

Demography India

A Journal of Indian Association of Study of Population

Journal Homepage: <https://demographyindia.iasp.ac.in/>



Urbanisation Dynamics in North-East India: A Comparative Analysis of Trends and Patterns

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Abstract

Introduction: Urbanisation is a key driver of economic transformation and social development. While India has witnessed rapid urban growth, the North-Eastern Region (NER) follows a distinct urbanisation pattern shaped by its geographical, socio-economic and infrastructural characteristics. This study analyses urbanisation trends, patterns and regional disparities in the NER in comparison with national trends.

Data and Methods: The study uses secondary data from the Census of India (1991, 2001 and 2011), the United Nations Population Division and Consumer Expenditure Surveys. Descriptive statistical methods have been employed using indicators such as the level and speed of urbanisation, village-town ratio and Revealed Urban Concentration Index (RUCI).

Results: The findings show that the NER remains less urbanised than India as a whole, though the urban population share increased from 13.83 per cent in 1991 to 18.36 per cent in 2011. Considerable interstate variations exist, with Sikkim, Nagaland and Tripura exhibiting relatively higher urban growth, while Assam and Meghalaya lag behind. Urban households generally enjoy better access to amenities and higher per capita consumption expenditure. Consumption patterns also indicate a shift towards non-food expenditure, reflecting changing lifestyles and economic diversification.

Conclusion and Policy Implications: The study highlights uneven urbanisation across the NER and stresses the need for region-specific policies focusing on infrastructure, connectivity, secondary town development and urban governance to promote balanced and sustainable urban growth.

Keywords

Basic Amenities,
Consumption
Expenditure, North-
East India, Regional
Disparities,
Urbanisation, Urban
Concentration.

JEL Codes: R10, R23

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Introduction

Urbanisation plays a pivotal role in driving economic growth, alleviating poverty, stabilizing population growth, and promoting long-term sustainability. The rapid pace of urbanisation in Asia and Africa shows a global shift, with developing nations and emerging economies now at the forefront of urban growth. Urbanisation is increasingly recognized as one of the most significant challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century. Currently, over half of the global population resides in urban areas, and this proportion is expected to reach 75 per cent by 2050 (UN DESA, 2015). A significant share of this urban expansion is projected to occur in Africa and Asia. Particularly in developing countries, migration plays a major role in urbanisation, driven by people's pursuit of social and economic opportunities or compelled by environmental degradation. The availability of better education, employment opportunities, and enhanced healthcare services in urban areas serve as key pull factors driving rural-to-urban migration (Arya and Rejuna, 2024). Rapid urbanisation comes brings challenges, like overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and mounting environmental concerns, to the urban dwellers. Over 50% of forcibly displaced individuals now reside in urban areas (World Bank Group, 2023). India, with its vast demographic footprint, plays a pivotal role in this global urban surge, exhibiting remarkable growth trajectories. Projections suggest that India's share of the world's urban population will rise to 10-14% by 2050 (UN World Urbanisation Prospects, 2018). These trends demonstrate the rapid and unprecedented nature of India's urban development journey, marked by both opportunities and challenges for sustainable growth.

The North Eastern Region (NER) of India consists of eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. This region is known for its rich cultural and ethnic diversity, encompassing over 200 ethnic groups with unique languages, dialects, and socio-cultural identities. It accounts for 7.97 per cent of the country's total geographical area and 3.78 per cent of its population. North East India has a unique trend in the growth of villages and towns compared to the national average. During 2001-2011, the NE India has experienced a higher growth in the number of town and villages than that of the overall India (Ali, 2023).

Against this backdrop, the present article aims to examine the trends and patterns of urbanisation in the North-Eastern states and present a comparative analysis with the rest of India.

Review of Literatures

Urbanisation, simply put, is the process where large populations concentrate in relatively small areas, accompanied by a shift in occupational patterns from primary activities to secondary and tertiary sectors. This transition leads to the permanent establishment of cities and towns, driving the physical expansion of urban centres. This process is intricately tied to economic activity, as urban growth often stems from industrialization and the development of service sectors, as explained by economic base theory and central place theory. However, in many cases, particularly in developing economies like India, urbanisation can also reflect historical influences, such as the role of colonial trade hubs which shaped their modern spatial and economic scenarios.

Theoretical Literatures

The theory of *cumulative causation* by Myrdal (1957) explains how economic transformation can initiate further changes that not only align with the initial change but extend beyond it. He introduced the concepts of the *backwash effect* where regional imbalances create a chain reaction favouring one area, and the 'spread effect,' where growth in one region positively influences neighbouring areas through increased demand, knowledge transfer, and technological advancements. Myrdal argues that when the backwash effect outweighs the spread effect, regional inequalities increase. Kaldor (1970) relates Myrdal's ideas to external economies, agglomeration economies, and increasing returns to scale. Similarly, later theories, like the centre-periphery model (Friedman, 1966), also predict regional polarization. Friedman emphasizes that prolonged economic growth tends to promote spatial integration over time. Perroux's (1955) growth pole theory aligns with Myrdal's approach, emphasizing the importance of interventions to reduce regional disparities.

The theory of modernization (Riesman, 1964) attributes urbanisation in the West primarily to industrialization, a trend mirrored in developing nations, though with distinct challenges. Researchers generally agree that urbanisation in developing countries differs significantly from that in advanced industrialized nations, particularly in class structures and ecological contexts. Developing economies often bypass the industrial phase, moving directly from agriculture to the service sector, which results in an underdeveloped industrial base. This rapid shift frequently leads to what is termed over-urbanisation or hyper-urbanisation. Castells and Sheridan (1977)

were pioneers in linking dependency theory to urbanisation. They described urbanisation as a reflection of the social dynamics associated with the spread of the capitalist mode of production, originally developed in Europe. According to dependency theory, urban expansion is often driven by the exploitation of peripheral regions, a process deeply tied to colonial history. King (1990) highlights that many of today's global cities, previously imperial capitals, colonial trade hubs, or ports, have shaped current global hierarchies through their colonial past. Indian cities such as Mumbai, Kolkata, and Chennai, shaped by their historical roles as colonial ports or administrative centres, display a spatial duality between traditional and modern sectors. These metropolitan areas, along with Delhi, have evolved into major hubs of resource concentration, particularly financial resources, supported by well-functioning financial institutions. While this aligns with Friedman's ideas of resource concentration driving regional growth, the expected spread effects, as envisioned by Myrdal, remain limited. This imbalance highlights the uneven development within these cities, where concentrated growth fails to significantly benefit surrounding regions.

