



URBAN WARFARE & 'THE RIGHT TO THE CITY' IN INDIA

NISHA NAYAK ¹ | DR. RAJKUMAR MANDORA ²

¹ RESEARCH SCHOLAR, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE AND STRATEGIC STUDIES, SHRI KUSHAL DAS UNIVERSITY, RAJASTHAN.

² RESEARCH SUPERVISOR, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE AND STRATEGIC STUDIES, SHRI KUSHAL DAS UNIVERSITY, RAJASTHAN.

ABSTRACT:

The critical intersection of urban warfare and the right to the city (RTTC) in India, specifically addressing how state-led exclusionary planning and militarized security strategies clash with the democratic claims of marginalized inhabitants. Contemporary Indian urbanism is increasingly defined by "authoritarian urbanism" and technocratic master plans that prioritize capital-driven growth, often at the expense of the urban poor. RTTC in India is framed as more than simple access; it is a collective right to participate in, design, and transform the urban environment.

In Indian cities, "urban warfare" often refers to the systematic displacement of informal settlements, where state agencies treat slums as "aberrations" and engage in aggressive evictions and land-clearing operations. The intersection of urban warfare and the "Right to the City" (RTTC) in India highlights a critical tension between the state's security-driven urban policies and the democratic struggle of marginalized residents to inhabit and reshape urban space. While the RTTC advocates for inclusive, participatory urban governance, the reality of "Built Up Area" (BUA) operations and security-based planning often prioritizes "city-as-target" logic, leading to the marginalization and dispossession of vulnerable groups.

KEYWORDS:

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PAPER ACCEPTED DATE:

6th May 2026

PAPER PUBLISHED DATE:

7th May 2026

1. INTRODUCTION

Cities have often played key roles in armed conflicts, but more so in political than military terms. World War II marked a turning point in terms of urban combat. At the start of the conflict, armies tried to move quickly, using motorised and armoured columns to outflank the cities and cut them off from the rear however as the war progressed the towns and cities so isolated could not be captured or cleared for lack of troops and lack of desire on part of the German Army to get bogged down in attacking built-up areas which is costly in terms of time and effort. Later these very cities which held out became the spring board for counter offensives of the Soviet armies.

The concept of the Right to the City (RTTC) is powerfully suggestive and very ambivalent at the same time; briefly tracing its genealogy may help to clarify its contemporary meaning and relevance.

Situating the concept of RTTC in the Indian context is best done through a discussion of urban citizenship. Citizenship can be defined as being essentially a boundary between citizen and others, i.e. those who are inside, and those who

are outside the concerned community.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1-To explore the historical factors and conflicts the right to the city in India.

2-To analyse key events and policies that included Indian (RTTC).

3-To identify the growing challenges and limitations of India urban Warfare.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study shows Urban warfare and the "Right to the City" in India are increasingly intertwined as rapid, neoliberal urbanization creates intense competition for land, often pitting state-led development against the housing and livelihood rights of the urban poor.

1-LITERATURE REVIEW: The foundation of this study was built upon an extensive literature review of academic books, journal articles, official documents and credible online sources.

2-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS: A historical analysis the fight for the "Right to the City" in India is a daily struggle for survival and inclusion. It requires shifting from a model that prioritizes elite urbanism and land commodification to one that recognizes the rights of all inhabitants to shape the urban environment.

3-CONTENT ANALYSIS: Content analysis was utilized to examine forced evictions, slum demolitions, and the securitization of space, with significant, often violent, land conflicts arising in metropolitan areas.

4-SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS: The findings from the literature review, historical analysis and content analysis were identify , challenges and future directions in Urban Warfare and the right to the city in India.

2. HOW COME OF URBAN WARFARE & THE RIGHT TO THE CITY IN INDIA

Recent trends show a "violent turn" where the state uses bulldozers for administrative demolition and as an instrument of spatial exclusion, particularly against marginalized, often minority, communities. There has been rapid and extensive urbanisation at a global level. Forty-eight per cent of the world's population lived in urban areas in 2003. It was projected to exceed the 50 per cent mark by 2007 and expected to rise to 61 per cent by 2030. In the Indian context the so-called semi-desert and desert terrain, with a growing network of canals and irrigation channels, is fast becoming urbanized with population centres springing up close to the border which are becoming bigger and bigger every year with a good network of roads and motor able tracks. Thus the geography of desert and semi-desert is undergoing a dramatic change which will impact upon the military operations in such areas.

