



Migration and the Urban Remaking of NCT Delhi: A Study of Demographic and Spatial Change

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Abstract

The National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi constitutes one of the most analytically consequential laboratories for studying migration-driven urbanisation in the contemporary Global South. This article advances a central argument: that internal migration is not a background variable in Delhi's urban growth but a structural force that has architecturally remade the city's spatial form, labour markets, housing system, and governance apparatus — producing a metropolitan economy functionally dependent on migrant labour while systematically excluding that labour from formal planning frameworks. Drawing on Census of India data (2001, 2011), the Economic Survey of Delhi (2022–23 to 2025–26), the Draft Master Plan for Delhi 2041, and an integrated theoretical framework combining the extended Harris-Todaro model, Kundu's exclusionary urbanisation paradigm, and New Economic Geography, the analysis establishes three principal empirical findings. First, migration has definitively surpassed natural increase as the primary demographic driver of Delhi's expansion, contributing approximately 74 per cent of annual population growth by 2021. Second, built-up area expanded from approximately 31 per cent of NCT's total area in 1990 to over 73 per cent by 2020, driven overwhelmingly by unregulated informal construction rather than planned DDA delivery. Third, the urban informal sector functions as the permanent — not transitional — structural destination for the vast majority of migrant workers, rendering classical human capital assimilation models empirically untenable. The article identifies the Lal Dora urban village system and the proliferation of Census Towns as the primary spatial expressions of this paradox: governance structures that produce affordable but hazardous housing as an unintended by-product of the state's constitutional inability to provide formal housing for its own workforce. Policy recommendations span regional development, inclusive housing, labour formalisation, and metropolitan governance reform, arguing that sustainable urban futures for Delhi require simultaneous structural reduction of migration-producing inequalities and formalisation of the migrant-built city.

Keywords: Internal migration; NCT Delhi; exclusionary urbanisation; informal settlements; Lal Dora; Harris-Todaro model; Census Towns; peri-urban transformation; metropolitan governance; labour informality

Introduction

Among the defining demographic transformations of the twenty-first century, few carry greater structural weight than the migration-driven urbanisation of large cities in the Global South. In India, this process has concentrated with extraordinary intensity in a small number of metropolitan agglomerations, none more dramatically than the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi. From a modest administrative centre of roughly 400,000 at the dawn of the twentieth century, Delhi has grown into one of the most densely populated urban extents on earth. Its population reached 16.78 million at the 2011 Census, and current estimates project the broader metropolitan agglomeration at over 34 to 35 million by the mid-2020s. This expansion is not primarily a story of biological reproduction. It is, more fundamentally, a story of migration.

The millions of individuals who have redirected their lives toward Delhi — from the agrarian plains of Uttar Pradesh, the river-scarred districts of Bihar, the drought-prone stretches of Rajasthan, and a dozen other

sending regions- have transformed not only the demography of the city but also its built environment, labour markets, class structure, governance challenges, and ecological footprint. Yet the analytical literature, though extensive, has treated these transformations largely in parallel rather than as interconnected expressions of a single structural condition. Demographic studies have documented migration volumes and origins; urban geographers have charted the spatial consequences of population growth; economists have analysed labour market informality; and policy scholars have critiqued successive master plans, but rarely has a single analytical framework connected these dimensions into a coherent argument about how migration structurally produces the city Delhi has become.

This article advances precisely that argument. Its central claim is that migration into NCT Delhi is not a variable to be controlled or managed at the margins of urban policy but a structural engine whose dynamics have architecturally determined the spatial form, economic organisation, and governance challenges of the metropolis. The formal planning system has not merely failed to keep pace with migration-driven growth; it has actively produced a form of urbanisation- what Kundu (2011) terms 'exclusionary urbanisation'- in which the formal economy's dependence on migrant labour is paired with a structural refusal to accommodate that labour within the formal spatial and social fabric of the city. Understanding this paradox is both an analytical imperative and a policy necessity.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant scholarly literature and identifies the theoretical gaps this analysis addresses. Section 3 presents the conceptual framework. Section 4 describes the methodology. Section 5 constitutes the analytical core, examining migration-urbanisation dynamics across demographic, spatial, labour market, and governance dimensions. Section 6 develops policy implications. Section 7 concludes.

Literature Review

The theoretical heritage of migration studies, Ravenstein's (1885, 1889) laws of migration, Lee's (1966) push-pull reformulation, and Harris and Todaro's (1970) seminal two-sector economic model, provides indispensable analytical tools, yet each requires significant qualification when applied to the specific structural conditions of a twenty-first-century Indian megacity. Ravenstein's distance-decay principle, for instance, is empirically confounded in Delhi's case: the dominant migrant origins- Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, hundreds of kilometres away- violate the expectation that migration volume declines sharply with distance. The explanation lies not in the falsity of distance-friction as a principle but in its dissolution by railway infrastructure, mobile telecommunications, and the social capital accumulated through decades of established migration corridors. The effective social and logistical distance between a Bihari construction worker and Delhi has been radically compressed by these enabling conditions.

Harris and Todaro's (1970) model captures something genuinely real about migration behaviour: that decisions to migrate are based not on observed urban wages but on expected wages, probability-weighted across formal employment and unemployment. The model's explanatory power lies in accounting for the persistence of rural-urban migration even in the face of visible urban unemployment. Its empirical limitation, however, is the binary structure, formal employment or open unemployment, that is factually inadequate in Delhi's context. Gary Fields' (1975) three-sector extension, incorporating the urban informal sector as an additional absorption category, substantially improves the model's fit with Delhi's labour market reality, and it is this extended formulation that informs the present analysis. The critical analytical implication of the three-sector model is that the informal sector wage, lower than formal wages but typically above subsistence rural incomes, sustains continuous migration precisely because it maintains the expected wage differential that makes migration rational.