Empirical Literatures

Recent studies on urbanisation in India have highlighted diverse drivers and patterns of urban growth. Krishan (1993) identifies the slowdown of urbanisation in India, attributing it to a decline in rural-urban migration. The study points to agricultural development as an important factor that reduced the push for migration to urban areas by providing rural employment opportunities. On the other hand, Kundu and Gupta (1996) found that urban population growth in India has been modest

and fluctuating over recent decades. This inconsistency is attributed to higher population growth in large cities and the upward movement of towns into urban status. Despite this, the study concludes that urbanisation in India has not maintained a steady upward trajectory. Mathur (2005) observed that the post-liberalization era witnessed significant urban expansion driven by population growth and rising employment in the manufacturing and service sectors. Cali (2009) emphasized a strong correlation between the level of urbanisation and economic growth across Indian states over time. Kalamkar (2009) explores the relationship between agriculture and urbanisation in India. Using data on urban population growth and production of major crops, the study concludes, unlike Krishan (1993), that faster growth in urban population is primarily driven by rural-to-urban migration.

Sridhar (2010) found that proximity to larger cities have a positive effect on the size of nearby urban centres due to agglomeration effects. Bhagat (2011) analyses urbanisation trends using data on rural-urban population growth. The findings indicate that the emergence of new towns in recent decades has significantly contributed to the speeding up of urbanisation; this finding is consistent with the findings of Kundu and Gupta (1996). The findings of Das (2013) show that since independence, the absolute increase in urban population has been much higher than that in the rural areas, marking a critical trend in India's demographic transition; further significant inequality in the distribution of the urban population across regions is also observed. Tripathi (2013) concludes that a higher rate of urbanisation is associated with higher economic growth and lower poverty levels but also with increased inequality in urban areas.

Thongkhant Hang P. (2015) specifically investigates urban growth patterns in the north-eastern region of India using exponential models and composite indices. The findings emphasize that the availability of urban amenities, such as electrification, medical facilities, and cultural infrastructure, plays a key role in attracting migration to urban centres. This, in turn, has led to the dominance of Class-I cities in the north-eastern region. Mahey and Tripathi (2016) study the impact of urbanisation on economic growth in Punjab. The results indicate a positive link between urbanisation and economic growth. Chaudhuri et al. (2017) highlighted considerable variation in the growth patterns of towns across different states. Tripathi (2017) proposed that enhancing infrastructure facilities might not lead to population growth in large cities but could enhance their potential to contribute to national economic growth.

While empirical studies focusing exclusively on urbanisation in the North-Eastern Region remain limited, a number of studies have examined related dimensions of regional development, migration, infrastructure and living conditions. Singh and Kutwal (2015) analysed development disparities among Indian hill states and found considerable inter-state variations in infrastructure and socio-economic development, which have important implications for urban growth. Konwar (2015) highlighted persistent inequalities and deprivation across the North-Eastern states and argued that uneven access to infrastructure and public services continues to shape regional development outcomes. Ali (2023) emphasized the growing role of migration from the North-East and linked it to both economic opportunities and regional developmental constraints. More recently, Ghising et al. (2024) analysed the political economy of

North-East India and identified infrastructural bottlenecks, connectivity challenges and uneven economic transformation as key barriers to balanced regional development. Similarly, Singha et al. (2024), in the context of Sikkim, highlighted the positive association between urbanisation, infrastructure development and economic growth.

Despite these contributions, the existing literature largely focuses on individual states, migration, regional disparities, quality of life or broader development issues. Comprehensive studies examining the trends, pace, concentration and comparative patterns of urbanisation across all North-Eastern states remain scarce. In particular, very few studies have analysed urbanisation in the region from a comparative perspective vis-à-vis the national urbanisation process. This paucity of region-wide empirical evidence provides a strong rationale for the present study, which seeks to examine the changing patterns of urbanisation in the North-Eastern Region and compare them with the broader Indian experience.

Data and Methodology

The present study is descriptive in nature and primarily relies on secondary data obtained from the Census of India (1991, 2001 and 2011) for analysing urbanisation patterns in the North-Eastern Region. To provide a broader historical and comparative perspective, additional data from earlier Census years and provisional population estimates up to 2023 have been incorporated wherever relevant. The study also utilizes data from the United Nations Population Division, compiled from the World Bank database, to examine global and national urbanisation trends. The extent / level of urbanisation is measured as the

percentage of urban population in total population. Village town ratio has been calculated to know how many villages a state has against one town. It is calculated by:

$$\text{Village Town Ratio of state } i = \frac{\text{No. of Villages in states } i}{\text{No. of Towns in State } i}$$

Then, The Revealed Urban Concentration Index (RUCI) has also been calculated for all the NE states. This index is helpful in determine the comparative intensity of urban population absorption of the individual states over the national average. This index is the modified version of the Revealed Comparative Advantage Index (Balassa, 1987) which is originally used to measure the Revealed Comparative Advantage in International Trade and Relative Absorption Index (Paul & Devi, 2026). In this paper the index is modified to find the relative urban concentration intensity of the states.

$$RUCI_i = \frac{\text{Share of Urban Population in State } i}{\text{Share of Urban Population in India}}$$

After this, the pace of urbanisation in India, and NER is measured by the rate of change in the proportion of the population residing in urban areas over a specific time period. This is determined by analysing the variation in the share of the urban population between two periods (Parkar, 2018). Symbolically,

$$\text{Speed of Urbanisation} = \frac{U_A - U_B}{U_B}$$

Where,

U_A = Share of Urban Population in period t

U_B = Share of Urban Population in period t-1

Census data on the number of inhabited villages and statutory/census towns were used for the period 2001-2011 to maintain consistency with the revised census

classification and administrative boundaries adopted in later census rounds. Therefore, Tables 1 and 2 focus on the most recent intercensal period (2001-2011), while Tables 3 and 4 incorporate 1991 data to examine long-term trends in urban concentration and pace of urbanisation.

Results and Discussions

Population Trends of India vis-à-vis with the World

The exponential growth rates of the total population and urban population for India and the world from 1971 to 2021 are presented in Figure 1. Over this period, both India and the world experienced declining growth rates for total and urban populations, indicating a global trend of slowing population growth. The global and national urbanisation trends are presented to provide a broader context within which the urbanisation experience of the North-Eastern region can be situated. The subsequent sections compare the

urbanisation trajectory of NER with national trends.

In 1971, the exponential growth rate for India's total population was 2.23 per cent, higher than the global total population growth rate of 2.05 per cent. By 2021, India's total population growth rate had dropped significantly to 1.14 per cent, aligning more closely with the global growth rate of 1.11 per cent. This decline highlights the gradual stabilization of population growth over the decades.

The urban population exhibited a similar trend of decreasing growth rates. In 1971, the growth rate of India's urban population was 3.26 per cent, surpassing the world's urban growth rate of 2.78 per cent. However, by 2021, India's urban population growth slowed to 2.38 per cent, while the world's urban growth rate declined to 1.94 per cent. Despite this deceleration, India's urban population continues to grow at a relatively higher rate than the global average.

