LEX LOCALIS-JOURNAL OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT
ISSN:1581-5374 E-ISSN:1855-363X
VOL. 23, NO. S6 (2025)

TRUST AND PARTICIPATION CHALLENGES FOR A SMART URBANISM IN IMPHAL CITY (INDIA)

Ningthoujam Irina Devi*

Abstract:
Digital governance plays a central role in advancing administrative development and development administration by enhancing transparency, accountability, and citizen trust, thereby enabling smart and innovative urban service delivery. India's Smart Cities Mission, a multi-crore initiative implemented across selected cities, depends heavily on public trust and participation; without these, the project risks failing its social objectives and becoming vulnerable to financial mismanagement. Importantly, the effectiveness of these factors is often shaped by the socio-political structure of the local state politics. This article examines how citizen participation has been conceptualized and operationalized in a very fragile urban context of Imphal, a small city in India, during both the formulation and implementation phases of its Smart City Mission. Using a mixed-methods approach—combining literature review, policy analysis, and a primary survey of Imphal's residents—the study finds that the city adopted a hybrid participatory model. This model blended direct interaction, digital-media outreach, crowdsourcing of ideas, and mass publicity campaigns. Survey findings shed light on citizens' socio-economic characteristics, levels of awareness, and expectations, providing empirical insight into how participatory planning unfolds on the ground. While engagement mechanisms were relatively active during the proposal stage, the results indicate that achieving sustainable urban transformation requires ongoing, inclusive, and institutionalized participation, along with continuous trust-building—an aspect that remains a significant challenge.

Keywords: Citizen Participation, Imphal, Urban Governance, Public trust, Digital Democracy

Introduction

Urban centres have long served as engines of economic growth, yet they are equally marked by challenges in the delivery of basic services. Urbanisation increasingly shapes the global transition toward smart cities—envisioned as technologically advanced spaces that enhance urban efficiency and improve quality of life. In India, approximately 31% of the population resides in urban areas, contributing 63% to the national GDP (Census of India, 2011). In response to the growing complexities of urban management, the Government of India launched the Smart Cities Mission (SCM) in 2015, aiming to transform cities into inclusive, sustainable, and technology-enabled engines of development. The concept of a "Smart City" remains inherently fluid and lacks a universally accepted definition. People in different parts of the world have different ideas about what it means to be smart, depending on how developed their region is, the political situation, and their own goals. In India, for instance, the idea of smart cities may be very different from what it is in Europe or East Asia. These interpretations change from city to city in India, depending on how well the government can handle things, how many resources are available, and what citizens expect.

Even though the definition is unclear, some clarity is needed to help with implementation. For a lot of people living in cities in India, the idea of a Smart City is a mix of their own hopes and dreams, like better roads, more reliable water supply, better waste management, safety, and job opportunities. The SCM meets these needs by using a framework based on four main pillars: institutional, physical, social, and economic infrastructure. This vision is not meant to bring about immediate change, but rather to make small changes that will lead to long-term urban sustainability. The mission is to make sure that basic infrastructure is in place, that people have a good quality of life, that the environment is clean and sustainable, and that Smart Solutions driven by technology are used. It is important because it shows how important participatory governance is—encouraging bottom-up planning and using local knowledge to improve service delivery and hold people accountable in a democratic way. So citizen engagement as one of the important pillar of governance is emphasised.

One of the 23 Fast Track Cities chosen in 2016 under the Smart Cities Mission was Imphal, the capital of Manipur, which is situated in the economically and socially impoverished north-eastern region of India. This case provides important insights into the adaptation of participatory practices in the urban environment of north-eastern India. As a gateway to Southeast Asia, Imphal is strategically located under the Act East Policy. Because of its proximity to international trade routes, it has the potential

to serve as a centre for cultural diplomacy, economic exchange, and regional connectivity. The public's trust in formal institutions has been undermined by Imphal's governance issues, which include political instability, frequent disruptions in the provision of public services, and a precarious law-and-order situation. Imphal is home to 277,196 people, including 135,313 according to the 2011 Census of India. The city consists of the Imphal Municipal Corporation's jurisdiction and the surrounding urban areas that make up the Imphal Urban Agglomeration. Additionally, 89,368 people are listed in the Census as main or marginal workers, yielding a 32.23% Work Participation Rate (WPR). Although the Census does not explicitly provide unemployment rates, the comparatively low WPR suggests that the working-age population is not very involved in either formal or informal employment. While Unemployment figures are not directly provided in the census, this relatively low WPR implies limited engagement of the working age population in the formal or informal employment sectors.

