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Q8

How does smart city in India, address the issues of urban poverty and distributive justice?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · GS I · 10 marks · Indian Heritage and Culture

Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.

Core demand of the question

- State urban poverty and distributive justice as housing, work, services and voice
- Show what the Smart Cities Mission actually funds
- **Give a balanced view:** pockets of better service versus exclusion and project cities

Revision summary

Urban poverty is housing, services, insecure work and weak voice, not only income.

The Smart Cities Mission funded area retrofits and pan-city digital tools.

Some drains, lights, tax maps and buses improved in chosen pockets.

Eviction, island development and surveillance without jobs undermine distributive justice.

Technology is a tool; city-wide basic services are the justice test.

Introduction

Urban poverty in India is not only a low wage. It is a **kutcha roof**, a tap that runs an hour, a job without a contract, and a vote that does not decide the slum's drain. **Distributive justice** asks whether the city's land, water and mobility are shared, or captured by a few kilometres of glass. The Smart Cities Mission promised technology and **area-based development**. Whether it addressed those injustices is an empirical question, not a logo.

Body

What the poor actually need

A poor urban household needs **tenure**, a toilet that connects to a sewer or a safe pit, a clinic, a school, and a way to reach work without a two-hour walk. Justice is **who gets the flood-free plot** when a riverfront is "beautified". It is also **whose street is camera-lit** and whose is still dark.

What smart cities tried

The Mission (2015 onward) asked cities to mix **area-based retrofitting** of a chosen pocket with **pan-city digital tools: command centres, sensors, e-governance**. **Some projects relaid roads, added LED lighting, mapped properties and improved bus information**. A few placed **shelters, markets and toilets** in the area plan. Property-tax GIS can, in principle, fund services more fairly if the rich are actually billed.

Where justice slips

A "smart" district can become an **island**. Capital piles into one precinct while the rest of the municipal poor wait. **Eviction** for a riverfront or a transit corridor, without a nearby replacement, is the opposite of distributive justice. Sensors do not by themselves create **jobs**. Informal vendors can be swept off a "world-class" footpath. Command centres may watch the poor more than they serve them.

The honest elucidation is mixed. Smart cities sometimes **improve a drain, a park and a digital grievance window** in a defined ward. They have not, as a national programme, **abolished slum insecurity** or guaranteed affordable housing at the scale of the 2011-2021 urban increase. Justice would mean **city-wide basic services first**, with technology as a tool, and a seat for slum boards in the design. Without that, smartness is a **geography of privilege** inside the same unequal city.

Flow diagram

Urban poor -> Need: tenure water work
Smart Cities Mission -> Area pocket upgrade
Smart Cities Mission -> Digital command
Area pocket upgrade -> if inclusive Need: tenure water work
Area pocket upgrade -> if eviction island Justice gap

Conclusion

Smart city projects can upgrade a chosen area's lights, roads and digital desks. Urban poverty and distributive justice need tenure, water, work and a voice across the whole city. Technology helps only when those goods move with it.

Facts & figures

Smart Cities Mission, 2015

A Union scheme for one hundred cities mixing area-based development with pan-city smart solutions.

Area-based development

A defined precinct is retrofitted or redeveloped, which can raise quality or displace the poor depending on design.

Pan-city solutions

Command centres, sensors and e-governance meant to cover the whole municipal area, often stronger on traffic than on slums.