

Supporting a More Inclusive and Responsive Urban India

India's urbanization story is both massive and complex, as 300 million people will move to its urban spaces by 2030, creating significant challenges. In this brief, we argue that India's cities would be better served in the long-term by supporting the inclusive urban policies over those that carry exclusionary after-effects, by limiting the use of the city as a promotional tool for actors that gain from forwarding divisive identity politics, and by creating more robust city-level political structures in order to improve municipal accountability to urban citizens. We conclude with suggestions for how to further encourage inclusive urban planning and political processes.

Brief Points

- India's cities are better served by consciously supporting inclusive urban policies, and there is deep value in restricting the use of Indian cities as tools for actors who gain from forwarding divisive identity politics.
- India urgently needs to create more robust city-level political structures in order to improve municipal accountability to urban citizens, and transform urban areas into more livable and inclusive spaces.
- Addressing "informality" and "right to the city" concerns must be integral parts of urban planning and governance processes to address exclusion and inequality in India's growing urban spaces,
- Insulating urban governance from entrenched elite networks can slow the current trend of urban spaces becoming more exclusionary, unaccountable and unwelcome places for India's poorest and most disadvantaged.

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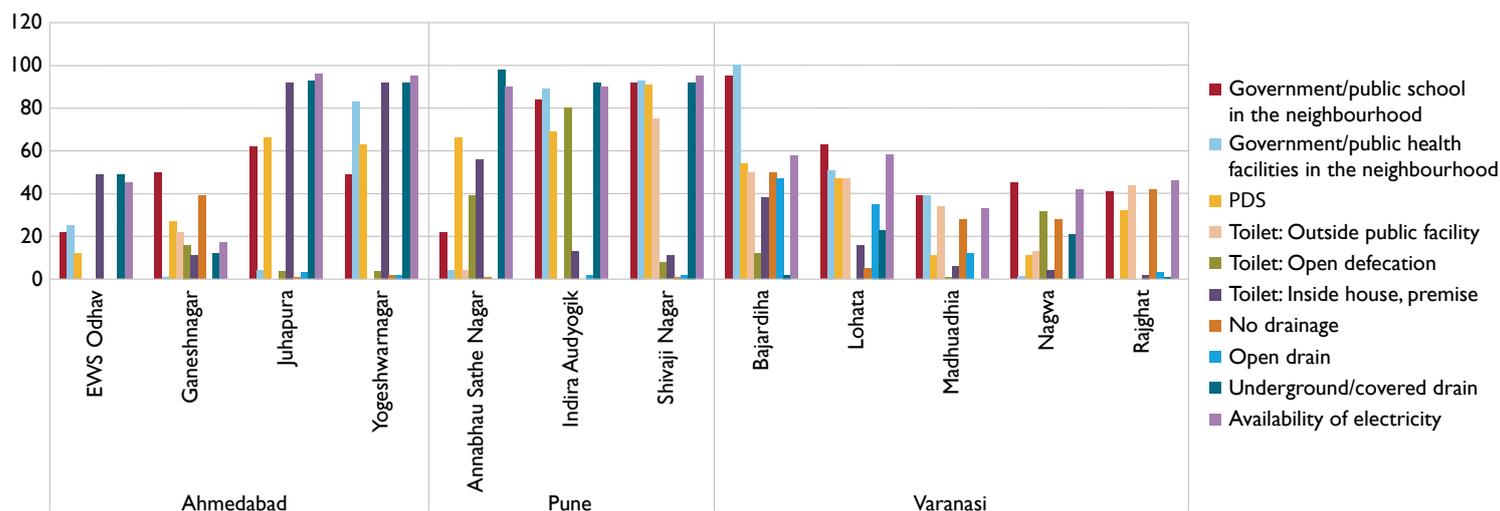


Figure 1: Public service variation for selected Hindu and Muslim majority neighborhoods in Varanasi, Pune and Ahmedabad

India's Changing Urban Landscape

India is one of the fastest growing large economies in the world, but it is also one of the least urbanized. This trend, however, is changing. As per the 2011 Census, over 31 percent of Indians (some 377 million people) now live in urban cities and towns – but the McKinsey Global Institute estimates that this figure will swell to 590 million by 2030.¹ Of course, this movement is just as reflective of the country's present rural-urban demographics as it is about future migration trends. Significantly, urban population growth now outnumbers rural growth in India for the first time.²

