Question on Small Towns?

Uttam Singh

Rsearch Scholar, School of Humanities and Social Science, Indian Institute of Technology Mandi, Himachal Pradesh. ORCID: 0000-0001-7955-2614. Email: uttammmsw2008@gmail.com

Abstract

According to 2011 Census, the number of Indian towns has increased from 2001 census. 2011 census shows a tremendous increase in the number of statutory towns and census towns. Their contribution to urban population is around 75% but they did not get any spotlight. Only metropolitan cities get the attention of researcher, policymaker, and academician. Therefore, scholars emphasize on Metropolitan cities as it offers a set of economic, political, social and cultural power. In the liberalization of market and the flow of funds in big cities increase the size of population, business activities, new cultural and social pattern. In this small towns also transform in term of economy, politics, demographic and cultural and social level. The focuses of researcher are basically big settlement and they neglect the small towns. In this corporatist socio-economic structure in small town gave the importance to small towns and also become a site for study which raise some basic question. Can small towns become a research agenda? Can they have same experience such as metropolitan cities? Can small towns break the myth of shadow towns and explore their aspiration to achieve urban status? How the term 'small' defined? This paper try to build a portrait how the urban studies change their path and include new themes and major focus given to big settlement and small settlement neglected.

Keywords: Small Town, Urbanity, Globalization, Decentralization

Introduction

Small towns constitute an important part of Indian urbanization story. 31.16% of the total population lives in urban areas and among which 75% of the population resides in small towns[i]. Small town plays an important role in the expansion of economic activities and political processes. Nevertheless, we do not know much about urban aspirations, urban forms, and urbanity that exists in small towns. This is partly due to lack of interest of academicians and policymakers in the small towns as well as the way we define urban and cities in social sciences in general and sociology, in particular. However, before we delve into the issue of small town and its conceptualization, it is necessary to locate the small town in the larger framework of urban classification in India.

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[i] http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/India2/1.%20Data%20Highlight.pdf

The moment we use the word city, we are drawn towards certain places, images, and descriptions. We immediately associate the term with places like New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, New York, London, and Paris and so on. These places are called cities as the term resonates with certain social, cultural, political and economic functions. We also associate these places with certain features such as high population density, physical infrastructure and urban amenities like the supply of drinking water, adequate sanitation, better health facilities and arrangements for entertainment and recreation. Often we associate cities with the large-scale physical area and huge population size. Apart from huge and dense population size, these are also places where large volumes of trade and business operate and contain some or other sort of political seat. This is how we understand city across the globe. As likely, in other parts of the world, the Indian administration also categorizes cities on the basis of population size (i.e. Class I-VI)[ii]. Traditionally, for a place to be considered urban, it must qualify following three criteria: a population size of more than 5,000; 75% of male population shall be employed in non-agricultural activities; and, the population density of 400 persons/per sq km. This is a very mechanical way of understanding the city as it neglects various other aspects that are urban in nature. The definitional aspects of city and urban are contested. Also, in our popular understanding a city is associated with huge size and its economic utility. This is well reflected in the quantum of work that has appeared around specific cities such as Mumbai, Madras, Delhi, Kolkata, and Bangalore and so on. Somehow we have not given attention to the small towns.

Changes in Urban studies

In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the idea of "global city" was employed to explore connections among cities and economic functions that they played in the expansion of global economic networks (Sassen 1990). In social sciences study, the major focus has been on large and global cities. This is due to the way we define and understand city and urban. Urban and city are defined by four major dimensions — demographic; institutional; cultural; and, behavioural. Despite such varied approaches, we have largely focused and restricted our understanding to mainly demographic and institutional dimensions. This also restricts our understanding of urban forms that operate outside and beyond the large and global city. Similarly, emphasis on governance also guides our understanding of urban and its classification. The social scientific explorations of the urban itself have formed a hierarchy that resultantly relates to the importance that we have placed on the cities. The cities from Global North are given more importance than the cities from Global South. With such approach, the small towns do not find a place and our knowledge on large networks of such towns and the varieties of urbanism that resides in these places remain unexplored. Consequently, such approach has established a hierarchy in the urban system wherein, the cities from the Global North are used as the template for comparison and reference for non- western cities. This also creates some kind of bias towards small cities. Jennifer Robinson (2006) traces the history of such bias

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[ii] http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2-vol2/data_files/AP/Chapter_IV.pdf

through her call for "Ordinary City". She asks for the shift away from the world city theory towards an understanding of the 'world of cities'.

