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**Abstract:**

Observing that India is experiencing an accelerated growth in the number of small towns below 100,000 which host half of the urban population, Chapter 3 invites to question the classical paradigms linking urbanisation and development. To consider entirely and with their specificities the urban changes in India, the author pushes forward the notion of subaltern urbanisation. Doing so, he demonstrates that the transition is far from being limited to large metropolis. The polarisation of growth by large urban regions is not occurring and the urban transition remains diffuse. This transformation is driven notably by the morphing of places, when villages become towns. Then, a typology encompassing the different forms and drivers of small towns is exposed. Based on these observations, the author suggests that this dense network of small towns constitutes a unique opportunity for India to support a more inclusive development pass that embraces its entire territory and serves all its inhabitants. It represents an alternative to the accumulation of negative externalities linked to fast-growing large metropolis and exacerbated by the climatic changes and growing inequalities.

# The Burgeoning Small Towns of India

## Lessons for Inclusive Development

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### 1 Introduction

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Over the past ten years, we have defined subaltern urbanisation as vibrant smaller settlements and spaces outside the metropolitan shadow that support a dispersed pattern of urbanisation to help improve understanding of urban challenges, notably in the case of India (Denis et al., 2012; Denis and Zérah, 2017). Thus, we developed new arguments to focus on urban policy choices and more specifically, inclusive approaches. Within that frame, what is the significance of small towns' invisibility? How could an inclusive agenda (if it exists in practice in India) materialise in a truncated conception of the urban domain? We re-examine the link between urbanisation and inclusive development by widening our conceptualisation of the Indian system of cities. A noteworthy fact is that since the idea of inclusion made its way into the corridors of Indian ministries, including the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation and Ministry of Urban Development,<sup>1</sup> it has evolved into 'inclusive growth.' This denotes a significant semantic shift; the economy is thus expected to generate inclusion.

Although studies have achieved complexity and widened our understanding of the urban transition, the current urban policies remain driven by a conceptualisation that reflects the dominant turn-of-the-century theories related to the New Economic Geography (NEG)<sup>2</sup> dogma and its apology of the metropolitan concentration (Moriconi-Ebrard et al., 2010). On the ground, public efforts and private investments have together helped to push for improved infrastructures and business-friendly major metropolitan cities. They conjugate Harris' mantra that 'cities are motor engines of economic growth.' The trade-off between spatial justice and

polarisation for productivity gain is driven by the growth coalition towards the concentration of investments in major cities and avenues of development.

Because our research is conducted using mixed methods combining quantitative, statistical, and land-use data as well as approximately 20 ethnographies,<sup>3</sup> it is able to construct an understanding of this layer of urban structure (Zérah and Denis, 2017: 9–12). Our research focuses on settlements with lower than 100,000 people, where 41.1% of the urban population lives in India in 2011, which has increased since 2001 and has continued to grow. Our results show that the Indian system of cities is characterised by its dispersion.

This leads us to coin the notion of subaltern urbanisation, which is elaborated in Section 2. The quantitative results are presented in Section 3, wherein they demonstrate that the logic of agglomeration is insufficient for mapping shifts in the Indian system of cities. The constant relative weight of small towns and a process of in situ urbanisation serve to highlight the reality of urbanisation of ‘morphing places’ and bleeding urban–rural frontiers. Based on our ethnographic studies, the diversity of pathways and forms of subaltern urbanisation are analysed in Section 4. A typology of settlements is first proposed based on the nature of socio-economic transitions of these localities, considering various factors (land, employment, agency and innovation, history and the nature of capital, and shifts in rural–urban relations). The intersection of these shifts with the unique official definition of Indian urbanisation is discussed in Section 5. We argue that the performative role of the existing rural–urban nomenclature calls for closer attention to the methods through which government regimes influence the process of (dispersed) urbanisation—administrative classification matters. Based on the importance of the emergence of small towns supporting a horizontal urbanisation process in India, in Section 6, we propose the analysis of recent urban policies and their inclusive ambition in socio-spatial terms. To what extent do they consider, benefit from, or interact incidentally with the growing importance of the small-town stratum? Finally, we demonstrate that diffuse urbanisation, which characterises India in addition to its major metropolitan areas, provides an opportunity for spatial justice in India. Small towns constitute various bases for increasingly inclusive development and access to rural margins as well to limit migration towards major cities in the context of rapid economic transition.

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## 2 Subaltern urbanisation and urban theory

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We first proposed (Denis et al., 2012) the notion of subaltern urbanisation to qualify the observed trends as well as a heuristic tool to engage a collective in research.

We begin by considering the autonomous growth of settlement agglomerations—large and dense clusters of people, higher than 10,000 and lower than 100,000 inhabitants, regardless of their administrative status as urban or not. We attempted to investigate the growth of these settlements and focused on the self-determining capabilities of each settlement (through the agency of its inhabitants). This individual and collective ability reflects and is mediated by social and governance structures.

Our second claim is that subaltern urbanisation refers to a commitment to restore visibility to an unseen and often unspoken process of myriad forms affected by local actors. Most invisible settlements are far from the major metropolitan areas and are not necessarily covered by public urban schemes. Some are located in the shadow of major cities; these are also included in our framework. We posit that the transformations these towns are undergoing are not only subject to the influence or spread of metropolitan growth as well as the extension and de-concentration of banal and polluting activities. The trajectories and configurations of these small towns are also dependent on their own historical capital and their local and long-distance linkages.

Our focus on the historicity, ordinariness, and local agency of urban sites located off the map anchors our perspective of urbanisation from the critical and postcolonial perspective (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2011a, 2011b). We also aim to pursue, debate, and extend the ontological and topological frame delineating the ‘ordinary city’ (Robinson, 2002; Amin and Graham, 1997).

Consequently, the centrality we assign to small settlements is central to subaltern urbanisation. This represents one of the key differences between our idea of subaltern urbanisation and the subaltern urbanism posited by Roy (2009), despite the common insistence on the notion of agency. We partly resituate the idea of ‘subaltern urbanism’ (Roy, 2009) outside the metropolis. Another difference between the two ideas is that we do not associate

agency solely with spaces of poverty and vulnerability, and instead include innovative actors, local entrepreneurs, and the practices of the local elites in an extended link between agency and subaltern urbanisation.

Furthermore, the idea of subaltern urbanisation confronts the theses on planetary urbanisation (Brenner, 2014; Brenner and Schmid, 2011); in particular, this involves the acknowledgement of the unbounded process of urbanisation, as well as determining whether the rural/urban frontier is being blurred. There is strong proximity between the subaltern and recent works in planetary urbanisation research, due to the attention provided to the intersection of morphological changes, legal framework, and the practices of grounded local actors (Schmid, 2018). However, although planetary urbanisation acknowledges the role of small towns, our research features two differences when compared with this framework: first, subaltern urbanisation does not analyse small towns in a classical dependence relationship with large agglomerations, similar to the method used in central place theory (Christaller, 1933); second, subaltern urbanisation provides nuances to the ontology of the urban in planetary urbanisation, which continues to be perceived through the lens of large cities, their 'endless' peripheries, and small towns on the edge of rurality that are only being transformed due to a trickle-down effect and the diffusion of banal activities and extractivism. To some extent, it remains similar to the framework featured in the NEG, in terms of its adherence to the idea of universal history and teleological trajectory towards modernity. This is common among both neoclassical as well as Marxian conceptualisations, wherein cities are ordered vis-à-vis the stylised European system of cities since the European pre-industrial and industrial movements, which were dominated by nation states and colonial relations. We argue that this order may be insufficient to map the nature of inter-linkages and exchanges in an open and globalised postcolonial world, wherein horizontal as well as direct long-distance relations matter.