The New Economics of Labour Migration (Stark and Bloom 1985) adds a further corrective by insisting that migration decisions are household strategies for income diversification and risk management rather than purely individual choices. This perspective illuminates the prevalence of circular and seasonal migration in Delhi-arrangements in which workers maintain dual residential bases across urban and rural environments- which standard census methodologies systematically fail to capture. The COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020 functioned as a natural experiment that dramatically confirmed this point: the reverse migration of millions of workers who had been invisible in census counts as 'usual rural residents' revealed that the functional migrant population in Delhi substantially exceeded documented figures.

At the macro-structural level, New Economic Geography (Krugman 1991; Fujita, Krugman, and Venables 1999) offers the most rigorous account of why migration flows to Delhi are structural and sustained rather than contingent and episodic. The model demonstrates how initial locational advantages set in motion cumulative agglomeration processes that concentrate economic activity in core regions while progressively marginalising the periphery. Applied to India, this logic explains why Delhi's growth generates further growth, continuously widening the income gap with its hinterland that constitutes the fundamental structural driver of migration. The political economy of post-1991 economic liberalisation intensified this logic dramatically: liberalisation simultaneously created new service-sector employment in metropolitan cores and undermined the livelihoods of agricultural workers in the sending states.

Within Indian urbanisation scholarship, two theoretical contributions are particularly formative for this analysis. Kundu's (2011) concept of 'exclusionary urbanisation' identifies the structural mechanism through which rapid economic growth fails to translate into inclusive urban development: market-oriented urbanisation systematically excludes the poor from formal urban spaces through prohibitive land costs, hostile municipal policies, and the absence of public investment in affordable housing. The consequence- the spatial concentration of migrant workers in informal peripheral settlements- is not an accident of planning but a predictable structural outcome of a development model that captures the benefits of agglomeration while externalising its social costs onto the most marginalised residents. Dupont's (2007, 2011) extensive fieldwork in Delhi provides the ethnographic counterpart to Kundu's structural argument, documenting with empirical precision how urban development processes displace and dispossess the poor through the cumulative weight of everyday planning decisions- a logic she terms 'dispossession by accumulation'.

Against this theoretical richness, several significant gaps persist in the literature. No study has comprehensively integrated the spatial, economic, and governance dimensions of migration-driven urbanisation in a single coherent analytical framework. The post-pandemic revelation of circular migration's scale has not been fully incorporated into the empirical literature. The policy literature has evaluated Delhi's master plans largely on their own terms rather than against the structural political economy that renders them necessarily inadequate. And the spatial analysis of peri-urban transformation, particularly the Census Town phenomenon and the Lal Dora urban village system, has remained fragmented across specialist literatures that rarely speak to one another. The present article addresses these gaps directly.

Conceptual Framework

The analytical framework employed in this article operates across three interconnected levels. At the macro-structural level, New Economic Geography and the World Systems tradition explain why migration flows into Delhi are not contingent or correctable by metropolitan-scale policy alone but are structurally generated by deep and durable regional inequalities within India's spatial economy. The per capita income differential between NCT Delhi and Bihar, approximately eightfold, is not a natural condition but the accumulated product of decades of uneven development that metropolitan planning is constitutionally incapable of reversing.

At the meso-level, the analysis deploys two complementary frameworks. The extended, three-sector Harris-Todaro model explains labour market dynamics: the expected urban wage, incorporating the relatively high probability of informal sector absorption at wages modestly above rural subsistence, sustains continuous migration even as formal employment opportunities remain restricted. The equilibrium condition, $W_{\text{rural}} = P_{\text{formal}} \times W_{\text{formal}} + P_{\text{informal}} \times W_{\text{informal}}$, captures the structural logic of Delhi's persistent labour surplus in the informal sector. Kundu's exclusionary urbanisation paradigm explains the spatial consequences: the systematic exclusion of migrant workers from formal housing through land price mechanisms and hostile governance produces the proliferation of informal settlement types that characterise Delhi's metropolitan periphery.

At the micro-level, Social Capital and Network Theory (Massey et al. 1993) explain the spatial patterning of migrant communities within Delhi. Established migration corridors, linking specific sending districts to specific occupational and residential niches in the city, function as self-sustaining systems that reduce the information costs and entry risks of migration for subsequent movers. The occupational clustering that results- Bihari construction workers, UP domestic workers, Rajasthani street vendors- is not incidental but reflects the structural geography of migrant social networks.

These three analytical levels are integrated through the concept of Spatial Dualism: the proposition that Delhi's built environment is simultaneously the product of two structurally different spatial production regimes. The formal regime- planned residential colonies, regulated commercial development, DDA-delivered infrastructure- serves the formal economy and its higher-income participants. The informal regime- Jhuggi Jhopri (JJ) clusters, unauthorised colonies, Census Towns, and Lal Dora urban villages- houses the informal workforce that makes the formal economy function. Neither regime is comprehensible in isolation from the other; each is the structural condition of possibility for the other's existence.

Methodology

This article employs a mixed-methods secondary data analysis, combining quantitative demographic and economic data with qualitative policy analysis and spatial evidence. The methodological design is explicitly adapted to the constraints and opportunities of the available evidence base.

The principal quantitative data source is the Census of India, particularly the 2011 decennial census, which is the most recent census for which complete migration-specific tabulations are available. The D-series migration tables- especially Table D-5 on migrants by place of last residence, age, sex, reason for migration, and duration of residence- provide the fundamental empirical basis for the demographic analysis. Because the decennial census scheduled for 2021 was indefinitely postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, analysis of contemporary conditions draws on the Economic Survey of Delhi series (2020–21 to 2025–26), published by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of NCT of Delhi. The 2022–23 edition was particularly significant in providing direct estimates of migration's contribution relative to natural increase in the post-2011 period.

