# Public Spaces: Prospect of Cities

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**Abstract—***Public spaces are important parts of all cities, these acts as multifunctional spaces and are hub of activities, interaction nodes, relaxing spaces, children play areas, walking and jogging spaces, meeting points and spaces to socialize. Some of the public spaces also become landmarks. These act as the activity nodes for the city and its people, and provide numerous benefits; such as economic, social, health and environmental benefits. Parks and open spaces are essential to fulfill such needs. These contribute towards healthy surroundings and help mitigate several environmental problems. These are the much needed spaces in the fast paced lives today where one can relax and unwind. Public spaces can be regarded as prospect of cities. Despite being such an important part of our cities, public spaces are the most neglected part of cities. This negligence at the part of authorities as well as users results in poor state of public space and render them unfit for use. Such conditions in any public space provide a ground for its conversion to hub of antisocial activities. This results in poor image of the public spaces as well as city.*
*This paper discusses the problems and issues that are the reasons for deteriorating condition of public spaces of Indian cities and provides suggestions to improvement and creation of good quality public spaces.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A public space can be defined as a social space that is generally open and freely accessible to all irrespective of age, sex, race and religion. These are hub of activities, interaction nodes, resting areas; children play areas and sometimes landmarks. Public spaces perform numerous functions and provide several benefits to the city and its people. Presence of public spaces in an area attracts business investments, tourism and hence supports local economies by providing cultural opportunities for communities to flourish and helps in reducing crime rate by design. Public spaces being hub of activities provide direct health benefits and leads to healthy lifestyle. Public spaces also provide niche for animals. Public spaces in spite being such important part face negligence, particularly in planning, design, maintenance and management. Many public space projects in their initial stage face major budget constraints like inadequate funds resulting in less desirable quality of basic facilities for public use. The condition of these spaces is further deteriorated when these are put to use and are poorly maintained and managed. Poor quality of public spaces not only reduces the attractiveness of the city but lead to misuse of public realm making it unsafe.

This paper discusses problems and issues of selected Indian cities (Delhi, Dehradun and Roorkee) having variety or diverse public spaces and discusses prospect of creating better public spaces.

## 2. IMPORTANCE AND BENEFITS OF PUBLIC SPACES

"Healthy public spaces are the springboard for revitalizing communities, whatever they are and wherever they are. That attractive, active, well-functioning public spaces can jumpstart economic development in a community – from a small rural town to a big city – is being recognized increasingly around the world." [1]

Public spaces benefit all communities, diverse groups, ethnic groups, and all types of developments - from dense urban neighbourhoods, city areas to suburbs and from large metropolitan cities to small towns. Benefits of public spaces includes social, health, aesthetic, economic and environmental benefits.

**Social benefits:** Public spaces can also be accounted for social benefits that the people of the city enjoy. These offer its people space for interaction, and promotes social cohesion and provides an environment for social learning.
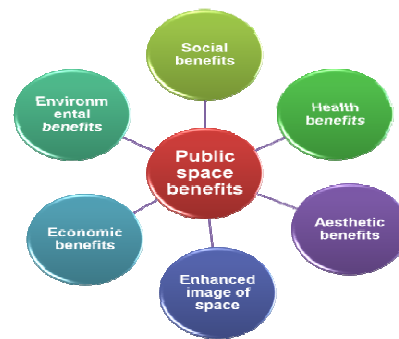


**Fig. 1: Benefits of public spaces**

**Health benefits:** Having adequate and good quality public spaces in an area encourage activities that can be related to health benefits of the users of the space. These also contribute in the reduction of stress levels and improvement of mental health. Children also yield health benefits as they get opportunities for physical activities.

**Aesthetic benefits:** Public spaces can be associated to the sensory benefits of touch, smell, sight and sound, these provides to its users. Features such as trees, plants, shrubs, flowers, water bodies, and presence of birds, insects and other textures contribute towards these sensory experiences and aesthetic benefits of a public space.

**Enhanced Image of space:** Presence of good quality public spaces provides attractive looks to its surroundings areas and enhances the image of the city area where it is located and adds to the identity of the city space, e.g. Central park of New York and Hide park of London are integral to the city they are located in.

