

## **"Navigating the Urban Health Landscape in India: Challenges, Disparities, and Strategies for Well-being"**

The global urban population is increasing year by year, and currently, 55% of the global population resides in urban areas (UN World Urbanisation Prospect). Additionally, this number is expected to grow to 68% by the year 2050 (World Bank). The Indian scenario is no different, with 461 million people living in the cities, and this urban growth is expected to rise by 2.3% every year (Statista). Moreover, cities are spaces for increasing economic activity, with Indian cities expected to contribute 75% of the GDP by the year 2031 (World Bank). While there has been a continuous increase in the population, the quality of health services provided in the cities of the country has not grown to accommodate everyone. While there is a high concentration of providers of health care in the urban parts of the country, a large population of urban poor is excluded from these services. Hence, it becomes important to understand who forms the urban poor and what the different services are from which people are excluded. Additionally, it also becomes crucial to address these challenges of exclusion in cities and look into the different policy solutions that can provide better access to amenities for the urban populations, especially the vulnerable and the marginalised groups.

People face different health-related challenges in urban areas, ranging from communicable diseases to life-threatening non-communicable diseases, as well as mental health issues. Moreover, it is also essential to bring to light the well-being of people with disability and address the planning of cities and care services, keeping in mind these major concerns.

Mental health has long been a matter of concern in society, but it is only in recent times that it has garnered extensive recognition in India. With a population of over 1.3 billion, the country faces a substantial burden of mental health problems. However, there persists a considerable social stigma surrounding mental health, causing numerous individuals to endure their struggles silently. India is reported to have the highest prevalence of mental illness, as stated by the World Health Organization (WHO), affecting approximately 15% of its population. The urban areas, characterized by a fast-paced lifestyle and intense competition, exacerbate the burden of mental health problems. The prevalence of mental health disorders in urban India is undeniably worsened by a range of demographic and socioeconomic factors. Elements such as social determinants, economic disparities, environmental conditions, and structural inequalities all have a part to play in shaping the mental health scenario in urban India. These factors can give rise to additional stressors and difficulties that have an impact on the overall mental well-being of individuals.

**Social Determinants:** Urbanization can lead to changes in social networks, community cohesion, and support systems, which can impact mental health outcomes. Disruptions in social connections and support can increase feelings of isolation and loneliness, which are risk factors for mental health disorders.

**Economic Disparities:** Urban areas often have higher levels of income inequality and disparities in access to resources and opportunities. These disparities can contribute to stress, anxiety, and depression among individuals who face economic challenges.

**Environmental Factors:** Urban environments can be characterized by overcrowding, pollution, noise, and limited access to green spaces. These factors can have a negative impact on mental health and well-being.

**Structural Inequalities:** Urban areas may have inadequate infrastructure and limited access to quality healthcare services, including mental health services. This lack of access can further exacerbate the burden of mental health disorders.

As discussed earlier, health services in urban areas of the country are not easily accessible to the marginalised group. These people live in slums or squatters, and the lack of a robust primary medical service in the urban areas makes it difficult for these people to access health facilities. According to the UHRC, 2019, there is a disproportionate burden of the spread of diseases, both communicable and non-communicable, on the urban poor as compared to the population of non-poor households. While they are the most vulnerable groups, they are also at the back of the hierarchy in getting access to services, which only makes it more difficult for them to improve their well-being, both physically and mentally. It is a no-hidden secret that these are the first people who bore the brunt of the impact of the Covid-19 virus. While most of the population migrated to their hometowns in Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, etc., the ones who stayed could not get health services in time. Hence, it becomes essential that this large population that resides in slum areas and largely works in the informal sector, not only have access to good health services but also have better housing, water, and sanitation facilities.

Apart from the challenges faced by the urban poor, there is a lack of basic health infrastructure in the tier-2 and tier-3 cities of the country. According to the Niti Aayog Report in 2019, the delivery of primary health centres in the cities has been poorer than their rural counterparts. Most of the focus has been on the rural areas, which can be seen from the fact that in 2019-20, the central government's expenditure on the urban health services was Rs. 850 crore as compared to that of nearly Rs. 30,000 crore in rural areas. While the Central Government launched the National Urban Health Mission (NUHM) to address these challenges, there is still a long way to go to overcome them. According to the NUHM, Urban Public Health Centres must be established in cities to promote better health services. However, the pace of these establishments has been slow and mostly understaffed.

While steps have been taken at a central level, it becomes crucial that the urban local bodies are encouraged and given the funds, functions, and functionaries to address the challenge of urban-well being. While the 73rd Amendment was introduced to provide powers to the urban local bodies, seldom have they been given freedom and funds to act in real space. To address the problem of urban well-being, it is integral that the ULBs are provided funds from their state governments. When it comes to addressing mental health challenges, it is crucial to prioritize the dissemination of information regarding mental health in Indian cities. Many individuals are unaware of the importance of mental well-being and the profound impact it can have on their lives. By conducting awareness campaigns through various channels such as social media, television, and community events, the message of mental health can reach a broader audience. These campaigns should primarily focus on reducing the stigma associated with mental health and encouraging individuals to seek assistance when necessary. Lastly, the creation of safe and supportive environments in workplaces and communities is vital for promoting mental health.

## **Conclusion**

The growing urban population has made us all think about addressing the different challenges that arise out of rapid urbanisation, one of them being urban health and well-being. We already discussed that Indian cities lack the delivery of primary care services, and hence, it is important that the different levels of government focus on improving the health care services in the cities. Mental and physical well-being are the most crucial elements of an inspiring population of people. It is important that more focus is paid to health infrastructure in the urban areas as they are the places of growth, dreams, and aspirations of the millions of Indians. Lastly, cities have always been formed by the people and their dreams. These dreams must shape the cities of the future.

## **Sources**

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