Supplementary data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) 68th Round (2011–12) estimated urban unemployment rates in Manipur to range between 6–9%, depending on the measurement criteria (NSSO, 2014). The situation is especially concerning for educated youth and women in urban areas, reflecting both structural barriers and a mismatch between skills and opportunities. More recent data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) reaffirms the persistence of urban unemployment, emphasizing the need for inclusive, employment-oriented urban development interventions.

Against this backdrop, the Smart Cities Mission presents a dual opportunity: to upgrade urban infrastructure and to strengthen participatory governance. In a context marred by institutional mistrust and socio-political fragmentation, citizen engagement becomes not just a procedural requirement but a potential driver of democratic revitalization. Through access to digital tools, public platforms, and transparent decision-making, citizens can actively co-create urban solutions, monitor implementation, and contribute to peacebuilding and accountability. Although the design phase of SCM in Imphal reflects commendable innovation in citizen inclusion, maintaining this engagement post-approval remains a persistent challenge—one that calls for institutional adaptability and long-term participatory mechanisms. This paper attempts to understand the nature of citizen participation in Imphal's Smart City Mission.

Literature Review

Citizen participation is commonly understood as voluntary involvement in structured activities aimed at achieving collective objectives, without monetary compensation (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Public participation refers to the mechanisms through which public concerns, preferences, and values are integrated into governmental and corporate decision-making processes (Creighton, 2005). Effective participation requires two-way communication and interaction between citizens and governing bodies, with the goal of producing more informed and publicly supported decisions. In the context of smart city development, meaningful community engagement plays a crucial role in securing the necessary commitment for the successful implementation of projects (Mazhar, Sarshar, Fayaz, Kaveh, & Bull, 2017). To assess the extent and quality of citizen involvement, Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation offers a valuable framework, as demonstrated in analyses of smart city initiatives such as those undertaken in London (Willems, Van den Bergh, & Viaene). To conceptualize citizen engagement in smart city projects, Arnstein's (1969) "Ladder of Citizen Participation" serves as a critical analytical framework. The ladder delineates eight (8) rungs of participation, from manipulation and therapy (non participation), through informing, consultation, and placation (tokenism), to citizen power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control). This model may be useful to differentiate shallow consultation from having a truly empowered consultation. The functionality of this ladder can be seen in the case of Imphal Smart City, where despite attempts to have public

consultation it often remained restricted to being tokenism and was not institutionalised to empower people to actually take decisions.

Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969)

8. Citizen Control	← Highest degree of citizen power
7. Delegated Power	
6. Partnership	
----------	← Degrees of Citizen Power
5. Placation	
4. Consultation	
3. Informing	
----------	← Degrees of Tokenism
2. Therapy	
1. Manipulation	← Non-participation

The three levels of participation identified by Arnstein's model are Citizen Power, Tokenism, and Non-participation. Evidence from public responses in the Imphal case suggests that participation was primarily at the level of consultation or placation rather than involving real citizen control or decision-making.

Cardullo (2019) highlights the evolving ideas of citizenship in smart cities, voicing concerns about the marginalization of grassroots voices and data-driven urban governance. The limitations of implementing digital platforms in SCM top-down are emphasized by Vaishampayan et al. (2023), who also make the case for integrating participatory governance frameworks. They argue that, particularly in Tier-II cities, smart city initiatives need to be in line with regional sociopolitical contexts. The importance of stakeholder engagement in the successful execution of public projects is further emphasized by PMBOK (2017)

Kundu's (2018) recent study on urban governance in India emphasizes that sustainable urban transformation necessitates participatory mechanisms at all stages of development. Datta (2015) likewise critiques smart city methodologies for their excessive technocracy, advocating for more democratic governance frameworks. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (2021) says that structured feedback systems and citizen-report cards would help the government work better with citizens. In the context of Imphal, Singh and Devi (2022) underscore the historical marginalization of citizen voices in development planning in Manipur and stress the necessity for inclusive urban governance in northeastern states.