Spatial analysis draws on published remote sensing and GIS-based studies that have quantified the transformation of Delhi's land cover between 1990 and 2020. Governance and policy analysis employs a critical evaluative approach to the Draft Master Plan for Delhi 2041 and predecessor planning documents, assessing them against stated objectives, empirical outcomes, and the structural political-economic context established by the theoretical framework.

Several methodological limitations require explicit acknowledgement. The absence of Census 2021 data means that post-2011 analysis relies on projections and intercensal estimates that carry increasing uncertainty with distance from the census benchmark. Census-based migration data systematically undercounts circular, seasonal, and highly transient migrants- workers who maintain dual residential arrangements between Delhi and rural origins

— meaning that migration's contribution to Delhi's functional population is likely substantially larger than official figures capture. The reliance on secondary data means that migrant perspectives and experiences are structurally absent from an analysis that speaks extensively about their conditions. Future research incorporating ethnographic and participatory methods would usefully complement the structural analysis presented here.

Analysis and Discussion

Demographic Dynamics: Migration Surpasses Natural Increase

Figure 1 presents one of the analytically most significant empirical patterns in this study: the divergence between NCT Delhi's actual total population trajectory and the estimated 'natural base' population- what the city's population would have been if it had grown solely through natural increase since 1971. The growing gap between the two lines maps migration's escalating demographic contribution with directness.

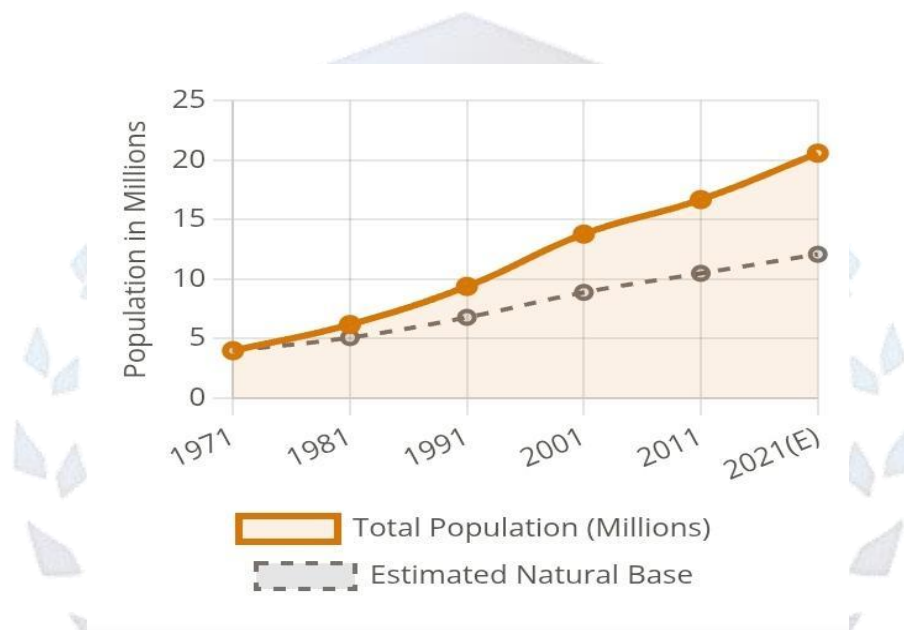


Figure 1. Total Population of NCT Delhi vs. Estimated Natural Base Population (1971–2021). The expanding divergence between the documented population trajectory (solid orange line) and the projected natural-increase baseline (dashed grey line) quantifies the escalating cumulative contribution of net migration. Sources: Census of India A-02 Series; Economic Survey of Delhi 2022–23; NIUA Demographic Projections.

Delhi's total population across census decades reveals a pattern of sustained, high-intensity growth: from 4.07 million in 1971 to 6.22 million in 1981, 9.42 million in 1991, 13.85 million in 2001, and 16.79 million in 2011. Projected estimates place the 2021 figure at approximately 20.67 million. The natural-base population- estimated by applying declining fertility rates and stable mortality rates to the 1971 base- stands at approximately 12 to 13 million by 2021. The gap of roughly 7 to 8 million represents the cumulative demographic contribution of net migration since 1971, and the trajectory is unambiguous: migration's relative contribution has grown across the entire period.

The Economic Survey of Delhi 2022–23 provides particularly direct contemporary evidence: in 2021, migration added an estimated 283,000 individuals to Delhi's population while natural increase contributed approximately 101,000- giving migration a 74 per cent share of total growth in that year. This represents a dramatic structural shift from the 1970s, when natural increase and migration contributed roughly equally to annual growth. Delhi has crossed a threshold from a city growing primarily through reproduction to one growing primarily

through migration, and no structural development in the sending regions or receiving city suggests this will change in the near term.

Decadal growth rates present what appears paradoxical: rates declined from approximately 53 per cent in the 1970s and 1980s to 47 per cent in 1991–2001 and 21 per cent in 2001–11, yet migration's absolute and relative contribution continued to rise over the same period. The resolution is arithmetic: declining percentage growth rates simply reflect a larger base. The absolute number of migrants added to Delhi's population in the 1991–2001 decade alone, approximately 2.22 million, exceeded the total population of many Indian state capitals. The decelerating growth rate obscures the continuing scale of migration, a source of systematic misunderstanding in both the research literature and policy discourse.

The Geography of Origin: Structural Concentration in the Hindi Belt

Figure 2 presents the state-wise origin composition of NCT Delhi's inter-state migrant population as recorded in the 2011 Census D-series tables. The concentration is striking: two states- Uttar Pradesh and Bihar- account for approximately 68 per cent of all inter-state in-migrants, with Uttar Pradesh alone constituting roughly 46 per cent.

