

The latest Census data, which shows urban India added more people (90.99 million) than rural India did (90.47 million) in the last decade, simply confirms the shape of things to come. From a little over a fourth in 1991, a third of Indians now live in cities, and this is projected to rise to 40% by 2030. Given that urban incomes are higher—an NCAER survey showed, in 2004-05, average incomes for SC households were R37,615 per annum in rural areas versus R85,000 in big towns—and as that's where the jobs are getting created, it is best people migrate to the cities.

But before you conclude that's a winner all around, it's instructive to read the Isha Ahluwalia-chaired expert committee on this. The committee recommended spending on cities rise from 1.6% of GDP today to 2.1% over two decades, but the money is the least of the issues—cities have enough land that can be monetised to pay for this development. The real issue today is the complete lack of civic amenities—4,861 out of 5,161 cities don't even have a partial sewerage network, less than a fifth of the road network has storm drains ... So unless the march to urban India is matched with commensurate investment in facilities, we're really talking of developing several more Dharavis, or even worse.

In a curious way, this brings us to the Mumbai blasts last week—politicians with their eyes on the rural vote (two-thirds of India lives here) are just not doing enough to empower cities; so much so that virtually none of the decisions taken after 26/11 to make Mumbai safer got implemented, including one to buy just 5,000 CCTVs. Cities need elected mayors with clearly defined powers if they are to develop well—one chart in the Ahluwalia report shows three bodies are in charge of planning and land development in Bangalore, another three for city roads and about two each for water supply and sewerage. Things will obviously improve as urban India's population rises and the votes shift. It'll probably be too late by then.