DELHI: IF IT WAS BUILT FOR THE PEOPLE

A Critical Examination of Urban Planning, Governance, and Social Equity in India's Capital

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Abstract-

Delhi, home to over 33 million people in the metro area, is one of the most populous and intricate cities in the world. It's not just the political capital of India but also a symbol of the country's democratic values. However, for many residents, there's a noticeable gap between how the city is planned and what people actually need. This paper takes a closer look at Delhi from the perspective of people-centric urbanism. We'll dig into its historical growth, the challenges it faces today, and the systemic issues that hold it back from being a truly inclusive city. By doing this, we'll imagine what Delhi could be like if it actually prioritized the needs of its residents—focusing on accessibility, fairness, environmental health, and community involvement in urban decision-making.

1. Introduction

Delhi's urban landscape tells a story of contradictions. Gleaming metro stations coexist with sprawling informal settlements. Wide boulevards designed for automobile traffic cut through neighborhoods where most residents walk or use public transport. The city's master plans speak of orderly development while millions live in 'unauthorized colonies' lacking basic infrastructure. This disconnect raises a fundamental question: For whom was Delhi built?

The answer reveals itself in the city's spatial organization, resource allocation, and governance structures. Delhi was built primarily for bureaucratic administration, elite residence, and automobile-dependent mobility. The vast majority of its residents—working-class families, informal sector workers, migrants, and marginalized communities—navigate a city that often treats them as afterthoughts rather than primary stakeholders.

This paper examines what a people-centric Delhi might entail by analyzing five critical dimensions: housing and spatial justice, transportation and mobility, environmental sustainability, economic opportunity, and democratic governance. Each section identifies current failures and proposes alternative frameworks grounded in principles of equity, participation, and human dignity.

1.1 Delhi at a Glance: Key Statistics

Indicator	Value/Status
Metropolitan Population (2024)	33+ million
Population in Informal Settlements	~40% (13+ million)
Housing Shortage	1+ million units
Average 2BHK Price (decent area)	₹1+ crore ($120,000+)
Informal Economy Workers	70-80% of workforce
Air Quality (Winter PM2.5 levels)	20-30x WHO guidelines
Annual Traffic Fatalities (2023)	1,400+ deaths
Delhi Metro Coverage	390+ km, 15-20% of trips
DTC Buses for 33M People	~3,000 buses

Table 1: Key urban indicators for Delhi highlighting the scale of challenges facing the city's residents.

2. Historical Context: Colonial Legacies and Modernist Planning

2.1 The Colonial Blueprint

The spatial organization of contemporary Delhi cannot be understood without examining its colonial foundations. When the British decided to shift India's capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911, Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker designed New Delhi as an imperial statement—a city that would physically embody British supremacy through monumental architecture, wide processional avenues, and strict spatial segregation.

The Lutyens Bungalow Zone, covering approximately 2,800 hectares in central Delhi, was reserved for colonial administrators. This area featured low-density housing, abundant green space, and proximity to seats of power. Meanwhile, the 'native' population was relegated to Old Delhi and peripheral areas with minimal infrastructure investment. This colonial spatial hierarchy persisted after independence, with the bungalow zone now housing government officials and the political elite.

2.2 Post-Independence Planning: Continuity and Contradiction

India's first Master Plan for Delhi (1962) attempted to address the city's rapid growth while maintaining the colonial spatial structure. The plan embraced modernist planning principles influenced by Le Corbusier and the Athens Charter, emphasizing functional zoning, hierarchical road networks, and neighborhood units. However, it fundamentally misunderstood the realities of Indian urbanization.

The plan projected Delhi's population at 4.6 million by 1981. The actual figure exceeded 6 million. This chronic underestimation of growth, combined with unrealistic assumptions about formal employment and housing markets, meant that successive master plans created frameworks that bore little resemblance to the city actually emerging on the ground. By 2021, approximately 40% of Delhi's population lived in informal settlements, unauthorized colonies, or resettlement colonies—areas that exist outside the formal planning framework.

3. Housing and Spatial Justice

3.1 The Housing Crisis

Delhi faces an acute housing shortage, estimated at over 1 million units. However, this statistic obscures a more fundamental issue: the housing that does exist is either unaffordable to most residents or lacks security of tenure.

