

Forming Cities and Transforming Societies

The Influence of Urbanization on Society in the Indian Context

Anusha Muralidhar



Source: Housing and Urbanization, Charles Correa, 1999

1 Introduction

India forms 17.70 % of the World's population today (World Population Review, 2020), with over 1.3 billion citizens. The country has an area of 3,287,240 sq.km and 454.94 inhabitants per square kilometre in 2020.

According to the World Bank census, about 66% of India's population is still rural, while the remaining 34%, consisting of the population in cities and smaller towns, is under rapid urban development. The country also did not undergo urban expansion until it gained independence from the British rule in 1947, much later than the rest of the World. The Indian urban context is thus exceedingly different from the rest of the World.

Figure 1.2: Global patterns of urbanization, 1995

Source: Based on United Nations, 2014b.

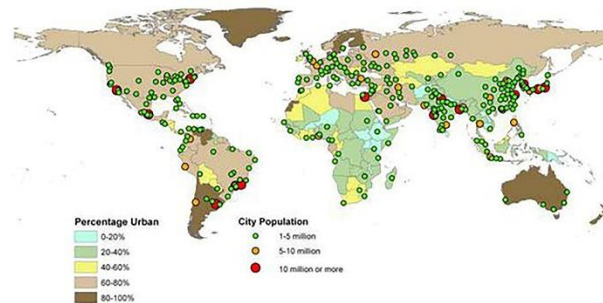


Figure 1.3: Global patterns of urbanization, 2015

Source: Based on United Nations, 2014b.

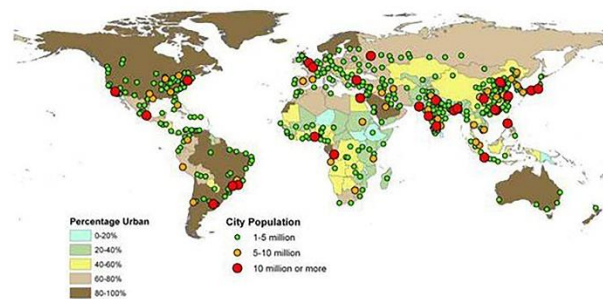


Photo: Global Patterns of Urbanization in 1995 and 2015

Source: Urbanization and Development, UN-Habitat, 2016

In the Indian context, urbanization is as much a social process, as it is an economic and specialized process. Cities often act as the commencement grounds for social change that offer financial and cultural possibilities and directly affect rural societies.

Since cities play such a significant role in influencing societies, rapid urbanization in these areas brings about more significant problems, that affect all strata of society. Hence there is a need to inspect the possibility of changing societies by changing the way we look at cities, their function and planning.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Urbanization and Development: Emerging Futures, UN-Habitat

The document is an analysis of urban development around the World in the last twenty years. It starts off talking about the various problems associated with increasing urban population in the World.

The document puts forward the issues and challenges emerging on an urban level due to increased urban population. Some of the problems are change in family patterns, increased residency in slums and other informal settlements, challenges in providing urban services, climate change, exclusion, segregation, rising inequality, insecurity and increase in international migration.

The report provides examples and evidence to prove the fact that positive change can be achieved with a newer and more innovative approach to collaboration between nations and organizations, planning in developing and under-developed countries, better governance, finance, cooperation and learning.

Through this report, the message that the current situation of urbanization needs to change is promoted. The report argues that evolving our processes of design and planning can help fight the battle against inequality, societal stigmatization, insecurity, sustainability and climate change.

The proposed "New Urban Agenda" aims to approach development in the city-scale, implement new policies with a sense of urgency, to use urbanization as a tool to achieve sustainability, and to introduce transformative change in the urbanization model that can be adapted to any circumstance.

Along with the New Urban Agenda comes a "City Prosperity Initiative", which is a multi-purpose platform to collect data through surveys in a city (City Prosperity Index), understand factors which generate or inhibit prosperity in that city, change these components by implementing policies, strategies and action plans, and monitor the outcome of these policies and strategies.

