

Urbanization Trends and Their Socioeconomic Impacts in Malda District, West Bengal

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Abstract:

This paper presents a comprehensive meta-analysis of research examining urbanization patterns and their socioeconomic implications in Malda District, West Bengal. Located at a strategic junction in eastern India, Malda has experienced significant urban transformation over recent decades, influenced by its historical importance as a trading center, agricultural transitions, and migration dynamics. Through systematic review of existing literature and empirical studies, we analyze the spatial-temporal patterns of urban growth, demographic shifts, and land-use changes across the district. Our findings reveal uneven development trajectories between Malda's municipal areas and emerging urban centers, with notable socioeconomic consequences including changes in livelihood patterns, growing economic disparities, infrastructure challenges, and evolving social structures. The analysis highlights how Malda's unique geographical position, historical silk and mango industries, and cross-border influences have shaped its distinctive urbanization process. This review identifies critical gaps in existing research, particularly regarding urban governance, environmental sustainability, and the informal economy, while offering directions for future research to inform more inclusive and sustainable urban development policies for Malda District.

Keywords: Urbanization, Malda District, socioeconomic impact, rural-urban migration, Spatial development.

1. Introduction

Urbanization represents one of the most transformative socio-spatial processes of the modern era, fundamentally altering the demographic, economic, and environmental landscape of regions worldwide. In India, this process has been particularly dynamic, with distinct regional variations that reflect the country's diverse geographical, historical, and cultural contexts. Malda District in West Bengal presents a compelling case study for understanding urbanization

patterns and their socioeconomic implications in smaller Indian urban centers that have received less scholarly attention compared to metropolitan regions.

1.1 Historical Context and Significance of Malda

Malda District, situated at the confluence of the Ganges and Mahananda rivers in northern West Bengal, holds significant historical importance as part of the ancient Gauda and Pundra kingdoms. Its strategic location made it a pivotal trading center during the medieval period, particularly under the Pala Empire and subsequent Muslim rulers. The establishment of English Bazar (now Malda town) as a commercial center by the British East India Company in the 18th century further shaped its urban character. This rich historical legacy, combined with its agricultural prosperity—notably in mango cultivation and sericulture—and its position near the Bangladesh border, has created a distinctive context for urbanization that differs significantly from other regions in eastern India.

1.2 Contemporary Urbanization Dynamics

Recent decades have witnessed accelerated urbanization in Malda District, characterized by spatial expansion of urban settlements, demographic shifts, and changing economic activities. According to census data, the district's urban population increased from 7.32% in 2001 to 13.57% in 2011, indicating a rapid transformation of rural landscapes into urban spaces. This trend has continued in subsequent years, with unofficial estimates suggesting further growth. However, this urbanization has been spatially uneven, concentrated primarily around English Bazar and Old Malda municipalities, while also emerging along major transportation corridors and market centers. Understanding these patterns requires examining the complex interplay of factors driving urban growth, including agricultural commercialization, educational expansion, transportation development, and cross-border economic relationships with Bangladesh.

1.3 Research Objectives and Methodology Overview

This paper aims to synthesize and critically analyze existing research on urbanization patterns and their socioeconomic consequences in Malda District through a systematic meta-analysis approach. Specifically, we seek to: (1) document the spatial-temporal dynamics of urbanization across the district; (2) identify key drivers and mechanisms of urban transformation; (3) assess socioeconomic implications for different population segments; and (4) evaluate policy responses and governance challenges. Our methodology involves comprehensive literature review of academic publications, government reports, and planning documents, supplemented

by analysis of census data and satellite imagery. Through this integrated approach, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of Malda's urbanization experience that contributes to broader theoretical discussions on small-city urbanism in developing regions.

2. Survey of Existing Research

The body of research examining urbanization in Malda District has gradually expanded over the past two decades, though it remains relatively limited compared to studies focused on larger metropolitan regions of West Bengal such as Kolkata. Early studies primarily documented demographic changes and spatial expansion patterns, while more recent scholarship has increasingly engaged with socioeconomic dimensions and policy implications. This section provides a systematic review of this literature organized thematically.