However, before focusing on subaltern urbanisation, we wish to clarify two important points. First, our intent is not to propose a claim in opposition to major cities. The idea of subaltern urbanisation is featured while discussing other approaches to urbanisation, and we perceive it as a bridge to think across agency and scale. In this study, we agree with other commentators that what is 'lost as a consequence of the bias toward large cities is a full picture

of urban form and function: the urban world is not made up of a handful of global metropolises, but characterised by heterogeneity. Studying small cities enables us to see the full extent of this' (Bell and Jayne, 2009: 683). Smaller settlements must be examined not in contrast to large cities, but by themselves as sites of urbanity, economic activity, and social transformation and to understand their place as rural–urban links and as part of the global economy in the process of urbanisation (Zérah and Denis, 2017). Second, by restoring visibility to smaller settlements, subaltern urbanisation does not reinforce the perspective of subordinate settlements, but instead aims to underscore the multi-layered and trans-local material and immaterial flows that shape a non-hierarchical urban landscape.

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### **3 Beyond the metropolis: the weight of small urban settlements in the Indian system of cities**

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This section analyses the long-term evolution of the system of cities, one of the first urbanised regions of the world, by a network of cities, as early as 2500 BC, and shows its resilience. The official Indian urbanisation rate is low (and underestimated, see Denis et al., 2012) at 31.2%. However, in 2011, 377 million urban residents in India represented a population larger than all the inhabitants of North America (Canada and the United States). The yearly increase in the urban population is equivalent to that of a megacity (more than 9 million people). The data analysis results show that policies favouring the logics of agglomeration have limited impact on the long-term restructuring of an urban system, wherein small towns continue to play a crucial role.

India serves as yet another example of Asian urbanisation, characterised by the coexistence of gigantic megalopolises and a rural environment, with many villages becoming towns at the bottom of a system of cities, and fast-expanding metropolises at the apex. Ancient and complex forms of irrigated agriculture, powerful rivers, and wide deltas have resulted in large basins with high human densities. Through natural growth associated with a diversification of activities, these ancient systems of settlements set an environment wherein many settlements emerge as urban candidates. Therefore, a significant share of urban growth

is caused by the natural population growth in existing cities and the formation of new urban units, usually by reclassification and/or mergers of existing villages (Heitzman, 2008; Denis and Marius-Gnanou, 2010).

We posit that Indian urbanisation is focused on morphing places, instead of moving people, and is thus partly characterised by the urbanisation of its countryside (Mukhopadhyay, 2012). Structurally, and contrary to the dominant perception of the migrant influx, since 1971, residential migration from rural areas to urban localities has remained limited. Using census data, Chandrasekhar and Sharma (2014) showed that this occurrence did not contribute to more than one-fourth of urban growth. From 2001 to 2011, among the 90.9 million new members of the urban population, 38.5 million were attributed to the natural growth and expansion of the area, 20.6 million were attributed to net migration or moving to other areas, **4** and the remaining 31.8 million were attributed to the reclassification from rural to urban areas. This reclassification acknowledges the morphing of places into census towns, which are large, dense villages with urban characteristics, and without an administrative status.

From 2001 to 2011, the percentage of the urban population in census towns nearly doubled from 7.4% to 14.6%, and their number rose from 1,362 to 3,894 (Pradhan, 2013), whereas the percentage of small towns with urban administrative status (called statutory towns) fell from 32.9% to 26.5%. This indicates that as of 2011, 41.1% of the urban population lived in small towns with a population lower than 100,000—an increase from 40.3% in 2001. However, these statistics do not fully reflect the ongoing process of change. Another 23.5% of the rural population, which comprises 47.4% of the total population (including the population officially classified as urban), lived in settlement agglomerations of more than 5,000 people. This configuration leads to questions about the definition of ‘what is urban’ and underscores the rapid urbanisation of the Indian countryside.

Although a top-heavy urban structure has prevailed in many Indian states, the national urban system remains dispersed and balanced (Swerts et al., 2014, 2018). Overall, the growth of cities, regardless of size, has tended to decrease and converge over the past 20 years. As seen in **Table 3.1** (including all cities classified as urban in the 2011 Census), the annual population growth rate of the urban sector is currently closer to the national figure, compared



with that of 1971–1981. With an annualised urban growth rate of 3.9%, the urban differential was +1.7% during 1971–1981. During 2001–2011, with an annualised urban growth rate of 2.4%, the differential was at +0.9% only. A detailed study of the system of cities subdivided based on population size classes of urban units since 1971 demonstrated that cities, regardless of size, have had similar opportunities for growth. Currently, no significant differential is noted in terms of growth for the largest cities.

The output of this structural trend is an almost constant percentage of the urban population being distributed based on city class sizes. The differential growth of major cities is a limited phenomenon, and the growth of cities is not based on their size. Large metropolises do not grow at the expense of smaller towns, which continue to multiply, as an increasing number of villages become towns. Therefore, the evolution of the Indian system of cities questions the canonical trends currently associated with urban transition, particularly in terms of a hierarchical and spatial reorganisation of the population, as well as in terms of the polarisation of economic growth among the largest urban areas (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Annual Population Growth Rate (%) by Size Class of Urban Unites (Cities)

<i>Table 3.1 Annual Population Growth Rate (in %) by Size Class of Urban units (cities)</i>							
	Gross Increase (including intercensal class changes)				Constant Classes of 2011 (without reclassification effects)		
	1971–81	1981–91	1991–2001	2001–11	1971–81	1981–91	1991–2001
Cities*	4.4	3.7	3.5	2.7	3.7	3.2	2.9
Metropolises	4.2	4.9	4.2	3.5	2.8	3.8	2.9
Class IA	5.5	4.3	4.8	3.3	2.7	3.4	2.8
Class IB	2.7	5.7	3.5	3.8	3.4	4.0	3.1
Class IC	4.5	2.6	2.6	1.7	4.2	3.1	3.3
Towns	2.7	2.4	1.5	1.6	3.4	3.2	2.3
Class II	4.1	2.8	1.6	1.6	4.8	3.7	2.5
Class III	2.4	3.0	1.9	1.6	2.7	3.4	2.3
Others	1.9	1.3	1.0	1.6	2.3	2.4	2.2
Memo: Population Growth							
Urban	3.9	3.2	2.8	2.4			
Rural	1.8	1.8	1.7	1.2			
Total	2.2	2.1	2	1.5			

*Note:* Class IA is above 5 million inhabitants, IB between 1 and 5 million, IC between 100,000 and 1 million, Class II towns between 50,000 and 100,000, and Class III between 20,000 and 50,000.

☐ Official cities and towns comprising the urban sector of the 2011 Census.

This diffused urbanisation is resilient to urban policies and focuses on significant agglomerations since economic liberalisation. After independence, during the first phase, Indian policies focused on rural areas. In 1979, a scheme was developed for the benefit of small- and medium-sized towns. The fifth Five-Year Plan promoted smaller towns, whereas the sixth one focused on connecting towns with their hinterland. A turning point was noted during the mid-1980s, with the introduction of economic liberalisation. The National Commission on Urbanisation was launched in 1985 and recommended the strengthening of existing larger metropolises, which led to a paradigm shift and shaped the discourse on cities as engines of growth sustained by numerous policies and schemes that favoured the largest cities (Sivaramakrishnan, 2011). This focus on the economy of agglomeration contrasts with the first phase, wherein industrial policies supported small-scale and cottage industries connected to local resources and the creation of employment opportunities without migration. Due to this shift, smaller towns have been side-lined in the public policy debate, even though they continue to play a significant role in India's economy.

