

THE CIVIL LENS

Zooming in on what matters

An Initiative by the students of MA Public Policy (2025-27), IILM University, Greater Noida

This Month's Exclusive Read

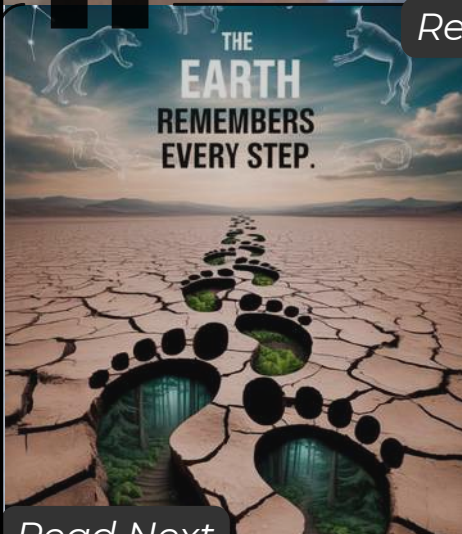
Can democracy thrive in an atmosphere of persistent intimidation?



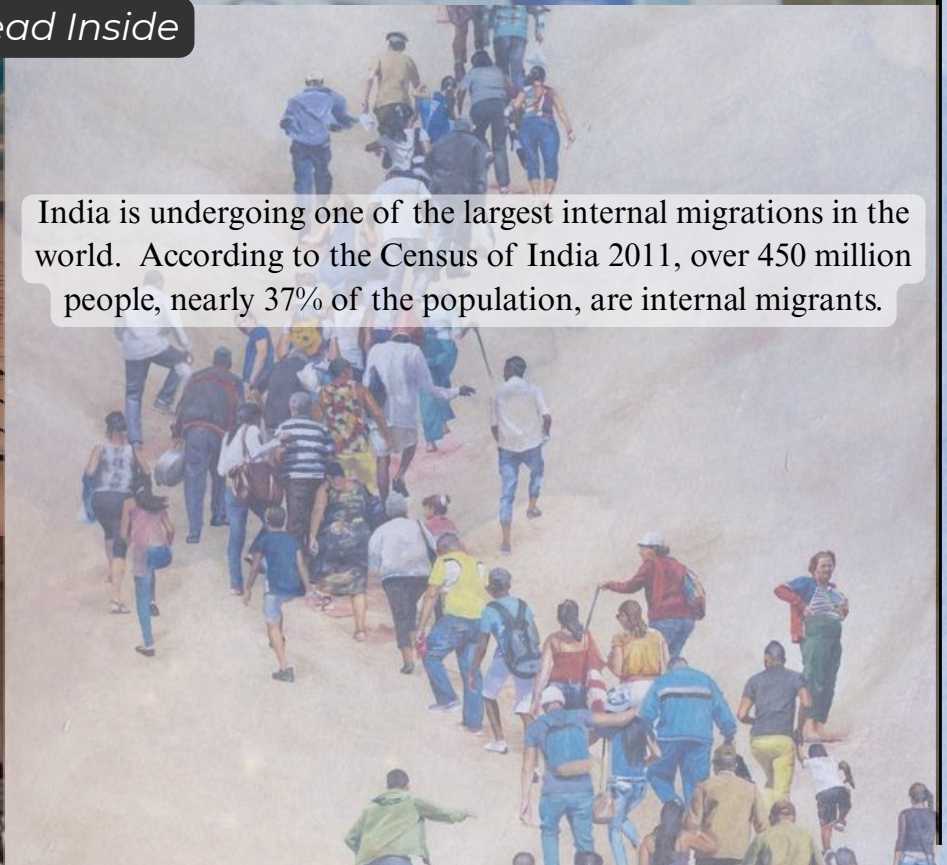
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THE
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EVERY STEP.



India is undergoing one of the largest internal migrations in the world. According to the Census of India 2011, over 450 million people, nearly 37% of the population, are internal migrants.



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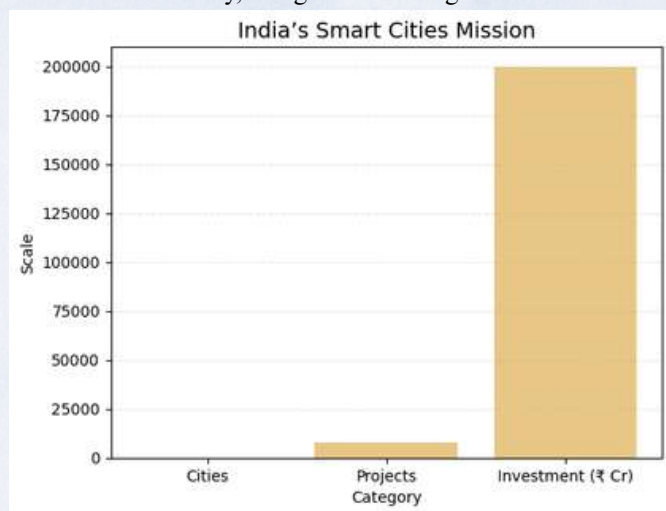
Between data and democracy: India's smart city dilemma

MEHAK BANSAL, *Managing Editor*

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India's urban future is increasingly being imagined through the language of "smartness." From integrated command-and-control centres to AI-driven surveillance, sensor-based infrastructure, and digital governance platforms, the Smart Cities Mission promises efficiency, sustainability, and improved quality of life. But beneath this promise lies a critical question: who is the smart city really built for?

Launched in 2015, the Smart Cities Mission covers 100 cities, with an estimated investment of over ₹2 lakh crore. As of recent government data, more than 7,800 projects have been proposed, with a majority focused on infrastructure upgrades - roads, lighting, water supply, and digital systems. While these numbers signal progress, they also reveal a deeper pattern: smart cities are often infrastructure-heavy, but governance-light.



The idea of a smart city is built on data to monitor traffic, manage waste, optimise energy use, and enhance service delivery. Cities are increasingly becoming data-driven systems, where governance decisions are mediated through digital platforms. However, the centrality of data raises an important concern: who controls this data, and who benefits from it?

