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CHALLENGES OF INDIAN MEGACITIES AS A MIGRATION DESTINATION

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Abstract

Migration from rural to urban areas, particularly megacities, is inevitable due to the greater economic opportunities available in these urban centers. Indian megacities are no exception to this trend. For instance, Mumbai, one of India's most populous megacities, receives more than 200 migrants daily. Over the years, Indian megacities expanded their territorial boundaries. This study examines the challenges faced by megacities as a result of rural-to-urban migration by focusing on the three largest megacities in the country: Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata. While migrants contribute to the development of these urban areas, they also place significant pressure on the urban infrastructure. A primary issue is the acute shortage of affordable housing, which leads to the proliferation of illegal slums, exacerbating pollution levels in megacities. In addition, the increased demand for transportation infrastructure necessitates the expansion of road networks, often at the expense of natural resources. Furthermore, the influx of migrants is associated with an increase in criminal activity within urban areas.

Keywords: Migration, Megacities, India, Challenges of megacities

Introduction

The migration and development of megacities are closely linked, particularly in the context of developing nations. Migration has been a persistent phenomenon since the dawn of human civilization, with individuals historically relocating in response to environmental changes, often seasonally. Mobility is a fundamental component of both nomadic groups and pastoralists. Migration is typically defined as a permanent or semi-permanent change in an individual's place of residence. Essentially, migration can be understood as a form of relocation diffusion involving the transfer of people, ideas, innovations, and behaviors from

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one location to another, often resulting in permanent settlement in new areas. Motivations for migration are shaped by push and pull factors, which either drive individuals to move to a new location or compel them to leave their previous residences. These factors may be economic, political, cultural, or environmental, and isolating a specific influencing factor can be challenging. Individuals tend to migrate from rural to urban areas, particularly megacities, where opportunities for livelihood are more abundant than in underdeveloped rural regions.

Megacities are characterized by diverse populations encompassing unique communities, cultures, religious beliefs, and lifestyle values. According to the World Urbanization Prospect 2024, approximately 55 percent of the global population resides in urban areas, and this figure is projected to rise to 68 percent by 2050. The urban population growth rate in India significantly exceeds the overall growth rate of the country, which is largely driven by migration to urban centers. In-migration to urban areas results in a population surge in cities, particularly megacities, disrupting the demand-supply equilibrium of infrastructure. Rapid urbanization presents substantial challenges to infrastructure development and resource management in cities worldwide. As urban populations continue to expand, especially in developing countries such as India, strain on existing systems becomes increasingly evident, impacting sectors such as housing, transportation, healthcare, and basic utilities. This disparity between population growth and infrastructure capacity can lead to proliferation of informal settlements, increased traffic congestion, and environmental degradation.

The objective of this study is to examine the challenges faced by three Indian megacities (Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata) owing to in-migration. Currently, pull factors do not drive in-migration because the opportunities in these three megacities are already saturated. Instead, push factors from places of origin regulate in-migration to these megacities. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The first section introduces the study, and the second section discusses the reasons for migration in urban areas. Trends in migration to urban areas, focusing on Indian megacities, are explored in the subsequent section. The challenges posed by in-migration to the development of these three Indian megacities are addressed in the fourth section. The final section concludes the paper.

2. Reasons for migration in urban areas

Migration is an intrinsic aspect of human existence, driven by the pursuit of enhanced social,

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economic, and environmental prospects (Santhapparaj 1996; Faggian and McCann 2006; Herrmann and Svarin 2009). It significantly influences urbanization, land-use patterns, and urban infrastructure (Rao, 1981). In Asia, migration is closely associated with urban expansion (Guest 1994). W. Arthur Lewis, in his renowned 1954 Lewis model, identified the rural-urban wage differential as the primary catalyst for urban in-migration. In addition to income disparities, factors such as inadequate educational infrastructure (Cote 1997), limited land and employment opportunities, pervasive poverty (Barbora et al. 2008), environmental degradation due to natural disasters (Dasgupta and Dey 2010), and low agricultural productivity (Panda 2010) are pivotal to influencing migration decisions from rural to urban areas. Higher educational qualifications increase the likelihood of migration to urban centers (Friedlander and Roshier, 1966; Cote, 1997).

