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Urbanisation In India: A Geographical Reappraisal

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Abstract

Urbanization is a process of transition from a rural to a more urban society. Statistically, urbanization reflects an increasing proportion of the population living in settlements defined as urban. It is a long term process. This paper is a brief appraisal of growth and development of urban places in India with the set objective to ascertain the patterns and trends in the Indian urbanization using Indian census data during 1901-2001.

At the moment India is among the countries of low level of urbanization. In 2001, 27.8 percent of the total population was enumerated in urban areas. Number of urban agglomeration/ town has increased considerably. Over the years there has been continuous concentration of urban population (68.6%) in class I towns. Moreover, it has a poly-metropolitan apex in which the million cities including the four mega cities dominate the entire urban scenario. On the contrary the concentration of urban population in medium and small towns either fluctuated or declined. Urbanization is a product of demographic explosion and poverty induced rural-urban migration.

Introduction

India is one of the countries in which urban centers and urbanization flourished as early as 3000 B.C. The urban centers of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa may be cited as the examples of prehistoric urbanization in India. During the ancient and medieval periods of Indian history numerous towns and cities developed mainly because of socio-economic, geopolitical and cultural reasons. The colonial rule led to the development of many cities and towns in the country. Though some of the towns could develop as industrial centers during the British period, they established trading centers to export the raw materials from India and to sell their finished products in the Indian market. The British also established many cantonments and the strategic points to administer the country.

Objectives

The present paper aims at exploring the process of urbanization in India with emphasis on level, trend and tempo of urbanization. It also tries to trace the pattern of urbanization, urban problem and related policy issues. The objectives of this demographic appraisal are:-

1. To study the degree of urbanization from 1901 to 2001.
2. To analyze the tempo of urbanization in the last century.
3. To examine Indian's future urbanization issues and concerns.
4. To examine the temporal dimension of urban population change in six categories of towns during twentieth century.

Data and methodology

Census is the main source of data on urban population for not only India but also most of the countries of the world. The population figures for urban areas for the period 1901-2001 have been taken from various census reports of Census of India. In order to understand the demographic and geographical dimension of urbanization in India, the following indicators of urbanization have been considered in the paper.

1. Percentage of urban population to total population and urban-rural ratio [(U/R)* 100] are used to measure degree of urbanization. This shows the degree of urbanization in an area.
2. Tempo of urbanization refers to speed of urbanization and measured as change registered in the degree of urbanization over the years. Tempo of Percent Urban (PU) = 1/n [log(PU_{t+n}/ PU_t)] X 100.

Indian census definition of urban area

In census of India (2001) two types of town were identified

1. **Statutory Towns** : All places with a municipality, corporation, cantonment board or notified town are committee etc. declared by law
2. **Census Towns.** : Places which satisfy following criteria:
   a. A minimum population of 5000 persons,
   b. At least 75% of male working population engaged in non agricultural pursuits and,
   c. A minimum density of population of 400 persons per square kilometer.

Urbanization in India

The urban population has grown 11 times over the last century (1901-2001); from 258 lakh in 1901 to 2853 lakh in 2001. In relative term the rural-urban ratio has decreased from 8.1:1 to 2.6:1 during the same period. There has been a steady growth in the size and proportion of the urban population as well as in the number of urban areas in India since independence. Total urban population of India increased from 62.4 million in 1951 to 285.3 million in 2001- an increase of 457.21 percent. The number of urban centers (Towns and urban agglomerations) increased from 2843 in 1951 to 4368 in 2001. The decadal growth rate of the urban population during 1991-2001 was 32.51 percent, slightly less than that of the previous two decades 1981-1991 (36.19%), and 1971-1981 (46.14%). Thus it appears that the pace of urbanization has been slower in the last two decades.

Trend and level of urbanization in India

Three noteworthy trends of urban population growth in India during the twentieth century may be observed. First, urban population has been growing at a faster rate than the country's total population. A faster rate of urban population growth indicates a net immigration to the urban areas. Increasing population (35.76% in 2001) is migrating to urban areas in search of livelihood and employment opportunities.

