



Urban policy: Gaps, Contradictions and Blind Spots

Urban policy seems like a good thing to have, but is terribly difficult to define as a singular entity. In reality, multiple different and often uncoordinated policy frameworks together constitute what actually operates like a force field that we call urban policy. Not surprisingly then, it is very easy to find gaps in what this force field actually addresses given the enormous diversity of issues on the ground and multiplicity of disciplines involved in understanding the city.

However, it is legitimate to expect that individual disciplines that underpin particular policy domains or sectors would have left very few important unexamined areas within their own domain. This newsletter addresses this expectation by showing that, in reality, important gaps, contradictions and blind spots can be found within the policy frameworks deriving from particular disciplinary and professional domains. The following pages offer insights from four different doctoral research projects at Ashank Desai Centre for Policy Studies at IIT Bombay into what is missing or unresolved in urban policy in India. Each offers important questions and reflections about how and why such disjunctures and gaps exist, and how they may be addressed. Together, they also urge us to widen the research gaze to other domains within the urban sector, and even to other sectors, so as to strengthen the policy field as a whole.

Why identify gaps and contradictions? There are many good reasons. Appropriate and effective policy making and any problem solving requires a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the situation in which an intervention is planned. Gaps and contradictions are an important feature of the existing policy and governance system anywhere. Knowing them is essential for a robust understanding of the intervention context as well as the governance apparatus through which policy interventions are realised. They are also essential to understanding the limitations of the disciplinary and scientific knowledge that policy is expected to be built upon. And as all scholars know, identifying gaps and tensions is an important first step in defining research problems. The soundness of the critique that results from such an exercise is likely to be the most robust foundation on which we can build creative and effective 'solutions'.

The four notes that follow reflect the diversity of worlds and challenges that urban policy must address in India. They concern how policy definitions of urbanity affect the governance of an urbanising village in Maharashtra; the ghostly nature of slum categories and lists in Guwahati; the weak presence and homogenisation of the pedestrian in transport planning; and the blind spot of risk thinking in land-use planning in the country. All of them raise useful questions about how policy knows and understands the real world. In the same breath, they outline domain-specific agenda for reworking urban policy, planning and governance.

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The Polilogue Quarterly is the newsletter of IIT Bombay's Ashank Desai Centre for Policy Studies. The next issue is slated for January 2027. Contributions may be sent to head.cps@iitb.ac.in by 23 December 2026.

Beyond the Rural-Urban Binary: Acknowledging Urbanising Villages

Harshali Ghule



India is rapidly urbanising, but official figures capture only part of this transition. Many settlements are becoming increasingly urban in terms of population density, employment, built environment, land markets, connectivity, and lifestyles, while continuing as villages ad-

ministratively and statistically. Census Towns are one of the clearest signs of this overlooked urbanisation. These settlements are villages that meet the prescribed criteria for population, density, and non-farm employment, yet continue to be governed by Gram Panchayats. Their number increased dramatically from 1,362 in 2001 to 3,894 in 2011, accounting for about one-third of urban growth during the decade. This suggests that significant urbanisation in India is occurring beyond statutory towns. My doctoral research focuses on one such Census Town, Lasalgaon (pop. 17,360), a village known for housing Asia's largest wholesale onion market. I seek to understand what such urbanisation looks like on the ground.

I find that Lasalgaon is experiencing spatial expansion, economic diversification, and growing infrastructure demands. Its functional landscape extends beyond the administrative boundaries of the village and the Census Town, connecting with the surrounding region through economic and spatial relationships. As Figure 1 shows, its built environment increasingly looks more like that of a town than a village. Why then do settlements like Lasalgaon remain unacknowledged and unrecognised as urbanising settlements in policy? A key reason is the rigid rural-urban binary embedded in Census definitions and governance arrangements.