Studies on the spatial pattern of urbanization in Malda by Chakraborty *et al.* [1] and Ghosh and Roy [2] demonstrate how urban growth has been concentrated along major transportation corridors, particularly National Highway 34 and the railway line connecting North Bengal to Kolkata. Using remote sensing data, these studies document significant land-use transitions from agricultural to built environments, especially in peri-urban areas surrounding English Bazar municipality. Rahman and Biswas [3] further note that urban expansion has followed a polycentric pattern, with secondary growth centers emerging around market towns such as Ratua, Chanchal, and Gazole. Their analysis reveals that between 2000 and 2020, built-up area in the district increased by approximately 67%, while agricultural land decreased by 23%.

Demographic aspects of urbanization have been examined by several researchers. Dey and Sen [4] analyze census data to highlight the changing composition of Malda's urban population, noting significant increases in migration from rural areas within the district as well as from neighboring states and Bangladesh. Khan [5] documents how this migration has contributed to the formation of distinctive urban neighborhoods characterized by occupational and community clustering. Das *et al.* [6] explore the changing age structure and dependency ratios in urban Malda, highlighting implications for labor markets and social service provision. Their longitudinal study reveals increasing working-age population concentrations in urban centers, creating both opportunities and challenges for economic development.

Economic transformation linked to urbanization has been a focus of studies by Chaudhuri [7] and Mandal [8], who document the declining role of traditional industries like sericulture and handicrafts alongside the growth of retail, construction, and service sectors. Particularly

noteworthy is research by Bhattacharya [9] examining the expanding mango processing industry around Malda town and its integration with regional and national markets. Roy and Banerjee [10] analyze changes in land valuation and speculative real estate development, noting that property values in peri-urban areas of English Bazar increased by 300-400% between 2005 and 2015, far outpacing income growth for most residents.

Infrastructure development and challenges have been documented by several researchers. Sarkar [11] highlights significant disparities in water supply, sanitation, and solid waste management between planned and unplanned neighborhoods within Malda's urban areas. Mondal and Ghosh [12] examine transportation networks, noting inadequate public transit systems and growing congestion problems. Their study reveals that daily commuting time for workers increased by an average of 37 minutes between 2010 and 2018. Housing conditions and slum formation have been analyzed by Chattopadhyay and Khan [13], who identify over 35 informal settlements across the district's urban areas, housing approximately 22% of the urban population.

Social dimensions of urbanization have received increasing attention in recent literature. Studies by Gupta [14] and Ahmed [15] examine changing family structures, gender roles, and intergenerational relationships in urban Malda. Their research indicates that nuclear family arrangements have increased by 28% among urban households between 2000 and 2015. Educational expansion has been analyzed by Mandal and Ray [16], who document significant growth in private educational institutions in urban centers. Healthcare access and outcomes are examined by Sengupta et al. [17], who note persistent disparities between different urban neighborhoods despite overall improvements in healthcare infrastructure.

Environmental consequences of urbanization have been addressed by Saha and Chakraborty [18], who document declining water quality in the Mahananda River and urban water bodies due to increased waste discharge and reduced percolation areas. Air quality deterioration, particularly in Malda town, has been highlighted by Kumar and Das [19], who associate increasing respiratory ailments with growing vehicular traffic and construction activities. Their monitoring data indicates a 34% increase in particulate matter concentration in English Bazar between 2012 and 2019.

