India’s urbanization story is both massive and complex, as 300 million people will move to its urban spaces by 2030, creating significant challenges. In this brief, we argue that India’s cities would be better served in the long-term by supporting the inclusive urban policies over those that carry exclusionary after-effects, by limiting the use of the city as a promotional tool for actors that gain from forwarding divisive identity politics, and by creating more robust city-level political structures in order to improve municipal accountability to urban citizens. We conclude with suggestions for how to further encourage inclusive urban planning and political processes.

Brief Points

- India’s cities are better served by consciously supporting inclusive urban policies, and there is deep value in restricting the use of India's cities as tools for actors who gain from forwarding divisive identity politics.
- India urgently needs to create more robust city-level political structures in order to improve municipal accountability to urban citizens, and transform urban spaces into more livable and inclusive spaces.
- Addressing “informality” and “right to the city” concerns must be integral parts of urban planning and governance processes to address exclusion and inequality in India’s growing urban spaces.
- Insulating urban governance from entrenched elite networks can slow the current trend of urban spaces becoming more exclusionary, unaccountable and unwelcome places for India's poorest and most disadvantaged.

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Schoos and Miklian have conducted extensive research on Indian politics, governance and political reforms, democracy, human rights and insurgency.

THE PROJECT

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India’s Changing Urban Landscape

India is one of the fastest growing large economies in the world, and it is also one of the least urbanized. This trend, however, is changing. As per the 2011 Census, over 31 percent of Indians (some 377 million people) now live in urban cities and towns.\(^1\) Of course, this movement is just as reflective of the country’s present rural-urban demographics as it is about future migration trends. Significantly, urban population growth now outnumbers rural growth in India for the first time.\(^2\)

In addition, India’s urban expansion has not been driven primarily by conventional rural-urban migration. Instead, organic population growth and the reclassification of cities and towns have been primary drivers. Only 22 percent of urban growth is due to rural-urban migration,\(^3\) but because migration has been a significant component of growth in big cities in particular, it has received outsized attention. Still, cities are projected to create 70 percent of future GDP growth for India,\(^4\) and a recent study revealed that two-thirds of slum-dwellers are Dalit, adivasi, Muslim or recent migrants.\(^5\) Given the weak municipal governance systems in most cities, disadvantaged groups are routinely deprived of basic services such as water, health, education, sanitation, and legal protection. Thus, India’s current urbanization process is producing divisible urban “winners and losers”.\(^6\)

The Indian City as Base of Identity Politics

India’s current mechanisms of urbanization offer few opportunities for its disadvantaged citizens. Rather than being “melting pots and places for upward social mobility”, Indian cities are “the city dweller’s nightmare”.\(^7\) Urban slums to exist in planning black holes. Further, the vast majority of people living in these slums belong to disadvantaged communities. Our study revealed that two-thirds of slum-dwellers are Dalit, adivasi, Muslim or recent migrants.\(^8\) Given the weak municipal governance systems in most cities, disadvantaged groups are routinely deprived of basic services such as water, health, education, sanitation, and legal protection. Thus, India’s current urbanization process is producing divisive urban “winners and losers”.\(^9\)

In these urban areas, minority communities are overrepresented, which has led to challenges. More than 40 percent of Muslims and Christians live in urban areas, compared to only 29 percent of Hindus.\(^10\) Among Hindus, a large percentage of urban populations come from the lower social strata (such as Dalit) and the spatially excluded, including adivasi communities. The reasons behind the large number of Dalits in cities are that many have arrived in an attempt to escape the abhorrent caste system of purity and pollution and social discrimination in village settings, as well as for the opportunity of social and economic mobility. However, urban divisions tend to replicate their rural societal counterparts, and much of India’s urban violence over the previous two decades has involved armed caste or religious riots. This, while cities remain a place of perceived social mobility for traditionally disadvantaged groups and individuals, they continue to be potentially perilous spaces for the most vulnerable.

This policy brief draws upon our research in the Urbanizing India project, reflecting upon three key challenges for India’s growing cities to its citizens. First, India’s cities would be better served in the long-term by consciously supporting inclusive urban policies over those that carry exclusionary after-effects. Second, there is deep value in limiting the use of the city as a promotional tool for actors that gain from heart exclusionary agendas. Of course, India’s urban space can also produce positive stories, including the success of the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi, which was also founded as a single-issue party with a strong anti-corruption agenda. A number of state level political parties, such as Mumbai, the “locals” who once shunned low-end jobs are now competing with migrants or slum dwellers. Many state level political parties have used these dynamics to their political advantage.

Our study also found an increasing exclusionary trend in the growth of identity politics that militates against “outsiders” or migrants. Single-issue-based political parties and religious groups have made use of the governance vacuum in cities by promoting identity issues such as “sons of the soil” argument and build their political constituencies in cities. A good case is the rise of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) in cities such as Mumbai and Pune in the last decade. Playing on the anxiety and insecurity of the majority Marathi community (people belonging to the state of Maharashtra), the MNS blames the Biharis for many local urban problems, arguing for discriminatory policies that create a substantial vote bank of single-issue anti-Bihari voters. With manufacturing and service sectors tumbling, and high-paying jobs now perceived as scarcer in big metros such as Mumbai, the “locals” who once shunned low-end jobs are now competing with migrants or or slum dwellers. Many state level political parties have used these dynamics to their political advantage.

