

INDIA URBANISING



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THE BIG QUESTION

How can India plan for the full rural-urban continuum?

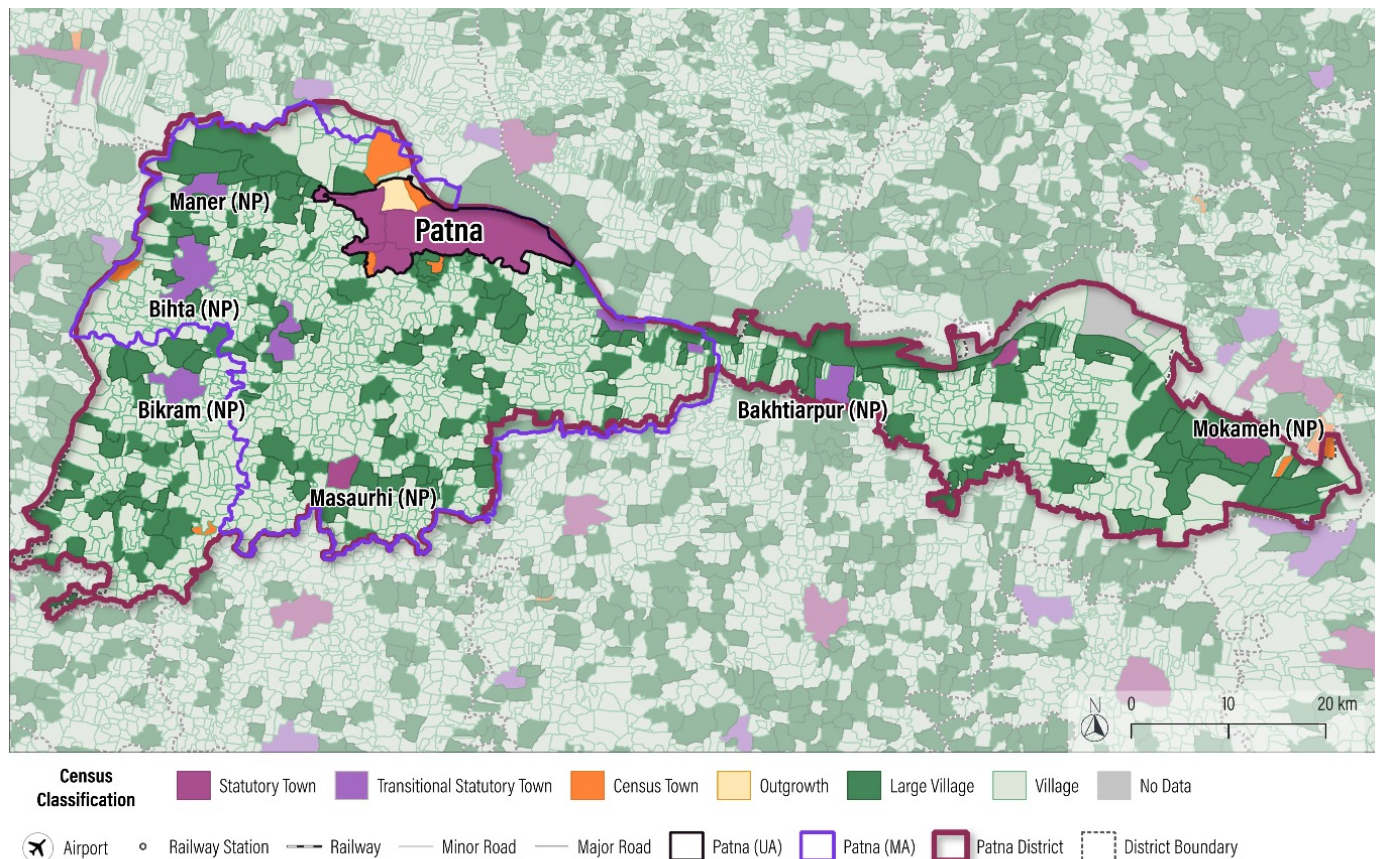
India's urban future is taking shape across a vast and increasingly interconnected landscape of small towns, census towns, peri-urban areas, city-regions, villages and metropolitan centres. Commuting patterns, employment clusters, housing and land markets, transport networks, infrastructure systems, and natural ecosystems increasingly extend across the administrative boundaries separating "rural" from "urban".

This creates an opportunity to plan more deliberately. Regional and spatial planning can help integrate development of urbanising areas alongside larger cities and coordinate systems shared across jurisdictions, while municipal and local plans respond to the distinct needs of individual settlements.