**Environmental benefits:** Public spaces have the potential to improve environmental conditions; the green spaces help in improving the quality of air, reduce the problem of water runoff, improve the situation of soil erosion as well as help in reducing the heat island effects, and hence have direct or indirect influence on energy use. These also provide opportunities for flora and fauna to flourish.

**Economical benefits:** Presence of public spaces in an area attracts business investments and commercial activities such as eating outlets, informal shops, and vendors. The public spaces also promote tourism and have positive impact on property prices in the surroundings areas.
In spite the above mentioned benefits; public spaces face the problems in majority of settlements which needs to be understood before suggesting an approach.

## 3. PRESENT SCENARIO OF PUBLIC SPACES IN INDIAN CITIES

India is a country with diversity and the public spaces can't remain untouched, hence one come across a variety of public spaces that cater to day today recreation needs of the citizens. Public spaces of Indian cities add life and vibrancy to the city and provides break to the users of the space from their daily monotonous schedule. Despite being spaces of high importance, these face issues and problems which result in low quality of public spaces in a city. To develop a better understanding of public spaces people's opinion regarding public spaces in different cities was taken and an observational study was carried out.

### 3.1 State of Public Spaces in Indian Cities

To understand the prospect of Public spaces in Indian cities, public opinion was collected and observational studies were carried out in few of the Indian cities, having different sizes i.e. Delhi (a metropolitan city), Dehradun (a medium sized city), Roorkee (A small city). For the study, public opinion was gathered regarding the several issues or problems they encounter regarding the state of public spaces, when put to daily use. The opinion of the space was limited to the parks and open areas of the city. People were asked about their visits to parks or open spaces. They were asked; if they visit park or open space regularly? If not what is the reason for their non visit? What kind of spaces they visit? Are there spaces in their neighbourhood or at distance? Which spaces are preferred by them; spaces in neighbourhood or at distance and the reasons of their preference. What is the purpose of visit to these spaces? How convenient is it to reach the space? They were further asked to rate several aspects of the park i.e. design and appearance, cleanliness and maintenance, kind of facilities, overall impression of the park or open area. They were also requested to mention what can encourage more usage of parks and open spaces.

### 3.2. Problems and Issues: Public Opinion

From the analysis it is concluded that people need some kind of unwinding space where one can saunter and get oneself free from the stress of daily life. Public spaces of big city are more in number as well as offer variety to its people. These are a result of planned development whereas some areas also exist where there is no planned development and hence lack facilities such as parks, but has other kinds of public spaces which serve the purpose. In big cities like Delhi public spaces are provided in planned manner, and every neighbourhood has public spaces to meet recreational needs of the people in the neighbouring area. These spaces are smaller in size, and their existing state depends on the maintenance and management by the respective stakeholders or authorities involved. Public spaces in high profile areas are found to be better maintained as compared to spaces in low profile areas, but exceptions can always be there. Other than small size public spaces big cities offer its citizens large size spaces to add to their recreational needs and are options of good change from regular neighbouring spaces. These are more in number and provide variety to the users. Public spaces in medium size city are less in number and also less in variety as they are also result of unplanned development. Medium size city still offer its people some variety in terms of parks and other public spaces though they might not be sufficient to cater to the needs of the people of the city, whereas the public space of small cities are very less in number, small in size and lacks variety.

Further the major issues of the public space in Indian cities are more or less same irrespective of the city, though the magnitude of problems depends on the size of the cities.

