

Impact of Covid 19 Outbreak on Urban cities in India



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ABSTRACT: According to the UN habitat report 2020, the next decade is considerable to see a rise in urbanization which may range to 60.4 % by 2030 as compared to 56.2% in 2020. Hence the current article intends to unravel the impact of Covid 19 on cities globally. The world cities report 2020 and Covid 19 Response plan 2020 by UN Habitat will be reviewed to get a better understanding of the overall condition of cities globally. Furthermore, the article also focuses on studying the major challenges in urban areas as mentioned in the UN habitat report like high risk for transmission, impact on economic activities, urban inequalities and coping mechanisms, by considering major cities in India. Lastly, it deals with the suggestions on how to enhance urban growth by tackling the prevailing issues so that sustainable cities can be developed which will accommodate the influx of people in the upcoming years as estimated by the UN habitat report 2020.

KEYWORD: Urban cities, Covid 19 outbreak, Economic downfall, Urban Inequalities

BACKGROUND

Cities are widely perceived as a place of hope where an individual envisages to live a free and comfortable life distant from various stresses and also yearns to be financially stable. Nevertheless, the above notion has not disclosed the harsh struggles faced by people who migrate to cities from rural areas. In particular, the phenomenon of migration towards cities must be further exemplified with the help of the urbanization process. According to Turan & Besirli (2018) “Urbanisation is considered as an increase in the number of cities and the overall urban population”. The authors have also argued that the understanding of urbanization was limited to the demographic features like people's movement from villages to cities(as cited in Turan & Besirli, 2018). However, it was stated that the social, economic and psychological determinants must be examined to get an overall understanding of how urbanisation impact an individual. Furthermore within the concept of urbanization there consist of a push/ pull factor to determine the process. Luder mir AB, Harpham T (1998) have termed social drift as a concept that points out how individuals are incline to migrate to a particular area(as cited in ibid). Although the authors have placed the notion of social drift in the ambit of urban mental health, there exists a need to consider this phenomenon within urban studies to further understand the pull factors. While analysing the pull factors, better living conditions, economic opportunities, access to basic services, health, and education were major contributors towards migration. On the contrary conflict, reduction of land area, unemployment are some of the major push factors(Turan & Besirli, 2018).

The world cities report encompasses the impact of Covid 19 cases in cities on how it had affected the economy and people at large. Besides, the SDG 11 agenda, Sustainable cities and communities were focused upon by stating that there exists a need to address issues like poverty, affordable housing, reduce inequalities, minimise excessive land consumption (urban sprawl), more green spaces, access to services (like health, transportation, manage overcrowded spaces and lastly imply on local action for climate change. In fact, the report instills a positive outlook on how “Covid 19 is not the end for cities” and what measures can be taken at the local government and community level to address the highlighted issues. Meanwhile, the UN Habitat Covid 19 response plan 2020 has pointed out three major areas to be intervened. The first part focused on the informal settlement areas by supporting local government bodies and “community driven solutions”. Moreover the lack of appropriate sanitation and water facility in these areas where the alarming factors that need heed to reduce the transmission of Covid 19 as well as curb the people from being vulnerable to other public health diseases and hunger. The second area emphasise the usage of ICT(Infor) to track Covid 19 hotspots, procuring data on quarantined people, capacity building for response force mainly frontline workers. The last action area focused on developing a recovery plan to tackle the economic impact created by the lockdown. The recovery plan has highlighted the dire need for change in policies for both formal and informal sectors. And it had also stressed the need for an increase in monetary support to municipality’s sot that essential services are available to its residents. Furthermore, the UN Habitat has estimated an amount of 72 million USD for meeting to help 64 countries from the Covid induced challenges.(UN Habitat, 2020b, 2020a)

After analysing both the reports, it can be summed that there consist of key areas like cities hub for transmission, economic downfall, urban inequality and coping mechanism that needs to be further studied upon, Hence the article envisages on building a

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discourse under each challenge mentioned above, where such instances in major cities of India will be studied to have a reflective analysis of the issues. Each section highlights the major challenges faced, what all factors apart from the pandemic contributed to it, how people were affected and local level interventions taken up by local authorities and residents.