The way urban has been explored and hierarchical traditions that have formed around cities do not allow us to explore urbanism and urbanity that exists in the small town. The linear model of transition from rural to urban has also restricted our understanding of small town urbanism and urbanity. Maringanti (2009) argues that this lack of appreciation of the variation also affects designing of developmental policies. Similarly, Moriconi Ebrard (2010) also draws our attention towards the methodological issue regarding the measure of urbanization phenomenon which also obscures the role of small towns in understanding economic globalization and political decentralization. Harvey Molotch (1976) brings out that cities in the modern economic system are seen as sites of growth. Similarly, in India, cities were seen as the site of modern form where the developmental benefits of modernization will trickle down. The major emphases on the city as growth engine restrict our explorations of the small town. Similarly, Banerjee-Guha (2013) asserts that big cities are identified as champions of urbanities and are responsible for setting new trends in urbanization. Therefore, scholars emphasize on big cities as it offers a set of economic, political, social and cultural power. Bell and Jayne (2009) articulate that this leads to small towns being neglected from the mainstream agenda of research. Urban theorists argue, in contemporary times, the incapability to appreciate small town urbanism is a proof of failure to understand urbanism (Brenner 2013). Metropolitan cities have perpetuated a kind of urbanity which is very different from the small town. As said earlier, urbanism and urbanity are often measured in terms of economic activities, financial services, urban amenities, law and order, infrastructure, airport connectivity and population size. However, variety and diversity of towns in India and the large proportion of population living in small towns offer an opportunity to move away from the metropolitan cities. The focus of research on small towns also allows examining the practices of Asian urbanism that will further help in building up urban theory from the South (Roy and Ong 2011). As like other sociological concepts, there is no real agreement on what constitutes small towns. Scholars such as Kundu (2007) and Dhaliwal (2004) acknowledge small towns as having less than 50,000 inhabitants while Dupont (2002) considers small towns as having the population of fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. Jain, Ghosh, and Kim (1993) classify small towns by size i.e. the last three categories cities (IV, V, VI) of the Census of India. Brenner (2013) argues that urban theorists 'one size fits for all'. The process of urbanization cannot be generalized because the conditions and actors are different as per territory (Brenner 2013).

Urban theory is based on the experiences and history of western cities and these western theories of urbanization are not relevant in the Indian context. In wider urban perspective, there is a lack of knowledge on the non-metro urban area. Though, the number of census[iii] and statutory[iv] towns increased between 2001 and 2011 census. In 2001, the number

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[iii] Places that satisfies the three criteria are termed as Census town(CT) a. Minimum population of 5,000 b. At list 75% of male population involved in non agriculture activities. c. Density of population of at least 400 per sq. Km. http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/kerala/13-concept-34.pdf

[iv] All places with a municipality, cooperation, containment board or notified town area committee etc. http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/kerala/13-concept-34.pdf

of Census and statutory towns were 5161 and in 2011, the number goes to 7935[v]. This gives significant importance to small towns as a research agenda.

Indian Cities and changing perspective

Available literature on Indian cities can be divided into two broad categories with respect to 'Urban Turn' (as Gyan Prakash calls it) that is, kind of literature emerged on urban phenomena before and after 1990s. The latest writing on urban phenomena looks at the idea of urban transformation which is associated with rapid growth of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), infrastructure development, new business opportunity, structural change in the institutions, and change in the social and cultural life of the inhabitant. This new urban paradigm gives an opportunity to discuss increasing corporate real estate development, the role of emerging new middle class, consumption, culture, governance, urban inequality and urban hierarchy. As I have discussed in earlier sections the sociological focus is on the big cities and a large number of small towns and related urban phenomena has not been explored by the scholars. Importantly, there is a lack of discussion on small-town urbanism, urbanity and how they experience and respond to the changes brought by his new political and economic system. The available literature and research interest of academicians makes it clear where small towns stand in the wider network of the urban system. Therefore, small towns become a potential research area to explore the changes and sustainability that work in these towns.

