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Riya Bhattacharya*

Abstract

Urban areas in India are perpetually struggling to meet the services demanded by the proliferating population. However, policies and studies are traditionally focused on a few metropolitan cities. Conversely, population growth and economic activities began concentrating towards urban peripheries and areas beyond class I towns. These cities are undeniably crippled with various spatial, socio-economic, and political challenges that hinder local governments from effectively delivering basic services. Even after three decades of decentralisation, studies and reports reveal that urban local governments perform poorly in terms of providing basic service. In this context, the present paper, by reviewing various reports and studies, highlights that the present condition of service delivery in urban areas in general is rather ineffective while smaller cities in peripheries are performing worse and are subjected to various factors that differ across cities. Therefore, the paper further emphasises the need for a city-based study to help local bodies assess the peculiarities of each city, thereby aiding in the effective formulation and implementation of policies and plans.

Keywords: Basic Services, Urban Local bodies, Urban Governance, Large and Small Cities.

Introduction

Basic service delivery in Indian cities is reportedly failing to cope with the pace of urban growth. Although it has been argued that the rate of urbanisation in India has been sluggish in the past decade (Bercegol, 2019), it is undeniable that significant growth has occurred in the cities, especially in the peripheries. Various studies have shown that the recent trend of urban growth in India took a peripheral turn, as evidenced by the growth in the number of census and statutory towns in the 2011 census (Pandey, 2012; Guin and Das, 2015). Many larger cities have experienced suburbanisation and a growing population in the periphery (Sridhar and Monkkonen, 2024). Despite this, it has been widely observed that with the increase in population and demands for services and infrastructure, the cities in India are getting overburdened (Sridhar, 2007). This is more critically found in the peripheries. There exists an expanding gap between the demand and supply of basic services and infrastructure, which can be attributed to various factors like lack of finance (Sridhar, 2007), overlapping responsibilities of different governing agencies (Pandey, 2012), absence of coordination between different stakeholders (Biswas, 2020) etc.

Basic services such as sanitation, water supply, etc. are undoubtedly of utmost importance in improving one's lifestyle and well-being. Notably, the sixth agenda of the Sustainable Development Goal

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(SDG) is to render clean water and sanitation to all. The delivery of such crucial services is often at the direct disposal of local governments. Constitutionally, local governments are authorised to render these services effectively. In this context, the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) of 1992, has established local governments in cities and empowered them with political, administrative and fiscal powers. Furthermore, the amendment listed 18 functions to be undertaken by local governments in urban areas. Among these 18 functions, the fourth, fifth and sixth empower the Urban Local Bodies (ULB) to provide transport infrastructure, safe drinking water and sanitation facilities. The amendment empowered the cities to reinvigorate their capabilities to assess the requirements at the grassroots level and undertake planning activities in consonance with the same. Even to support local city governments, the central government has launched various programs from time to time. One of the leading programs is the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Reform Mission (JNNURM) to rejuvenate the large towns, Urban Infrastructural Development Scheme for Small and Medium Towns (UIDSSMT), Basic Services for Urban Poor (BSUP), Integrated Housing and Slum Development Program, etc. (Sivaramakrishnan, 2011).

Despite all these efforts, many research studies have reported the poor performance of local governments even after 30 years of decentralisation (Sivaramakrishnan, 2015). ULBs are still lagging in the delivery and management of these services. For instance, according to the data provided by the National Sample Survey (NSSO) in 2018, around 19 per cent of urban households do not have any water connection. Another 48.9 per cent of households do not have adequate drainage infrastructure in Indian cities (Kumar and Joseph, 2012); similarly, 27 per cent of urban households do not have access to any kind of latrine facility (NSSO, 2018). Additionally, 70-90 per cent of the generated waste is collected in metropolitan cities, while the proportion of collected waste is as low as 50 per cent in small towns. The condition of roads is substandard, with potholes causing frequent accidents and water logging. Furthermore, in many cities, there is a serious lack of coordination between local governments and parastatal bodies leading to poor service delivery (Biswas, 2020). Notably, in the cities within metropolitan peripheries, the quality of services declines away from the core city (Mondal, 2021). Additionally, many reports reveal that in many suburban cities and small towns, the delivery of services is poor and often ineffective (Chattopadhyay, 2015; Mondal, 2021; Biswas, 2020). On the other hand, study has highlighted that in terms of coverage of services, metropolitan cities are performing better than non-metropolitan cities (Subramaniam, 2020). Some studies have identified some common causes behind this; for instance, poor public participation (Chattopadhyay, 2012; Sridhar and Smitha, 2020), poor fiscal condition (Mohanty *et al*, 2007; Sridhar and Reddy, 2010) and biased delivery of services against poor neighbourhoods (Ghosh and Das, 2020), poor planning, etc. hampering the improvement in service delivery. Furthermore, small towns often lack fiscal capital, human resources, and private capital to improve the condition of basic services (Subramaniam, 2020). In short, the large and smaller cities struggle to manage basic services despite having constitutional authorities.

However, this raises a serious question: if all the cities, regardless of their size and economic power are facing issues with basic service management, then what are the key causes behind it, and does the pattern of the issues differ across cities or not? The present paper delves into this aspect while illustrating the condition of basic service delivery in different cities in India with a focus on key services (water supply, drainage, sanitation, solid waste management, street lights and roads) and attempts to

highlight the factors stated as responsible for this condition. By doing so, the paper raises a few serious concerns derived from existing studies and literature and argues for studying service delivery and management from different approaches to help identify the unique pattern of problems and factors influencing basic service delivery in different cities in India.

