



Special issue on cities for social and economic development

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The UN estimates that more than half of the world's population lives in urban regions. Around the world, 7 out of 10 people are predicted to live in metropolitan areas by 2050. According to the World Bank, when handled properly, urbanization can create opportunities for a better life, provide a pathway out of poverty, and act as an engine of economic growth. Even at 31% urbanization, cities in India have a massive deficit in infrastructure and service delivery. We risk exacerbating this deficit further due to the exponential population growth, with significant adverse impacts on the urban poor and other marginalized groups, if we do not address the infrastructure and service delivery problems existing already. While urbanization is moving the global economy forward, rising inequality and exclusion within cities can derail the development progress. *So the focus of this special issue is to investigate how various aspects of the city economy and governance can be made conducive for India's social and economic development.*

Given finances are a significant answer to infrastructure and service delivery problems, we envisage that research on municipal finances in India and the limited sources of revenue generation in Indian cities is eminently pertinent for this special issue. The paper by Nallathiga and Sridhar on property taxation systems and revenue performance provides a comparative analysis of selected Indian cities—Pune and Hyderabad. The authors identify significant scope for enhancing municipal finances through reforms in tax policy design, valuation systems, and administrative efficiency, thereby addressing the growing fiscal pressures faced by urban local governments in delivering civic infrastructure and services. Their results imply the scope for improving the selected cities' property tax revenue through reforms in property tax policy and administration, which apply to other Indian cities too.

Not only finances, but cities are also adjudged by the extent of democratic involvement by citizens and their participation in governance of the city. This special issue asks the question of how best to govern India's cities. We attempt to understand the degree of decentralization and devolution of ULBs, in terms of governance, and citizen engagement in select cities. Here we ask if methods, laying down models for greater participation of citizens and policy interventions (both tech and non-tech), provide effective and efficient

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platforms in Indian cities. Alternatively, we may obtain insights into the systemic reasons for the lack of citizen participation and the ways to empower marginalized groups.

The paper by Riya Bhattacharya studies citizen participation in Dankuni municipality in West Bengal, with particular attention to suburban governance dynamics. The paper finds that formal participatory mechanisms such as ward committees are often ineffective due to low awareness, limited information dissemination, and informal engagement practices. The paper highlights differences between migrant and native populations in their modes of participation, underscoring asymmetries in representation and service delivery that require tailored policy responses. The findings point to the need for governance approaches that recognize diverse forms of participation rather than privileging only formal institutional channels.

Chittrakshi Pramod Shirke and Shelly Kulshreshtha turn the attention of this special issue on services for the urban poor, evaluating the effectiveness of the Comprehensive Complaint Redressal System (CCRS) in Ahmedabad's slums. Using a mixed-methods approach, their study documents service delivery challenges related to water supply and drainage and finds that many grievances remain unresolved despite the availability of digital complaint channels. The paper demonstrates that technology-enabled governance systems can remain exclusionary when issues of access, awareness, trust, and system design are inadequately addressed, thereby contributing to debates on digital governance by highlighting the limits of technological solutions in the absence of institutional responsiveness.

The paper by Divya Sharma investigates saving and credit behaviour among low-income households in unauthorized colonies in Delhi. Drawing on field interviews and survey data, the paper demonstrates that transaction costs, convenience, and financial literacy significantly influence both the decision to use financial instruments and the intensity of their usage. The study moves beyond the conventional focus on access to financial services and foregrounds the importance of meaningful, sustained use. By highlighting demand-side constraints and behavioural factors, it underscores the need for policy interventions that address practical barriers faced by marginalized urban populations rather than relying solely on supply-side expansion of financial infrastructure.

Shubham Shekhar, in his paper, interrogates the concept of splintering urbanism through an ethnographic study of two state-resettled slums in Patna. By comparing Kaushal Nagar and Lohanipur, the paper shows how communities negotiate and contest access to infrastructure in distinct ways, despite being established under the same housing scheme. The study challenges metro-centric and Global North-oriented applications of splintering urbanism, demonstrating that fragmentation in second-tier cities is shaped less by elite secession and more by everyday negotiations, spatial politics, and historically embedded exclusions.