If we observe the modality and temporality of the Indian insertion into the global value chain, recent studies have shown that industries tend to be located away from the urban environment (Ghani et al., 2012) and non-farm activities are expanded outside municipal boundaries (Vishwanath et al., 2013). Reducing costs through a less unionised and low-cost workforce, lower environmental regulations, and cheaper land prices are among the potential motivations for this structural trend. Furthermore, significantly improved road connectivity and low employment rates in villages serve as evidence to support the emergence of large settlements and small towns as pivotal places, as well as the clustering of villages around manufacturing activities.

Consequently, the configuration of the Indian system of cities leads to questions regarding the concept of agglomeration economy introduced by Marshall in 1890 (Henderson, 2003) and the universality of the hierarchical system of cities (Pumain and Moriconi-Ebrard, 1997), dominated by large, innovative metropolises where talents converge. The New Economic Geography models (Krugman, 1998) led to the incorporation of this spatially differentiated approach into mainstream economics (Glaeser, 2010). The global city networks approach (Taylor, 2004) that attempted to parameterise the global city debates (Sassen, 2001) led to a quasi-exclusive focus on large metropolises, thereby blurring the extension of the urban domain beyond the megacity. This approach provides intellectual legitimacy for pro-metropolitan and urban mega-infrastructure policies that have become increasingly common. However, the metro-centricity of private and public investments disregards the diversity and diffuse urbanisation in India. In particular, by focusing on the mechanisms and agency of stakeholders in the ‘non-metropolitan world,’ we must adopt other analytical lenses and develop a new conceptualisation of the urban.

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## **4 Subaltern urbanisation in India: diverse forms and processes**

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The primary methodological approach in subaltern urbanisation is to rely on a methodology that constantly shifts between quantitative and qualitative methodologies to capture the nature of the urbanisation process. As explained earlier, urbanisation in India primarily occurs by morphing places, thus blurring the urban–rural frontiers and underscoring the reality of unbounded processes. We posit that this overall unbounded process must be considered in terms of varied configurations that account for complex institutional and economic linkages (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2020).

This section highlights the first step towards qualifying the types of settlement by observing the multiple and complex economic processes playing out in small towns. We present four broad types that can be identified to summarise the diversity of local conditions (micropolises as well as influence, market, and census towns). Locally, it is noteworthy that

these four ideal types are interlaced with each other. The aforementioned types of small towns do not exist in a pure configuration. Each one is the product of multiple influences supported by an increasingly diverse population, which is often well-connected with distant places. We are aware of the risk of creating an oversimplified typology, but this constitutes the first step towards qualifying the varied pathways of urbanisation to enlarge the recent debate regarding the forms of agrarian Asian urbanism (Roy, 2016).

A common factor prevalent in all types of settlements is the centrality of the land-based economy underpinning the financing of the urban transition, particularly in increasingly developed states, in the context of poor access to institutional banking and credit. The rapid and extensive conversion of fertile land into popular real estate, educational institutions, and factories, as well as for securing access to loans, supports the monetisation and diversification of local economies, thus blurring the frontiers of urban and rural environments and questioning the effectiveness of the present regulations.

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## 5 Towards a type of settlements

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The first category—**the Influenced Town**—corresponds to small towns incorporated into functional areas influenced by metropolitan and large cities. The diffusion, localisation, and re-localisation processes of economic activities in the extended peripheries of large cities radically transform peri-urban land use. The combination of economic liberalisation and foreign direct investment accelerates entrepreneurs' tendency to procure the privilege of such peripheral locations. Our ethnographies underline the simultaneous processes.

First, a diffusion process made with a heterogeneous amalgam of investments in infrastructure, real estate, commercial ventures, industrial parks, and educational institutions surrounds small towns, which, in turn, become central locations (i.e., nodes and sites of agglomeration). In this case, the agency of local actors is limited. The urban transformation of such localities is dependent on their perceived attractiveness, in terms of accessibility and location (new roads, mass transportation, etc.). Other factors determine the development of these peripheries, such as the lower cost of land, the local tolerance to pollution, and the

availability of a labour force willing to accept difficult working conditions, characterised by low wages, daily contracts, and a weak level of unionisation. In most cases, the weak enforcement of regulations by the government has become an added advantage, in terms of attractiveness. Because there is limited availability of significant tracts of land within large cities, majority of the globalisation-related investment occurs in these peri-urban areas wherein megaprojects, such as special economic zones (SEZs), materialise. Banal and polluting activities are de-concentrated from the city centre to these peripheral small towns alongside industrial development parks. Over time, however, the physical planning of metropolitan regions, megaprojects, and SEZs as well as the appetite for new land opportunities among real estate promoters can serve as destabilising factors for existing flourishing clusters of activities that depend on the intensive workforce, inherited knowledge, and local capital. Examples of these instances can be seen in the cases of the Kartarpur furniture industry in the periphery of Ludhiana (Bercegol and Gowda, 2017) and the Malpe fishing industries in coastal Karnataka (Benjamin, 2017), wherein SEZ projects and large highways threaten to destabilise vibrant local economies.

The re-localisation process of commuters is the second component of effervescent small towns surrounding large cities. The circular migration of daily commuters **5** transforms small towns into new households, comprising primarily of young people who cannot find affordable housing in the core city. They stimulate the diversification of local economies and alter the local political equilibrium. Among the youth, those with access to technical colleges are also increasingly engaged in commuting. This daily circulation tends to adjust itself as major firms relocate their factories and offices to peripheral parks, thus ensuring that circular migration comes full circle as people from the core city begin commuting to the periphery.

The second category—**the Micropolis**—is comprised of entrepreneurial, resilient, and innovative small towns (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2018). Outside the direct influence of metropolitan cities, many such vibrant small towns exist due to a strong and often fast-growing network of interconnected and interdependent entrepreneurs as well as skilled workers who contribute to the development of industrial clusters. They are able to expand their market, adapt to changes, innovate, and eventually export products, thereby reaching markets far away.

Small- and medium-sized towns have proven to be attractive locations for establishing and developing productive activities, particularly in response to the immense demand constituted by the vast majority of Indian families that do not belong to the middle and upper urban classes. In these locations, entrepreneurs innovate to create low-cost products responding to the specificities of the non-metropolitan environment with solid and rustic equipment that is easy to operate and repair by using local skills. It is an environment of *jugaad* (low-tech innovations) and trans-local circuits of knowledge, skills, and capital that enable entrepreneurs to do more with less. Such innovative products, particularly vehicles adapted to bad roads and difficult weather, are not only limited to the Indian customer base because some small companies manage to export to other emerging low-cost markets.

