

Prestige vs. Services: How Bureaucratic Incentives Shape Urban Project Prioritization in India

1. Abstract

Indian cities systematically allocate disproportionately larger budgets to visible, capital-intensive prestige projects (metro systems, bus rapid transit, riverfront beautification) compared to essential services (road maintenance, sewerage, stormwater drainage), despite citizen complaints consistently naming road repair and basic infrastructure as priority concerns. This research examines whether bureaucratic incentive structures, institutional fragmentation, and media visibility explain this allocation paradox. Using Delhi (fragmented governance: MCD, NDMC, multiple agencies) and Pune (consolidated governance: unified PMC) as comparative cases, the study combines quantitative municipal budget analysis (FY 2019–20 to FY 2024–25) with qualitative timeline reconstruction and media coverage analysis of four flagship projects. Drawing on Niskanen's Economic Theory of Bureaucracy and institutional governance literature, the research hypothesizes that bureaucratic preference for visible, discretionary projects generating career advancement opportunities, amplified by media visibility and institutional fragmentation that explains observed spending disparities independent of resource scarcity or corruption alone. Findings will inform evidence-based policy reforms to realign municipal resource allocation toward citizen-demanded essential services.

2. Introduction

Indian urban governance faces a persistent and counterintuitive paradox: high-profile infrastructure projects command substantial budgetary support and media attention, while foundational urban services, the unglamorous backbone of city functionality, remain chronically underfunded despite being repeatedly cited as citizens' primary complaints. Road maintenance, pothole repair, sidewalk development, sewerage systems, and stormwater drainage rank consistently as the most demanded municipal services across Indian cities, yet they receive far smaller budget allocations than prestige projects. Between 2017 and 2022, for instance, Delhi spent over Rs 6,856 crore on Yamuna cleanup initiatives (a high-visibility project), yet the river remains biologically dead, suggesting that resource availability is not the constraint. Meanwhile, basic road infrastructure, the #1 citizen complaint in most Indian municipalities receives

incremental, dispersed funding across multiple agencies. This phenomenon is not limited to Delhi; Pune, with a consolidated governance structure, exhibits parallel patterns despite institutional differences, suggesting that explanations rooted in corruption, capacity constraints, or resource scarcity alone are insufficient.

This research posits a more specific mechanism: bureaucratic incentive structures and institutional arrangements systematically bias municipal decision-making toward visible, discretionary projects that generate personal and institutional recognition for officials, at the expense of routine but essential services whose impacts are incremental and politically unremarkable. The question is not why Indian cities lack resources for essential services, but why available resources are allocated as they are.

3. Problem Analysis and Literature Review

3.1 The Infrastructure Allocation Paradox

Municipal governance in India operates within a well-documented crisis of service delivery. The 74th Constitutional Amendment (1992) devolved urban functions to local bodies, yet empirical evidence reveals systematic misalignment between citizen demand and budget allocation (Rao & Rao, 2007; Bardhan & Mookerjee, 2006). Citizen Report Cards and public grievance data from platforms such as CPGRAMS and municipal complaint systems consistently identify road repair, drainage, and water supply as the top priorities, yet capital expenditure budgets allocate substantially higher proportions to metro rail expansion, bus rapid transit systems, and symbolic infrastructure projects.

Research on municipal budgeting in developing countries identifies several explanatory frameworks. Traditional approaches attribute allocation gaps to fiscal constraints, administrative capacity limitations, or corruption (Tanzi & Davoodi, 1997). However, comparisons across Indian cities with varying governance structures and fiscal capacities question this framing. Delhi, despite having higher per capita resources than Pune, maintains similar prestige biases despite its fragmented institutional structure theoretically creating additional coordination costs. This suggests that resource availability and administrative capacity, while important, do not fully explain observed patterns.

3.2 Institutional Governance and Fragmentation

Urban governance in India operates through overlapping institutional structures. Delhi exemplifies fragmentation: the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (unified in 2022 but previously trifurcated), the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC; 3% of city area, directly accountable to Ministry of Home Affairs), the Delhi Development Authority, Delhi Metro

Rail Corporation, and Delhi Jal Board create competing priorities, unclear accountability, and inter-agency competition for budgetary attention. Empirical studies on Delhi's Smart City Mission implementation reveal that high-visibility projects (Integrated Command and Control Centers, smart surveillance) are concentrated in NDMC zones, while citywide service delivery remains fragmented across multiple agencies.

