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Contemporary urbanization as unregulated growth in India: The story of census towns

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the growth of census towns in India's Capital Region because the unregulated growth of census towns has been the key feature of recent urbanization in India. The article first examines the population and municipal status dynamics, location and economic characteristics of census towns as well as their migratory and commuting patterns. The status and costs of providing basic amenities and social infrastructure are then analyzed. The paper emphasizes the contribution of contemporary theories that explain the growth of census towns and the role of secondary and primary data in capturing their characteristics. Taking advantage of the economic potential of India's urbanization as census towns will require the following: (i) the enforcement of reforms to empower Gram Panchayat for spatial planning and growth regulation; (ii) the discontinuation of subsidized infrastructure provision and charging development tax; and (iii) investment in decentralized infrastructure for more accountable and more efficient delivery of basic amenities.

1. Introduction

Contemporary urbanization in the countries of the global South – and particularly in India – remains a challenge for planners who must wrestle with unprecedented population increases and the continuing absence of appropriate institutional structures as they attempt to manage and provide for adequate urban amenities (GoI, 2014; Patel & Bhattacharya, 2009; Toutain & Gopiprasad, 2006; WB, 2013). A particular feature of India's recent urbanization in this regard is the rise of 'census towns'.

Between 2001 and 2011, the Census of India identified unprecedented growth in the number and population of census towns, whose share of the urban population increased from 7.6% in 2001 to 14.5% in 2011 (GoI, 2016a:21). Census towns are towns that are defined as urban based on the definition from the Census of India, which means that these towns have more than 5000 people, a density of more than 400 people per square kilometer and more than 75% of males working in non-agriculture activities. Unlike statutory towns, which are provided with municipal governance, census towns are under rural governance ('Gram Panchayat'). In this respect, the growth of census towns has been termed 'non-recognized growth' (Samanta, 2014), 'unacknowledged urbanization' (Pradhan, 2013) and 'denied urbanization' (Denis, Mukhopadhyay, & Zérah, 2012). The absence of a municipal authority for providing and maintaining urban amenities as well as land-use planning and regulation has led to unregulated growth, which can weaken the economies of agglomeration (GoI, 2016a: 21). To

leverage the economic potential of urbanization and to achieve sustainable urbanization in terms of the growth of census towns, the characteristics of this type of urban growth must be elucidated.

Theories explaining certain characteristics of contemporary urbanization in the global South can be grouped under 'in-situ urbanization', 'planetary urbanism' and 'informal urbanization'. The central thesis of in-situ urbanization is that rural settlements and their populations can transform themselves into urban or quasi-urban populations without substantive geographical relocation of the residents (Zhu, 2004). In China, this type of urbanization has arisen because of the massive development of rural non-agricultural activities and the concurrent permeation of urban and quasi-urban facilities into the Chinese countryside. This pattern differs from that of traditional urbanization experienced in the global North, which is distinguished by rural to urban migration.

In attempting to explain these changing trends in urbanization, planetary urbanism theory suggests that 21st-century urbanization is a radical blurring of the urban with everything outside it and that formerly urban areas can no longer be distinguished conceptually or empirically from the rest of the geographic space (Brenner & Schmid, 2015). This theory treats the urban as a dynamic process of socio-spatial, socio-economic and socio-metabolic transformation (2015: 165, 173) in which urban space is defined by the people who use it, appropriate it and transform it by means of their daily routines and practices (2015: 171).

The feature of 'urban informality' is postulated by the theory of

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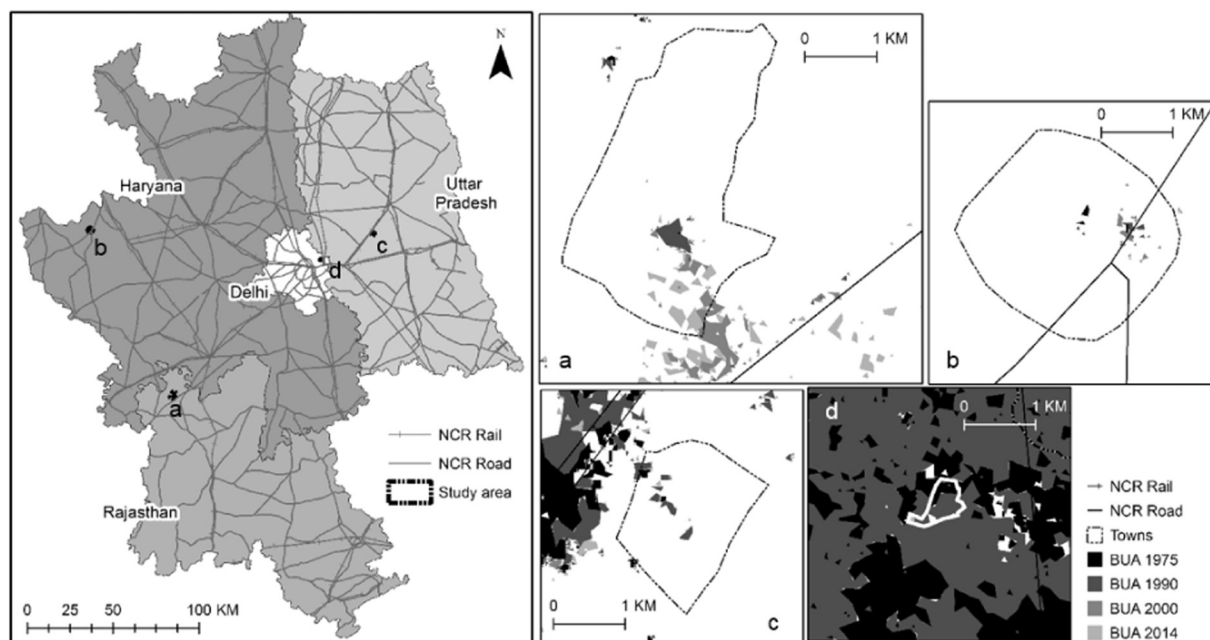