Based on frugal innovations and retro-engineering focusing on the needs of end users, in many aspects, several of these types of settlements possess the qualities associated with large metropolises, such as innovation and global connectivity, albeit at significantly smaller scales. This can be observed in localities, such as Tiruchengode (Tastevin, 2017; Raman, 2017) in Tamil Nadu, which have been reinventing themselves over the course of decades, and adapting their entrepreneurial endeavours to suit the local demand as well as global market transformations. Tiruchengode excels in the drilling rig industry. Currently, companies from Tiruchengode are able to export their low-cost borewell drilling trucks to Africa, wherein their adaptability to local needs is appreciated, particularly the ease of repair and maintenance. These manufacturers developed the ability to satisfy the markets neglected by large European and American truck makers, who produce sophisticated vehicles that are too expensive for certain countries. Furthermore, these large firms are unable to provide customised vehicles. In all Indian states, such small- and medium-sized towns are flourishing due to their ancient crafting traditions, such as textile and furniture, as well as the ability to design and develop low-cost products, often based on reverse engineering. These products are adapted to fulfil the relatively frugal needs of a non-metropolitan population transitioning into an urban environment. This type of milieu is not limited to India, and global diffusion does occur.

In some places, these innovative environments extend beyond individual settlements, to specialised clusters of towns and villages with a long-standing tradition of manufacturing

and trading. In Udupi, coastal Karnataka, an assemblage of towns and villages is known as far away as Japan for supplying fishnets, and for the quality of their fish products (Benjamin, 2017). These traditional activities have been able to cope with globalised trading. Since the beginning of the previous century, local private actors have been engaged in development initiatives to grow this strong and open regional economy. Starting from the 1930s, investments were geared to build an integrated and affordable bus network, and starting from the 1960s, banks were set up (such as the well-known Canara Bank that is now owned by the Government of India) to facilitate local investments. However, planners, consultants, and private corporations continue to perceive this coast as a tabula rasa, well-suited for SEZs, power plants, tourism, and real estate investments, ignoring its current economic global presence and its importance for employment.

Small **market and/or administrative towns as well as emerging census towns** constitute the third and fourth categories. Both categories can be subsumed under the image of an **Anyplace town**. Market and administrative towns, which cater to the needs of the rural areas in their hinterland, constitute a notable proportion of small towns. Many such towns have historically been market towns or administrative centres. Depending on their administrative functions (whether they are home to a block office or a police station, etc.), and the dynamism of the local agriculture (such as the nature of production and volume of cash crops), they can be more or less dynamic. They are primarily categorised as statutory towns and are governed by an urban local body. Emerging census towns are large, urbanised or rapidly urbanised, and villages expand and grow, including a workforce moving away from the farm sector.

These types of settlements fulfil a more ordinary, but necessary function. Although these are often not sites of production, with the exception of construction, they are service towns with markets, private health and education, and local transit hubs. They are spaces of change, wherein people drift in and out of non-farm and farm work. The density of India as a country enables the spread and depth of this phenomenon, which is further accentuated by the rapidly improving rural transportation networks. In these small urban settlements, the nature of economic transformation can be grouped into three categories: i) an everyday economy; ii) settlement-specific activities, which may reflect their historical functions; and iii) new

activities. Almost all of these are primarily financed through non-formal sources. It is crucial to highlight that these ordinary but necessary functions can often provide incomes notably higher than those of traditional agricultural activities.

The everyday economy, which is geared towards servicing the demands of surrounding areas, benefits from higher levels of connectivity, and improved transport possibilities. Local markets or bazaars are at the centre of this everyday economy. However, despite its resilience in providing employment and trade in the surrounding villages, its scale of activity is typically insufficient for generating surplus capital. Some settlements also benefit from external investment in their area, such as the road to the Dhamra port project in Erein, Odisha, or the public hospital and college in Bishnugarh, Jharkhand (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2016). The bazaar economy benefits from the rising incomes of the rural areas, and their demand for diverse consumer goods, which are supplied through an intricate locally specific logistics chain. Few consumer goods are produced locally; however, the logistics chain generates local employment.

Activities specific to settlements can differ considerably; however, they tend to be small-scale and often linked to traditional caste occupations, such as the yoghurt industry in Gopalpur, West Bengal, and small-scale foundries in Cherra, Jharkhand. The ability of such specific activities to scale up and provide increased income and employment opportunities improves with enhanced connectivity, because transport networks increase the market for such products. The markets for these goods can be quite far-flung, particularly for handloom and handicrafts or bidi manufacturing, which have well-developed supply chains. These settlement-specific economic activities may also be linked to local natural resources, such as stone crushing in Domchanch, Jharkhand (entrepreneurs adjusting to the loss of traditional mica mining) or cold storage for potato farmers in Garbeta, West Bengal, as highlighted by Sircar (2017).

Identifying the specific characteristics of emerging census towns is a crucial task. With a decline in farm employment, people must generate incomes with access to minimal resources. This is how mandi towns as well as large villages become increasingly diverse. A significant number of the labour force open petty shops or become daily workers in the construction sector



or at brick kilns, either locally or in other towns through seasonal migrations. In turn, their remittances stimulate the morphing of their place of origin. This morphing, which occurs in villages, leads to increased growth in the number of census towns, as the workforce shifts away from non-farm work. The local economy tends to move away from agricultural activities, as noted in the aforementioned settlements. However, there is no previous history of urban-like activity, such as administration or regional markets. Therefore, the emergence of these census towns is not supported by the presence of a local elite related to the presence of a market, educational, or administrative functions, but markets do emerge. These emerging urban areas consolidate and diversify because of the need for their population to create new activities and access resources through self-employment and mobility. Therefore, these settlements often serve as local transport hubs, assisted by improved rural roads and growing access to vehicle finance from formal banks.

In these emerging census towns, the presence of five new activities can be observed. Two such activities, which are considered significant in terms of employment and/or local impact, are construction and paratransit services. Construction is driven by the continuous shift to brick and mortar (*pucca*) housing that appears to be taking place in rural India, whereas the paratransit services for both freight and passengers lubricate the everyday economy. Growth in paratransit transport is driven by public investment in rural roads, and increased demand for travel (e.g., for education and general consumption, and manufacturers and/or banks providing financing to purchase vehicles). Those engaged in paratransit activity are often migrants returning from large cities, wherein they acquired finance and the skills required to drive vehicles, and they contribute to drastically transforming the connections between rural and urban settlements and the creation of increasingly integrated rural regions. In addition to these, three other common activities are smartphone-related services (sale and recharge of SIM cards, loading multimedia, sale and repair of instruments, etc.), private education, and private healthcare. The ubiquitous manifestation of these new activities is primarily driven by self-employment hint at a shift towards post-agrarian urbanism that is taking place in sites often disregarded by urban research and theory.

The multiplication of towns in India must be understood in terms of a social transition. In a subcontinent wherein the workforce is colossal, 487 million in 2011—second only after China—and sectoral transformation is underway; small towns constitute the privileged sites facilitating this adaptation; they accommodate people and ensure access to jobs and resources. This occurs through diversification of sources of income or occupational pluralism around areas where people already live.

A key factor shaping this urban system of cities as well as supporting the dispersion and importance of small towns is related to types of employment and methods through which people access resources. Despite the rapid fall of the farm sector in the GDP, the destruction of jobs in agriculture has only recently started to become noticeable. Although farmers continue to account for approximately half of the workforce (48.9% in 2011–2012<sup>6</sup>), a rising number of people are slowly dropping out of the agriculture sector (the percentage of farm employment decreased by approximately 1% per year); however, residential migration to large cities remains limited. In addition, instead of leading to a boom in job creation outside of agriculture, the acceleration of economic growth after liberalisation and in the 2000s has been termed a ‘jobless growth’ decade because most of the job creation, primarily in construction and services, barely compensates the loss of employment opportunities in agriculture and industry (Himanshu et al., 2011). The service sector, which contributed to more than 60% of the GDP in 2013, employs only 27% of the workforce, whereas the celebrated IT sector employs only 3 million people (0.6% of the total workforce). These figures help to comprehend the limited attraction of large cities in a context wherein most jobseekers have limited skills (Kundu and Saraswati, 2012). Once we recognise that the job situation in India is characterised by precariousness, we can determine that the scale of the challenge to include the workforce in the context of rapid economic transition is tremendous and includes additional stress on urban environments.