This edition of the **Urbanisation Dispatch** explores how India can enable a more connected, resilient, and efficient system to manage the full rural-urban continuum, one that aligns land use, livelihoods, mobility, infrastructure, services, and environmental resilience.

Patna: Where does the city really end?

Patna Metropolitan area census town classification 2011



The spatial extent of Patna's urban agglomeration and metropolitan area brings together several forms of settlement and governance, including statutory towns, census towns, outgrowths, transitional urban areas, and large villages.

These overlapping geographies illustrate an important planning challenge: the area through which people travel, work, access services, and participate in the economy may extend well beyond the limits of any one municipality.

THE DATA STORY

52%

of Statutory
Towns Lack
Master Plans

76%

of Census
Towns Lack
Master Plans

Planning coverage varies sharply across India's urban system.

More than half of India's statutory towns and three-quarters of its census towns are not yet covered by master plans. This leaves many settlements navigating land use change, rising infrastructure demand, and economic transition without an up-to-date statutory spatial framework.

But extending conventional master/local plans to every emerging settlement is not enough. Because most new growth occurs in peri urban areas beyond municipal boundaries, city master plans—whose legal jurisdiction stops at the municipal edge—cannot by themselves guide or regulate this expansion. Statutory regional plans are therefore essential to integrate outward-expanding areas with core cities, prepare for the urbanisation of new locations, and ensure that they are built on a foundation of equitable public infrastructure and services.

The question is not only whether a plan exists, but whether planning instruments connect across scales and guide real investment decisions.



Planning for India's Rural-Urban Continuum

By Dr. O. P. Agarwal

India aspires to become a \$30 trillion economy, and its cities – both big and small – will be the engines of this transition. Cities will also be central to achieving India's climate commitments, as majority of the GHG emissions emanate from urban centres. At the same time, leveraging the country's demographic dividend will require the creation of millions of new jobs, many of which will be concentrated in cities and surrounding regions.

With much of India's future economic growth expected to come from manufacturing and services, achieving these interconnected ambitions will require India's planning and governance systems to move beyond the restrictive rural-urban binary and plan deliberately for the full rural-urban continuum.

Settlements do not transform abruptly from rural to urban; they evolve along a continuum, gradually acquiring urban characteristics as they grow. The rigid classification of places as either rural or urban does not reflect the ground reality and is increasingly incompatible with contemporary development planning philosophy.

Economic activities do not adhere to the administrative boundaries of cities. Industries, workers, housing and infrastructure increasingly extend into urban peripheries and surrounding rural areas. Economic development plans must, therefore, evolve to recognise these strong interlinkages between urban and rural.

The future of India's cities cannot be planned through the lens of administrative boundaries or conventional land use plans. Focus must now shift from managing urban land use to integrating it with regional economic development.

Small cities will be particularly important to India's economic transition. They can support the expansion of the manufacturing sector by providing critical resources such as land, which is becoming increasingly scarce and contested in bigger cities. This requires a fundamentally different approach to urban planning.

However, many of India's urban programmes continue to treat rural and urban areas as separate systems and concentrate their attention and resources on the big cities. This approach risks overlooking the places where much of India's future economic transformation will occur.

India must reorient planning and investment towards connected regions rather than isolated jurisdictions. Recognising the rural-urban continuum, strengthening smaller cities and aligning land use planning with regional economic development will be essential to translating the country's national economic ambition into inclusive and sustainable growth.

“The future of India's cities cannot be planned through the lens of administrative boundaries or conventional land use plans. Focus must now shift from managing urban land use to integrating it with regional economic development.”

