

Breaking The Current Metropolitan Mold: Why India's Urban Future Must Be Inclusive **Rythm Setia**

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Background And Context

The path to prosperity in modern economic development is inextricably linked to urbanization. Cities have historically served as engines of growth, fostering innovation, enabling economies of scale, and creating the dense networks of talent and resources that power advanced economies. From the industrial revolution in Europe to the economic miracles of East Asia, the ability to efficiently concentrate economic activity, human capital, and infrastructure in urban areas has been paramount in lifting nations from low to high-income status, thereby emphasizing on planned urbanization as a defining factor for driving successful economic transformation. Yet the process of urbanization itself –its pace, quality, and inclusivity –often determines whether a country can successfully harness its demographic potential or succumb to the pitfalls of unplanned and inequitable urban growth.

In this context, while India's workforce is expanding significantly –with an estimated 9.7 million new potential workers entering the labor market annually during the current decade (Bardhan, 2024) –its overarching urbanization story presents a case of both missed opportunities and future potential. The country's demographic dividend is poised to profoundly shape its trajectory – influencing not only its GDP growth, but also its social structures, wealth distribution patterns, and the country's overall development path.

India's current urbanization patterns stand in stark contrast to its rapid economic growth, and are marked by inequality, exclusion, and unsustainability, thereby presenting a unique paradox. While China transformed from 20% to 64% urban in just four decades (1980-2020), India's urban population grew at a modest 1.15% annually between 2001-2011 (Leveraging Urbanization in India, 2015), reaching only 31% urbanization by 2011. Twelve years later, the figure roughly stands at 36% (*India Urban Population 1960-2023*). This sluggish pace, coupled with the exclusionary and unsustainable nature of urban development, represents both critical challenges and untapped opportunities.

Why India Must Reform Urban Development Policies

As millions of rural migrants seek better prospects across just a handful of Indian cities due to lackluster opportunities back home, India's urban infrastructure and policies have struggled to

create inclusive spaces, often reinforcing existing social and economic disparities. The burden of this exclusionary urbanization falls disproportionately on those already at society's margins – women facing restricted mobility and harassment in public spaces, persons with disabilities confronting inaccessible infrastructure, and lower-income communities pushed to precarious peripheral settlements lacking basic services. Moreover, with projections suggesting that Indian towns and cities will account for nearly 70% of the country's GDP by 2036(Kouamé, 2024), there is an urgent need to reimagine India's urban transformation and the state's defining role in steering this in the right direction – one that could augment socio-economic mobility for all. However, this will only succeed through deliberate policy interventions and inclusive planning that specifically addresses the aforementioned structural inequalities. India's path to realizing its long-term economic ambitions – especially that of achieving a developed country status by 2047, its 100th year of independence –critically hinges on addressing this dual challenge of catalyzing sustainable urbanization with inclusion.

A focus on inclusive urbanization is essential for several reasons. First, it can contribute to poverty reduction by providing marginalized communities with better access to economic opportunities, education, healthcare, and affordable housing. Second, it can help in bridging regional disparities by creating balanced growth across urban and rural areas, fostering a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. Finally, inclusive urbanization can promote social cohesion by empowering diverse communities to participate in the economic and political life of the nation. However, the road to inclusive urbanization in India is fraught with challenges. One of the most significant barriers is the widening gap between urban elites and disadvantaged groups, such as women, migrants, low-income families, differently abled and other marginalized sections. This is more pronounced in a country like India where these identities interact with each other to further entrench extant socio-economic challenges. These groups often face exclusion from basic services and upward mobility opportunities due to factors such as poor infrastructure, lack of affordable housing, discrimination, safety, healthcare and unequal access to jobs. Informal settlements, or slums, are a common feature in rapidly urbanizing Indian cities, where residents live in precarious conditions, devoid of proper sanitation, healthcare, and education. In addition, the rapid expansion of cities often leads to environmental challenges, including excessive pollution, waste management issues, and depletion of natural resources, which, in turn,

disproportionately affect the poorest urban residents, creating a vicious cycle of poverty, underdevelopment, and unsustainable urbanization.

Overcoming these challenges warrants the adoption of a far-sighted, comprehensive approach to urban planning and development – one that ensures marginalized communities have access to basic services such as clean water, sanitation, healthcare, and education while empowering them through economic opportunities and social protection programs.

Urban Challenges And Their Intersections With Socio-Economic Identities

While the challenges confronting urban India are multifarious, a non-exhaustive list would potentially begin with the absence of adequate infrastructure to serve the burgeoning populations of metropolitan cities. Additionally, deficient land allocation for housing the urban poor, lack of women's safety in public spaces resulting in inconducive atmospheres for women's economic participation, and inaccessibility to high quality healthcare and education, among other limitations, inadvertently prevent the optimization of state initiatives and resources aimed at advancing sustainable growth and development. These challenges are expanded upon below to understand how they intersect with class, gender and disability to create hostile urban environments for marginalized groups.