Problems and issues of the Indian cities are more when the city is small, medium size as they lack number of public spaces and also have more pressures on them; as they have to deal with new development pressures and maintain the standards of the existing facilities. These cities lack in area for provision of more number of such facilities and the provided facilities are in such a state that they needs to be completely redeveloped as per the changing trends and demands of the users. The Fig. s 2 to 5 depict the public opinion regarding public spaces of the selected Indian cities.
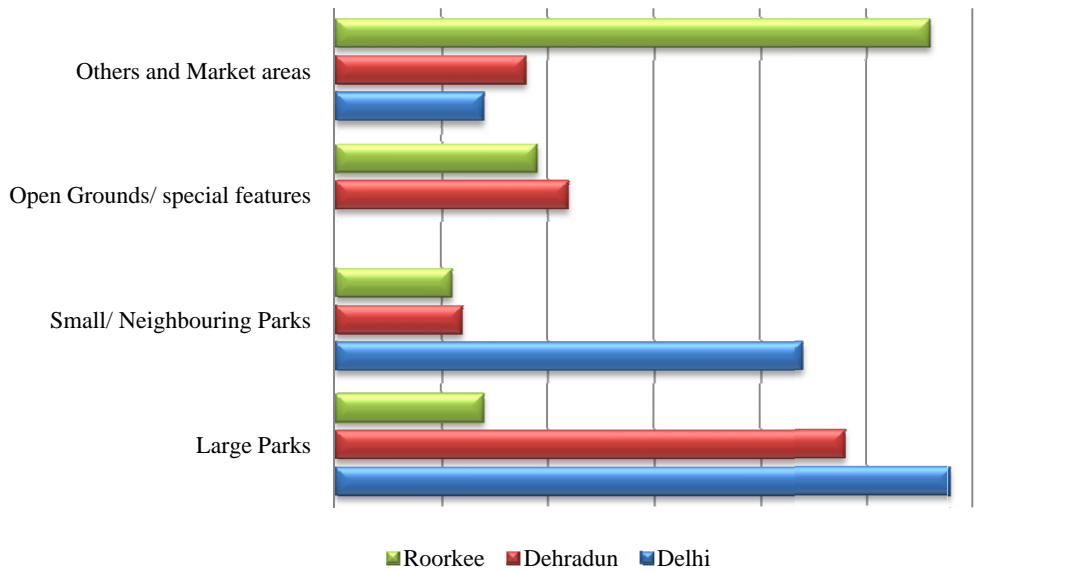


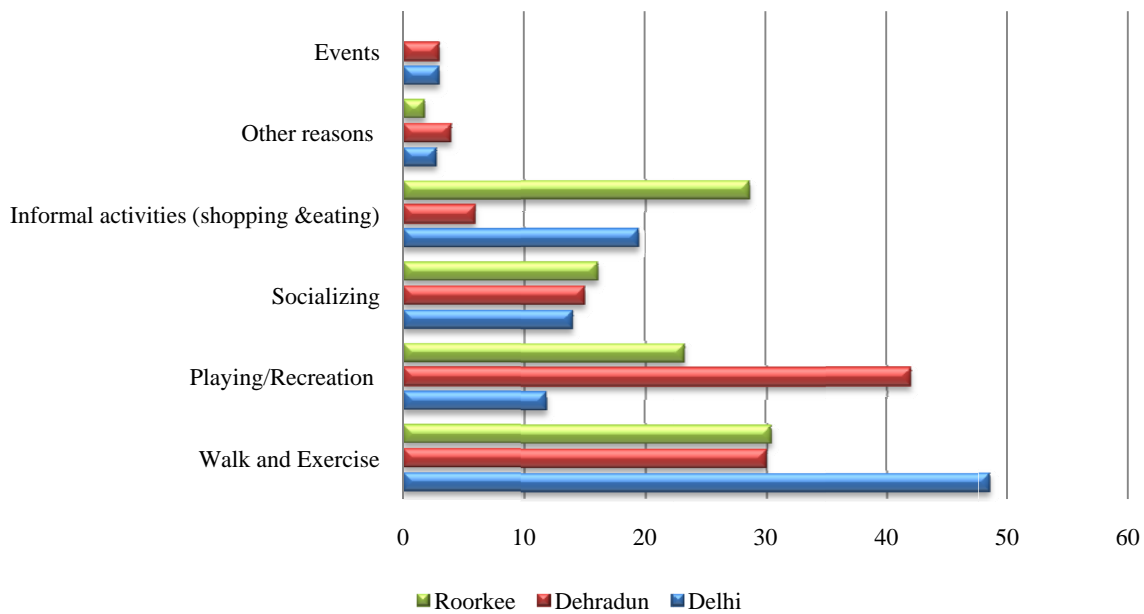**Figure2. Public opinion on preference for type of Public space**



