

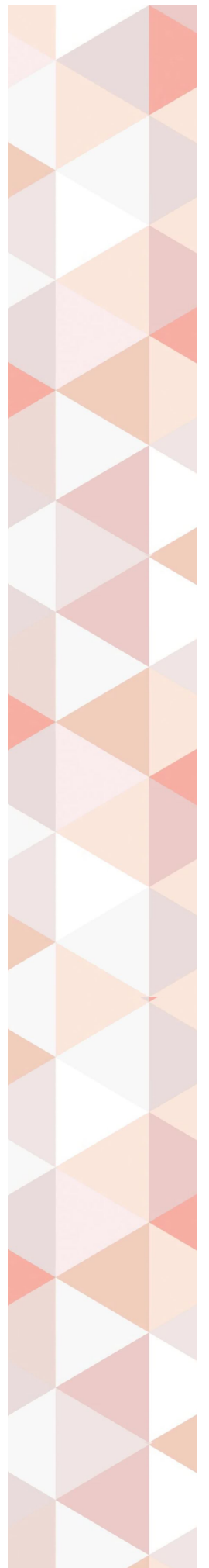
# REDEFINING URBAN

EXPLORING THE OFFICIAL DEFINITION OF URBAN IN INDIA

September 2021



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### Contribution:

This document was prepared by Pragya Sharma with the support of Mrunmayee Velukar under the overall supervision and guidance of Priyesh Salunke.

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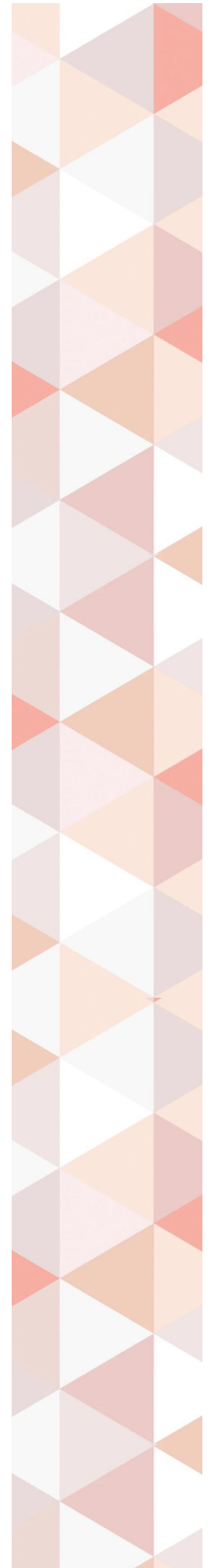


# 1.0

## Introduction

As the rate of urbanization has increased over the years, it has been recognized as an integral aspect of economic growth. The expectations of alleviating poverty in the developing world through urbanization have been quantified by World Bank and International Institute for Environment and Development, as a positive correlation between urbanization and GDP per capita (Hiranandani, 2018). Asian Development Bank has also observed that ‘rapid urbanization has been a key driver of Asia’s growth and accompanies poverty reduction’ (Asian Development Bank, 2008). As a result, unmanaged and rapid urbanization in developing nations has materialized, accompanied by inaccessible housing, deteriorating environmental conditions, living conditions and quality of life; creating pressure on land, infrastructure, and institutions. As the urbanization level of the world is expected to reach 68% by 2050 (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018), we still lack a uniform criterion for measuring urbanization and defining rural-urban classifications across countries.

Even within India, urban areas are defined differently at national and state level. The administrative status of the areas guides the nature of the governing body, its functions, jurisdictions and ability to access government schemes.





## 2.0

### Polysemy of the word ‘urban’ in India

Urban, is a place-based characteristic. It can be defined as a spatial concentration of people whose lives are organized around non-agricultural activities (Weeks, 2010). Hence, countries use either one or a combination of three prevalent criteria for defining urban –

1. Population cut-off,
2. Population density and
3. Percentage of residents employed in non-agricultural activities.

This variation in definition can be observed not only amongst countries but even within a country. India defines Urban at the national as well as state level. The towns that meet the criteria of the national definition provided by the Census of India are called census towns; whereas the towns that are notified under the state gazette are known as Statutory towns.