By contrast, Pune operates through a consolidated Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC), divided into 15 administrative wards with a single Municipal Commissioner appointed by the Maharashtra government. Institutional consolidation theoretically enables better coordination and unified accountability. However, recent transport budget analysis reveals that Pune similarly prioritizes metro expansion (₹1,26,489 crore for 30-year Comprehensive Mobility Plan) relative to sewerage and stormwater upgrades, suggesting that governance consolidation alone does not eliminate prestige bias.

This variation in institutional structure provides analytical leverage: if prestige bias is purely institutional, Delhi (fragmented) should show significantly stronger bias than Pune (consolidated). If bureaucratic incentives operate independently of structure, both cities should exhibit similar patterns.

3.3 Bureaucratic Incentive Structures and Public Choice Theory

Niskanen's Economic Theory of Bureaucracy (1971) posits that bureaucrats behave as budget-maximizers seeking to increase organizational authority, budget size, and personal utility (power, prestige, job security) rather than optimizing public welfare. While empirical critiques have challenged strict budget maximization, the framework offers insights into bureaucratic preference for visible, discretionary projects. Public choice theory identifies several mechanisms:

Visibility as Utility: Projects with high media coverage, political endorsement, and public recognition generate utility for officials beyond budget size alone. Metro inaugurations, ribbon-cutting ceremonies for flyovers, and riverfront beautifications create photogenic moments tied to individual officials' careers. Road pothole repair however essential, generates no career-advancing visibility.

Career Advancement Linkage: Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers and municipal commissioners are evaluated partly on infrastructure "achievements" visible during their tenure. Officials championing prestige projects accrue political capital and improve promotion prospects relative to those managing routine maintenance. Tenure instability (average 2–3 years for municipal commissioners) incentivizes short-term, visible accomplishments over long-term, unglamorous service improvements.

Institutional Credit: Prestige projects can be attributed to individual officials and political leaders; essential services are treated as obligations. This creates asymmetric visibility in both media and political narratives.

Recent research on infrastructure quality in India (Chakraborty, 2024) confirms that bureaucratic emphasis on rapid project completion, driven by short-term political cycles and personal incentives, systematically compromises service quality in essential infrastructure.

3.4 Media Visibility as a Reinforcing Mechanism

Media coverage amplifies bureaucratic biases. Newspaper archives reveal that prestige projects (Delhi Metro Phase IV, Yamuna cleanup announcements) receive 10–50× more annual mentions than equivalent essential service upgrades, despite often smaller cumulative impacts on citizen welfare. This "visibility spiral" creates a feedback loop: officials prioritize visible projects partly because media attention legitimizes and celebrates these choices, further elevating their political value. Media framing differs qualitatively—prestige projects are described as "transformational," "world-class," "modern," while essential services are framed as "maintenance," "routine," "technical problems." This linguistic distinction encodes implicit hierarchies of importance.

4. Objectives

Overall Objective:

To empirically examine whether and how bureaucratic incentives, institutional structures, and media visibility explain the systematic prioritization of prestige infrastructure over citizen-demanded essential services in Indian cities, with implications for understanding and reforming municipal governance in similar contexts.

Specific Objectives:

1. To Measure the proportion of municipal budgets allocated to prestige projects versus essential services across a 6-year period (FY 2019–20 to FY 2024–25) in Delhi and Pune, calculate per capita expenditures, and identify trend trajectories.
2. To Determine which factors—bureaucratic incentive structures, institutional fragmentation, political cycles, media visibility—best explain observed spending disparities through comparative institutional analysis.
3. To Establish whether governance fragmentation (Delhi) predicts stronger prestige bias than consolidated governance (Pune), isolating institutional effects.
4. To Quantify whether media mention frequency and prominence correlate with budget allocation changes, testing media visibility as a reinforcing mechanism.
5. To Propose institutional and procedural reforms targeting observed allocation biases, informed by comparative findings.

5. Hypotheses

H1 (Primary): Delhi and Pune systematically allocate 55–70% of capital budgets to prestige projects versus 30–45% to essential services, despite road repair being the #1 citizen complaint, consistent with bureaucratic preference for visible projects.

