

Indian 'Urban' Classification at Crossroad

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Abstract: 'Urban' is classified primarily by the Census of India, a central government institution, which can declare a settlement as Census Town (erstwhile non-municipal town), and this method applies to all States irrespective of their different geospatial conditions. This urban classification by the Census is the primary process of identifying the future urban areas of that particular State. However, the criteria for classifying urban settlements is age-old and does not have much context in present-day India. This article takes up the earlier debate of urban classification on board and extends it to a new level by using the author's experience of extensive fieldwork carried out on both the Census Towns and small Statutory Towns in different parts of eastern India (Jharkhand, Bihar, and West Bengal). The article argues that these criteria need complete restructuring. To make the data system better capable of capturing the real-world urban phenomenon in India, it needs a change in criteria and a new data collection format by the Census of India.

Keywords: Urban classification, Threshold population, Non-farm activities, Continuous built-up area, Gender-sensitive criteria

Introduction

Although the tradition of population enumeration, officially called Census operation, was started in 1872 by the then-British Government, the first Census in Independent India took place in 1951, after four years of Independence. According to that report, 17.3 per cent of the Indian population lived in urban areas in 1951, which resulted from a high decadal growth rate in the 1940s, a growth rate of 41.42 per cent against 31.37 per cent in the earlier decade. The decadal growth rate of the urban population during the 1940s was the second highest till 2011, surpassed only by 46 per cent during the 1970s (Appendix 1). Much of this contribution to urban population in the 1940s came from partition and consequent international refugee migration from the then West and East Pakistan to Indian cities, especially in West Bengal, Punjab and Delhi, and also from rural to urban migration led by famine, agrarian distress, and poverty during the decade of partition.

During the last seven decades, both the urban situation and the urban landscape have undergone tremendous changes. The change in the level of urbanisation, i.e., the percentage growth of the urban population compared to the total population, was more or less around 1 to 2 percentage points in those decades except in 1981 and 2011, both of which experienced 3.4 per cent growth of urban population. Unfortunately, we still do not have any data on the current urban situation in India at the settlement level, as there has been no Census operation since 2011. However, during the last two decades, urban growth in India has taken on a different shape. It has been oriented more towards new territorial expansion and growth of small cities in areas beyond the metropolitan shadow (Samanta, 2017b) than the earlier trend of urban densification and peri-urban expansion of big cities (Appendix 2).

Following this new trend, there is an enormous increase in the number of Census Towns (settlements classified as 'urban' by the Census of India), but the growth of Statutory Towns is not so high. In the first decade of the 21st century, the number of newly classified towns was 2532, whereas only 242 settlements were granted statutory status by the different State Governments. There is also an intense debate about this kind of urban growth. Some experts, such as Kundu (2011:15), claimed that this is Census activism, which is partly true as the State Directorates of Census have been given

some discretionary power to identify such towns. Moreover, the classification criteria for declaring a settlement as a town by the Census of India devised in 1961 are being continued to date. Other scholars like Bhagat (2018 p. 6) claim that as India's definition of urban is quite stringent compared to other South Asian countries, its level of urbanisation is even lower than that of Pakistan and several African countries. A bunch of research on the macro picture of India's Census Towns (Pradhan, 2013; Roy and Pradhan, 2018; Punia et al., 2017) and in-depth micro-scale empirical studies of specific Census Towns (Roy, 2022; Guin, 2018, Sircar, 2016; Mukhopadhyay et al., 2016; Samanta, 2014 and 2017b) show that the urban transformation is happening at a much faster rate and in areas beyond the shadow of metropolitan cities. These empirical studies also observed that the development and growth of a place-based non-farm economy at the local level facilitates the emergence of a higher number of newly classified Census Towns.

A team of scholars working under the project entitled 'Subaltern Urbanization in India' looked into small towns (both Census and Statutory Towns below 1,00,000 population size) to understand the patterns and processes of urbanisation in India beyond big and metropolitan cities. Several empirical studies carried out by this team showed that urbanisation in India has diversified forms. However, a common pattern is the clustering of settlements into small agglomerations, which the Census is not capturing in classifying settlements as 'urban' (Denis and Zerah, 2017). The economy may be banal, but it is linked to local or global chains. Some studies, such as Roy and Pradhan (2018), noted the anomaly in the urban classification system, and it is claimed that the Indian Census is failing to represent the actual urban situation of India because of their erroneous classification policies. I also have pointed to this anomaly through my previous research in the context of West Bengal (Samanta, 2012 & 2014). Many towns are not classified as Census Towns despite having an agglomeration of non-farm activities (Sarkar, 2022). In contrast, there is also a range of Census Towns which do not qualify to be declared as urban settlements (Roy, 2022).