Reckless Urbanization A Bigger Problem For The Poor

The transformation of India's major cities in recent decades reveals a tale of two worlds: one of gleaming skyscrapers and modern amenities, and another of urban slums marked by persistent poverty and exclusion – the latter forming a periphery around the former both literally and metaphorically. As of 2020, 49% of India's urban population lived in slums (*World Bank Open Data*, n.d.), indicating an acute lack of state-regulated, affordable and practical housing solutions for the poor – majority of which are migrants – and, by extension, associated public goods provision that ensures quality of life.

Exclusionary, reckless urban development policies and siloed city planning absent empowered local governments fails to identify and address the challenges of the urban poor, and how infrastructural inadequacies further interact with their marginalized identities. Particularly in this context, with increasing urban migration and radial expansion of cities, the country's physical and socio-economic infrastructure is simply too weak to service swelling urban populations. Urban local bodies and municipalities severely lack institutional capacities – funds, functions, and functionaries – and there is limited political and administrative will to bring them up to

speed. This reflects the absence of poor accountability measures and skewed incentives. Research finds inconsistent and unclear financial reporting at the decentralized municipal level, indicating hazy welfare monitoring (*Strengthening Fiscal Health of Urban Local Bodies*, 2018). Moreover, effects of unsustainable growth and consequent climate adversities are undoubtedly far more pronounced for vulnerable groups, especially in terms of economic susceptibility – case in point being the inordinate Air Quality Index (AQI) scores in New Delhi. Although poor air quality affects the entire population of North India, it hits the capital city's poor far harder due to the physically strenuous and outdoor nature of their work and the unaffordability of advanced protection equipment such as air purifiers and oxygen masks. Beyond major cities, the rapid expansion of tier-2 and tier-3 cities in India is predominantly fueled by private sector capital flowing into local economies. However, this economic surge lacks corresponding public infrastructure development from state and local governments, leading to uneven and fragmented growth patterns across these regions. This market-driven urbanization naturally caters to those with existing advantages – be it wealth, education, or social capital – and thus provides selective access to opportunities and amenities. The absence of robust state intervention at the local level in infrastructure and public services provision means that the benefits of this growth remain concentrated among those who can afford to pay for private solutions, thereby deepening existing social and economic divides rather than bridging them.

Gender-Blind Urbanization Further Impedes Women's Mobility

An equally problematic impediment is the lack of safety in public places for women. Less than 40% of India's labor force comprises of women, that too with liberal estimates¹ (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024). Moreover, women's contribution to the formal economy stands at 18% (Woetzel et al., 2018), one of the lowest proportions in the world. To add to it, women's experiences in urban Indian cities paint a particularly troubling picture of exclusion and marginalization. The female labor force participation rate in urban areas was pegged at approximately 28% in 2023-24, and has shown only an 8 percentage-point growth in the last six years (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024). This incremental progress isn't merely a statistical concern but reflects deep-rooted structural barriers in urban spaces.

¹ Recent terminology and measurement changes in Periodic Labor Force Survey Data by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation incorporate unpaid economic work. While this can be seen as a corrective measure for earlier mismeasurement resulting from excluding unpaid work adding economic value to the country, the scope of definitions is conclusively expansive than international estimates such as that of International Labor Organization.

Urban planning continues to overlook women's specific needs, from inadequate street lighting that compromises safety to insufficient female-friendly public facilities. Owing to a lack of access to affordable public transportation that assures safety for women, a high number of women walk to their workplace (Buses Are Vital for Women's Economic Success in India. Here's Why, 2024). While the lack of access to public transport presents relatively similar problems for males who are discouraged to seek jobs in far-off areas, they often resort to hitchhiking, carpooling and other alternatives, which are unquestionably unsafe avenues for a majority of women, given the enduring prevalence of gendered violence in India. Well-reflected by their limited contribution to the economy's growth numbers, this in turn constrains women's job opportunity radius and keeps avenues for professional growth and subsequent prosperity at bay.

Devising gender-sensitized urban interventions becomes imperative to ameliorate women's participation in the economy. Through much needed improvements to security in public spaces, increased police patrolling, social awareness, transport access with extensive metro last mile connectivity, among other support systems, we can promulgate inclusive urban development. One critical piece of supportive evidence in this regard is the gendered transport subsidy rolled out by the Government of Delhi in 2019. In a bid to enhance women's socio-economic mobility, the government provided free access to public buses and ensured women's safety through employing security marshals on each bus, resulting in increased women ridership. Dissecting the impact of this policy on paid work and employment, Dasgupta et al. (2023) find large and statistically significant increases in employment of economically marginalized women, indicating safe transportation channels as a critical supply-side enabler for women's economic participation.

