

BYPASS URBANIZATION IN INDIA: THE CASE OF AHMEDABAD AND KOLKATA

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Abstract. Large-scale private real estate projects in the past few decades in vast areas of increasingly varied scales have been created that were once sparsely inhabited agricultural land and wetlands in the remote locations of these urban areas. This paper examines the reasons for India's peripheralization of real estate megaprojects. Such projects are typically constructed on agricultural land, notably paddy fields and wetlands. Developers' site selections are mostly influenced by the low cost of land and future development potential. In contrast to the disarray of existing urban spaces, "bypass urbanism" creates restricted and unique city spaces that allow more contented or high-status lifestyles. They avoid large parts of the city area as part of their daily lives, reinforcing socio-economic isolation, peripheralization, and uneven urban development. With the help of two case studies, this paper explores how peripheralization has created a restricted and exclusive space that facilitates middle-class life while bypassing and neglecting existing urban areas. This massive bypass urbanism constitutes a new quality of urban growth with far-reaching and uncountable repercussions, resulting in the creation of islands and the reshuffling of the entire metropolitan region.

Keywords: bypass urbanism, integrated townships, private urban development, peripheralization, real estate megaprojects

1. Introduction

Something unique is happening in the peripheries of large metropolitan cities in India. Large-scale real estate developments are coming onto the urban fringe in an increasing variety of scales in the past decades, often on green-field sites. Interestingly, these sites were once sparsely inhabited farming lands, wetlands, and nature

reserves in the remote places of these cities. This massive scale of alteration is quite visible in our case studies through mapping, which is not visible from the ground alone. In each of these cases, we noticed that a cluster of large-scale private development projects is coming on peripheries that bypass the central city. We validate this process as bypass urbanism under which the center-

periphery relationship is re-ordered and the creation of exclusive elite-only zones in specific locations. It is a multifaceted process consisting of territorial bypassing, circumventing legal frameworks, and socio-economic bypassing in daily life. This massive bypass urbanism constitutes a new quality of urban growth with far-reaching and uncountable repercussions, resulting in the fundamental reshuffling of the entire region.

It is standard in India, especially in the periphery of large cities such as Kolkata and Ahmedabad. Over 200 large integrated townships across India covered over 200,000 acres under various stages of approval, planning, and construction in 2007 (Joshi, 2009). According to data provided by the Center for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE), from 1996 to 2018, there were 7,129 projects in housing construction and commercial complexes in India with investments of Indian Rupees one million or more (Sood, 2021).

Privatized urbanization is not a particularly new incident in India. However, the corporate sector has a unique prospect of influencing city regions' future development through large-scale projects. Geographically these kinds of developments are constructed on urban fringes, and these ultra-modern urban environments lack regional or local context. They reproduce many aspects, like transformation in the regulation and structure of the world economy in the direction of neoliberalism and the implementation of capitalist approaches by the government, which seeks to draw overseas investments (Brenner

and Theodore, 2002). Ineffective or weak urban governance and middle-class growth are also other essential factors. Although many large private integrated townships have been built in different locations, they exhibit substantial path dependence. It seems as if an entirely new urban area is developing, overruling the urban fabric of the physical form of the existing city areas in terms of territorial system and socio-economic specialties. In this way, it is hypothesized that the entire urban area is modified through rising centralities and new communication routes resulting in the eccentricity of the city form.

This paper is outlined as follows; the opening section examines emerging literature about the peripheralization of private real estate projects in India, focusing specifically on strengthening socio-economic inequality and rising socio-spatial division. The subsequent section discusses bypass urbanism in Ahmedabad and Kolkata in India. We argue that bypass urbanism is a multi-dimensional urbanization process, and this study develops a specific understanding of its Indian context. In the last section, conclusions are drawn from these case studies to highlight emerging issues associated with peripheralization and the way forward.

2. Review of Literature

Hi-tech townships are placed in peri-urban areas on a broader scale. They are typically constructed on rural hinterlands, notably paddy fields and wetlands. Developers' site selections were influenced mainly by the potential for future market demand with low land rates rather than any other criteria. When land is converted from rural to

urban usage, land values are lower, allowing developers to make big profits. There is an enormous difference in prices before and after the project's construction as developers have the power to construct access roads themselves; accessibility is not an essential worry for them (Percival and Waley, 2012). As (Coelho *et al.*, 2020) argued, one of the critical aspects of peripheralization has always been associated with prospects for land development. The "Urban Land (Ceiling and Regulation) Act" of 1976 (ULCRA) placed a cap on individual landholding in cities. It allowed the state to expropriate surplus land for city housing for the underprivileged and other public uses.