Urban Focus of Plans and the 74th CAA

Historically, the urban policies of India have been prioritising large cities such as Kolkata, Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, etc., especially in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and later the policies included Bangalore, Pune and Hyderabad (Shaw, 1999). Major studies and reports (Sivaramakrishnan, 2015; Mohanty, 2014; 2016; Ruet and Lama-Rewal, 2009; Baud and Wit, 2008; Kamath and Vijayabaskar, 2013) were also focused on large cities, highlighting the governing issues persisting in these cities. Only in the early 21st century did the significance of planning and developing small and medium towns receive acknowledgement. This has been highlighted through the shift of centralised policies over decades to incorporate decentralisation in India (Barcegol, 2019, p-2). Studies gradually began to go beyond the metro centrality of the extant studies and policies (Maringanti, 2013), and emphasise small towns and peripheral cities (Denis *et al*, 2012; Narain, 2013; Shaw, 2005; Aijaz, 2019; Bercegol, 2019; Chattopadhyay, 2012; 2015; Guin, 2019; Das, 2015; Sood, 2021; Gururani and Kennedy, 2021). Apart from highlighting the governing issues of these spaces, studies have also stated that these peripheries are critically lagging in terms of basic amenities and infrastructure (Shaw, 2005; Samanta, 2013; Guin, 2019; Aijaz, 2019; Das, 2015). Therefore, undeniably, the role of local governments in these cities become crucial.

Notably, the 74th CAA of 1992 marked the watershed moment in urban governance in India, which aimed at empowering ULBs with political, administrative and fiscal authorities. The revolutionary measure significantly addressed the urban challenges arising from the increasing middle-class domination, changing urbanisation patterns to improve the quality of life in urban India. In the words of Ahluwalia (2017):

"In 1992, the 74th Constitutional Amendment formally recognized urban local bodies as the third tier of government and mandated that state governments transfer to local governments a set of specified functions under the 12th Schedule, assigning to them the responsibility for functions such as urban planning, including town planning; regulation of land use and construction of buildings, roads, and bridges; the provision of water; public health; and sanitation and solid waste management" (Ahluwalia, 2017, p-2)

In urban areas, three major types of ULBs are found, namely Municipal corporation (for cities with more than one lakh population), Municipal Council (for cities with more than 50 thousand population) and Nagar Panchayat (Aijaz, 2008). Some of the responsibilities are delegated to these bodies while keeping some in the purview of the central and state governments (Ahluwalia, 2017). Under this Act, 18 major functions are delegated to local governments; however, unfortunately, though many cities readily undertook these responsibilities, they were unable to effectively deliver them. Such issues are pertinent even after 30 years of decentralisation where confusion, conflicts and litigations

create difficulties in metropolitan planning (Sivaramakrishnan, 2015, p-58). Many accuse partial delegation of power to the local government as a major concern where centralised systems are still operating, hindering the progress of local governance (Sivaramakrishnan, 2015). However, at the same time, some studies highlight the incapability of local governments when they rely on the centralised policies (Biswas, 2020). Hence, although undoubtedly, the local governments are in the best position to govern the areas, it is crucial to identify the issues related to different local bodies, emphasising the factors leading to the same.

Status of Provisioning of Major Basic services in ULBs of India:

The rationale for assessing the status of basic services is that people's well-being and survival often depend on a few key amenities: safe drinking water, effective drainage and sanitation system, waste management and proper connectivity. Until the post-colonial period, water supply and sanitation were considered to be obligatory functions by municipal bodies (Sivaramakrishnan, 2015, pp-201). The decentralisation of ULBs is supposed to confer the basic amenity provisions. However, if we look into the statistics, the issues become prevalent. The High-Powered Expert Committee (HPEC) report of 2011 clearly stated as follows:

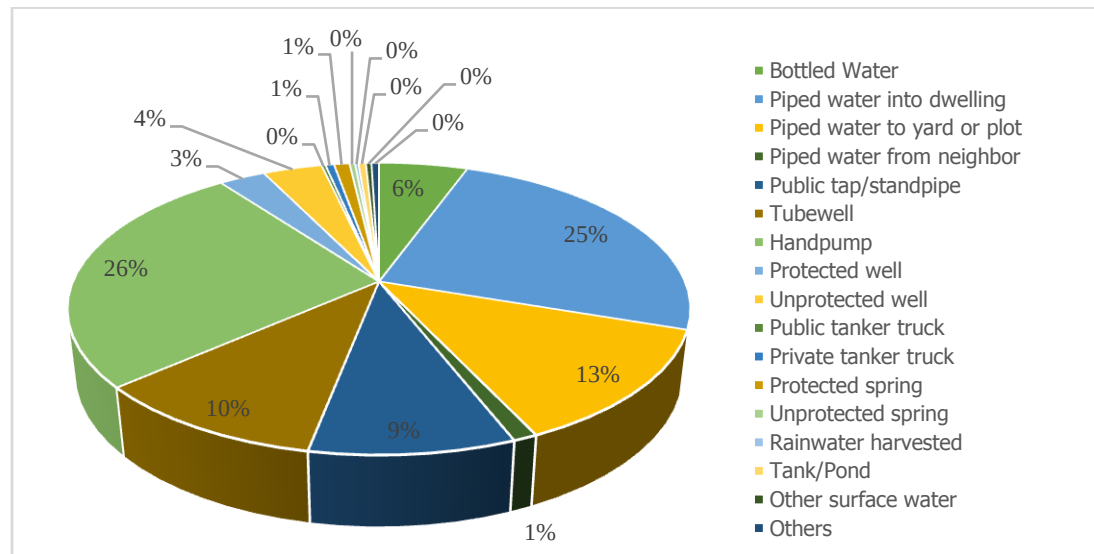
"Cities and towns of India are visibly deficient in the quality of services they provide, even to the existing population. Considering that the Indian economy is now one of the fastest growing economies in the world, and standards are rising, current service levels are too low relative to the needs of urban households.....On average, 25 per cent of the population in many Indian cities lives in slums;" (Ahluwalia et al, 2011, p XXIII)

Apart from this, rendering each service has its own set of challenges. Moreover, the nature of such challenges differs regionally from city to city, depending on their size and class. Small towns and municipal bodies face problems quite differently than metropolitan cities. Now, we can look into each of the basic services and the status of its provisioning.