Fig. 1. The National Capital Region (NCR): (a) Neemrana in Rajasthan; (b) Tosham in Haryana; (c) Aurangabad Gadana in Uttar Pradesh; and (d) Khanpur Dhani in Delhi.

post-colonial urbanism as a state of deregulation in which the ownership and use of land cannot be fixed and mapped based on any prescribed set of regulations or laws (Roy, 2009). Informality in Indian planning is an ever-shifting relationship between what is legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, and authorized and unauthorized (2009: 80). It resides at the heart of the post-colonial state and is an integral part of the territorial practices of state power in which the state allows the conversion of land-use into peri-urban townships, Special Economic Zones (SEZ), and other forms of high-end developments that violate its own bans. Thus, it is informality imposed from above as opposed to informality emanating from below (2009: 84). This feature of informality in planning creates a certain territorial impossibility of governance, justice and development (2009: 81).

These theories postulate that the contemporary urbanization of the global South is different from the experience of the global North. They also underscore the complexities of explaining the contemporary urbanization that is underway in the global South and the need for new conceptual approaches that can capture the special features of urbanization in the global South (Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Roy, 2009; Storper & Scott, 2016). This paper seeks to develop a better understanding of the characteristics of urbanization as census towns and to test whether contemporary theories are helpful in illustrating the growth of census towns.

Research on census towns is scarce and limited (Mukhopadhyay, Zerah, Samanta, & Maria, 2016). Moreover, a theoretical underpinning for the growth of census towns is rare. Pradhan (2013) briefly explained the growth of census towns in the context of in-situ urbanization. Other studies have attempted to explain the factors of growth. Denis et al. (2012) called the growth of census towns the politics of classification. Bhagat (2005) discussed a set of factors that play a role when states decide to retain a settlement as a census town. Guin and Das (2015b) claimed that in West Bengal, agrarian distress drives the increase of the rural non-farm sector leading to enormous growth of census towns.

Empirical research on census towns is limited to the use of census data or field surveys. Using census data, Pradhan (2013) argue that census towns were formed predominantly due to the reclassification of rural areas to urban areas, and that these have emerged in developed states and in close proximity to large statutory towns. Guin and Das (2015a) confirmed that in West Bengal, new census towns follow the pattern of the existing urban centers. Recently, Jain and Korzhenevych

(forthcoming) compared the growth of census towns with statutory towns and found that census towns are better endowed with toilet facilities and electricity connections, although they are poorly endowed with educational and health infrastructure. Furthermore, these are more urban than statutory towns with respect to high non-agricultural employment and literacy levels. Using a field survey, Mukhopadhyay et al. (2016) studied census towns in Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, and West Bengal and found that the majority of census towns fulfill the role of market towns, which provide trade and other local services to a growing rural market. Samanta (2014) examined Singur City in West Bengal and found that the provision of infrastructure and services remains poor under the rural administration due to a lack of financial resources.

Unlike previous studies, this study uses a combination of built-up area information, census data enumeration on employment and infrastructure, and a field survey to capture the characteristics of census towns and to answer the following questions. What economic opportunities drive the growth in census towns? What type of migration and commuting patterns can be observed? What effect does the failure to acquire municipality status have on development? How do low or no taxes affect the provision of infrastructure? How are basic amenities and other infrastructure accessed by residents and businesses? What are the challenges for the government and residents in handling this growth?

This paper takes census towns in the participating states of the National Capital Region (NCR) of India as case studies and uses census data, remote sensing imagery, and expert and household interviews to answer the above questions. The paper is divided into six sections. This introduction is followed by an explanation of the study area and governance in India. The third section describes the research approach and data used, and the fourth section explains the key findings. The fifth section discusses the results, and the paper concludes with policy recommendations.

2. Study area and governance in India

2.1. Case studies

The NCR is one of the world's largest rural-urban regions, with a population of 58 million people and an area measuring 55,144 km²

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