In this context, small towns are at the forefront of the transition. They are places that accommodate a higher share of non-regular workers, compared with larger cities. They usually constitute settlements wherein people access or self-generate non-farm activities and access resources, notably through commuting and temporary migration. Therefore, the multiplication

of small towns and the urban transformation of villages constitute the material expression of the current socio-economic transition in India, which is characterised by a notable reduction of jobs in the farm sector and low creation of employment in the industrial sector, associated with a limited level of residential migration towards large cities. Many emerging small urban centres are places where people struggle to access resources; however, most of them prefer to live in a known environment wherein solidarity from their extended family can provide support and the cost of living remains lower.

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## **6 Subaltern urbanisation and the politics of classification**

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By engaging with the notion of agency and innovation, we posit that the system of cities is created through multi-layered connections that are not necessarily going through large towns. We observe the urbanisation of the countryside and of the peripheries (of metropolitan and non-metropolitan cities) that reshaped urban–rural relationships in a notably less hierarchical perspective, compared with the one hinted at in planetary urbanisation. In this section, another nuance of this framework is highlighted through our focus on the impact of governance regimes, particularly through the manner in which essential services expand in these liminal territories.

First, the unique and complex definition of ‘urban’ in India as well as its related institutional structure complicates the reading of the dissipating urban–rural frontier. This definition has consequences for the economic, social, and demographic development of a settlement because it determines how it is governed as well as its access to funds. It is essential to recall that the definition of the urban population in India includes two primary categories of settlements: statutory and census towns. Statutory towns are settlements that are administratively designated as such by the state government and are of different types, with their corresponding urban local bodies. The functions, budgets, and responsibilities of these local governments differ based on their size and the power delegated to them by the provincial

legislature. Furthermore, each regional government defines its rules and thresholds for designating statutory towns that can be different, flexible, and arbitrary.

In contrast, the second type of urban unit—the census town—is defined on the basis of statistical specifications that are identical throughout the country. A locality is classified as a census town when it crosses three thresholds simultaneously: a population of more than 5,000, a density higher than 400 inhabitants per square kilometre, and over 75% of the primarily male workforce working in non-farm occupations. **7** Census towns are settlements that are designated to be urban, but do not have statutory urban status.

This dual definition of urbanisation, based on administrative (statutory towns) and functional criteria (census towns) poses several problems of harmonisation. The inter-state variability of statutory town status is accentuated by regional political interests and relations between local and regional powers that determine urban classification. The list of statutory towns is strongly influenced by the state government's decisions, thus signifying a lack of homogeneity within the statutory category. Thus, a significant variation is noted in the size of statutory towns and some census towns have significantly larger populations, compared with many statutory towns.

From a governance and public policy perspective, the distinction between the two different types of settlements is crucial. Statutory towns are full-fledged urban local bodies, whereas census towns remain governed, similar to a village. This has major consequences for the delegation of responsibilities and access to government schemes. For instance, census towns can access rural government schemes, whereas small statutory towns can benefit from urban-oriented schemes that provide increased funding for basic infrastructure.

Determining whether a census town must remain a village or become a small town is a matter of vigorous discussion at the local level. Our qualitative inquiries show that on the ground, proposals for alternative administrative formations (developed at different scales, such as the redefinition of boundaries, demand for urban status, or reversion to rural status) can be traced, in varying degrees, to the four axes of contestation: the first axes of contestation is service provision (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2016); the second is related to the nature of non-farm activity and related land-use changes; the third is related to benefits from public housing

schemes, such as *Indira Awas Yojana* <sup>8</sup> and employment guaranteed schemes; and the costs of new taxes and local sociopolitical formations comprise the fourth subject of contestation.

In particular, social grouping and local conflicts in the area influence the debate on governance in a 'politics of classification.' In some areas, aspirations for urban status appear to be driven by local elites and resisted by poorer groups, thus reflecting an economic divide between the bazaar (market, including traders and members of the local elites) and *basti* (residential area). In contrast, aspirations for urban status among others appear to be driven by poorer groups and resisted by local elites, because the landed elites perceive the rural status as offering increased freedom to monetise land. The increase in taxes and the enforcement of building by-laws associated with the urban status are perceived as constraints on local development. In states wherein access to welfare schemes is low, such programmes do not by themselves offer a strong argument to remain rural. Social elements, such as caste, can feature prominently within political coalitions resisting or advocating the transition from rural to urban status. In more developed states, the monetisation of land, inter alia, plays an increasingly crucial role and can lead to the appearance of a capital surplus, which can be invested in productive activities in the same or a different place, immediately or at a later date.

In census towns, service provision remains a major axis of mobilisation related to the applicable form of public policy (rural versus urban). These complex modalities of governance regimes have a deep impact and can accentuate regional disparities, particularly in states with a high number of census towns, which are not recognised as statutorily urban. A form of denied urbanisation has emerged in terms of a lack of public infrastructure and financial resources (Denis et al., 2012: 56; Samanta, 2017: 52). Therefore, a complicated relationship is noted between the governance of small towns and service provision. Although there are variations in the service delivery, depending on the effectiveness of local governance mechanisms and controlling for size, there is little measurable difference in the service provision between small-sized census and statutory towns (Mukhopadhyay, 2017).

Based on multiple trajectories of small towns and quantitative and geographical analyses, our research provided results that helped us to learn about the complexity of the urban transformation process and the biases induced by analytical oversimplification into

dichotomous, supposedly universal categories. The spatial pattern of development and relationships across settlements are presented in various hues, instead of distinct colours, and one must have equivalent focus on the similarities and differences. However, if dichotomous categories pose problems, claims about the disappearing boundaries between the urban and rural also pose problems, and the concept of a city no longer makes sense.

The recent 'planetary urbanisation' trope (Brenner and Schmid, 2015) can also be perceived as a reflection on the morphing of places or the blurring of rural–urban boundaries; however, our more grounded approach leads us to articulate two primary reservations:

First, legislation and public policies that maintain a clear distinction between rural and urban affect the actions of governments, corporations, and individuals. Although our results demonstrate a shift in rural–urban relationships, the nature of the difference is not undermined. On the contrary, in India, the structure of governance and public policies effectively reinforce this divide.

Second, the nature of the subaltern urbanisation process deeply interrogates the nature of economic transformation. Although Brenner and Schmid (2015) argued that emerging urban forms must be understood based on their dependence on large cities and primarily vertical relationships, we consider that subaltern urbanisation is imbued with agency. This agency provides an opportunity for a socio-spatially more inclusive development if it is supported by the appropriate public policies. These emerging forms are not necessarily linked to a metropolitan hierarchy, and both local and external factors, which are often distant, are at play. In a recent publication, Schmid (2018) agreed to the same and pledged in favour of a decentred and open-ended vision of urbanisation.