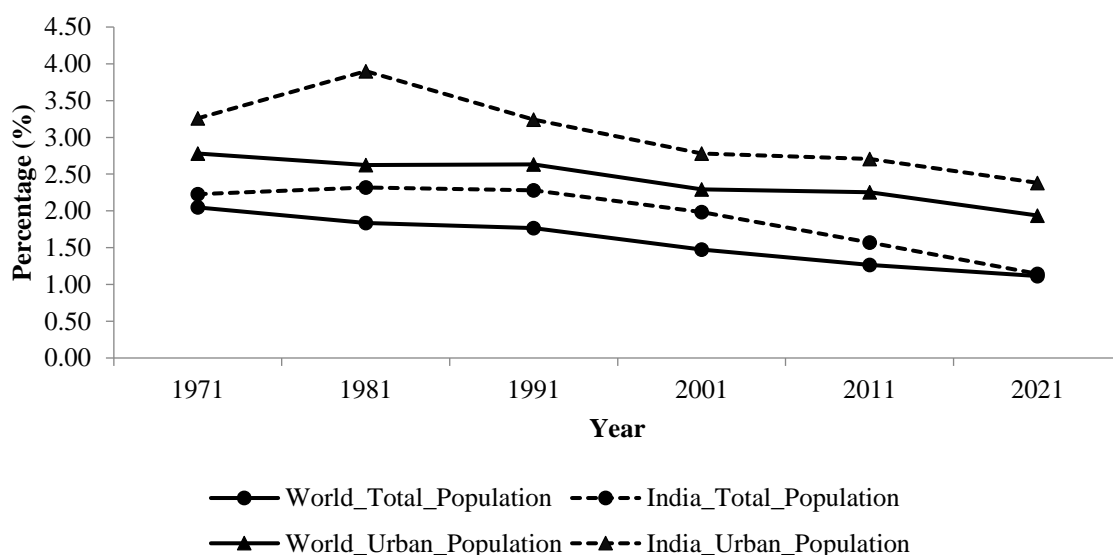


Figure 1 Exponential Rate of Growth of Urban and Total Population of India and the World
Source: United Nations Population Division

The urban population as a percentage of the total population reflects the extent of urbanisation and its growth over time across different countries. Figure 2 illustrates the growth of the urban population as a percentage of the total population for India, China, and the world from 1961 to 2023. India and China started with similar urbanisation levels in 1961 (18 per cent and 17 per cent, respectively), but China experienced a dramatic rise over the decades, reaching 65 per cent in 2023, far surpassing India's 36 per cent. This

divergence highlights China's rapid urban development compared to India's more gradual progress.

Globally, the share of the urban population increased from 34 per cent in 1961 to 57 per cent in 2023, reflecting a steady global trend towards urbanisation. India's slower pace of urban growth contrasts sharply with China's accelerated transformation, particularly after 1991. The world average consistently outpaced India's growth but lagged behind China in recent years.

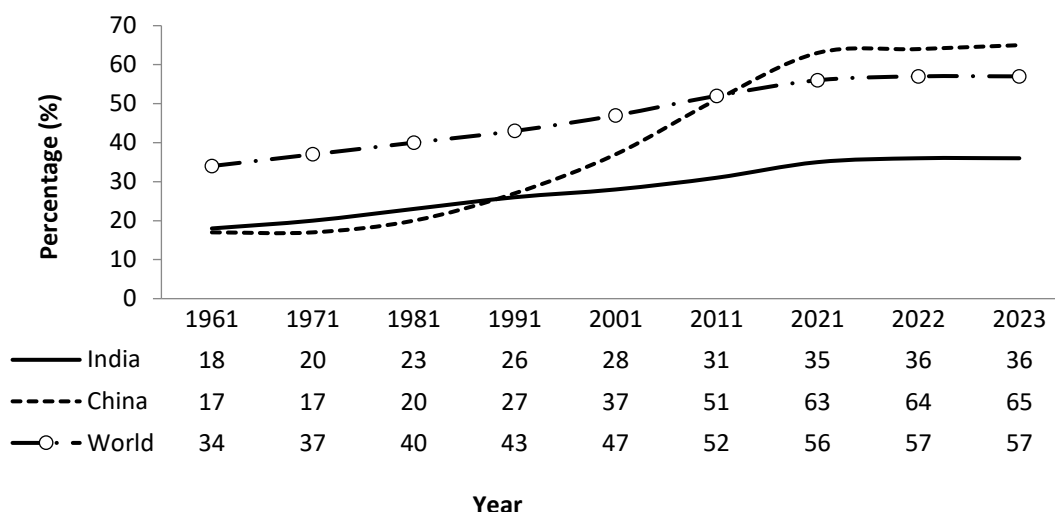


Figure 2 Urban Population as a Percentage of Total Population

Source: United Nations Population Division

Number of Villages and Towns in North Eastern States and India

The Table 1 compares the growth and distribution of inhabited villages and towns in the North Eastern states of India, as well as the country as a whole, between 2001 and 2011. Over the decade, Arunachal Pradesh saw the highest growth in the number of villages (36.11 per cent), while Sikkim experienced a decline (-5.56 per cent). The number of towns grew significantly in states like Nagaland (188.89 per cent) and Tripura

(82.61 per cent), reflecting a significant move towards urbanisation, while Sikkim saw no increase in the number of towns. In terms of the village-to-town ratio, Arunachal Pradesh had the highest ratio in 2001 (227.24), indicating a much larger rural population compared to urban areas. However, by 2011, the ratio declined in most states as towns increased in number, especially in Nagaland and Meghalaya, where urbanisation outpaced rural growth.

When comparing the NER with India, the data shows higher growth rates in both

villages and towns in the North East. The region experienced a 6.49 per cent growth in villages and 62.99 per cent growth in towns, compared to India's 0.65 per cent and 53.71 per cent respectively. This indicates that urbanisation (in terms of number of towns) is advancing more rapidly in the North East

compared to the national average. The village-town ratio has decreased both nationally and in the North East, signalling increasing urbanisation, but states like Nagaland and Tripura show more substantial urban growth than others.

Table 1 No. of Villages and Towns in North Eastern States vis-à-vis with India

States	No. of Inhabitant Village			No. of Towns			Village-Town Ratio	
	2001	2011	Growth (%)	2001	2011	Growth (%)	2001	2011
Arunachal Pradesh	3,863	5,258	36.11	17	27	58.82	227.24	194.74
Assam	25,124	25,372	0.99	125	214	71.20	200.99	118.56
Manipur	2,315	2,515	8.64	33	51	54.55	70.15	49.31
Meghalaya	5,782	6,459	11.71	16	22	37.50	361.38	293.59
Mizoram	707	704	-0.42	22	23	4.55	32.14	30.61
Nagaland	1,278	1,400	9.55	9	26	188.89	142.00	53.85
Sikkim	450	425	-5.56	9	9	0.00	50.00	47.22
Tripura	858	863	0.58	23	42	82.61	37.30	20.55
North East India	40,377	42,996	6.49	254	414	62.99	158.96	103.86
India	593,732	597,608	0.65	5161	7,933	53.71	115.04	75.33

Sources: Calculated from the Census, 2001 and 2011 data.