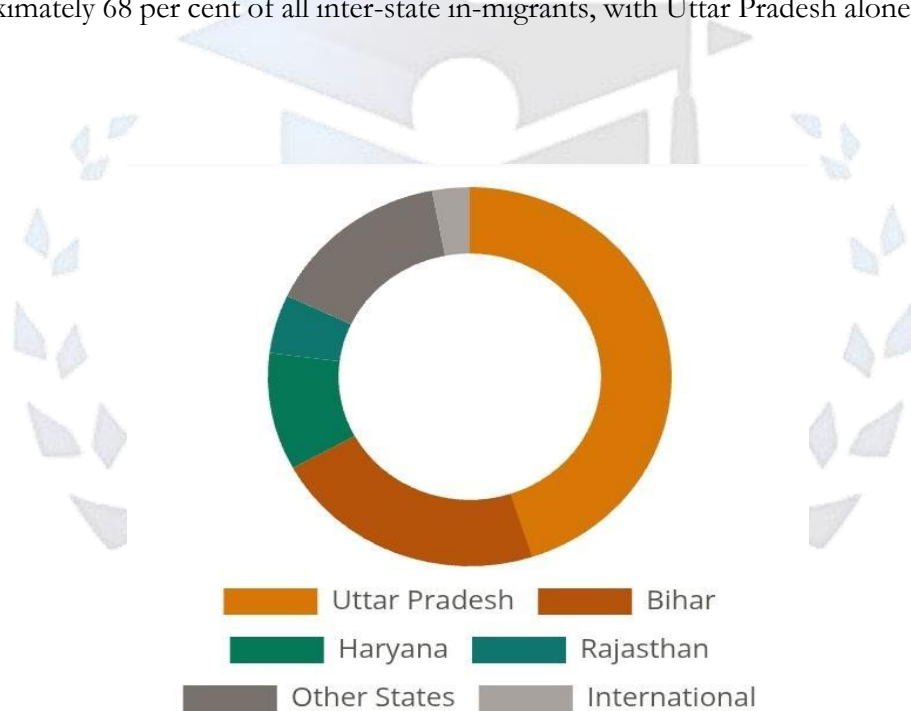


Figure 2. State-Wise Origin of Inter-State Migrants to NCT Delhi (Census 2011). The geographical distribution illustrates the profound concentration of flows within the Hindi Belt, where Uttar Pradesh and Bihar collectively constitute roughly 68 per cent of all inter-state in-migrants. Sources: Census of India 2011, D-5 Migration Tables.

This geographical concentration is not incidental; it reflects a specific political economy of regional inequality in India's north. Both Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are characterised by agricultural stagnation, rapid population growth against fragmented landholdings, limited organised-sector employment, and per capita incomes dramatically below the national average. The income differential between Delhi and Bihar, approximately eightfold on per capita measures, constitutes the structural foundation on which the Harris-Todaro expected wage logic operates. Migration is the rational household response to conditions that offer no viable local economic alternative for the agricultural surplus labour these states generate.

The persistence of Bihar as a major source despite its geographical distance from Delhi, substantially further than many other states that contribute less- directly invalidates Ravenstein's distance-decay principle as

applied mechanically in this context. The explanation lies in the migration corridor effect: decades of sustained Bihar-to-Delhi migration have established dense social networks that drastically reduce the effective costs and risks of migration. A young man from Darbhanga or Muzaffarpur arriving in Delhi encounters an established community of fellow Biharis who provide initial accommodation, employment leads, and social support. The migration corridor functions as a self-sustaining institution that reproduces itself through kinship and community networks regardless of changes in macro-level economic conditions- precisely as Massey et al.'s (1993) network theory predicts.

Haryana (approximately 6 per cent), Rajasthan (approximately 5 per cent), and West Bengal (approximately 3 per cent) represent secondary but analytically significant origin streams. Haryana's proximity to Delhi means much of its migration takes the form of commuting and circular movement that census figures undercount. Rajasthan's contribution is structured around particular occupational niches- gem-cutting, security services, handicrafts, reflecting the caste- and community-based labour market segmentation that channels migrant streams into specific employment categories. The social geography of Delhi's informal settlements- where entire blocks may be populated predominantly by migrants from a single district- is the spatial expression of these network-structured migration corridors.

The Gendered Architecture of Migration

Migration into Delhi is a profoundly gendered process, and the gender dimension exposes structural features that aggregate statistics systematically conceal. For male migrants, employment is overwhelmingly the stated primary reason for migration- approximately 62.7 per cent report work and employment as their principal motivation. This reflects both genuine economic calculation and the patriarchal social licence that enables and expects male economic mobility. Female migration tells a structurally different story: approximately 66.7 per cent of female migrants report marriage as their primary reason for movement, reflecting the near-universal practice of patrilocal exogamous marriage in northern Indian communities. Independent female economic migration accounts for only approximately 5 per cent of female flows- a proportion slowly rising but still marginal.

The gendered structure of migration has significant labour market implications. Women who migrate for marriage arrive in Delhi as members of established households with pre-existing residential arrangements, and their subsequent entry into the labour force, if it occurs, typically happens through informal channels mediated by family and community networks. Women who migrate independently for employment are concentrated in domestic work, home-based manufacturing, and low-wage service employment that is particularly precarious: characterised by unregulated conditions, minimal social protection, and vulnerability to harassment. The intersection of migration status, gender, and occupational informality produces a specific vulnerability profile that deserves greater analytical attention than the aggregate literature has provided.