Against the above backdrop, the present article unpacks the paradoxes in classifying the 'urban' and its trajectories over the last seventy-five years in independent India. The article critically looks at the measurement criteria of 'urban' and points out the generic problems in classification by the Indian Census. It explains why and how rural/urban classification gets problematic in India. However, the article does not take any side on the debate of under-representation or over-representation of the urban in India, which is very common among the earlier studies on classification. The principal argument in this article revolves around the problems inherent in the classification system following the stipulated norms set in 1961 and its probable solutions so that the data system can represent a more realistic picture of urban India. The argument of this article is based on an analysis of the current debate on urban classification, complemented by my research over the last three decades in understanding the 'urban' in the form of small and medium towns (both Statutory and Census Towns) in India.

Classifying 'Urban' by Indian Census

Identifying a settlement as 'urban' in India starts with the Indian Census Authority, which identifies Census Towns (erstwhile non-municipal towns) while organising the population data during each census year. The method of their identification follows the norms set by the 1961 Census authority to classify a settlement as 'urban' based on the following criteria: 5000 population size; 400 persons per sq. km.; and three-fourths of the occupation of the working population outside of agriculture. In 1971, the third criterion was modified to exclude women workers and, accordingly, was changed to '75 per cent of male workers engaged in non-agricultural sectors. In 1981, the Census changed the counting of the non-farm workforce and excluded workers engaged in livestock, forestry, fishing, hunting and plantations, orchards and allied activities (Bhagat, 2005). The same criteria for urban classification continued till 2011 when the marginal workforce was excluded entirely, and only the main workforce (engaged in an occupation for over six months) was only taken into account.

Moreover, the Census has stopped publishing ten workforce categories at the *mouza* or village level and has reduced the number of categories to four since 2001. This new categorisation includes non-farm activities within the 'other workers'. This erases the nature of non-farm activities, which helps to understand the nature of urbanisation. The threshold population size and density are unrealistic to the ground situation, as both the size and the density of Indian villages have increased many times since 1961.

The studies noted the lack of parity between the set norms and the actual classification measures (Roy & Pradhan, 2018; Samanta, 2014), which dealt with both the macro data and micro-level analysis. The problems are many, and I do not have a concrete proposal on every issue, but in this article, I intend to analyse the roots of these problems and would like to come up with certain specific recommendations for consideration. After 75 years, it is high time to reconsider the classifying criteria of urban settlements regarding population size, density, and the measurement of the non-farm workforce. In this article, I additionally argue for newer factors and characters to be considered for classifying urban settlements instead of just focusing on the demographic criteria. These can include checking the built-up area, introducing new categories of the workforce, including the female workforce, and checking physical growth beyond the *mouza* (revenue village) boundaries with the help of geospatial data. The following sections bring the current system's problems to the fore and the corrective measures proposed to be incorporated.

Threshold Population Size and Density

The Indian Census considers 5000 as the threshold population size to classify a settlement as urban. That size must be backed up by two other criteria: density and proportion of male main non-farm workforce participation. However, the classification process starts with the size, so the size threshold must be realistic. This size of 5000 was probably appropriate for the 1961 situation but cannot be satisfactorily applied to the present context if we consider the growth of the total population and the growth of the urban population. The total population in 2011 was 2.8 times that of 1961, whereas the urban population increased during the same period by 4.7 times. Although the natural growth rate has declined, migration from rural to urban areas has accelerated much faster due to the decay of the farm sector and the booming of informal service sectors in both urban and 'rurban' areas. Therefore, the population size criterion cannot continue to be set at 5000, as the number of Indian villages above that mark will probably surpass the number below 5000. If a small hilly country like Nepal can have a population criterion of 9000 for declaring a settlement as 'urban' (Bhagat, 2005), how can India continue with the 5000 population mark? Considering the growth of the total population (2.8 times) and the urban population (4.7 times) in the country, the threshold size should be increased at least two to three times. Similar is the condition for the density threshold—400 persons per sq. km is too low for Indian villages. Even in highly vulnerable areas like the Indian Sundarban, 44 per cent and 77.6 per cent of the villages with a population above 5000 had a population density of more than 1000 and 800 per sq. km. respectively, in 2011.