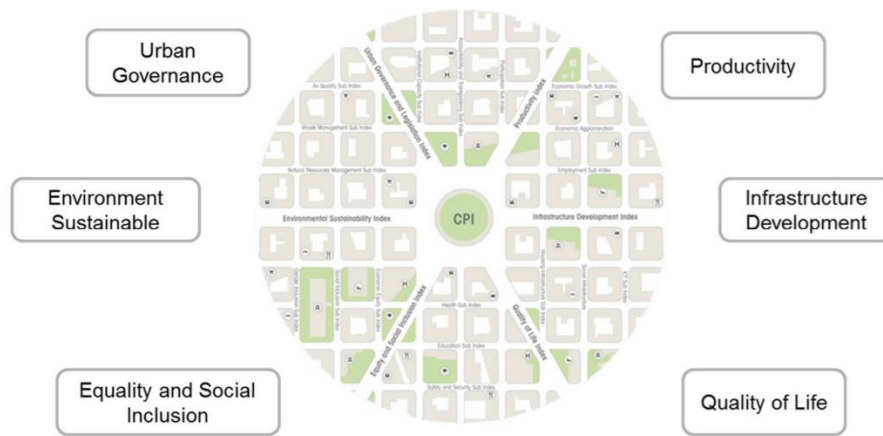


Photo: The Wheel of Urban Prosperity

Source: *Urbanization and Development: Emerging Futures, 2016*

2.2 Urban Development in India in the Twenty-First Century: Policies for Accelerating Urban Growth, Rakesh Mohan, Shubhagato Dasgupta



Source: *Urban Development in the Constitution of India, Dr Binti Singh, 2018*

The paper is a statistical analysis of the urbanization patterns in India in the 20th Century. The authors compare the global statistics of urbanization to that in India in the early 1900s and the early 2000s, establishing the urban context and discussing the future projections for urban growth in India. For instance, where the urban population in the World was around 250 million in 1900, and 2.9 billion in 2001, urbanization in India was only beginning in the late 1900s. India did not experience an explosive increase in the urban population in the twentieth Century, like the rest of the World. Moreover, there was only a small

margin of growth in urban populations from 1951 to 1981. However, the magnitude was much higher, as the increase in urban population from 1990 to 2001 was 70 million. India hence experienced a slow, but steady urbanization. Despite problems like low per-capita income and deficit in urban investments, that followed urbanization, India coped well. The urban population had increased from 62 million in 1951 to 285 million in 2001. Four of the largest cities in the World and in history were now in India.

Increase in urban populations also came with challenges in improving urban services. These challenges were compounded with infrastructure having to support economic development. The task was further complicated with growing urban populations. Many of these problems exist even today. The government, along with private organizations, is actively seeking, devising and implementing solutions to these problems.

3 Critique and Discussion

Several trends that encourage urbanization in India can be recognized. Some of these are the involvement of the private sector in city planning and development, the 'Smart Cities' initiative by the central government, focus on 'special economic zones' such as the IT sector, fashion and apparel, and petrochemical industries, industrial townships, and so on.

Until the early twenty-first Century, India experienced a measured yet steady urbanization (Mohan, Dasgupta, 2000). A rapid and unprecedented urbanization later followed, succeeded by changes in attitudes, values, beliefs and bringing about the significant transformation of cities, their people and hence societies (Mohan, Dasgupta, 2004).

3.1 Urbanization and Urban Sprawl

The most notable byproduct of India's rapid urbanization is urban sprawl. As the population in the country increased, and the cities underwent urban development, a large percentage of the rural population began to migrate to the urban regions in search of better opportunities and a better lifestyle (Jayaswal, Saha, 2014).

Mass migration, over the years, caused overcrowding in cities, which led to unplanned horizontal development of these cities, resulting in the current urban sprawl situation in India (Jayaswal, Saha, 2014).

Urban Sprawl led to a change in land use in cities. It hindered proper urban development outside the inner core of the city, leading to the development of informal settlements and, in some cases, development of vast slums surrounding the city (Mohan, Dasgupta, 2004). The main impact of this horizontal development is the loss of agricultural lands, open land, and economically sensitive areas around the city.

3.2 Consequences of Urbanization on Society

The rise in the number of residents not only affects the character of the city but also leads to social segregation. As more people interact in a given setting, the likeliness of them being from different backgrounds, economically and socially, is much higher. This leads to stigmatization and also a feeling of not belonging. The result is the lack of ordinary social relationships between neighbours, bonds and kinship, and sentiments of living together for generations (Mukherjee, 2003).



Photo: Conditions in a small town on the outskirts of Bengaluru city

Source: youarticlelibrary.com

Social structure largely influences the family organization. This has been seen to be true in recent decades in Indian society and families. For instance, the main focus a few decades ago was to raise a family, but today, the main focus is for the family to have multiple sources of income. As this change started occurring, women started stepping out to earn a living, giving rise to the need for child care services.

Another result of migration due to urbanization is unemployment. Overcrowding makes it impossible for every resident to find a job in the city (Jayaswal, Saha, 2014). The change in family structure resulted in rising expectations for economic growth in a family, which remains to be the primary motivation between most crimes today. Moreover, urbanization led to rapid economic liberalization, political upheaval, violent conflicts, and so on (Jayaswal, Saha, 2014). Hence, Urban areas tend to be the base for criminal activity.