H2 (Institutional Variation): Fragmented governance (Delhi) predicts 10–15 percentage points higher prestige bias compared to consolidated governance (Pune), suggesting institutional accountability mechanisms partially mitigate prestige bias.

H3 (Media Visibility): Prestige projects receive 15–50× more annual newspaper mentions per rupee spent compared to essential service projects, and annual media spikes correlate with subsequent budget increases ($r > 0.5$).

H4 (Mechanism Interpretation): Observed allocation disparities are explained primarily by bureaucratic visibility-maximization incentives and institutional structures rather than resource scarcity or corruption alone.

H5 (Career Linkage): Project announcements coincide with high-profile political/bureaucratic tenures, and prestige project leadership positions show shorter tenures (2–4 years) than essential service management, consistent with career advancement drivers.

6. Limitations

The research acknowledges the following topical and analytical limitations:

1. **Case study generalizability:** Findings are specific to Delhi and Pune. Results may not generalize to smaller cities, cantonment areas, or cities with different governance models (e.g., municipal corporations with elected mayors vs. IAS-appointed commissioners). However, findings are theoretically generalizable to similar governance contexts in South Asia.
2. **Causal inference:** The research adopts a correlational-explanatory approach rather than claiming deterministic causality. Bureaucratic incentives are examined as one of multiple explanatory factors (alongside political demand, technical capacity, central government directives); causal inference is limited by institutional complexity and overlapping political influences. Findings identify systematic alignments, not definitive causal mechanisms.
3. **Budget classification ambiguity:** Some projects are difficult to categorize as purely "prestige" or "essential"—e.g., smart city infrastructure could enhance

service delivery or function as symbolic investment. Classification will be pre-tested with expert review and documented transparently.

4. **Media as imperfect proxy:** Newspaper mentions do not fully capture bureaucratic perception of prestige. Supplementary analysis will include official awards, municipal council meeting minutes, and budget speech language to triangulate institutional priorities.
5. **Data access constraints:** Detailed project-level budgets may not be publicly available; RTI applications may be required. Analysis will work with available data and acknowledge gaps explicitly.
6. **Temporal scope:** The 6-year analysis window (2019–20 to 2024–25) captures recent allocation patterns but may miss longer-term institutional evolution. Findings reflect current dynamics, not historical trends.

7. Methodology and Methods

7.1 Research Design

A comparative case study of Delhi and Pune combining quantitative budget analysis with qualitative narrative reconstruction and media analysis. The contrast between fragmented governance (Delhi) and consolidated governance (Pune) enables isolation of institutional effects.

7.2 Data Collection

A. Municipal Budget Analysis (Quantitative Core)

Time Period: FY 2019–20 to FY 2024–25 (6 comparable years)

Data Sources:

- Delhi: MCD budget documents, NDMC budget highlights, DDA capital expenditure reports, Delhi Metro Rail Corporation financial statements (ndmc.gov.in, mcd.gov.in)
- Pune: Pune Municipal Corporation annual budgets, Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation allocations, PMPML (bus corporation) budgets (pmcpune.gov.in)
- National sources: MoHUA CityFinance portal, municipal annual reports, budget speeches

Classification Framework:

All budget line items classified into mutually exclusive categories:

PRESTIGE PROJECTS:

- Metro rail expansion (Delhi Metro Phase IV, Pune Metro extensions)
- Bus rapid transit systems (Pune Rainbow BRTS, Delhi BRT)
- Riverfront/beautification projects (Yamuna cleanup announcements, Mula-Mutha projects)
- Smart city infrastructure and command centers
- Elevated roads, flyovers, high-visibility cultural infrastructure

ESSENTIAL SERVICES:

- Sewerage systems and treatment plants (operational/maintenance)
- Stormwater drainage and flood management
- Solid waste management
- Drinking water supply and distribution networks
- Basic sanitation infrastructure
- Road maintenance and pothole repair

Quantification Method:

- Annual allocation (₹ and % of total budget) for each category
- Year-on-year change analysis
- Per capita expenditure (normalized by population)
- Trend visualization (6-year trend lines)

B. Project Timeline and Budget Tracking

For each city, four flagship projects analyzed in detail:

City	Project Type	Project Name	Budget	Timeline	Status
Delhi	Prestige	Delhi Metro Phase IV	₹24,948.65 cr	2020–2028	Ongoing
Delhi	Essential	Yamuna Cleanup & Sewerage Upgrade	₹1,500 cr	2025–2026	Initiated Mar 2025
Pune	Prestige	Rainbow BRTS	₹1,475.4 cr	2006–	Operational

		Expansion		2026	
Pune	Essential	Mula-Mutha River & STP Development	₹690 cr (Union) + ₹840.84 cr (upgrade)	2016–2026	50% complete

Data Points Extracted:

- Annual budget allocations
- Project announcement dates and political context
- Inauguration and completion milestones
- Personnel involved (project champions, bureaucratic heads, tenure duration)
- Budget revisions and timeline extensions
- Fund disbursement patterns

Sources: City government websites, project reports, RTI applications, municipal council meeting minutes, annual reports.

C. Media Coverage Analysis (Quantitative & Qualitative)

Objective: Measure whether prestige projects receive disproportionate media visibility relative to spending.

Data Collection:

- Newspaper mentions across major dailies:
 - Delhi: Times of India (Delhi edition), Hindustan Times, Indian Express, The Hindu
 - Pune: Times of India (Pune edition), Indian Express (Pune), Hindustan Times, Sakal
- Time period: 2019–2025 (aligned with budget analysis)
- Search terms: Project-specific (e.g., "Delhi Metro Phase 4," "Yamuna cleanup," "Rainbow BRTS," "Mula-Mutha")

Measurement Variables:

1. **Frequency:** Annual count of newspaper mentions per project
2. **Prominence:** Front-page vs. inside-page appearance
3. **Tone:** Positive (progress, achievement), negative (delay, criticism), neutral (factual)

4. **Column inches:** Space dedicated to each project type
5. **Visuals:** Photographs and graphics accompanying coverage

Analysis Method:

- Correlation analysis: Link media mention frequency to budget allocation
- Year-on-year comparison: Identify coverage spikes aligned with announcements or elections
- Comparative ratio: Media mentions per rupee spent (prestige vs. essential)
- Qualitative coding: Identify narrative framing differences (transformational vs. technical language)

Data Source: Google News Archive, Factiva, newspaper websites' search functions, manual archive review.

D. Institutional Mapping (Contextual)

Brief documentation of governance structures to contextualize findings, including bureaucratic hierarchy, transfer policies, and political oversight mechanisms. Sources: Municipal Acts, organizational charts, academic literature on Delhi and Pune governance.

7.3 Data Analysis Plan

Step 1: Budget Proportion Calculation

For each city-year, calculate % of total budget allocated to prestige vs. essential. Create time-series visualizations identifying trends.

Step 2: Comparative Analysis

Compare Delhi vs. Pune spending ratios. Test whether institutional fragmentation predicts higher prestige bias using difference-in-differences or similar quasi-experimental methods.

Step 3: Per Capita Standardization

Normalize by population to control for city size differences.

Step 4: Media-Budget Correlation

Calculate correlation between annual media mentions and budget allocation for each project; test statistical significance.

Step 5: Qualitative Integration

Reconstruct project timelines, linking announcements to election cycles and bureaucratic transfers. Code media framing language qualitatively (transformational, technical, etc.).

Step 6: Mechanism Interpretation

Synthesize quantitative and qualitative findings to test which explanation best fits observed patterns (Niskanen effect, institutional effect, political cycle effect, or hybrid).

8. Expected Findings

Expected Finding 1: Quantified Prestige Bias

- Delhi: ~60% of capital budget to prestige vs. ~40% to essential services
- Pune: ~55% to prestige vs. ~45% to essential (less extreme due to consolidated governance)
- Per capita prestige project spending 15–20× larger than equivalent essential service projects

Expected Finding 2: Media Visibility Amplification

- Delhi Metro Phase IV: ~500 annual mentions vs. Yamuna Cleanup: ~50 mentions
- Pune BRTS: ~200 annual mentions vs. STP upgrades: ~30 mentions
- Correlation between media spikes and subsequent budget increases ($r > 0.5$)

Expected Finding 3: Institutional Variation

- Fragmented governance (Delhi) shows 10–15 percentage points higher prestige bias than consolidated governance (Pune), supporting hypothesis that institutional accountability mechanisms partially mitigate bias

Expected Finding 4: Mechanism Interpretation

- Evidence supports bureaucratic visibility-maximization incentives as primary driver, with institutional structure and media visibility as amplifying mechanisms; resource constraints do not explain observed patterns

9. Significance and Contributions

Academic: Empirically tests Niskanen's theory in developing-country municipal context; advances public choice theory in urban planning; offers comparative institutional analysis relevant to South Asian governance.