A second trend is the remarkably higher growth rate of class I towns (population one lakh or more) than of towns less than one lakh population. Not only have class I towns been growing rapidly their share of the urban population has been progressively increasing. In 1901, there were 24 class

Table 1: **Trend and level of urbanization in India: 1901-2001**

Census year	Number of urban agglomeration / town	Total population	Urban population	Urban population as percentage of total population	Decennial growth rate of urban population percentage	Rural population as percentage of total population	Urban rural ratio (Percentage)
1901	1827	238396327	25851873	10.84	-	89.15	12.16
1911	1825	252093390	25941633	10.29	0.35	89.71	11.47
1921	1949	251321213	28086167	11.18	8.27	88.82	12.58
1931	2072	278977238	33455989	11.99	19.12	88.01	13.63
1941	2250	318660580	44153297	13.86	31.97	86.14	16.08
1951	2843	361088090	62443709	17.29	41.42	82.71	20.91
1961	2363	439234771	78936603	17.97	26.41	82.03	21.91
1971	2590	598159652	109113977	19.91	38.23	81.76	22.31
1981	3378	683329097	159462547	23.34	46.14	76.66	30.44
1991	3768	844324222	217177625	25.72	36.19	74.28	34.63
2001	4368	1027015247	285354954	27.78	32.51	72.22	38.47

Source: Indian, Urban Poverty Report (2009).

Notes

1. As the 1981 census was not conducted in Assam the 1981 population figures for India include interpolated figures for Assam.
2. The 1991 census has not been held in Jammu & Kashmir, the 1991 population figures for India include projected figures for Jammu & Kashmir, as projected by the Standing Committee of Experts on Population Project (Oct. 1989)

I towns consisting 26 percent of urban population. In 2001, their number increased to 393 representing more than two – thirds (68.6%) of the urban population of the country. The growth of million plus cities also shows a parallel trend. Their number rose from 1 to 35 during the same period. These 35 cites make up 37.8 percent of the total urban population of India. Moreover it has a poly-metropolitan apex in which the million cities including four mega-cities (Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi, and Chennai) dominate the entire urban scenario.

Thirdly, small towns with population less than 10,000 remained nearly constant in their absolute population. Their share in urban population has been declining. As per 1901 census proportion of urban population in class V, IV were 20.1% and 6.1% but these figures declined to 2.3% and 0.2% in 2001.

There is big regional variation in the states/union territories wise level of urbanization in India. The union territories of Delhi (93.01%) and Chandigarh (89.78%) are the most urbanized among the states/ union territories in the country. The state