Urbanization in a country as huge, culturally contrasted and diversely populated as India, has brought about a range of issues that contribute to a large part of urban life in the country. Hence, there is a need to recognize these problems and find innovative solutions to deal with them.

3.3 The Rural-Urban Concept

It is time to acknowledge the presence of a "rural-urban dichotomy" and a "rural-urban continuum" (Mukherjee, 2003). The concept of people moving from rural areas to urban regions presents as a rural-urban dichotomy. In contrast, the connection these people establish between the places they migrate to, and the places they emigrate from forms a rural-urban continuum.

Whereas today, the concept of "rural" is often generalized as a village economy based on agriculture, and the concept of "urban" is translated into infrastructure investments (Mukherjee, 2003). This intellectual response to urbanization leads to ignorance and neglect in understanding India's urban context, hence preventing the introduction of effective policies of development. Moreover, simplification of the nuances each of these concepts holds results in a mostly underperforming political rural economy, and an unplanned, unsystematic urban scenario (Mukherjee, 2003).

Urban scenarios are surprisingly neglected and often misunderstood in the broader development context. Rural and urban life and economies are often seen as entirely separate, but they are more intimately linked and interdependent than many realize (Tannerfeldt, Ljung, 2006). This not only holds for India but also for a large part of the World. There is hence an urgency to look at these issues carefully before introducing and implementing new policies for development.

4 Urban Shelter Design

The first issue we have to address is the negative connotation we have associated with urbanization. Many view urbanization as negative and threatening, since it is easy to point to growing slum areas, environmental degradation and social gaps. But cities contribute to development, and urbanization is both a requirement for – and a result of – economic, cultural and social development. The aim is to promote sustainable cities where all citizens have opportunities to improve their living conditions (Tannerfeldt, Ljung, 2006).

The most significant problems with urban development in India are the overpopulation in cities and the resulting urban sprawl. These urban problems, when recognized concerning the geographic, economic, political and social context, can often have simple solutions.

On a planning level, solutions such as placing highways and expressways on the outskirts of the city, vertical densification of the city and proper connections between the central core and the suburbs can be implemented to improve the present conditions of urban sprawl and all the problems that come with it.



Photo: Most central parts of Mumbai have a FAR of only 1.3

Source: nextcity.org, 2014

4.1 Proposed Solutions

Re-densification of the city's core could draw a lot of the population into the city than surround it, making necessary facilities like running water, electricity and healthcare accessible to them. This, with more opportunities for employment, could potentially solve the issues of slum formation and associated crime.

Moreover, physical elements like the hierarchy of spaces, sizes, territorial boundaries and nature of spaces and the usage of available facilities could affect the rate of social interaction.

Mixed land use is another step in providing a solution for urban sprawl and creating communities within neighbourhoods. Creating mixed-use spaces not only increases walkability, reduces travel costs and fuel usage, but also strengthens newly settled communities instead of alienating them to the outskirts of the city, as is the case with urban sprawl.

Socialized housing and other social welfare projects could also help in this process, provided, the people are put first, and their needs are considered essential.