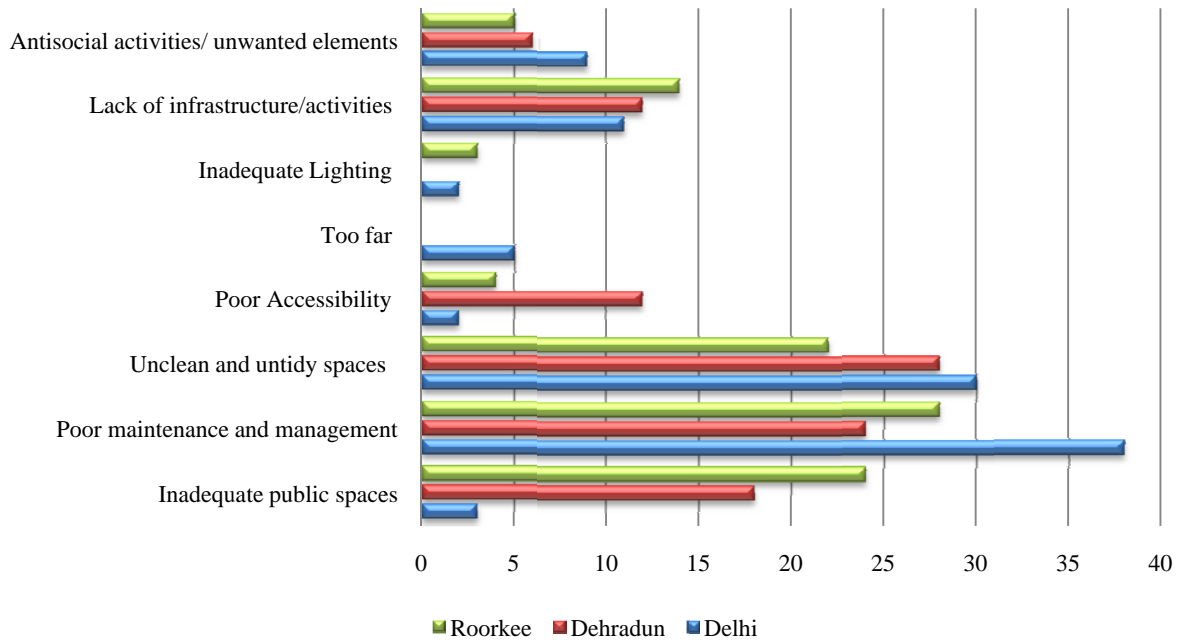**Fig. 3: Public opinion on reasons to visit public space**