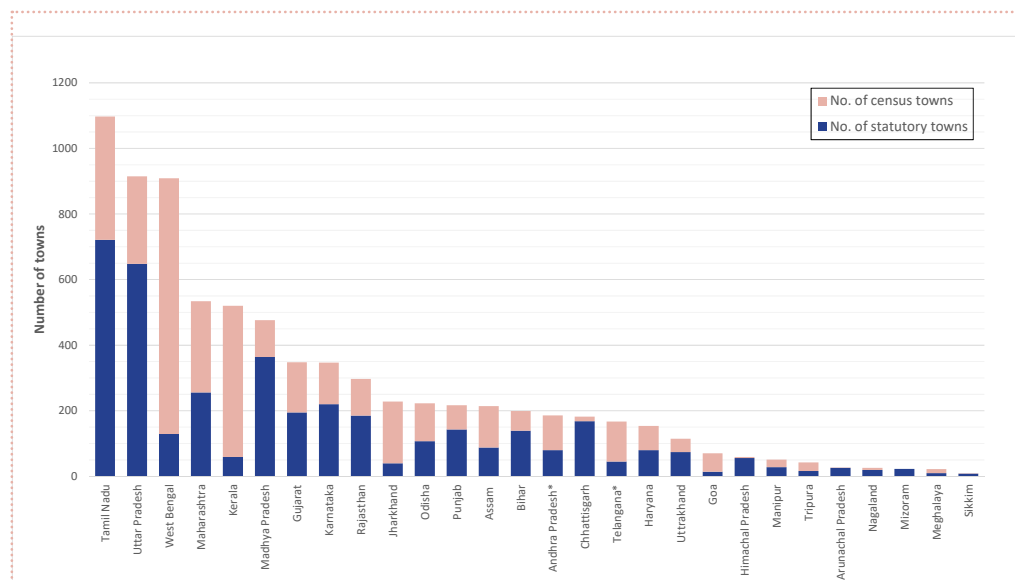
Census of India, on the other hand, considers all three parameters into consideration to define “Urban” areas – minimum population of 5000, the density of population not less than 400 persons/sq.km. and at least 75% of the male population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits. Based on these criteria for the Census Year 2011, India is 31.15% urbanized. After Independence, India has updated the census definition of “Urban” four times, but it has not been upgraded since 1971. Scholars have argued that India follows very stringent criteria defining urban and underestimates the urbanization level by large, some predicting it to be as high as 63% (Aijaz, 2017).

An area can be notified as ‘statutory towns’ by the governor followed by the constitution of an urban local body (ULB) – municipal corporation, development boards etc. Furthermore, the seventh schedule of

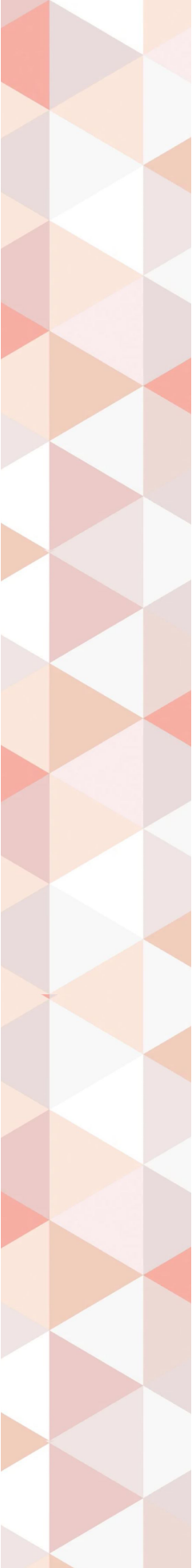
the Constitution of India recognizes the authority of establishment of municipal corporation, and other local authorities, as subjects of the state. The criteria set by the state government can be a result of multiple instances such as ‘population of the area, the density of the population therein, the revenue generated for local administration, the percentage of employment in non-agricultural activities, the economic importance, political motivation, or such other factors’ (Aijaz, 2017). Each state in India defines ‘urban’ differently. Although such criteria have allowed the states - flexibility to plan, track and monitor the requirement of potential urban areas, the definition is also vague and is often misused as a political leverage by the decision-makers/politicians.

One of the major reasoning behind defining and redefining the “urban”, comes from the fact that the administrative governance of an area is dependent on the state definition of urban. The underestimation of urbanization forces large villages and census towns to be

## Statutory and Census Towns in India



Source: Reforms in Urban Planning Capacity in India, NITI Aayog, 2021



governed by rural governments. These definitions guide revenue generation, fund allocation and implementation of schemes along with the responsibilities and structure of rural or urban governance bodies. Even with the stringent definition provided by census, 3894 census towns along with 4041 statutory towns were identified in 2011, implying that 49% of “urban” settlements are still administered as rural settlements.