Moreover, the mean density of all 295 villages above the 5000 population mark was 1,235 in 2011. The Indian Sundarban does not belong to a high-density area; therefore, this data indicates how unrealistic the density criteria are of 400 persons per sq. km. It should be increased at least twice, i.e., 800 persons per sq. km. Ramachandran (1989) suggested increasing this density criterion to 1000 persons per sq. km.

This recommendation may trigger a debate on the fact that if the threshold population size is lifted, the level of urbanisation might go down, which is already low compared to many other countries in Asia and even Africa. It is already claimed by some scholars (Bhagat, 2018) that the level of urbanisation is low in India because of stringent measurement categories. However, I have already stated that this article does not enter into the debate on under- and over-representation of the level of urbanisation; instead, it argues for a closer representation of the ground situation of India's urban landscape. Additionally, it argues that this change in threshold population will not reduce the

level of urbanisation, as many States of India have a huge number of settlements in the size category of 10,000 to 20,000 which were not considered urban in 2011, and it is now already 11 years past that time. For example, Sarkar (2022), in his empirical research on the Indian Sundarbans, consisting of 19 C.D. Blocks of North and South 24 Parganas of West Bengal, showed that there were six large villages above the size category of 10,000 and 5 villages in the size category of 5000–10000 population which fulfilled all other criteria but were not classified as urban in 2011. Therefore, 11 villages qualified to be classified as urban but did not appear in the Indian Census and the data system.

Non-Farm Workforce

The second puzzle is in the proportion of the non-farm workforce. In 1971, the male workforce was considered important to understand a settlement's economy, whether farm- or non-farm-based. Consideration of only male workforce has been defined as a sexist approach or gender bias of the Census of India by many scholars such as Bhagat(2005), Sivaramakrishnan et al.(2005), and Shah (2003). However, it was more realistic if we considered the condition of women in India in 1971. Both the level of education and the workforce participation of women were limited in the non-farm sectors. However, after several decades the situation is no longer close to the ground situation of 1971. Women are now found to be working in different sectors other than the agricultural labourforce. Liberalising the economy has opened and expanded avenues of women's service sector work, as exploiting women's labour at a much lower cost is always easier for private entrepreneurs. These jobs are often informal, without much security of tenure, and are purely temporary. Therefore, there is no basis for considering only male workforce participation as a criterion for classifying settlement as urban.

The problem also lies in the method of counting. The Indian Census considers two categories: the main workforce, who are engaged in a particular work for more than six months in a year, and the marginal workforce, who are engaged in one specific work for less than six months in a year. If we look at the male/female break-up of the main and marginal workforce in the same category, we will see more men in the main categories of work, and in the marginal workforce, there are more women. However, in the workforce participation criterion, the Census does not consider the marginal workforce, and by doing so, it thus eliminates the higher proportion of women who are in the marginal workforce. Thus this gender bias can be easily overcome if the workforce criteria include both marginal and main workforce.

Now the question arises: Is there any point in categorising the main and marginal workforce given today's ground situation in India, where the permanent tenure of work has reduced drastically, and the seasonality of work has increased considerably? Instead, at this juncture, our main concern regarding the workforce should be formal and informal. If the Census considers the workforce participation rate in both formal and informal categories, the proportion of women workers need not be excluded, and it can save the honour of the Census by not being sexist in setting norms for classifying urban settlements.

The question of the categories of workforce participation is an important factor which needs intense examination. The Census used to give village-level data against ten activities till 1991, but from 2001 the categories of work got narrowed down to only four: cultivator, agricultural labourer, household industry workers, and other workers. Although there has been a mandate since 1981 against counting activities like fishing and livestock in non-farm employment when classifying a settlement as 'urban', we cannot get village-level data against those activities. Neither do we have any village-level published data on categories like manufacturing and construction or trade and commerce, which may lead us to know the nature of non-farm activities in those places. 'Other workers' include workers in manufacturing and service sector activities like banking, IT, and all other works linked to service provision. Therefore, a reorganisation of workforce categories must be taken care of urgently to understand the nature of settlements in terms of their non-farm activities and the nature of urbanity.