To avoid the ULCRA's restrictions, the developers developed extensive swaths of inexpensive agricultural land outside the 5-kilometer radius around the city limit to which the act was applicable. The government then began liberalizing land regulations in 1999 and repealing the ULCRA. Although designed to encourage industrialization, this eventually assisted real estate builders in consolidating huge landholdings, frequently through unofficial contracts with peasants (Gururani, 2020).

Amusingly these private developments took place within the administrative limits of the parastatal agencies, which took on the task of providing roads and other infrastructure, which caused land prices to shoot up and developers to reap windfall profits. Cities are ever-growing and creeping into their rural hinterland. Land use is altered by creating a Master Plan from agricultural to non-agricultural land uses like residential, commercial, and Industrial, providing an opportunity for the

private developer to make a profit through their 'land banks.' The private developers buy cheap farming land from landowners at peripheral locations; hoard it for some time till the prices appreciate in the market, after which they extract a higher price from home buyers.

Neil Smith's rent gap theory represents a simple framework for interpreting spatial and temporal patterns of urban real estate megaproject development. It cuts to the state's very center, which corporate actors face during the property boom. The theory aims to explain when and why land values rise, allowing property developers and investors to make speculative investments and how the actions of these players impact the spatial development and politics of cities. Smith, 1979 argues that the rent gap is the dissimilarity between the amounts of rent the present landlord extracts and the possible ground rent that investors could obtain after rebuilding to its highest and greatest use.

Smith, 1979 prepared a study on gentrification in response to a surge in financial services and high-end service businesses in many European and American cities. Smith's gentrification theory seems to be limited applicability in the Indian case as the primary market conditions, socio-economic and political conditions, and spatial dynamics are primarily diverse. To be helpful in these settings, therefore, the rent gap concept must be de-contextualized from the European and American locations and understood simply as the gap between capitalized and ground rent. In the context of this paper, this theory explains why builders tend to buy land in fringe areas of cities, and it also

demonstrates that in the process of land-use change from agriculture to urban usage, builders make big profits through the gap between the price of cheap farming land and developed land price. Also, for-profit developers tend to profit by creating giant land banks by hoarding cheap agricultural land in potential demand locations, developing them very late.

This theory provides a helpful understanding of the opportunities and threats that the Indian central government and various state governments have faced in the past three decades. Property values in Indian cities have amplified parallel to population growth, foreign direct investment (FDI), and international commerce. Still, the timing varies because not all towns have become international business hubs concurrently. Economic growth has increased demand for high-end residential, commercial, and office development and an increased supply of finance through an influx of investment capital that inevitably seeks an outlet in property development as land and property prices rise. Murray, 2016 argues that planned new towns at the fringe should make an ideal city form with a logical order forced by qualified skill and validated by the state. These concepts emerged from modernist planning principles intended to tame and control city living and the chaotic blend of people and conditions that characterize vast urban areas.

However, the nature of these urban megaprojects has changed in recent decades. These are increasingly being constructed as gated, privatized, and lavish enclaves to reflect the ambitions

of the privileged class within neoliberalized city governance (Murray, 2016). Frequently located at the urban periphery, these projects cater to higher-income groups, excluding the lower-income ones. Urban real estate megaprojects also emerge in different parts of metropolitan regions, on the urban periphery, central cities, and occasionally in far-flung exurban areas. They occur on state-owned land, smallholder land, and reclaimed land. This spatial and temporal variation has important implications for understanding the opportunities and threats that compel state and private-sector actors to push forward with urban real estate megaproject strategies and for understanding the modalities of their policy strategies (Shatkin, 2017).

These new forms of governance include problematic land acquisition tactics typically perceived as veiled opportunistic land grabs. State actors and business developers frequently use unethical and unjust techniques to consolidate enormous areas of land, against which local players are essentially helpless and unorganized. The forced relocation of citizens residing and working on the site may be a chief cause of disagreement, leading to diverse acts of protest, argumentation, and disruption (Shatkin, 2011). Whereas megaprojects are frequently defended on the ground providing economic development, ecological protection, and much-needed housing and infrastructure facilities, there is little responsibility for fulfilling these objectives and much less for assessing long-term consequences. It is vital to recognize that the specific societal and ecological impacts, also the duties of

diverse individuals concerned in the procedure, differ significantly in the diverse background and should be distinguished.