Insensitive Infrastructure A Catastrophic Urban Stressor For The Disabled

Constrained access to public-private spaces for persons with disabilities poses another key dimension of insensitive urbanization. Current urban infrastructure development fails over 2.2% of Indians that live with some form of physical or mental disability (*India - Survey of Persons with Disabilities NSS 76th Round: July 2018 - December 2018 - Overview*, 2022). The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPwD), 2016 represents a landmark shift in this direction, adopting a comprehensive approach to empowering the disabled (Nipman Foundation et al., 2024). The Act mandates specific provisions including employment quotas and educational reservations, while establishing accessibility standards for public infrastructure and services to

ensure full participation of differently-abled individuals in society. However, there has been little adherence on-ground, with grave bottlenecks in the implementation process, including but not limited to lack of political will stemming from poor monitoring and accountability measures – rendering the inclusivity provisions as merely perfunctory.

Despite the RPwD Act 2016 mandating accessibility in public spaces and infrastructure, inaccessibility persists as a lived reality for millions of disabled persons in India. While major metro cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore occasionally showcase accessible infrastructure like tactile footpaths and ramps, these are often poorly maintained, incorrectly designed, or rendered useless by encroachments and unauthorized usage. The situation is particularly dire in tier-2 and tier-3 cities, where basic accessibility features are virtually non-existent. Even celebrated infrastructure projects like metro rail systems, while partially accessible, often fail at the crucial last mile connectivity phase, with surrounding areas lacking basic features like continuous pavements or wheelchair-friendly surfaces. These challenges are compounded by India's complex urban landscape, where overcrowding, unauthorized construction, unmitigated encroachment and the coexistence of formal and informal settlements make implementation of accessibility standards particularly challenging. Municipal authorities frequently cite resource constraints or technical difficulties while continuing to approve new constructions that violate accessibility norms with impunity. Adding to these are issues with India's current mindset around socio-economic infrastructure for the disabled, case in point being a 5% Goods and Service Tax on disability aids – an absolute travesty of fairness and empowerment transcending urban-rural distinctions. Such issues collectively create a larger issue of '*invisibilisation*' (Nipman Foundation et al., 2024), as accessibility is a necessary precondition for persons with disabilities to enjoy their social, economic and political freedom.

While the concerns discussed above create significant barriers on their own, more often than not, identities intersect and exacerbate accessibility and mobility challenges for citizens. Though these intersectional limitations are redolent of the disparities largely found in metropolitans, they exacerbate in magnitude in tier-2 cities, tier-3 cities, rural areas and villages, necessitating holistic policy solutions that go beyond singular challenges and rural-urban disparities.

Way Forward

Though historically sluggish, India's projected urbanization trends are promising, with the population in towns and cities expected to reach 600 million by 2036, representing

approximately 40% of the total population and contributing almost 70% to the nation's GDP(Kouamé, 2024). While this explosive growth represents one of the largest urban transitions in human history, this wave is unfolding in a deeply inequitable manner in India. Recent data published by Oxfam India indicates that 40.5% of India's total wealth was owned by top 1% of the population, reflecting concerning income inequality (*Survival of the Richest: The India Story* / Oxfam India, 2023). This inequality manifests not just in income disparities but in every aspect of urban life, from access to basic services to opportunities for social mobility. As the nation sprints toward its economic ambitions, the current trajectory of urban development raises serious concerns about its inclusivity and long-term sustainability, representing not just a social challenge but a fundamental threat to India's aspirations of becoming a developed nation. Moreover, with an unsustainable precedent set by extant metropolitans, the country's emerging urban centers and developing towns continue to follow a flawed development model, warranting urgent attention and political prioritization.

That urbanization ought to be inclusive and sustainable is a universally acknowledged aphorism. Our government is undoubtedly aware of the various limitations that hinder this trajectory. As it deploys measures to overcome these challenges, the state must dial up the urgency on its policy interventions and take cognizance of its grave ramifications. Policies need to be actively enforced, and robust institutional capabilities must be built and devolved to local governments in tandem with incentivizing active political will through better accountability measures. If left unaddressed, this exclusionary and reckless urbanization will continue to undermine India's GDP estimates, with ramifications potentially impacting generations to come.

While governments target maximization of economic opportunities through urbanizing the masses by bridging the divide between tier-1, tier-2 and tier-3 cities, this endeavor presents a host of challenges that the government must responsibly navigate to promote equitable, sustainable and, most importantly, inclusive growth.

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