After all, urbanisation is a socio-spatial and economic transformation process, often followed by the agglomeration of non-farm activities at any place triggered by capital accumulation under the neo-liberal global economy (Brenner & Schmid, 2014).

Built-up Area and Settlement Agglomeration

Although the demographic characteristics of a settlement were always considered to classify them as urban, the spatial nature has never received enough attention. Instead, spatial attention was given to cases such as urban agglomeration and outgrowth, which are phenomena of big urban settlements and, in most cases, have a statutory class-1 town (more than one lakh population) at the centre of such spatial focus. However, the spatiality of newly classified settlements can also be easily captured with the help of both satellite images and mapping software. Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) is already mapping built-up areas and settlement agglomerations in India under the National Resource Census programme. As both these institutions belong to the central/union government, the Census of India can easily use the spatial data generated by ISRO. It would help to check the nature of the built-up area of a settlement very easily and may also offer information on spatial change through clustering and its journey towards urbanity.

To understand this argument of cross-checking the image of the built-up area, we need to go back to another methodological fix of the Indian Census, which counts population against a revenue village called *Mouza*. These revenue villages often do not match a single village. Sometimes there might be more than one village within one *mouza*; in some cases, one village might cut across the *mouza* boundary and extend into two *mouzas*. Therefore, while counting the eligibility of a Census Town, the Census needs to check the large villages' physical expanse and look into the settlement clusters. In almost all cases, urbanisation starts with an agglomeration effect; therefore, adjacent large villages physically merge. This agglomeration has nothing to do with the *mouza* boundaries. However, when the Census classifies a large village (*mouza*) as a Census Town, it does not consider the village clusters accommodated within the Census Town but instead maintains the boundary strictly. In my previous research on two such clusters of West Bengal—one on Singur (Samanta, 2014) and the other on Barjora (Samanta, 2017a)—I have shown that *mouza*-driven classification of Census Towns does not capture the physical reality of urban phenomena. I have shown in both cases that the actual size (both in terms of population and area) would be more than two to three times if the village clusters were considered. Spatial transformation is one of the important keys to understanding urbanity, and this cannot be measured within the limits of *mouza* or revenue villages. The Census needs to check the spatial transformation by using a wider lens with the help of geospatial technology to capture the actual urban spread rather than only using the demographic data within revenue village boundaries. Even if the Census wants to conform to *mouza* for data collection, they can merge the data against agglomerations of different *mouzas* and represent them as one Census Town.

Method of Prior Estimation in Urban Classification

The final critique is of the approximation and extrapolation method of counting population and classifying urban settlements based on previous Census data. According to Roy and Pradhan (2018) and Guin and Das (2015), for the computation of Census Towns, the Indian Census follows a complicated policy. Before the operation of enumeration, the Census classifies 'would be' urban settlements based on data from the earlier Census. They consider settlements with a 4000 population and fulfilling other criteria as Census Towns with the expectation that those settlements would cross the 5000 mark in the upcoming Census. This problem gets aggravated in the next Census when many such expected-to-be-urban settlements do not turn out to be qualified, but as they have already classified those as urban settlements, they continue with the same status. Therefore, there are many non-qualified Census Towns in each state. For example, Roy (2022), in his PhD research, has shown that out of 65 declared Census Towns in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal, based on the population in the 2011 Census, eleven do not qualify the threshold criteria of being Census Towns.

Similarly, we find evidence of overgrown villages in the 10,000 to 20,000 population size and qualifying in all other criteria, which remain undeclared as Census Towns. There were eight large villages above the size category of 10,000 and another ten villages in the size category of 5000–10,000 population, which fulfilled all other criteria but were not classified as urban in 2011 in Murshidabad district (Roy, 2022). This anomaly occurs purely because of the prior estimation and decision taken on classification based on the data from 10 years before.