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## **7 A growth coalition more favourable than ever to the polarisation of territorial development**

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Despite the reality of the Indian system of cities, prioritised investment locations are determined based on the opportunity of returns and the maximisation of profit, instead of a socio-spatial fair distribution of (public) services, means, and wealth.

However, profit maximisation in the context of present-day India is also fuelling the expansion of disperse and in situ urbanisation, thus supporting the economic emergence of small towns. Investors of different origins: local, regional, and foreigners meet in small towns. Local and external investments are focused on locations where workers will accept low wages, pools of resilient skills, and local agrarian capital. Small towns constitute places wherein land is less expensive, polluted, and controlled. These conditions underpin horizontal interconnections between sites of production and the redistribution of workforce-intensive activities along a chain of values.

Therefore, the attractiveness of these small cities goes hand-in-hand with their lack of territorial and social inclusion as well as the lack of governance that characterises them. It is primarily because they remain, from an administrative perspective, villages that they attract industrial investments. Investors encounter little resistance that can easily be circumvented. Land assemblies for small, medium, and intermediate projects are easily negotiated with the local dominant castes. To a certain extent, their invisibility in territorial policies serves the small towns. Greater inclusion would indicate higher costs for industrial plants, more taxes, more environmental standards to be respected, and unions and authorities with whom it becomes crucial to negotiate.

It is regrettable that small towns were underleveraged in their ability to deliver widespread improvements in both prosperity and liveability. They are places where people cope with poverty and experience inequalities. However, these conditions of injustice are also the factors that make them attractive in the globalised environment wherein India is integrating. Its attractiveness as a country entering the global market outside IT services late<sup>9</sup> depends on its advantage in terms of low labour costs, flexibility, and the right to pollute.

The observation of the business fabrics of these small towns also indicates that they are the focus of a dynamic of low-cost innovations. They are the places of *Jugaad*. Their status as places of *jugaad* involves seeking exporting opportunities in major emerging markets. There are manufactured products that are easy to repair under difficult conditions. They fulfil the modest needs of a mass of poor people in India, but also in other countries in Asia and Africa.

The urban official framework is Malthusian, with the exception of a myriad of large villages that can be recognised as small towns. This reflects a neglected/ignored bottom of the urban hierarchy, small towns; however, in a certain extension, it serves their economic growth and the creation of wealth in general. This can be perceived as an opportunity for the development of those localities. This is not a simple mechanism of invisibility or neglect but also a local strategy stimulated by local dominant actors, and works with a local agency. People in small towns are not passive but are instead actors of this position. Local politicians and entrepreneurs actively refuse opportunities to become part of the urban frame and convert the locality where they live in to an official town belonging to the urban framework.

For instance, unrecognised small towns and large villages benefit from the rural connectivity programme, notably the *Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana* scheme launched in 2000. With good roads, distance from national highways and metropolises is no longer an issue in most regions. Small towns benefit from India's infrastructure-driven development paradigm, which was promoted in the turn of the millennium universal access, not only in terms of roads but also for sanitation and electricity. In that sense, they are favoured due to their rurality.

In addition, in the trade-off between sharing wealth and alleviating poverty or stimulating economic growth, urban policies clearly support the motor engine of growth—in other words, the large cities. In the urban context, inclusive policies are limited to poverty reduction schemes and slum rehabilitation, essentially focusing on large cities. As explained in the following paragraph, public expenditure is focused on only the largest metropolitan areas.

The first consistent urban policy in terms of means invested (INR 1,205–360 million—USD 26.7 billion) began from 2005 onwards.<sup>10</sup> The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM; 2005–2014) concentrated its means on the 67 largest cities in India. It signified infrastructure improvement driven by compulsory city governance reforms (Kundu, 2014). An inclusion approach was embedded in; it focuses on urban poverty reduction and integrated slum rehabilitation through the Basic Services to Urban Poor (BSUP) scheme and the flagship of the UPA government—the *Rajiv Awas Yojana* mission or Slum-Free City scheme. They were all centred on large cities and their results were limited in terms of



inclusion. Only the sub-mission for Urban Infrastructure Development Scheme for Small and Medium Towns (UIDSSMT) administered by the Ministry of Urban Development and the Integrated Housing and Slum Development Programme (IHSDP) component targeted smaller towns, but it focused on water supply and their means were limited (Khan, 2017).<sup>11</sup>

After the shift in the central government and the victory of the National Democratic Alliance, urban policy aligns itself with the pro-business agenda of the dominant growth coalition. A new scheme called the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) was launched in June 2015, with an outlay of INR 500,000 million (USD 11.06 billion) for five years from 2015–2016 to 2019–2020. AMRUT constitutes a remodelled and less-funded version of JNNURM, which primarily relies on earlier infrastructure-centred JNNURM components, such as augmentation of water supply, collection and treatment of sewage and garbage, and building roads and flyovers. The new additions that are being introduced include digitisation and Wi-Fi zones in cities. The incomplete projects under JNNURM will be covered under the AMRUT. In addition to AMRUT, the Smart City Mission flagship programme promotes 100 cities across the country, thus ‘making them citizen-friendly and sustainable.’ If participation and inclusiveness are claimed, smart cities are in fact, a new declination of spatial concentration of investments for economic growth and innovation. ‘The vision about smart cities in India being about symbols instead of enabling the power of citizens to find the financial and intellectual resources to address their problems is unsmart,’ stated Partha Mukhopadhyay (2016).

By connecting the largest metropolitan regions of India with their string of smart cities and SEZ, several industrial corridor projects are taking off. The largest project is the 1,500-kilometre-long Delhi–Mumbai Industrial Corridor Project (DMICDC), and another similar project will connect Chennai and Bangalore. Conceived in 2008, DMICDC reached an agreement for INR 1,000 crore (USD 139.1 million) between India and Japan. Corridors are conceived to articulate and expand the mega pole of growth.

The urban imagination is focused on the attractiveness of the largest metropolitan regions, and Make in India policy has contributed to this. Extreme heatwaves may soon render cities like Delhi unliveable (Im et al., 2017). Almost every year, Bangalore and Chennai