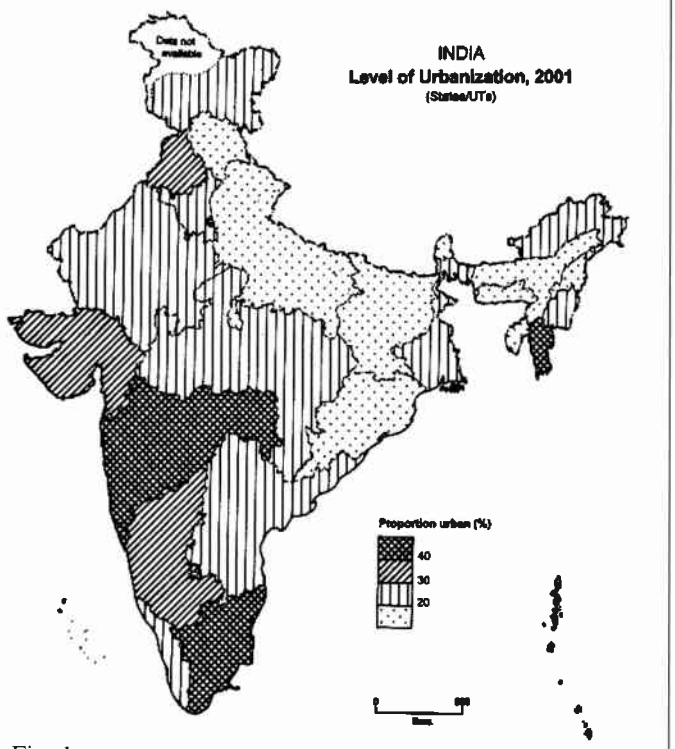

Fig. 1

of Goa is the most urbanized with 49.77 of its population living in urban areas, followed by Mizoram (49.5%), Tamil Nadu (43.86%), Maharashtra (42.40%) Gujarat (37.35%), Karnataka (33.98%), Punjab (33.95%), Haryana (29.00%) and West Bengal (28.03%). In all these states the proportion of urban population is higher than the national average of 27.78 percent. More than half of the urban population of the country resides in the five states, namely, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh. In the states of Andhra Pradesh (27.08%), Madhya Pradesh (26.67%), Rajasthan (23.38%), Uttar Pradesh (20.78%), Assam (12.72%), and Bihar (10.47%), the proportion of urban population is below the national average. Himachal Pradesh (9.79%) is the least urbanized state of India. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the Peninsular India is more urbanized than the densely populated productive plains of the northern India.

The level of urbanization has increased significantly during the post independence period in India. In the pre-independence period, the level of urbanization varied from 10.84 percent to 13.86 percent, from 1901 to 1941. It stated increasing subsequently at a much faster rate from 17.29 percent in 1951 to 27.78 percent in 2001. Still the proportion of urban population in 2001 cannot be considered as very high. By and large, India continues to be predominantly rural in character.

Tempo of urbanization in India

Tempo of urbanization refers to speed of urbanization and is measured as change registered in the degree of urbanization over the years. It may be noted from table 2 that the tempo of urbanization is not uniform in the twentieth century in the country. It shows a fluctuating trend over the years 1901-1981 and a declining trend during the last two decade 1981-2001. Thus despite a steady growth in the urban population, the tempo of urbanization in India has slowed down during the last decade 1991-2001 to the previous decade 1981-1991 (Fig. 1).

Table 2: Tempo of urbanization 1901-2001

Year	tempo of (PU)
1901-1911	-0.5240
1911-1921	0.8250
1921-1931	0.7054
1931-1941	1.4444
1941-1951	2.2160
1951-1961	0.3846
1961-1971	0.1492
1971-1981	2.4629
1981-1991	0.9734
1991-2001	0.7714

Urban population by size class of towns

Table 3: Shows number of towns and percentage of urban population by size class of towns during 1901-2001. The pattern of urbanization in India is characterized by continuous concentration of population in large cities. This is manifested in a high percentage of urban population being concentrated in class I cities, it rose from 26 percent in 1901 to 68.6 percent in 2001 (Fig.2).

According to census of 2001, there were 35 metropolitan urban agglomerations / cities in the country with a population of one million or more. In 1901, there was only one such city namely, Culcutta (now Kolkata). During 1911 to 1941, Kolkata and Mumbai were representing million plus cities in the country. In 1951, their number increased to five, in 1961 to seven, in 1971 to nine, in 1981 to twelve and in 1991 to twenty three cities were in category of million plus cities. In the last decade the number has gone upto 35 with 37.8 percent of the total urban population of the country. Greater Mumbai with a population of about 164 lakh heads the list, followed by Kolkata (132 lakh) and Delhi (128 lakh). Out of these, Delhi has registerd the fastest growth (54.4%) in the urban population over the last decade. Thus it is said that India has witnessed metro politisation, not just urbanization.

