Rethinking Urbanisation and the Right to the City
Madras Music Academy (Mini Hall), TTK Road
October 2, 2018 | 9:30 am - 6:30 pm

Urban areas are continually expanding and evolving, and experts project that by 2030, nearly 5 billion (61%) of the world's 8.1 billion people will live in cities (United Nations). The rapid influx of people adds layers of complexities to already overwhelmed and saturated cities. To cope with this, governments are gravitating towards using technology and data-driven planning. There is much excitement and expenditure on real-time big data, sensors, and automation to create smart cities. Thanks to the rise of ubiquitous internet connectivity and the miniaturisation of electronics in such now-common devices as RFID tags, cities seem to have crystallised into an image of a vast, efficient robot. Yet, many city governments continue to fail to provide infrastructure and services in an equitable manner to city residents.

Indian cities have large pockets of unplanned settlements whose residents access basic services and earn livelihoods informally. Very often, there is no record of their homes or workplaces in official datasets. This lack of information not only prevents access to basic services, but also absolves the government of its responsibility to its citizens. This paradoxical situation not only paves the way for the gentrification of cities through anti-poor urban regeneration schemes such as JNNURM, Smart Cities and AMRUT, but also erodes democratic values of participation, equity, informed dialogue and accountability of elected representatives.

The right to the city, as described by Lefebvre, is the right of all citizens to access the qualities and benefits of urban life. It is about reclaiming the ability to access, occupy and use urban space. In this conference, we take a closer look at urban planning policy and praxis, and reflect on the footprint of urbanism on the environment and society.

Mind the Gap (the Rule of Law and Democracy)
Democracy in Indian cities has been reduced to mere elections: there is little interaction between people and their elected representatives, and critical decisions are taken hastily without active and informed consent of the people. Amendments to land, forest, coastal and environmental laws are being amended to reduce citizen oversight and to serve private interests. City planners are adopting ingenious ways to bypass the state's responsibility to provide housing, services and open spaces to all city residents. In this session, the speakers will explore how such legal opportunism erodes the hard-won rights of citizens to participate and to be heard in processes that shape their cities.

Displacement by Design

Since the narrative that cities are critical for economic growth has taken centre stage, there has been an unprecedented mobilisation of central and state funds for urban areas. The focus on providing infrastructure has led to the setting up of special purpose vehicles and task forces at the the cost of people's participation in decision making and their right to life and livelihood. The speakers in this session will present ways by which the current development paradigm results in the displacement and exclusion of citizens.

Right to the City

One of the key features of India's development is the inability of the state to provide adequate formal housing, basic services and livelihoods. This has led to the predominance of the informal sector. A large part of the urban population relies on these systems for meeting basic needs, and this renders them vulnerable to the vagaries of nature, the state, corporates and middle men. The session will dwell on how the current approach to urban planning restricts groups from accessing urban space and reinforces segregation, marginalisation and exclusion within the city.

Fooled by Smartness

Programmes such as the JnNURM, AMRUT and Smart Cities Mission aim to transform urban centres through 'smart' solutions. However, these schemes have entailed the dilution of the role of urban local bodies and the delegation of their responsibilities to unelected entities. They have institutionalised a powerful role of private enterprises in delivering public services, leading to the commodification of services. The session will interrogate how the neocolonial nature of the urban policies has resulted in the conversion of citizens to consumers, humans to sensors, and land to real estate..

The Urban Futures - Between the Smart and the Unsmart

The conference will close with a public lecture on the future of cities. It will posit that the urban poverty traps that exist in cities of today are framed within the form of rapid urbanisation currently occurring and the concurrent rise in poverty and inequality. In light of these trends, there is a clear need to recognise people, especially the urban poor, and the environment as integral to the future of cities. It is in recognising their contribution to the making and sustaining of our urban centres and making them partners in deciding urban futures that we can hope to have livable cities.

CAG cordially invites you to spend the day with a wide range of students, architects, urban planners, academicians, journalists, and social and environmental activists. **For enquiries, please write to Gayathri Pattnam at <u>gayathri.pattnam@cag.org.in</u>** .