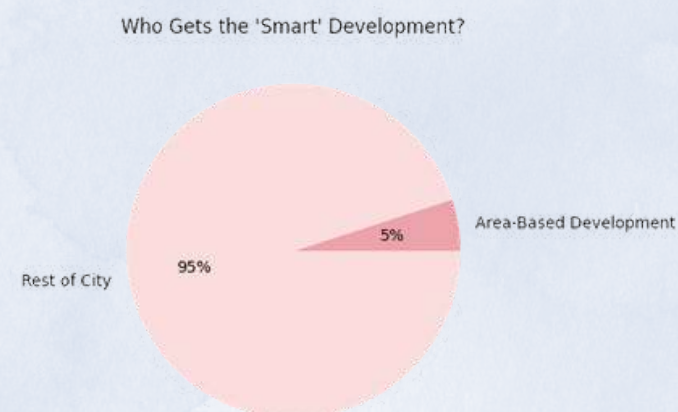
In many cases, data governance in smart cities remains opaque. Private firms, tech companies, and public-private partnerships often play a significant role in managing urban data systems. While this improves efficiency, it also risks transforming cities into spaces of surveillance rather than participation. When governance becomes data-centric but not citizen-centric, efficiency may improve, but

democratic accountability weakens.

This brings us to a crucial distinction in urban theory - the difference between the "right to the city" and the "right in the city." The right to the city refers to the collective right of citizens to shape urban spaces, policies, and priorities. It is about participation, inclusion, and democratic control. In contrast, the right in the city is limited to access to services, infrastructure, and opportunities within an already defined system.

Smart cities in India largely deliver the right in the city - better roads, improved lighting, digital services. But they often fall short of ensuring the right to the city, where citizens actively participate in shaping urban futures. Decision-making remains centralised, technocratic, and often disconnected from the lived realities of marginalised communities.

Consider the spatial distribution of smart city projects. A significant portion of investments is concentrated in "area-based development" zones, which cover only a small fraction of the city's total area—often less than 5%. These zones are transformed into model urban enclaves, while the rest of the city continues to struggle with basic infrastructure gaps. The result is a dual city, one that is digitally advanced and well-served, and another that remains excluded.



This uneven development is not accidental; it reflects the priorities embedded in urban governance. Infrastructure becomes a visible marker of progress, while deeper structural issues like housing inequality, informal labour, and urban poverty remain inadequately addressed. Slum redevelopment, for instance, often focuses on relocation rather than integration, pushing vulnerable populations further to the margins.

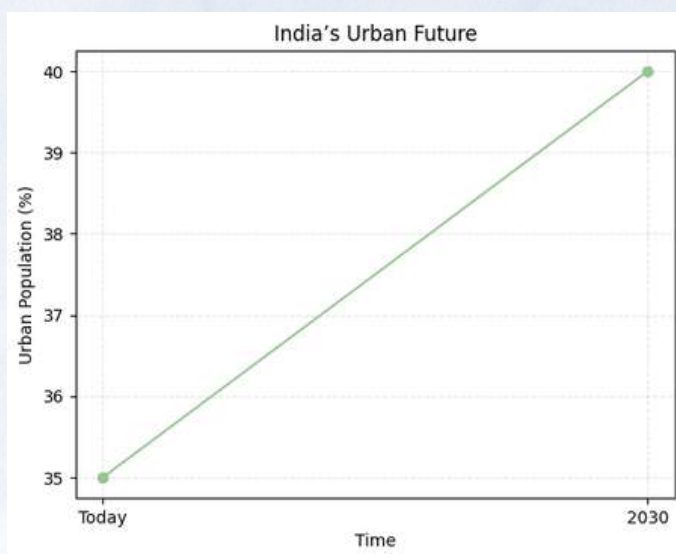
Moreover, the emphasis on “smart solutions” sometimes overlooks fundamental governance challenges. Technology can optimise systems, but it cannot replace institutional accountability. Without transparent governance frameworks, even the most advanced infrastructure risks becoming ineffective or exclusionary.

Globally, smart city models have shown mixed outcomes. While cities like Singapore and Barcelona have successfully integrated technology with governance reforms, many others have struggled with issues of privacy, data misuse, and unequal access. India’s challenge is not just to adopt technology, but to adapt it within its socio-economic realities.

For policymakers, this calls for a shift in approach. Smart cities must move beyond being technology-led projects to becoming people-centred governance models. This means:

- Ensuring data transparency and accountability
- Strengthening local governance institutions
- Expanding development beyond limited zones
- Integrating informal settlements into planning frameworks
- Prioritising citizen participation in decision-making

The future of cities cannot be built solely through dashboards and digital platforms. It must be grounded in equity, inclusion, and democratic engagement.