Globally, young individuals migrate to megacities to seek better employment prospects and educational facilities. Migration among educated youth is prevalent in Indian cities (Sebastian, 1989; Usha & Shimray, 2010; Remesh, 2012; Marchang, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). Furthermore, urban areas encompass an informal sector characterized by unregulated, small-scale activities. New migrants with limited education, unable to secure formal sector employment, often enter the informal sector and engage in activities such as street vending, domestic work, knife sharpening, prostitution, drug sales, and firework sales. These informal sector roles require minimal skills to enable uneducated rural migrants to earn sufficient income for daily sustenance. Additionally, most informal sector work is labor intensive, and local urban residents may be unwilling to perform. Although the living conditions in urban areas may be inferior to those in rural areas, their income is substantially higher. Consequently, the informal sector can be considered a driver of rural-urban migration. Another significant factor in urban in-migration is the urban bias in government policies, which supports disproportionate increases in wage rates and employment opportunities in urban areas, contributing to rural-urban imbalances.

Currently, migration to Indian megacities is driven by push factors, such as inadequate educational opportunities, unemployment, social unrest, and political tensions in migrants' places of origin. The modernization and mechanization of agriculture in rural areas have led to consolidated agriculture with reduced demand for manual laborers, diminishing employment opportunities, and prompting migration to urban areas. Rural regions are more susceptible to climate change and natural disasters, which decreases agricultural productivity

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and motivates individuals to migrate to industrialized areas in search of improved opportunities and living standards.

3. Trend of migration in megacities

In recent decades, there has been a notable increase in migration from rural areas to urban areas. According to the United Nations Population Division, over 4 billion individuals currently reside in urban regions. This figure indicates that Half of the global population lives in urban areas. The United Nations estimated that in 2007, the number of individuals residing in urban areas surpassed that in rural areas worldwide.
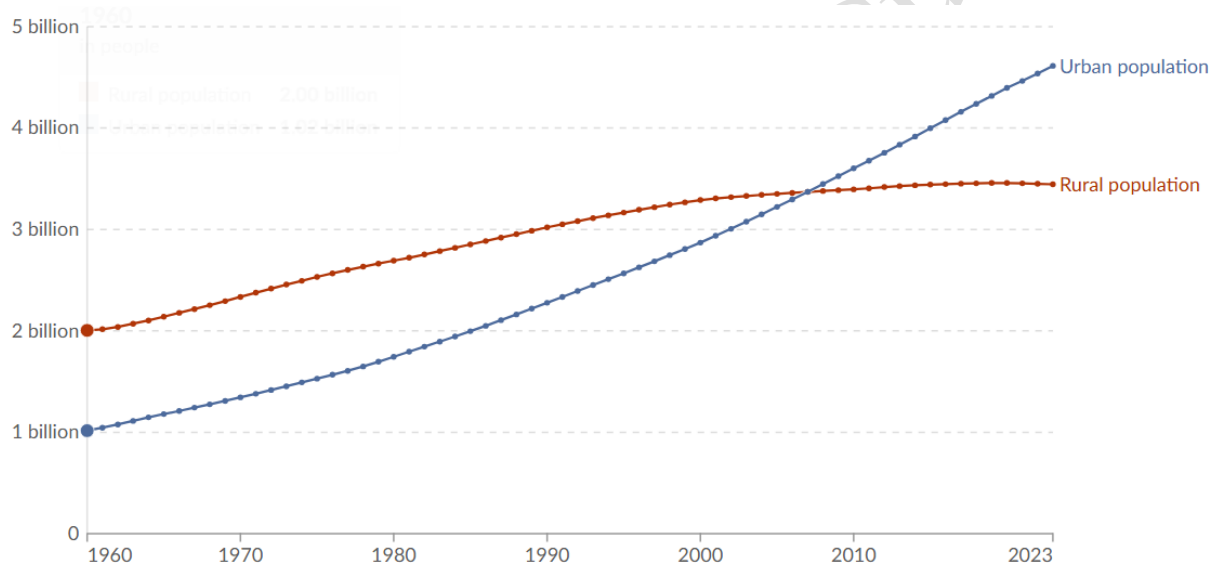
Source: World Bank based on data from the UN Population Division (2025)