For the MNS and others, cities are increasingly used as the new political platforms for social and religious movements that have at heart exclusionary agendas. Of course, India’s urban space can also produce positive stories, including the success of the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi, which was also founded as a single-issue party with a strong anti-corruption agenda. A number of single-issue political parties have used these dynamics to their political advantage. The city is a crucial context in which urban spaces can come through the political recognition of urbanism and urban governance as matters of urgent priority. This can happen in two ways. First, addressing “informality” and “right to the city” concerns must be integral parts of urban planning and governance processes that structurally address the issues of exclusion and inequality in India’s growing urban spaces. Second, insulating urban governance issues from both the entrenched nexus of real-estate landlords-politicians-bureaucrats elites as well as the losers from the previous decade of commu nal and vote bank politics can serve to slow or even reverse the current trend of urban spaces becoming more exclusionary, unacceptable and unwelcome places for the poorest and most disadvantaged.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{1}India’s current urbanization growth has come about in an unplanned and unplannen}
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This policy brief draws upon our research in the Urbanizing India project, reflecting upon three key challenges for India’s growing cities. First, India’s cities would be better served in the long term by consciously supporting inclusive urban policies over those that carry exclusionary after-effects. Second, there is deep value in limiting the use of the city as a promotional tool for actors that gain from forward-moving divisive identity politics. Third, there remains an urgent need to create more robust city-level political structures in order to improve municipal accountability to urban citizens. We conclude with suggestions for how to take inclusive urban planning and political processes forward.

Urban Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion

India’s current mechanisms of urbanization offer few opportunities for its disadvantaged citizens. Rather than being “melting pots” and places for upward social mobility, Indian cities tend to be spaces for upward social mobility, Indian cities attempt to escape the abhorrent caste system of purity and pollution and social discrimination and functionaries are yet to be devolved to urban local bodies. Required to operate within dated planning laws that restrict flexibility, and operating within a federal system that gives both states and the centre potential power over local planning, local municipalities often have little recourse. This is compounded by the fact that none of India’s big metropolises have produced a Mayor with adequate powers and functional jurisdictions to affect change.22

Bringing Urban India Forward

Potential answers to India’s urban challenges lie in both the urban planning and political realms, and we argue that the latter are the most promising in the short term. The transformation of spaces into more livable and inclusive spaces can come through the political recognition of urbanism and urban governance as matters of urgent priority. This can happen in two ways. First, addressing “informality” and “right to the city” concerns must be integral parts of urban planning and governance processes that structurally address the issues of exclusion and inequality in India’s growing urban spaces. Second, insulating urban governance issues from both the entrenched nexus of real estate barons-politicians-bureaucrats as well as the losers from the previous decade of commu- nal and vote bank politics can serve to slow or even reverse the current trend of urban spaces becoming more exclusionary, unacceptable and unwelcome places for the poorest and most disadvantaged.
India’s urbanization story is both massive and complex, as 300 million people will move to its urban spaces by 2030, creating significant challenges. In this brief, we argue that India’s cities would be better served in the long-term by supporting the inclusive urban policies over those that carry exclusionary after-effects, by limiting the use of the city as a promotional tool for actors that gain from forwarding divisive identity politics, and by creating more robust city-level political structures in order to improve municipal accountability to urban citizens. We conclude with suggestions for how to further encourage inclusive urban planning and political processes.

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Notes
7. The PRIO-CRF urban study was collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods from the three above mentioned cities. To explore various facets of exclusion and access issues among the urban poor, an in-depth household survey of 300 respondents (heads of the household) from each city using random sampling methods was carried out. The household survey was complemented by qualitative data which was made possible through observation: in-depth interviews of officials, slum dwellers, local NGOs, community leaders, elected representatives apart from a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) involving small groups.
8. See study TKTKT for additional information.
12. New Delhi’s recent progress can be at least partially credited to the fact that it is officially a territory (the National Capital Territory of Delhi), with a more consolidated power structure.

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Supporting a More Inclusive and Responsive Urban India

As has successfully been achieved in many other global urban contexts, supporting a more empowered mayoral system in both cities and big metropolises can have tremendous positive benefits. What is accentuating India’s slow devolution of powers to third-tier urban government is the continuation of a very weak mayoral system. For instance, none of the mayors of eight major cities in India handle more than 3 out of 10 critical functions, and nor do any have adequate powers on finance and staffing, the most critical areas to ensure good governance. Thus, an empowered mayoral system with longer tenure and adequate autonomy over both bureaucratic staff and city finances could greatly improve the flexibility and accountability of India’s growing urban spaces. Indirectly, a strong mayoral system would also attract political talents to India’s third tier, potentially transforming city politics and its governance. Reflecting upon the sheer size of populations aspiring to be in urban spaces and the magnitude of challenges that such rapid urbanization poses for a country, India’s urbanization mission needs a “seismic shift” in thinking and action if it is to avoid substantial negative future outcomes.

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