

## Review Article

# The State of Urban Governance and Urban Planning: Bridging the Participation Gap for Marginalised Communities

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## A B S T R A C T

Urbanisation in India has been rapid, significantly impacting urban governance and planning, particularly for marginalised communities. Despite contributing substantially to the national GDP, Indian cities face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, environmental degradation, and housing shortages, which disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. The constitutional mandate for inclusive governance often falls short in practice, leading to gaps in public participation in urban planning. Climate change exacerbates these issues, intensifying the need for robust climate adaptation strategies and inclusive governance. This paper examines the state of urban governance and planning in India, highlighting the participation gaps for marginalised communities and the urgent need for sustainable and inclusive urban development practices. Through an analysis of governance structures, planning mechanisms, and case studies, the paper underscores the importance of climate justice and community engagement in building resilient urban environments. It calls for adopting global best practices tailored to the Indian context to ensure equitable and sustainable urban growth.

**Keywords:** Urbanisation, Marginalised Communities, Urban Governance and Planning, Climate Change, Climate Justice, Resilience, Migration, Community Engagement, Land Management, Public Policy, Direct Democracy, Democratic Governance, Neighbourhood Forum

## Introduction

Ever wondered what really drives a city's success? It's easy to get caught up in the glitz of towering skyscrapers and bustling streets. But beneath the surface lies a crucial, often overlooked factor: the people—the true backbone of urban life. Think about it this way: You can have all the flashy tech and top-down policies in the world, but without active involvement from the people who call the city home,

those grand plans are just empty promises. That's where things get interesting. In the world of urban governance, it's not just about drafting policies and planning from above—it's about ensuring those policies actually work for the people they're meant to serve. And that's where marginalised communities come into play. They're the ones who often bear the brunt of urban challenges, from inadequate infrastructure to environmental hazards. Yet, their voices are frequently sidelined in the decision-making

process. What should be noted here is: that empowering these communities isn't just a matter of social justice—it's key to building resilient, sustainable cities for everyone. So, in this article, we'll take a closer look at the critical link between inclusive urban planning, active community participation, and climate resilience. Because when it comes down to it, the success of any urban system hinges on its ability to harness the collective power of its people. Let's explore how bridging the gap between policy and people can pave the way for a brighter, more inclusive future in our cities.

Urbanisation is a global phenomenon and in India, it has accelerated dramatically over the past few decades, with the urban population rising to 35.8% by 2022.<sup>1</sup> The popular notion of development revolves around urban models and smart cities, projecting a vision where the comforts of life—from basic services to educational opportunities and luxuries—are ensured for a better quality of life. In contrast, rural life is often associated with ignorance and illiteracy. The resilience and resources inherent in rural areas are rarely considered in the broader development paradigm. Cities like Mumbai, Delhi, and Chennai have become economic powerhouses, significantly contributing to the national GDP. Following these models even smaller cities and towns are multiplying the urbanisation trend as development. However, this rapid urbanisation has brought numerous challenges, particularly concerning urban governance and planning, and has exposed significant gaps in the participation of people, particularly marginalised communities. According to a United Nations estimate, by 2050, 85% of the world's population will live in urban areas.<sup>2</sup>

### Urbanisation Surge and Its Impacts

Globally, it is a well-established fact that climate change and disasters are largely human-made and impact all regions, whether urban or rural. However, urban development significantly exacerbates these effects. Burgeoning populations and expanding city boundaries characterise India's urban landscape. When we take the case of Tamil Nadu, which is one of India's most urbanised states, 48.4% of its population living in urban areas as of 2011. As per the report of the Technical Group by the National Commission on Population, the population of Tamil Nadu is projected to be 7.71 crores, as of July 1, 2024.<sup>3</sup> It is also projected that the percentage of the urban population will reach up to 60.53% by 2036 (Table 1). However, public participation in this urban growth is significantly lower than in rural areas.

Chennai, the state capital, exemplifies the urbanisation trend and highlights vulnerability to climate change, including sea-level rise and extreme weather events. The state faces severe water scarcity due to erratic monsoon patterns and groundwater depletion, and urban flooding is a recurrent problem, as seen in the major floods of

**Table 1. Urbanisation in Four South Indian States 1991-2011 (Urban Population Figures in Percentages)**

State/Year	1991	2001	2011	2036 Projection <sup>4</sup>
Andhra Pradesh	26.9	27.3	33.49	43.06
Karnataka	30.9	33.99	38.67	51.37
Kerala	26.4	26	47.7	49.56
Tamil Nadu	34.2	44	48.4	60.53
Telangana	The data included as part of Andhra Pradesh			50.94

2015, 2021, and 2024. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires sustainable urban planning and robust climate adaptation strategies to ensure resilient growth.