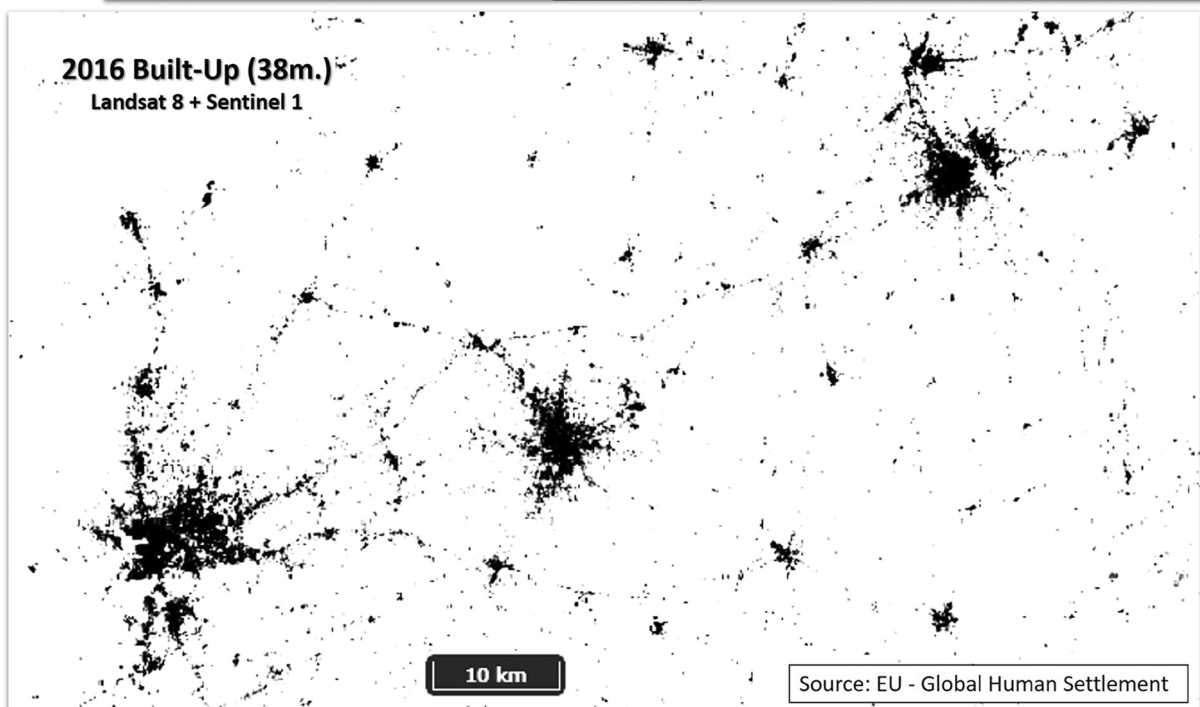
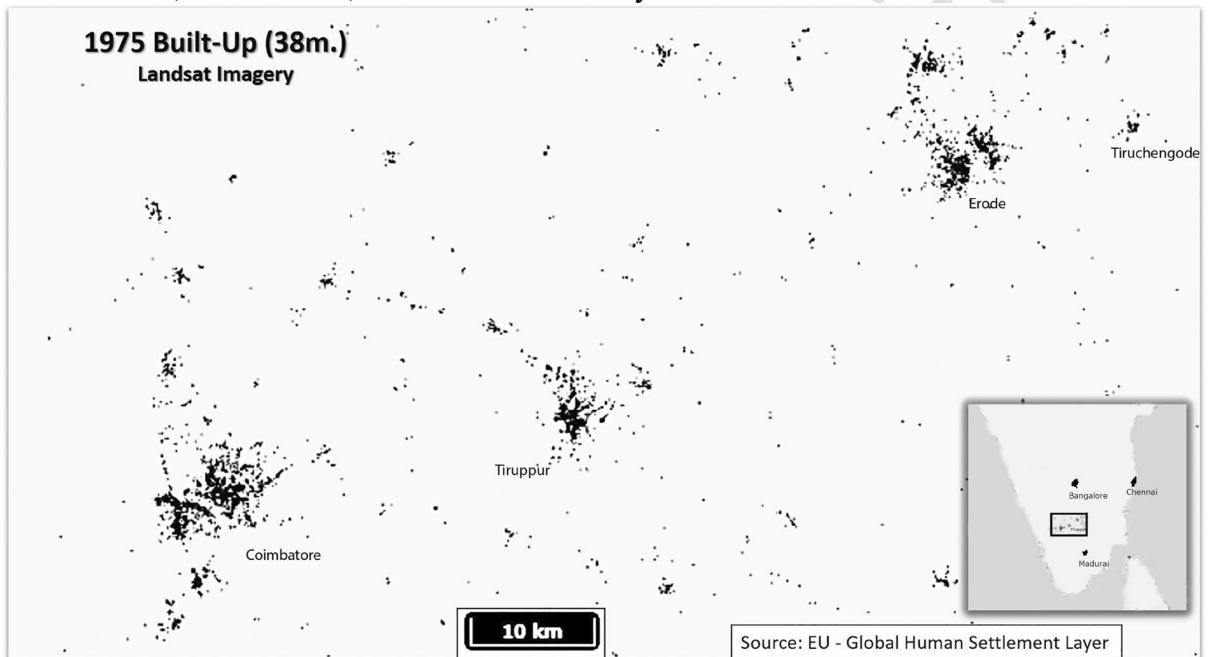
experience an acute lack of water. Floods linked to cyclones affect all the coastal cities, notably Mumbai and Chennai, thus resulting in massive destruction.

In addition to metropolitan regions' further adaptation to rapid climate changes, the network of small towns could represent a complementary approach in terms of crisis mitigation. The post-disaster resilience of the diffuse clusters of small towns and their capacity to avoid it must be investigated vis-à-vis the large metropolis.

Delhi is, almost every day, the most polluted city in the world, and despite the investments in road and mass transportation, the average speed of traffic in the largest cities continues to slow down. In other words, without even considering the effects of climate change, the negative externalities of concentration far outweigh the benefits of concentration in large Indian cities. This is particularly true if we consider the social inequalities in the face of these constraints, that is, if we consider the daily commute time of the poorest workers from peripheral slums marked by extreme pollution and without access to drinking water.

The challenge then becomes to design new integrated, inclusive mega-regions that integrate the halo of dispersed small towns. Although meta-forms/configurations of a horizontal metropolis region start to be conceptualised (Vigano et al., 2018), it is no longer a polarised urban region but is instead a multi-polarised assemblage that shares relationships with distant localities, abroad, and their immediate hinterland. Here is the case for new modernity without a metropolitan bias. India, with its diffuse urbanisation characterised by the growing weight of small towns in its system of cities, can represent an emerging case of horizontal urbanism. This may be a method for the reconciliation of the entire urban system from an inclusive perspective. In the words of Vigano et al. (2018: 1), 'the horizontal metropolis as a radical project, is both an image and a conceptual device through which to criticise, apprehend and imagine the contemporary city. It refers to a specific spatial condition characterised by a horizontality of infrastructure, urbanity, relationships, and by closely interlinked, co-penetrating rural/urban realms, communication, transport, and economic systems.' It constitutes a pursuit of McGee's *desakota* conceptualisation, *zwischenstadt* in Germany after Sieverts (2003), or *città diffusa* in Italy (Indovina et al., 1990). The horizontal metropolis adds a performative/programmatic agenda in favour of spatial justice and horizontal circulations.

We are invited to apprehend Mega-Urban-Regions, which differ from those centred on a major metropolis, and are invited to conceive the possibility of the emergence of urban–rural/rurban concentrations without a core. Metropolitan areas are not necessarily created by big cities. They could be the product of a multipolar dynamics as well as an anisotropic development and may generate a ‘non-centred’ or de-centred urban region.<sup>12</sup> In the horizontal emergence, there is no place for a hierarchical structure, and the opportunities for more inclusive development are less constrained. It is, in that sense, an innovative territory.



Based on comparison of satellite imageries in 1975 and 2016, the two maps demonstrate how the urbanisation has expanded and integrated the three localities, Coimbatore, Tiruppur and Erode. They are currently part of a unique urban and productive system that became, economically and demographically, comparable to the State's capital of Tamil Nadu and fifth metropolis of India, Chennai.

**Map 3.1** Example of an Emerging Horizontal Metropolis in South India (Tamil Nadu)

The emerging multipolar Coimbatore-Tiruppur-Erode conurbation is emblematic of the horizontal metropolis paradigm, which is becoming a dominant functional landscape (Map 3.1). It gathers from Coimbatore to Erode a population equivalent to the metropolitan region of Chennai: approximately 8.5 million inhabitants and major industrial clusters and a myriad of census towns. Coimbatore is known as the Manchester of the South for a long time. It is a major centre for machine factoring and in recent times, an emerging hub in the software industry (two SEZs have been implemented to support it). Along the National Highway, in small towns and villages, a string of technical colleges and private universities are fast expanding. The Tiruppur cluster for knitwear exportation is of national importance with 6,000 textile units. It is an assemblage of five villages that began to be recognised as a city corporation only since 2008. Tiruppur accounted for 90% of Indian knitwear exports (INR 200 billion—USD 2.8 billion in 2014–2015). Tiruchengode, with its truck industry, belongs to it too.