So far, academic research has concentrated chiefly on specific growths, like infrastructure or private urban development projects. Whereas the vast streamlining effects of such projects are commonly visible and asserted, most reviews center on particular projects, termed as luxury enclaves and integrated townships imply – with the larger spatial context often ignored. The greater geographic reach of urban expansion has only recently been studied (Datta and Shabnam, 2017) to provide insights into the emergence of hitherto unseen mechanisms and sizes of peripheral alteration in Asian and African metropolitan areas. These novel city zones, dubbed fast cities to emphasize their speed of expansion, emerge at the regional scale of urbanization. Avoiding the urgent issues currently facing megacities may lead to more urban mega-clusters. Large-scale urban development projects usually benefit from convinced possible 'flexibilities' and lawful 'gray spaces' in formal structure to execute them. In contrast to the disarray of existing urban spaces, bypassing urbanism creates restricted and unique city spaces that allow more contented or high-status lifestyles (Shatkin, 2008). They evade vast parts of the city region as part of their daily lives, reinforcing issues of socio-economic segregation, peripheralization, and uneven urban development.

3. Material and Methods

To conduct this research, we applied mobile and multi-sited ethnography,

interviewed residents, and comprehensively examined scholarly literature surrounding the particular urban region for each round of field research. Comparative mapping was a critical tool for identifying emerging similarities between urban regions as we identified the key features of each urban region through mapping sessions with local experts.

Large-scale "private sector-led urban development projects" are primarily located in the peripheral locations of large metros in India. In this part, we outline where private townships have sprouted up, beginning in large cities like Kolkata, Mumbai, Delhi, Pune, and Ahmedabad but now spanning a much larger geographic area. The growth of these Private Townships demonstrates local variation, with certain styles but also variances.

4. Bypass Urbanism in Ahmedabad and Kolkata

Ahmedabad's bypass urbanism has replicated the historical contrast amid the city's western and eastern periphery (refer Fig. 1). While low-income dwellings and industrial land use dominate the eastern fringes, the western periphery is dominated by middle-class and elite housing (Mahadevia, 2013). In the beginning, to avoid ULCRA restrictions, private developers developed parcels of agricultural land outside a 5 km radius, mainly towards the western suburbs. To encourage industrialization in 1999, the Gujarat Government liberalized various land acts, including revoking the ULCRA; eventually helped the developers to frequently combine large tracts of agricultural land through unofficial agreements with peasants.