India's Census definition of 'urban' is industrially and gender biased, as it primarily considers non-farm economic activity among the male population as the defining criterion for categorising a settlement as urban. For instance, in Lasalgaon, 3,000 women work around the onion trade but remain unaccounted for in the use of such criteria. The Census also considers the administrative boundary of the settlement as the unit for data collection. Operationally, Lasalgaon, forms a continuous productive landscape of five villages and has economic relations with onion-producing villages in the region. However, each of these villages are captured as separate entities in the Census. This not only leads to the unseeing of contiguous, polycentric built-up areas like Lasalgaon but also of those emerging along transport corridors, as the urbanising settlements they are. This leaves these settlements with 'almost urban' challenges but lacking urban gover-

nance arrangements. Additionally, villages like Lasalgaon often cater to a floating population that is several times their resident population, but this growing demand remains largely unaccounted for. This reveals a broader mismatch between settlement transformation and the administrative capacity to govern it.

The mismatch between urban-scale demands and the fact that these settlements continue to operate through rural institutions matters because settlements like Lasalgaon, face water scarcity, a major waste-management crisis, and unplanned growth, along with issues related to roads, drainage, and housing that lie beyond the administrative capacity of the Gram Panchayat. It needs trained functionaries, such as town planners and engineers, to perform necessary functions. This does not mean that Lasalgaon should be recognised as a statutory town. What matters more than its official or census status is the recognition of the spatial and economic processes that are underway there.



Figure 1: Lasalgaon's dense core surrounded by agricultural land

Every Census Town need not be converted into a municipality. Rather, urbanisation in these settlements must be understood as a continuum, and not force-fitted into a rural-urban binary. Urbanising villages need to be recognised as a distinct planning category, using indicators beyond the existing Census Town criteria. This could enable differentiated infrastructure and fiscal mechanisms, strengthen rural-urban regional planning, and create pathways for administrative transition where appropriate.

When Policy Instruments become Spectral

Brishti Banerjee



Policy recognition of informal settlements is a common approach to governing housing informality. In Indian cities, this typically takes the form of legal recognition or categorisation as 'notified slums' under a Slum Act passed by the state government concerned (since land and housing are 'state' subjects). Every state's Slum Act is usually modelled on the Government of India's Slum Areas (Improvement and

Clearance) Act (1956). When enacted, the central legislation signalled a shift in the government's approach to informal settlements from the colonial attitude of intolerance (which often led to demolition and eviction) to that of betterment. On paper, once an informal settlement is recognised as a slum and notified, the notification is expected to offer a degree of protection, some entitlement to basic services and, in cases of eviction, the right to due process leading possibly to compensation or rehabilitation. By contrast, informal settlements that are not notified enjoy none of these entitlements. Thus, in spite of many disappointments in practice, the category 'notified slum', materialised through policy instruments such as slum lists, holds important promises for residents. But what happens when these policy instruments, such as slum lists, and their associated categories, exist on paper but have little bearing on how settlements are actually governed?

My doctoral research on housing informality in India explored this question through the concept of spectral policy instruments. In the frontier city of Guwahati in Assam, I encountered multiple 'slum lists' prepared by different government agencies. They differed in their number of slums, coverage and, most importantly, categorisation. Yet the lists themselves were not publicly available. In fact, a closer examination revealed that the lists had never been formally notified under the Assam Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act, 1959 (ASA). Each list had been prepared for 'internal' administrative purposes only. Therefore, they did not have the legal force associated with notification despite their presence in government records. More significantly, the ASA was not being utilised as the principal legislation for governing informal settlements in Guwahati. Instead, housing informality was governed through state-specific legislation related to land rights (and not slum governance). This legislation has been shaped by Assam's post-1971 history of political tumult around cross-border migration from neighbouring Bangladesh, under which eligibility (Government of Assam, Assam Land Policy 2019, clauses 14.2-14.6, pp. 13-14). for grant of land titles (pattas) by the state is contingent upon recognition as 'indigenous people'. Typically, this is applied mainly to 'ethnic Assamese' or groups considered 'locals' of the state – those who speak Assamese or any tribal dialect native to the region. It is thus a politically constructed and potentially exclusionary category. It shapes how claims to land and identity are understood and acted upon by the state, and interestingly, also by residents of informal settlements in Assam.

