



**THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHY OF BHUBANESWAR:
HISTORICAL GROWTH, MIGRATION,
AND URBAN TRANSFORMATION**

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ABSTRACT :

Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Odisha, stands as one of the most remarkable examples of urban transformation in contemporary India. From its origins as an ancient sacred settlement renowned for its religious and cultural significance, the city has evolved into a modern administrative, educational, and economic centre. The transition from the historic landscape of Ekamra Kanan to a planned capital city after independence has profoundly altered its demographic structure, spatial organization, and socio-economic composition. This study investigates the demographic evolution of Bhubaneswar from the early twentieth century to the Census of 2011, with particular emphasis on population growth, migration trends, gender composition, ethnic diversity, and patterns of urban expansion. Drawing upon census reports, archival records, government publications, planning documents, and scholarly literature, the article explores the complex relationship between state-led urban development and demographic change. It argues that the growth of Bhubaneswar represents a broader narrative of post-colonial urbanization in eastern India, where administrative restructuring, infrastructural development, and economic opportunities have stimulated rapid population growth and social transformation. At the same time, the city faces significant challenges associated with migration management, gender imbalance, environmental stress, informal settlements, and sustainable urban governance. By examining these demographic processes within their historical context, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the forces that have shaped Bhubaneswar into one of India's leading urban centres.

KEYWORDS: *Bhubaneswar, Demography, Urbanization, Migration, Capital City, Population Growth, Odisha..*

INTRODUCTION

The study of urban demography provides valuable insights into the historical processes that shape the growth and transformation of cities. Among the urban centres of eastern India, Bhubaneswar occupies a distinctive position because of its unique synthesis of antiquity and modernity. Unlike many Indian cities that emerged through gradual and unplanned expansion over centuries, Bhubaneswar represents a rare example where an ancient religious settlement coexists with a modern planned capital. The city embodies a remarkable continuity of human habitation, cultural activity, and political significance stretching from the early historic period to the present day. Historically known as Ekamra Kanan and celebrated as the "Temple City of India," Bhubaneswar preserves a rich legacy of religious

monuments, sacred traditions, and archaeological remains that testify to its long and distinguished past.¹

The historical significance of Bhubaneswar extends beyond its architectural heritage. For centuries, the city functioned as an important centre of Shaivism and religious pilgrimage, attracting devotees, scholars, artisans, and traders from different parts of the Indian subcontinent. The concentration of temples and sacred institutions fostered a vibrant urban culture that distinguished Bhubaneswar from many other settlements in the region. However, the modern character of the city began to take shape only after Indian independence, when the Government of Odisha selected Bhubaneswar as the new state capital in 1948. This decision marked a turning point in the city's history and initiated a process of planned urban development that fundamentally altered its demographic and spatial profile.²

The designation of Bhubaneswar as the capital of Odisha transformed a relatively small temple town into a rapidly expanding administrative centre. Government offices, residential colonies, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, transportation networks, and commercial establishments were developed to support the new capital. These developments attracted migrants from diverse social, economic, and geographical backgrounds, creating unprecedented opportunities for employment and social mobility. As a result, Bhubaneswar experienced a dramatic increase in population and became one of the fastest-growing urban centres in eastern India.³

The demographic transformation of Bhubaneswar is particularly significant because it illustrates the interaction between historical continuity and modern urbanization. While the city's ancient religious identity continued to attract pilgrims and preserve cultural traditions, the emergence of administrative and economic functions generated new demographic dynamics. Migration from rural Odisha and neighbouring states contributed to population growth, social diversification, and changing occupational structures. The expansion of municipal boundaries and urban infrastructure further accelerated the process of urbanization, reshaping the physical and social landscape of the city. Consequently, Bhubaneswar evolved from a settlement with fewer than ten thousand inhabitants in the early twentieth century into a major urban agglomeration with a population exceeding 885,000 by 2011.⁴