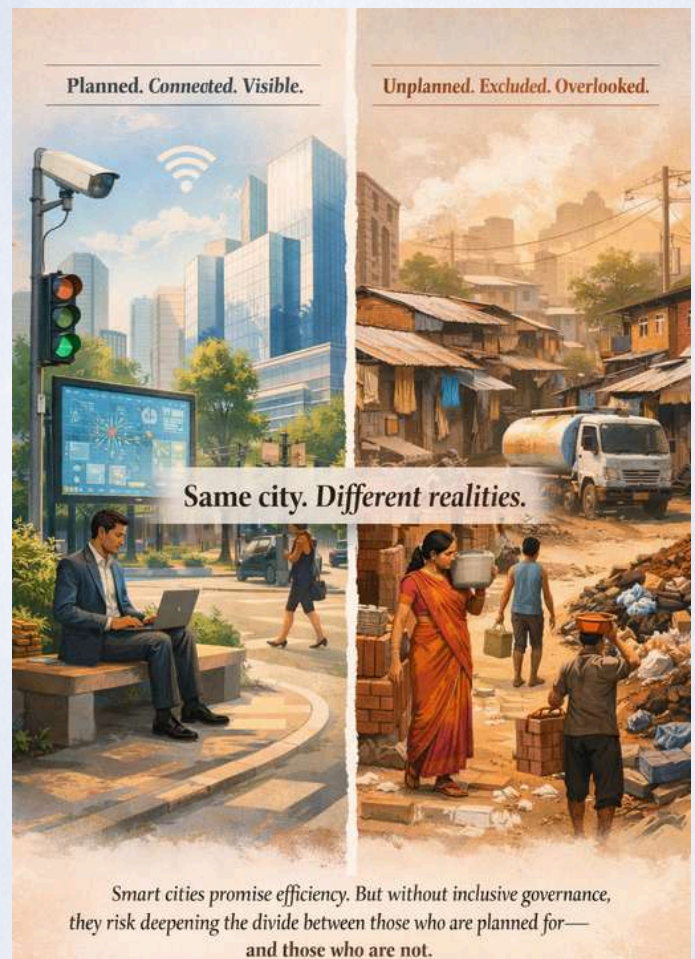


India is urbanising rapidly, with over 40% of its population expected to live in cities by 2030. The choices made today will shape not just infrastructure, but the very nature of urban life. If smart cities continue to prioritise efficiency over equity, they risk becoming islands of progress in oceans of exclusion.

The real measure of a smart city is not how technologically

advanced it is, but how just, inclusive, and participatory it becomes.

Because a city is truly “smart” only when it belongs to all.



In the end, the idea of a “smart city” cannot be reduced to sensors, data dashboards, or seamless infrastructure. A truly smart city asks a deeper question: who is being seen, and who remains invisible? As cities expand and policies evolve, efficiency alone cannot be the benchmark—equity must be at the centre. Development that overlooks lived realities risks reinforcing the very inequalities it claims to solve.

For those engaging with public policy, the challenge is not just to design smarter systems, but fairer ones—where governance is participatory, data is used responsibly, and infrastructure serves all sections of society. The future of urban India will not be shaped merely by technology, but by the choices we make about inclusion, access, and justice. Because in the end, a city is only as smart as it is humane.

What we need, therefore, is a shift—from building cities for people to building them with people. Only then can development move beyond promise and become a lived reality for all.

Charging the Future: EV Infrastructure in India

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India is currently positioned at a critical point in its mobility transition, where the ambition to move toward electric vehicles is becoming increasingly visible in policy frameworks, market trends, and public discourse. Electric mobility is no longer a distant aspiration. It has entered urban streets, policy conversations, and investment priorities. However, this transition is unfolding within a context where foundational infrastructure challenges continue to persist, raising important questions about the readiness of the system to support such a shift at scale.

The discourse around electric vehicles often emphasises their environmental and economic benefits. Urban air pollution has reached levels that demand urgent intervention, and transport emissions contribute significantly to deteriorating air quality. Electrification of vehicles is therefore positioned as a necessary step toward cleaner cities. At the same time, India's reliance on imported fossil fuels creates economic vulnerabilities, making the transition to electric mobility strategically important for energy security. These arguments provide a strong rationale for policy support and industry investment.

Despite this, the implementation landscape reveals a more complex reality. Electric mobility is not only about manufacturing vehicles or offering subsidies. It requires a robust ecosystem that includes reliable roads, accessible charging infrastructure, stable electricity supply, and coordinated planning across regions. In India, these foundational elements are still evolving, and their limitations become particularly evident when examining long-distance travel and infrastructure readiness.

Long-distance road travel in India remains uneven in quality and reliability. While certain expressways and segments of national highways have seen significant improvement, large portions of the road network continue to face issues related to maintenance, congestion, inconsistent design, and inadequate supporting facilities. Even within urban areas, challenges such as poorly maintained roads, limited parking infrastructure, and a lack of integrated transport planning are common. These conditions already affect the efficiency and comfort of conventional vehicle travel, creating delays, uncertainty, and increased operational costs.

When electric vehicles are introduced into this context, the

limitations of the existing system become more pronounced. Unlike conventional vehicles that rely on a well-established network of fuel stations, electric vehicles depend on a charging infrastructure that is still in the process of being developed. This dependency introduces a level of complexity that is not easily managed in an environment where infrastructure gaps already exist.

Data from recent reports indicates that while India has expanded its network of public charging stations, the scale of development remains insufficient relative to the size of the country and its growing mobility demands. The number of charging points has increased in recent years, but their distribution is heavily concentrated in urban centres, leaving highways, smaller towns, and rural areas significantly underserved. This uneven distribution limits the feasibility of long-distance travel using electric vehicles, as users cannot rely on consistent access to charging facilities across routes.

Reliability further complicates the situation. Industry analyses suggest that a large proportion of charging stations face operational issues, including downtime, connectivity failures, and inconsistent charging speeds. Fast chargers, which are essential for reducing travel delays, are often limited in number and may not function reliably. As a result, users frequently encounter situations where charging stations are either unavailable or not operational when needed. This creates uncertainty that goes beyond the traditional concept of range anxiety and directly affects user confidence in the system.

The challenges become particularly significant during intercity travel. Unlike urban commutes, which may allow for planned charging at home or nearby stations, long-distance journeys require a dependable network of chargers along highways. In the absence of such reliability, even a single non-functional station can disrupt travel plans, leading to extended delays or the need to reroute entirely. Given the current state of infrastructure, such scenarios are not uncommon.

These issues are further compounded by broader systemic constraints. Electricity supply in India, while improving, is not uniformly stable across all regions. Power outages, voltage fluctuations, and grid limitations can directly impact the functioning of charging stations, especially in

areas outside major urban centres. The integration of electric vehicles into the energy system, therefore, requires not only an expansion of charging infrastructure but also significant improvements in grid reliability and capacity.

In addition, the environmental benefits of electric vehicles depend on the source of electricity used for charging. India's energy mix continues to include a substantial share of coal-based power generation. While renewable energy capacity is increasing, the transition is still in progress. This creates a situation where the shift to electric mobility may not fully achieve its intended environmental outcomes unless it is aligned with a parallel transition toward cleaner energy sources.

The economic dimension of electric mobility also presents challenges. The initial cost of electric vehicles remains relatively high, particularly for four-wheelers, largely due to the cost of batteries. Although operating costs are lower over time, the higher upfront investment can act as a barrier for many consumers. Policy incentives have helped mitigate this issue to some extent, but long-term affordability will depend on advancements in battery technology and economies of scale.