Water Supply

Water scarcity in the growing cities of India has become a crucial yet common problem. In the majority of the studies, it has been found that groundwater is the main source of drinking water in the majority of the cities. To confer the sustainable use of water, ULBs need to be efficient to sufficiently ensure mass coverage of water supply. However, the current picture of the Indian cities is very disappointing. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 5, 98.7 per cent of households have improved drinking water sources (NFHS 5, 2019-21). However, the 76th round of surveys by the NSSO shows that only about 80.7 per cent of urban households have a water supply connection. Among them, only 37.5 per cent of households rely on piped water connections, while others have to rely on public taps, tube wells, hand pumps, wells, etc. Overall, 67.8 per cent of households have a source of water within their premises (Figure 1). Conversely, 45.7 per cent of households have to fetch water from a nearby source situated within one km, while 3.5 per cent of households have to fetch it from further distances. Moreover, only 74.3 per cent of the households daily receive water from these sources (NSSO, 2018).

Figure 1: Percentage of households relying on different sources of water supply in Indian cities



Source: 76th round of NSSO, 2018

In many cities, the average hours of water supply fluctuate. Consequently, the average consumption of water declined, for instance in 2011, the daily water supply per capita varied from 37 LPCD to 298 LPCD (Ahluwalia *et al*, 2011). Studies have highlighted that the absence of revenue against this service is a major constraint of water supply, i.e., 40 per cent of water supplied in Indian cities does not earn any revenue. Consequently, the cost recovery is poor, leading to the deterioration of the service quality (Shinde and Parmar, 2024). Moreover, as per the NSSO data, 21.96 per cent of households do not have water meters (NSSO, 2018), leading to misuse of this resource and also difficulties in monitoring the usage and collecting user charges against the same. Even at the central level, NITI Aayog has confirmed that around 70 per cent of the urban areas in India provide contaminated water. This raises serious concerns regarding the over-utilisation of groundwater in many cities. Besides, the pipelines are rarely well maintained and are often placed near storm water drains or urban sewers, especially around informal settlements. Additionally, during the prolonged times of non-supply, contaminated groundwater seeps into the pipes, leading to contamination of the supplied water (Bhaduri, 2023).

Scenario of large cities:

A significant problem is that around half of these connections suffer from leakage during transportation. A news article in *The Hindu* by Bhatnagar gave the shocking news that about 40 per cent of water in New Delhi disappeared during transportation, making a gap in the water supply of about 1300 million litres. He further adds that the water supply in Delhi is inconsistent, with residents receiving an average of four hours of water supply per day (Bhatnagar, 2016). Apart from the quantity side, there is the quality side, which is also a major problematic area. According to the UN Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking Water (GLASS) report of 2017, although the budget for quality

water supply and sanitation has increased, globally, almost two billion people are still at risk of getting cholera, diarrhoea, or typhoid due to consuming water containing faeces (Hindustan Times, 2017). The access and quality of the water matter more than just the availability of the water supply. In a recent article by Dhaval Desai (2019), the assessment of the water quality, supplied by the urban areas in 15 major state capital are summarised. The main finding reveals that the following:

"In mid-November, media went abuzz with stories proclaiming Mumbai, the country's commercial capital, to have achieved 100 percent safe quality of its municipal water supply. Samples of tap water from across the city were said to meet – rather outperform – each of the 11 individual parameters of tests conducted by the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) in 15 major state capitals. On the other hand, water samples collected in Delhi, including the office and residence of the Union Consumer Affairs Minister, failed all the individual parameters, meaning that the quality of water supplied to the national capital is the poorest in the country"

Furthermore, recent cases of water scarcity in Chennai and Bengaluru (Guruvamikanathan, 2024; Mogul *et al*, 2024) highlight the urgent need for the attention of policymakers. As it is evident from Chennai, governmental interventions and planning may help avoid such a crisis in future (Hindu, 2024). The aim is not limited to supplying water to the people in a particular area but to provide it sustainably, through proper planning, and according to the needs of an area via local governments; which is failing in India.

Scenario of small and medium towns:

Now, if we look into the condition of small and medium towns, one of the studies highlighted the problem of water scarcity existing in the small towns of Uttar Pradesh (Bercegol, 2019). Similarly, another study highlighted that the low tax sources and poor administrative and governing capacities of small towns and non-metropolitan cities lead to poor coverage of municipal water supply, which he regarded as the failure of local government to keep pace with the rapid urban growth in these towns (Subramanyam, 2020). Similarly, a study of suburban Kolkata found that many rely on public taps and hand pumps in the absence of municipal water connections (Bhattacharya and Guin, 2024). A recent article articulated concerns regarding the poor capacity of small municipalities to support the increasing demand for safe water, given that their own resources are lagging (Panwar and Sinha, 2023). Similarly, in the periphery of Hyderabad, the services are skewedly provided to the gated enclaves, depriving the marginalised population and creating a splintered space (Das, 2015).

