SUBALTERN URBANISATION REVISITED*

PARTHA MUKHOPADHYAY
MARIE-HÉLÈNE ZÉRAH
ERIC DENIS

INTRODUCTION

When we used the phrase 'subaltern urbanisation' (Denis, et al., 2012), we were quite up front about it being as much a literary device to focus attention on our area of inquiry as to acknowledge a link, possibly tenuous, with the wide literature on subaltern studies, particularly in Guha of the 'contribution made by the people *on their own* that is *independently of the elite*' (1982: 39). Four years later, as we publish results of the initial project (Denis and Zérah, 2016), it is a matter of some satisfaction to see the phrase travel a little—even to a documentary featuring four residents of Guwahati.[1]

To recall, subaltern urbanisation refers to the autonomous growth of settlement agglomerations—large clusters of people living in close proximity (which may or may not be classified as urban by the Census of India or the relevant state government)—that are generated by market and historical forces, and which are not dependent on large, traditionally important settlements or planned cities like Chandigarh and Bhubaneswar, or industrial townships like Mithapur or Bokaro. The attempt is to investigate the growth of settlements beyond that driven by the economics of large agglomerations as advanced by new economic geography, or directly orchestrated by the state or private corporate enterprise. The object is to focus on the autonomy of the settlement, not in the sense of autarchy, but in the ability to affect its growth process and interact autonomously with other settlements, whether local or global. In essence, therefore, subaltern urbanisation is about vibrant smaller settlements—spaces outside the metropolitan shadow—sustainably

supporting a dispersed pattern of urbanisation. Concomitantly, subaltern urbanisation refers to an unseen, and often unspoken, process of myriad form, effected by local actors, far from the major metropolitan areas and outside urban schemes.

In doing so, the intent is not to put forward a claim in opposition to large cities. Rather, it is to present a fuller picture, especially in India, where the share of urban population (as defined by the Census in 2011) living in settlements of less than 100,000 people has grown slightly since 2001. In this, we are in agreement with Bell and Jayne, that what is

> lost as a consequence of the bias towards large cities is a full picture of urban form and function: the urban world is not made up of a handful of global metropolises, but characterised by heterogeneity. Studying small cities enables us to see the full extent of this (2009: 683).

Smaller settlements need to be studied not in contrast to large cities, but for themselves, as sites of urbanity, economic activities and social transformations, and for their place in the process of urbanisation, as rural–urban links and as a part of global economy.

In this brief reprise, we interrogate their role in India's development trajectory. We first focus on the diversity, agency and socio-economic transitions of these spaces. Next, we discuss the different scales and implementation processes of governance and policy, interrogating the relevance of the rural–urban dichotomy in theory and practice. Finally, we relate our findings in the context of a broader reappraisal of urban transition in India.

THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION

Indian urbanisation, such as it is, is more about morphing places than moving people. From 2001 to 2011, of the 90.9 million freshly minted urban population, approximately 40 million were added through natural growth, 19.1 million by migration, and the remaining 31.8 million came from this phenomenon of morphing places. Small towns account for a growing share of even the officially urban. As of 2011, 41.1 per cent of the urban population lives in small towns of less than 100,000—up from 40.3 per cent in 2001. However, much of this growth took place in the small towns without administrative urban status—Census Towns—whose share of urban population

nearly doubled from 7.4 to 14.6 per cent, whereas that of small towns with urban administrative status dropped from 32.9 to 26.5 per cent.[2] But, even this does not fully reflect the situation. In 2011, when 31.2 per cent were officially urban, another 23.5 per cent of the rural population, i.e., a total of 47.4 per cent of the population, lived in settlement agglomerations of more than 5,000 people.

This kind of morphing creates a level of dispersion that makes it harder to maintain a clear—'bright line'—distinction between rural and urban. Figure 1a shows the spread of villages over 1991–2011, where a majority of the male workforce has moved away from agriculture. As one can see, such villages cover large portions of the country. There were 34,998 such villages in 1991, comprising 8.4 per cent of the rural population. In 2011, this had risen to 23 per cent of the rural population in 116,430 villages. In many of these places, individuals start self-providing services. Figure 1b highlights areas where villages have better sanitation (higher proportion of households with septic tanks) than the average for small statutory towns (with a population of 50,000 or less) in the state. In many areas, this reflects the lack of services in formal urban areas, political choices to provide status but not services and, in other cases, it points to the lack of information inherent in classifying a settlement as a village or a town, and an inadequate and outmoded system of statutory governance classification.