The Census may follow this method of approximation. It classifies settlements before the actual Census takes place to conform to another limitation in their data generation system—village directory and town directory—to represent the level of amenities, accessibilities, and other kinds of settlement characteristics. For the data generation of these two directories, they have different formats, which they take in hand while collecting the data. Now the question is: why do we need to run a town directory questionnaire for Census Towns? Census Towns are nothing but urbanising villages and do not become proper towns unless recognised by the respective State Governments as areas under urban administration in either a town/nagar panchayat or municipalities. Therefore, for a not-so-necessary reason, the Census cannot ignore the system of capturing the urban situation in real-time of the Census operation. With the help of the digital mode of data collection, which is much easier to compile and classify, they can easily capture the actual urban situation at the ground level and in real-time.

Conclusion

The growth and nature of the urban situation have changed drastically in the globalising period, and it is beyond the capacity of the Census, with its age-old norms and practices, to capture these changes unless they go for methodological reforms of both the measurement criteria and the data collection format. This article critiques specific methods and recommends certain kinds of restructuring to make the urban classification process more grounded. First, the threshold population size should be increased to 2 to 3 times. Second, the density mark should be increased to at least two times to represent the ground reality of urban forms and structures. Third, the non-farm sector must not only stick to the main male workforce. It should include marginal workers, both male and female. In the context of present development discourses, it is challenging for a poor household to stick to one particular activity for a year or more than six months. Multiple activities and seasonal non-farm activity have become the norm for poor people's livelihood security; that percentage of people is no less in any place in India, be it rural or urban. If the Census considers marginal workers, it does not need to be limited to only male workers, as more women workers are in marginal categories. The Census should thus take a gender-sensitive approach towards the workforce by eliminating the long-practised sexist approach of sticking to the main male workforce only, which is unnecessary in the current context.

Thorough checking of expansion and nature of the built-up area and the settlement agglomeration demands attention to verify the urbanity of settlements, as the form of agglomeration makes a settlement urban. These agglomerations often have nothing to do with *mouza* boundaries but are linked to accessibility and connectivity factors. Therefore, classifying a settlement as Census Town should be preceded by checking the nature of agglomeration, if any, using geospatial images. In declaring Census Town, it would be wise to consider these *mouzas* together to declare them as one Census Town by merging *mouza* boundaries rather than classifying adjacent *mouzas* as separate Census Towns.

Last but not least, the Census needs to restructure the activity classes—there is a need for new categories against a) manufacturing and construction, b) trade and commerce, and the category called 'other workers' should purely consider the service sector activities. These three categories can give a better idea about the urban transformation of Indian villages rather than just checking the proportion of non-farm activity. The current classification follows an exclusionary policy by eliminating farm and farm-like activities such as fishing and plantation, which should be changed to an inclusive one focusing on the nature and sectors of economic activities leading to settlement

agglomeration and urban expansion. Above all, these three categories also need a formal and informal break-up, along with a gender break-up which will automatically make the main/marginal categorisation of the workforce redundant and urban classification gender sensitive. After 75 years, we need to introspect on how we can capture the urban situation at the ground level with more realistic parameters and criteria, and that is the call of the day in the year of *Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav*.

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Appendix-I: Level of Urbanisation and Growth Rate: 1941-2011

Census year	Per cent of Urban Population to Total	Decadal Growth Rate
1941	13.9	31.9
1951	17.3	41.4
1961	18.0	26.4
1971	19.9	38.2
1981	23.3	46.0
1991	25.7	36.2
2001	27.8	31.1
2011	31.2	27.6

Appendix II: Distribution of Cities and Towns across Categories (2001-2011)

Based on Population Size			
<i>Categories</i>	<i>Sizes</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2011</i>
Million Cities	More than 1 million	35	53
Class-I	1,00,00 to 1,000,000	413	452
Class-II	50,000 to 1,00,000	498	605
Class-III	20,000 to 50,000	1389	1905
Class-IV	10,000 to 20,000	1564	2233
Class-V	5,000 to 10,000	1043	2187
Class-VI	Less than 5,000	235	498
Total		5177	7933
Based on Status			
Statutory Town		3799	4041
Census Towns		1362	3894
Urban Agglomerations		384	475

Acknowledgement:

I do express sincere thanks to Dr Deabrshi Guin, Dr Shamindra Nath Roy, Dr Kanhu Charan Pradhan and Dr Kiran Kumar Roy, who have thoroughly worked on the issues of urban classification and census towns in India, for their critical comments on the draft version of the article.