Comparative Picture of Urban Population Trends of North Eastern India vis-a-vis India

The Table 2 provides a comprehensive overview of urbanisation trends in India, highlighting variations across states and Union Territories (UTs) between 2001 and 2011. At the national level, the urban population as a percentage of the total population increased from 27.81 per cent in 2001 to 31.14 per cent in 2011, reflecting a 3.33 percentage point (pp) rise. During this period, urban areas grew at a rate of 31.80 per cent, far surpassing the rural growth rate of 12.27 per cent, resulting in an urban-to-rural growth ratio of 2.6. This trend shows the rapid pace of urban expansion driven by rural-to-urban migration, natural population growth in cities, and the reclassification of

rural settlements as urban areas. (Punyamurthy & Bheenaveni, 2023)

The North-Eastern region, as an aggregate, saw its urban population share increase from 15.61 per cent in 2001 to 18.36 per cent in 2011, a modest 2.75 pp rise, slightly below the national average. Despite this, urban growth in the North-East (38.06 per cent) outpaced its rural growth (13.59 per cent), yielding an urban-to-rural growth ratio of 2.8, slightly higher than the national average. Among individual states, Arunachal Pradesh exhibited a balanced increase, with a 2.18 pp rise in urban population share and urban growth at 39.27 per cent, nearly double its rural growth of 22.56 per cent. Similarly, Nagaland demonstrated a unique trend with an urban growth rate of 66.57 per cent, though rural population decline (-14.55 per cent) contributed significantly to this

shift. Tripura showed remarkable urbanisation, with a 9.11 pp rise in urban population share, the highest in the region, driven by an urban growth rate of 76.17 per cent, far exceeding rural growth (2.22 per cent).

Table 2 Population Trends in Urban India: A State-level Comparison

States / UTs	Urban Population as a % of Total Population		Share Differential (2001-2011)	Rural Growth	Urban Growth	Ratio of Urban- Rural Population Growth (2001-2011)
	2001	2011				
Andhra Pradesh	27.30	33.36	6.06	1.73	35.61	20.5
Arunachal Pradesh	20.75	22.94	2.18	22.56	39.27	1.7
Assam	12.90	14.10	1.19	15.47	27.89	1.8
Bihar	10.46	11.29	0.83	24.25	35.43	1.5
Chandigarh	89.77	97.25	7.48	-68.53	26.96	-0.4
Chhattisgarh	20.09	23.24	3.15	17.78	41.84	2.4
Delhi	93.18	97.50	4.32	-55.64	26.83	-0.5
Goa	49.76	62.17	12.41	-18.51	35.23	-1.9
Gujarat	37.36	42.60	5.24	9.31	36.00	3.9
Haryana	28.92	34.88	5.96	9.85	44.59	4.5
Himachal Pradesh	9.80	10.03	0.23	12.65	15.61	1.2
Jammu & Kashmir	24.81	27.38	2.57	19.42	36.42	1.9
Jharkhand	22.24	24.05	1.80	19.58	32.36	1.7
Karnataka	33.99	38.67	4.69	7.40	31.54	4.3
Kerala	25.96	47.70	21.74	-25.89	92.76	-3.6
Madhya Pradesh	26.46	27.63	1.18	18.42	25.69	1.4
Maharashtra	42.43	45.22	2.80	10.36	23.64	2.3
Manipur	25.11	29.21	4.10	17.68	44.83	2.5
Meghalaya	19.58	20.07	0.49	27.17	31.12	1.1
Mizoram	49.63	52.11	2.48	17.40	29.65	1.7
Nagaland	17.23	28.86	11.63	-14.55	66.57	-4.6
Orissa	14.99	16.69	1.70	11.77	26.94	2.3
Pondicherry	66.57	68.33	1.76	21.33	31.47	1.5
Punjab	33.92	37.48	3.56	7.75	25.86	3.3
Rajasthan	23.39	24.87	1.48	18.96	29.01	1.5
Sikkim	11.07	25.15	14.08	-4.99	156.52	-31.4
Tamil Nadu	44.04	48.40	4.36	6.61	27.05	4.1
Tripura	17.06	26.17	9.11	2.22	76.17	34.3
Uttar Pradesh	20.78	22.27	1.49	17.97	28.82	1.6
West Bengal	27.97	31.87	3.90	7.68	29.72	3.9
North East	15.61	18.36	2.75	13.59	38.06	2.8
India	27.81	31.14	3.33	12.27	31.80	2.6

Sources: Calculated from the Census, 2001 and 2011 data.

Note: Growth rate are in percentage.

When compared to the national average, urbanisation trends in the North-East reveal distinctive patterns. While the overall level of urbanisation in the NE region remains lower than the national figure, its urban growth rates indicate a gradual narrowing of

this gap. Sikkim underwent remarkable urbanisation during this period, with its urban population share rising significantly by 14.08 percentage points to reach 25.15 per cent in 2011 (see figure 3). This growth was fueled by an exceptional urban growth rate of 156.52 per cent, even as the rural

population experienced a decline of 4.99 per cent. In contrast, Meghalaya and Mizoram exhibited slower urbanisation, with minor increases in urban population shares of 0.49 pp and 2.48 pp, respectively, but still maintained urban growth rates higher than their rural counterparts.

Examining the larger states of India highlights substantial regional diversity in urbanisation. Southern states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu achieved significant urbanisation during this period. Kerala experienced the most dramatic shift, with its urban population share rising by 21.74 pp to 47.70 per cent in 2011, driven by a remarkable urban growth rate of 92.76 per cent despite rural population decline (-25.89 per cent). Tamil Nadu also saw a substantial 4.36 pp rise in urbanisation, with urban growth (27.05 per cent) surpassing rural growth (6.61 per cent) by a wide margin. Similarly, Andhra Pradesh recorded a 6.06 pp rise in urban share, supported by urban growth of 35.61 per cent. Western states like Gujarat and Maharashtra also demonstrated significant urban growth. Gujarat's urban

population share increased by 5.24 pp, with urban growth at 36 per cent, four times higher than its rural growth rate of 9.31 per cent. Maharashtra, already highly urbanized, experienced a modest rise of 2.80 pp in urban share, with urban growth (23.64 per cent) outpacing rural growth (10.36 per cent). Meanwhile, northern states such as Haryana showed a robust 5.96 pp increase in urban population share, with urban growth at 44.59 per cent, nearly five times its rural growth rate (9.85 per cent).

States with relatively low levels of urbanisation, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, saw slower progress in urban growth. Urban population share of Bihar rose by only 0.83 pp, reflecting an urban growth rate of 35.43 per cent against rural growth of 24.25 per cent. Uttar Pradesh recorded a marginal 1.49 pp rise, with urban growth at 28.82 per cent compared to rural growth of 17.97 per cent. The lack of effective governance and resources in these states exacerbates spatial inequalities, limiting urban expansion (Kundu, 2014).