Hence, this indicates that, although the condition of the water supply is ineffective in many urban areas, small towns are lagging in terms of coverage. In contrast, large cities are struggling to manage quality and effectiveness.

Sanitation

Indian cities are crippled with acute problems regarding sanitation and drainage management. Sanitation facilities are a prerequisite to maintaining a healthy lifestyle, especially amid the current situation, which calls for serious attention towards sanitation conditions. Moreover, the majority of ULBs are unable to render basic infrastructure to support the supply of drainage services. Similarly, in some instances, daily use of these services in a rampant manner dilapidates the infrastructure straining the local bodies. A survey by the Ministry of Urban Development (City Sanitation Study, 2010) revealed that, out of 423 cities, not even a single one met the satisfactory performance standard (Ahluwalia *et al*, 2011, p-51). Currently, as per the NFHS 5, 81.5 per cent of households in urban India have access to improved sanitation facilities, whereas 6.1 per cent of households still rely on open defecation practices (NFHS 5). Similarly, as per the NSSO data, 72.2 per cent of houses have access to latrine facilities within their premises (NSSO, 2018). This indicates that in terms of sanitation facilities, urban India is still lagging. However, the government initiative of the "Clean India Mission" began to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining sanitation in ULBs in India. The quality of sanitation has improved over the years; for instance, according to government data, currently, 73 per cent of the ULBs are defecation-free, which accounts for 4324 ULBs. Furthermore, under the flagship program of the "Swachh Bharat Mission", around 66 lakh individual toilets and over six lakh public toilets were under construction in Urban India (MOHUA, 2020).

Moreover, the existing drainage system is inadequate. For instance, in 2011, 33 per cent of households used open drainage systems, while 48.9 per cent of households did not have adequate drainage infrastructure in Indian cities (Kumar and Joseph, 2012; Vishwakarma *et al*, 2023). Only a few planned cities like Chandigarh and the urban territory of Dadra Nagar Haveli have a higher proportion of closed drainage systems. States like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Jammu and Kashmir, Assam and Meghalaya have a large proportion of urban areas with no drainage services, echoing the need for the attention of the policymakers. Overall, the majority of ULBs have mixed patterns of drains with a higher proportion of open drainage. Various studies have highlighted the persisting issue of water logging as a common daily issue faced by people living in urban areas. Moreover, the storm water generated during monsoons creates an additional burden on the existing system. Furthermore, in many states of India, there is unsustainable construction of drains, which are unable to keep pace with rapid urbanisation (Gupta, 2005). Additionally, there are approximately one lakh sanitary workers employed by 4800 urban local bodies (Lakshman, 2024). However, their safety measures and hygiene in the working environment are unsuitable causing frequent death and morbidity among these workers.

Scenario of large cities:

Class I cities are performing better in terms of having latrine facilities. These cities outperformed small towns in terms of latrine facilities as about 80 per cent of households in these cities had access to toilet facilities within their premises (Wankhade *et al*, 2014). However, many large cities such as Mumbai and Delhi lack coverage of public toilets to serve marginalised populations (Ghosh and Pinto, 2024; GONCR, 2015). In terms of drainage facilities as well, the large cities are lagging. For instance, in Bangalore, only half of the towns are served by a sewerage system. Similarly, in Hyderabad, 86 out of 124 towns, do not

have sewerage systems (Kumar and Joseph, 2012). Urban water logging is a common issue observed these days. However, although a majority of large cities are connected with centralised sewage systems linked with treatment facilities, there is a serious gap in wastewater treatment facilities; for instance, in class I towns, the treatment capacity gap stands at around 67 per cent (Panwar and Sinha, 2023).

Scenario of small and medium towns:

Conversely, the scenario in small and medium towns is worse. For instance, while moving down according to the size of cities, a decline in the share of households having latrine facilities within their premises can be observed. Only about half of the households (48%) in Class V towns have latrine facilities. Open defecation continues to persist, as per the report, as much as one-third of the population (33%) of Class VI towns defecates in open spaces (Wankhade *et al*, 2014). A majority of municipal corporations and councils have mixed patterns. In the case of three small and medium cities in West Bengal, Samanta found the absence of proper sewerage networks, the dominance of open drains, and the absence of scientific passage of drain water to be challenging issues (Samanta, 2013). On the other hand, a study highlighted the problem of drain clogging due to irregular cleaning, disposal of garbage and plastic wastes into drains, and poor maintenance causing broken drains in three municipalities (Chattopadhyay, 2012). The small towns are not linked to a centralised sewage system, and the treatment capacity gap in the Class II towns stands at 95 per cent (Panwar and Sinha, 2023). An article depicted that about 60 per cent of households from non-metro cities such as Moradabad, Gorakhpur, Kolhapur, Bilaspur, and Kharagpur discharge their wastewater in open drains, indicating the gap existing in achieving complete sanitation in urban areas (Dash, 2015). Similarly, a study highlighted the poor condition of drainage infrastructure in the small towns of Uttar Pradesh (Bercegol, 2019).

Hence, in terms of drainage systems, large cities are struggling to provide adequate drainage and latrine facilities as a majority have open drains, and lack treatment infrastructure, and latrine coverage. However, in smaller cities, the problem is worse as many towns do not have full coverage of even open drainage systems; furthermore, these drains are not connected with centralised sewage treatment systems and often lack adequate latrine facilities.