When these factors are considered together, it becomes evident that India's transition to electric mobility is occurring within a framework that is still addressing fundamental infrastructure gaps. The country is attempting to adopt advanced mobility solutions while simultaneously working to improve basic elements such as road quality, urban planning, and energy distribution.

This does not diminish the importance of the transition. Electric vehicles represent a necessary and forward-looking shift that aligns with global sustainability goals and domestic policy priorities. However, the pace of adoption must be matched by the development of supporting infrastructure. Without this alignment, there is a risk of creating a system where vehicles are available, but the ecosystem required to support them remains inadequate.

Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated approach that brings together policy, technology, and investment. Expansion of charging infrastructure must be planned strategically to ensure coverage across regions, including highways and smaller towns. Reliability must be prioritised alongside quantity, with standards and maintenance systems in place to ensure consistent operation. Improvements in road infrastructure and urban planning must continue, as they form the foundation upon which all mobility systems depend.

At the same time, the energy sector must evolve to support increased demand from electric vehicles. Investments in grid capacity, renewable energy, and smart charging solutions will be essential to ensure that the transition is both sustainable and efficient. Consumer awareness and trust must also be strengthened through transparent information and improved user experiences.

India's journey toward electric mobility is therefore best understood as a gradual transition rather than an immediate transformation. The ambition to lead in this space is evident, and the potential benefits are substantial. However, the current state of infrastructure indicates that the country is still in the process of building the systems required to support this vision at scale.

The future of mobility in India is likely to be electric, but the realisation of this future will depend not only on technological advancement but also on the ability to address existing structural challenges. The success of this transition will ultimately be determined by how effectively the country bridges the gap between aspiration and implementation, ensuring that the infrastructure supporting electric vehicles is as robust and reliable as the vision that drives them.



The Invisible Builders of Our Cities: Migrant Workers and Urban Growth

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When we think about cities in India, we usually imagine tall buildings, big roads, and busy markets. Cities look modern and full of opportunities. But we often forget about the people who actually build and run these cities—migrant workers. They do many important jobs, but their role is not always noticed.

Migration to cities has been happening for a long time. Many people leave their villages because farming is not always reliable, and jobs are limited. They come to cities hoping to earn more and live a better life. But things do not always go as planned. Most migrant workers get jobs in the informal sector, where salaries are low, and there is no job security.

Still, their contribution is very important. They build houses, roads, and offices. They also work in shops, factories, and homes. In simple words, cities cannot function without them. Even then, they are not given much importance in policies or society.

One big problem they face is housing. Many of them live in small rooms or temporary shelters. These places are often crowded and do not have proper water supply, sanitation, or healthcare. Because of this, their living conditions are quite poor.

Another issue is the lack of social security. Since their jobs are informal, they do not get benefits like insurance, a pension, or paid leave. Also, many government schemes are hard for them to access because they move from one place to another and may not have proper documents. This makes their life very uncertain, especially during emergencies.

We saw this clearly during the COVID-19 pandemic. When everything suddenly stopped, many migrant workers lost their jobs. They had no money or support, so they had to go back to their villages. Some even walked long distances. This showed how important they are, but also how neglected they have been.

In many cases, city planning focuses more on development and less on people like migrant workers. They are often treated as temporary, even though they stay in cities for many years. Because of this, their needs are not properly

included in planning.

To improve their condition, we need to change our thinking. Migrant workers should be seen as a part of the city, not outsiders. They should have better housing, basic facilities, and easier access to government schemes. There should also be rules to ensure fair wages and safe working conditions.

Better data is also needed. Many migrant workers are not properly counted, which makes it hard to develop effective policies. If we have the correct information, we can plan better for them.

In the end, a city is not just about buildings and roads. It is also about the people living there. If migrant workers are treated with respect and given proper support, cities can become fairer and more inclusive. Migrant workers are the real builders of our cities. Even though they remain in the background, their role is very important. Recognising their contribution is necessary for true development.



Bengal's Ballot of Fire: Between Promise, Power, and Peril

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West Bengal's 2026 elections are not merely a contest for power; they are a test of political narrative, institutional credibility, and public trust. Beneath the rhetoric of development and welfare lies a far more uneasy reality, one where governance, identity, and violence intersect in ways that are difficult to ignore.

At the centre of this contest stands the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), positioning itself as the architect of a "new Bengal." Its campaign has leaned heavily on promises of economic revival, employment generation, and administrative transparency. Commitments such as filling government vacancies, streamlining recruitment, and extending central benefits are being framed as corrective measures to what it describes as years of stagnation.

Equally significant is the BJP's attempt to shift the political discourse from welfare to governance. By foregrounding issues such as corruption scandals, unemployment, and alleged failures in law and order, the party seeks to build a narrative of anti-incumbency against the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC). The underlying message is clear: Bengal needs structural change, not continuity. However, the BJP's strategy is not limited to policy promises. It is also deeply political, rooted in identity, cultural symbolism, and a recalibration of Bengal's place within national politics. From invoking "Bengali asmita" to countering perceptions of being an outsider, to aligning its messaging with national security and migration concerns, the party is attempting to reshape the ideological terrain of the state.

Yet, if the BJP's campaign is about aspiration, the ground reality tells a more turbulent story. Recent weeks have seen repeated instances of violence that cast a shadow over the electoral process. Clashes between party workers, attacks on political figures, and the recovery or use of crude bombs in certain regions suggest that the electoral battlefield in Bengal remains fraught with volatility. In Murshidabad, reports of stone-pelting and crude bomb attacks during polling highlight how deeply entrenched political rivalry has translated into physical confrontation. Similarly, incidents of violent clashes between supporters of rival parties in districts like Howrah, involving weapons such as rods and sticks, underline the fragile law-and-order environment surrounding the elections.

These are not isolated disruptions, they are symptomatic of a political culture where electoral competition often spills into coercion. The discovery or deployment of crude explosives during election phases is not just a law-and-order failure; it is a democratic concern. Elections, by definition, demand consent. Violence replaces that consent with fear.

