

Managing India's Urban Shift and its Policy Paradigms

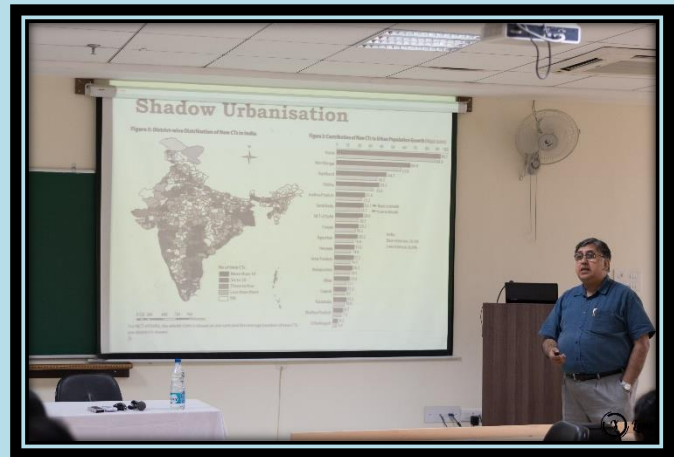
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Urban Management and Governance

Xavier University Bhubaneswar

India's transition towards a more market-oriented economy has received extensive research attention in recent years. Relatively, the implications of economic restructuring on India's urbanisation trajectory and the policy framework are still under researched. The first objective of this paper is to understand how changes in approach towards the city from the state-led development era to the neoliberal era influenced the urban policy and the institutional landscape through which it operates. The second objective is to understand effectiveness of national urban agenda in the age of decentralisation and globalisation.



We argue that changes in the consumption behaviour and aspirations of people, mode of economic production, capital formation, infrastructure delivery mechanism and land assembly are radically restructuring space relations within the metropolitan regions and demanding fundamental changes in approaches towards urban governance. New stakeholders have come up on the urban landscape in the form of aspirational neo-middle class tied to the globalizing economy as well as rural migrants tied to informal local economy. Their contrasting claims on the city are redefining policy discourses and changing institutional arrangements of urban governance, with the rise of non-state actors in the policy arena.

In the pre-liberalisation days, the political rhetoric in India towards the cities and big cities were negative. Emphasis was on balanced regional development through development of small and medium towns. That approach started to change with the political and economic reforms of the early 1990s. Progressive devolution of the national government's economic power has increased Inter-state economic competition – which in turn has fuelled world class city building aspirations amongst the powerful state leaders. Simultaneously, the national government also sought to strengthen urban local governments by granting constitutional status to the elected municipalities and define their powers vis-à-vis the state governments.

Reluctance of the state governments to dilute their hold over the cities – came in the way of the municipalities becoming empowered to the extent envisaged. Nevertheless, from 2005 onward, the national government had launched several urban-centric missions. These schemes combine features of financial programme as well as policy instruments, but side-step vexed political issues related to municipal autonomy. Emphasis is on augmenting urban infrastructure through market-friendly financial instruments and improve delivery of civic services through the application smart digital technologies, privatisation and ensure efficiency in urban management through involvement of special purpose vehicles and elitist civil society groups bypassing elected municipalities.

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Apart from tracing the changes due to economic reforms, our research highlights the importance in understanding national-state-local government power relations in implementing urban policy reforms. In India centralised and top-down policy approaches do not follow a linear narrative due to mediations by state and local institutions. Twenty-five years of neoliberal reforms, we argue, is leading to widening gap between the states in urbanisation level and their ability to undertake market oriented urban reforms – which calls for a more calibrated place specific urban agenda.

Key Words: Urban, Policy, Governance, India.



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