](#) of India's city systems by Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Governance has found that the poor state of service delivery across cities points to a failure of urban governance. This must change, and we should take heart from [notable exceptions like](#) Coimbatore, where citizen participation is leading to a rejuvenation of its water bodies.

India is at the crossroads of an urban transformation. We must manage it well, with an eye on sustainable ecological management to avoid flooding. Otherwise, we will have to face up to the unpleasant prospect of being ferried by canoes in Chennai or gondolas in Ghaziabad.

*Soumya Sarkar is Managing Editor of [IndiaClimateDialogue.net](#). Follow him on Twitter [@scurve](#)*

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