URBANISATION PULSE

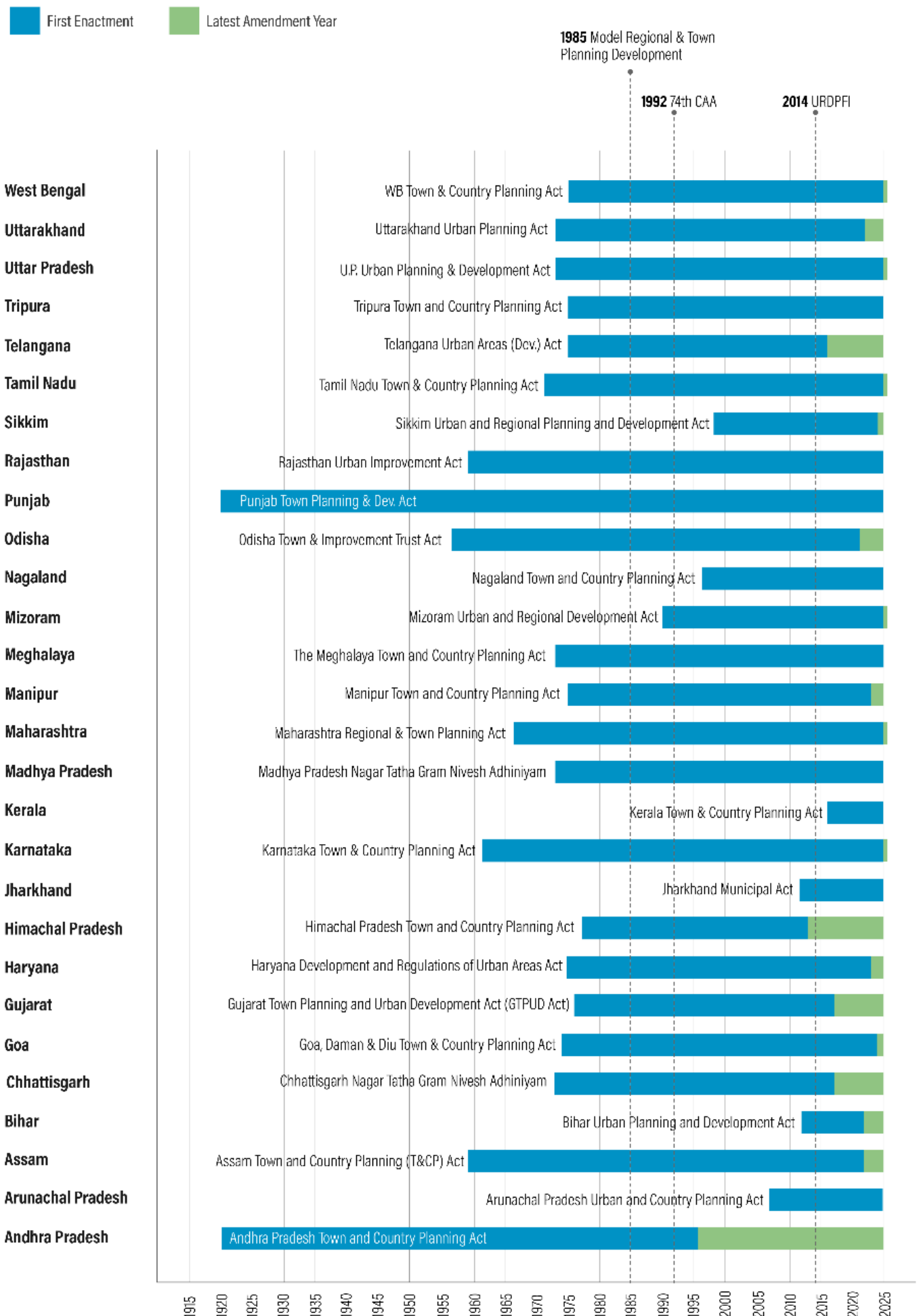
Are state planning laws keeping pace with India's evolving urban landscape?

Many state town and country planning laws were developed with reference to the Model Regional and Town Planning and Development Law, 1985. This model framework predates the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments and many of the spatial, economic, environmental, and technological shifts now shaping urban India.

The chart below shows when state planning laws were enacted or most recently revised. While several states have updated their legislation, others continue to rely on frameworks that predate key decentralisation reforms and contemporary patterns of metropolitan, peri-urban, and regional growth.

Updating these laws offers states an opportunity to create clearer links among regional, municipal, local-area, and village spatial plans; define institutional responsibilities; strengthen public participation and accountability; and connect statutory planning more closely with infrastructure investment and implementation.