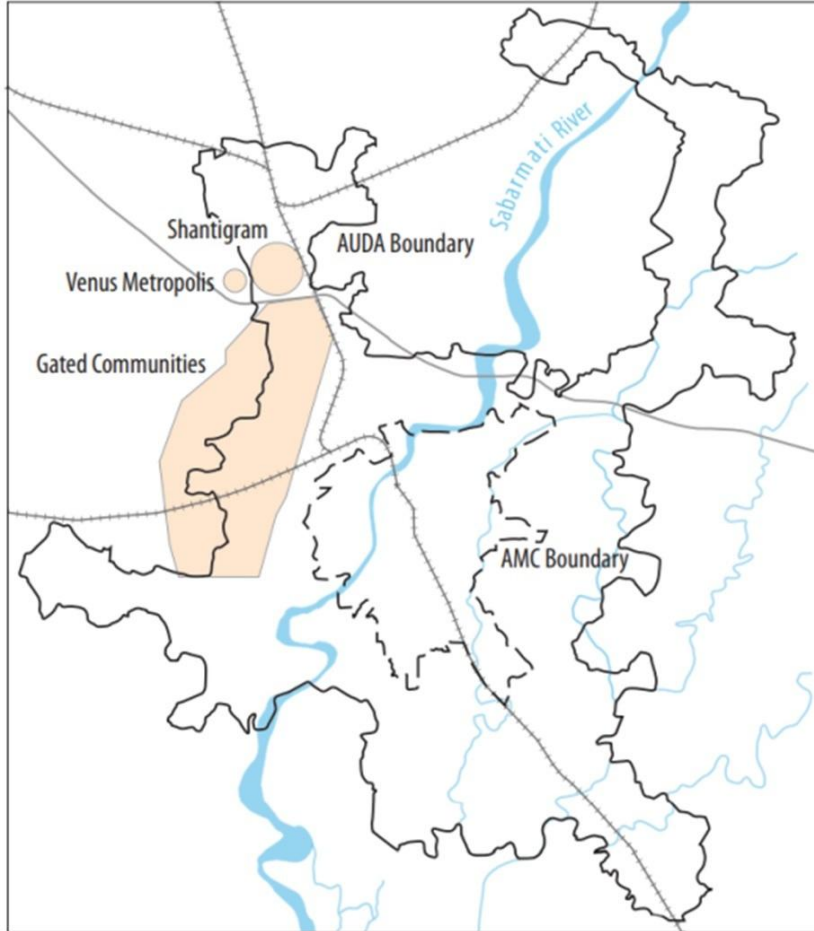


Fig. 1. Bypass urbanization around Ahmedabad (Source: Mahadevia, 2013).

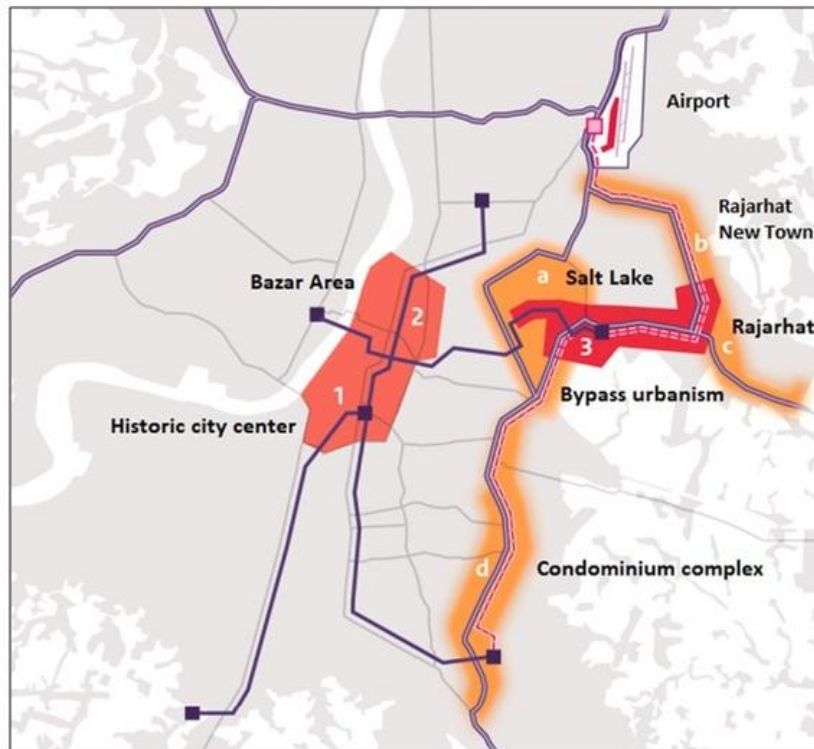


Fig. 2. Bypass urbanization around Kolkata (Source: Sawyer *et al.*, 2021).

Most of the development took place inside the Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority (AUDA) boundary, which facilitated the developers in terms of providing roads and other infrastructure, which caused land prices to shoot up and developers to reap windfall profits. The development of Sardar Patel Ring Road in 2002-06 led to a rise in property rates and further expansion on the western periphery, especially in high-end gated enclaves. The latest Master Plan of the city has proposed a 1km band of Residential Affordable Housing (RAH) zone alongside the ring road.

Ballaney and Patel (2009) studied various 'Township Policies' announced by state governments. Private developers are encouraged to buy agricultural assets in areas with opportunities for developed urban land and new townships. The government offers assistance in a variety of manners. A few assist with land purchases, while the others promise regulatory clearance, land re-zoning in statutory development plans, and "single-window" approvals. The majority of people are served by connecting to the current infrastructure. Developers are anticipated to raise private capital to invest in infrastructure. Despite many township acts enacted, significant uncertainty remains, and it seems too early to decide why this type of land transformation will play out in the long term.

The Kolkata Eastern Metropolitan Bypass Expressway is a 32-kilometer-long urban corridor that connects the International Airport in the north and Baruipur towards the south, passing

through the rapidly rising Rajarhat New Town and the modernist-planned satellite town of Salt Lake City. Hundreds of new condominium towers, office buildings, medical centers, luxury hotels, shopping centers, private schools, universities, and a science museum are developing along this corridor. Also, some comparable projects are either under development or are in the planning stages.