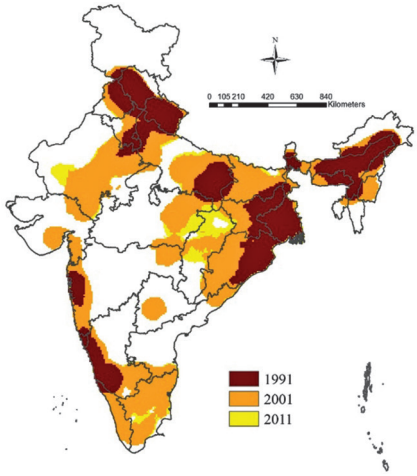


Figure 1a: *Spread of villages with a majority of non-farm workers*

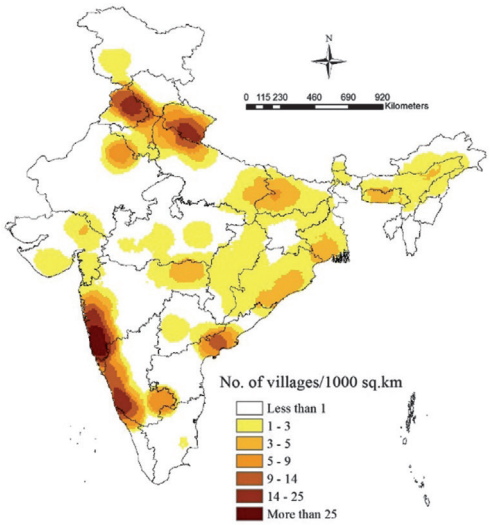


Figure 1b: *Villages with better sanitation than small statutory towns (2011)*

Source: The authors acknowledge the support of Shamindra Roy and Kanhu C. Pradhan in preparing these maps. Any remaining errors are our responsibility.
Note: Figure 1a shows areas with at least one village per 1,000 sq km with majority non-farm workers.

It is perhaps useful at this stage to separate, at the risk of over-simplified dichotomy, two broad types of settlements. One is a more nationally and globally connected settlement, often, but not always, somewhat larger and statutory, while the other is a locally connected settlement—census town, small statutory town, large village with many non-farm workers, etc. These two types of settlements contribute to the growth of the economy in different ways.

In many respects, several of the first type of settlements possess the qualities associated with large metropolises—like innovation, global connectivity, etc., albeit at much smaller scales. This can be observed in localities like Tiruchengode and Ranipettai in Tamil Nadu, which have been reinventing themselves over decades, adapting their entrepreneurial endeavours to local demand, as well as global market transformations. The first excels in the drilling truck industry, while the other predominates in leather and shoemaking. Today, companies from Tiruchengode are able to export their low-cost bore-well drilling trucks to Africa, where their adaptation to local needs is much appreciated, especially their ease of repair and

maintenance. These manufacturers developed the ability to satisfy markets neglected by large truck makers of Europe and the United States, which produce over-sophisticated vehicles that are too expensive. Furthermore, these large firms are able to provide the individual customisations requested by the customers. In all Indian states, such small and medium towns based on a long tradition of craft—e.g., textile and furniture—and developing low-cost products, often starting from reverse engineering a prototype, are flourishing. These products are adapted to the frugal needs of a non-metropolitan population in transition to their urban environment.

In some places, these innovative environments extend beyond individual settlements, to specialised clusters of towns and villages with a long tradition of manufacture and trading. This is the case, for instance, in Udupi, coastal Karnataka, where an assemblage of towns' and villages' role in the fishing industry is known up to Japan for supplying fishnets, as well as for the quality of their fish products. These traditional activities have been able to cope with globalised trading. Since the beginning of the last century, local private actors engaged in development initiatives to further this strong and open regional economy. From the 1930s, investments were geared to build an integrated and affordable bus network, and from the 1960s, syndicated banks were set up (such as the well-known Canara Bank) to facilitate local investments. But, despite this, planners, consultants and private corporates conceive of this coast as a *tabula rasa*, well suited for SEZs, power plants, tourism and real estate investments, ignoring its current existing global economic presence and its importance for employment.