Spatial Expansion: From Agricultural Fringe to Migrant City

The spatial consequences of sustained migration-driven population growth are most directly legible in the transformation of NCT Delhi's land use over the past three decades. Published remote sensing analyses document a land use transition of remarkable rapidity and comprehensiveness: built-up area expanded from approximately 31 per cent of NCT's total territory in 1990 to over 73 per cent by 2020- a more than doubling of the physical footprint of urban construction within a single generation. Agricultural land contracted from approximately 44 per cent to approximately 15 per cent, and open or wasteland from approximately 25 per cent to 12 per cent.

Year	Built-Up Area (%)	Agricultural Land (%)	Open Space / Wasteland (%)
1990	~31%	~44%	~25%
2000	~46%	~33%	~21%
2010	~61%	~23%	~16%
2020	~73%	~15%	~12%

Table 1. Land Use Change in NCT Delhi, 1990–2020. Tracks the decadal transformation of territory from agricultural/ open land to built-up urban surfaces. Sources: Synthesis of published remote sensing analyses and DDA planning archives.

Crucially, this spatial transformation was not primarily the product of DDA planned development. The DDA's delivery of planned housing has been chronically and dramatically insufficient relative to demand across all successive master plans. The expansion of built-up area has been driven overwhelmingly by informal construction: the densification of Lal Dora urban villages, the expansion of unauthorised colonies, the self-help housing of JJ cluster residents, and the organic growth of Census Towns. Migration's spatial legacy in Delhi is written in concrete and brick, much of it technically illegal, not because migrant communities prefer illegality but because formal housing options are structurally inaccessible at their income levels.

The most dynamic spatial frontier is the peri-urban fringe, the contested territory where agricultural land is being converted to urban use, where informal settlements absorb overflow from the saturated urban core, and where administrative boundaries between Delhi and the wider National Capital Region create governance lacunae exploited by informal developers. The peri-urban fringe has replaced the inner-city slum as the primary destination for low-income migrants, a displacement that reflects not voluntary preference but the progressive demolition and redevelopment of inner-city JJ clusters, pushing their residents and subsequent new arrivals toward peripheral locations where land is cheaper and enforcement is weaker.

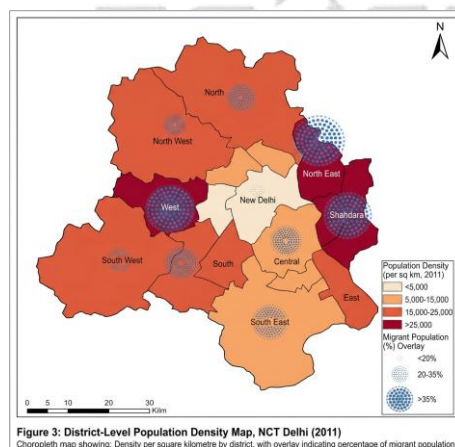


Figure 3: District-Level Population Density Map, NCT Delhi (2011). Cartographic representation identifying the spatial nexus between aggregate density and migrant settlement patterns. The choropleth map featuring a migrant population overlay reveals that inflows are disproportionately concentrated in high-density districts, establishing that migrant residence is structurally tethered to residential density and informal housing availability.

Census Towns and the Administrative Paradox

The single most analytically revealing indicator of how migration-driven urbanisation has outstripped formal governance in Delhi is the transformation of the Census Town count over successive censuses. A Census Town is a settlement that meets the demographic-functional criteria for urban classification- minimum population of 5,000, density of at least 400 persons per square kilometre, and at least 75 per cent of the male main working population engaged in non-agricultural activities- but has not been assigned an urban local body, remaining formally administered as a rural Gram Panchayat.

Census Year	Statutory Towns	Census Towns	Rural Villages
1971	3	27	~294
1981	3	27	~272
1991	3	41	~300
2001	3	59	~234
2011	3	110–112	~165

Table 2. Administrative Settlement Classification in NCT Delhi, 1971–2011. This longitudinal record illustrates the profound institutional inertia in acknowledging urban status amidst intensifying migration-led expansion. Sources: Census of India; NIUA 2021 planning archives.

The data reveals a pattern of profound analytical significance. The number of statutory towns has remained fixed at three throughout the entire period- not because Delhi stopped urbanising, but because the institutional mechanism for recognising new urban areas (creating new municipal bodies) has been politically frozen. Instead, urbanisation has overflowed into the Census Town category, which grew fourfold from 27 to 110 between 1981 and 2011. This fourfold increase is the spatial fingerprint of migration-driven peri-urban expansion that the formal governance system has refused to acknowledge.

The practical consequences of this administrative lag are severe. Census Towns governed by Gram Panchayats lack the budgetary resources, legal mandate, or institutional capacity to provide urban infrastructure. The largest Census Towns are not small villages: Kirari Suleman Nagar in North West Delhi had a 2011 population of 283,211; Karawal Nagar in North East Delhi had 224,281; Nangloi Jat in West Delhi had 205,596. These are substantial cities by any measure, but they receive rural governance in what is functionally- and overwhelmingly migrant-populated- urban territory. Their residents experience the infrastructure deficit of rural administration in settlements that demand urban services.

The Lal Dora Paradox: Hazardous Housing as Structural Necessity

No spatial phenomenon more vividly embodies the contradictions of Delhi's migration-driven urbanisation than the Lal Dora urban village system. The term 'Lal Dora' (literally 'red thread') derives from colonial land survey practice that marked village settlement cores on cadastral maps, separating the habitation area

from surrounding agricultural land. When Delhi's post-independence urbanisation progressively consumed those agricultural lands, most aggressively through DDA acquisition from the 1960s onwards, the Lal Dora areas were preserved as regulatory islands exempt from standard building bylaws, structural safety regulations, and municipal zoning rules.