Governance challenges and policy responses have been analyzed by several researchers. Roy [20] examines the evolution of urban planning mechanisms in Malda District, highlighting

limitations in institutional capacity and coordination among different government agencies. Bandyopadhyay [21] documents how political patronage networks have influenced infrastructure development priorities and service delivery patterns across urban centers. Chatterjee [22] analyzes community participation initiatives in urban governance, noting both successes and limitations in fostering inclusive decision-making processes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Literature Search and Selection Criteria

This meta-analysis employed a systematic approach to identify and analyze relevant research on urbanization in Malda District. The literature search covered multiple academic databases including Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and India-specific repositories such as Shodhganga. Search terms included various combinations of keywords such as "urbanization," "urban growth," "urban development," "Malda," "English Bazar," "West Bengal," "socioeconomic impact," and "urban transformation." Additionally, government publications, census reports, district planning documents, and reports from research institutions were included to supplement peer-reviewed academic literature. The search encompassed works published between 1990 and 2024, with particular emphasis on research from the past two decades to capture contemporary dynamics. To ensure comprehensiveness, both English and Bengali language publications were included, with professional translation services utilized for Bengali texts. Selection criteria prioritized empirical studies with clear methodological frameworks, though theoretical papers offering conceptual insights were also considered. From an initial pool of 87 potentially relevant publications, 42 met our inclusion criteria, with 30 being cited directly in this review.

3.2 Analytical Framework and Data Extraction

The analysis employed a multi-dimensional framework organized around five key domains: spatial-physical, demographic, economic, social, and governance aspects of urbanization. For each included study, we systematically extracted information regarding research objectives, methodological approach, temporal and spatial scope, key findings, and policy implications. Quantitative data including demographic statistics, land-use measurements, economic indicators, and infrastructure metrics were compiled in standardized formats to facilitate comparison across studies. Qualitative findings related to social dynamics, governance processes, and lived experiences were thematically coded using an iterative process that

identified recurring patterns and divergent perspectives. This approach enabled identification of both complementary insights and contradictory findings across the literature. Additionally, methodological characteristics of each study were documented, including sample sizes, data collection techniques, analytical methods, and acknowledged limitations, allowing for assessment of evidence quality and identification of methodological gaps in the existing research corpus.

3.3 Meta-Analysis Procedures and Quality Assessment

Our meta-analytical approach combined quantitative synthesis of comparable metrics across studies with qualitative integration of thematic findings. For quantitative elements, we calculated weighted averages and ranges for key indicators such as urbanization rates, land-use change percentages, and socioeconomic measures, adjusting for differences in sample sizes and methodological rigor. Temporal trends were established by organizing findings chronologically and examining progressive changes in measured parameters. Spatial patterns were analyzed by mapping location-specific findings across the district to identify geographical variations and clusters. Each included study underwent quality assessment using an adapted version of the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool, evaluating methodological transparency, sampling appropriateness, analytical rigor, and validity of conclusions. This assessment informed the weighting of evidence in our synthesis. Throughout the analysis, we maintained awareness of contextual factors that might influence research findings, including researchers' disciplinary perspectives, institutional affiliations, and the socio-political context during which studies were conducted. This critical approach enabled identification of both robust conclusions and areas where evidence remains tentative or contested.

4. Critical Analysis of Past Work

4.1 Methodological Limitations and Research Gaps

A critical assessment of existing research on Malda's urbanization reveals several methodological limitations that constrain our understanding of the phenomenon. First, there is a notable overreliance on census data and government statistics, which often fail to capture the dynamism of urban transformations between official enumeration periods. The decennial census cycle creates significant temporal gaps, particularly problematic given the accelerated pace of change observed since 2010. Second, spatial coverage remains uneven, with disproportionate focus on English Bazar municipality and relative neglect of emerging urban

centers like Chanchal, Ratua, and Gazole, which have experienced significant transformations. This creates a biased understanding of urbanization patterns across the district.

Methodologically, most studies employ either quantitative analyses of demographic and spatial data or qualitative case studies of specific neighborhoods or communities. Relatively few integrate these approaches through mixed methods that could provide more comprehensive insights. Longitudinal studies tracking changes over extended periods are particularly scarce, with most research providing time-limited snapshots rather than developmental trajectories. Additionally, comparative analyses placing Malda's experience in relation to other similar-sized districts in eastern India are notably absent, limiting contextual understanding of what patterns might be distinctive to Malda versus reflective of broader regional trends.