The TMC, on its part, continues to rely on its extensive welfare architecture and claims of grassroots connectivity. Schemes targeted at women, rural households, and marginalised communities remain central to its electoral appeal. At the same time, it positions itself as the protector of Bengali identity and regional autonomy, countering what it frames as external political imposition.

The result is a sharply polarised contest- one where voters are not merely choosing between two parties, but between two visions of governance. One promises systemic overhaul and integration into a broader national framework; the other offers continuity, welfare stability, and regional assertion. But beyond these competing narratives lies a deeper question: can democracy thrive in an atmosphere of persistent intimidation?

High voter turnout suggests enthusiasm. But enthusiasm alone cannot sustain democracy if participation is accompanied by fear.

West Bengal's elections have long carried the weight of political intensity. What is unfolding today, however, raises concerns that go beyond routine electoral contestation. When bombs become part of election vocabulary, when violence becomes predictable, and when trust in institutions is repeatedly tested, the issue is no longer which party wins, it is whether the process itself remains credible. The BJP's rise in Bengal reflects a broader shift in India's political geography. The TMC's resilience reflects the enduring power of regional politics. But the true measure of this election will not lie in seat counts.

It will lie in whether Bengal can move from a politics of confrontation to a politics of conviction. Because in the end, the question is not who captures Bengal, but whether Bengal can reclaim the dignity of a democratic choice.

Concrete without capacity: India's infrastructure boom and the governance gap

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Look at India today, and the proof of transformation is evident in smooth expressways, good metro networks, and new airports opening regularly. From ribbon cuttings to global summits, infrastructure has become the most visible language of development. It signals ambition, attracts investment (often foreign), and offers a clear view of progress. Yet under this bedazzlement lies a quiet truth.

India is building more than it can govern, and often announcing faster than it can execute.

This contrast is most present within urban India. Metro rails, designed to slice through congested cities with great speed, promise fast and safe travel. But step outside the metro station, and the deficiency appears once again, unregulated construction like in the sector 51 and sector 52 link in Noida, chaotic traffic systems like the highway outside Kalindi Kunj, weak enforcement of zoning laws like in Lajpat Nagar or Karol Bagh, which were residential once, but allowed for mixed land use to accommodate commercial growth, which it did of course, but the congestion is immense within those areas now, many coaching centres in Karol Bagh don't even have fire exits for the students; and inadequate last mile connectivity, like Dwarka for example, whilst being a well planned sub city with metro connectivity, residents there have to pay large sums to rikshaws and cabs because there's no proper bus route that goes through the residential areas.

The problem is not the absence of good infrastructure; it certainly exists, the DMRC is proof of it, but there is a clear lack of planned governance for it. Urban planning remains divided amongst multiple municipal bodies, development authorities, transport agencies, etc., each with its own rules. The result is a modern city, but in bits and pieces, it is inconsistent as a system.

Infrastructure, instead of being part of a plan, becomes a series of disconnected endeavours.

This divide is not just a failure in planning; it reflects a deeper issue: the ability of the state. Governance in urban cities is not merely about flashy projects, but about making sure that those projects have the ability to function and persevere within a broader ecosystem. A metro system, in hindsight, cannot be called successful without bus networks

that are in sync, there is usable infrastructure for the pedestrians and specially abled personnel.

Yet these important factors are neglected because they come under other jurisdictions or simply don't have the same political visibility.

If we compare India to others, the critique becomes sharper. Consider the contrast with China; both countries have relied heavily on infrastructure as a driver of economic growth, yet their governance models diverge significantly. China's genius system enables quick actions, approvals, and tight executions. Land acquisitions, regulatory clearances, and project implementation are managed with a level of coordination that allows projects to move from conception to completion at remarkable speeds. India, by contrast, operates within a democratic framework that divides authority among various institutions and levels of government.

In theory, this should ensure transparency, accountability, and public participation. However, in reality, it often results in delays and policy debate.

However, the issue is not simply within one of the political systems. Democracies are not inherently inefficient; there are plenty of examples; they require stronger institutional capacity to manage complexity, especially in cases like India.

Decision-making is most of the time slowed by bureaucratic protocols, overlapping mandates, and old governance cultures. Projects get stuck trying to get approvals, within litigations, and more often than not, administrative bottlenecks.

This is very evident in the way public money is allocated and utilised. India does not suffer from a shortage of budget allocation towards infrastructure. Each year, huge allocations are made, which signals intent. However, a big portion of these funds is left unused or is spent not fast enough to achieve meaningful impact.

Delays in tendering, land acquisition hurdles, procedural inadequacies, and lack of administrative readiness often mean that budgets are either rolled over or just rushed at the end of financial cycles. In both cases, the outcome is the

same. Money that isn't spent within the time frame fails to translate into infrastructure that we can see, rendering the allocation itself useless, and we know that intent without execution is indistinguishable from not doing anything.

This exposes a critical flaw in the development narrative: the overemphasis on announcements over outcomes. Project inaugurations and budget speeches create a false perception of progress (and a lot of money is spent on said events as well), but the real measure of effective governance lies in the timely and effective implementation of said projects. When funds are left idle or projects are delayed again and again, the costs are not just financial; they are both economic and social. Now, Delayed infrastructure means mobility that's also delayed, growth that is delayed,

and opportunities that are delayed for the millions who have always depended on these systems in their day-to-day lives.

This brings us to a deeper conceptual distinction: the difference between state visibility and state capacity. Infrastructure is highly visible; it can be seen, celebrated and photographed. Governance, however, is much less tangible; it resides in the efficiency of all the institutions, the nature of bureaucracy, the coordination between all institutes, and the consistency of rule enforcement.

India has become amazing at ensuring visibility, creating projects that show progress, but the capacity, the thing no one emphasises, is the driven backbone of development; in this, India simply lags.

A Note from the desk of Associate Editor

Some conversations don't announce themselves with a siren. They settle quietly into the cracks of a flyover, the weight of an unpaid water bill, the corner of a footpath that no one planned.