This recourse to land laws in governing housing informality revealed an unexpected disjuncture between the intended policy pathway and the actually practiced one in governance. Put simply, the Slum Act intended to provide good housing units, a very different objective from the land laws that sought to distribute land itself. The spec-

trality of slum lists in Guwahati have called attention to this disjuncture.



Figure 2: Uzanbazar Rail Line bosti, internally categorised as a 'notified' slum on railway land in multiple slum lists in Guwahati. Photos: Author, 2022.

Walking while different: Rethinking the Pedestrian in Transport Planning

Nisha Nair



The gap between the lived walker and the governed pedestrian is a central insight emerging from my doctoral research on walking in Mumbai. The research challenges the treatment of walking as simply movement between

two points. Instead, it understands walking as a spatial, social and temporal practice: one shaped by work, care, affordability, safety, bodily capacity and the organisation of everyday life. On paper, Mumbai has repeatedly recognised pedestrians as a policy priority. The Pedestrian First Policy of 2016 promised to place pedestrians at the centre of street planning, and the subsequent Universal Footpath Policy established standards for accessible and continuous pedestrian infrastructure. More recently, the Supreme Court has recognised the right to walk as a fundamental right under Articles 19(1)(d) and . Article 21 in 2026. One tragedy is that such policy intent has not been materialised in a more walkable city, and Mumbai has, in fact, only become more difficult for all pedestrians. But a deeper tragedy lies in the apparently progressive policy intent itself. It 'constructs' the pedestrian as a homogeneous entity, failing to recognise that walking practice differs across identity, professions, and tasks, as the case of the woman domestic worker suggests.

My research with women domestic workers reveals that walking is deeply gendered, relational and intersectional. Their mobility cannot be understood without considering the multiple responsibilities, destinations and temporal constraints that organise their day. Consider a typical woman domestic worker in Mumbai. At the end of a working day, she may have already walked several kilometers, not as a single journey but in fragments. She may walk from her home to the railway station, from the station to an employer's house and between workplaces, walk to collect groceries or accompany a child, and finally rush home on foot from a bus stop. A detour created by a median, an obstructed footpath, a pedestrian bridge requiring stairs, or an unsafe route is therefore not simply an inconvenience. It can mean additional time, bodily effort, lost care time or compromised safety. These compound the challenges and burdens she already faces because she is a woman-gendered constraints on personal and livelihood choices, care burdens at home and work, sexual harassment in public space. These impose additional non-monetary costs on her because of her identity and status. Yet in transport planning, she is likely to appear, if at all, simply as a pedestrian like any other or, within a journey survey, primarily as a rail or bus user. The gendered nature of the walking that connects her work, home, care and everyday life can disappear from expert knowledge and transport governance agendas.

Lack of adequate reflection and research in transport planning on this aspect is a significant gap in expert knowledge in transport. More generally, greater attention needs to be paid in expert and policy knowledge to the differentiated nature of all mobility practices, burdens and needs.



Figure 3: A woman domestic worker walking to work, taking a shortcut through an abandoned cycling track, Marol, Mumbai.

Risk Thinking: Blind Spot of Urban Planning

Priya Chavan



In its latest report on climate change, the United Nations specifically mentions Mumbai as a city at risk from sea-level rise and other hazards (UNEP, 2026). Taking this as a cue, my research explores how risk is addressed in Mumbai's land-

use planning. Existing scholarship suggests that risk management is inherent to planning practice, but only implicitly (Maroni & Chiffi, 2021; Pelling, 2003). Planning routinely engages with a variety of risks by framing them as sector-specific concerns related to infrastructure, environmental safeguards, and housing, for instance. However, this engagement remains fragmented, addressing only certain aspects of the risk through zoning and regulation, rather than treating risk as an explicit, generic concern of planning. As a result, certain risks become visible and governable, while other risks remain obscure and unrecognised.