More than 80 percent of the population resides in urban areas within the highest-income countries globally, such as those in Western Europe, the Americas, Australia, Japan, and the Middle East (Ritchie et al. 2018). In contrast, in most upper-middle-income countries, including those in Eastern Europe, East Asia, North and Southern Africa, and South America, approximately 50%–80 percent of the population is urbanized. Conversely, in many low-to lower-middle-income countries, the rural population continues to surpass the urban population. The United Nations has estimated that there are currently 33 megacities, defined as urban areas with populations exceeding 10 million, worldwide, compared to only 10 such cities in 1990. This number is projected to increase to 47 by 2050. Presently, Tokyo is the most populous city, with 37 million inhabitants, followed by Delhi with 34 million

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inhabitants. Rapid urbanization has emerged as a defining characteristic of the 21st century, with existing megacities anticipated to continue expanding as populations from rural areas migrate to urban centers.

3.1 Trend of in-migration in three Indian megacities

In India, persistent and rapid urbanization can be attributed to several factors, including rural-urban migration, natural population growth, reclassification of rural areas as urban towns, and shifts in employment structures. Census data indicate that the decadal growth rate of urban population surpasses that of urban areas, suggesting an increase in urban population density. The continuous rise in urban density, along with the expansion of urban areas and high urban population growth rate, implies that urban population growth is driven not only by natural population growth but also by migration. This is further supported by the observation that between 2001 and 2011, the urban population grew at a significantly faster rate of 32% than the overall population growth rate of approximately 18% (Marchang 2022).

The current population of India stands at 1.46 billion, with 36.36% of the population residing in urban areas. The country is home to six megacities, namely Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore, Chennai, and Hyderabad, with approximately 5 percent of the total population living in these megacities. Rural-urban migration is projected to elevate Ahmedabad to the megacity category by 2030. Delhi and Mumbai are the two principal megacities in India, each with a population exceeding 20 million, attracting over 200 migrants daily in search of livelihood. It is anticipated that by 2030, the populations of Delhi and Mumbai will reach 36 million and 27 million, respectively (Singh, 2015). There are two categories of migrants to megacities, interstate and intrastate. Interstate migrants constitute the majority of migrants to Indian megacities. However, the proportion declined from 67 percent in 2001 to 54 percent in 2011 (Census 2001 & 2011). Conversely, intrastate migration increases during this period. The megacities of Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata experienced a decrease in interstate migration and a higher influx of intrastate migration (Marchang 2022).

4. Stress on megacities: Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata

Megacities predominantly rely on migrants as labor sources, particularly within the informal sector. Migration from rural areas also rejuvenates the age structure of these urban centers, as

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younger individuals tend to relocate to megacities. While there are some advantages to receiving migrants, this study primarily addressed the challenges associated with the daily influx of migrants into megacities.

Substantial migration from rural areas has exerted pressure on the urban infrastructure. Many cities are now planning post-occupancy, leading to what is termed 'pathological urbanization,' characterized by chaotic urban environments lacking sufficient public spaces, unsanitary slums, and a vast unregulated informal sector. An acute shortage of affordable housing has resulted in both legal and illegal slums, particularly in developing countries. In Indian megacities, the scarcity of affordable housing has led to the widespread illegal construction of low-cost homes using substandard materials and methods. The rapidly growing population of Indian megacities has resulted in an increasing number of slum dwellers who lack access to safe drinking water, sanitation, healthcare facilities, education, and the urban economy. The shortage of affordable housing is particularly severe in Mumbai, where an estimated six out of ten residents live in slums. Urban water supply and sanitation in the country suffer from inadequate services, a widening demand-supply gap, and poor sanitation conditions. Approximately 35 cities in India, with populations exceeding one million receive water for only a few hours each day. Waterborne diseases result in a loss of 90 million days of annual productivity (Rami and Vansiya, 2018). These slums are also hotspots for urban crimes. In addition, these three megacities have a significant number of homeless individuals residing in railway stations, footpaths, and beneath flyovers.