The rapid growth of Bhubaneswar also produced a range of demographic and urban challenges. Increasing population density, changing migration patterns, gender disparities, pressure on housing and public services, and the emergence of informal settlements became important concerns for urban planners and policymakers. Simultaneously, the incorporation of diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups transformed the city into a cosmopolitan urban centre. These developments underscore the importance of examining demographic change not merely as a statistical phenomenon but as a process deeply intertwined with political decisions, economic transformations, and social interactions.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to analyse the changing demography of Bhubaneswar through a historical perspective. It explores the factors responsible for population growth, the role of migration in shaping urban society, the evolution of gender composition, and the changing ethnic profile of the city. Furthermore, it examines how urban expansion and state-led planning influenced demographic trends over time. By integrating historical evidence with census data and contemporary urban studies, the article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the demographic forces that have contributed to the making of modern Bhubaneswar.

In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on urbanization, capital-city development, and demographic transition in post-independence India. The experience of Bhubaneswar offers valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges associated with planned urban growth and provides an important case study for understanding the relationship between demographic change and urban transformation in the developing world.

Historical Background and Urban Antiquity

The name Bhubaneswar derives from Tribhubaneswar, an epithet of Lord Shiva, whose worship has dominated the religious landscape of the region for centuries.⁵ Historical texts including the Skanda Purana, Shiva Purana, Ekamra Purana, and Kapila Samhita describe the city as an important sacred centre.⁶ The ancient settlement known as Ekamra Kanan flourished between Khandagiri and Dhauli, encompassing a much larger area than the modern temple town.⁷

Archaeological evidence demonstrates continuous habitation from at least the third century BCE. The proximity of Dhauli, associated with Emperor Ashoka and the Kalinga War, further enhances the historical significance of the region.⁸ The construction of the Lingaraj Temple during the Somavamsi period consolidated Bhubaneswar's position as the foremost centre of Shaivism in eastern India.⁹

Unlike other ancient cities such as Varanasi and Patna, Bhubaneswar preserves an extraordinary concentration of historical monuments representing different phases of Odisha's architectural and cultural evolution.¹⁰

Population Growth and Urban Expansion

The demographic evolution of Bhubaneswar presents a compelling illustration of the transformative impact of political and administrative decisions on urban development. Prior to its emergence as the capital city of Odisha, Bhubaneswar remained a relatively small settlement whose population growth was gradual and largely influenced by its role as a religious and cultural centre. Census statistics reveal that the population increased from 8,170 in 1921 to 9,253 in 1941, indicating a modest demographic expansion over two decades.¹¹ The limited pace of growth during this period can be attributed to the city's predominantly sacred character, restricted economic opportunities, and the absence of large-scale industrial or administrative establishments that could attract migrants from surrounding regions.¹²

A decisive turning point in the demographic history of Bhubaneswar occurred in 1948 when it was selected as the capital of Odisha. This administrative transformation fundamentally altered the city's developmental trajectory and initiated a period of unprecedented population growth. The establishment of government offices, residential colonies, public institutions, and infrastructural facilities created a substantial demand for labour and services. Consequently, the population increased to 16,512 in 1951 and further expanded to 38,211 by 1961.¹³ This remarkable growth was driven by the influx of government employees, engineers, architects, construction workers, traders, and professionals who migrated to the city in search of employment and new opportunities.¹⁴

The decade between 1961 and 1971 represents the most significant phase of demographic expansion in the history of Bhubaneswar. During this period, the city recorded an extraordinary population growth rate of 176.07 percent, the highest ever registered in any decennial census since independence.¹⁵ Such unprecedented growth reflected the rapid implementation of capital-building projects, expansion of administrative infrastructure, establishment of educational and healthcare institutions, and improvements in transport and communication networks.¹⁶ The city increasingly emerged as the political and economic nucleus of Odisha, attracting migrants from both rural and urban areas.

The subsequent decades witnessed sustained demographic expansion, although the rate of growth gradually moderated. The population increased to 219,211 in 1981, 411,542 in 1991, 658,220 in 2001, and 885,363 in 2011.¹⁷ These figures demonstrate that Bhubaneswar continued to consolidate its position as one of eastern India's fastest-growing urban centres. The growth was accompanied by increasing economic diversification, expansion of educational opportunities, growth of service-sector activities, and the emergence of information technology and knowledge-based industries.