**Fig. 4. Public opinion regarding problems and issue of public spaces**
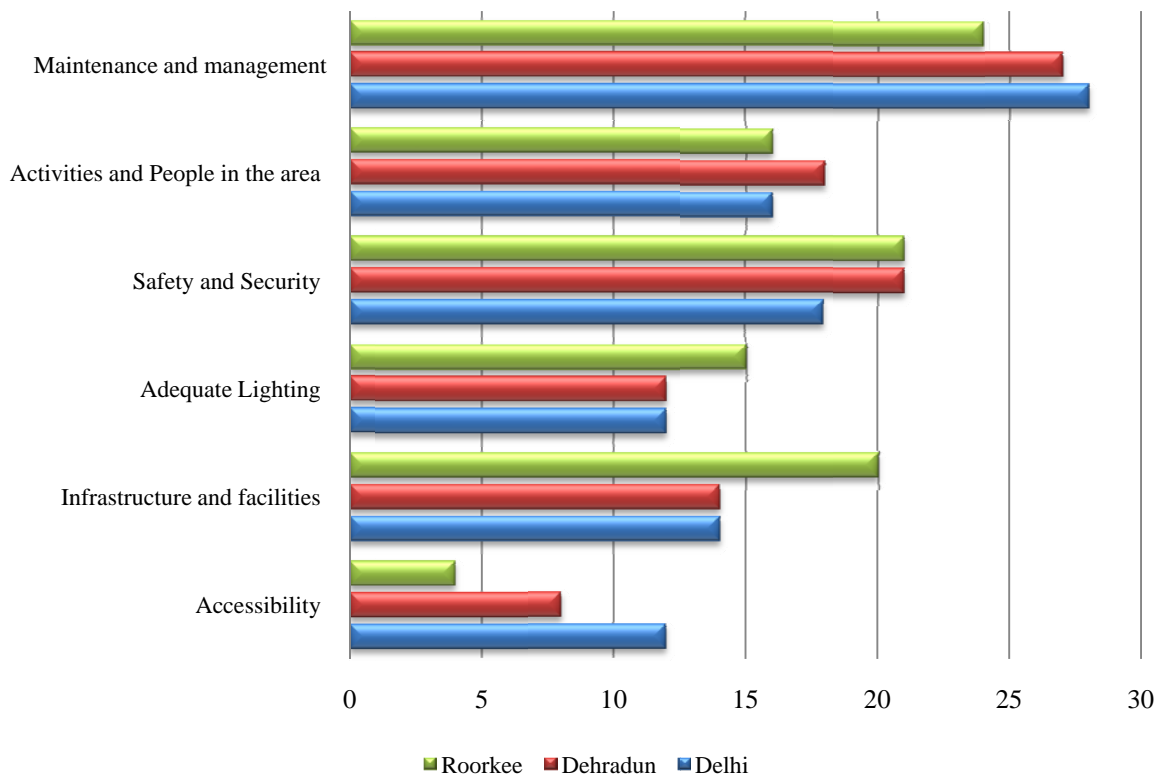


**Fig. 5: Public opinion on factors leading to better public spaces**

Other than these several common issues have been identified after observations and discussions with the users of public spaces from few of these cities. One of the major issues of public spaces is poor or absence of quality, which is the result of ill maintained conditions and lack of cleanliness (Fig. 6, Fig 11). Presence of filth in the surroundings and all over the space, pan spits in corners and on walls, poor graffiti, dangling wires and torn posters all around the space (Fig 7), broken paths leading to the space and in the space, shabby state of grounds (Fig 8), poorly maintained shrubs and trees, broken walls (Fig 10) and lack of furniture (seats, lights, fences, swings, trash bins, etc.) (Fig 9), damaged equipments (sculptures, fountains etc.) results in deprivation of the public space quality.


**Fig. 6: Unclean and ill maintained canal front, Roorkee**


**Fig. 7:  Poor entrance and shabby advertisements, Nehru stadium, Roorkee**


**Fig. 8: Poorly maintained ground, Nehru stadium, Roorkee**


**Fig. 9. Bad state of child play equipments and antisocial activities in a park, Delhi**


**Fig. 10: Poorly maintained boundary wall of park, Dehradun**

Difficulty in occupancy of a public space is another issue that results in less usage of space. Presence of foul smell due to urination and presence of filth, nearby and in the space makes it difficult even to cross by such space and hence makes its occupancy more difficult; the same is result of lacking public amenities or presence of amenities that are in unusable state due to non maintenance. Non occupancy can also be result of poor furniture, inappropriate lighting and presence of antisocial elements. These create feelings of insecurity and discomfort in the users. Public spaces which are located in isolated surroundings or areas also become hub of antisocial activities and raises security concerns (Fig 9). All the above leads to non occupancy of a public space and reduce its popularity.

Poor accessibility is another issue; any space can be a failure if it lacks proper approach to it. Public spaces in cities have to deal with physical and visual barriers, which are results of overcrowding or encroachment of the approach to these spaces by traffic, parked vehicles, and vendors or by spill of shops in the space (Fig 12, Fig 13). Access to the public spaces is further hindered as there is lack of public transport and lack of parking facilities for private transport. Improper stoppages for public transport further add chaos to the situation. Many a times it is difficult to locate these spaces as they lack proper directions or have inadequate street frontage.