CITIES A HUB FOR COVID 19 SPREAD

According to UN Habitat report (2020), out of the total number of Covid 19 cases globally, over 95 percent came from the urban areas. The above statistics portray how vulnerable cities are towards Covid 19 spread. Besides, the report had also pointed out how the Asia Pacific region in the global south is at a high risk of Covid 19 transmission as a result of rapid urbanisation. In particular, the major reason behind the rapid spread was due to the interconnectivity that most of the cities have which led to the scenario. Further, the exemplifying interconnectivity, the case of Africa was considered to illustrate how the virus spread from the airport to nearby cities (cite). Nevertheless, the issue of interconnectivity cannot be solely blamed as the airports as well as other transportations must also focus on having stringent surveillance on the people.

In addition to the urban centers being the hub for pandemic spread, there exist another issue which was overcrowdedness (Shari & Khavarian-garmsir, 2020). And the urban periphery areas were more prone to overcrowding due to the morphological setup of informal settlements. In a recent study by Biswas (2020) an analogical inference was made on the floor area occupied by a city dweller with that of a prisoner in India. The results portray that the poorest 60 percent of city dweller had floor space of 72 sq ft which was way less in comparison to prison and the case of urban slums were even worse. Nevertheless, Wasdani & Prasad (2020) highlighted how the extent of overcrowdedness in urban slums in India had made it difficult to stay in quarantine and also to maintain physical distancing. The case of Dharavi slum in India was a prominent example of how the high population density of 270,000 per sq km had made the physical distancing etiquettes tough (UN Habitat, 2020b). Furthermore, the difficulty in home quarantine for a person living in a slum can be reflected from the analogy mentioned by (Biswas 2020), but the issue of physical distancing cannot be limited to a floor area. Instead, the reason behind the difficulty in maintaining social distancing in urban slums in India resulted from lack of access to a proper sanitation facility, water supply which forces the residents to move out of their area for it (Golechha, 2020; Shari & Khavarian-garmsir, 2020; Vardhan et al., 2020, UN Habitat, 2020)). Besides Connolly et al (2020b) have also added that the lack of access to basic services ranging from water, sanitation to health services were really poor in “peri-urban and suburban areas” which had those areas more susceptible to coronavirus transmission (as cited in Shari & Khavarian-garmsir, 2020).

Furthermore, Matthew & Mc Donald (2006) have emphasized the lack of supporting literature on the impact of a pandemic on cities. Whereas Wade, L (2020) have noted that the previous literature on cities and pandemic have extensively focused on urban inequalities (as cited in Shari & Khavarian-garmsir, 2020). Nevertheless, there is a dearth of literature when it comes to the impact of Covid 19 in cities and from the above discourse developed it can be ascertained how urban inequality is linked to the widespread of coronavirus disease in cities. Hence, the linkage of urban inequality with the rapid Covid 19 spread will be further analysed in the section on urban inequality.

ECONOMIC DOWNFALL AND ITS IMPLICATION

According to UN habitat report (2020), urban areas contribute around 80 % to the global GDP. In fact the unprecedented lockdown has made the urban areas bear the brunt of the economic shutdown. While comparing with the previous economic crisis of 2008 and the great depression 1929, the covid 19 pandemic had significantly impacted the global economy which was worse than the 2008 Subprime Mortgage Crisis (UN Habitat, 2020b). Meanwhile, the onset of economic downfall has impacted the development of cities as well as led to a surge in unemployment. Further, the World Bank has shed light on the case of urban planning and development by stating that the local urban bodies globally may incur a revenue decline of 15-25 % by 2021. The reason behind that was extensively discussed by Shari & Khavarian-garmsir (2020) where the lack of tax revenue in cities may impact the urban development projects.

Alongside the city development, another key area was the global unemployment scenario. As per the UN habitat report (2020), industries like tourism, food and beverage, leisure had witnessed a 75 % cut in jobs. Further, the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) (2020) has estimated a fall in international tourists by 20-30 % which will adversely impact Tourism, Aviation, and Retail. In most of the cases of unemployment in urban areas, both youth and women were largely affected by it. While specifically focusing on the impact of unemployment in the global south, there consist of various instances where the economic shutdown had affected the population. In the case of Bangladesh, it was reported that around 2.3 million workers in the garment industry were unemployed once their contract was withdrawn due to the cancellation of exports to developed countries (UN Habitat, 2020b). And still, now those garment industries are struggling post lockdown due to a lack of orders from developed countries¹. Here the theoretical concepts like dependency theory (Raul Prebisch) and world system theory (Immanuel Wallerstein) can be inferred to

¹ *Big blow for the big industry.* (2020, December 29). The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/big-blow-the-big-industry-2018829>

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understand how the core countries abrupt move to cancel order had significantly impacted the periphery countries largely. Various instances of labour exploitation, income inequality and lack of social protection can be witnessed in this case. Another case of unemployment can be traced in Africa, where 20 million jobs were lost due to a fall in commodity price (UN Habitat report, 2020). The above instance can be linked with the warnings given by Klein, N (2008) on how neoliberal policies may act counterintuitive to the democratic interest when it is handed over to private players (capitalists).