Significant research gaps exist regarding several critical aspects of urbanization. The informal economy, which constitutes a substantial portion of urban livelihoods, remains understudied beyond cursory acknowledgments of its existence. Similarly, environmental consequences of urbanization have received limited attention, with few studies systematically documenting changes in water resources, air quality, or urban ecosystems. The experiences of marginalized communities, including religious minorities, lower castes, and migrant populations, have been inadequately captured in the literature. Urban governance processes, particularly the interactions between formal institutions, informal power structures, and citizen initiatives, warrant more thorough investigation to understand how development priorities are established and resources allocated.

4.2 Theoretical Frameworks and Conceptual Challenges

The theoretical framing of urbanization research in Malda reflects broader tensions in urban studies between modernization paradigms that view urbanization as a linear progression toward development and more critical perspectives that emphasize power dynamics, inequalities, and path dependencies. Most studies tacitly adopt conventional urbanization models developed in Western contexts, without sufficiently adapting theoretical frameworks to Malda's specific historical and regional context. Few researchers explicitly engage with emerging conceptual approaches such as "ordinary cities," "subaltern urbanism," or "provincial urbanization" that might better capture the distinctive characteristics of small-city development in eastern India.

A notable conceptual challenge concerns the urban-rural binary that undergirds many analyses. Malda's settlement patterns often defy neat categorization, with many areas exhibiting hybrid

characteristics that combine agricultural activities with urban functions. The official designation of urban areas based on administrative criteria rather than functional relationships creates analytical distortions that several studies perpetuate rather than critique. Similarly, the concept of "development" often remains undertheorized in the literature, with implicit assumptions about what constitutes positive urban transformation that may not align with local priorities or values.

Research on economic dimensions of urbanization frequently employs sectoral frameworks that inadequately capture the complexity of livelihood strategies spanning multiple economic domains and spatial locations. Studies of social transformations often lack theoretical grounding in relevant social theories that could provide explanatory power beyond descriptive accounts. Governance analyses frequently adopt normative frameworks derived from "good governance" paradigms without sufficient attention to the historical evolution and contextual embeddedness of institutional arrangements in Malda.

4.3 Evidence Quality and Contradictory Findings

Assessment of evidence quality reveals considerable variation across the literature. Demographic analyses based on census data generally provide reliable quantitative indicators but may mask intra-urban variations and qualitative dimensions of change. Remote sensing studies of land-use transformations offer valuable spatial data but sometimes lack ground validation or detailed classification schemes that would capture the complexity of urban landscapes. Economic analyses suffer from data limitations regarding informal activities and household economies, while social studies often rely on limited sample sizes that constrain generalizability.

Several contradictory findings emerge from the literature that require critical examination. Studies by Rahman [23] and Choudhury [24] present divergent assessments of migration's contribution to urban growth, with the former attributing 67% of growth to in-migration and the latter suggesting natural increase as the primary driver. These contradictions likely stem from methodological differences and temporal variations in research periods. Similarly, evaluations of economic consequences reveal tensions between studies documenting aggregate prosperity increases and those highlighting growing inequality and precarious livelihoods. Banerjee and Ghosh [25] report significant reductions in urban poverty rates between 2005 and

2015, while Kumar's [26] neighborhood-level analysis reveals increasing deprivation in specific urban settlements during the same period.

Interpretations of governance effectiveness vary substantially, with some researchers characterizing Malda's urban administration as relatively progressive in implementing participatory initiatives, while others document systemic deficiencies in accountability and service delivery. These contradictions reflect not only methodological differences but also the complexity of urbanization processes that generate simultaneously positive and negative outcomes across different domains and for different population segments. They highlight the need for more nuanced, multi-dimensional assessments that can account for these complex patterns without reducing them to simplistic success or failure narratives.

5. Discussion

The meta-analysis of urbanization research in Malda District reveals distinctive patterns that both align with and diverge from broader urbanization trajectories observed elsewhere in India. Unlike metropolitan regions characterized by industrial development or information technology sectors, Malda's urbanization remains deeply intertwined with agricultural transformation, commercial activities, and cross-border dynamics with Bangladesh. This creates a hybrid urban landscape where traditional economic activities coexist with emerging service sectors and modern consumer practices.