Urban growth was not limited to population increase alone. The physical extent of the city also expanded considerably. The municipal area, which covered approximately 50.25 square kilometres in

1961, expanded to nearly 185.30 square kilometres by 2011.¹⁸ This territorial expansion incorporated surrounding villages and peri-urban settlements into the urban framework, facilitating the development of new residential neighbourhoods, institutional complexes, commercial centres, and transportation corridors. The spatial enlargement of Bhubaneswar thus reflected the city's transformation from a compact administrative capital into a sprawling metropolitan centre.

Population Growth of Bhubaneswar (1921-2011)

Census Year	Population	Decadal Growth (%)
1921	8,170	—
1931	9,024	10.45
1941	9,253	2.54
1951	16,512	78.45
1961	38,211	131.41
1971	105,491	176.07
1981	219,211	107.80
1991	411,542	87.74
2001	658,220	59.94
2011	885,363	34.51

Source: Census of India Reports (1921-2011).

Interpretation of Table 1

The demographic trajectory presented above clearly demonstrates the impact of capital-city development on urban population growth. While the pre-independence period was characterized by slow and incremental growth, the post-1948 period witnessed a dramatic demographic surge. The exceptionally high growth rate recorded during 1961-1971 corresponds with the intensive phase of state-sponsored urban development and institutional expansion. Thereafter, although population growth remained substantial, the declining percentage growth rates suggest a gradual transition towards demographic stabilization commonly associated with mature urban centres.

Migration and Urban Transformation

Migration has been one of the most influential factors shaping the demographic character of Bhubaneswar. Prior to independence, migration into the city remained relatively limited because of inadequate transportation facilities, restricted economic opportunities, and the absence of major administrative functions.¹⁹ The city's population was largely composed of local residents, temple functionaries, traders, and pilgrims associated with its religious significance.

The establishment of Bhubaneswar as the state capital dramatically altered migration patterns. As administrative activities expanded, the city became a major destination for migrants from different districts of Odisha. Government employment opportunities, educational institutions, healthcare services, and expanding commercial activities attracted individuals and families seeking improved livelihoods and social mobility.²⁰ Consequently, migration emerged as the principal driver of urban growth, contributing significantly to the city's expanding labour force and social diversity.

A new phase of migration began after India's economic liberalization during the 1990s. The rapid growth of higher educational institutions, information technology enterprises, private-sector employment, and service industries generated fresh opportunities that attracted both skilled and semi-skilled workers.²¹ Bhubaneswar increasingly evolved into a regional hub of education, technology, and administration, drawing migrants not only from Odisha but also from neighbouring states.

The growth of regional connectivity further transformed migration patterns. Improved road and rail networks facilitated daily commuting from nearby urban centres such as Cuttack, Khordha, Jatni,

Dhenkanal, and Angul.²² Unlike earlier decades when migrants tended to settle permanently within the city, contemporary migration is increasingly characterized by mobility and commuting. This phenomenon has resulted in the emergence of a substantial floating population that contributes to the economic vitality of Bhubaneswar while remaining outside the city's permanent residential statistics.²³ The growing significance of temporary migration and daily commuting presents new challenges for urban governance. Planning for transportation, housing, public services, and infrastructure must increasingly take into account not only the resident population but also the large number of transient users who participate in the city's economic and social life. In this sense, migration continues to remain one of the most dynamic forces shaping the urban transformation of Bhubaneswar in the twenty-first century.

