



Mains Practice Question

Q. “India’s cities are the drivers of economic growth with significant production and consumption, however, this sunrise story is threatened by unsustainable urban development in the era of climate change”. Comment. (250 Words)

03 Mar, 2022 GS Paper 1 Geography

Approach

- Explain how the cities are drivers of economic growth.
- Discuss how the cities are threatened by the unsustainable urban development due to climate change.
- Suggest some steps as a way forward.

Introduction

The World Economic Forum in Davos brings with it a surge of narrative about India’s economy, often invoking the country’s rising GDP but tending to ignore the epicentres of economic growth – cities.

While in India just 10 percent of the population is housed in the 50 most populous cities, and close to 68 percent of the population lives in rural areas. The 10 largest commercial cities in India[1] account for 55 percent of GDP, with the top 4 cities accounting for a quarter of the country’s output.

Body

Cities are threatened by the unsustainable urban development

- **Disaster Susceptibility of India:** According to the [National Disaster Management Authority](#), around 12% of the total land in India is exposed to floods, 68% is vulnerable to droughts, landslides and avalanches, 58.6% landmass is earthquake-prone.
 - Tsunamis and cyclones are a regular phenomenon for 5,700 km of the 7,516-km long coastline.
 - Such vulnerable conditions have placed India amongst the top disaster-prone countries.
- **Issues in Planning and Local Governance:** Less than half of all cities have master plans, and even these are ruled by informality, since both influential elites and the poor encroach upon commons such as wetlands and river banks.
 - Neglect of municipal councils, lack of empowerment and failure to build capacity among municipal authorities have produced frequent urban paralysis in extreme weather.
- **Encroaching Natural Spaces:** The number of wetlands has reduced to 123 in 2018 from 644 in 1956 and the green cover is only 9%, which ideally should have been at least 33%.
 - The encroachment of important commons reflects the extreme dependence on market forces to supply affordable urban houses..
- **Inadequate Drainage Infrastructure:** Overburdened drainage, unregulated construction, no regard to the natural topography and hydro-geomorphology all make urban floods a man-made

disaster.

- Cities like Hyderabad, Mumbai rely on a century-old drainage system, covering only a small part of the core city.
 - As the city grew beyond its original limits, not much was done to address the absence of adequate drainage systems.
- **Lax Implementation:** Even with provisions of rainwater harvesting, sustainable urban drainage systems, etc, in regulatory mechanisms like the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), adoption at user end as well as enforcement agencies remains weak.

Way Forward

- **Role of Local Self Governments:** What is needed is a central role for democratically-elected local governments, to ensure greater inclusion and a sense of community.
- **Holistic Engagement:** Urban floods of large scale cannot be contained by the municipal authorities alone, without concerted and focused investments of energy and resources.
 - The Metropolitan Development Authorities, NDMA, State revenue and irrigation departments along with municipal corporations should be involved in such work together.
- **Better City Planning:** All dimensions of a city's growth, starting with affordable housing, play a central role in adapting to future climate change.
 - They can lower carbon emissions growth even during infrastructure creation if biophilic design and green materials are used.
 - Planned urbanisation can withstand disasters, the perfect example being Japan which faces earthquakes at regular intervals.
 - The India Disaster Resource Network should be institutionalised as a repository for organised information and equipment gathering.
- **Drainage Planning:** Watershed management and emergency drainage plan should be clearly enunciated in policy and law.

Conclusion

The need is to develop sound, functional metropolitan cities that can handle floods, heat waves, pollution and mass mobility to keep the engines of the economy running. Urban India would otherwise turn into a subprime investment.