Indian States Planning acts and last revision status

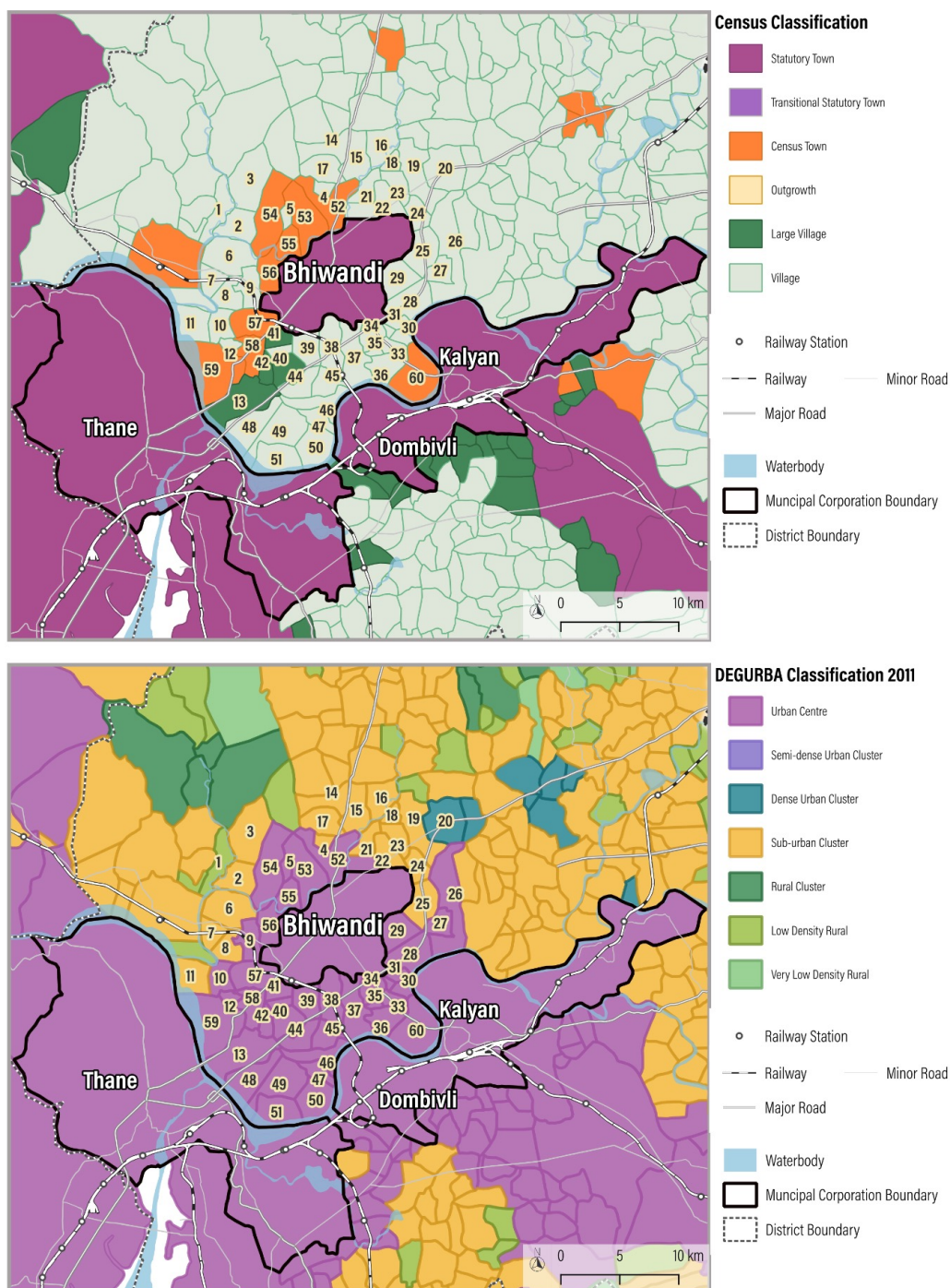


URBANISATION MAPPED

The Bhiwandi Surrounding Notified Area (BSNA) was established in 2007 by the Maharashtra government to manage the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation occurring in the villages surrounding Bhiwandi within the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. These villages experienced significant growth in manufacturing, warehousing, and other non-agricultural sectors, driven by their proximity to major urban centres such as Mumbai, Kalyan, and Thane, as well as strong transport links via the Mumbai-Agra National Highway and state highways. However, most of these peri-urban areas continue to remain under rural administration even as 42 of the 60 villages classify as urban centres or dense urban clusters as per DEGURBA analysis. The region continues to face severe deficits in social and physical infrastructure, including unreliable water supply, inadequate sanitation, and poor solid waste management. Designating peri-urban areas under regional planning authorities is, therefore, not enough unless accompanied with timely municipalisation.

Of the 60 peri-urban settlements that are under rural administration around Bhiwandi Municipal Corporation, 70 percent of the settlements are urban centers or dense urban clusters as per DEGURBA analysis.

Where rural meets urban: Mapping Bhiwandi's peri-urban evolution



Disclaimer: This map is for illustrative purpose and does not imply the expression of any opinion on the part of WRI India, concerning the legal status of any country or territory or concerning the delimitation of frontiers or boundaries.

WHAT INDIA NEEDS

Connected Plans, Institutions and Investment

1. Recognise

Map functional growth, settlement transitions, infrastructure networks, commuting patterns, and ecological systems.