Compared to these first type of 'micro global settlements', the second type of settlements fulfil a much more banal but very necessary function. While they are often not sites of production—except for construction—they are service towns, markets, private health and education, and local transit hubs. They are spaces of change, where people drift in and out between non-farm and farm work. Some of the spread and depth of this phenomenon is made possible by the density of India as a country, and now by the rapidly improving rural transportation networks.[3] In these small census towns, the nature of economic transformation can be grouped into three categories: (i) the everyday economy; (ii) settlement-specific

activities, which may reflect historical function; and (iii) new activities. Almost all of these are largely financed through non-formal sources. It is important to stress that these banal but necessary functions can often provide incomes much higher than traditional agricultural activities.

The everyday economy, which is geared towards servicing the demand of surrounding areas, benefits from higher levels of connectivity and better transport possibilities. Local markets, or bazaars, are at the centre of this everyday economy. However, in spite of its resilience in providing employment and trade in the surrounding villages, its scale of activity is usually insufficient to generate surplus capital. Some of these settlements also benefit from external investment in their area, such as the road to the Dhamra port project in Erein, Odisha, or the public hospital and college in Bishnugarh, Jharkhand.

The bazaar economy benefits from the rising incomes of rural areas, and their demand for diverse consumer goods which are supplied through an intricate, locally specific logistics chain. Few of these consumer goods would be produced locally but the logistics chain does generate local employment.

Activities that are specific to settlements can differ considerably, but tend to be small scale and often linked to traditional caste occupations, such as the yoghurt industry in Gopalpur, West Bengal, and small-scale foundries in Cherra, Jharkand. The ability of such specific activities to scale up and provide more income and employment improves with better connectivity, as transport networks increase the market for such products. The markets for these goods can be quite far-flung, especially for handloom and handicrafts, or bidi manufacturing, which has well-developed supply chains. These settlement-specific economic activities may also be linked to local natural resources, such as stone crushing in Domchach, Jharkhand (entrepreneurs adjusting to a loss of traditional mica mining), or cold storages for potato farmers in Garbeta, West Bengal (Sircar, 2015).

In addition to these channels, five new activities appear to be present at many of these small census towns. Two of these, which are major in scope in terms of employment and/or local impact are construction and para-transit services. Construction is driven by the

continuous process of shifting to brick and mortar (*pucca*) housing that appears to be taking place in rural India, while the para-transit services for both freight and passengers lubricate the everyday economy mentioned earlier. In addition to these two, three other common activities are services around cell phones (sale and recharge of SIM cards, loading of multimedia, sale and repair of instruments, etc.), private education and private healthcare.

It is possible to identify three main drivers of growth in para-transit transport, viz.: (i) public investment in rural roads; (ii) increased demand for travel, e.g., for education and general consumption; and, critically (iii) manufacturers and/or banks providing financing to purchase these vehicles. There are also spin-off benefits, such as repair and maintenance services for these vehicles, and in some places like Gopalpur, there is also local manufacturing of vehicles like battery-powered electric rickshaws. People engaged in para-transit activity can often be migrants returning from large cities, where they acquired finance and the skills required for driving vehicles.

A factor that is often common across both types of settlements is the centrality of the land-based economy that is supporting the financing of the urban transition, especially in the more developed states, in a context of poor access to institutional banking and credit. Everywhere, the rapid and extensive conversion of land, often fertile, into popular real estate, educational institutions and factories, as well as the sprawl of idle lands backing the access to loan support the monetisation, and diversification of local economies. It blurs the frontiers of urban and rural environments, and questions the effectiveness of present regulations.

POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

It is important to recall that the definition of urbanisation in India is unique. Statutory towns are recognised by state municipal acts. They are all full-fledged urban local bodies, whose governance structure and delegation of responsibilities are defined by the 74th Constitutional Amendment on decentralisation for urban areas. Census towns are considered urban by the Registrar General of India and included in the measurement of urbanisation. However, they remain under rural governance with village panchayats. In other

terms, census towns can avail of rural government schemes, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), while small statutory towns can benefit from urban programmes.

Consequently, there is a complicated relationship between the governance of small towns and service provision. The limited work on basic services in small towns points towards low levels of both infrastructure services and administrative capacity. These small statutory towns are a neglected layer of development as exhibited in the bias of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) that focused on large agglomerations (Khan, 2016). Thus, though service delivery varies, depending on the effectiveness of local governance, there is, controlling for size, little measurable difference in service provision between census and statutory towns (Mukhopadhyay, 2016).