Solid Waste Management

Solid waste management is a cumbersome facility that often remains neglected in many urban areas. It is perceived as a luxurious facility that cannot be provided in every class of urban areas. Solid wastes are seldom segregated (based on their degradability) due to persisting unawareness among citizens as well as municipal bodies. As per the recent CPCB¹ report, only half of the collected waste is treated and 18.4 per cent is land filled, whereas 31.7 per cent of such waste remains unaccounted for (ICED and TERI, 2022). Moreover, the amount of generated waste varies depending on the size of the city, for instance, the average per capita waste generated ranges from 0.22-0.62 kg for cities having more than 2 million population, which decreases to 0.17-0.54 kg in case of cities having less than 0.1 million population (Kumar *et al*, 2017). Notably, a significant amount of ULB's budget is spent on garbage

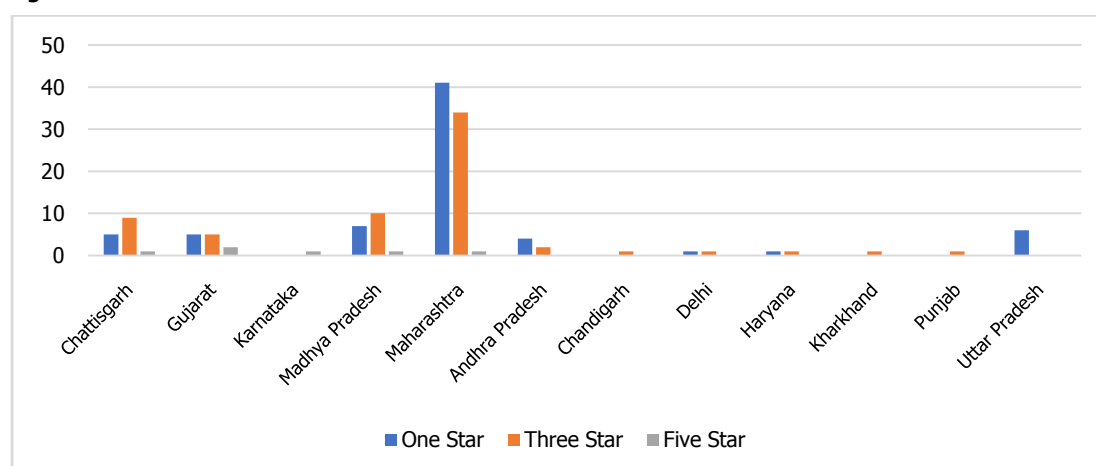
¹ Central Pollution Control Board

collection and transportation, while only around 5 per cent of the same is used for disposal and treatment (MOHUA, 2002). Consequently, despite outsourcing waste collection services, the absence of a scientific disposal and recycling system remains the major problem (Ahluwalia *et al*, 2011, p 54). Moreover, the amount of generated waste is increasing along with the growing population, which is stressing the existing waste management system, as well as escalating the concerns of policymakers. Among this waste, 41 per cent is bio-degradable, 40 per cent is inert matter and 5-19 per cent is recyclable material (Kumar *et al*, 2017). It is found that a total of 4520 cities are covered with daily waste-picking facilities in every ward (<http://swachhbharaturban.gov.in/>), processing 65 per cent of the garbage (MOHUA, 2020). This issue can be attributed to various administrative, fiscal and financial constraints prevailing at the municipal level. For instance, the first and foremost reason is the lack of budget allotted to the municipality for the implication of proper waste management. Secondly, these ULBs lack technical planning associates and the absence of proper planning for SWM is a pivotal factor. Thirdly, waste segregation practices are not enthusiastically followed by both the residences and municipal bodies (Kumar *et al*, 2017). The average expenditure on SWM accounts for only 50-60 per cent of ULB budgets and recovery of the revenue is less, creating a deficit for organisation and management (Ahluwalia *et al*, 2011, p 54). In recent decades, private partnerships for outsourcing these services are being heavily relied upon. However, such practice can potentially threaten equal access to these services, while financially burdening the marginalised citizens.

Scenario of large cities:

Perceptibly, large cities are producing huge amounts of solid waste as compared to small cities. About 72.5 per cent of total waste is generated by class I towns (MOHUA, 2002). However, most of these cities (90%) do not have sustainable and efficient waste disposal mechanisms (Kumar *et al*, 2017). For the successful implication of Solid Waste Management, GOI has launched to assess the performance of ULBs under the Swachh Bharat Mission. For the assessment of SWM, 1435 cities had applied for Star Rating Assessment as carried out by MOHUA under the SMART framework, where 141 cities are provided with star rating (Figure 2). The results are quite astonishing.

Figure 2: State-wise Star-rated Cities



Source: MOHUA Report 2020 (<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1625076>)

Large cities like Ambikapur, Rajkot, Surat, Mysore, Indore, and Navi Mumbai were given five-star ratings in 2020. However, many large cities such as Noida, Lucknow, Jhansi, Ghaziabad, Nashik, Delhi Cantt, etc. were rated as onestar. Statistically, the eleventh five-year plan report reveals that about 70-90 per cent of the generated waste is collected in metropolitan cities. Furthermore, there are issues regarding segregation, disposal and treatment in many cities. For instance, in Delhi, only 12 wards out of 250 could achieve 100 per cent segregation of waste at the source level (Kapoor and Chakma, 2024). An article has depicted that cities like Delhi, Patna, Gurugram Imphal, Gaya, etc. are segregating less than 33 per cent of their waste (Tripathi, 2018). However, in Bengaluru, waste management is encouraged by community initiatives and networks. Local initiatives and the involvement of 15,000 informal waste pickers have led to some success stories, where waste management saw improvement (Kalra and Manasi, 2020).