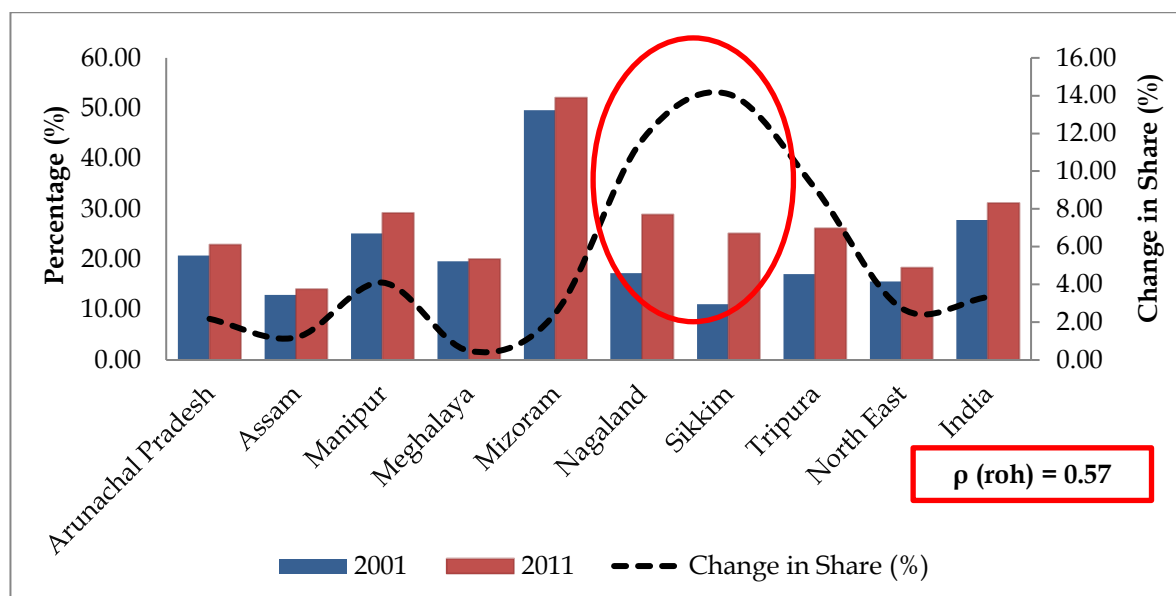


Figure 3 Population Trend in Urban India: A State-level Comparison
Sources: Calculated from the Census, 2001 and 2011 data.

The table (Table 2) also reveals unique outliers. Chandigarh and Delhi, highly urbanized UTs, saw urban population shares rise by 7.48 pp and 4.32 pp, respectively. However, rural population decline in these areas (-68.53 per cent for Chandigarh and -55.64 per cent for Delhi) shows the near-complete urbanisation of these territories. Goa, another notable case, exhibited a 12.41 pp rise in urban population share despite rural decline (-18.51 per cent). This shift is indicative of a broader trend where urbanisation leads to significant rural depopulation, as individuals migrate for better economic prospects (Sridhar, 2019).

State level Urban Concentration Index

The Revealed Urban Concentration Index (RUCI) in Table 3 gives insights into the urbanisation patterns in NER and India from 1991 to 2011. This index provides a comparative understanding of the relative concentration of urban dwellers across regions. While India's overall urban population increased from 25.7 per cent in 1991 to 31.14 per cent in 2011, the North-Eastern states witnessed slower growth, with their collective urban share rising from 13.83 per cent to 18.36 per cent. Consequently, the region's RUCI saw only a modest increase from 54 to 59, indicating the relative underrepresentation of North-East in national landscape.

Sikkim emerged as a standout performer in urbanisation. Its urban population share grew dramatically from 9.1 per cent in 1991 to 25.15 per cent in 2011, leading to a notable rise in its RUCI from 35 to 81. This significant growth can be attributed to infrastructure improvements, economic diversification, and targeted policy initiatives aimed at urban development. Similarly, Nagaland displayed substantial urban growth, with its

urban population share increasing from 17.2 per cent to 28.86 per cent over the same period, accompanied by an increase in its RUCI from 67 to 93. This growth reflects enhanced urban migration and administrative efforts to bolster urban centres. Tripura also exhibited steady urbanisation, with its urban share rising from 15.3 per cent to 26.17 per cent, resulting in an increase in its RUCI from 60 to 84. This trend highlights the state's consistent efforts in developing urban infrastructure and services, which have attracted migration toward cities. In Mizoram, urbanisation remained a dominant feature, with the urban population share rising from 46.1 per cent in 1991 to 52.11 per cent in 2011. However, its RUCI declined marginally from 179 to 167, suggesting a relative deceleration in its urban growth compared to the national average, even though urban centres continued to expand.

Urbanisation patterns of Manipur remained relatively stable, with the urban population share increasing modestly from 27.5 per cent to 29.21 per cent over the two decades. Its RUCI showed slight fluctuations, declining from 107 in 1991 to 94 in 2011. This reflects a balanced urban-rural dynamic, with limited but consistent urban growth. Arunachal Pradesh, on the other hand, showed moderate urban growth, with its urban population share increasing from 12.8 per cent to 22.94 per cent, and its RUCI rising from 50 to 74. This growth can be linked to infrastructure development and policies aimed at promoting urbanisation in the state. While, the urbanisation of Meghalaya saw a slower pace compared to its counterparts, with the urban population share increasing marginally from 18.6 per cent in 1991 to 20.07 per cent in 2011. Its RUCI declined from 72 to 64, indicating a lag in urban concentration relative to the national average. Assam also

experienced minimal growth in urbanisation, with its urban population share rising from 11.1 per cent to 14.1 per cent, leading to a slight decline in its RUCI from 43 to 45. These states' slower urbanisation trends reflect challenges in attracting migration to urban centres, possibly due to economic, geographical, or policy constraints.

Collectively, the North-Eastern states showed varied trends in urbanisation, but their overall contribution to India's urban population remained relatively small. While certain states like Sikkim, Nagaland, and Tripura demonstrated robust urban growth, others like Meghalaya and Assam lagged, reflecting significant disparities in urban development. Research studies, such as those by Bhagat (2011) and Kundu (2014), have highlighted that North-Eastern states often face geographical and infrastructural

challenges that impede urban expansion. Also, cultural and social factors unique to the region may influence urbanisation patterns, leading to slower growth compared to the national average.

The regional variation in RUCI across North-Eastern states shows the need for tailored policies to promote balanced urbanisation. Efforts to enhance connectivity, invest in urban infrastructure, and address socio-economic disparities could help accelerate urban growth in underperforming states. Moreover, integrating regional urbanisation strategies with national urban development programs could bridge the gap between the northeast and the rest of India. As India continues its urbanisation journey, understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by the North-Eastern states will be crucial for achieving inclusive and sustainable urban growth.