Regardless, in census towns, service provision remains a major axis of mobilisation related to the form of governance (rural vs. urban). Whether a census town should remain a village or become a small town is a matter of vigorous discussion at the local level. Our qualitative inquiries show that, on the ground, proposals for alternative administrative formations (which are developed at different scales such as redefinition of boundaries, demand for urban status or reversal to rural status) can be traced, in varying degree, to four axes of contestation, the first of which is service provision itself.[4]

The nature of non-farm activity and related land-use changes benefits from public schemes like the IAY, and costs of new taxes and local socio-political formations form the three other axes of contestation. In particular, social grouping and local conflicts of the area often influence the debate on governance in a 'politics of classification'. In some areas, the aspirations for urban status appear to be pushed by local elites and resisted by poorer groups, reflecting an economic divide between the bazaar (including traders and members of the local elite) and the basti (residential area). In others, it is the opposite, since the landed elite see rural status as offering more freedom in monetising land and the increase in taxes, and the enforcement of building bye-laws is seen as a constraint on local development. In states where access to welfare schemes is poor, such schemes, in and of themselves, are not a strong argument to

remain rural. Social elements, such as caste, can feature prominently within political coalitions resisting or advocating the transition from rural to urban status. In more developed states, a more central role is played, inter alia, by the monetisation of land. This could lead to the appearance of a capital surplus, which could be invested in productive activities at the same, or different, place and time.

This grounded view of the politics of classification underlines the limits of claims that 'all is urban', as in the recently coined notion of 'planetary urbanisation' (Brenner and Schmid, 2014). From an operational point of view, such a posture wishes away a reality where binaries (here urban vs. rural) are inscribed in legislations and public policies. Although we question the relevance of these binaries in the face of contemporary urban transition, they are performative: they guide investments of private actors, development initiatives of national and regional governments, as well as shape ordinary practices of inhabitants.

URBAN TRANSITION IN INDIA

At the start of this project we had stated that India seemed intent, as Nijman (2012: 18) put it, on 'writing its own script', a story of urbanisation based on 'contribution[s] made by the people *on their own*' (Guha, 1982: 39). We had said that understanding how agents make a world no state or theory could imagine was critical for comprehending the ongoing Indian transformation. In this endeavour, we tried to shed light on unseen and neglected non-metropolitan transformations.

A first learning that bears reiteration is the complexity of the urban transformation process and the violence that is done by analytical over-simplification into dichotomous categories. The spatial pattern of development and the relationships across settlements come in various hues, rather than distinct colours, and one must focus as much on the similarities as on the differences. Posited against this, a binary constitutional framework of governance is proving inadequate to the task at hand.

Initially, we were guilty of these attempts at sparse categorisation, e.g., trying to characterise subaltern urbanisation on two axes, viz., spatial proximity and administrative recognition. On the spatial proximity axis, we considered two types: peripheral, where the settlement is located in the periphery to the metropolis,

and non-peripheral, i.e., all other settlements. We have since come to realise that a more nuanced measure of transport connectivity is perhaps more important as a metric. Similarly, on the administrative recognition axis, we posited four types of settlements: (i) invisible, or not recognised as urban by either the census or the state; (ii) denied, or classified as a census town; (iii) recognised, as a statutory town; and, finally (iv) contested, where the settlement is contesting its administrative status (Denis, et al., 2012). Here, we learnt that while classification often has little measureable effect, there are myriad local reasons to prefer one classification over another, that vary by context, and often, there is active politics around this issue.

Put simply, we now increasingly question the relevance of focusing on a poorly articulated *urban* transition, rather than studying the myriad changes in settlements across the country.

Second, it questions the pre-eminence of metropolitan areas in fashioning the transition from agriculture (and the transition of agriculture) and the broader development process. The effects that smaller settlements have on their neighbourhood are diverse and durable, making for a broader, if more deliberate, process of change. The autonomous global connections of settlements like Tiruchengode or the Udupi cluster, as well as many other settlements and clusters of villages and towns, also brings into relief the manner in which global influences are rapidly becoming scale-free, chipping away at the indispensability of 'global cities'. The same forces that activate business networks through the diaspora can also, however, make these urban spaces (as in the guilds of early global cities) closed to people outside particular social and caste groups, a feature that militates against the—possibly oversold—conception of cities as socially open spaces compared to rural India.

These findings provide textured detail about the connections that underpin the findings of Himanshu, et al. (2011: 38), who found a statistical relationship between rural non-farm diversification and rural poverty reduction with growth in consumption in neighbouring urban centres. They found a stronger association when the urban centre was a small one as compared to a large city. Given that the overwhelming majority of the urban poor live in small and medium towns (Lanjouw and Murgai, 2010), the implications for a broad-based development transition are obvious.