Bypass urbanism in Kolkata has been somewhat challenging to understand. Chakravorty, 2014 remembers that until the 1980s, the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass was only a two-lane road. Salt Lake City was developed in the 1940s to decongest Kolkata city and served as a satellite to the central city. The town was developed by reclaiming the marshy land of the East Kolkata Wetlands. Until the mid of 20th century, the urban growth in Kolkata city had been chiefly beside the Hooghly River, one of the tributaries River Ganges. The ground progressively drops to marshes, rainforests, and tidal lakes to the east, producing a significant natural reserve and an economically and environmentally active region.

The planned new towns of Kolkata, Rajarhat, and Salt Lake City were designed to "bypass the slums, poor infrastructure – city's ills" (Chakravorty, 2000). Writing on Salt Lake City, Rumbach, 2014 notes that this "bypass urbanism" of new towns looks for the creation of "new zones" of exceptionality and provides an opportunity for the urban elites where they can enjoy the metropolitan amenities and its informal labor force from a comfortably distant core city.

Rumbach, 2014 posits that there might be a significant difference when implementing plans into reality. The desired and advertised modes of segregation from existing city ills might go through notable alterations in due course of time during implementation. Some contradictory effects are created; for instance, when new towns exacerbate traffic clogging, they are thought to ease and relieve, buildings do not live up to glossy brochures, or plans are only partially executed. Amidst the economic and financial crises accompanying these urban fantasies, the entire metropolitan area is incomplete and resembles "ghost towns" rather than "new middle-class aspirations."

The political shift from an evolutionary approach focused on villages to a neoliberal urban policy was a clear impetus for bypass urbanization in Kolkata (refer to Fig. 2). This shift was shown not in the novel investment in the city core but in the peripheral areas of the city, where new urban projects were relatively easier to implement. The West Bengal government's multiple, often unplanned, endeavors to urbanize rural lands in various sections of the metropolis resulted in bypass urbanization. While some of these initiatives failed tragically, others were successful. Faced with considerable opposition in some areas, the administration focused on areas with the least resistance – the eastern wetlands. As a result, behind the state planners and individual players, a variety of plans emerged; neither do they live in enclaves of urban wealth nor on an island of technology and wealth, but the compaction of a whole new urban structure. The Eastern Metropolitan Bypass in Kolkata is a

quintessential example of a novel type of development that bypass the vast quarters of the city's vibrant political, cultural, and everyday life.

4.1. Public-private coalitions

Although bypass urbanism is an outcome of practical needs, it can be intersected and overlapped by a multiplicity of various agencies like the private sector and public sector actors. The state's role changes significantly depending on context and time: the governments are neither the sole prominent actors nor facilitators of private investment. As regulators, landlords and financiers, they have a role in circumventing urbanization. They use their legal and governmental capabilities to intervene in the property markets and buy and consolidate vast tracts of property. However, in a context where the prospective to produce value and income from urban property has dramatically expanded, business entrepreneurs and private money have a far more significant impact on urban space development.

In the case of Kolkata, the state government was instrumental in the construction of facilities like the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass expressway and the metro system in West Bengal. It also oversaw the development and construction of new settlements of Salt Lake and Rajarhat, as well as the acquisition and expropriation of property. Investors and landowners benefited from these government programs and projects through a variety of behavior, frequently by engaging in unlawful acts such as encroaching on wetlands or filling up ponds and water bodies. These examples imply that the responsibilities of government and

private actors in bypass modernism cannot be implied: in each case, particular geographical associations were made to utilize their resources and power.

4.2. Land acquisition and consolidation issues

Land acquisition and consolidation is a contentious endeavor in almost all cities in India because builders and government agencies sometimes operate in legal "grey space." Using "deliberate confusion" concerning land ownership and acquisition, the government of West Bengal, in the case of Kolkata, expropriated "rural" land for urban development, providing the base for urban growth. Expropriation of public and state land, skewed access to important locations, economic loss and ecosystems, and environmental damage were all vigorously opposed in Kolkata. Many projects in Kolkata have been slowed or even halted due to widespread opposition. The absence of openness in the land purchase process and the circumvention of legal planning regulations impeded coordinated opposition. Furthermore, because of its "unintentional" large-scale consequences and the lack of an overall master plan, bypass urbanism may slip under the radar of public awareness, resulting in a lack of understanding, further hindering mobilization.