Consider the Mumbai Development Plan 2034, in force since 2018. Like previous versions (DP 1967) and (DP 1991), it explicitly engages with only a few kinds of risk, like that of fire and floods, while ignoring many others, such as heat and climate change. It reveals how a risk is selectively acknowledged, framed and acted upon. Further, only certain aspects of risk, which are measurable and amenable to spatial and technical regulations, are addressed in practice. For instance, in the Mumbai (DP 2034), fire risk is acknowledged and translated into regulations for road widths, building heights, and firefighting systems. Interestingly, these focus on building-level vulnerabilities, related regulatory measures and compliance, but not on the city's systemic or aggregate vulnerability to fire. Thus, planning's risk responses end up acknowledging risks unevenly across the social groups that face them.

Uneven distribution of risk is also involved when certain risks, while explicitly acknowledged in planning analysis, are ignored in proposal formulation following a tacit risk-reward calculus. For instance, the Mumbai DP 2034 recognises the role of salt pans and ecological buffers in flood attenuation. However, these formerly off-limits coastal lands have been opened up in the DP for building affordable housing, avowedly to address the housing crisis. Apart from contradicting its own understanding, in this case, risk is clearly passed onto already vulnerable social groups who would live in the planned affordable housing.

These blind spots of risk thinking can be traced to planning's modes of knowing and acting. Only risks that can be measured, standardised and evaluated are more readily incorporated into plan-making. By contrast, risks that are less amenable to quantification, or are layered, cumulative, socially differentiated or politically inconvenient, are more likely to remain marginal to planning practice.

To conclude, planning continuously negotiates risk without considering it as an explicit focus of attention in practice. However, this negotiation often leads to the creation and unequal redistribution of new risks. Thus, the central question for planning practice and its research is not 'how does planning practice manage risk?', but rather: How does planning practice define risk, which risks are acknowledged, addressed and mitigated, and which remain outside the field of vision?

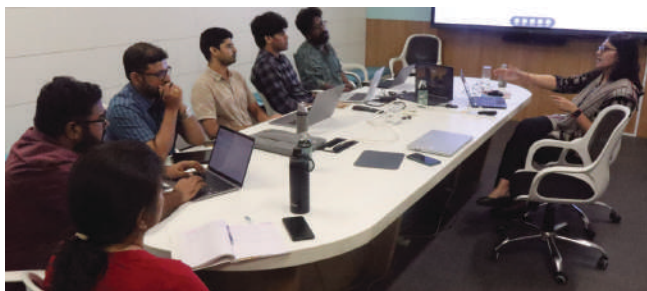
Workshops & Book Discussion

10-13 August 2026

From Dissertation to Job Talks: A Workshop on Pitches and CVs for Academic, Private Sector, and Social Sector Careers.

Dr Ishani Mukherjee, Associate Professor of Public Policy at SMU & Visiting Associate Professor at ADCPS.

The four-day workshop provided participants with practical guidance on developing effective pitches, job talks, and CVs for diverse career pathways.



02 September 2026

Book Discussion on 'The Science and Practice of Public Health: Perspectives from the Developing World' (Routledge, 2026).

Resource Persons: Prof. T. Sundararaman, Former Executive Director, National Health Systems Resource Centre, Government of India & Dr Daksha Parmar, Associate Professor, D.Y. Patil University, Navi Mumbai.

The discussion offered an opportunity to engage with contemporary debates and critical perspectives on public health policy and implementation in the developing world.



04-07 September 2026

India School on Internet Governance (inSIG) 2026

ADCPS co-hosted the 11th India School on Internet Governance (inSIG 2026) with the Youth India Internet Governance Forum (YIGF India) at IIT Bombay from 4-7 September 2026. The event brought together diverse stakeholders to strengthen dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and capacity building in Internet Governance in India.



Other Activities

23 July 2026

Department Orientation | MPP & PhD 2026 Cohort

ADCPS welcomed the new MPP cohort of 16 students and PhD cohort of two (2) scholars during the Department Orientation Programme held on 23 July 2026.



08 August 2026

Launched of the e-Post Graduate Diploma (ePGD) in Digital Governance

The ADCPS, in collaboration with Educational Outreach, IIT Bombay, and with programme delivery support from Simplilearn, launched the ePGD in Digital Governance on 8 August 2026. This 24-month online programme is designed for professionals seeking expertise in digital governance, AI policy, cybersecurity governance, technology regulation, and digital transformation.