The concept of the Right to the City (RTTC) is powerfully suggestive and very ambivalent at the same time; briefly tracing its genealogy may help to clarify its contemporary meaning and relevance. The Right to the City is the title of a book written in 1968 by Henri Lefebvre, French, Marxist social scientist who meant it to be a radical call to all inhabitants in the city to contribute to the "production of [urban] space" and to appropriate its uses. Situating the concept of RTTC in the Indian context is best done through a discussion of urban citizenship. Citizenship can be defined as being essentially a boundary between citizen.

Citizens' rights are defined in the exercise of urban citizenship. Claiming the right to the city does not confer specific rights (such as 'city rights' of the Middle Ages—to hold and receive income from the markets, tolls, and taxes, or modern rights to specific urban services). Nor does it translate into national claims to the urban level so that urban citizenship replaces or negates national citizenship. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between formal citizenship of the nation state, and the exercise of urban citizenship through democratic practice. Substantive practices of citizenship emphasize the difference between rights and the ability to enjoy and perform such rights.

Urban warfare is considered challenging due to the difficulty in distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants and the presence of civil infrastructure that can be exploited by the fighting forces.

As contemporary warfare develops, it is more and more receding from open spaces and distant frontlines into the congested centre of cities. The conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza have thrown into relief the savage, sophisticated, and frequently immoral character of urban warfare. For India—confronting both domestic insurgencies and possible external challenges in densely populated environments—the lessons of the three operational, technological, and strategic lessons from these two theatres are not theoretical. They are imminent, relevant, and pressing. Each of these wars is extremely complex from a political perspective, but they converge on one of their frontiers: cities have become targets and terrain. In Ukraine, urban centres such as Bakhmut, Mariupol, and Avdiivka have become burnt-out fortresses where victory is in terms of meters, not miles. In Gaza, Israel's war against Hamas has turned crowded civilian areas into underground battlegrounds. In each situation, city space has been weaponised—using infrastructure, population density, and information. And in both, traditional teachings have been unsettled.

TACTICS FROM THE RUBBLE: WHAT UKRAINE AND GAZA REVEAL

Perhaps most significant is the lesson from the use of subterranean warfare. Gaza's complex network of underground tunnels has enabled Hamas to attack, hide assets, and take blows, despite Israel's decisive technological advantage. In Ukraine, a less comprehensive set of tunnels and underground strong points in salt mines and city rubble has given equivalent defensive benefits. For India, this highlights the necessity of rapidly upgrading its ability to detect, chart, and combat in underground spaces. This is particularly imperative in Jammu and Kashmir, where cross-border tunnels already enabled infiltration, and may become more influential in any future conflict.

A second revolution has been the ubiquitous employment of drones. In Ukraine and Gaza, drones are not force multipliers—they are force equalizers. Ukrainian troops have employed drones for artillery correction and target acquisition, as well as strikes against infantry and tanks. Hamas has employed loitering munitions and reconnaissance drones in closed environments with a horrific psychological effect. For India, that creates the need to rethink its drone doctrine from the top down. Urban terrain—infested with line-of-sight obstacles and civilian cover—requires decentralized deployment of drones at the platoon level, in conjunction with powerful counter-drone responses via jammers, kinetic interceptors, and AI-based sensors.

Perhaps, however, the most distinctive feature of urban warfare is the civilian aspect. In Gaza, civilian fatalities and

infrastructure destruction have attracted intense international attention, not only to battlefield morale but to diplomatic latitude as well. In Ukraine, both the defenders and the attackers have struggled with fighting in territory where the presence of civilians either protects defenders or slows offensives. For Indian troops fighting in sensitive areas such as Kashmir or border territories of Assam, the message is unmistakable: precision, intelligence-based targeting, and civil-military cooperation are not merely moral necessities—they are operational requirements. Urban warfare also exposes the problems of logistics. In each war, forces have grappled with attempting to resupply troops, evacuate wounded, and keep communications open within populated places. Urban warfare wears men and equipment out more quickly than open combat ever could. Vehicles are funnelled into killing zones, GPS equipment malfunctions amidst buildings, and supply lines get knocked out constantly. For India, this translates into investment in modular logistics centres, autonomous supply chains, small-form-factor medical evacuation systems, and battlefield networking that functions even where GPS signals fail and where signal clutter prevails.