Scenario of small towns:

The proportion of collected waste is as low as 50 per cent in small towns. As per the latest SS20 report, towns with population of less than one lakh show better performance than those with population of more than 10 lakh. However, these small and medium ULBs lack the technical and financial resources to build infrastructure to manage this generated waste. For instance, in the suburban city of Kolkata, a solid waste management facility within enclaves and institutions managed by a private authority is performing better than municipal facilities (Bhattacharyya, 2018). However, some of the smallest towns of India namely Vengurla, Panchgani, Alappuzha, and Thiruvananthapuram are more efficiently managing waste than larger cities. Notable, these cities are segregating 90 per cent of their wastes. These cities are reportedly promoting decentralised waste management at the household level (Tripathi, 2018). A study of peri-urban Chennai and Kolkata highlighted that the absence of waste management facilities is creating serious environmental issues in such areas (Shaw, 2005).

In the case of solid waste management, both large and small towns are equally struggling to cope with the increasing generation of waste. Even large cities lack sufficient resources to support the proliferating demand for effective waste management.

Roads and Streetlights

The transport network and services are heavily dependent on the quality of road infrastructure in the cities. State highways and national highways are often maintained by the parastatal bodies, while the internal roads are maintained by the PWD and municipality. However, in many cities, roads are often found to have degraded with potholes and cracks (Nair, 2023), leading to serious issues of water logging and accidents (TNN, 2020). Along with the roads, the streetlights are a neglected facility in the cities. Many cities lack sufficient number of streetlights and maintenance despite spending a huge amount of revenue on them (Kumar, 2022) and their quality differs from city to city. Consequently, the absence of streetlights enhances the plausibility of crimes threatening the safety of the residents and pedestrians (Kumar, 2019; TNN, 2017). Although various government programs such as Green City Mission, JNNURM, etc. have aimed to facilitate these civic infrastructures; studies have unearthed the

reality of poor basic amenities in many cities in India. Therefore, the delivery of these services is substandard and poorly maintained in many cities of India. A recent article highlighted that in Indian cities, there is a lacuna in maintenance plans for the streets and roads, the roads frequently undergo cutting and construction due to a lack of “one-road and one tender” approach (Vishwanathan and Ramesh, 2024). Similarly, articles also highlighted negligence in road planning, causing poor construction of footpaths and suitable road designs (Tiwari, 2022). Concerning the streetlights, a report by the International Finance Corporation revealed that there is a problem with the substandard construction of poles, non-alignment of lamp quality with the standard of roads, voltage variation, defunct meters, etc. (IFC, 2021). Additionally, there is a lack of monitoring systems and municipal staff, causing problems with maintaining the streetlights (Kumar, 2022). The condition of roads and streetlights is more critical in small towns. The study of a city in suburban Kolkata highlighted that roads and streetlights are inadequately provided in peripheral wards, while wards with more migrants have better facilities (Bhattacharya and Guin, 2024).

From the above discussion, it is perceptible that, urban areas in India suffer from a lack of effective service delivery. However, these issues more evident in small and medium towns in general and in metropolitan peripheries in particular. The growth of the population is unmatched by the supply of basic services in these towns; moreover, these cities have been historically neglected by policy-relevant schemes. Studies reveal that small towns in India are crippled with challenges posed at the local level, resulting in poor road conditions, informal solid waste management, neglected sewerage infrastructure, and inadequate water supply (Bercegol, 2019; Aijaz, 2019; Chattopadhyay, 2015; Guin, 2019). However, it is discernible that the nature of the issue in small towns differs from that of large cities, where small towns are yet to achieve sufficient coverage of services. Therefore, it is essential to scrutinise the performance of ULBs in terms of basic service delivery. Nevertheless, an existing body of literature has attempted to identify the factors contributing to the performance of ULBs in India. The following section will delineate the identified factors potentially influencing the performance of city governments in service delivery.

Factors influencing service delivery in ULBs

Traditionally, policymakers and developers discernibly emphasised rural India, while urban areas received recognition only recently (Ahluwalia, 2017), markedly after the seventh five-year plan. The studies have begun to focus on urban areas and attempted to identify the various factors influencing the performance of ULBs in various cities of India. Such factors can be thematically categorised, which is systematically delineated below.

Administrative Complexities

Following the footprints of the 74th CAA, different states have formulated their respective municipal acts, depending on which the structure of the administrative body differs. Consequently, in India, it is difficult to compare municipal functioning across the states. Besides, the population margin for the three categories of ULBs is left in the hands of the state government. Irrespective of the size, all the ULBs are provided with basic 18 functions as mentioned in the 12th schedule (Sivaramakrishnan, 2015, p-57).

Bhide raised her concerns regarding the universal nature of India's primary decentralised policies, which did not distinguish between cities while delegating powers and responsibilities (Bhide, 2022). The capability and resource base of the ULBs must vary as per the population size. These complexities are further deepened by the state-wise variation in municipal laws.

Furthermore, in cities in metropolitan areas, there are parastatal bodies that undertake crucial activities such as water supply, drainage, solid waste management, etc. However, these bodies lack coordination and cooperation among themselves. There is a clear overlapping of responsibilities between these parastatals and municipal bodies (Sivaramakrishnan, 2015, p-56; Pandey, 2012; Singh, 2020). As a result of these complications, the quality of services deteriorates (Gupta, 2005). For instance, ULBs within a metropolitan area are incapable of undertaking various activities due to inadequate technical and administrative capacity, in this condition, parastatal bodies undertake such activities on their behalf (Biswas, 2020). These parastatals are often unable to abide by the needs of the citizens as these bodies do not have any provision for citizen representation.

On the other hand, the cities in the peripheries constitute a mixed nature known as "rurban" or "urban village". Here, the focus is more blurred and complexities are more alarming as rural and urban authorities do not have a clear vision to govern the area (Khatua, 2016). In many instances, existing authorities such as Nagar panchayats fail to adhere to the needs of the growing population, leading to poor delivery of services (Shaw, 2005).