The state has also consistently announced the merger of rural local bodies (Panchayats) into urban local bodies, yet these entities have little say in urban development and planning.<sup>5</sup> As smaller towns in Tamil Nadu emerge as economic hubs, they attract a steady influx of migrant populations seeking job opportunities. This migration, however, often leads to degrading living conditions, strained infrastructure, and inadequate basic amenities. The demand for housing frequently outstrips supply, resulting in the proliferation of informal settlements and slums.

Further, Climate change has intensified the challenges faced by Indian cities. The average temperature in India has risen by 0.7 °C from 1901 to 2018, leading to an increased frequency of extreme weather events such as heatwaves, floods, and cyclones (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2018).<sup>6</sup> In 2019 alone, India experienced 23 extreme weather events, resulting in 1,659 deaths.<sup>7</sup> Cities like Chennai and Mumbai are particularly vulnerable to these impacts. Further, Chennai experienced severe flooding in 2015, followed by significant floods in 2021 and 2024. These events caused extensive damage to infrastructure and displaced thousands of residents, with marginalised communities bearing the brunt of the impact due to their inadequate living conditions and limited resources.<sup>8</sup>

Heatwaves have also become more frequent and severe, posing significant health risks to urban populations. In 2019, India experienced one of its most prolonged heatwaves, with temperatures soaring above 45°C in several cities, leading to over 350 deaths.<sup>9</sup> In April-May 2024, deadly heatwaves are severely affecting marginalised communities across Asia. The urban poor, often in overcrowded and poorly ventilated housing, are particularly vulnerable to

heat-related illnesses.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation's recent report, titled 'State of the World's Land and Water Resources for Food and Agriculture: The System at Breaking Point' (2021), emphasises the pressing need for attention to a previously overlooked aspect of public policy and human welfare: safeguarding the future of land, soil, and water. Similarly, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's special report on 'Climate Change and Land' (2019) recommends that countries conduct thorough assessments of land management practises and suggest various immediate and long-term strategies.<sup>10</sup> These strategies prioritise land management options that alleviate competition for land while maximising co-benefits and minimising adverse effects on essential ecosystem services.

### Governance and Planning Challenges

Urban planning and governance in India face numerous hurdles that impede sustainable development, especially for marginalised communities. Infrastructure deficits, such as inadequate transportation and water supply, exacerbate pollution and congestion, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. Children and agricultural workers are significantly more exposed to urban heat risks, while wealthier households with electricity access benefit more from green space.<sup>11</sup> Housing shortages drive marginalised groups into informal settlements, exacerbating urban sprawl and social inequalities. People's participation, even that of elected representatives of urban local governments in planning is dismal.

An observational study conducted in Chennai, partitioning it into 10 zones to observe the resilience of communities to disasters, found that the communities in northern and older parts of Chennai have lower resilience compared to newer urban fringe areas.<sup>12</sup> Emissions in North Chennai exemplify how significant industries, including thermal power plants and foundries, operate beyond control. Unregulated and unauthorised activities on the coast lead to suffocation for local people, who have no platform to voice their concerns except through the courts. Environmental sustainability suffers due to insufficient green spaces and poor pollution control, further marginalising communities already burdened by adverse living conditions. According to another observational study done in Gujarat, the socially disadvantaged populations are more likely to live near hazardous industrial facilities, Fragmented governance and corruption exacerbate these challenges, hindering effective urban management and increasing disparities.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, climate change impacts often hit marginalised communities hardest, necessitating urgent climate resilience, mitigation, and adaptation measures.

Agencies like the Chennai Metropolitan Development

Authority and the Town and Country Planning Board wield enormous power over the urban landscape, extending even to rural areas through environmentally unsustainable land use plans to boost tourism. In the hilly regions like the Nilgiris, Yelagiri Hills, and Kodaikanal and also the Coastal regions through the Coastal Regulation Zone, the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority controls planning approvals, sidelining elected local governments and panchayats.<sup>14</sup> The elected local governments with the representation of local communities, particularly Indigenous tribal and fisherfolk do not get the opportunity to voice their concerns.

The above examples highlight the deficiencies in the governance system in addressing the challenges posed by growing urbanisation. They further underscore the urgent need to explore how cities are being challenged by climate change and historical legacies, which together create disproportionate impacts on human communities, particularly those already marginalised.