For more details: <https://www.cps.iitb.ac.in/epgd-digital-governance>



22 August 2026

Degree Distribution Function (64th Convocation) held on 22 August 2026

The ADCPS, hosted its Degree Distribution Function as part of the 64th Convocation of IIT Bombay, celebrating the achievements of its graduating students.

The ceremony was graced by Prof. J.B.G. Tilak, Former Professor & Vice-Chancellor, NIEPA as Chief Guest and Mr Ashank Desai, Founder, Chairman and MD of Mastek Ltd. as Guest of Honour.



24 September 2026

Placement Discussion

Mr Abhay Ranjan, Lead, People and Culture at Zuddl, a US-based B2B SaaS company.

The ADCPS, hosted a pre-placement talk for MPP students with Mr Abhay Ranjan. The session offered practical insights on building a professional narrative, tailoring applications, preparing for interviews, and understanding employer expectations when exploring new career sectors.



Visitors & Distinguished Guests

06 August 2026

Dr Santosh Kumar Pattanayak, former Managing Director, Indian Railway Finance Corporation (IRFC), Ministry of Railways, and former Director (Finance), HEC Ltd., Ranchi, visited the ADCPS.



14 August 2026

PS646 | Union Budget Session

Mr Shaji Vikraman, Former Senior Editor, The Economic Times, BCCL, and **Dr. Nitin Kareer**, Former Chief Secretary, Government of Maharashtra explaining the nuances of the Union Budget to students as part of the PS646 course.



11 September 2026

PS646: Public Finance and Budget Analysis

Guest Lecture by **Dr Niranjan Rajadhyaksha**, Executive Director, Research and Strategy, Artha Global.



27 September 2026

Mr N. R. Narayana Murthy, Founder and Chairman Emeritus, Infosys, visited IIT Bombay and interacted with faculty members and students of the ADCPS at the VMCC Board Room. Mr Ashank Desai, Founder, Chairman and MD of Mastek Ltd. anchored the interaction.



Events Scheduled for 2026 Q4

9 October 2026

Prof. (Dr) Stefan Voigt, Director & Professor, Institute of Law and Economics, University of Hamburg, Germany, and **Dr Nadia von Jacobi**, Assistant Professor, University of Trento, Italy

Policy Talk: Once Upon a Time: Fairy Tales and Culture Have Long-Term Effects

14 October 2026

Mr Vaibhav Gupta, Principal, The Bridgespan Group

Policy Talk: Philanthropy and the Government: A Perspective on Collaborations

17 October 2026

ADCPS 10th Foundation Day

ADCPS will celebrate its 10th Foundation Day on 17 October 2026, bringing together students, faculty, alumni, and distinguished guests to mark the Centre's decade-long journey in advancing research and practice in public policy.

The programme will feature a keynote address, special address, and panel discussion, followed by Alumni Talks, a meet-and-greet session, a cultural event, and a concluding dinner.

Appointments



Dr Ashish Desai, has joined ADCPS as a Visiting Associate Professor from 29 July 2026.

Dr Desai is an Associate Professor at SP Jain Institute of Management and Research (SPJIMR) and a Senior Visiting Fellow at National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER). He also previously held the role of Director of Monitoring and Evaluation at NITI Aayog's Development Monitoring and Evaluation Office (DMEO) and Advisor to ONDC, a Government of India initiative. His research focuses on digital financial literacy, women's entrepreneurship and livelihoods, digital public infrastructure, remote sensing for public policy, and technology governance.

Dr Desai holds a B.E. in Electrical Engineering from VJTI, Mumbai and a PhD from IIM Kozhikode and has been a visiting faculty member at IIM Raipur and IIM Ahmedabad.

Awards & Honours



Dr Himanshu Burte, Associate Professor

Received the Departmental Award for Excellence in Teaching 2026.