Policy: Provides data-driven explanations for persistent urban governance failures; informs municipal reform strategies; generates actionable recommendations for state governments and international development agencies.

Methodological: Demonstrates how budget analysis, media analysis, and timeline reconstruction substitute for primary data collection in governance research; provides replicable framework for other Indian cities.

10. Research Timeline

Phase	Duration	Activities
Phase 1: Data Collection	Weeks 1–3	Download budgets, organize project data, set up media scraping
Phase 2: Analysis	Weeks 4–6	Budget classification, correlation analysis, media coding
Phase 3: Synthesis & Writing	Weeks 7–8	Integrate findings, draft manuscript sections
Phase 4: Revision	Weeks 9–10	Refine arguments, format, final review
Total Timeline:	10 weeks	

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Appendix A: Research Matrix

Specific Objective	Hypothesis	Data Required	Data Collection Method	Data Analysis
1.1 Quantify prestige bias	H1: Budget allocation 55-70% prestige vs 30-45% essential	Annual budget allocations (₹) by category for 6 years	Municipal budget documents, CityFinance portal	Budget proportion calculation, time-series visualization, per capita standardization
1.2 Test institutional variation	H2: Delhi (fragmented) shows 10-15pp higher prestige bias than Pune	Comparative budget proportions by city and year	Same sources	Difference-in-differences analysis, statistical significance testing
2.1 Analyze media coverage	H3: Prestige projects receive 15-50× more mentions per rupee	Annual newspaper mention frequency, project budgets, prominence indicators	Newspaper archives, Factiva, Google News	Correlation analysis, media-to-budget ratio calculation
2.2 Examine narrative framing	H4: Language differs qualitatively (transformational vs. technical)	Newspaper articles (full text) for four flagship projects	Newspaper archives (2019-2025)	Qualitative content coding, thematic analysis
3.1 Project timeline reconstruction	H5: Announcements align with tenures; shorter tenure for prestige projects	Project announcement dates, personnel timelines, election cycles	Municipal records, news archives, council minutes	Timeline synthesis, personnel tenure analysis
3.2 Link to bureaucratic incentives	H5: Career advancement drives visible projects	Official biographies, promotion records, transfer	IAS/municipal service records, news archives	Descriptive timeline analysis, pattern identification

Appendix B: Data Collection Instruments

Instrument 1: Budget Classification Coding Sheet

Project Name	Category (Prestige/Essential)	Budget Year	Allocated Amount (₹ Cr)	Justification	Expert Review
Delhi Metro Phase IV	Prestige	2024-25	[Amount]	High political visibility, media coverage, metro rail	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree
Yamuna Cleanup	Essential	2024-25	[Amount]	Sewerage/water systems; classified as essential despite political salience	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree

Instrument 2: Media Analysis Coding Template

Project	News paper	Publication Date	Headline	Section	Tone	Word Count	Visual (Y/N)	Search Terms Used
Delhi Metro Phase IV	Times of India	15-Jan-2024	[Headline]	Front Page	Positive	450	Y	"Delhi Metro Phase 4," "metro expansion"
Yamuna Cleanup	Hindu stan Times	10-Feb-2024	[Headline]	Page 5	Neutral	200	N	"Yamuna cleanup," "sewerage," "STP"

Instrument 3: Project Timeline Data Extract Template

Project Name: [e.g., Delhi Metro Phase IV]
City: [Delhi/Pune]
Category: [Prestige/Essential]

Information	Entry
Project Announcement Date	[Date]
Announcing Official/Political Leader	[Name, Position]
Initial Budget	[₹ Cr]
Revised Budget (if applicable)	[₹ Cr, Year]
Original Timeline	[Year-Year]
Revised Timeline (if applicable)	[Year-Year]
Key Implementation Milestones	[List with dates]
Personnel (Project Head/Commissioner)	[Name, IAS/Other, tenure dates]
Political Context (election, policy announcement)	[Context]
Media Coverage Intensity (annual mentions)	[2019: X, 2020: X, etc.]