# 3.0

## Gaps in the present definitions of urban

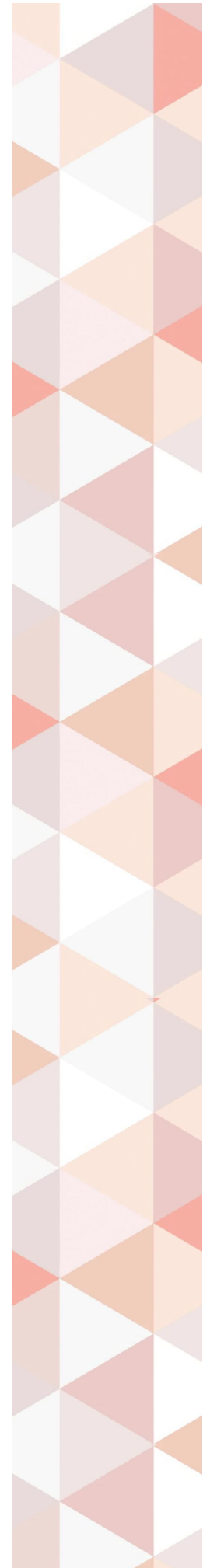
The census defined urban area after independence in 1951 which had only one criterion ,i.e., population of 5000 and over. It was only after 1961 that the other two criteria were introduced of minimum population density of 400 people/ sq. km. and three-fourth male population engaged in non-agricultural activities. As a result, the number of census towns decreased from 3060 to 2700 in 1951 and 1961, respectively. The requirement was then again refined in 1971 replacing three-fourth of male population with 75% of working male population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits. Since 1971, the definition has not been updated and is still implemented. Over the years, multiple gaps have been identified in the definition:

### 3.1 Missing Spatial Characteristics

Neither the census nor the state definitions take into consideration the spatial characteristics that mark the urban development. The impact of urbanization can be directly observed on the land, the area it occupies and built fabric. An urban area can easily be distinguished from rural, simply by observing the scale and built fabric from satellite imagery.

### 3.2 Requirement of minimum 75% of male working population engaged in non-agricultural activity

Nearly 24,000 dense settlements have not been recognized as urban due to their inability to meet this criterion of 75% male engaged in non-agricultural activity

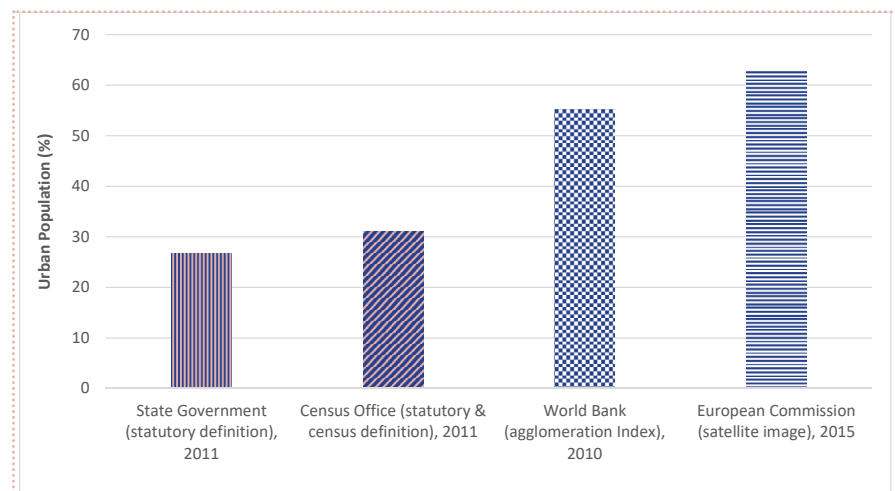




(Jana & S., 2021). Such “rural” areas are home to 190 million people and qualify for the urban status on the basis of population cutoff and population density. These could be future hubs for manufacturing and service industries. Not recognizing their potential and needs could deprive the residents of housing and infrastructure. As a result, the financial assistance might not reach these areas, until it is too late to manage their growth.

Furthermore, the definition clearly states ‘75% of male working population’ as a prerequisite to the urban definition, disregarding the contribution of women in economic activities. The women in India have contributed to all the three sectors, be it agricultural, manufacturing or service industry. Such disparity in recognition of work done, especially on the basis of sex, should not be propagated further in the 21st century.

### Urbanisation Rate in India according to various definitions



*Note: 63% denotes the population living in cities or large urban areas. The percentage will be more if the population of towns or small urban areas is added.*

*Source: Census of India 2011, World Bank 2015, European Union; retrieved from Aijaz, 2017*

### 3.3 Conundrum of Peri-Urban Development

An urban place can be said to be characterized by the kinds of infrastructure they provide to their residents. John Weeks proceeds with an assumption that rural and urban are mutually exclusive and sets a clear distinction between the two on the basis of self-sufficiency of the area. A truly non-urban/ rural area can be defined as completely self-sufficient, having their own sources of food, water, energy, and disposal. Whereas a truly urban area is completely dependent on strangers for the same (Weeks, 2010). Based on this reasoning, a conundrum can be observed in today's urban scenario, wherein overlap of certain characteristics of urban and rural infrastructure can be observed, resulting in the development of an area that cannot be truly defined as urban or rural. Hence the definition of urban itself needs to be detailed further, while considering peri-urban development and urban agglomeration.