Gender Asymmetry and Population Structure

Gender composition provides valuable insights into urban demographic dynamics. Census data consistently reveal a male-dominated population structure in Bhubaneswar.²⁴ In 1951, males constituted approximately 59 percent of the total population.²⁵ Similar trends persisted throughout subsequent decades:

- 1961: 22,580 males and 15,631 females
- 1971: 61,190 males and 44,301 females
- 1981: 124,820 males and 94,391 females
- 1991: 234,897 males and 176,645 females
- 2001: 366,131 males and 292,086 females
- 2011: 468,043 males and 417,320 females²⁶

This imbalance largely reflects migration patterns, as employment opportunities historically attracted larger numbers of male migrants.²⁷ Nevertheless, the gender gap has gradually narrowed due to increasing female participation in education, professional employment, and public life.²⁸

Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Ethnic Diversity

One of the most significant features of Bhubaneswar's demographic transformation has been the increasing social and ethnic diversification of its population. As the city evolved from a historic temple town into the administrative and economic capital of Odisha, it attracted migrants from different social backgrounds, regions, and communities. This process has contributed to the emergence of a heterogeneous urban society characterized by cultural plurality and social mobility. The expansion of educational opportunities, employment avenues, and government welfare initiatives has particularly facilitated the migration and settlement of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) within the urban landscape of Bhubaneswar.²⁹

The growth of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe populations reflects the broader processes of urbanization and socio-economic transformation occurring within Odisha. Census data indicate that the Scheduled Caste population increased from 53,677 in 2001 to 76,770 in 2011, while the Scheduled Tribe population rose from 29,594 to 44,016 during the same period.³⁰ This increase can be attributed to several factors, including rural-to-urban migration, improved access to educational institutions, greater employment opportunities in the public and private sectors, and the expansion of urban boundaries that incorporated surrounding settlements into the municipal framework. The growing presence of SC and ST communities has contributed significantly to the social composition of the city and has enhanced the diversity of its urban culture.

Religious diversity constitutes another important dimension of Bhubaneswar's demographic profile. Although the city continues to be overwhelmingly Hindu in its religious composition, it has gradually developed into a cosmopolitan urban centre accommodating people from different faiths and cultural traditions. According to the Census of 2011, Hindus formed the dominant religious community, while Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists collectively represented a smaller yet socially

significant segment of the population.³¹ The coexistence of multiple religious communities reflects the city's long-standing tradition of cultural accommodation and social interaction. This diversity has been further strengthened by the growth of educational institutions, professional networks, and commercial activities that attract people from various parts of India.

The transformation of Bhubaneswar into a major centre of higher education, information technology, healthcare, and administration has also had a profound impact on its ethnic and linguistic composition. The establishment of universities, research institutions, technology parks, and central government organizations has encouraged the migration of students, professionals, entrepreneurs, and skilled workers from different regions of the country.³² As a result, the city today represents a complex mosaic of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identities. While Odia remains the dominant language and cultural medium, communities speaking Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Punjabi, and several tribal languages have become integral components of the city's social fabric.

The increasing social diversity of Bhubaneswar reflects not only demographic growth but also the city's expanding role as a regional hub of education, governance, and economic opportunity. This diversification has enriched the cultural landscape of the city and contributed to the development of a more inclusive urban society. At the same time, it has generated new challenges related to social integration, equitable access to resources, housing, employment, and urban governance. Consequently, understanding the changing composition of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, religious groups, and migrant communities remains essential for assessing the broader trajectory of urban transformation in Bhubaneswar.

Urban Challenges and Demographic Pressures

The demographic expansion of Bhubaneswar since its emergence as the capital city of Odisha has transformed it into one of eastern India's most dynamic urban centres. However, this growth has simultaneously generated a range of complex urban challenges that increasingly test the capacity of city planners and policymakers. The population of the Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation area, which stood at 885,363 in 2011, is now estimated to have crossed one million, while the broader Bhubaneswar Development Planning Area accommodates nearly 1.3 million residents. This rapid increase in population has intensified the demand for urban infrastructure, housing, transportation, and public services, thereby placing unprecedented pressure on the city's governance mechanisms and development institutions.