Third, land use change or spatial transformation in a census town is not confined within the administrative boundaries of the village. In all the settlements, expansion occurs outside the census town (village) boundaries, a process also observed in many of the statutory towns studied, and as indeed is the familiar experience with larger settlements. In the statutory towns, this spatial spillover may be partly driven by the lack of building regulations and lower taxes outside the boundary of the town, but in the census towns this may be simply the inability to contain growth within a small settlement area or because the locus of activity is at the edge of the settlement. In such a situation, the recent initiative of the Union Ministry for Urban Development to get states to convert census towns into statutory urban local bodies[5] is probably not a good idea.

Instead, this points to the need to plan at a more aggregated level, like the panchayat or sub-district, and not at the level of the settlement. The arrangements under the Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission[6] are a first step in this direction. There is a dissonance between the existing administrative separation of rural and urban, which affects all public interventions, and the spatial and economic reality of smaller settlements. There are many ways to imagine a different approach requiring more or less intervention. For example, a start could be made by effectuating district planning committees. The existing administrative framework accounts for them and they have been implemented more or less successfully in Kerala. Eventually, one could consider the radical solution of ending the rural–urban binary present in the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. These are just some of the discussions provoked by a detailed study of subaltern urbanisation.

CONCLUSION

But, is subaltern urbanisation about urbanisation at all? It is a question of some interest—one that goes back to Wirth (1938): Are these census towns or even these small statutory settlements urban in any sense, or are they merely overgrown villages? One way of answering this question would be to say that they are not visibly different from other, if slightly larger, small statutory towns that are designated as urban by the state government. Their claims of recognition as urban stand, as it were, on a comparable footing.

One can then, of course, question the urbanity of these small statutory towns, too. This is a debate worth having, one that comes into contention once we move away from metrocentricity (Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010), but it is not one with which we choose to engage.

Neither is our proposition of a continuum of the urban beyond the metropolitan novel. A well-known precursor is the concept of *desakota* (McGee, 1991). Indeed, the recent trope of 'planetary urbanisation', which is being increasingly used, can also be seen as a reflection on the morphing of places, the blurring of rural–urban boundaries, and on the encompassing process of urbanisation, both from a morphological point of view (the physical spread of the urban) and from an economic point of view (the role of the urban footprint in the shaping of places). However, our less aerial and more grounded approach leads us to articulate two main reservations.

The first, already mentioned, is that such an approach wishes away a reality where legislations and public policies are inscribed with such binaries (here urban vs. rural), which, even if irrelevant, are performative, affecting the actions of governments, corporates and individuals.

The second relates to the very nature of the subaltern urbanisation process that interrogates deeply the nature of the economic transformation. While Brenner and Schmidt (2014) argue that the emerging urban forms are to be understood in their dependence and exploitative relationships to the larger cities, we consider that subaltern urbanisation is imbued with agency, it is not necessarily linked to a metropolitan hierarchy, and that both local and external factors are at play.

At this time, though a primate top-heavy urban structure prevails in many states of India, the national urban system remains more dispersed and balanced (Swerts and Pumain, 2013). Such an urban system may actually be more future ready, in a world that is moving away from large-scale Fordist manufacturing to more mass customisation of products. In such a future, the scale of viability for towns could rapidly diminish. While it is as yet unclear at what city scale the benefits from interaction with other individuals and increasing diversity of consumption start to peter out, it is likely to be less than that needed for purposes of production. Better understanding

of local development dynamics can provide insights into the future potential of smaller settlements and a more complete understanding of the system of human settlements. This, in essence, was one of our goals of advancing the notion of subaltern urbanisation.

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NOTES

1. *Little City, Blues* directed by Pranom Datta Mazumdar, produced by Public Service Broadcasting Trust, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5d6iulgPfwohttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5d6iulgPfwo
2. Census towns are settlements designated as urban by the Registrar General of India, but which do not have statutory urban status. They are villages with a population of more than 5,000, density of more than 400 per sq km, and where more than 75 per cent of the male main workforce is engaged in non-farm occupations.
3. Almost half a million kilometres of rural roads have been added under schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana and its state counterparts in the last 15 years.
4. Much of the subsequent discussion in this section draws from Mukhopadhyay, *et al*. (2015).
5. For details see http://pib.nic.in/newsite/ParintRelease.aspx?relid=145405.
6. For details see http://pib.nic.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=126934.

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