Slum population

The proportion of the population in towns and cities living in slums has been increasing over the years and has risen from 17.5 percent of the urban population in 1981 to 21.4 percent in 1991. In 2001, the slum dwellers in the century have gone up to 23.1 percent of the population of 640 cities/ towns reporting slums. Among the states, Andhra Pradesh has the largest number of cities and towns (77) reporting slums population followed by Uttar Pradesh (69), Tamil Nadu (63), Maharashtra (61), West Bengal (59), Madhya Pradesh (43) and Gujarat (41).

The state of Maharashtra is the prime example of slum population in which about 11.2 million people lived in slums in 2001 that is more than one fourth of the

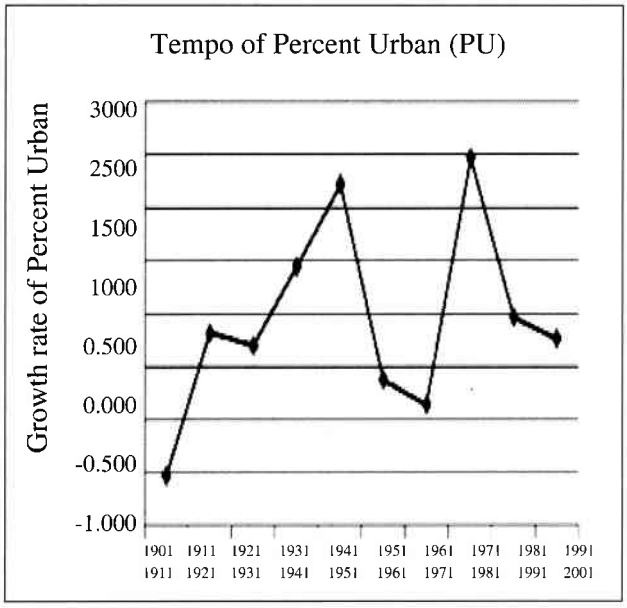

Fig. 1: Growth rate of Percentage Urban (PU)

Table 3: India:Number of towns and percentage of urban population1901-2001

Census year	**Number of Cities and Towns**						**Percentage to total Urban population**					
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
1901	24	43	130	391	744	479	26.0	11.2	15.6	20.8	20.1	6.1
1911	23	40	135	364	707	485	27.4	10.5	16.4	19.7	19.3	6.5
1921	29	45	145	370	734	571	29.7	10.3	15.9	18.2	18.6	7.0
1931	35	56	183	434	800	509	31.2	11.6	16.8	18.0	17.1	5.2
1941	49	74	242	498	920	407	38.2	11.4	16.3	15.7	15.0	3.1
1951	76	91	327	608	1124	569	44.6	9.9	15.7	13.6	12.9	3.1
1961	102	129	437	719	711	172	51.4	11.2	16.9	12.7	6.8	0.7
1971	148	173	558	827	623	147	57.2	10.9	16.0	10.9	4.4	0.4
1981	218	270	743	1059	758	253	60.3	11.6	14.3	9.5	3.5	0.5
1991	300	345	947	1167	740	197	65.2	10.9	13.1	7.7	2.6	0.3
2001	393	401	1151	1344	888	191	68.6	9.67	12.1	6.8	2.3	0.2

Source: Various Census Reports

Class I : 1 lakh or more population
Class II : 50,000-99,9999 population
Class III : 20,000-49,999 population
Class IV : 10,000-19,999 population
Class V : 5,000-9,999 population
Class VI : Less than 5,000 population