The formal real estate market caters almost exclusively to middle and upper-income groups. As of 2024, the average price of a two-bedroom apartment in a decent location exceeds ₹1 crore (approximately $120,000), placing it beyond the reach of families earning median incomes. Even rental markets have become increasingly unaffordable, with rents consuming 40-60% of household income for working-class families.

Meanwhile, the government's public housing programs have consistently failed to meet demand. The Delhi Development Authority's (DDA) housing schemes involve complex application processes, long waiting periods, and final costs that still exclude the poor. Economically Weaker Section (EWS) housing units, meant for the poorest residents, often end up being sold to middle-income buyers through informal channels.

3.2 Slums and the Criminalization of Poverty

Approximately 3-4 million Delhi residents live in jhuggi-jhopri (JJ) clusters—informal settlements characterized by insecure tenure, inadequate infrastructure, and constant threat of eviction. Rather than recognizing these settlements as evidence of planning failure and housing market dysfunction, official discourse often frames them as 'encroachments' and their residents as 'illegal occupants.'

This criminalization of poverty manifests in brutal eviction drives. Between 2004 and 2024, over 300,000 people were displaced through slum demolitions, often with minimal notice and inadequate rehabilitation. The 2010 Commonwealth Games alone led to the eviction of approximately 200,000 people, relocated to peripheral areas like Bawana and Narela—far from employment opportunities and lacking basic services.

Period	Event/Reason	People Displaced
2010	Commonwealth Games	~200,000
2004-2024	Total Evictions	300,000+

Table 2: Major eviction events in Delhi showing the scale of displacement caused by demolition drives.

3.3 A People-Centric Housing Framework

If Delhi were built for the people, housing policy would begin with three fundamental principles:

- Recognition of housing as a human right: This would require constitutional and legal frameworks guaranteeing secure tenure and prohibiting forced evictions without due process and adequate compensation.
- In-situ upgrading over relocation: Rather than demolishing informal settlements, the city would invest in upgrading them with infrastructure, secure tenure, and community participation in planning. This approach, successfully implemented in cities like Medellín, Colombia, and parts of Mumbai, preserves social networks and maintains proximity to livelihoods.
- Mixed-income, mixed-use neighborhoods: Instead of segregating the city by income and function, planning would promote diversity. This means allowing commercial activities in residential areas, providing affordable housing in well-located areas, and ending the concentration of EWS housing in peripheral ghettos.
- Community land trusts and cooperative housing: Alternative tenure models could ensure long-term affordability and community control. Singapore's model of public housing, where 80% of residents live in well-designed, well-located government flats with 99-year leases, offers valuable lessons.

4. Transportation and Mobility Justice

4.1 The Automobile Bias

Delhi's transportation planning prioritizes private vehicles despite the fact that they account for only 20-25% of trips but consume the majority of road space. The city has constructed flyovers, expressways, and multi-lane arterials that facilitate high-speed automobile movement while making streets dangerous for pedestrians and cyclists.

This automobile-centric approach has devastating consequences. Delhi has among the highest traffic fatality rates in the world, with pedestrians and two-wheeler riders accounting for the majority of deaths. In 2023 alone, over 1,400 people died in traffic accidents in the city.

The emphasis on roads has also failed to solve congestion. Despite massive investments in road infrastructure, Delhi experiences some of the world's worst traffic jams, with average speeds in central areas often below 10 km/h during peak hours. This is the predictable result of induced demand: building more roads encourages more driving, which creates more congestion.

4.2 Public Transportation Gaps

While the Delhi Metro represents a significant achievement, covering over 390 kilometers with 286 stations, it serves only 15-20% of daily trips. Most Delhiites rely on buses, walking, cycling, and auto-rickshaws—modes that receive far less investment and infrastructure support.

The bus system, once the backbone of Delhi's public transport, has deteriorated over decades. The Delhi Transport Corporation operates approximately 3,000 buses for a city of 33 million people. By comparison, Bogotá, Colombia, with a population of 8 million, runs over 11,000 buses. This shortage means overcrowded buses, long waiting times, and dangerous conditions, particularly for women.

City	Population	Bus Fleet
Delhi	33 million	~3,000
Bogotá	8 million	11,000+
London	9 million	9,000+

Table 3: Bus fleet comparison showing Delhi's inadequate public transportation infrastructure relative to city size.