### 3.4 Lack of implications followed by recognition as a Census town

Even after being accounted for in Census, not all census cities have an operating municipality, due to a lack of acknowledgment by the states. This transformation in governance is opposed not only by the politicians, to maintain their power, but also by residents of the area. One of the major reasons behind which is tax evasion such as property tax, along with stricter building construction norms and impeding industrial activities, that accompany the change in governance. As a result, the area grows with indiscriminate plot division, narrow streets, limited public places and, absent firefighting, water and sanitation infrastructure. Due to such shortcomings of the state, the Ministry of Urban Development had asked the states to convert 3,784 census towns into statutory ULB (Press Information Bureau, 2016).





## 4.0

### Suggestions and Way Forward

Definitions are the foundations that remain consistent for research and analysis. These are fine-tuned for effective transfer of knowledge or concept, throughout the process. Hence the following recommendations have been provided for making the definition of urban more effective in the Indian context.

#### 4.1 **Dilution of the third criteria of engagement in non-agricultural activity for the national level definition**

The requirement of infrastructure for sustaining 5000+ population with population density of 400 people per square kilometer area, should be met regardless of their engagement in economic activities.

The recognition of being 'urban' is heavily linked to the services, responsibilities and even the constitution of an ULB. The recognition as 'census town' needs to be followed by a step toward formalization of these settlements which may or may not be similar to the administrative government structure mentioned in Urban and Regional Development Plans Formulation and Implementation (URDPFI).

#### 4.2 **Rationalization of state's definition of urban**

The urban definition followed by the state, allows the states to follow their variation of definition that enhances the implementation of their vision and development

characteristics. But the vagueness of the recognition the process needs to be addressed as the constitution of a governing body depends on the definition itself. The parameters for recognizing an area as “Urban” should be defined and finalized after consultation with state functionaries.

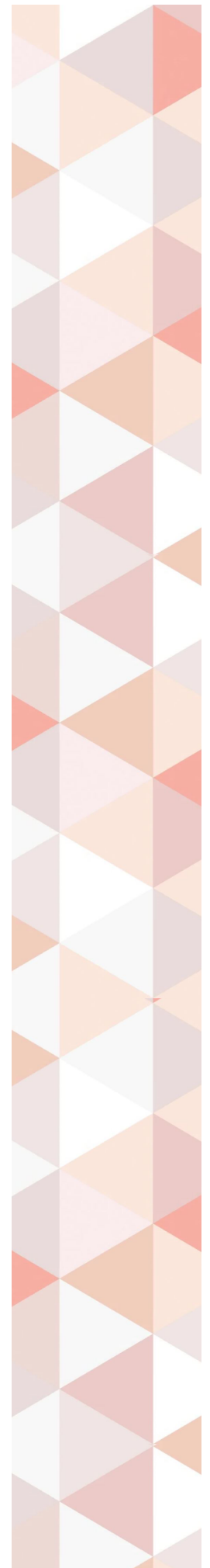
Recognizing urbanization as a process rather than a phenomenon will also help address the development in peri-urban areas.

### 4.3 Inclusion of Spatial parameters

Under the recent schemes like SPMRM (Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission; Ministry of Rural Development) and AMRUT (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation), priority was given to mapping of existing built and preparation of action plan/ master plan using satellite imagery. This allowed the towns and villages to overlap their data spatially to their jurisdiction area, helping in identifying gaps and addressing them. The achievements of these schemes can be further updated and integrated in the identification process of urban areas for new schemes.

### 4.2 Timely conversion of administrative governance

Provisions should be made for timely transfer of administrative governance on the basis of a set criteria defined by the state, not leaving it on the whim of political will. For this, the administrative government structure may be followed as mentioned in URDPFI. Such classification will also allow the states to assess the urban areas in a uniform manner for better resource allocation.





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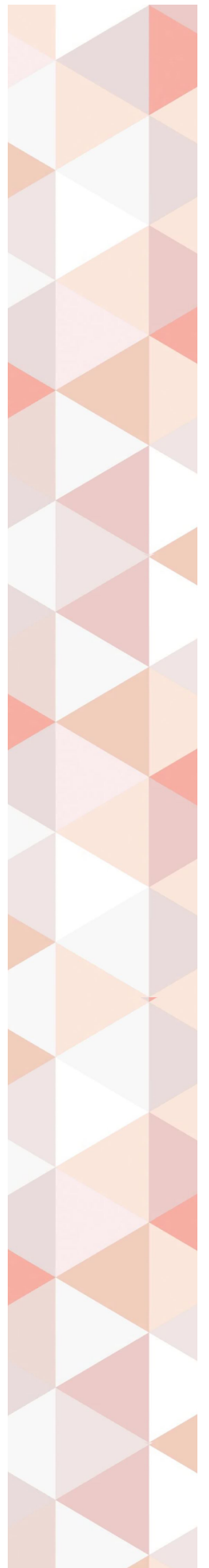
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