In addition, India's urban expansion has not been driven primarily by conventional rural-urban migration. Instead, organic population growth and the reclassification of cities and towns have been primary drivers. Only 22 percent of urban growth is due to rural-urban migration,³ but because migration has been a significant component of growth in big cities in particular, it has received outside attention. Still, cities are projected to create 70 percent of future jobs and GDP growth for India,⁴ and a recent survey of rural India found that, despite their improved living conditions, most people have aspirations of becoming urban citizens and are eager to trade village life for the city given the opportunity.⁵ In short, India in the 21st century will be driven by its urban centres, defining how successful its economic transformation story will be.

In these urban areas, minority communities are overrepresented, which has led to challenges. More than 40 percent of Muslims and Christians live in urban areas, compared to only 29 percent of Hindus.⁶ Among Hindus, a large percentage of urban populations come from the lower social strata (such as Dalits) and the spatially excluded, including adivasi communities. The reasons behind the large number of Dalits in cities are that many have arrived in an attempt to escape the abhorrent caste system of purity and pollution and social discrimination in village settings, as well as for the opportunity of social and economic mobility. However, urban divisions tend to replicate their rural societal counterparts, and much of India's urban violence over the previous two decades has cleaved along caste or religious lines. Thus, while cities remain a place of perceived social mobility for traditionally disadvantaged groups and individuals, they continue to be potentially perilous spaces for the most vulnerable.

This policy brief draws upon our research in the Urbanizing India project, reflecting upon three key challenges for India's growing cities to its citizenry. First, India's cities would be better served in the long-term by consciously supporting inclusive urban policies over those that carry exclusionary after-effects. Second, there is deep value in limiting the use of the city as a promotional tool for actors that gain from forwarding divisive identity politics. Third, there remains an urgent need to create more robust city-level political structures in order to improve

municipal accountability to urban citizens. We conclude with suggestions for how to take inclusive urban planning and political processes forward.

Urban Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion

India's current mechanisms of urbanization offer few opportunities for its disadvantaged citizens. Rather than being "melting pots" and places for upward social mobility, Indian cities stubbornly mirror India's rural social and economic realities. Inequality and exclusion markers that are deeply embedded within the country's social and cultural structures are simply reproduced in urban settings. Our study of three Indian cities (Varanasi, Ahmedabad and Pune)⁷ found that Muslims, Dalits (Scheduled Caste) and new migrants from lower income groups find it hard to escape discriminatory treatment (e.g., access to housing, education) merely by moving to a metropolis (see figure 1). Segregated colonies are thus formed along caste, communal and ethnic lines – a trend present in all of our survey cities (see figure 2).

Due to the fact that much of India's urban growth has come about in an unplanned and haphazard manner, mostly through the efforts of private individuals, nearly every Indian city has a distinct divide between wealthy gated communities and poor slums. While one-third of India's urban population live in slums, India's city master plans typically only take "legitimate areas" into the planning process, leaving

slums to exist in planning black holes. Further, the vast majority of people living in these slums belong to disadvantaged communities. Our study revealed that two-thirds of slum-dwellers are Dalit, adivasi, Muslim or recent migrants.⁸ Given the weak municipal governance systems in most cities, disadvantaged social groups are routinely deprived of basic services such as water, health, education, sanitation, and legal protection. Thus, India's current urbanization process is producing divisive urban "winners and losers".

The Indian City as Base of Identity Politics

Our study also found an increasing exclusionary trend in the growth of identity politics that militates against "outsiders" or migrants. Single issue-based political parties and religious groups have made use of the governance vacuum in cities by promoting identity issues (such as "sons of the soil"-style arguments) and build their political constituencies in cities. A good case is the rise of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) in cities such as Mumbai and Pune in the last decade. Playing on the anxiety and insecurity of the majority Maratha community (people belonging to the state of Maharashtra), the MNS blames Bihari migrants for many local urban problems, arguing for discriminatory policies that create a substantial vote bank of single-issue anti-Bihari voters. With manufacturing and service sectors tumbling, and high-paying jobs now perceived as scarcer in big metropolises such as Mumbai, the "locals" who once shunned low-end jobs are now competing with migrants or so-called "outsiders". Many state level politicians have used these dynamics to their political advantage.