4.3. Commoditization of city boundary

A significant element of bypass urbanism is that it takes place on the outskirts of cities, transforming vast swaths of "non-urban" property into prime urban territory with a substantially high market price. This land was peripheral in two ways: a) geologically, on the outskirts of urban areas, and b) socioeconomically,

because it was agricultural land, natural reserves, or property judged inappropriate for urbanization, like slanting slopes, wetland, or unstable terrain that had grown decrepit and polluted (Kundu, 2016). Bypass urbanism is, therefore, a process that creates new urban places from peripheries, such as Kolkata's eastern marshy lands, which are sparsely inhabited and prone to flooding. Bypass urbanism is characterized by exploiting and realizing the possible "rent gap" intrinsic to the adjacent peripheral lands with marginal value.

4.4. Creation of new centralities

Bypassed urbanization extends beyond land commercialization to establish new centralities in these outlying areas. Because it alters the center-periphery constellation of the entire region, this process has far-reaching ramifications and impacts that extend beyond the areas immediately involved. The full complexities of this process are exposed only via a relational understanding of the urban area. In this regard, Lefebvre's ideas on centrality as an essential urban condition are helpful. According to Lefebvre, 2003, centrality is a crucial asset because it condenses the riches and possibilities of urban culture, leading to a circumstance in which diverse parts no longer exist separately and independently from each other (Kundu, 2017).

The bypassing of central areas profoundly impacts the configuration of centralities in an urban region since it not only entails the shifting of centralities, which impoverishes vast swaths of a metropolitan territory of this essential resource but bypassing urbanism also implies the deliberate

creation of new central areas as well as the building of a reciprocal connection with current centralities. Bypass urbanism also raises the possibility of everyday center activities being relocated to the bypass area, like new government departments or business buildings. Important public institutions and even governmental operations have been transferred to Rajarhat and Salt Lake in Kolkata, while existing central hubs in the city are facing a reduction in investment (Wang *et al.*, 2010).

4.5. Mass scale peripheralization

Through bypass urbanization, by this way, peripheralization is started. A socio-spatial interaction may be reorganized and reconfigured by using this concept. Sassen, 1994 used the term in the global city framework, where the creation of new strategic centralities resulted in the depreciation of other financial sectors and, as a result, other urban places. However, the "bypass urbanism" perspective devalues the whole metropolitan zones. Congestion, population density, severe socio-economic inequality, huge impoverished majorities, and various land claims impede investing in inner-city districts like Kolkata.

5. Conclusion

The concept of bypass frequently arises as a symbol in the literature examined here; the chief consideration is to avoid the pre-established means of everyday life, planning tools and geographic restrictions, and local and other actor groups. This form of urban expansion will inevitably result in a profound rearrangement of the whole city zone, with wide-ranging and unfathomable implications. As a result, we widen the notion of "bypass urbanism" to include

a multimodal urbanization procedure in everyday life, which encompasses territorial escaping, jurisdictional regulations overriding, and demographic avoiding. Bypass urbanism consists of tasks that collectively change the urban landscape at the edge of a city or region. The new infrastructure includes large integrated townships with luxury housing, condominium towers, airports, highways, office complexes, malls, large industrial parks, business districts, and other private real estate projects (Sengupta, 2013). All of these initiatives, when combined, have the consequence of effectively bypassing the existing city. Therefore, the expanding urban territory is exposed to a fundamentally different urbanization paradigm (irregularly).

Large-scale urban development projects usually benefit from convinced possible 'flexibilities' and lawful 'gray spaces' in formal structure to execute them. Several private and state actors join forces in such projects, often expanding and reinforcing the capitalist position of the public sector (Rumbach, 2017). In contrast to the disarray of existing urban spaces, bypass urbanism creates restricted and unique city spaces that allow more contented or high-status lifestyles. They evade vast parts of the city region as part of their daily lives, reinforcing issues of socio-economic segregation, peripheralization, and uneven urban development.

The creation of vast private areas with excellent infrastructure for various civic functions and services for the wealthy amplifies existing inequalities, strengthens socio-spatial divides, and realigns the planetarium of the urban

periphery with that of the city core. These trends are frequently complex to detect; through the lens of ex-centric urbanization, we could appreciate this unique urbanization process and situate diverse urban initiatives within the broader context of the region. The main aim of establishing the notion of bypass urbanism in this paper was to throw light and generate alertness about it on a metropolitan scale beyond these two cases. This study has created an extra layer of significant contribution to growing peripheralization in Indian cities due to large-scale real estate projects. Furthermore, this alertness might enable more interference to check the size of it and make isolated struggles more visible to each other.

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