

Growth of Megacities and Decline of Small Towns in India: Why it Demands Attention from Planners and Policy Makers

Dr. (Mrs.) ¹Sumita Chaudhuri

Abstract: The slow growth of small towns and stagnation, decay and declassification of several such towns in a period of rapid urbanization in India is a phenomenon which have not received much attention from demographers or economic planners.

The slow growth, stagnation or decay of a large number of small towns is a phenomenon which must be studied historically. The stagnation of small towns in the era of planned industrialization and urbanization deserves serious attention from planners and policy makers in India.

Introduction

Urbanisation, in the demographic sense, is an increase in the proportion of the urban population (U) to the total population (T) over a period of time. As long as U/T increases, there is urbanization. However, theoretically it is possible that these proportions remain constant over time in a situation where there is absolutely no rural to urban migration and both the rural and urban population grow at the same rate. In such a case there will be urban growth without urbanization. But in so far as the absolute urban population will increase in such a situation, there will be problems of urbanization regardless of the fact that the rate of urbanization is zero. We know the urban population of a country comprises the total population of its towns.

The study of urban growth by size class of towns would help us to understand the stages of urban development in a country. Differential growth rates indicate the extent of rural to urban migration and the changes in the structure of city sizes. Some towns are likely to change their size class status between two Censuses. The size class at the later census was taken in the calculation of urban growth rate.

¹ Former UGC Research Scientist, Department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta
Sumita_chau@hotmail.com

Out growths of cities and towns are also treated as urban in the Census. Is each such towns and cities along with its out growth, and also sometimes together with adjoining towns are termed urban agglomeration (UA). In the calculation of growth rate both UA and individual town/city could be considered.

In India the definition of urban is more rigorous. Both civic status as well as demographic criteria is defined for urban. The census of India defined the urban places on the basis of the following criteria (Census of India, 2001):

- i) All places with a municipality, corporation, cantonment, board or notified town area, committee etc.
- ii) All other places that satisfy the following criteria:
 - a) Minimum population of 5000
 - b) At least 75% of male working population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits.
 - c) A density of population of at least 400 persons per square kilometer. (1000 per square mile)

Urban population is usually distributed among settlements of different sizes along a continuum from small towns to metro cities/mega cities with population of over tens of million (2001 Census). Large cities grow initially from the increasing agglomeration economy. The trend of urbanization during the last ten decades indicated in the Table 1.

Table 1: Trends of Urbanization in India

Year	No. of Towns/UAs	Urban population in thousands	Percentage of urban population to total population	Annual growth rate of urban population	Decennial growth
1901	1827	25851.9	10.84	-	-
1911	1815	25941.6	10.29	0.03	03.5
1921	1949	28086.2	11.18	0.79	8.27
1931	2072	33456	11.99	1.75	19.12
1941	2250	44153.3	13.86	2.77	31.97
1951	2843	62443.7	17.29	3.47	41.42
1961	2365	78936.6	17.97	2.34	26.41
1971	2590	109113.9	19.91	3.21	38.23
1981	3378	159462.5	23.34	3.83	46.14
1991	3768	217611.0	25.72	3.09	36.47
2001	4368	285354.9	27.78	2.73	31.13
2011	4516	370070.0	31.35	2.65	31.80

Source: Census, 2011

India, one of the largest multiethnic society in the World, is a new nation where the vast majority of people live their entire life in the vicinity of their place of birth. Yet, particularly since independence from British rule in 1947, there has been an increase in the number of people moving within the sub continent consequent to which there has been an increase in interaction between the people from different cultural, linguistic, religious and caste background in the major Indian cities. Urbanisation has to be seen as a part of development, the growing percentage of the population living in urban areas is just one of the several structural changes and developments as are related to the modernisation process. Historically, cities and towns have usually been the centers where development and civilisation have flourished and eventually it is likely that many nations will develop into urban societies.

The urban population in India at the beginning of 20th century was only 25.85 million constituting 10.84 % of India's population in 1901, which increased to 285.35 million comprising 27.78 % of total population in 2001. The growth rate was highest observed during 1971-81 (46.14%) and there was subsequent slowing down of urbanization.

In India, the urban population has grown steadily and it has furthered its momentum in the recent decades. It is evident from the available data that the urban population registered a less than three fold increase. The urban and total population in 1901 was 26 and 238 million respectively in 1981. While the total population increased between 1901 and 1981 by about 187 per cent, the urban population has increased by around 518 percent and the corresponding rural increment was less than 150 percent. The total number of towns has increased from 1917 in 1901 to 3245 in 1981 where as the number of the million plus cities increased from 9 in 1971 to 12 in 1981. The rapid increase in urban growth in recent decades further scope for growth of the urban population unless migration is recognised both as a vehicle for and the consequences of modernisation. Urbanisation has to be seen as a part of development the growing percentage of population living in urban areas is just one of the several structural changes and developments as are related to the modernisation process. Historically, cities and towns have usually been the centres where development and civilisation have flourished and eventually it is likely that many nations will develop into urban societies.

The level of urbanization in India was 27.78% in 2001, which is much lower than the average level of urbanization in developing countries (40% in 2001). In South Asia the neighbouring countries of India like Bangladesh (25%), Sri Lanka (23%), Bhutan (7%), Nepal (12%) have lower level of urbanization than India, but only Pakistan has higher level of urbanization (33%) than India. It is however important to note that the comparison of the level of urbanization at the world level is affected by definition of urban areas

followed in each country. For example, in Bangladesh places having a municipality (Poura Shabha), a town committee (Sahar Committee) or cantonment board are defined as urban; in Nepal all localities of 9000 or more inhabitants are declared urban; in Pakistan places with municipal corporation, town committee or cantonment are declared urban; in Sri Lanka also municipalities, urban councils and town are treated as urban (UN 2001).