Resource Mobilisation Capability

It has been widely debated whether the ULBs are given enough financial autonomy to undertake the necessary responsibilities. The recommendation of the HPEC regarding the annual requirement of funds for infrastructural was about Rs. 50,000 crore in 2013, which was expected to increase upto Rs. 4 lakh crore by 2032 (Sivaramakrishnan, 2015, p-161). However, studies and reports have depicted that ULBs in India have a serious scarcity of resources (Ahluwalia *et al*, 2019). There has been a persisting gap between the availability and demand of funds over the years (Bandopadhyay and Rao, 2009; Jain and Joshi, 2015; Mohanty, 2016; Ahluwalia *et al*, 2019). Notably, after the abolition of "octroi"- a major source of revenue in the majority of states, the ULBs are left with very few buoyance options for self-functioning (Sridhar, 2007). One of the major sources of revenue is "user fee", which is rarely collected properly because of a lack of accountability and responsiveness in the majority of the metro cities in India. The most buoyant source of revenue is "income tax", which is kept out of the reach of ULBs. As a result, most of the ULBs are unable to recover their expenditures.

Apart from these self-collecting sources, ULBs receive tied funds from the state finance commission under various schemes. The funds transferred through the finance commission are crucial for the sustenance of ULBs. In 2017-18, 11.9 per cent of the total revenue of all ULBs was contributed through central transfers, and another 7.1 per cent was through CFC grants. However, 32.3 per cent of the revenue is generated from state transfers. Notably, in the small and medium ULBs, 24.56 per cent is own revenue, while the share is 52 per cent for municipal corporations (large cities). Similarly, small cities are more dependent on external sources as compared to large cities (Ahluwalia *et al*, 2019). However, the allocation of grants often depends on the performance of the city. Contextually, large

cities can perform better because of agglomeration effects. Conversely, small towns lack such resources and technical expertise, and hence, are less likely to perform well. As a result, large cities can acquire more resources through transfers than small towns.

Moreover, a few studies highlighted that many large cities in India (Bangalore, Kolkata) significantly spend less on basic services (Mohanty *et al*, 2007; Sridhar and Reddy, 2010). Consequently, the quality of basic services is normally poor. On the other hand, the spending profile of small towns is seldom discussed in the literature. Additionally, small towns do not have much borrowing power as compared to large cities. Consequently, these cities are unable to harness resources from private markets and bonds.

Lack of Technical Capacity

The HPEC, 2011 mentioned the incapability of the ULBs to carry out the major objectives of the JNNURM projects for infrastructural development. In a report, Ahluwalia stated as follows:

"State governments will have to develop and strengthen their municipal cadres and support their training in contemporary tools of urban planning and management, in financial management through accrual-based, double-entry financial bookkeeping and regular audits, and in use of e-governance tools" (Ahluwalia, 2017, p-3).

The HPEC have thus suggested building the capacity of the ULBs through various training programs. A report by NITI Aayog highlighted that ULBs in India have a serious shortage of staff; associated with this are issues such as frequent transfer of staff, absence of formal structure of recruitment, staffing norms, procedures, job descriptions, etc. For instance, in the case of Chandigarh, the report states that there is a serious tension between elected leaders and official representatives where the latter do not have much power. Similar problems are observed between elected representatives and civil servants. This leads to problems in the efficient functioning of the administration. The training and capacity-building programs were rendered futile amid this political tension and power struggle among different stakeholders. Whereas in Indore, the capacity-building programs are restrained by the officials themselves, who often perceive them as ad-hoc and not demand based. In addition, there is an issue of non-recruitment of staff, which was also observed in Mussoorie. Similar problems are observed in Nagpur, Patna and Surat (NITI Aayog, 2015).

Similarly, in the case of SWM, municipal bodies were found to have various lacunas; for instance, smaller cities are devoid of professional and managerial capacity, there are no constitutionalised charges or fees levied for garbage collection and incentives are not provided, and access to modern techniques is absent in case of SWM (Nadkarni *et al*, 2018, p-344). ULBs lack the technical expertise to undertake various activities, leading to poor delivery of services, which is more prominent in the metropolitan periphery (Subramaniam, 2020; Biswas, 2020). Such issues with shortage of staff and technologically fluent staff lead to ineffective functioning of the administration. Such issues are more prominent in smaller ULBs as large metros have multiple agencies extending services including parastatals, though the system has its own externalities as mentioned before.

Limited Representation of Citizens from Different Socio-Economic Backgrounds

Lack of public participation impedes the effective delivery of basic services. The poor representation of citizens takes away their opportunities to convey their problems and opinions. Consequently, their needs get overlooked during planning and implementation, leading to poor basic service conditions (Chattopadhyay, 2015). As per the 74th CAA, ULBs are supposed to constitute ward committees consolidating a few wards or for each ward of the city. This committee is supposed to regularly interact with citizens to take account of the problems and attempt to resolve them. However, only 12 states have constituted these committees, while a majority of them are defunct or partially functioning (TERI, 2010; PRAJA, 2020). Furthermore, many citizens are unaware of these committees in the majority of cities where they are functional (Chattopadhyay, 2012; Sridhar and Smitha, 2020). Besides, in large cities, RWAs, CBOs, and NGOs often actively convey citizens' problems to higher authorities; this practice is rarely observed in small towns, and if observed, the scale is small.