Anukriti Negi, Priyabrata Sahoo and Tophan Patra, in their paper, construct a multidimensional deprivation index to assess urban deprivation across social groups and states in India. Covering housing, economic, social, and amenities dimensions, the paper reveals pronounced regional disparities and identifies specific dimensions in which Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes face heightened deprivation. Their findings underscore the need for targeted, dimension-specific interventions to address persistent subnational inequalities and demonstrate the value of multidimensional frameworks for understanding urban disadvantage.

Post-Covid, cities are assessed for their health care and insurance coverage. In their paper, Tarun Arora, Prashant Kumar Choudhary, and Namesh Killemsetty examine health insurance uptake in urban India using NFHS-5 data. Their paper documents the expansion of insurance coverage over time while highlighting that a substantial share of the urban population remains uninsured. The authors identify socio-economic, demographic, and regional determinants

shaping coverage, including financial inclusion, wealth status, caste, religion, and household gender dynamics. By drawing attention to differentiated access patterns within urban populations, this paper emphasises the need for policy frameworks that address heterogeneity rather than assuming uniform urban advantage, contributing to broader debates on social protection in rapidly urbanising societies.

An important characteristic of cities as engines of economic development is vehicular commute to access jobs. The paper by Vidya Mahabare, Sowmya Dhanaraj, Madhumitha Srinivasan and Anita Christopher analyse commuting patterns and gendered mobility in Bengaluru, Chennai and Mumbai. The study finds that commuting decisions are shaped by gender, with men more likely to use private modes of transport and women more likely to rely on intermediate public transport. The authors show that lower travel quality is associated with reduced workplace productivity, particularly for women, highlighting the intersection of infrastructure design, gender norms, and economic outcomes. The paper illustrates how transport systems are not merely technical infrastructures but social institutions that shape everyday urban experience.

A significant aspect of cities being discussed now, is sustainability, given cities contribute to more than 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Tarun Arora, Prashant Kumar Choudhary and Reetika Syal, in their paper, examine disparities in access to clean cooking fuel between Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe and non-SC/ST households using NSSO data. Employing decomposition analysis, the authors show that a significant share of the access gap remains unexplained by observable socio-economic characteristics, suggesting persistent structural discrimination. The paper calls for targeted policy interventions, including improved last-mile delivery, integration with housing schemes, and subsidies sensitive to caste and income data to ensure sustained adoption of clean energy solutions, situating energy access within broader questions of social justice and institutional inequality.

Most commute and traffic congestion problems are attributed to land use along problems with its acquisition. The paper by Yinghong Huang offers a comparative conceptual analysis of land development approaches in India and China. Proposing a typology based on participation and benefit-sharing, the paper identifies four land development models and evaluates their socio-economic implications. By arguing that no single approach is universally optimal, the study encourages policymakers to move beyond compulsory land acquisition and adopt more context-sensitive and participatory development frameworks. The comparative perspective enriches debates on land governance by highlighting the importance of institutional design and local conditions in shaping development outcomes.

Collectively, the papers in this special issue illuminate the structural complexities of urban transformation in India, revealing how fiscal constraints, governance deficits, social hierarchies, infrastructural inequalities, and institutional design interact to shape lived urban experiences and how we can make them environmentally and socially sustainable. The contributions converge on a central insight: urban policy must move beyond aggregate indicators and uniform solutions towards differentiated, evidence-based, and inclusive approaches that acknowledge the heterogeneity of Indian cities. By foregrounding both structural constraints and local agency, the studies provide a nuanced understanding of how urban systems function in practice. We hope this special issue will advance academic scholarship, stimulate interdisciplinary inquiry, and inform policymaking aimed at building more equitable, resilient, and participatory cities.