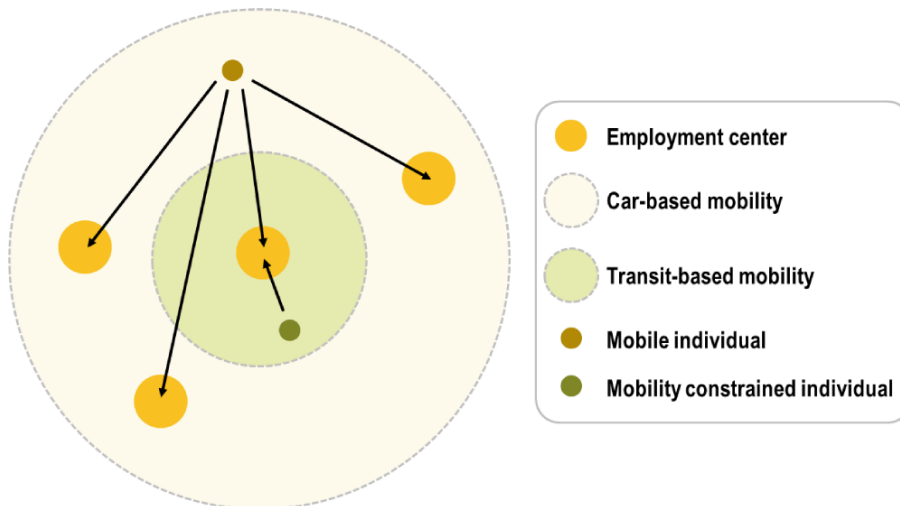


Photo: Mobility Gaps in Urban Areas

Source: *The Geography of Transport Systems*, Dr Jean-Paul Rodrigue, 2006

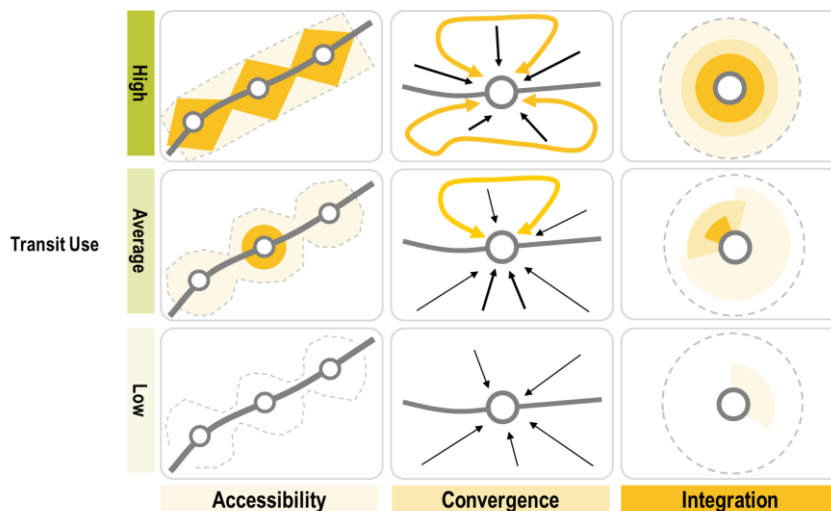
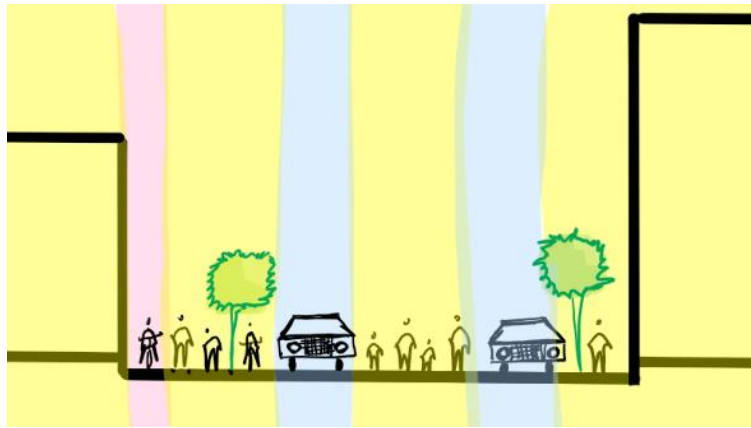
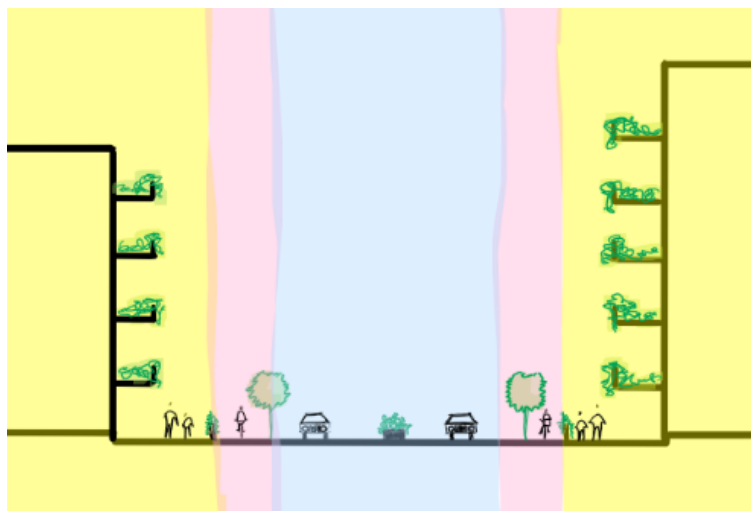


Photo: Transit and Urban Land Use Impacts

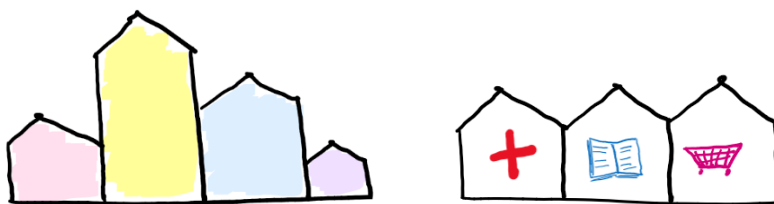
Source: *The Geography of Transport Systems*, Dr Jean-Paul Rodrigue, 2006



Sketch: Existing situation in India - Planning absent on street level, mixed bicycle, vehicular and pedestrian zones



Sketch: requirement – clearly demarcated pedestrian, bicycle and vehicular zones, and in general, planning at street level.