Prof. Sundeep Oberoi, Adjunct Professor

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India has set up a nine (9) members expert committee under the Chairmanship of Prof. Sundeep Oberoi to prepare a National Trust Framework for connected mobility, device identity and hardware root of trust. The committee comprises members from different ministries, BIS, pvt organization(s) among others.



Ms Keerthikrishna S, PhD scholar

has had her research paper accepted for presentation at the Journal of Vocational Education and Training (JVET) Early Career Researcher Day Conference 2026, to be held on 5 October 2026 at the University of Glasgow, United Kingdom. She has been awarded a bursary to support her participation in the conference.



Mr Siddharth Bhatkar, 2nd-year MPP student

Received the Institute Academic Prize for 2025-26 in recognition of his academic performance. He has also been selected for the GESH IIT Bombay Living Lab Fellowship.

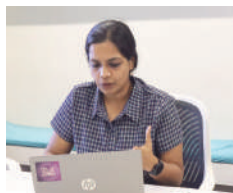


Dr Satish Kumar, ADCPS alumnus

has joined the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) as Principal Scientist, Policy (Agriculture & Livelihoods) in New Delhi.

Satish defended his PhD thesis titled "Agriculture-Nutrition Pathways in Semi-arid India" on 16 April 2026.

PhD Defended

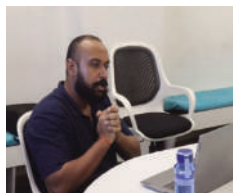


Nikita Pandey

Thesis: Turn to Publicly Funded Health Insurance: A Policy Cycle Analysis of Ayushman Bharat PMJAY

Defended on: 8 July 2026

Supervisor: Prof. Arnab Jana



Shashank Yadav

Thesis: Situating Influence in Cyber Threat Intelligence

Defended on: 24 July 2026

Supervisor: Prof. Shishir K Jha



Sarath K. T.

Thesis: Transport Equity in Mumbai: A Multidimensional and Multi-level Assessment

Defended on: 10 August 2026

Supervisors: Prof. Trupti Mishra & Prof. Rangan Banerjee



Tejendra Pratap Gautam

Thesis: Implementation Process of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 – What works?: A case in Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra

Defended on: 17 August 2026

Supervisors: Prof. Sarmistha Pattanaik & Prof. Satish B. Agnihotri



Kavery Ganguly

Thesis: Conditions, Agency, and Interactions: Explaining Farmer-Market Dynamics through the Framework of Farmer-Market Linkages (FML)

Defended on: 17 August 2026

Supervisors: Prof. N. C. Narayanan & Prof. Subodh Wagle

Publications

Moharil, A., & Jha, S. K. (2026). The Digital-physical Disconnect in Digital ID: A Case of Aadhaar-based Authentication Failures Due to Outdated Physical Cards. *Information Technology for Development*, 32(3), 1-19. <https://aisel.aisnet.org/itd/vol32/iss3/11>

IASC-ECN Power Collective, Schwindenhammer, D., Suresh, L., **Gautam, T. P.**, Unnikrishnan, H., Dehmel, N., Hackmann, V., & Gerullis, M. (2026). Toward Making Power More Explicit in the IADF: A Review and Diagnostic Approach to Power Theories. *International Journal of the Commons*, 20(1), pp. 414-432. <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.1595>

Sapkal, R.S. (2026). Labour Codes, Criminalisation of Collective Action, and Workers' Protests. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 61(31) (1 August). 19-21 <https://www.epw.in/journal/2026/31/commentary/labour-codes-criminalisation-collective-action-and.html>

Burte, H. (2026). Just Affordances: Planning and the Temporalities of Spatial Justice in Mumbai. *Planning Practice & Research*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2026.2700320>

Jha, S., Kakkar, R., & Sarkar, T. (2026). A Study of the Data Brokerage Industry: Between Trustworthiness and Monetization. In *De Gruyter Handbook of Critical Data Studies* (Chapter 13, pp. 257-278). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111373096>

Note: Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information presented in this newsletter. However, if any errors have inadvertently slipped in, we regret them in advance and would be grateful if you could bring them to our attention. For any feedback, queries, or further information, please contact us at office.cps@iitb.ac.in or 022 2576 5061.