This edition of *The Civil Lens* walks into one such conversation. As our cities grow faster than our conscience, we find ourselves standing between the master plan and the makeshift. Between the promise of 24/7 water and the reality of a handpump that dried up years ago.

This is not a story of design or dysfunction alone. It is a story of distance. Between a policy drafted in an air-conditioned room and a family that never saw it coming. Between a digital dashboard and a commuter left waiting in the rain.

In shaping this issue, I held two truths at once. A city must be efficient, sustainable, and future-ready. And that efficiency without empathy becomes another form of erasure. Because when governance reduces lives to data points, we forget that a slum is not a problem to be solved — it is a neighbourhood to be heard.

This edition invites you not to decide quickly, but to dwell. To ask who owns the pavement. Whose mobility is measured, and whose is ignored. And at what price do we call a city "world-class"

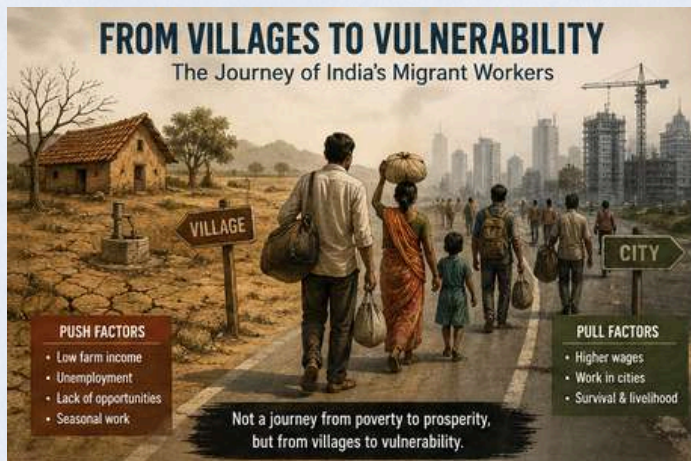
Because sometimes, the most radical thing urban policy can do is not to pave over but to pause, and listen.

~ Paarth Grover

From Villages to Vulnerability: Urban Migration and the Unorganised Workforce in India

EKTA GROVER,

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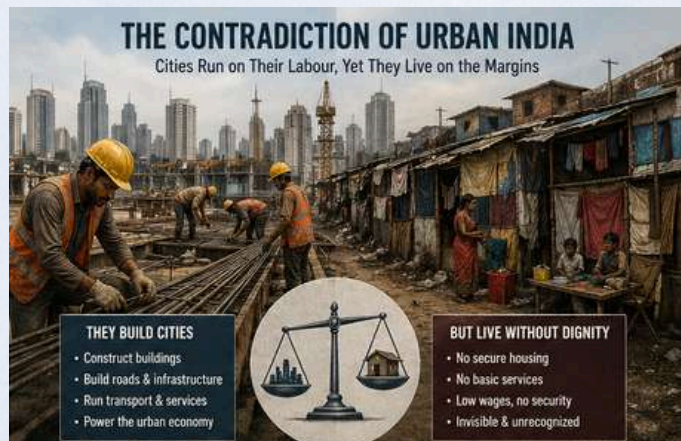
Internal migration has been a silent engine of India's urban economy. Every year, many workers leave their villages in search of a livelihood, moving towards cities that offer higher wages and opportunities. But for millions of migrants, the journey from village to city is less a story of insecurity, no proper houses, displacement and structural neglect. India's urban growth is largely dependent on migrant labour, but urban policy and planning have failed to recognise these migrants as residents, who are entitled to proper housing, welfare, and dignity at work. But as a result of migration, it is not a movement from poverty to prosperity, but from villages to vulnerability.

Migration in India is deeply linked to unequal development. Rural areas often suffer from drinking water issues, farm income seasonality, unemployment, limited non-farm opportunities and distress. In small and marginal farmers' land, labourers are landless. Rural youngsters have few livelihood options. For many houses, migration is not just a matter of better opportunity, but survival. Field surveys repeatedly result in workers moving from villages, mostly because of low wages and irregular agricultural employment. Daily earnings in the rural areas are mostly insufficient to support families, especially as rural areas suffer from seasonal unemployment.

Urban cities attract rural people as they have comparatively high income, such as construction sites, markets, transport, work, sanitation, jobs, domestic household work, Street vending and casual service sector employment. Urban work is overwhelmingly concentrated in the unorganised sector,

where jobs are insecure, wages often fluctuate, and labour rights are present but not implemented. Many workers have no written contracts. No paid leaves, no insurance and not even access to proper healthcare. In the urban areas, employment is mostly arranged through contracts, can ship networks, informal referrals, and labour Chowk, which creates dependency rather than security.

This showcases a central contradiction of Indian urbanisation: how cities rely on migrant labour to function, yet those workers are unable to have a stable livelihood. Migrant labourers build roads, transport goods, run food stalls, and sustain urban life, but they remain excluded from the protection extended just to formal workers. Long working hours, unstable income, and a risk of job loss are considered a normal part of labour life.



One side of the problem is labour exploitation, whereas migrant vulnerabilities are also a concern as urban areas lack formal housing, workers are mostly posted into slums, overcrowded, rental rooms in formal colonies, in shelters or temporary structures near the work sites. Most of the workers are crammed in one room, which is shared by several people. Such settlements lack sanitation, waste management, drainage, and security. Even where water is available, overcrowding and poor environmental conditions create health risks.

These realities highlight the failures of city-centric planning. Most urban development focuses on elite housing, commercial real estate, and beautified transport corridors. At the same time, low-income migrant

settlements lack even the necessities. Migrants are welcomed as labourers but are often unwelcome as residents.

Street vendors and small store owners experience the removal of vending zones in the name of order or redevelopment. These individuals provide affordable goods and services, create aesthetics in public spaces, and are self-employed. Yet, they face regular harassment and restrictions due to licensing barriers or anti-encroachment campaigns. Instead of inclusive regulation, urban authorities often criminalise these survival strategies.