Pedestrian infrastructure is abysmal. Footpaths are frequently encroached upon, poorly maintained, or non-existent. Walking, which accounts for 30-40% of trips, is treated as an afterthought. The result is that pedestrians navigate roads at their peril, competing with cars, buses, and motorcycles for space.

4.3 Rethinking Mobility

A transportation system focused on people would turn current priorities upside down:

Pedestrians first: Every street should have smooth, accessible, and well-kept walkways. Crossings would prioritize pedestrian safety over keeping traffic moving. This idea, which cities like Copenhagen and Barcelona have embraced, highlights that everyone walks at some point during their travels.

Expanding the bus system dramatically: Delhi needs between 15,000 and 20,000 buses running on dedicated lanes to avoid traffic jams slowing them down. Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems, while Delhi's initial rollout struggled due to poor design and lack of political commitment, can learn from successful models in cities like Curitiba, Bogotá, and Guangzhou.

Creating safe cycling infrastructure: Every major route should have protected bike lanes, offering a safe, healthy, and emissions-free way to get around. The Netherlands shows that with the right infrastructure, cycling can be a main mode of transport even in large urban areas.

Affordable, integrated public transit: There should be smooth connections between subways, buses, and other transport options, with fare systems that don't burden low-income riders. Monthly passes should cost no more than 5% of the minimum wage to make it accessible for everyone.

Cutting down on car dependency: This means implementing parking fees, congestion charges in busy city areas, and gradually repurposing road space for pedestrians and cyclists instead of cars. Cities like London, Singapore, and Stockholm offer effective examples for controlling car usage.

5. Environmental Sustainability and Climate Justice

5.1 The Air Quality Crisis

Delhi consistently ranks among the world's most polluted cities. During winter months, particulate matter levels often exceed WHO guidelines by 20-30 times, creating a public health emergency. This pollution results from multiple sources: vehicular emissions, industrial activity, construction dust, crop burning in neighboring states, and thermal power plants.

The health consequences are catastrophic. Studies estimate that air pollution causes 10,000-30,000 premature deaths annually in Delhi and reduces life expectancy by 9-10 years. Children growing up in Delhi develop lung capacity 10% lower than their peers in less polluted cities. The poor, who lack access to air purifiers, masks, and medical care, suffer disproportionately.

5.2 Urban Heat and Green Space Inequity

Delhi experiences extreme summer temperatures exceeding 45°C, exacerbated by the urban heat island effect. Concrete and asphalt absorb and radiate heat while the city has lost tree cover to development. Between 1998 and 2018, Delhi lost approximately 20% of its green cover.

Access to green space is highly unequal. The Lutyens Bungalow Zone maintains abundant tree cover and parks, while working-class neighborhoods often have minimal greenery. This environmental injustice has direct health impacts: poor neighborhoods experience higher temperatures and residents have fewer opportunities for recreation and respite.

5.3 Water Scarcity and Flooding

Delhi faces a paradox of scarcity and excess. The city experiences severe water shortages, with many areas receiving piped water for only a few hours daily, forcing residents to depend on expensive tanker water.

Simultaneously, monsoon rains overwhelm inadequate drainage systems, causing flooding that particularly affects low-lying informal settlements.

Both problems stem from poor planning. Delhi has eliminated most natural water bodies and paved over areas that once absorbed rainwater. Groundwater is depleted by unregulated extraction. The Yamuna River, once the city's lifeline, has become a toxic drain, with sewage and industrial effluents rendering it biologically dead in stretches passing through Delhi.

5.4 Towards Environmental Justice

A people-centric approach to environmental sustainability would recognize that climate and environmental justice are inseparable:

- Massive expansion of public green space: Every neighborhood should have accessible parks within walking distance. Converting empty plots, widening road medians, creating rooftop gardens, and establishing urban forests would provide cooling, recreation, and ecological benefits.
- Prioritize public transportation and clean energy: Transitioning to electric buses and metro systems, powered by renewable energy, would dramatically reduce emissions while improving mobility.
- Restore water systems: Reviving water bodies, creating wetlands for natural filtration, and implementing rainwater harvesting across the city would address both scarcity and flooding. The successful restoration of Bangalore's lakes offers a blueprint.
- End environmental racism: Polluting industries, landfills, and waste treatment facilities are disproportionately located near poor neighborhoods. Environmental justice requires equitable distribution of environmental burdens and benefits.
- Climate-responsive architecture: Building codes should mandate passive cooling design, green roofs, and reflective surfaces rather than energy-intensive air conditioning as the default solution.