While analyzing the impact of Covid 19 on the Indian economy, the above circumstances of developing countries can be seen. The decrease in GDP as a result of extensive lockdown measures throughout the country was a major debate amongst economists, news media etc. Besides, Oswal (2020) have highlighted the grave impact on GDP during the lockdown period and has statistically estimated that each day during the lockdown had led to 14-19 basis point decrease in GDP of our country(as cited in Chaudhary et al., 2020). Meanwhile, most of the studies have indicated that the lockdown had led to the shutdown of the supply chain, a decrease in demand for goods and services and a fall in exports (Chaudhary et al., 2020; Sahoo, 2020; Shari & Khavarian-garmsir, 2020; UN Habitat, 2020b). Likewise, it is crucial to consider the extent of economic impact on sectors that constitutes the overall GDP. As mentioned in previous reports (UN Habitat 2020) the major impact was on the tourism, aviation sectors during the lockdown period. In India, the tourism industry has around 26.7 million workforces employed with a contribution of about 9.2 % of the GDP(Chaudhary et al., 2020). But the ongoing lockdowns, travel restrictions, had eventually led to the decrease in the operation of the industry at large, which in turn impacted their revenue. During this time it can be witnessed how certain aviation as well as tourism companies have carried out multiple wage cuts and lay off which drastically affected the employees². Similarly, the export of goods from India had significantly fallen by 13.7-20.8 % in 2020 due to travel restrictions and lockdown in certain countries (ibid). In the case of the manufacturing sector a decrease of 5.5-20 % (rough estimate) as a result of low demand for goods especially the machines, motor industry and chemical products(Sahoo, 2020). Likewise, the retail industry had also faced a fall due to a decrease in demand for products.

In addition to the above sectors, the unorganised sector that constitutes half of the total GDP contribution was also impacted largely due to the shutdown of various industries. While connecting the dots of economic downfall amongst each sector discussed, the lockdown, physical distancing measure and decrease in demand for work were the major factors that led to the recession stage for the Indian economy at times of lockdown. Besides, it is also crucial to understand how cities tackled the economic downfall at times of lockdown to understand how various stakeholders worked together in managing the situation which will be further discussed in the coping mechanism of cities section,

UNCOVERING URBAN INEQUALITIES

The discourse on pandemic and cities in the previous section had ended up with a strong inference upon how urban inequalities was the major factor leading to certain areas like informal settlements in cities being more vulnerable to pandemic spread. In particular, it can be noted that the existing structural inequality in urban areas like the informal worker, people inhabiting in the urban periphery areas had an unequal status in comparison to the rest urban population. The above dichotomy can be seen in terms of job status where the blue-collar job worker did not benefit from the work from home model as their nature of work forced them to move out which violated the physical distancing norm during this pandemic(UN Habitat,2020). Furthermore, most of the informal sector workers bared the brunt of economic fallout and were pushed towards the harsh cycle of poverty. Nevertheless, inadequate savings, medical insurance, social security have made the condition of informal workers more deplorable. The lack of savings amongst informal workers can be briefly understood by the estimation given in Jan Sahas survey (2020) where 55% of migrant worker income was around 200-400 daily and had also pointed out that they feared hunger more than the Covid 19 virus(as cited in Chaudhary et al., 2020). Besides the Oxfam report (2019) had alarming statistical data which states that 73% of our country's wealth was owned by the one percent rich during 2017-2018. In contrast, the data on poor population has shown an increase of only one percent in their overall wealth. Thus the data intrigues upon the question of development for whom; the rich or poor and also reveals the humongous wage disparity that need grave attention(Chaudhary et al., 2020).