This exemption, formalised in 1957 and clarified in 1963, was nominally intended to preserve traditional village autonomy. Its practical effect was to create categories of urban land on which construction could proceed without any regulatory oversight whatsoever- no building permits, no structural safety audits, no setback requirements, no height restrictions, no requirements for utility connections. As housing demand from the migrant influx escalated and formal housing became permanently inaccessible to low-income workers, the original landowners of Lal Dora villages recognised the extraordinary economic opportunity that this regulatory exemption created. By constructing multi-storey buildings on every available square metre- sometimes reaching five, six, or seven storeys on foundations designed for single-storey village structures- they created rental income streams that vastly exceeded what agriculture could provide.

Delhi's Revenue Department currently recognises 357 Lal Dora villages, of which 309 have been formally declared urban. Villages including Munirka, Shahpur Jat, Lado Sarai, Khirkee, Sanjay Colony, and Hauz Rani house hundreds of thousands of migrants, students, and low-income workers in conditions of extreme density and frequently precarious structural integrity. Building collapses and fire incidents in several of these villages have produced fatalities that are not aberrations but predictable consequences of decades of unregulated construction on inadequate foundations. The Lal Dora system is not a planning failure in the conventional sense of an inadvertent oversight; it is a structural arrangement that serves the interests of original landowners, informal developers, and the formal economy's need for cheap proximate housing for its service workforce, while imposing the physical hazards of its construction standards on the migrant residents who have no alternative.

The analytical significance of the Lal Dora phenomenon extends beyond its immediate hazards. It exposes the fundamental paradox at the heart of Delhi's urban political economy: the city formally plans as if migrants do not need to be housed within it, yet structurally depends on informal spatial mechanisms that are only possible because formal regulation has been withheld. The Lal Dora exemption system is, in this sense, not the absence of governance but a particular form of governance- selective, deliberately ambiguous, and ultimately serving the interests of those with the power to shape regulatory outcomes.

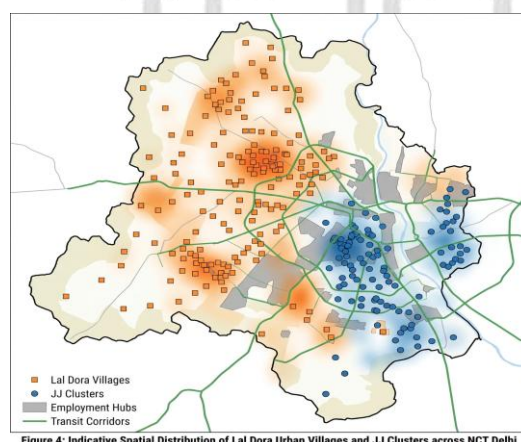


Figure 4: Indicative Spatial Distribution of Lal Dora Urban Villages and JJ Clusters across NCT Delhi

Figure 4: Indicative Spatial Distribution of Lal Dora Urban Villages and JJ Clusters across NCT Delhi. Cartographic representation identifying the structural nexus between informal residential regimes, employment hubs, and metropolitan infrastructure.

Labour Market Absorption: The Permanence of Informality

The most direct socio-economic impact of sustained in-migration is on Delhi's labour market structure. The continuous large-scale influx of predominantly young, male, limited-formally-educated workers has fundamentally shaped the city's employment system in ways that challenge conventional theories of urban economic development. The critical empirical finding, confirmed by multiple rounds of NSSO and Periodic Labour Force Survey data, is that the majority of migrant workers in Delhi remain in informal employment regardless of their duration of urban residence. Informality is not a transitional condition in Delhi; it is the permanent structural destination.

Labour Market Segment	Est. Share of Workforce	Dominant Migrant Occupations	Social Security Coverage
Formal Organised Sector	~25–30%	Government, IT/ITES, formal services, registered manufacturing	Comprehensive
Urban Informal Sector	~55–65%	Construction, domestic work, street vending, transport, informal manufacturing	None / Minimal
Self-Employment / Petty Trade	~10–15%	Small retail, food vending, repair services, artisanal work	None
Open Unemployment	~5–7%	—	None

Table 3. Labour Market Segmentation in NCT Delhi. Presents the structural distribution of employment across formal, informal, and self-employed sectors, with dominant migrant occupational niches and social security coverage indicators. Sources: PLFS 2022–23; Census of India 2011 Economic Tables; NIUA demographic synthesis.

Classical Human Capital Theory generates a clear and testable prediction: migrants will initially accept lower wages in informal employment but will progressively acquire skills, credentials, and formal-sector connections, eventually transitioning into organised employment. The evidence from Delhi unambiguously refutes this prediction for the structural majority of the migrant workforce. The barriers to formal-sector entry are not primarily informational deficits that experience and skill accumulation can overcome; they are structural exclusions maintained by credential-based screening, caste network gatekeeping, and the structural interest of formal-sector employers in maintaining a surplus of cheap, flexible, informal labour supply. A construction worker from Bihar who has lived in Delhi for fifteen years has not failed to accumulate human capital; he has encountered a labour market that is designed- through informal subcontracting systems, the absence of formal employment contracts, and the non-enforcement of minimum wage legislation in informal settings- to permanently exclude the majority of migrant workers from formal-sector employment.

The wage consequences of this structural informality are significant. Informal sector wages in Delhi are typically between one-quarter and one-half of formal sector median wages, yet the city's overall productivity—reflected in its per capita GSDP of approximately ₹5,31,610 (roughly 2.5 times the national average as of 2025–26 estimates), is supported in part by informal workers whose wages bear no proportionate relationship to the value they generate. The informal wage structure functions as a subsidy: domestic workers, construction teams, street food vendors, and delivery riders provide services at prices that would be unsustainable if labour costs reflected formal wages. The beneficiaries are Delhi's formal economy, higher-income consumers, and the city's image as a productive global metropolis. The costs, in the form of insufficient incomes, absent social protection, precarious housing, and intergenerational reproduction of informality, are borne by the migrant workforce and their families.