There are few valuable studies on small towns that address the question of small towns. Haynes (2012), takes the case of colonial Surat and discusses how the economy of small town changes with the introduction of machine production. There were several towns before independence that were major site of production, where involvements of capital in every aspect of development is altering the economy, politics, social and culture dimension of small towns. Hence, study offers a deep insight on how capitalism changes the discourse of small-town development. Away from small towns, the larger trajectory of studies on urban phenomena looked at urbanism and urbanization. However, the nature of urbanization in India was seen to be co-terminus with westernization and social change. As Rao (1974) argued that there is no real urban transformation associated with urbanization. However, there is no valid distinction between urban and rural sociologies because both cities and villages are having the same structural features of cast and kinship (MSA Rao 1974).

In the larger trajectory of sociological exploration, cities did not emerge as a research issue; rather cities were seen as a site of the specific modern problem. Most of the studies were based on census and National Sample Survey and even the emphasis of research committee of planning commission were on the socio-economic survey of the city. Apart from this, Prof Ghurye[vi] and Prof Radhakamal Mukherjee[vii] studied urban world, there was a little literature available during that time period which had some sociological significance because urbanization

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[v] http://moud.gov.in/cms/number-of-cities--towns-by-city-size-class.php
[vi] Prof. Ghurye in University of Bombay encourages his students to study various Indian cities. He himself worked on the comparative and historical aspect of urbanization and also studied rural-urban relation.
[vii] Prof. Radhakamal Mukherjee in Lucknow University contributed to the social ecological studies of towns and cities.

seemed to be the study of social problems of cities and towns. Before the 1970s urban studies centred around the dominant themes like linkage between rural and urban, colonial urbanization, migration, spatial patterns and ethnic composition, change in social institution, slum, development of the fringe area and territorial basis of population distributions, social and cultural activities of the people. Then after 1990s, there is an urban turn in sociology that accommodated the growing concern with the city. The Urban turn as Gyan Prakash[viii] suggested an opportunity to understand and act upon the city as the society. There is a growing recognition of the city as spatial form of society itself, which means city is not seen a place that contains social group and social relations but city itself has a social structure with social experiences. This is a remarkable turn towards city and the way we think about the city in India.

Urbanization in India seen as a western perspective and colonial rulers are responsible for the urban development. Rao (1974) argued that the colonial ruler fostered urbanization process in India, due to which traditional towns lost their significance. Later on, India experienced a tremendous change in urbanization process. The growing concern with urban became a global idea particularly writing of 'Manuel Castells' debate on 'Urban question', where urban problems become an essential part of government policies and everyday life of the large population. For Castells, the urban question is ideological, where foundational processes are associated with the capital accumulation and state role in the production of labour.

In the twenty-first century, the concept of capital accumulation and reproduction of labour become one of the dominated matanarratives. Hardt and Negri (2009) argue the contemporary metropolis has become a place of socio-political mobilization equivalent to the role of the factory during the industrial age. For them, the metropolis has become the "space of the common" and a territorial base for collective action. Harvey (1989, 2012) argues that urban is thus no longer only a site of controversial politics but has become one of its primary stakes. In twenty-first century global capitalism transforms the urban conditions, economic-political and spatial structure. As the discourse changes with urban transformation and focus is diverted towards the global cities. Bunnell and Maringanti (2010) argue that urban study changes the path and includes the new concepts such as Global city, Metro city and so on. The global cities, after the 1990s (with the expansion of economic globalization), became financial centre and attracted new actors but they again supported the hierarchies of cities system (Sassan 1990). The emphasis on global cities was opposed by scholars as it lacks the appreciation of local and regional variations and effects of economic globalization. The scholars have failed to acknowledge the impact of liberalization on small towns as there is a change in business actor, capital and financial flow, change in political geography and change in the consumption in small towns.

The researchers, till now, have mainly focused on the opportunities that have been made available to the global and metro cities by globalization. Bell and Jayne (2009) identify how small cities are integrated into global flows of capital, culture, and people. They also critique the limited measure which decides and categorizes the global cities. They develop an idea which helps explore us how neoliberal economy works in small cities. Small cities enhance

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[viiiviii] http://shekhar.cc/2002/12/25/the-urban-turn/s

our understanding of the urban world and facilitate the development of new theories based on small cities research. Small Towns and cities play different function for their hinterland and big cities. There is localized commercial, personnel, financial and consumption process that are related to the nature of small-town itself. But these localized activities create a huge demand for transportation, supply services, storage, financial and insurance services and that increases the size and service area of small towns.