Apart from the WC, the role of the elected representative is important in bringing better services to a locality. According to a study, the absence of day-to-day interaction between the residents and their elected representatives leads to the marginalisation of the locality and poor service delivery (Ghosh and Das, 2020). These gaps are often filled in by different civil bodies, which are mostly inclined towards middle-class citizens (Lama-Rewal, 2013), as further elaborated below. Furthermore, many citizens leverage their social and political networks to access basic services, while in the absence of effective participation, citizens avail of basic services through community initiatives to some extent (Bhattacharya and Guin, 2024).

Lobbying and Clientelism, Domination of Class Structure

Urban India is a mosaic of people from different socio-economic backgrounds. As mentioned previously, the level of citizen participation varies depending on these socio-economic characteristics. Such prevalent differences help harbour vote bank politics and clientelism. Contextually, it is argued that the dominant notion of involving "community" in governance for the sake of achieving efficiency and transparency and enhancing accountability (Maringanti, 2013) has backfired due to the misconception of the "community" as a holistic structure. Communities are selfish in many instances and can mobilize their resources while depriving the needy people.

The studies of the involvement of gated communities and Residential Welfare Association in Governance in many cities in India confirmed the case of "middle-class" domination of urban service delivery. This, on one hand, reflects the positive implication of democracy in urban governance as people voice their concerns against the leaps of authority, while on the other hand, it clouds the unheard voices of urban poor. This is highlighted via studies of RWA dominance in Delhi (Lama-Rewal, 2013; Mehra, 2013; Bose, 2022) and Bangalore (Kamath and Vijayabaskar, 2013; Sridhar and Smitha, 2020), which depict the increasing inequality through class domination rather than simply elite capture.

Conversely, relatively impoverished populations due to the absence of strong networks or representative communities like RWAs, often rely on government authorities, and public representatives

to resolve their issues. Such a practice takes a long time to resolve some of the issues. Such practices are prominent both in large and small towns. For instance, in small cities of West Bengal, middle-class citizens abstain from participating in citizen meetings, while the marginalised keenly participate in the meetings (Samanta, 2013). Similarly, poor citizens often rely on representatives and MLAs to resolve their problems (Sridhar and Smitha, 2020). Even in the smaller towns, areas with socially marginalised communities are deprived of better facilities, especially when the representative is also from a marginalised community (Ghosh and Das, 2020). Likewise, in a suburban town, services were found to be better in the area where citizens had higher socio-economic networks (Bhattacharya and Guin, 2024).

Spatial Disadvantages

The periphery of large urban areas has been traditionally deprived. Being in the periphery, they are mostly treated as a dumping ground of metropolitan nuisance. They lack basic amenities such as drinking water, solid waste management, drainage, etc. (Mukherjee and Mondal, 2022; Mondal, 2021; Singh, 2020; Shaw, 2005) and the quality of these services declines away from the core city (Mondal, 2021). In the post-neoliberal era, when large investments are slowly shifting towards these urban spaces (Dupont, 2005), they are attracting population from different places (Singh, 2020), and the pressure on existing infrastructure is increasing (Gururani and Kennedy, 2020), leading to inadequacy of basic amenities in these areas. Furthermore, governmental programs and planned development are found to be discriminatory towards the marginalised citizens of the periphery, which subsequently creates a fragmented space (Das, 2015). The peripheries however have a serious lacuna of public investments for the development of basic infrastructure (Purushothaman, 2016).

Policy Interventions and Government Agendas

The quality of services often depends on the daily practices of citizens. A paper on the management of solid waste in Indore and Ambikapur city emphasises how the sensitisation of citizens can enhance their cooperation and engagement in service delivery as well as promote healthy practices that can make the city clean (Dey, 2024). Rejuvenation projects aimed at improving the environment and aesthetics of a city can increase its value and may invite further investments to improve other services as found in the case of the Hubballi-Dharwad corridor (Korlapati, 2024). The cities are receiving opportunities to develop infrastructure and civic amenities under various government schemes such as the Green City Mission, Swachh Bharat Mission, and Smart City Mission. However, the extent of these schemes is limited and is not inclusive of every city, thereby aggravating the asymmetries.

Therefore, it is innocuous to argue that, the level of service delivery is variously influenced by spatial, economic and social characteristics of a city. Hence, it is imperative to study cities at a micro level to address issues prevailing at the local levels. Since, it is assumed that decentralised governments are in the best position to undertake such scrutinising mechanisms, it is pivotal to assess the performance of decentralised urban governments in different cities.

Conclusion

The urban service delivery and infrastructural development in the majority of Indian cities is far from satisfactory. However, there is a clear variation between large metros that receive most of the investments and policy attention and small and medium towns. It is discernible from the above discussion that larger cities are relatively outperforming smaller cities in terms of coverage of basic services and infrastructure. Given their spatial and economic advantages, large cities enjoy greater policy-relevant attention, relatively higher resource base, public interventions and political interests that helped in improving the service coverage, though in many cities, services are ineffective. Conversely, the condition of the services is poor in non-metro cities and cities in the periphery. These cities lack sufficient resources, technical capacity, and public interest, and have historically remained in the shadow of metropolitan cities. The nature of the problems and factors influencing service delivery in smaller towns widely differs from large cities.

This underscores the significance of studying the nature of such problems from the city level, to formulate relevant policies suitable for the particularities of the cities. For this purpose, it is crucial to understand existing issues from different aspects, for instance, instead of solely relying on coverage of services, it is important to examine the quality, maintenance, and access to these services at the local level. Such an approach will further help in identifying the factors influencing service delivery in such cities and also help compare the same with other urban areas. Contextually, decentralised policies are presumed to make decisions in consonance with such specificities of the respective cities; however, the present scenario raises serious questions on the implementation of decentralised policies at local levels, which requires city-specific scrutinisation.

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