One of the most pressing consequences of demographic growth has been the strain on urban infrastructure. The continuous expansion of residential colonies, commercial hubs, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and administrative establishments has significantly increased demand for roads, drainage systems, electricity, water supply, and waste-management services. As vehicle ownership and daily commuting continue to rise, traffic congestion has become a major concern in several growth corridors, particularly along the Cuttack-Puri Road, Patia, Chandrasekharpur, Rasulgarh, and Jayadev Vihar areas. Urban planners increasingly emphasize the need for integrated transportation systems, intelligent traffic management, and sustainable mobility solutions to accommodate the city's expanding population.³³

Housing represents another critical challenge in contemporary Bhubaneswar. Migration from rural Odisha and neighbouring districts has generated a substantial demand for affordable housing. Although planned residential townships and apartment complexes have proliferated across the city, housing accessibility remains uneven. Informal settlements continue to accommodate a sizeable segment of the urban poor. Recent urban development assessments indicate that Bhubaneswar contains nearly 450 slum settlements, many of which still face deficiencies in sanitation and sewerage infrastructure despite ongoing government interventions. Efforts are currently underway to connect all identified slums to the city's sewerage network as part of broader urban upgrading programmes.³⁴

The rapid appreciation of land values and real-estate prices has further complicated the urban landscape. As Bhubaneswar has emerged as a centre for information technology, higher education, healthcare, and administrative services, demand for residential and commercial land has increased substantially. The conversion of peri-urban agricultural land into residential and commercial developments has accelerated urban sprawl, often creating tensions between economic development and sustainable land-use planning. Recent remote-sensing studies reveal that the built-up area of Bhubaneswar Urban Agglomeration expanded from approximately 34.76 square kilometres in 1991 to 81.73 square kilometres in 2024, reflecting the extraordinary pace of urban expansion.³⁵

Environmental sustainability has emerged as one of the most significant concerns associated with this rapid urban transformation. Historically, Bhubaneswar was distinguished by its extensive network of tanks, ponds, wetlands, and green spaces that played a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance and supporting urban life. In recent decades, however, encroachment upon water bodies, reduction of green cover, and increasing levels of pollution have altered the environmental character of the city. Scientific assessments indicate a substantial decline in vegetation cover, which decreased from approximately 35.63 square kilometres in 1991 to 17.86 square kilometres in 2024. Simultaneously, recurrent waterlogging and urban flooding have become increasingly common, prompting the Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation to identify multiple flood-prone zones and undertake large-scale drainage restoration projects. Environmental challenges are further compounded by growing water demand; recent official estimates suggest that the city currently faces a potable water deficit of nearly 65 million litres per day (MLD), necessitating major investments in water-treatment and distribution infrastructure.³⁶

The cumulative effect of these demographic and environmental pressures highlights the need for a more integrated and sustainable model of urban development. While Bhubaneswar has achieved national recognition under the Smart Cities Mission and was ranked among the better-performing cities in recent cleanliness assessments, significant challenges remain in ensuring equitable access to housing, water, sanitation, transportation, and environmental resources. The long-term sustainability of Bhubaneswar will depend upon its ability to balance economic growth and population expansion with ecological conservation, social inclusion, and resilient urban governance. As the city continues its transition from a planned capital to a metropolitan and smart urban centre, addressing these challenges will remain central to shaping its future trajectory.

Bhubaneswar in the Era of Smart Urbanization

The inclusion of Bhubaneswar in the Government of India's Smart Cities Mission marked a decisive turning point in the city's contemporary urban history. In January 2016, Bhubaneswar secured the first rank among the twenty cities selected under the inaugural phase of the Mission, thereby emerging as a national model for smart urban development. This recognition was not merely symbolic; it reflected the city's commitment to citizen-centric planning, technological innovation, and sustainable urban governance. The Smart City initiative introduced a new developmental framework that sought to integrate digital technology, efficient public services, environmental sustainability, and participatory governance into the city's urban management system.³⁷

Since its selection, Bhubaneswar has witnessed substantial investments in urban infrastructure and digital governance. Through the Bhubaneswar Smart City Limited (BSCL), numerous projects have been implemented, including intelligent traffic management systems, Integrated Command and Control Centres (ICCC), smart roads, public Wi-Fi networks, energy-efficient street lighting, and digital citizen-service platforms. The ICCC, which gained national attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, has become one of India's most advanced urban monitoring systems, enabling real-time management of traffic, public safety, disaster response, and civic services. By 2025, Bhubaneswar had successfully completed more than 90 percent of its sanctioned Smart City projects, with investments exceeding