Table 3 Degree of Urban Population Concentration

States	Urban Population as a % of Total Population			Revealed Urban Concentration Index (%)		
	1991	2001	2011	1991	2001	2011
Arunachal Pradesh	12.80	20.75	22.94	50	75	74
Assam	11.10	12.90	14.10	43	46	45
Manipur	27.50	25.11	29.21	107	90	94
Meghalaya	18.60	19.58	20.07	72	70	64
Mizoram	46.10	49.63	52.11	179	178	167
Nagaland	17.20	17.23	28.86	67	62	93
Sikkim	9.10	11.07	25.15	35	40	81
Tripura	15.30	17.06	26.17	60	61	84
North East	13.83	15.61	18.36	54	56	59
India	25.70	27.81	31.14	100	100	100

Sources: Calculated from the Census 1991, 2001 and 2011 data.

Table 4 presents the speed of urbanisation across Indian states from 1991 to 2011. At the national level, urbanisation accelerated significantly from 8.22 per cent during the 1991-2001 period to 11.98 per cent in the following decade. This reflects India's overall movement toward urbanisation,

driven by rural-to-urban migration, and infrastructural growth. The increasing rate of urbanisation in India during the 2001-2011 period indicates the country's transition towards more urban-centric growth, particularly in the context of economic liberalization and increased

industrialization (Kavita, 2017; Sarkar, 2020; Kundu, 2020)

Looking at the North-Eastern states as a group, the region exhibited a varied pace of urbanisation. The speed of urbanisation for the entire North East India was 12.90 per cent from 1991-2001, and it increased to 17.59 per cent from 2001-2011. This rise is significant but still remains below the national average. The relatively slower urbanisation in the first decade can be attributed to factors such as geographic isolation, underdeveloped infrastructure, and limited industrial growth compared to the rest of India (Ghising, 2024). However, the acceleration in the second decade indicates a shift towards urban growth, though at a slower pace than other parts of the country.

Within the North-Eastern region, certain states experienced rapid urban growth during this period. For instance, Sikkim saw an extraordinary spike in urbanisation speed, with a rate of 21.64 per cent in the 1991-2001 period and an astounding 127.23 per cent in the 2001-2011 period. This massive increase can largely be attributed to the state's concerted urban development efforts, which were driven by both state government policies and national infrastructural initiatives. Sikkim's exceptional growth in urbanisation in the second decade might also be linked to the development of key urban centers such as Gangtok, as well as improvements in connectivity and governance (Lachungpa & Syangbo, 2024; Singha et al., 2024). Nagaland also experienced notable urban growth, with the speed of urbanisation rising from 0.15 per cent in 1991-2001 to a remarkable 67.54 per cent in 2001-2011. This rapid growth reflects a sharp transition in the state's urban development, possibly due to better economic opportunities in urban areas,

particularly as state and central government investments in infrastructure and urban planning took effect. In contrast, other states like Meghalaya and Assam showed more moderate growth, with urbanisation speeds of 5.29 per cent and 16.24 per cent respectively in the 1991-2001 period, followed by more gradual increases in the next decade (Sharma & Singh, 2024). Manipur exhibited a sharp contrast with a negative growth rate of -8.70 per cent in the 1991-2001 period, followed by a recovery with a 16.33 per cent increase from 2001 to 2011. This reversal may reflect shifts in internal migration patterns, as people moved from rural to urban areas, driven by factors such as better employment opportunities and the development of infrastructure in urban centres like Imphal (Agrawal & Dixit, 2024). However, the initial decline in urbanisation may also reflect local socio-political issues that restricted urban growth in the first decade. Tripura is also notable for its urban growth patterns. Tripura displayed a steadier urbanisation speed, with an 11.50 per cent increase in 1991-2001 and a substantial 53.41 per cent increase in the subsequent decade. This indicates that Tripura managed to increase its urban growth, largely driven by the expansion of urban infrastructure and economic opportunities in towns like Agartala (Goswami & Dutta, 2024; Das, 2024)

On the other hand, Kerala stands out as an anomaly in the national context. The state saw a decline, at a rate of 1.66 per cent, in its speed of urbanisation during the 1991-2001 period, but a huge recovery of 83.73 per cent from 2001 to 2011. Kerala's unique social structure, where urbanisation was initially slower, may have been influenced by factors such as emigration, which has historically reduced the urban migration trend (Das et

al., 2019). However, during the second decade, the state witnessed significant development in its cities, particularly in terms of infrastructure, IT hubs, and service industries, contributing to a sharp rise in urbanisation (Arya & Rejuna, 2024).

Among the states with higher urbanisation speeds, states like Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu display substantial increases. Andhra Pradesh's urbanisation speed surged from 1.50 per cent in 1991-2001 to 22.19 per cent in 2001-2011, with rapid urban development in cities like Hyderabad and Visakhapatnam. Similarly, Tamil Nadu, with its urbanisation speed of 28.77 per cent in 1991-2001, experienced a more moderate 9.89 per cent in the subsequent decade, reflecting the maturing of its urban centres after an initial boom. Both states demonstrate how industrialization, improved infrastructure, and economic

diversification can accelerate urban growth (Shekhar, 2021; Chauhan & Kumar, 2022; Tripathi, 2021).

Punjab and Haryana, two of India's most industrialized states, also experienced considerable urban growth, although at a slower pace compared to some of the high-growth states. Punjab's speed of urbanisation was 14.98 per cent from 1991-2001 and 10.51 per cent from 2001-2011, while Haryana exhibited a faster urbanisation rate, moving from 17.57 per cent in 1991-2001 to 20.60 per cent in 2001-2011. The continued growth of Haryana's urban areas, particularly around Delhi, indicates the region's focus on economic and infrastructural development, positioning it as one of India's rapidly urbanizing states. (Randhawa & Kumar, 2020; Mahey & Tripathi, 2016; Singh & Dixit, 2019).

Table 4 Speed of Urbanisation in the States

States	Speed of Urbanisation (%)		States	Speed of Urbanisation (%)	
	1991-2001	2001-2011		1991-2001	2001-2011
Andhra Pradesh	1.50	22.19	Pondicherry	4.02	2.65
Bihar	-20.15	7.98	Punjab	14.98	10.51
Chandigarh	NA	8.33	Rajasthan	2.12	6.35
Chhattisgarh	NA	15.68	Tamil Nadu	28.77	9.89
Goa	21.36	24.95	Uttar Pradesh	4.96	7.15
Gujarat	8.29	14.02	West Bengal	1.72	13.95
Haryana	17.57	20.60	Arunachal Pradesh	62.15	10.51
Himachal Pradesh	12.63	2.36	Assam	16.24	9.24
Jammu & Kashmir	4.24	10.34	Manipur	-8.70	16.33
Jharkhand	NA	8.11	Meghalaya	5.29	2.48
Karnataka	9.99	13.79	Mizoram	7.66	5.00
Kerala	-1.66	83.73	Nagaland	0.15	67.54
Madhya Pradesh	14.04	4.44	Sikkim	21.64	127.23
Maharashtra	9.63	6.59	Tripura	11.50	53.41
Delhi	3.65	4.64	North East India	12.90	17.59
Orissa	11.87	11.31	India	8.22	11.98

Sources: Calculated from the data compiled from Census, 1991, 2001 and 2011.