6. Economic Opportunity and Livelihood Security

6.1 The Informal Economy and Street Vendors

About 70-80% of people working in Delhi are part of the informal economy. This includes street vendors, domestic workers, construction workers, auto-rickshaw drivers, and those working from home. These individuals are crucial for the city's economy, but they constantly deal with harassment, unstable jobs, and very little legal protection. Street vendors, for instance, number around 450,000 and face steep challenges. Even though there's the Street Vendors Act from 2014 that should safeguard their rights to vending areas and involve them in planning, not much has actually been done to enforce it. They often get evicted, harassed by police, and face extortion. The pandemic really hit this group hard, leaving many vendors without savings and plunging them into debt.

6.2 Spatial Mismatch and Long Commutes

The poor often live far from employment opportunities due to high housing costs in well-located areas. This spatial mismatch forces brutal commutes. Construction workers may travel 2-3 hours each way, leaving home before dawn and returning after dark. Domestic workers similarly face long journeys for work that pays ₹5,000-10,000 monthly while consuming ₹2,000-3,000 in transportation costs.

6.3 A People's Economy

If Delhi prioritized economic justice:

- Recognize and support informal work: This means implementing the Street Vendors Act fully, creating designated vending zones with infrastructure, and ending harassment. Domestic workers need legal protections including minimum wages, working hour limits, and social security.
- Promote worker cooperatives: Rather than treating informal workers as individual entrepreneurs, supporting cooperative models would provide collective bargaining power, access to credit, and economies of scale.
- Decentralized employment hubs: Instead of concentrating employment in a few zones, mixed-use neighborhoods would reduce commute times and improve quality of life.
- Skills development linked to decent work: Current skill training programs often prepare workers for non-existent jobs. People-centric programs would be designed with worker input and connected to actual employment opportunities with fair wages.
- Universal basic services: Providing universal healthcare, quality public education, affordable childcare, and subsidized food would reduce the income needed for basic dignity and free workers from exploitative labor conditions.

7. Democratic Governance and Participation

7.1 The Accountability Crisis

Delhi's governance is pretty complicated and fragmented. The local government has power over certain functions, but the central government, through the Lieutenant Governor and agencies like the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) and municipal corporations, holds sway over others. This split leads to a lot of finger-pointing and makes it hard to hold anyone accountable.

On top of that, most planning decisions are made behind closed doors, with hardly any public involvement. The master plans are usually crafted by technocrats without much input from the community. Even when public hearings happen, they often feel more like a formality—people voice their concerns, but those objections rarely affect the final decisions.

7.2 Exclusion and Invisibility

Marginalized communities face systemic exclusion from governance. Migrants, who constitute a large portion of Delhi's population, often lack voter registration and thus political voice. Slum residents, lacking legal addresses, struggle to access government services. Women's voices are systematically underrepresented despite their majority use of public spaces and services.

7.3 Participatory Democracy

A truly people-centric Delhi would require:

- Decentralized decision-making: Ward committees with real power and budgets would allow neighborhood-level planning responsive to local needs. Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting model demonstrates how communities can directly allocate resources.
- Inclusive consultation mechanisms: Planning processes must actively reach marginalized groups rather than relying on public hearings that educated, mobile residents dominate. This means conducting meetings in multiple languages, at times and locations accessible to working people, and with childcare provision.
- Transparency and right to information: All planning documents, contracts, and decisions should be publicly accessible online. Citizens should have legal standing to challenge decisions that violate planning norms or harm communities.
- Community-led planning: Neighborhoods should have the right to develop their own plans within broader frameworks, as demonstrated by community land trusts and cooperative housing movements globally.
- Protection of dissent: Activists, journalists, and community organizers who challenge unjust planning decisions face harassment and violence. Democratic governance requires protecting those who hold power accountable.

8. Case Studies: Alternative Approaches

8.1 Medellín: Social Urbanism

Medellín, Colombia, transformed from one of the world's most dangerous cities to a model of inclusive urban development through 'social urbanism'—prioritizing investment in the poorest neighborhoods. The city built cable

cars connecting hillside slums to the metro, constructed library parks in marginalized areas, and upgraded informal settlements rather than demolishing them. These interventions, combined with community participation, dramatically improved quality of life while respecting residents' dignity.