Another critical issue arising from migration is the road congestion in megacities. Although Delhi boasts an extensive road network, it lacks sufficient traffic capacity (WHO 2014). According to a report by the Victoria Transport Institute, half of the increased roadway capacity in Delhi has been consumed by additional traffic over the past five years. Nearly 20 percent of the time, cars travel no faster than pedestrians (Singh 2015). These three megacities are exploring underground public transport systems as sustainable solutions to transportation challenges. Delhi has the most extensive metro coverage, with ten color-coded lines serving 289 stations over a total length of 395 km. In both Mumbai and Kolkata, four metro lines are already operational, and many more are under construction. However, traffic pressure remained high in these three megacities. Furthermore, the expansion of road networks and metro lines in these megacities often necessitates the removal of trees, thereby exerting a significant pressure on the environment.

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Indian megacities are experiencing rapid expansion due to significant migratory pressures, which in turn impact the environment at the local, regional, and global levels. In recent decades, the emission of anthropogenic greenhouse gases (GHGs) has markedly increased in these urban areas. Notably, Delhi is recognized as the most polluted city in the world. Concerns regarding air pollutants, such as particulate matter, black carbon, NOx, and ozone, have intensified in Indian megacities. Although authorities have implemented measures to address air quality issues, the scale and complexity of the problem necessitate more comprehensive and effective solutions (Bhola and Nagpure, 2015). The ongoing urbanization and industrialization processes continue to exacerbate air pollution, requiring a multifaceted approach that includes stricter emission controls, improved urban planning, sustainable transportation systems, and heightened public awareness. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for enhanced monitoring and enforcement of environmental regulations to ensure successful implementation of air quality improvement initiatives. As Indian megacities continue to expand, balancing economic development with environmental sustainability remains a critical challenge that requires urgent attention and innovative solutions.

The convergence of diverse populations in Indian megacities engenders a complex social landscape where cultural differences may precipitate friction and conflict. Migrants originating from rural areas, smaller towns, and other countries have introduced their distinct traditions, languages, and social norms into these urban centers. While this diversity enriches the cultural fabric of the city, it can also lead to misunderstandings and tensions among communities. The pronounced disparities in lifestyle, values, and economic conditions among various groups further exacerbate these social challenges. In particular, religious festivals have emerged as flashpoints for communal tensions in Indian megacities. These events, which frequently involve public processions, gatherings, and rituals, occasionally result in clashes between different religious groups. Factors such as competing claims over public spaces, perceived disrespect for religious symbols, and historical grievances may trigger conflicts during these celebrations. Local authorities are tasked with the complex responsibility of balancing the right to religious expression with the need to maintain public order and harmony. As megacities continue to expand and attract increasingly diverse populations, addressing social conflicts and fostering intercultural understanding remains a critical challenge for urban planners, policymakers, and community leaders.

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5. Conclusions

Megacities serve as centers of social, economic, and cultural opportunities, enabling migration from rural areas to these urban hubs. Consequently, megacities are expected to expand over time. This study has already addressed the opportunities and challenges associated with such migration. Indian megacities are currently at a critical juncture where the advantages of urban migration must be weighed against the accompanying challenges. A primary requirement in this context is the development of inclusive urban planning that includes affordable housing and the enhancement of infrastructure to accommodate the growing population. As megacities are significant economic drivers of a country, it is imperative to create employment opportunities that leverage the skills of both migrants and existing residents, thereby bolstering the national economy. To achieve the 11th goal of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, it is essential to implement green initiatives that mitigate environmental degradation and enhance resilience to climate change.

Given that megacities attract individuals from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, the government and social authorities should establish policies that foster social cohesion. Initiatives should be undertaken to promote religious and cultural integration and to protect the rights of all residents, regardless of their origin. Local urban authorities should be empowered to take necessary actions tailored to the specific nature of their localities, thereby effectively managing urban growth and service delivery. However, caution should be exercised when granting autonomy to urban authorities.

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