Realigning Urban Planning

What is the issue?

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The unending problems in urban areas and the transition in India's urban spaces demand a renewed approach to urban planning.

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How is the urban scenario?

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- Over 34% of India’s current population lives in urban areas, rising by 3% since 2011.
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- Existing large urban agglomerations (with population above 50 lakh) have remained mostly constant in number since 2005.
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- However, smaller clusters (with 10-50 lakh population) have risen significantly from 34 to 50 clusters.
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- By some estimates, India’s urban population could increase to 814 million by 2050.
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What are the concerns?

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- **Needs** - Cities are already downtrodden, with poor infrastructure and widespread poverty.
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- Increase in urban population is sure to increase the demands for basic services.
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- It includes clean water, public transportation, sewage treatment, etc.
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- Also, there is still an outstanding shortage of over 10 million affordable houses.
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- This is despite the government taking steps to incentivise their construction.
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- The annually recurring floods in Mumbai, dengue in Delhi and lakes on fire in Bengaluru are reminders of poor planning.
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- **Pollution** - Pollution in India’s urban areas seems to have sparked off a reverse migration.
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- Farmers from Haryana who migrated to Delhi and Gurugram are increasingly going back to their farms during winter, due to toxic pollution.
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- **Governance** - One primary problem is that of the definition of what urban area is.
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- Urban development comes under State governments, with the Governor notifying an area as urban.
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- The parameters include population, density, local revenue generation and percentage employed in non-agricultural activities.
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- The vague definition leads to discretionary decisions, resulting in a wide variance in what is considered a town.
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- The Central government considers a settlement as urban if it has
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i. an urban local government
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ii. a minimum population of 5,000
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iii. over 75% of its (male) population working in non-agricultural activities
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iv. a population density of at least 400 per sq. km
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- However, many States consider such “census towns” as rural, and establish governance through rural local government or panchayat.
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- **Investment** - The low level of urban infrastructure investment and capacity building is a significant concern.
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- India spends about $17 per capita annually on urban infrastructure projects.
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- This stands low against a global benchmark of $100 and China's $116.
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- Schemes such as the National Urban Renewal Mission have limited financing options, leading to inefficient implementation.
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- E.g. some cities collect only 5-20% of their potential property tax
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- Meanwhile, on the 'Smart City' front, India lags on implementation.
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- Besides, urban institutions also suffer from a shortage of skilled people.
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- **Policy** - Internal migration in India is very closely linked to urban transitions.
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- Also, such migration helps reduce poverty or prevent households from slipping into it.
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- But urban migration is not viewed positively in India.
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- As, policies often blindly seek to reduce rural to urban migration.
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- A deeper understanding reveals that preventing such migration could be counterproductive.
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What should be done?

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- The urban local bodies should be granted the freedom to raise financing and enforce local land usage norms.
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- There needs to be a systemic policy to deal with urban migration.
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- It should facilitate the integration of migrants into the local urban fabric.
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- City plans should be designed with a regular migration forecast assumed.
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- E.g. Delhi - focus is changing on revitalising cities nearby such as Meerut, by building transport links and connectivity

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- Lowering the migration cost, eliminating discrimination against migrants, and protecting their rights will facilitate development.
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- The proposed new urbanisation policy seeking to rebuild Indian cities around clusters of human capital is welcome.
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Source: The Hindu

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