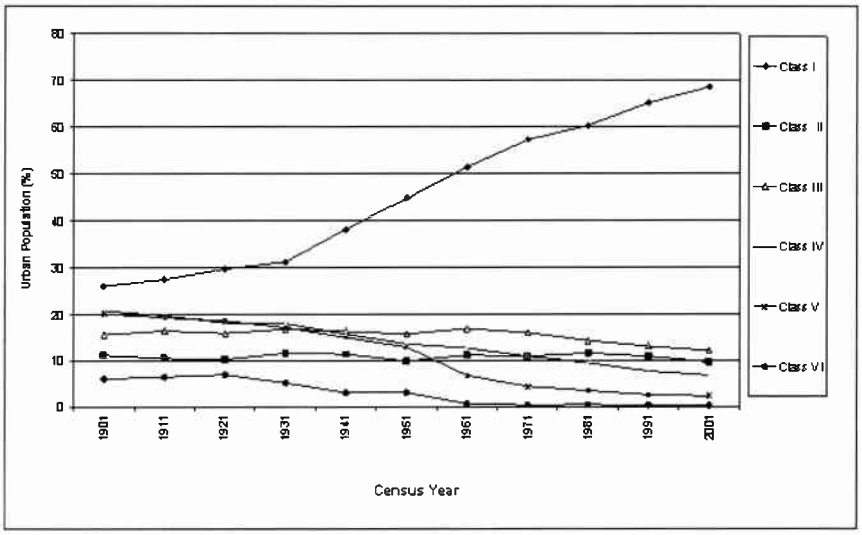

Fig. 2 : India : Growth of Towns and Cities by Size Class : 1901-2001

total slum population of the country. Five states, namely Maharashtra (11.2 million), Andhra Pradesh (5.2 million), Uttar Pradesh (4.4 million), West Bengal (4.1 Million) and Tamil Nadu (2.9 million) account for about two thirds (65.3%) of the total slum population of the country.

Policy concerns and a vision for the urban future

The share of class I cities in India's urban population has been increasing over the decades. It went up from 44.6 percent in 1951 to 68.6 percent in 2001. The high concentration of population in class I cities reflects that cities are more attractive, having a higher level of employment opportunities compared to the small urban centers. Consequently, more and more people have been migrating to urban centers, particularly class I cities. This in turn puts a severe strain on the civic facilities in urban centers. Thus the urban areas are facing a great challenge in providing basic facilities and amenities, such as water supply and sanitation, management of solid and hazardous wastes, supply of adequate and safe drinking water and affordable housing to burgeoning urban population.

Most of the mega cities are industrial hubs of their region and pulling center of migrants. Most of the slum dwellers are rural migrants whose migration is poverty driven. Indeed, it is a movement of rural poverty to urban poverty, particularly in slums. Are we able to meet the challenges of this growing population in slums and squatter settlements of the urban areas? Will these cities ever cope up with the increasing demand for various amenities and facilities? Would slums appear as 'islands of poverty' in the urban areas in coming days on the city maps? Most of the slum dwellings are illegal encroachments and pose threat to land owning agency when it tries to retrieve the land? Would it be possible to make such cities sustainable?

Cities are hubs of manufacturing, trade, finance, culture, and information, and are incubators of innovation and new ideas. They have been described as engines of development and progress. In order to make them play this role, they must be well planned and, more importantly, well governed. They should also exist in harmony with the natural environment and provide healthy living and congenial working environments for their inhabitants, particularly for the poorer section of society.

Policy steps that need urgent attention of urban policy makers may be mentioned as follows. First, using demographic data together with satellite images and other spatial data in a GIS can help orient urban expansion of a given locality in more favorable directions. Projections of demographic growth trends, used in conjunction with other data for example, on elevation, slope, soils, land cover, critical ecosystems and hazard risks can help policy makers identify areas in which future settlement should be promoted or avoided. Second, the presence of roads, public transport, power and water supplies helps determine the direction in which cities grow. Their development should be oriented in accordance with environmental and demographic criteria. Information on demographic trends and commuting patterns can help predict increased pressure on housing, as well as on the road and street system. Thirdly, the same GIS tools mentioned above can identify areas for green space preservation. The urban trees have important environmental benefits such as filtering air pollutants, attenuating the urban heat island effect.

Urbanization – the increase in the urban share of total population is inevitable, but it can also be positive. The current concentration of poverty, slum growth and social tension in cities does point a threatening picture, yet no country in the industrial age has ever achieved significant economic growth without urbanization. Cities concentrate poverty, but they also represent the best hope of escaping it.

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