The stark inequality within Indian cities

Dalits are segregated, and have unequal access to public goods in India's biggest cities

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B.R. Ambedkar's view continues to influence the dominant narrative on caste in India. Photo: Reuters

Calling the Indian village a 'den of iniquity', the founding father of India's constitution, B.R. Ambedkar, exhorted Dalits to migrate from villages to cities to escape the shackles of caste. Ambedkar's view continues to influence the dominant narrative on caste in India.

In the popular imagination, caste is the key marker of identity only in villages. In contrast, cities are often seen as sites of emancipation, where even the lowest in the caste ladder has better access to public goods, and greater

opportunities in life. Much of this is been based on anecdotal evidence, and has rarely been backed by empirical research.

An **analysis** of the latest ward level census data for the 10 most populous cities in India shows that we may need to rethink how we view cities. Most of these cities display a high level of residential segregation, with scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) concentrated in a few areas of the city. Further, access to public goods such as tap water is much lower in these places.

Focussing on wards with an unusually high proportion of SC/STs relative to the city (outlier Census wards), and analysing the level of access to in-house water, a basic public good, and in-house toilets, a basic private good, a stark picture emerges, as the chart below shows.

In the 10 cities analyzed, these "extreme" wards have at least twice the proportion of SC/STs compared to the city average. Moreover, in all cities barring Delhi, these "extreme" wards do worse in terms of household access to in-house water and in-house toilets.

INEQUALITIES IN CITIES

City	Total number of census wards	Number of outlier census wards	Proportion of SC/STs out of total in these census wards (%)	SC/ST Proportion (%)		Househo...water s...
				Outlier census wards	Total	Outlier census wards
Delhi	272	13	13.8	52.1	16.6	9.3
Mumbai	97	4	9.8	19.9	7.4	22.4
Bangalore	198	13	14.2	35.6	13.2	23.5
Hyderabad	150	4	5.6	23.1	8.4	12.8
Ahmedabad	57	4	16.1	36.5	11.9	10.7
Chennai	155	10	20.2	53.7	17	53
Kolkata	141	12	40.6	19.5	5.6	43.2
Surat	102	6	3.8	27.5	5.3	40
Pune	144	4	7.6	47.4	14.5	14.8
Jaipur	77	3	11.1	46.9	16.7	33.6

Note: Every city is divided into wards in the census. The analysis uses the ward level database a... which contains information on population characteristics.

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Kolkata merits special mention. Out of a total of 141 wards in the city, with SC/STs making up 5.6% of the total population, it is only in 12 of these wards that more than 40% of the city's SC/ST population resides in. These wards do significantly worse than average in terms of household access to in-house water, with 43% of households of these wards without water supply in their homes, as compared to 27% of households overall in the city. Even a naïve study of the politics of the city would lead one to expect a different outcome. This finding merits a deeper study of the dynamics at play in the city.

Urban sociologist Robert E. Park noted in 1926 that social relations are inevitably correlated with spatial relations. His insight has driven almost all studies of residential segregation. While there are many studies on segregation of the black community in the US, comparable studies for Dalits and tribals in India are rarer.

As India urbanises, we need to understand that Indian cities are not just spaces for buildings, streets and offices. The city is a space for dispute, citizenship and politics. Cities can offer residents an opportunity to take part in the resources of the city or can restrict the same. The choices that we make would determine whether we would end up with a more inclusive city, as Ambedkar envisioned, or an exclusive, unequal city.

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