Mobility within the city is one of the other neglected dimensions. In the case of migrants. Many migrants choose housing close to their work sites to reduce transport costs. Others rely on public transport, whose fares have increased faster than their income. Poor last connectivity, long commute and exhausting work schedules reduce their time for rest, family, life, and social participation. Thus, everything is connected; transport policy is not different from labour policy as it directly shapes earning capacity and quality of life.

Migrant labourers frequently struggle to access ration cards, healthcare, schooling, and labour healthcare policies because benefits are given based on proper documentation, and there is a lack of awareness among workers. Families of these migrants often stay in villages to afford schooling for their children, as it's cheaper and more accessible. This creates related cycles of circular migration and even emotional strain on the workers. The city extracts labour, while the village continues to bear the costs of social reproduction.

A critical public policy should be introduced that goes beyond these temporary relief measures.

1. India needs to have a portable social protection system that travels with workers across cities and states, which

- includes food, healthcare, and even pension access.
2. Urban planning must incorporate affordable rental housing for the migrants, which includes sanitation, proper infrastructure, and good transport connectivity
3. Count on migrant workers to be kept through reliable data systems for proper policy implementation for them.
4. Labour regulations must be extended meaningfully into unorganised sectors, which include registration, grievance systems, and accountability for contractors and employees.

One of the Policy measures that can be introduced is the inclusion of regional development for migration, which should not be a choice, but a compulsion.

Migration is not the problem; excluding migrant workers is. Indian cities will continue to grow, and migrant workers will remain a central part of this growth. The real question is whether urban development will continue to depend on invisible labour houses in difficult conditions or whether cities will recognise migrants as citizens who have rights. Until this shift occurs. The parts from villages to the city will remain too many, but a path from villages to vulnerability should be reduced.

In the end, the story of migration in India is not simply about movement from one place to another; it is about the search for dignity, security, and survival. Migrant workers continue to power India's cities through their labour, resilience, and sacrifices, yet their contribution often remains invisible in public policy and urban imagination. A truly modern and inclusive city cannot be built only with highways, skyscrapers, and commercial centres while ignoring the people who sustain its everyday life. Urban development must therefore move beyond economic growth alone and focus equally on social justice, humane living conditions, and equal access to opportunities.



Flood to forum: reimagining Chennai's water urbanism

SUNAI NIKEDHAN S,

Architect & Founder, 8760 Design Labs, Chennai

Chennai is a city defined by extremes where heavy monsoon rains lead to widespread flooding, while prolonged summers result in severe water scarcity. This paradox reveals a deeper systemic issue: not the absence of water, but the inability of the city to manage, store, and reuse it effectively.

Historically, Chennai functioned through an interconnected network of eri (tanks) that captured rainwater, supported groundwater recharge, and sustained everyday life. These water bodies were not merely infrastructural elements but also social and cultural spaces embedded within the urban fabric. Over time, rapid urbanisation, encroachment, and neglect have led to the disappearance and fragmentation of these systems.

Today, rainwater is treated as waste and rapidly drained through stormwater networks into the sea, while the city depends heavily on external water sources and tanker supply during dry periods. The natural hydrological cycle has been disrupted, transforming a once self-sustaining system into a reactive and inefficient one.

The consequences are evident: flooding during the monsoon, depletion during the summer, and increasing pressure on urban infrastructure. This reflects a fundamental disconnect between natural systems and the built environment.

The challenge is not the lack of water, but the lack of a system that allows water to stay.



Understanding the breakdown of the water system

The transformation of Chennai's landscape from a porous, water-sensitive terrain to a predominantly impervious urban fabric has significantly altered its water cycle. Surfaces that once absorbed and retained water have been replaced by concrete, resulting in rapid surface runoff and minimal groundwater recharge.

Three key factors contribute to this breakdown:

1. Impermeability and runoff: The increase in paved and built surfaces prevents infiltration, causing rainwater to accumulate on roads and low-lying areas. This leads to frequent urban flooding, especially during high-intensity rainfall events.
2. Disconnected infrastructure: Stormwater drainage systems are designed as linear conduits that channel water directly into the sea. While effective in removing water quickly, they fail to integrate storage or recharge mechanisms, resulting in a loss of valuable freshwater resources.
3. Loss of water bodies: Encroachment and neglect have reduced the capacity and presence of traditional tanks. These systems once acted as nodes within a larger network, regulating water flow and maintaining ecological balance.

As a result, Chennai's water system has shifted from a circular and regenerative model to a linear and extractive one, where water is treated as a problem to be removed rather than a resource to be retained.

This condition presents a critical opportunity to rethink water infrastructure not as isolated engineering solutions, but as integrated systems that respond to both environmental and social needs.



Reimagining water infrastructure as multifunctional public spaces can restore ecological balance while enriching urban life.



The urban tank atrium: a climate-responsive public infrastructure

The proposal introduces the Urban Tank Atrium - a multifunctional, stepped water retention system embedded within the urban fabric. Inspired by traditional tank systems, it reinterprets water infrastructure as a dynamic space that responds to seasonal variations while supporting public life.

The design operates through a model of seasonal adaptivity:

During the monsoon, the tank functions as a retention basin, capturing excess rainwater and reducing the impact of urban flooding. Water is directed into the system through inlets, filtered, and stored within the stepped basin.

In the intermediate phase, as water levels recede, the edges of the tank become active zones. These transitional spaces allow limited public interaction while maintaining their ecological function.

During the summer, when the tank is fully or partially dry, it transforms into a vibrant public space. The stepped geometry enables a range of activities, including informal gatherings, performances, discussions, and recreational uses such as street cricket.

The system integrates key technical strategies such as filtration, groundwater recharge, and overflow management, ensuring both efficiency and resilience. At the same time, it creates a spatial interface between water and people, redefining infrastructure as an experiential and accessible element within the city.

When implemented as a disturbed network, these tanks can function collectively as a sponge system, capturing and storing water across multiple nodes while creating interconnected public spaces.

The urban tank atrium transforms infrastructure into a lived experience where water is stored, space is activated, and community is sustained.