The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) mandates the formation of Ward Committees and other local government institutions to ensure citizen participation in urban governance. However, implementing and functioning these participatory mechanisms must often catch up to expectations.<sup>15</sup> Despite the constitutional mandate for inclusive governance through mechanisms like Area Sabhas, the participation of marginalised communities in urban planning processes still needs to be improved. Planning authorities do not have any legal mandate to present proposals before Area Sabhas and listen to their voices. Different from Gram Sabhas in rural local governments (Panchayats), Area Sabhas need a system of participation and dialogue between people and authorities. The Gram Panchayat Development Planning (GPDP) facilitates people's participation in village planning and utilising and preserving natural resources. Programmes like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) are designed to protect natural resources. However, urban local governments have yet to create such platforms or comprehensive schemes.<sup>16</sup>

Many rural local bodies resist merging rural local governments into urban local governments (municipalities, town panchayats, and corporations). Despite severe objections, the state government is determined to merge these panchayats into urban bodies. The elected representatives in urban local governments often need more orientation in urban planning or any space for participation in state government decisions. Consequently, marginalised communities, including low-income earners, minorities, and indigenous groups, often bear the brunt of inadequate infrastructure, housing insecurity, and environmental degradation. Their voices are frequently

marginalised in decision-making processes, leading to urban policies failing to address their needs and concerns. Discrimination and exclusion further exacerbate their vulnerability, perpetuating cycles of poverty and social inequality.

### **Climate Justice and the Need for Inclusive Governance**

Climate justice emphasises climate change's disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations and calls for fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people in climate-related policies and practices. In India, this means ensuring that marginalised communities are protected from the adverse effects of climate change and actively participate in developing and implementing solutions.

Incorporating the perspectives and priorities of marginalised groups into urban planning is essential for creating inclusive and equitable cities. Further, developing institutional design propositions for inclusive and equitable climate governance at multiple levels is essential to the commitment to climate justice.<sup>17</sup> Ensuring their meaningful participation in decision-making processes and implementing targeted interventions to address their needs are crucial steps toward building more just and resilient urban environments.

### **Western Experience**

Learning from global best practices, urban planners and policymakers can adopt innovative strategies to foster greater community engagement. For instance, cities in the United States have established robust systems of local governance and citizen participation mechanisms like Neighbourhood Forums. In Atlanta, the Neighbourhood Planning Unit (NPU) system divides the city into several NPUs, each representing a cluster of neighbourhoods. These NPUs hold regular meetings where residents can discuss and provide input on various community issues, including urban planning, zoning, and public safety.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, the Sunshine Laws in the United States mandate that meetings, records, votes, deliberations, and other official actions are available for public observation, participation, and inspection. This transparency ensures that government decision-making processes are open to public scrutiny, fostering greater accountability and public trust. By adopting similar transparency measures, Indian urban governance can enhance community involvement and ensure that the needs and concerns of all citizens are addressed. The NPU system and Sunshine Laws are designed to facilitate greater citizen participation in government decision-making processes, ensuring that community members have a voice in shaping the future of their neighbourhoods. By adapting these practices to the Indian context, urban governance can become more

inclusive and effective.

Similarly, Brazil's participatory budgeting process in cities like Porto Alegre allows citizens to directly decide how to allocate part of the municipal budget.<sup>19</sup> This practice fosters greater transparency and public involvement in governance. In Germany, local advisory councils (Ortsbeirat) provide a platform for residents to discuss local issues and offer recommendations to the city council, ensuring significant influence on local policies.<sup>20</sup> Vancouver in Canada has Neighbourhood Planning Assemblies that bring together residents, businesses, and other stakeholders to participate in urban planning and decision-making processes.<sup>21</sup>

In Switzerland, the system of direct democracy empowers citizens to propose changes to the constitution and veto laws passed by the government, ensuring high levels of public participation and transparency in governance.<sup>22</sup> The United Kingdom's Localism Act 2011 empowers local communities to have a greater say in their governance through Neighbourhood Planning, allowing communities to come together to decide the future development of their areas.<sup>23,24</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The state of urban governance and planning in India reveals significant gaps in the participation of marginalised communities, exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. Addressing these gaps requires a comprehensive approach prioritising sustainable development, equitable resource distribution, and robust community participation. According to Article 243W of the 74th Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution, individuals who work for the welfare of society, particularly marginalised and underprivileged communities, should be encouraged to participate in governance.

The real representation in democratic governance is about understanding and fulfilling the diverse needs of the people. Accountability of the government, adherence to laws and regulations, and transparency in governance are also integral aspects of accurate representation. India, with the majority of its population residing in rural areas, is striving to enhance the quality of life by transitioning to urban settlements. This transformation would help to break the clutches of the cultural constraints of caste and class combinations and bring economic progress while upholding principles of equity and justice for the poor and marginalised. By adopting inclusive strategies, we can build resilient urban environments that cater to the needs of all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. Ensuring that marginalised voices are heard and considered in urban planning is a matter of justice and a crucial step toward sustainable and climate-resilient urban development.



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