Infrastructure Overload and Environmental Degradation

The convergence of migration-driven population growth, spatial informality, and governance incapacity has produced infrastructure deficits across NCT Delhi that are simultaneously well-documented and structurally resistant to correction. Transport infrastructure illustrates the dilemma with particular clarity: Delhi has invested substantially in road expansion and, from 2002 onwards, the Delhi Metro system—yet the registered vehicle fleet stands at approximately 8.76 million as of 2025–26 estimates, and transit provision remains concentrated in the formal planned core, leaving peripheral informal settlements, precisely where migrant workers are concentrated, with limited accessibility. The informal transport modes that serve these settlements—shared autorickshaws, e-rickshaws, informal minibuses—operate in regulatory grey zones that leave passengers with minimal safety protections and service quality guarantees.

The environmental consequences of migration-driven urbanisation are among the most extensively documented aspects of Delhi's crisis. The city's air quality is among the worst of any major urban centre globally, with annual PM_{2.5} concentrations routinely exceeding WHO guidelines by very large multiples. While attribution of air quality outcomes to migration per se is complex, the causal pathways are clear: population growth drives vehicle fleet expansion; informal settlement expansion destroys the vegetative cover—agricultural land, the Aravalli Ridge—that provides atmospheric filtering; and the informal industrial and waste-burning activities concentrated in unregulated settlements make disproportionate pollution contributions. The distribution of environmental harm is not random: it falls most heavily on the informal peripheral settlements where migrant workers are concentrated, and on the populations least able to buffer its health consequences through medical care or residential mobility.

Water scarcity represents an equally severe and less publicly visible dimension of infrastructure stress. Delhi's per capita water supply falls significantly below urban planning norms, and the shortfall is systematically unequal: planned colonies with Delhi Jal Board piped connections receive far more per capita than informal settlements dependent on tanker water, borewells, or contaminated local sources. The depletion of Delhi's groundwater — a consequence of the combined pressure of population growth, inadequate recharge infrastructure, and the paving-over of recharge areas by built-up expansion—represents a long-term water security crisis whose severity will intensify with each additional million residents.

Governance Fragmentation and the Limits of Master Planning

Delhi's formal urban planning system has operated since the Delhi Development Act of 1957 and the first Master Plan of 1962. Evaluated against its own stated objectives, the record of this system must be characterised as a history of systematic inadequacy, not primarily through the incompetence of individual planners but through

the structural misalignment between the planning system's design assumptions and the demographic and economic realities it was supposed to manage.

The most fundamental design flaw has been the persistent underestimation of migration-driven population growth, generating housing and infrastructure targets that were obsolete before implementation began. MPD 1962 projected a 1981 population of approximately 5.3 million against an actual of 6.2 million; MPD 2001 projected a 2001 population of approximately 12.8 million against an actual 13.85 million. These are not minor calibration errors; they reflect a planning philosophy that treats migration as an exogenous disturbance to be minimised rather than a structural driver to be planned for. The formal DDA planned housing delivery has consistently fallen short of stated targets by margins that are not incidental but structurally determined: the DDA's land acquisition and construction model cannot produce housing at the prices that informal sector workers can afford, ensuring that planned supply never reaches the majority of migrant households.

Beyond this underestimation, Delhi's governance fragmentation compounds planning failures at every turn. The city is simultaneously governed by the elected Government of NCT of Delhi (with limited autonomy under Article 239AA of the Indian Constitution), the centrally administered Delhi Development Authority, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, the New Delhi Municipal Council, and multiple other bodies, each with distinct mandates, budgetary structures, and political contexts. Beyond the NCT boundary, the National Capital Region Planning Board coordinates development across a metropolitan region spanning portions of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan, but with advisory rather than binding authority. The result is a governance architecture that almost structurally cannot produce the integrated, metropolitan-scale responses that migration-driven urbanisation requires.

The Draft Master Plan for Delhi 2041 represents the most ambitious planning document in Delhi's history, incorporating the lessons of previous failures through commitments to in-situ slum rehabilitation, Transit-Oriented Development, inclusive zoning, and green infrastructure. Its philosophical advances are genuine. But its structural limitations are also fundamental: it cannot address the macro-structural drivers of migration from sending regions, it depends on public-private partnership mechanisms whose track record in delivering genuinely affordable housing is mixed, and it operates within the same institutional fragmentation that has constrained all previous planning efforts. The critical assessment of MPD-2041 is not that its ambitions are misplaced but that its aspirations require a governance architecture and financial commitment that the plan itself cannot create.

Policy Implications

The analysis developed in the preceding sections generates policy implications that operate across multiple scales and domains. The central policy insight is that the challenges of migration-driven urbanisation in Delhi cannot be adequately addressed by metropolitan-scale planning alone: the structural drivers of migration are produced at the regional scale of uneven development, and effective responses require action simultaneously at the city, metropolitan, and regional levels.

Regional Development as Urban Policy

The per capita income differential between Delhi and Bihar, approximately eightfold, is the foundational structural driver of migration flows into the city. No urban planning intervention, however sophisticated, can substantially alter this dynamic from within Delhi. A genuine response requires sustained public investment in the economic development of the principal sending states: agricultural value chain development, rural non-farm employment generation, secondary city economic activation (Lucknow, Patna, and Varanasi as viable alternatives to Delhi), and the development of educational and health infrastructure that currently draws individuals to the

capital by default. This investment is not in competition with urban development; it is its structural precondition for sustainability.

The National Capital Region Planning Board exists precisely to provide the regional coordination that no metropolitan authority can deliver unilaterally. Strengthening the NCRPB with genuine binding authority over land use, housing standards, and regional infrastructure investment, rather than the advisory role it currently plays, would provide a governance architecture better matched to the metropolitan-scale problems that migration-driven urbanisation produces.