Beyond the physical is the realm of perception and information. Ukraine has demonstrated how a digitally nimble army can set the narrative, secure popular backing, and project moral legitimacy. Gaza has demonstrated how imagery and assertions—even if they cannot be verified—can convert battlefield occurrences into political crises. Every urban operation today is conducted under the surveillance of smartphones, satellites, and social media. India, facing adversaries adept at information manipulation, must institutionalise counter-narrative capacities. Psychological warfare, media management, and real-time rebuttal mechanisms should be embedded within combat formations. Urban architecture itself becomes a weapon in such conflicts. Buildings offer both cover and concealment, forcing combat into stairwells, rooftops, and tunnels. Traditional formations accustomed to open-field operations are confused. Both Ukraine and Gaza have made building-to-building warfare necessitate infantry fighting in independent squads with little support from artillery because of proximity to the civilian population. Indian troops, especially within the Rashtriya Rifles, CRPF, and Army infantry regiments, need to expedite training in close-quarter urban warfare, breaching structures, indoor drone reconnaissance, and vertical movement. Combat is not two-dimensional anymore.

RETHINKING DOCTRINE: INDIA'S PATH FORWARD

These operational lessons require not only tactical but also doctrinal transformation. India's existing war fighting doctrine, such as Cold Start and counter-insurgency guides, is predominantly man oeuvre warfare and rural theatre-oriented. Urban warfare, particularly on Gaza or Ukrainian levels, is underdeveloped in strategic thinking. There are schools dedicated to urban warfare, but they are

under empowered. Simulated training cities do exist, but they will not approximate the essence of actual Indian cities with their combination of slums, high-rises, and civilian infrastructure. Military forces must normalize urban warfare as a central operational environment, not a supporting subset. Urban conflict in India will not be an entirely military phenomenon. It will necessarily involve civil administration, police, emergency responders, and political players. Experience in Ukraine and Gaza alike illustrates that where urban warfare meets governance, disorder gets amplified unless inter-agency coordination is smooth. Combined operational procedures between state police, intelligence agencies, disaster response units, and civic administrators need to be codified now, on the anvil, not during an emergency.

CONCLUSION

A large portion of the population in Indian cities lives in informal settlements and is engaged in informal work. Much of India's urban poor operate in the realm of informality, outside the planned vision of the city, in a complicated relationship with the law. They make claims on urban housing by first occupying a space and then incrementally build and obtain the relevant urban infrastructure and services through various informal tactics and negotiations with the state. It is essentially through such practices, which may not be strictly legal, that the disadvantaged groups in Indian cities often makes claims on the city and its resources and exercise their Right to the City.

The Right to the City formulates a new idea of citizenship based on inhabitation and participation in the quotidian practices and transactions in the city. It is an important idea for furthering the interests of people living in informal settlements and engaged in informal work as it goes beyond the law and recognizes the rights of all inhabitants to live, work and participate in urban life. It breaks the legal formalism associated with citizenship, occupation and housing and acknowledges that people living and working in conditions of informality have equal claims over the city. For India, with its disputed borders, high population densities, and several internal fault lines, the danger of urban conflict is greater than ever before. Military preparedness must now factor in the likelihood that the next war will be waged not on barren plains, but among apartment buildings, data centres, and subway lines. To that purpose, the Indian military has to incorporate these lessons not as a response to other people's wars, but as preparation for our own. The city, which was once thought of as a detraction from war-fighting, is now the battlefield. And in the conflict to come, India's power will lie in how well it adapts to the war of streets, screens, and symbols—and not tanks and terrain.

The use of pavements by street vendors also offers an example of how disadvantaged sections of the urban population negotiate and access public space for pursuing their right to livelihood. These practices, ranging from street vending on pavements, to squatting on public lands

and auto-construction of informal housing, allow urban inhabitants to make claims over the use of urban space and thereby exercise their Right to the City.

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