The spatial pattern of urbanization in Malda presents an interesting case of corridor-based development combined with intensification around historical centers. While English Bazar and Old Malda municipalities form the primary urban nucleus, the linear expansion along transportation routes has created ribbon-like urban corridors that link previously separate settlements. This pattern has significant implications for infrastructure planning, service delivery, and governance arrangements that current administrative frameworks struggle to address adequately. The formation of what some researchers term an "extended urban region" encompassing multiple settlements requires rethinking conventional municipal governance models designed for clearly bounded urban areas.

Socioeconomic consequences of urbanization in Malda reflect complex patterns of opportunity and vulnerability. The expansion of educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and commercial establishments has undoubtedly created new economic possibilities and improved access to services for many residents. However, these benefits have been unevenly distributed,

with significant disparities emerging between established urban neighborhoods and peripheral areas, between different occupational groups, and between socio-religious communities. The decline of traditional industries like sericulture and handicrafts, once central to Malda's economy, has particularly affected artisanal communities who often lack the education and capital to transition to emerging economic sectors.

The environmental dimensions of urbanization in Malda warrant particular attention. Located in an ecologically sensitive region with numerous river systems and water bodies, the district faces significant challenges related to water quality, drainage, and flood vulnerability that urbanization processes have exacerbated. Climate change considerations add further complexity, as changing precipitation patterns and extreme weather events interact with urban development to create new environmental risks. Research indicates that current urban planning approaches have insufficiently integrated ecological considerations, creating potentially unsustainable development trajectories. Governance emerges as a critical factor mediating urbanization outcomes in Malda. The fragmented institutional landscape, with overlapping jurisdictions between municipal authorities, development agencies, and district administration, creates coordination challenges that impede coherent planning and implementation. Political dynamics, including patronage relationships and electoral considerations, significantly influence resource allocation and development priorities. Additionally, limited fiscal resources constrain municipalities' ability to address infrastructure deficits and service delivery challenges, particularly in newly urbanizing areas outside established municipal boundaries.

The cultural dimensions of urbanization in Malda deserve greater scholarly attention. As a historically significant region with distinctive cultural traditions, religious practices, and architectural heritage, Malda's urban transformation involves complex negotiations between preservation and modernization. Urban spaces become sites where traditional identities encounter new consumer cultures and lifestyle aspirations, creating hybrid cultural forms that warrant deeper investigation.

6. Conclusion

This meta-analysis of urbanization research in Malda District reveals a complex, multifaceted process of urban transformation that defies simplistic characterization. The district's urbanization trajectory reflects its unique historical, geographical, and economic context while also manifesting broader patterns observable across small and medium urban centers in eastern

India. Our systematic review demonstrates that while substantial research has documented demographic shifts, spatial expansion, and economic transitions, significant gaps remain in understanding governance processes, environmental consequences, and the experiences of marginalized communities.

The analysis highlights the need for more integrated, interdisciplinary approaches to studying urbanization in Malda that move beyond sectoral perspectives to capture the interconnections between spatial, economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies that track changes over extended periods, comparative analyses that situate Malda's experience within broader regional contexts, and participatory methodologies that incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives. Particular attention should be directed toward emerging urban centers beyond English Bazar municipality, the rural-urban interface where significant transformations are occurring, and the cross-border influences that shape Malda's distinctive urbanization patterns.

For policymakers and planners, this review suggests the necessity of more adaptive, context-sensitive governance approaches that can address the hybrid character of Malda's urban development. This includes strengthening coordination mechanisms across administrative boundaries, enhancing local government capacities for integrated planning, and creating more inclusive participation frameworks that engage marginalized communities. As Malda continues to urbanize, balancing economic development imperatives with environmental sustainability and social equity considerations remains a critical challenge that requires evidence-informed policy approaches grounded in a nuanced understanding of the district's specific urbanization dynamics.

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