Migration livelihood urban economics: built by migrants, failed by policy - the story of migrant workers in chennai

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Chennai's skyline, its flyovers, metro corridors, IT parks, and expanding industrial belts tell a story of rapid urban growth. But beneath this visible transformation lies an invisible workforce: migrant labourers from other states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They mix the concrete, carry the steel, load the goods, and keep the city's informal economy running. Yet, despite being central to Chennai's development, they remain largely excluded from its governance systems.

India is undergoing one of the largest internal migrations in the world. According to the Census of India 2011, over 450 million people, nearly 37% of the population, are internal migrants. More recent estimates from the Economic Survey suggest that interstate migration involves 60–65 million workers annually, with Uttar Pradesh and Bihar as the largest source states. Tamil Nadu, particularly Chennai, has emerged as a major destination, hosting an estimated 10–12 lakh interstate migrant workers, many of whom are concentrated in construction, manufacturing, logistics, and services.

These workers are not peripheral; they are foundational to the urban economy. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) shows that over 80–85% of India's workforce is informal, and migrant workers form a significant portion of this segment. In Chennai, entire sectors from construction sites in OMR to warehouses in Sriperumbudur depend heavily on migrant labour to sustain productivity and control costs. Yet, this economic dependence is not matched by institutional support.

Most migrant workers are employed through contractors, with no written agreements, no job security, and limited access to social protection. During the COVID-19 lockdown, this precarity became starkly visible. A study by the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) found that over 90% of migrant workers did not receive wages during the lockdown, and 96% did not receive government rations. As economist Jean Drèze aptly noted, "Migrant workers are treated as second-class citizens, excluded from basic entitlements because they are not seen as belonging anywhere."

Tamil Nadu, however, presents an interesting paradox. It is

often considered one of India's more welfare-oriented states, with a relatively strong social protection architecture. On paper, several schemes exist that could significantly improve the lives of migrant workers.

The Tamil Nadu Manual Workers Social Security Welfare Board provides benefits such as accident compensation, pensions, maternity assistance, and educational support. The Amma Unavagam (Amma Canteens) offer highly subsidised meals, ₹1 idlis and ₹5 full meals, which have become a lifeline for daily wage earners, including migrants. The state has also implemented the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme, aimed at enabling portability of food security benefits across India. Additionally, the Chief Minister's Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme (CMCHIS) offers free medical treatment in empanelled hospitals. The Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) scheme, introduced to address migrant housing needs, further reflects policy intent. However, the lived reality of migrant workers in Chennai tells a different story.

Despite the presence of these schemes, a large proportion of migrant workers remain excluded. The reasons are systemic. Registration with welfare boards is low due to a lack of awareness, language barriers, and contractor-mediated employment, which discourages formal documentation. Accessing ration benefits under ONORC is often hindered by Aadhaar linkage issues, biometric authentication failures, and a lack of local facilitation. Health insurance schemes like CMCHIS require documentation and state linkage, which many migrants lack, forcing them to rely on out-of-pocket healthcare.

Housing remains one of the most glaring gaps. While ARHC was envisioned as a solution, its implementation has been limited. Migrant workers continue to live in overcrowded rooms, informal settlements, or temporary labour camps with poor sanitation and high rents. In a city they helped build, they struggle to find a dignified place to live. Urban governance, in its current form, is simply not designed for mobility.

Most welfare systems in India are tied to domicile and assume stable residence, formal employment, and documentation. Migrant workers, by contrast, live and work

in conditions defined by mobility, informality, and uncertainty. This mismatch creates structural exclusion. As urban scholar Gautam Bhan observes, “The city depends on migrant labour, but its policies are designed for permanent residents.”

Language and cultural barriers further deepen this divide. In Chennai, where Tamil dominates public life, Hindi-speaking migrants often face difficulties accessing public services, legal systems, and even basic healthcare. This limits their ability to integrate and reinforces their invisibility within the urban landscape.

There is also a gendered dimension that remains under-recognised. Women migrants working in domestic labour, garment factories, and small industries face lower wages, unsafe working conditions, and limited access to maternity benefits or childcare. Their vulnerabilities lie at the intersection of gender, migration, and informality. The core issue, therefore, is not merely the absence of schemes but the failure of access and design.

Tamil Nadu has the institutional framework to support migrant workers. What it lacks is a system that recognises and responds to the realities of a mobile workforce. Policies remain fragmented, implementation uneven, and outreach inadequate. Migrants are treated as temporary outsiders, even though their contribution to the city is continuous and essential. What is needed is a fundamental shift in approach.

First, welfare systems must become fully portable, seamless, and accessible, supported by multilingual interfaces and on-ground facilitation.

Second, cities must invest in affordable and dignified rental housing located near employment hubs.

Third, labour protections must move beyond legislation to strict enforcement, particularly in sectors dominated by contractor-based employment.

Fourth, urban governance must actively include migrants through better data collection, representation, and targeted service delivery. At a broader level, migration must be integrated into urban planning itself. Cities cannot continue to plan for static populations when their economies depend on mobility.

Chennai’s story is not unique; it reflects a broader pattern across Indian cities. From Mumbai to Bengaluru, urban growth is powered by migrant labour, yet governance systems remain territorially rigid and socially exclusionary. As the pandemic revealed with painful clarity, when migrant workers stop, cities stop.

The question is no longer whether Indian cities need migrants. They already do. The real question is whether our policies will evolve to include them. Until then, India’s cities will continue to be built by migrants and failed by policy.



Neeti Prashnottari: Where Curiosity Met Policy



The Civil Lens recently hosted Niti Prashnottari, an interactive policy quiz that brought together curious minds and sharp thinkers for an evening of ideas, analysis, and quick thinking. Designed to move beyond rote knowledge, the event tested participants on their understanding of governance, law, economics, and current affairs in a dynamic, multi-round format.

From an intense preliminary round to collaborative team discussions and a fast-paced buzzer finale, the competition highlighted not just knowledge, but the ability to think critically under pressure. What stood out most was the enthusiasm of participants, students engaging with policy not as passive observers, but as active contributors to discourse.

Niti Prashnottari was more than a quiz; it was a reminder that public policy is not confined to textbooks or institutions, it thrives in conversations, debates, and the curiosity of young minds willing to question and understand the world around them.

