Major challenges faced by Indian cities

GS1: URBAN PLANNING

CONTEXT:

October 31 is observed every year as **World Cities Day**. The world's urban population has reached an estimated 4.7 billion, or 57.5% of the world's total population, with projections to double by 2050.

- **The theme for this year's** World Cities Day is '**Youth Climate Change makers: Catalysing Local Action for Urban Sustainability'.**

What are challenges faced by cities?

- The UN underscores that cities face unprecedented challenges, especially climate change.
- While strides have been made towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), urban centres remain plagued by poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation.
- **In the Global South**, these challenges are intensified by rapid urbanisation, inadequate infrastructure, and limited resources.
- Cities here often suffer from housing shortages, poor access to clean water and sanitation, and increased vulnerability to climate-related events.

About Indian urbanisation

➢ India's urbanisation trajectory differs from the cities in the Global North. In Western countries, urbanisation followed industrialisation, which created jobs that absorbed rural labour.

➢ Their urbanisation was sustained also because of massive economic transfers from colonies. Economist Utsa Patnaik has highlighted that India alone contributed over $45 trillion to England's economy during colonial rule.

➢ In contrast, India's urbanisation is **largely driven by economic distress**, resulting in "poverty-driven urbanisation," with both rural-to-urban and urban-to-urban migration.

➢ During the COVID-19 pandemic, the strain on urban planning became apparent, as reverse migration trends highlighted gaps in infrastructure.

Urban challenges in India

o **The main challenges Indian cities face include:**

✓ inadequate spatial planning,
✓ climate change,
✓ massive migration,

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- ✓ growing inequality and social segregation, and
- ✓ governance limitations.
- o Urban planning agencies have struggled due **to two main issues**.

- **First**, spatial and temporal plans are often outdated and fail to accommodate population growth.
- Since the 1980s, de-industrialisation has led to job losses in cities like Ahmedabad, Delhi, Surat, and Mumbai.
- Many workers displaced by this trend moved to peri-urban areas, where they live in overcrowded conditions. Currently, 40% of India's urban population resides in slums.
- **Second**, plans often focus on capital growth rather than people's needs, leading to a lack of local ownership and engagement in the planning process.
- o Additionally, inequality is widening, with exclusive developments catering to the wealthy while millions lack basic housing. Similarly, climate change severely impacts Indian cities.
- o Cities face severe pollution and are increasingly subject to urban flooding and "heat island effects."
- o Among the 10 most polluted cities in India, eight are in the NCR region around Delhi.
- o Despite the 74th Constitutional Amendment, most Indian cities remain controlled by undemocratic bodies.
- o Local government lacks **funds, functions and functionality**
- o Though cities have elected representatives, they rarely control urban planning, which is often outsourced to parastatals and private entities.
- o For example, less than three of the 18 functions outlined in the 12th Schedule have been universally transferred to urban governments, and cities receive a mere 0.5% of the GDP in intergovernmental transfers.
- o World Bank estimates suggest around 40% of India's population live in urban areas, in around 9,000 statutory and census towns.