Inclusive Housing and Mandatory Affordability

Delhi requires a genuine public rental housing programme for low-income workers, distinct from the market-assisted rehabilitation models that dominate current policy. The evidence clearly establishes that market mechanisms cannot deliver affordable housing at the scale required. A programme of public rental housing, concentrated near informal sector employment zones and transit infrastructure, and calibrated to informal sector wages rather than formal-market costs, would begin to address the structural housing deficit that underlies both the Lal Dora crisis and the JJ cluster situation. All Transit-Oriented Development projects should incorporate mandatory inclusionary zoning requirements, with a minimum of 25 to 30 per cent of residential floor area reserved for genuinely affordable units- a requirement with real teeth, not the token provisions that current frameworks permit developers to discharge through minimal contributions.

The 357 Lal Dora urban villages require a phased structural safety audit and rehabilitation programme, implemented with genuine community participation and firm legal commitments against involuntary displacement. The 1957 blanket regulatory exemption should be replaced by a nuanced graduated regulation system that distinguishes structurally safe from critically hazardous buildings and provides a clear pathway for remediation with public financing where residents lack the means to self-finance. The urban notification of the 48 villages proposed in early 2026 should be accompanied by dedicated capital grants for infrastructure provision- without which notification alone changes nothing.

Labour Market and Social Protection

The permanent informality of Delhi's migrant workforce requires targeted social protection reforms rather than the ambitious but unrealistic goal of comprehensive labour formalisation. Extending social security to informal sector workers- through universal health insurance accessible to informal workers, contributory pension schemes with registration requirements calibrated to informal sector realities, and occupational accident insurance- would reduce vulnerability to income shocks without requiring the politically difficult transformation of employment contracts. The construction industry, as the single largest employer of migrant labour, should be a specific priority: mandatory registration of construction workers, statutory accident insurance, and genuine enforcement of the existing Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Cess provisions would materially improve conditions for the hundreds of thousands of workers employed in this sector.

Metropolitan Governance Reform

The persistent jurisdictional conflict between the elected Government of NCT of Delhi and the centrally administered Delhi Development Authority, a conflict whose implications for urban governance extend far beyond any single policy domain, must be resolved in favour of democratic accountability. The case for a genuinely integrated metropolitan authority with elected representation, statutory powers over land use and infrastructure across the functional urban region, and binding coordination authority over major planning bodies is both analytically compelling and practically urgent. The evidence from this analysis suggests that the most consequential

constraint on Delhi's urban development is not the absence of planning ambition but the absence of the institutional architecture that would allow that ambition to be realised.

Conclusion

This article has argued that internal migration is the structural architect of contemporary Delhi- not a variable operating alongside or parallel to urbanisation but the primary engine driving the demographic, spatial, economic, and governance dynamics that define the city. The evidence assembled across demographic decomposition, spatial analysis, labour market examination, and governance critique converges on a single conclusion: Delhi is a city that cannot function without its migrants yet has never adequately planned for them, producing the paradox that Kundu identifies as exclusionary urbanisation and that this analysis traces through its specific spatial expressions in the Lal Dora village system, the Census Town proliferation, and the structural permanence of informal sector employment.

Three principal findings merit restatement. Migration now contributes approximately 74 per cent of Delhi's annual population growth, having surpassed natural increase as the primary demographic driver — a structural tipping point confirmed by the Economic Survey of Delhi 2022–23. The built-up area of NCT Delhi expanded from approximately 31 per cent of total territory in 1990 to over 73 per cent by 2020, driven overwhelmingly by informal construction rather than DDA planned delivery, with Census Towns growing fourfold from 27 to 110 between 1981 and 2011 as the administrative expression of this informally urbanising peri-urban frontier. And the structural majority of migrant workers remain in permanent informal employment regardless of duration of urban residence, directly refuting human capital assimilation models and confirming the informal sector as the permanent rather than transitional structural destination for Delhi's migrant workforce.

The theoretical implications of these findings are significant. The three-sector Harris-Todaro model, incorporating the urban informal sector as a permanent structural destination, explains the labour market dynamics with considerably more accuracy than either the original two-sector formulation or standard push-pull frameworks. Kundu's exclusionary urbanisation paradigm, combined with the spatial dualism framework developed here, explains the spatial consequences: a planned core that serves the formal economy paired with an informal periphery that houses the informal workforce, both essential, neither comprehensible without the other. And the analysis confirms that the structural drivers of these dynamics are generated at the regional scale of uneven development, beyond the reach of metropolitan governance alone.

The limitations of this analysis are genuine. The absence of Census 2021 data requires reliance on projections that carry increasing uncertainty with distance from the 2011 benchmark. The reliance on aggregated secondary data means that migrant perspectives and lived experiences are structurally absent. The policy analysis, however critical and evidence-grounded, does not incorporate the perspectives of planners and administrators who navigate the daily institutional realities that document analysis cannot fully capture.

Future research should address these gaps through ethnographic fieldwork with migrant communities in Lal Dora villages and Census Towns; analysis of the forthcoming census data when available; mobile phone and transport data analysis to capture the temporal dynamics of circular migration that census methods cannot measure; and longitudinal case studies tracking the implementation of MPD-2041's rehabilitation ambitions against the structural constraints that the present analysis identifies.

Delhi's migrants have built the capital of India. They have erected its towers, driven its economy, staffed its hospitals, and sustained its daily metabolism. They have done so largely without the protections, benefits, and spatial rights that the formal economy extends to those born into more advantaged circumstances. The structural

conditions that produce this situation are not accidental; they are the product of specific governance choices that can, in principle, be remade. The case for making them differently- for a Delhi that is simultaneously honest about its dependence on migrant labour and equitable in its treatment of that labour- rests ultimately not on theoretical elegance but on a straightforward demand for justice.

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