

Classifying Urban Informality: A Multi-Dimensional Typology of Bustee Settlements and Poverty Geographies in Kolkata

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Abstract

Informal settlements, previously referred to as bustees, account for almost one-third of the total population of Kolkata, thus serving as a prime example of the connection between poverty and spatial exclusion as emphasized by both SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Current classification systems of such settlements remain incomplete, depending exclusively on their legal status while ignoring the temporal, spatial, structural, and socio-economic complexity associated with urban poverty in Kolkata. This paper presents a thorough multi-axial classification of informal settlements in Kolkata using archival research, records of the municipal corporation of the city, and case studies of informal settlements in the city itself. Four classificatory axes are used in this regard: the temporal dimension (from the colonial period bustees, pre-1947, to post-Partition refugees' settlements, post-1971 Bangladesh influx and post-1990 economic growth), the spatial dimension (core-city, canal, railway track, and peri-urban settlements); the physical dimension (pucca, semi-pucca, and kutch settlement typologies based on the Census of India data); and the occupational dimension.

The research is based upon different types of Kolkata slums, facilitating comparison between vulnerabilities of the settlements, lack of services, and their permanence. Using the Kolkata Municipal Corporation ward level data (3,079 notified slums in 144 wards), the paper highlights the spatial distribution and clustering of informality and poverty within the various slums of the city. In doing so, this paper attempts to provide planners and policymakers with an analytical tool for classifying informal settlements, which considers both historical and spatial aspects together with physical considerations in one single framework.

Index Terms

Informal settlements, Bustee, Urban poverty, Kolkata, Sustainable Development Goals, Settlement classification