

India's Urban Blind Spot: Why Outdated Census Definitions Must Change

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India Urban Definition Latest News

- The Registrar General of India has proposed retaining the 2011 Census definition of urban areas for Census 2027, ensuring comparability and consistency in analysing urbanisation trends.

Criteria for Urban Classification

- In 2011, an urban unit was defined as either:
 - **Statutory Towns** – formally notified by State governments with urban local bodies such as municipal corporations, municipal councils, or nagar panchayats.
 - **Census Towns** – settlements meeting three conditions:
 - Population of at least 5,000
 - At least 75% of the male main working population engaged in non-agricultural activities
 - Population density of at least 400 persons per sq. km

- By these criteria, only 31.2% of India is considered urban, though the actual extent is believed to be much higher.
- Though census towns are administratively rural, they function like urban areas, creating a gap between governance and ground realities.

Global Comparisons

- Unlike India's strict three-criteria approach, most countries rely on one or two measures such as demographics, density, or infrastructure.
- The World Bank's **Agglomeration Index** estimated that 55.3% of India's population lived in urban-like areas in 2010, showing "hidden urbanisation" outside statutory limits.

DEGURBA: A Global Framework

- To harmonise global urban definitions, six international organisations developed the Degree of Urbanisation (DEGURBA) method, endorsed by the UN in 2020.
 - It uses satellite imagery and population grids of 1 km².
 - Settlements are classified into seven sub-categories: urban centres, dense/semi-dense clusters, peri-urban, and various rural categories.
- This approach captures the real spatial extent of urbanisation beyond administrative boundaries.
- DEGURBA helps detect settlement patterns, improve service monitoring, and guide financial targeting.
- However, its low-density thresholds may misclassify croplands or peri-urban fringes as urban.
- As it relies on algorithms and satellite data, risks of under- or over-detection remain.

Limitations of Current Urban Definition

- India's **binary definition of urban and rural** fails to capture the complex realities of evolving settlements.
- While urban local bodies enjoy autonomy and better governance, Panchayati Raj institutions are limited, leaving many fast-urbanising areas under inadequate rural administration.
- **Villages transforming into towns often remain unrecognised**, despite dense populations, non-agricultural livelihoods, and urban lifestyles.
- As a result, census towns and peri-urban regions are excluded from proper governance and infrastructure, creating gaps in planning and services.
- For example, Census data show that 251 towns identified as urban in 2001 continued to be governed as rural areas even in 2011.
- West Bengal, with the highest rise in census towns, illustrates this mismatch, as many newly classified urban settlements were never converted into statutory towns with elected bodies, leaving them underprepared for infrastructure and planning needs.

Implications of Outdated Urban Definition

- As India prepares for Census 2027, retaining the old definition of "urban" risks undercounting millions and excluding rapidly growing settlements from governance and services.

- Studies show India's true urban population in 2011 may have been 35-57%, much higher than the official 31%.
- **The rigid rules — such as the 75% male workforce engaged in non-agricultural jobs — are outdated**, ignoring women's informal work and the rise of industries, service jobs, and gig economy employment in semi-urban and rural areas.
- Many settlements that function as urban clusters remain unrecognised because they fall outside municipal boundaries or are divided administratively.
- Seasonal workers who straddle agriculture and urban jobs also fall through the cracks.
- Thus, continuing with the narrow, binary definition will misclassify urbanisation trends, leaving infrastructure, planning, and services ill-suited to India's evolving settlement patterns.

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