Fig. 11: Park corner turned in garbage dumping area, Delhi


Fig. 12: Road outside park encroached by vehicles, Roorkee


Fig. 13: Vehicles in front of entrance gate to park, Roorkee

Exploring public spaces on foots is an inconvenient exercise due to haphazard and chaotic vehicular traffic. Public spaces in most of the cities do not form part of identifiable pedestrian linkage or paths which are frequently used, and many times these spaces are planned in or feature in isolated locations. The above mentioned reasons results in less or no usage of the spaces for the purpose they are meant, and fall prey to antisocial elements further spoiling the image of the space and surrounding area.

Poor quality aesthetics is another issue when one talk about public spaces. Public art, landmarks, sculptures, water features, play installations, green areas, light posts and flower embellishment are few of the features which appends the aesthetics of the space (Fig 14, Fig 15). Absence of aesthetics

and poor state of the features of space are common characteristics of most of the public spaces in Indian cities.


Fig. 14: Poor design and badly maintained entrance to park, Delhi


Fig. 15: Poor maintenance of public art, Dehradun

Inequity in the distribution of space is another issue, which is result of development trends in the past and present. The newly developed areas are blessed with more number and variety of public spaces as compared to the old development. Lack of spaces devoid recreations benefits to people from the old development areas, and make them travel distances in order to benefit from the available public spaces as they are not in the nearby vicinity.

The problems and issues of the public spaces discussed above have been arrived at after studying few selected Indian cities varying in size and type. These provide an insight regarding the state of public spaces in the entire country. From the discussion it can be concluded that, public spaces of Indian cities need to offer more to the users in terms of activities and facilities than just their existence.

## 4. PROSPECT OF PUBLIC SPACES

Public spaces are prospect of cities as these are one of the most essential parts of any city. These have the potential to provide different users with different kind of experiences at one time and in one place. These are hub of activities, interaction nodes, relaxing spaces, children play areas, walking and jogging spaces, meeting points and spaces to socialize. Some of the public spaces also become landmarks.

These act as the activity nodes for the city and its people, and provide numerous benefits; such as economic, social, health and environmental benefits. Parks and open spaces are essential to fulfill such needs. These contribute towards healthy surroundings and help mitigate several environmental problems. These are the much needed spaces in the fast paced lives today where one can relax and unwind. To have quality spaces which adds to the prospect of cities; several strategies for revitalization are discussed.

Increasing population is one of the biggest challenges faced by the cities. Public spaces are not spared of the pressures of increasing population. Hence there is need to plan and create more public spaces to meet the need of growing population as well as maintain and modify the existing public spaces as per the requirement of present users considering and incorporating the issues identified.

Strategies to enhance user's involvement in a public space can be accounted for good quality and successful public spaces. Hence there is need to provide public spaces with activities and interest elements which can keep the users involved and interacting; individually and in groups. A public space should be segregated in various activity zones, such as pathway loops, skate parks, plays spaces, basket ball court, organized interactive sitting spaces, jogging tracks, special features, relaxing spaces, shelter spaces, activity corners, exhibition spaces, performance courts, toddler zone etc. Provision of such a variety will be able to offer to or serve all the age groups and sexes.

It is not just the planning, design, execution, maintenance and management, responsible for the state of public spaces alone; public spaces are compromised at each stage of their lifecycle. Any project needs good planning so that it fits well in its designated location, further any spaces must have a good design and incorporate all stakeholders needs. At the execution stage the work must be conducted well and no compromise should be made on the quality of the products to be used; such that they are able to bear daily wear and tear. Maintenance and management is must for the created spaces when put to use so that they can serve the purpose they are created for in the longer run, and do not become the city sores.

The suggested strategies for revitalization provide an insight regarding the provision of quality spaces that will be able to perform better according to users' needs.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Public spaces are crucial for the image and proper functioning of a city. They provide the much needed space to their citizens where they feel relaxed and engage in several recreational activities providing plethora of benefits. Despite being crucial component of cities, they are facing negligence at the hands of users and the authorities concerned regarding planning,

design, construction, maintenance and management. This negligence is responsible for the sorry state of public spaces. Hence there is need for a holistic approach towards the revitalization of public spaces, where not only the present state of public spaces is improved but the issues responsible for the poor state of public spaces are tackled.

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