• 4,500 crore across transportation, mobility, public infrastructure, sanitation, and urban rejuvenation sectors.³⁸

Urban mobility has emerged as one of the most visible dimensions of Bhubaneswar's smart transformation. The introduction of the "Mo Bus" public transport system, intelligent traffic signalling, smart parking facilities, and dedicated cycling infrastructure has significantly improved urban connectivity. Recent municipal reports indicate that the Mo Bus network now serves more than 150,000 passengers daily across the Bhubaneswar-Cuttack-Puri metropolitan region. Simultaneously, smart road projects and non-motorized transport corridors have sought to promote sustainable mobility and reduce dependence on private vehicles. These initiatives reflect a broader effort to enhance accessibility while minimizing environmental impacts associated with rapid urbanization.

Equally significant has been the emphasis on citizen participation in urban governance. Bhubaneswar's Smart City Proposal was recognized nationally for its extensive public consultation process, involving more than 300,000 citizens through surveys, meetings, digital platforms, and community interactions. This participatory approach has enabled municipal authorities to incorporate public priorities into urban planning and has strengthened the relationship between citizens and local governance institutions. The city has increasingly adopted digital platforms for grievance redressal, public service delivery, and civic engagement, thereby fostering greater transparency and accountability in municipal administration.

Despite these achievements, demographic realities continue to exert a profound influence on planning priorities. The population of the Bhubaneswar urban agglomeration is estimated to have exceeded 1.2 million by 2025, while the wider metropolitan region continues to attract substantial numbers of migrants, students, professionals, and daily commuters from across Odisha and neighbouring states. Population growth, migration, social inclusion, affordable housing, skill development, and employment generation therefore remain central concerns for urban planners and policymakers.³⁹ The city's role as a major centre of higher education, healthcare, information technology, and administration has generated new opportunities for economic growth but has also intensified pressure on housing, transportation networks, public utilities, and social infrastructure.

Another emerging challenge relates to the management of the city's floating population. Every day, thousands of commuters travel to Bhubaneswar from nearby urban centres such as Cuttack, Khordha, Jatni, Choudwar, Dhenkanal, and Angul for employment, education, healthcare, and commercial activities. This transient population significantly increases the demand for transportation services, public spaces, water supply, sanitation, and waste-management infrastructure. Consequently, the success of Bhubaneswar's smart-city initiatives cannot be measured solely by technological innovation or infrastructural development; it must also be assessed in terms of their ability to address the needs of both permanent residents and floating populations.⁴⁰

Looking ahead, Bhubaneswar faces the challenge of balancing technological advancement with social equity and environmental sustainability. Climate resilience, affordable housing, water security, heritage conservation, and inclusive economic development are likely to shape the next phase of urban transformation. The city's experience demonstrates that smart urbanization is not merely a technological project but a comprehensive process that integrates governance, infrastructure, environmental stewardship, and citizen participation. As Bhubaneswar continues its journey from a planned post-independence capital to a digitally enabled metropolitan centre, its developmental trajectory offers important lessons for understanding the future of urbanization in India.

CONCLUSION

The demographic history of Bhubaneswar illustrates the transformation of an ancient religious centre into a modern capital city and emerging metropolitan hub. Population growth, migration, urban expansion, and socio-cultural diversification have reshaped the city over the last century. While the

capital-city status accelerated demographic expansion, subsequent economic and technological developments reinforced Bhubaneswar's role as a regional growth centre.

Despite impressive achievements, challenges relating to gender imbalance, slum development, environmental sustainability, and migration management remain significant. Understanding these demographic trends is essential for future planning and governance. As Bhubaneswar advances further into the era of smart urbanization, its historical demographic experience offers valuable lessons for achieving inclusive and sustainable urban development.

Figures



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