2. Coordinate

Connect regional, municipal, local-area, village, mobility, infrastructure, and environmental plans.

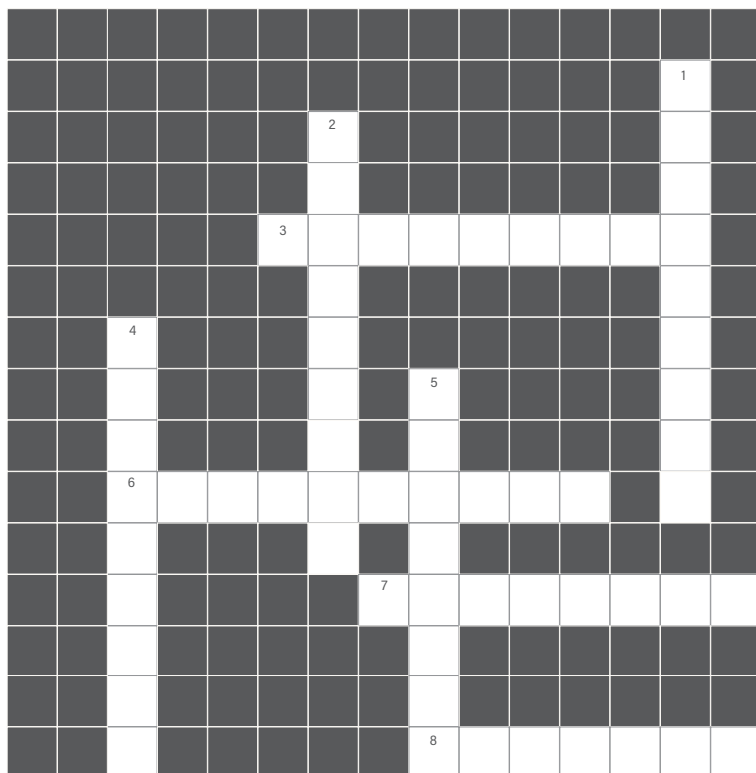
3. Deliver

Align institutions, finance, investment, services, implementation, and accountability.

Planning for the rural-urban continuum requires more than extending municipal boundaries. India needs a connected planning architecture that links regional strategies with city, local-area, and village plans. This will require updating planning laws, setting clearer institutional roles, sharing data, regular plan reviews and updates, and closer alignment between statutory plans, investment and implementation. National frameworks can establish common principles and enable coordination, while states determine the planning institutions, legal pathways, and implementation models best suited to their contexts.

URBANISATION DECODED

This month's crossword tests the vocabulary of India's changing urban system.



PS: Answers and winners announced in the next dispatch.

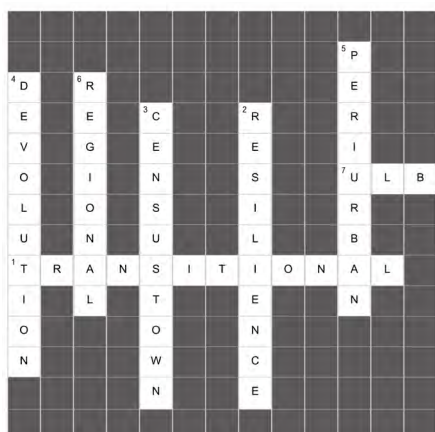
Across

3. Natural system that should guide water and flood planning across boundaries.
6. An area linked by economic, social, and mobility interactions.
7. A transport-linked growth axis that can reshape settlement patterns.
8. What spatial planning coordinates across housing, jobs, transport, and services.

Down

1. The connected spectrum of settlements between rural and urban.
2. A legally recognised plan that guides land use and investment.
4. The elected rural local body that may govern an urbanising settlement.
5. The planning scale that connects cities, towns, villages, and peripheries.

Last month's Urbanisation Decoded



Across

1. What kind of settlement sits between rural and urban governance, but lacks uniform criteria under Article 243Q?
7. Which local government institution should be empowered to plan, finance, and deliver urban services?

Down

2. What must urban policy build so settlements can withstand heat, floods, and other climate shocks?
3. Which settlement is counted as urban by Census criteria but may still lack municipal governance?
4. What reform transfers powers, functions, and finances to local governments?
5. What do we call the fast-growing zone just beyond formal city boundaries?
6. What planning scale is needed to manage growth across cities, towns, villages, and peripheries?

LOOKING AHEAD

In the next edition: How can economic and urbanisation pathways be better aligned for a more resilient and equitable future?

Learn more