For the MNS and others, cities are increasingly used as the new political platforms for social and religious movements that have at heart exclusionary agendas. Of course, India's urban space can also produce positive stories, including the success of the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi, which was also founded as a single-issue party with a strong anti-corruption agenda. A number of smaller social movements have arisen in our case cities, including agitations against gender discrimination and corruption. It is important to note, however, that true success stories of urban transformations are rare, as urbanization and urban growth remain haphazard and unplanned

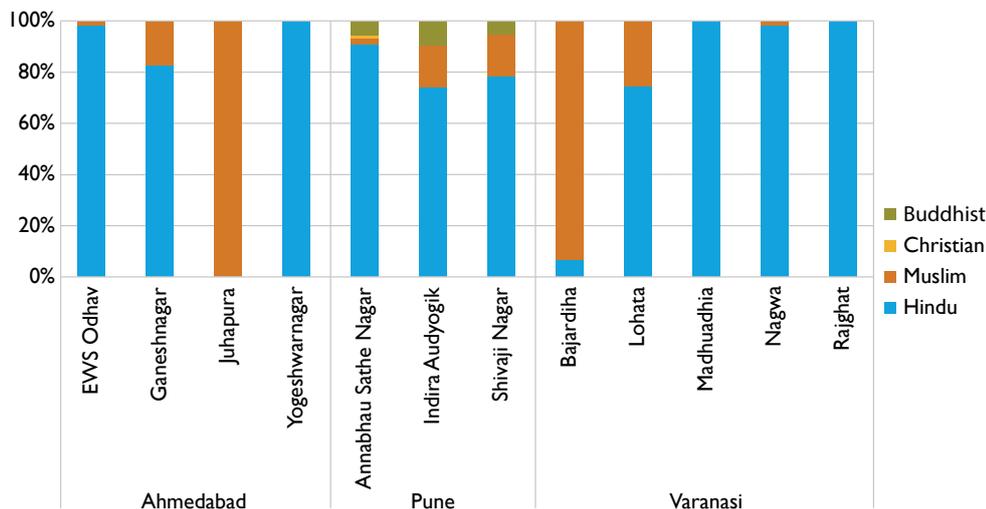


Figure 2: Religious composition of previously presented neighborhoods

and, perhaps more importantly, as individuals still tend to identify first with caste or religious identities that carry over from rural areas to their new urban "city dweller" alternatives.⁹

Letting India's Cities Run Themselves?

Why does decent urban governance continue to elude much of India? Part of the problem stems from the country's pro-rural democratic politics. For decades, the primary preoccupation of ruling elites at both the state and national levels has been with rural Indian concerns, largely due to demographics. Historically, urban issues have received relatively little attention from political leaders and other key decision makers. This has led to a skewed balance of power favoring rural issues and interests, or as framed by one analyst, "to get the votes in the village and use that power to rule and plunder the cities".¹⁰

More specifically, Indian cities today (and by extension those who run them) have few tools of governance or urban affairs institutions at their disposal. Urban local bodies have neither the capacity nor autonomy to address the myriad complex challenges they face, perennially too resource-starved to deliver infrastructure, services, law and order or other key services. Despite the 1993 constitutional recognition of urban governance in the 74th Amendment, decentralization and urban self-rule remain non-starters in most Indian cities as funds, functions and functionaries are yet to be devolved to urban local bodies.¹¹ Most Indian states and

bureaucratic elites are still opposed to genuine devolution to third-tier local bodies. Required to operate within dated planning laws that restrict flexibility, and operating within a federal system that gives both states and the centre potential power over local planning, local municipalities often have little recourse. This is compounded by the fact that none of India's big metropolises have produced a Mayor with adequate powers and functional jurisdictions to affect change.¹²