Methodology

This study combines qualitative and quantitative methods, including a review of government documents, stakeholder consultations, and a primary survey conducted online using structured questionnaires. The survey aimed to assess citizens' awareness, level of participation, and socio-economic profile. 300 online survey questionnaires were distributed, of which 88 valid responses were collected due to lack of willingness to participate by the respondent (70.6%), reflecting a valid 29.33% response rate only. However semi-structured interview with random public were conducted to reflect their view on smart city projects. The structured questionnaire covered areas such as digital engagement, awareness of SCM activities, inclusion in consultation forums, and satisfaction with project updates.

Modes of Citizen Engagement in Imphal Smart City Proposal

The Imphal city urban local governance comes under Imphal Municipal Corporation (IMC) and has 27 wards under it. Each ward elects one councillor who also heads the Ward Development Committee (supported by nominated and elected members). In 2022, 9 wards were reserved for women, and 3 wards were reserved for Scheduled Tribes. The last municipal election for the IMC took place on June

2, 2016, with results declared shortly thereafter. The next election was due in 2021, but has since been postponed. Though in August 2022**,** the High Court pressed the state to clarify reasons and schedule fresh elections. Governance continues under caretaker setups administered by the Manipur State Election Commission (SEC) where the earlier elected councillors continue to coordinate activities in the local level. The Imphal Municipal Corporation (IMC), in collaboration with the parastatal agency MAHUD (Department of Municipal Administration, Housing and Urban Development, Government of Manipur), played a key role in organizing a series of citizen consultations. These initiatives were aimed at soliciting public opinions and preferences to be incorporated into the final Imphal Smart City Proposal. Citizen participation in Imphal's Smart City Proposal was facilitated through multiple engagement modes:

- **Direct Interaction:** Consultations with SHGs, senior citizens, street vendors, NGOs, and local clubs reflected a community-centered deliberative model (Habermas, 1984).
- **Digital Platforms:** Facebook, Twitter, and MyGov were used to collect ideas and suggestions, though digital divides posed participation barriers (Jenkins et al., 2009).
- **Crowdsourcing:** Offline and online competitions—like essay writing and slogan contests—enabled creative engagement and co-production of urban visions (Fung, 2006).
- **Publicity Campaigns:** Mass media platforms like AIR-Imphal, Doordarshan, newspapers, and public events such as Sangai Festival ensured broad-based outreach.

This hybrid approach ensured inclusivity across gender, age, economic, and technological divides. Notably, there was active citizen participation during the proposal phase. Imphal's Smart City Proposal's strategic elements were directly impacted by citizen feedback. Citing its historical, economic, and cultural significance, residents favored retrofitting the core area, which includes the Kangla, CBD, and DM College campus. The proposal, which placed a strong emphasis on e-governance, mobility, and heritage conservation, strategically matched this feedback. Additionally, residents envisioned a city with better infrastructure for pedestrians, solar energy use, solid waste management, and drainage. This vision was shaped in part by surveys and competitions, demonstrating the high level of co-creation in urban planning. Similar dynamics where public opinion influenced project priorities are revealed by comparative studies (Sharma, 2020) on cities like Pune and Bhopal, highlighting the significance of vision co-creation.

Public opinion played a pivotal role in shaping the vision and strategic direction of the Imphal Smart City proposal. Citizens were actively engaged through interviews and structured questionnaires to articulate their aspirations and expectations for urban development. The feedback collected through these participatory methods directly informed the formulation of the city's vision and goals. The final improved Smart City proposal for Imphal city prepared by an architectural firm M/s Arkitechno Consultant Pvt Ltd, Bhubaneshwar after incorporating the suggested views and opinions from Citizens and Administrative staff College (mentoring institution) was approved on 18th April 2016 by the State level High powered steering committee (HPSC). The same committee also approved the formation of a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) named Imphal Smart City Limited (ISCL) on 18 April 2016**,** chaired by its then Imphal Municipal Corporation Chairperson, A. Nimai to operationalize the Smart Cities Mission in Imphal**.** According to the Human Resource Plan submitted by IMC, the SPV was to be constituted as a public limited company under the Companies Act, 2013**,** enabling it to function with administrative and financial autonomy for effective mission execution. Subsequently, in November 2018**,** the Government of Manipur signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with IL&FS Township and Urban Assets Limited and Price water house Coopers Private Limited (PwC) to provide consultancy and project management services for the SPV's establishment and functioning. Still, IL&FS and PwC have only given the public a little bit of information about their work on the Imphal Smart City project. People are very upset about this lack of openness. The Sangai Express published an article called "Consultant Turns Out a Defaulter," which was cited by the Centre for Research and Advocacy Manipur (CRAM, 2019). This article raised serious doubts about the