Small town in modern era

To study small town with the lance of modern capitalism fluctuates between several themes and ideas. It involves varies themes and ideas ranging from the discussion on small towns, globalization, politics, governance, market economy, smart city, everyday life, consumption, and urbanization. Denis, Mukhopadhyay, and Zérah (2012) argue in Indian context how the subaltern urbanization is growing in the shape of settlement agglomerations that are generated by the market and historical forces.

Subaltern urbanization is the important conceptual tool to explore and understand independence of small towns from the Metropolitan influence. Roy (2011) offers two prominent themes 'economic entrepreneurialism' and 'political agency' while advancing the notion of subaltern urbanism. In the 1980s, the role of small towns in development and transmission of urbanization generated interest of the urban theorist. Rondinelli (1983) emphasized the function and role played by the small urban centre in creating rural-urban linkages. It is the time when small urban places are known as a centre which builds the link between metropolitan cities and hinterland as well as a balancing space between urban and rural.

The small town acts as transmission mechanism in rural areas. lastly as Bell and Jayne (2009) argue that in the competitive environment of global city region and global urban hierarchy, it is important to understand the ways small towns develop and link with other cities and how market forces bring change aspirations, and lifestyle of people of small town that impact education, housing, and reproduction strategies. In recent studies on Himalayan towns by scholars such as Mehra (2016) and Negi, Thakur, and Ali (2016) there is a discussion on how small towns of Himalayans are transforming its relationship to nearby villages that are increasingly a part of the town's remit as it emerges as a new metropolitan region.

Small town mostly depends on the single industry or resources. Small town still remains a town due to their function like Moradabad (Uttar Pradesh) known for his handicrafts, Dindigual (Tamil Nadu) for his hand products and steel safes, Harda (MP) for its 'Mandi' especially for buying and selling of wheat. These are some example of the small town known for their particular function and still remain small in size. In the era of globalization and increased flow of capital into these towns, there is the growth of middle class, which has reshaped the consumption. The changing perspective of liberalization of the market shows the tremendous change in the structure and development of small towns. Anyone can see multiplex theatres, shopping malls, restaurant chains. Revolution in Information and communication technology especially the mobile phones, television, and laptops are available on street corners. There is an

increasing demand for daily consumption of items like cheese, chocolates and packaged rice. This shows that small town has tremendous flexibility in adopting or shifting dynamics of the larger economy and their dependence on other economic activity also place then in the capitalist economy (Basile and Harriss-White, 2009).

Census has a very useful source to measure the scale of urban settlement in that country where the population is main criteria to decide whether area falls under the urban category or not. 2011 census brings a new change in Indian urbanization, in which small and medium towns show potentials to challenge the set hierarchy. Census and administrative criteria to decide urban show there is the structural and ideological change in the small town economy and identity. The focus is only on the size of the population, density and economic activity which decide whether an area falls under the category of urban or not. The other qualitative side of towns is to never consider upon deciding urban status. Small towns are in the developing phase and they have also the urban aspiration to achieve the status of the city. Small towns show how they are transforming their economy, politics and cultural identity in the era of globalization. The new corporatist socio-economic structure emerges in the small town which changes the consumption pattern. Small towns are growing and are on the way to achieve the city indicator so they can also get the status of the city. Corporate consider small towns a favourable site to invest their capital and try to capture the market in all commodities. As Mehra (2016) and Negi, R., Thakur, K., and Ali, S. S. (2016) shows in their studies on Himalayan towns, how the structure of small towns change in term of infrastructure, mobility, heterogeneity, density, population and economic activities? In recent years, Indian cinema Bollywood also tried to portrait a new image of small towns. Some of the artists, actors, musician, and sportsman belong to the non metro cities. Small towns are growing and playing a critical role in the economy, politics, art and entertainment, sports and cultural. No doubt there are some studies on the small towns' development and different aspect. Can these studies provide a complete picture of Small town development? Why small towns are considered 'small'? Can 'small' be defined in term of population, density, economic activities, geographical area, export, and import? What about the other characteristics of urban form which is present in the small town? Can their aspiration, way of life, quality of life, non-dependence on the metro city, independent growth, impersonality be considered in deciding the term small? In the era of liberalization, small towns may be considered a site of emerging new social, cultural, political and economic practices which also grow independently and establish a new pattern in the urban system. There is a need to focus on small towns and place them in the wider urban system. In Indian context, small settlements are growing with rapid speed and it is in the process to become a new vibrant research agenda.

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