Apart from the inequality in income, lack of labour laws etc, there is a dire need to understand how morphological factors had led to various instances of inequalities amongst people living in the urban peripheries. A study by Vardhan et al. (2020) analyses four cities Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata and Chennai to understand the urban vulnerability in India. Besides it has emphasised how certain slum areas mainly Dharavi and Kahra Talao in Mumbai was more vulnerable to the covid 19 spread due to lack of sanitation and clean water facility(Vardhan et al., 2020) . In fact, the above case was prevalent in other cities where the lack of access to treated water can be witnessed. Similarly, the issue of untreated water was emphasised by Shari & Khavarian-garmsir, (2020) and in addition to that, it also emphasised the improper management of wastewater in informal settlements and how it can lead to the manifestation of various water-borne diseases. The above spatial inequalities faced by people portray how urbanisation process is

² Mukul, P. (2020, July 26). *Explained: What do the indigo layoffs mean for India's aviation sector?* The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-what-indigo-layoffs-mean-for-india-aviation-sector-6516473/>

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only helping big cities and the change should be made at the “urban governance framework” and making policies more inclusive(Kundu, 2014). Furthermore, there is a need for an urban development project which will cater to the issues in urban peripheries by making it more inclusive so that no area is left out. In fact, the urban inequalities which are structural in nature got magnified during this pandemic which had raised concerns on what all measures needed to be taken to reduce it. Hence, the change in urban policies with the support from local authorities, community organisations and civil societies can play a crucial role towards ensuring that the urban inequalities are minimised by enhancing the living condition of people residing in those informal settlements.

COPING MECHANISMS FOR CITIES

During the lockdown phase cities have responded to various needs of the residents from providing essential commodities in the doorstep, setting up a shelter for homeless migrants, and also on strengthening health care accessibility in slum areas. While considering various interventions in urban slums, the Dharavi model of combating the Covid 19 spread can be endorsed as the best strategy for various informal settlements across our country. In fact, there exist a lot of learning from the coalition group formed to address the issues present, Most prominently the public-private partnership role was a unique group set up by Bombay Municipal corporation with the help of local doctors, medical association and civil society organizations. As a team, they have engaged in effectively tracking the Covid 19 cases and also set up medical camps to address other public health emergencies in that area. Besides, the role of the corporate sector can be witnessed where they have extensively donated essential safety kits which encompasses gloves, mask, PPE kit, ventilators and oxygen cylinders. Moreover, the model also promoted community participation by making the local leaders, community based organisations accountable to the municipality on the status of quarantined people and other community issues(Golechha, 2020).

The shortage in supply of essential commodities during lockdown phase was a major hurdle that impacted many cities. However, the exemplary work done by Ahmedabad city Municipal Corporation was the major highlight of how the cities managed to provide essential commodities to the residents. They formed a network with vegetable vendors, electric auto rickshaw drivers and SEWA to ensure that the vegetables are delivered in each wards of the city by following appropriate safety etiquettes(Chen, 2020). The sheer innovation in such plans showcases how effectively sustainable cities can be envisioned. The lockdown period had also led to the circumstance where certain group of population mainly the migrants were stranded due to the travel restriction imposed. Amidst the migrant crisis across India, the work put forth by major cities in state of Kerala was an attempt towards providing shelter, food and support³.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the Covid 19 pandemic outbreak must be considered as a test as mentioned by Rachaniotis et.al, (2012) where a nation’s capability to save its people from the deadly virus attack and also ensure that the economy is revived amidst various adversities during that period(as cited in Khanna, 2020). The current article focused on reviewing the UN Habitat reports on pandemic and cities which guided towards exploring certain areas like rapid spread in cities, impact on the economy, urban inequalities and coping mechanism with reference to cities in India. Further, the section on cities a hub for covid 19 spread has explained how interconnectivity in cities and morphology of informal settlements were the major contributors to it. The impact on economic downfall has showcased the decline in GDP by analysing various sectors contributing to it. In addition to that, the decrease in demand for goods and services was the major factor that resulted in the economic downfall. While exploring the factors constituting urban inequalities it was ascertained that the existing structural inequality was visible and the only measure to tackle them is through an inclusive urban development project. The last part, the coping mechanism in cities had a positive connotation on how cities can tackle the adversity and develop at times of pandemic. And the innovative approaches undertaken by municipalities must be epitomised as the ideal sustainable city development model which must proliferate across various cities in India post-pandemic times so that the development is benefiting the marginalised and sustainable city models are developed.

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