Note: NA represents the unavailability of data.

Access to Basic Amenities: A Rural-Urban Comparison

The Table 5 illustrates the percentage of households in India and North-Eastern

states with access to basic amenities such as durable roofs, drinking water, electricity, toilets, drainage, bathrooms, LPG/PNG, and kitchens, as recorded in the 2011 Census. At

the national level, urban households generally have significantly better access to these amenities compared to rural ones. For instance, access to electricity in urban areas stands at 92.7 per cent, far exceeding the rural figure of 59.5 per cent. Similarly, 81.4 per cent of urban households have toilets compared to only 19.8 per cent in rural areas. The disparity extends to modern cooking fuels (LPG/PNG), with 65 per cent of urban households using them, compared to a mere 5.3 per cent in rural regions. This contrast highlights the transformative role of urbanisation in improving living standards.

In North-Eastern states, the data reveals diverse patterns, with some states performing well in certain areas and lagging in others. Sikkim and Tripura, for instance, exhibit high levels of urban household access to amenities like electricity (98.7 per cent and 91.6 per cent, respectively) and toilets (95.2 per cent and 97.9 per cent). In contrast, states

like Nagaland and Manipur demonstrate a rural-urban gap, with urban households significantly outpacing rural ones in access to facilities such as toilets and drainage systems (Shadap, 2017). Meghalaya and Mizoram also reflect similar trends, where urbanisation has brought substantial improvements, especially in access to bathrooms, kitchens, and modern fuels. (Konwar, 2015; Invention & Prem, 2015)

Comparing North-Eastern states to the national average, rural households in this region generally outperform the national rural average in several indicators. For example, rural Tripura's access to electricity (90.2 per cent) is considerably higher than the national rural figure of 59.5 per cent. However, urban households in these states often mirror the national urban standards, indicating that while rural areas are catching up, urbanisation remains a critical driver of access to basic services.

Table 5 Percentage of Households Having Access to Basic Amenities (2011)

States	Roof		Drinking Water		Electricity		Toilet		Drainage		Bathroom		LPG / PNG		Kitchen	
	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U
A.P.	18.3	12.1	74.5	89.8	55.3	96.0	30.7	89.5	36.8	66.2	45.0	80.6	11.4	77.5	52.8	93.0
Assam	1.2	15.1	71.6	63.1	55.5	84.1	52.7	93.7	21.9	56.3	29.7	84.5	13.0	68.0	88.0	91.0
Manipur	0.6	10.8	60.2	60.5	28.4	82.4	59.6	95.8	13.8	70.4	33.9	65.7	9.9	56.4	87.8	85.9
Meghalaya	1.5	32.8	37.1	78.0	61.2	94.9	86.0	95.7	43.9	80.3	43.7	79.9	16.0	45.6	53.8	95.0
Mizoram	4.1	24.7	32.2	75.2	51.6	98.1	53.9	98.5	22.9	79.5	28.5	89.7	2.6	83.8	89.6	93.0
Nagaland	1.4	15.7	42.2	39.7	68.8	97.4	84.6	94.6	37.6	76.5	58.8	94.4	17.9	52.7	82.7	96.0
Sikkim	1.5	55.0	53.2	92.1	75.2	98.7	69.2	95.2	39.5	92.1	77.7	92.0	6.7	85.1	96.1	90.0
Tripura	10.8	13.5	82.7	75.4	90.2	91.6	84.1	97.9	37.5	53.4	59.5	64.0	24.3	49.7	90.3	92.0
India	0.6	51.9	41.9	82.5	59.5	92.7	81.5	81.4	16.2	81.8	19.8	87.0	5.3	65.0	83.4	79.0

Source: Census-2011, Government of India.

Note: U stands for Urban; R stands for Rural; A.P. stands for Arunachal Pradesh.

Changing Trend and Composition of Per-capita Consumption Expenditure

Table 6 illustrates the inflation-adjusted per capita consumption expenditure (PCCE) for rural and urban areas across the North

Eastern (NE) states and compares them with the NE average and the all-India average over five time points from 1999-00 to 2022-23. A clear rural-urban divide is evident throughout the period, with urban areas consistently recording higher consumption

levels than their rural counterparts. This gap has widened over time, particularly in the most recent year (2022-23), indicating growing rural-urban inequality in consumption. The NE region as a whole shows a similar pattern. In 1999-00, the rural NE average was ₹1283 compared to ₹1922 in urban NE. By 2022-23, rural NE consumption rose to ₹2917, while urban NE reached ₹4499, reinforcing the persistent disparity. Compared to the all-India averages, the NE region performed better in

earlier years, particularly in rural areas. However, by 2022-23, the rural NE average (₹2917) was still higher than the rural India average (₹2250), while the urban NE average (₹4499) was slightly above the urban India average (₹3852). These figures indicate that although consumption has increased in both rural and urban NE, urban growth has been much faster, and the intra-regional disparities within NE states, as well as between NE and the rest of India, continue to persist.

Table 6 Inflation Adjusted Per-capita consumption expenditure (in Rupees)

Year	Area	Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Manipur	Meghalaya	Mizoram	Nagaland	Sikkim	Tripura	NER Average	India
1999-00	Urban	1598.26	1706.11	1483.23	2037.34	2214.32	2603.61	1898.00	1837.04	1922.24	1791.61
	Rural	1357.98	893.02	1127.04	1180.79	1512.72	1972.65	1114.40	1107.36	1283.25	1018.82
2004-05	Urban	1591.74	1942.82	1309.63	2149.91	2180.28	2727.76	1998.36	1712.41	1951.61	1899.87
	Rural	1283.66	991.92	1117.38	1173.77	1449.11	1803.85	1275.15	879.45	1246.79	996.15
2009-10	Urban	1924.82	1927.74	1276.13	1808.93	2138.53	2080.95	2524.18	2013.08	1961.80	2230.53
	Rural	1475.11	1041.43	1152.28	1162.15	1319.72	1656.80	1483.73	1178.01	1308.65	1145.36
2011-12	Urban	2241.63	2090.18	1448.91	2293.82	2426.53	2279.42	2528.11	1996.66	2163.16	2477.02
	Rural	1455.87	1056.98	1334.55	1315.12	1384.44	1756.70	1445.06	1194.14	1367.86	1287.17
2022-23	Urban	5150.08	3659.20	2910.19	3836.32	4565.06	4232.89	7218.82	4415.97	4498.57	3851.83
	Rural	3146.34	2046.67	2600.09	2095.57	3115.33	2619.77	4610.38	3104.60	2917.34	2250.03

Note: Deflated to the 2011-12 prices using GDP Deflator (Inflation Adjusted).