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Literally, the word metropolis means a mother city, a meaning no longer holding any significance, though it does mean a dominant or a large city (Dikshit: 2003). Generally million plus cities are also called metropolises. According to Census 2001, there are 35 million plus cities consisting of 107.9 million urban population and constitute nearly 39 % urban population in the country. Kolkata was the only million city at the beginning of 20th century. Mumbai joined the rank of million plus city in 1911. Nearly for four decades, there were only 2 million cities until 1951 when Delhi, Chennai, and Hyderabad joined the rank of million cities in 1951 increasing the total number of million cities to five. In the decade 1981-91, 11 new metropolises were added increasing the total number of metro cities to 23 in 1991 from 12 in 1981. During the last decade (1991-2001), 12 more million plus cities have been added- maximum number during the last century increasing the total number of million plus cities to 35. As a result, the concentration of urban population in million plus cities increased significantly in the last decade from nearly one-fifth in 1970s and 1980s to almost two-fifth in 1990s.

In the Indian context a small town may be defined as an urban area with a population below 20,000. There are 3 categories (by population) of small towns, as

- Class IV: 10,000-19,999
- Class V: 5,000-9,999
- Class VI: Below 5000

Table 2: Class wise number of Towns and Cities and Their population

Class	Population size	Number	Population (Million)	Percentage of total urban population	Percentage of growth from 1991-2001
Class I	100,000 and above	423	172.04	61.48	23.12

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Class II	50,000-99,999	498	34.43	12.30	43.45
Class III	20,000-49,999	1386	41.97	15.00	46.19
Class IV	10,000-19,999	1560	22.60	8.08	32.94
Class V	5,000-9,999	1057	7.98	2.85	41.49
Class VI	Less than 5,000	227	0.80	0.29	21.21

Source: Census, 2001

If we look at the table 2, it is observed that class I cities have increased and the population of class I cities has also increased considerably. The process of urbanization thus has been essentially a process of cityward migration. Table 2 and Table 3 give the urban population distributed in the six classes of towns from 1901-2001. In 1901 it was 25 for Class-I town, in 2001 it is now 423.

Table 3: Growth in the Number of Cities and Towns

Year	Class and Number					
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
1901	25	44	144	425	765	499
1901	26	38	158	385	742	543
1921	29	49	172	391	767	614
1931	31	59	217	474	842	571
1941	49	88	271	548	973	468
1951	76	111	368	668	1191	622
1961	106	138	508	811	827	257
1971	150	214	643	962	797	288
1981	226	325	883	1247	920	348
1991	296	341	927	1135	725	185
2001	423	498	1386	1560	1057	227

Source: Census, 2001

Table 4: Growth in the Percentage of Urban Population

Year	Class and Number					
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
1901	26.00	11.29	15.64	20.83	20.14	6.10
1901	27.48	10.51	16.40	19.73	19.31	6.57
1921	29.70	10.39	15.92	18.29	18.67	7.03
1931	31.20	11.65	16.80	18.00	17.14	5.21
1941	38.23	11.42	16.35	15.78	15.08	3.14
1951	44.63	9.96	15.72	13.63	12.97	3.09
1961	51.42	11.23	16.94	12.77	6.87	0.77
1971	57.24	10.92	16.01	10.94	4.45	0.44
1981	60.37	11.63	14.33	9.54	3.58	0.50
1991	65.20	10.95	13.19	7.77	2.60	0.29
2001	68.67	9.67	12.23	6.84	2.36	0.23

Source: Census, 2001

A detail look at the data indicate that much of the growth of the urban population has taken place in the big cities (Population: 100,000+) and most of the small and medium sized towns have stagnated. Urbanisation has been essentially a process of migration to the big cities, while there has been stagnation of small towns. The study of urban growth by size class of towns would help us to understand the stages of urban development in a country. Differential growth rate indicate the extent of rural to urban migration and the changes in structure of city sizes.

The slow growth of small towns and stagnation, decay and declassification of several such towns in a period of rapid urbanization is a phenomenon which have not received much attention from demographers or economic planners. If we look at the Table No. 4 it reveals the slow growth rate and stagnation of small towns specially the Class IV, V and VI towns in India. Our analysis of the process of urbanization in India during the last ten decades reveals the slow growth of population of small towns. It may be said that the small towns are quite often seen as the 'bridge' between the urban and the rural universe, as the kind of settlement which can offer the best, and none of the worst of both worlds. From the Table it reveals the declining trend of small towns. It can be analysed as follows:

- 1) The process of urbanization is essentially a city ward migration.
- 2) The small towns are sending out the people to bigger towns and cities for employment opportunities.
- 3) The stagnation of small towns may be linked up with the traditional industries.
- 4) The traditional industries are not that much viable from the point of view of economic opportunities.
- 5) In the globalised world the small towns have failed to develop planned economic development or to receive the adequate attention from planners in spite of the professed objectives of decentralization of industries.

The slow growth, stagnation or decay of a large number of small towns is a phenomenon which must be studied historically. The stagnation of small towns in the era of planned industrialization and urbanization deserves serious attention from planners and policy makers in India.

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