credibility of these consulting firms. It claimed that at the time of their hiring, PwC and IL&FS were both embroiled in significant national financial and ethical scandals. Due to its debt of over ₹99,000 crore, IL&FS was on the verge of going bankrupt. As a result, the Serious Fraud Investigation Office (SFIO) was tasked by the central government to investigate the situation. Meanwhile, PwC was prohibited from conducting business by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI).
These disclosures raise concerns about the level of due diligence state authorities performed when choosing companies for such an important urban development project. They underscore broader issues of transparency, governance, and accountability in public-private partnerships. The episode highlights the urgent need for robust oversight mechanisms and citizen-centric processes in the implementation of high-stakes government missions like the Smart Cities initiative (CRAM, 2019). There was 27 projects approved with a total cost of rupees 1523 crores to be implemented by different agencies conversing many central projects to achieved the Imphal smart city mission. Therefore this paper attempts to highlight the post-approval, citizen involvement which appeared to wane due to the absence of ongoing communication platforms and regular feedback loops. As Khosla (2021) points out, participatory planning must be backed by institutional infrastructure and accountability systems to ensure sustainability.

Primary Survey Findings
A total of 88 valid responses were received through online surveys. The key findings are summarized below:

- **Education:** A significant majority of respondents were highly educated, with 60.2% having completed postgraduate studies, 30.7% graduates, and the rest holding doctoral or M.Phil degrees. This reflects a well-informed participant group.
- **Awareness:** 69.3% of respondents were aware of the Smart City Mission, while 30.7% lacked awareness. Most participants learned about SCM through digital sources, particularly social media and news portals.
- **Income and Occupation:** The income distribution showed a dominance of lower to middle-income respondents. Employment categories included government employees, private sector workers, students, and self-employed individuals.
- **Engagement:** Although awareness was high among the respondents, few had engaged in public consultations or follow-up activities after the proposal stage.

A key finding, based on additional data represented in a public opinion chart, reveals that when asked whether opinions generated through mass media (radio, TV interviews, Facebook, etc.) were incorporated into Smart City projects:

- Only 1 respondent felt their views were fully taken.
- 41 respondents stated their views were partially taken.
- 20 respondents felt they were not taken at all.
- 23 respondents had no comments.
- 3 gave unspecified or miscellaneous responses.