Source: Based on the data of Table Appendix 1.

Table 7 presents the changing composition of per capita consumption expenditure between food and non-food items across rural and urban areas in selected North Eastern (NE) states for the years 1993-94, 2004, and 2022-23, alongside all-India averages. A key insight from the data is the substantial shift in urban consumption patterns, marked by a sharp decline in the share of food expenditure and a corresponding rise in non-food spending. This transformation is more pronounced in urban areas, highlighting the growing importance of services, durable goods, and lifestyle-related expenditures in urban household budgets.

In almost all NE states, urban households now allocate a majority of their consumption to non-food items. For example, in Manipur, the share of food in urban consumption fell from 63.82% in 1993-94 to 42.48% in 2022-23. In Mizoram, it declined from 54.14% to 41.22%, and in Meghalaya, from 56.38% to 41.27%. This shift reflects broader economic and social changes, rising incomes, better infrastructure, increased access to education, healthcare, communication, and transportation services, all contributing to a diversified urban consumption structure. The pattern mirrors the all-India urban trend, where food expenditure declined

from 54.65% to just 39.17% over the same period.

In contrast, rural areas in the NE show a slower but noticeable shift. While food still constitutes a larger portion of rural consumption, its share has declined over time. For instance, in Arunachal Pradesh, the rural food share fell from 61.63% in 1993-94 to 50.80% in 2022-23. This reflects gradual improvements in rural living standards and access to non-food services. However, the

transition is less rapid compared to urban areas, indicating a persisting rural-urban divide in consumption behaviour.

Overall, the data highlights a clear structural transformation in the consumption patterns of NE region, with urban areas leading the shift towards non-food expenditures, signaling increased economic complexity, modernization, and changing lifestyle aspirations.

Table 7 Composition of Per-capita consumption expenditure

States	1993-94				2004				2022-23			
	(Rural)		(Urban)		(Rural)		(Urban)		(Rural)		(Urban)	
	Food	Non-food	Food	Non-food	Food	Non-food	Food	Non-food	Food	Non-food	Food	Non-food
Arunachal Pradesh	61.63	38.37	60.82	39.18	55.54	44.46	NA	NA	50.80	49.20	47.73	52.27
Assam	NA	NA	NA	NA	62.40	37.60	46.80	53.20	54.26	45.74	46.71	53.29
Manipur	67.48	32.58	63.82	36.18	50.14	49.86	47.13	52.87	46.79	53.21	42.48	57.52
Meghalaya	60.83	39.18	56.38	43.62	NA	NA	NA	NA	48.17	51.83	41.27	58.73
Mizoram	61.24	38.76	54.14	45.86	NA	NA	44.21	55.79	47.82	52.18	41.22	58.78
Nagaland	64.99	35.01	58.85	41.15	NA	NA	NA	NA	48.17	51.83	42.78	57.22
Tripura	NA	NA	NA	NA	59.02	40.98	NA	NA	48.96	51.04	42.96	57.04
NE State	NA	NA	NA	NA	55.11	44.89	46.24	53.76	NA	NA	NA	NA
All India	63.18	36.82	54.65	45.35	53.94	46.06	41.64	58.36	46.38	53.62	39.17	60.83

Source: Various Rounds of Consumer Expenditure Survey (NSSO).

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The present study examined the trends and patterns of urbanisation in the North-Eastern Region (NER) of India in comparison with the national urbanisation trajectory using Census data from 1991, 2001 and 2011. The findings reveal that although the NER continues to remain less urbanised than the national average, the region has experienced a gradual but significant urban transition over the last two decades. The extent of urbanisation in the NER increased

from 13.83 per cent in 1991 to 18.36 per cent in 2011, accompanied by a substantial rise in the number of towns and improvements in access to basic amenities. However, the urbanisation process has been highly uneven across states, reflecting considerable regional disparities.

The analysis shows that states such as Sikkim, Nagaland and Tripura recorded remarkable progress in terms of urban population growth, urban concentration and speed of urbanisation. Their increasing Revealed Urban Concentration Index (RUCI)

values indicate a growing capacity to attract and absorb urban population. In contrast, states such as Assam and Meghalaya exhibited relatively slower urbanisation despite their demographic importance in the region. These findings suggest that urbanisation in the North-East is shaped not only by demographic dynamics but also by differences in infrastructure, connectivity, economic opportunities and administrative capacity.

The results are broadly consistent with earlier studies that identify urbanisation as an important component of regional economic transformation (Bhagat, 2011; Tripathi, 2013; Mahey and Tripathi, 2016). The findings also support the observations of Thongkhanthang (2015), who emphasized the role of urban amenities and infrastructure in attracting population towards urban centres in the North-Eastern region. The dominance of a few rapidly urbanising states alongside the relatively slow progress of others indicates that the benefits of urban growth are not evenly distributed across the region. This pattern is also consistent with the cumulative causation framework of Myrdal, where urban growth tends to concentrate in locations with relatively better economic and infrastructural advantages, thereby widening regional disparities.

The study further reveals that urbanisation has been associated with improvements in living conditions and changing consumption behaviour. Urban households across the North-Eastern states enjoy better access to electricity, sanitation, drainage and modern cooking fuels compared to their rural counterparts. Similarly, the increasing share of non-food expenditure in urban consumption reflects rising incomes, diversification of livelihoods and changing

lifestyle aspirations. Nevertheless, the persistence of significant rural-urban gaps in both access to amenities and consumption expenditure indicates that the gains from urbanisation have not been uniformly shared.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need for a differentiated and region-specific urban development strategy for the North-Eastern region. Given the geographical constraints and dispersed settlement patterns, policy interventions should focus on strengthening secondary and emerging towns rather than concentrating investments solely in a few urban centres. Improving transportation networks, digital connectivity, affordable housing, water supply, sanitation and waste management infrastructure can enhance the capacity of smaller towns to function as regional growth centres. Special attention should be given to states such as Assam and Meghalaya, where urbanisation has progressed at a relatively slower pace despite their strategic importance within the region.

Further, urban planning in the North-East must integrate environmental sustainability and disaster resilience, considering the ecological sensitivity and vulnerability of the region. Strengthening urban local bodies, improving governance capacity and ensuring effective implementation of national urban development programmes are equally important for achieving balanced urban growth. Finally, urbanisation should be viewed not merely as a demographic process but as an instrument for inclusive regional development. Promoting equitable access to urban infrastructure, employment opportunities and public services can help bridge existing regional and rural-urban disparities and contribute to sustainable

urban transformation in the North-Eastern region of India.

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