8.2 Vienna: Social Housing

Vienna demonstrates that affordable housing can be high-quality and well-located. The city owns or regulates 60% of housing, ensuring that workers and middle-class families can afford homes in desirable areas. Buildings include community spaces, courtyards, and services. This approach prevents segregation and speculation while maintaining social diversity.

8.3 Curitiba: People-Centric Transportation

Curitiba, Brazil, pioneered Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) in the 1970s, creating a system that moves people as efficiently as metros at a fraction of the cost. The city designed neighborhoods around transit corridors, promoted cycling and walking, and limited automobile dependence. The result is a livable city with relatively low pollution and congestion despite significant population growth.

9. Barriers to Transformation

9.1 Political Economy of Urban Land

Land in Delhi is extraordinarily valuable, creating powerful interests resistant to reform. The DDA holds vast land banks whose value depends on maintaining scarcity and exclusion. Politicians benefit from real estate connections and campaign donations. This political economy ensures that policies favoring developers and elites prevail over public interest.

9.2 Caste, Class, and Social Hierarchies

India's deeply entrenched social hierarchies manifest in urban space. Elite resistance to mixed-income neighborhoods or public housing near affluent areas reflects caste and class prejudices. The notion that poor people are 'out of place' in well-located areas or nice parks reflects these hierarchies rather than planning logic.

9.3 Institutional Capacity

Even well-intentioned reforms face implementation challenges. Municipal agencies lack resources, training, and autonomy. Corruption and political interference undermine technical expertise. Building the institutional capacity for people-centric governance requires sustained investment and political will.

10. Conclusion: Towards a Just City

Delhi wasn't created with its people in mind. It was shaped for empires, bureaucracy, and to gather wealth. Because of this, millions find themselves in poverty, breathing polluted air, enduring risky commutes, and having no say in the decisions that impact their lives.

But it doesn’t have to stay this way. There are enough resources to provide decent housing, reliable transport, a clean environment, and economic opportunities for everyone. What we really need is the political will and a governing system that puts people before profits and privilege.

To create a Delhi that serves its people, we must:

- Acknowledge housing as a basic human right and stop forced evictions.
- Focus on walking, biking, and public transportation instead of just cars.
- Put serious money into restoring the environment and adapting to climate change.
- Support informal workers and make sure they have fair livelihoods.
- Make planning more democratic by ensuring real participation and accountability.

These changes might clash with powerful interests and will require us to confront deep-rooted biases. They ask us to rethink our cities as not just machines for making money, but as shared spaces where everyone can flourish. Asking, 'What if Delhi was designed for its people?' pushes us to think about the kind of society we aspire to create. Are we okay with a city split between pockets of wealth and vast areas of poverty? Or do we want to build a city that respects the dignity and fulfills the needs of every resident?

The answer to this question will shape not only Delhi's future but will also influence whether India's democracy can truly uphold its commitments to justice and equality. A people-focused Delhi is within reach. The real question is whether we have the guts to make it happen.

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Bibliography

This research draws upon multiple disciplines including urban planning, sociology, environmental studies, public health, economics, and political science. The bibliography encompasses:

- Foundational urban theory from Jane Jacobs, David Harvey, and Henri Lefebvre on the right to the city
- Delhi-specific research from scholars like Gautam Bhan, D. Asher Ghertner, Amita Baviskar, and Véronique Dupont
- Comparative urbanism examining successful people-centric interventions in cities like Medellín, Vienna, Curitiba, Copenhagen, and Singapore
- Environmental justice literature connecting urban form to health outcomes and climate vulnerability
- Transportation planning research emphasizing pedestrian-first and transit-oriented development
- Housing rights frameworks from UN-Habitat and civil society organizations
- Empirical data from government statistics, academic surveys, and NGO field research

The interdisciplinary nature of this research reflects the reality that urban challenges cannot be understood through single disciplinary lenses. Building people-centric cities requires integrating insights from multiple fields and centering the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

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Lastly, this paper is dedicated to everyone who believes that cities should be designed for people, not profit; for dignity, not displacement; and for justice, not exclusion.