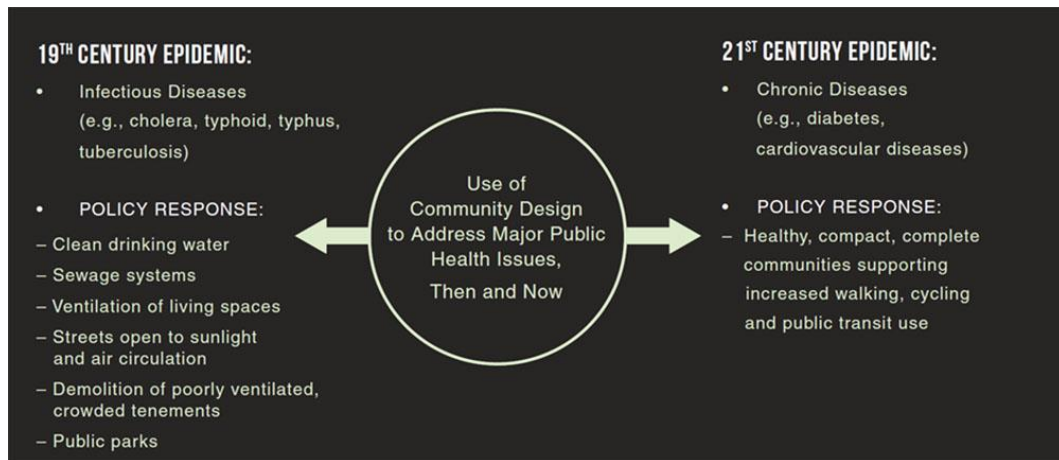


Sketch: Mixed density and mixed-use planning to counter urban development challenges

4.2 Designing for a Pandemic

The mingling of urban design and public health is of increasing significance today. Even though the spread of the coronavirus feels unprecedented, it is not the first time public spaces and urban settings have given rise to a pandemic (Klaus, 2020).

Comparing other pandemics like SARS and MERS to COVID -19, the mortality rate is a lot lower. However, the rate of infections is higher, and the symptoms being dormant for a long time in case of the coronavirus makes it challenging to prevent spread.



Source: Peel Region Health by Design, 2014

Rethinking density management is key for long-term survival in a pandemic world. Part of this means thinking about the decentralization of essential services (Klaus, 2020).

The first step, in this case, would be to devise ways in which a large number of tests can be conducted, even at a door-to-door level, especially in urban settings. The next step would be to design urban environments to enable such actions to take place.

With regards to the current pandemic, I believe that small changes in design need to be made in everyday life, especially in cities and other urban settings. Some could be as simple as eliminating the use of hand-operated elevators, and railings, public spaces that are divided into smaller compartments for smaller numbers of users, and broader, divided staircases.

On a planning level, it is essential to consider smaller pocket spaces for usage by a limited number of people, backyard and front yard spaces for residential settings, breathing spaces between larger buildings, and divided streets and isolated pathways.

Newer ways to design public buildings is of utmost importance. Distanced workspaces, cafeterias without seating, and drive through cafes are to become our future realities. Moreover, office spaces may become smaller, and residences may become more prominent with more people working from home than at the office.

5 The Role of Architects and Urban Designers

I believe architecture has the power to imbibe emotions of excitement, peace, anger, frustration, fear, and so on, depending on the way space is designed. Built environments, hence, hold the ability to influence social and cultural behaviours. We often think about what factors affect the design, and not about how the design affects the user.

We have seen through history that social and cultural practices determine how specific spaces are designed. However, we see the society and the World changing and adapting to how we choose to design our spaces, streets and cities today. The role of an architect today, in my opinion, is to consider these changes, the social, geographic, economic, political and cultural climate of said region, while designing a building or space. We, through our designs, hold the potential to changes people's lives for the better or for worse.

It is more critical now during a pandemic, than it ever was, to consider the role we can play in changing the World. It is our responsibility, as designers, to adapt to the changing world around us and come up with newer and more suitable solutions to prevent future scenarios like the current pandemic.

As planners and designers, there is a need for us to consider the streets, neighbourhoods and the cities we design, as functions for the people, for people from cities, and cities establish identities.

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