Bringing Urban India Forward

Potential answers to India's urban challenges lie in both the urban planning and political realms, and we argue that the latter are the most promising in the short term. The transformation of urban areas into more livable and inclusive spaces can come through the political recognition of urbanism and urban governance as matters of urgent priority. This can happen in two ways. First, addressing "informality" and "right to the city" concerns must be integral parts of urban planning and governance processes that structurally address the issues of exclusion and inequality in India's growing urban spaces. Second, insulating urban governance issues from both the entrenched nexus of real estate barons-politicians-bureaucratic elites as well as the losers from the previous decade of communal and vote bank politics can serve to slow or even reverse the current trend of urban spaces becoming more exclusionary, unaccountable and unwelcome places for the poorest and most disadvantaged.

As has successfully been achieved in many other global urban contexts, supporting a more empowered mayoral system in both cities and big metropolises can have tremendous positive benefits. What is accentuating India's slow devolution of powers to third-tier urban government is the continuation of a very weak mayoral system. For instance, none of the mayors of eight major cities in India handle more than 3 out of 10 critical functions, and nor do any have adequate powers on finance and staffing, the most critical areas to ensure good governance.¹³ Thus, an empowered mayoral system with longer tenure and adequate autonomy over both bureaucratic staff and city finances could greatly improve the flexibility and accountability of India's growing urban spaces. Indirectly, a strong mayoral system would also attract political talents to India's third tier, potentially transforming city politics and its governance. Reflecting upon the sheer size of populations aspiring to be in urban spaces and the magnitude of challenges that such rapid urbanization poses for a country, India's urbanization mission needs a "seismic shift" in thinking and action if it is to avoid substantial negative future outcomes. ■

Notes

1. See "India's Urban Awakening: Building Inclusive Cities, Sustaining Economic Growth", McKinsey Global Institute Report, 2010.
2. From 2001 to 2011, India's rural population increased by 90.06 million and its urban population grew by 91 million. See Census of India 2011, at censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/india/Rural_Urban_2011.pdf.
3. See S. Chandrasekhar and Ajay Sharma, "Internal Migration for Education and Employment among youth in India", *IGIDR Working Paper*, 2014, www.igidr.ac.in/index.php?view=article&id=350.
4. See McKinsey Global Institute Report, 2010, *Ibid*.
5. www.livemint.com/Politics/hxhVbsrdlLoe5nOszl00L/India-and-Bharata-are-the-same-says-IMRB-study.html.
6. A report by The Economic Times, articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-08-26/news/65886912_1_urban-areas-population-muslim.
7. The PRIO-ORF urban study data was collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods from the three above mentioned cities. To explore various facets of exclusion and access issues among the urban poor, an in-depth household survey of 300 respondents (heads of the household) from each city using random sampling methods was carried out. The household survey was complemented by qualitative data which was made possible through observation: in-depth interviews of officials, slum dwellers, local NGOs, community leaders, elected representatives apart from a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) involving small groups.
8. See study TKTKT for additional information.
9. Interestingly, Miklian and Birkvad (2016) find in Ahmedabad that identities of city belonging can be generated, specifically in instances where groups with ostensibly little in common (Hindus and Muslims) are perceived to be threatened by a third group, in this case Bangladeshi migrants. Jason Miklian and Ida Roland Birkvad, 2016. "Religion, Poverty and Conflict in the Garbage Slums of Ahmedabad." *International Area Studies Review*, forthcoming.
10. See Shekhar Gupta, "Anticipating India", *The Indian Express*, April 26, 2014, indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/anticipating-india.
11. McKinsey Report, 2010, *Ibid*.
12. New Delhi's recent progress can be at least partially credited to the fact that it is officially a territory (the National Capital Territory of Delhi), with a more consolidated power structure.
13. Srikanth Viswanathan, Power to the city, *The Indian Express*, June 13, 2014, indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/power-to-the-city.

THE AUTHORS

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THE PROJECT

The Urbanizing India (URBIN) project, funded by the Research Council of Norway, studies the interaction between three related social challenges and their implications for urban security: managing rapid urbanization and unplanned urban sprawl; ensuring sustained social and economic urban inclusion; and preparing for environmental change.

PRIO

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