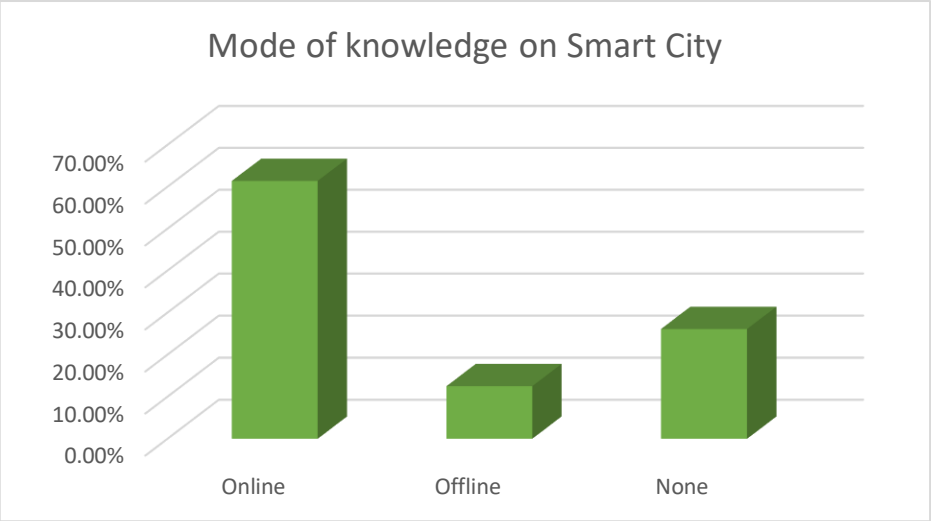
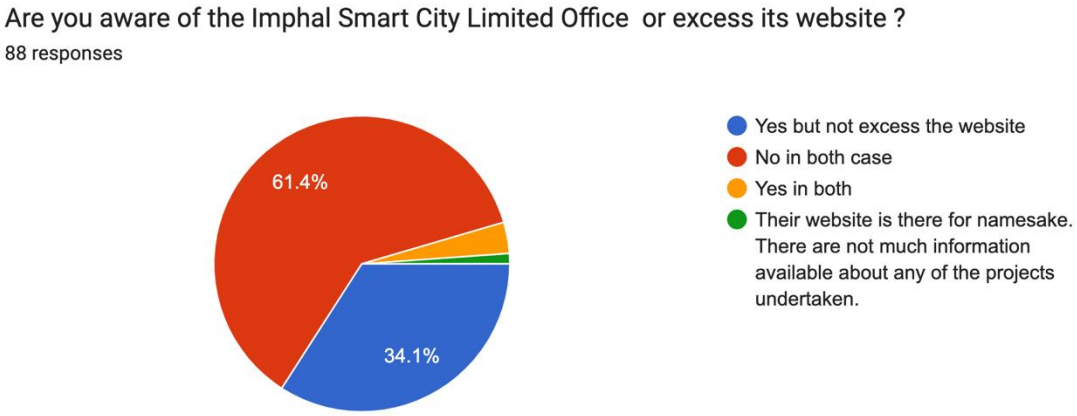
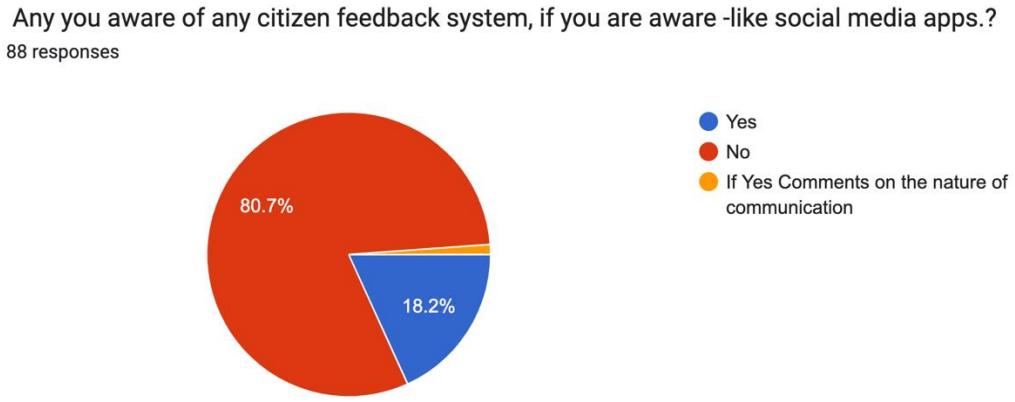


Figure: Mode of knowledge on Imphal Smart City Mission

This further supports the assertion that while mechanisms for engagement were created, their effectiveness in influencing outcomes remains questionable. The distribution of responses places the engagement process at the "consultation" or "placation" rung of Arnstein's ladder, reinforcing the need for mechanisms that transfer more decision-making power to citizens.





In fact in an effort to understand the structure and activities of ISCL, the researcher made several attempts to access the organisation's official website with the latest attempt on 20 June 2025.

However, many sections of the website were either inaccessible or did not provide adequate information regarding the organisation and its ongoing projects. During two years of observation, the website has not been updated with any new information. While it is often viewed as a point of critique, the website also illustrates the challenges of implementing the Smart Cities Mission. While the social media Facebook page has 2800 followers and has other four more link to connect with the citizens on their ongoing activities.

The research also found that once the Imphal Smart city mission was approved, there is almost no data of any Television discussion neither any citizen feedback system on any of the specific projects taken up within the Imphal smart city mission. There was less awareness on the projects. Despite claims of public consultation, survey data reveals a stark contrast between citizen aspirations and awareness levels. For most Smart City projects in Imphal, a majority of respondents were unaware of their existence, and many expressed uncertainty even if they had heard of them. This highlights critical gaps in communication strategies and the symbolic rather than substantive inclusion of citizens in urban transformation. Over 60% of responses across all project categories fall under the "No" or "Heard of but unclear" categories, with negligible awareness of services without user fees during the survey. This undermines the participatory ideals of the Smart City Mission.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the early momentum in participatory planning, several challenges were identified:

- **Sustainability of Engagement:** No structured mechanism was developed to sustain participation during implementation.
- **Digital Divide:** Citizens without access to internet or digital skills were largely excluded. Not just this frequent suspension of public internet connectivity by the state also hinder the digital accessibility.
- **Feedback Loop:** Absence of televised discussions or active citizen feedback channels led to limited ongoing participation.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Lack of accessible updates about project progress and expenditure led to public disengagement.
- **Tokenism in Engagement:** The charted data reflect that although public opinion was collected, many felt their inputs had limited impact—suggesting performative rather than substantive inclusion.

Going forward, Imphal must institutionalize citizen engagement through ward-level committees, mobile feedback platforms, and periodic town-hall meetings. Digital tools must be complemented with offline mechanisms to ensure no one is left behind. Evaluation mechanisms should also be integrated to assess how citizen inputs influence final decisions. The SCM framework could benefit from integrating public scorecards, citizen audits, and participatory budgeting, as seen in cities like Bengaluru and Kochi.

Conclusion

The findings from this study highlight both the promise and the complexity of citizen engagement in the implementation of the SCM in Imphal. While efforts have been made to initiate participatory models—such as consultations, surveys, and limited use of digital platforms—these mechanisms often fall short of enabling deep, continuous, and inclusive participation. The study reveals that success stories do exist, particularly where citizen voices have been meaningfully incorporated, as seen in the Nongpok Thong Bridge development and selected mobility and sanitation projects. However, these remain exceptions rather than the norm. The Imphal case study reveals that while the Smart City Mission has enabled innovative models of public participation, gaps in digital access, policy continuity, and feedback integration persist. Citizen engagement, particularly during the implementation stage, needs to be strengthened through institutional innovations. Ensuring

meaningful participation from all social groups, especially the digitally excluded, is key to achieving inclusive urban transformation. The study underscores the importance of long-term planning for participatory governance and the necessity to create feedback-informed policy cycles. Furthermore, an underlying issue that hinders effective citizen participation is the prevailing lack of trust in governmental institutions and governance mechanisms. Many citizens perceive public consultations as symbolic rather than substantive, which weakens public confidence and engagement. Addressing this trust deficit through transparent practices, timely dissemination of information, and accountability-driven governance will be crucial for building durable citizen-government relationships.

However the study was significantly affected by the sudden eruption of communal conflict on May 3rd, 2023 in Manipur. The ensuing curfews, public bandhs, political instability, and frequent internet shutdowns severely hindered the smooth collection of survey data as well as with the implementation of smart city mission which thrives with the support of internet facilities in many of these projects. These conditions not only disrupted outreach activities but also limited the ability of many citizens to respond to online questionnaires, likely contributing to the low response rate.

References

- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A Ladder of Citizen Participation. Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 35(4), 216–224.
- Cardullo, P. (2019). Citizenship and Citizens in the Smart City. In Citizens in the Smart City. Routledge.
- Centre for Research and Advocacy Manipur (CRAM). (2019). Imphal Smart City: Unveiling privatization and threats to human rights in Manipur. Imphal: CRAM. Retrieved from http://www.cramanipur.org
- Vaishampayan, S., Deshpande, R., & Jadhav, T. (2023). Enhancing Citizen Engagement in Smart Cities Mission in India. Indian Institute of Public Administration Journal.
- Habermas, J. (1984). The Theory of Communicative Action.
- Jenkins, H. et al. (2009). Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture. MIT Press.
- Fung, A. (2006). Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance. Public Administration Review.
- Project Management Institute. (2017). A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide) (6th ed.).
- Kundu, A. (2018). Urbanization in India: Challenges, Opportunities, and the Way Forward. OUP.
- Datta, A. (2015). The Intimate City: Citizenship and Slow Urbanism. In Environment and Planning D.
- Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. (2021). Smart Cities Mission Implementation Status Report.
- Singh, R. & Devi, L. (2022). Citizen Voices in Urban Planning in Northeast India. Economic and Political Weekly.
- Khosla, R. (2021). Planning Cities for People: Beyond Infrastructure. CPR India.
- Sharma, M. (2020). Public Participation in Smart City Implementation: Lessons from Pune and Bhopal. Urban India Journal.