Observing these macro-territories, in addition to the consideration for the entire system of cities, including subaltern urbanisation, introduces a reflection that overcomes the conceptual and administrative divide between the rural and urban sectors. A public policy started to provide a tool to partially conceive such a territorial hybrid assemblage.

Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission or National Rurban Mission, which was initiated in 2016, aims to develop 'clusters of villages that preserve and nurture the essence of rural community life with focus on equity and inclusiveness without compromising with the facilities perceived to be essentially urban in nature, thus creating a cluster of "Rurban Villages".'<sup>13</sup> Financial inclusion is also a major policy in favour of inclusiveness that can be favoured by the dense network of small towns characterising India's urban system.

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## 8 Conclusion

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Perspectives regarding contemporary urbanisation paths of the Global South privilege a configuration dominated by mega urban regions. This ideal spatial arrangement for development, including large metropolitan regions and corridors, is supposed to drive economic growth. Natural redistribution, or wealth trickling down socially as well as spatially, is the only mechanism conceived to ensure inclusion in that liberal path to prosperity. However, outside metropolises, an urban world exists with thousands of towns wherein people consume, make a living, create opportunities to access resources and generate employment, and connect with others on various scales. Our approach contributes a critical perspective that focuses attention on this other urban area, its diversity in terms of trajectories, and its significance for ensuring a more inclusive development path.

Through the current research, we used a combination of quantitative analysis and in-depth ethnographies to highlight the importance of these smaller towns. This was accomplished by emphasising the weight of their contribution to socio-economy and more importantly, highlighting the multiple local and trans-local flows that shape their engagement with the global economy, thereby contributing to (what can be mischievously called) subaltern globalisation. This attention to horizontal linkages, in addition to a vertical dependence framework, suggests a different perspective—more relational, open-ended, multi-layered, and multi-scalar approaches—of the urban transition.

This is a first step towards recoding our understanding of the Indian urban system as a whole, including the full variety of its components. It acknowledges the role of metropolitan areas, but questions their pre-eminence in fashioning the transition from agriculture (and the transition of agriculture) and the broader developmental process. It is instead the smaller settlements—the Anyplace towns—that have diverse and durable effects on their neighbourhood, thus making for a broader and more inclusive process of change. Concomitantly, the autonomous global connections of the Micropolis town (clusters of towns) bring into relief the manner with which global interconnections are rapidly becoming scale-free. Global cities are not the only hubs for regional and international interconnections.

The various forms of governance play a crucial role in the evolution of this urban system as well as the regional history of governing. The designation of settlements as ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ is performative because it affects the type of infrastructure that will be available to the settlement. Its physical connectivity will determine the settlement’s ability to network with its neighbours, whereas the availability of electricity would determine the nature of economic activity. If it is selected as the site for the administrative offices, it automatically acquires a collection of consumers for a potential market. Although such infrastructure does not overdetermine the path that the settlement will follow, it would be unwise to ignore the possibility that it exerts (substantial) influence on it.

This reality underlines the importance of the notion of Subaltern Urbanisation to think of a great diversity of connections and flows that can articulate scales in unexpected, complex, and myriad ways. Before the advent of agglomeration as a major urban analytical theme, small towns were largely perceived as counter-magnets to large towns, because the population sought to move away from rural life—similar to a buffer, but with an underdeveloped role of their own. Subaltern urbanisation moves away from this perspective and acknowledges the functionality of this layer of settlements as a stratum that is not subordinate, but is instead an integral and often parallel part of the manner in which cities are increasingly linked. We posit that it is important to go far beyond and to cease ignoring their agency and innovativeness, particularly in a world wherein in 2015, only 35 out of 115 countries had more than half of their urban population in large cities (agglomerations of more than a million in population).

Such a dispersed urban system may be increasingly future-ready as economic activities transform from large-scale Fordist manufacturing to increased mass customisation and localisation. Future studies must determine whether the contingent circumstances that support the emergence and stability of smaller towns in other geographies, such as Vietnam and China (Zhu, 2000), are similar to the process of subaltern urbanisation in India. Although the importance of smaller towns is not unique to India, the processes of subaltern urbanisation may well be. Small towns constitute a myriad of gates to an increasingly inclusive development path conceived in terms of socio-spatial justice.

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**1** In 2017, the UPA government merged the urban development and housing and urban poverty alleviation ministries to form the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA).

**2** NEG refers to a major and influential trend in the neoclassical economy that has promoted the introduction of geographical space into economics since the 1990s, notably with the aim to explain concentration. This has led to policies promoting the concentration of investment in large metropolitan areas, thereby affirming that this polarisation is beneficial to growth through the redistribution of wealth to all territories and populations. It tends to justify the persistent and eventually increasing spatial inequalities.

**3** This collective research was conducted by a group of 20 researchers as part of a French National Research Agency Grant. The ethnographies include small towns across different states in India and across different governance regimes. See Zérah and Denis (2017).

**4** To be precise, 32.1 million people moved from rural to urban areas and another 11.5 million people moved from urban to rural areas, thus indicating a bidirectional flow of population.

**5** Defined by a non-permanent movement to the city, but instead going back and forth from a place of residence towards jobs within the city.

**6** Based on the usual status of the National Sample Survey data. Alternatively, cultivators and agricultural labourers constitute 54.6% of the total workforce in the 2011 Census data.

**7** The classification is decided prior to each census enumeration because the urban and rural schedules differ on the basis of information collected during the previous census. For details, see <http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-Circulars/Circulars/11-31-10-Circular-02.doc> (accessed 10 January 2016). In short, the designation criteria for census towns are based on the data collected during the census conducted ten years prior to their designation. This led to a decadal underestimation of small towns.

**8** Indira Awas Yojana (Indira Housing Scheme) was a subsidy programme for housing the poor in rural areas. This has since been replaced by the Prime Minister's Awas Yojana, which has included a large urban component.

**9** We must not forget that although the IT sector is successful, it only employs 3 million persons and is not growing within an Indian workforce, which comprises 580 million people. It is a component of the exclusionary metropolitan growth of India and an illustration of the jobless growth that characterises India since the past 15 years of economic liberalisation. The IT sector is now being affected due to automation and cloud computing.

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**10** The Integrated Development of Small and Medium Towns (IDSMT), which was launched in 1979–1980, was a modest antecedent. The IDSMT was applicable to all towns/cities with a population of up to 0.5 million. The scheme continued until the middle of the 10th plan period and covered 1,854 towns until 2004–2005, after which it was subsumed into the Urban Infrastructure Development Scheme for Small and Medium Towns (UIDSSMT). Thereafter, the Megacity scheme was initiated in 1993–1994. The objective of the scheme was to undertake infrastructure development projects of city-wide/regional significance covering a wide range of components, such as water supply and sewerage, roads and bridges, city transport, and solid waste management. The Scheme was applicable to Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore, and Hyderabad. This phase of urban policy was marked by an emphasis on mega-cities as being central to urban development. This bias has never been structurally corrected since then. During this period, the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992 that sought to make the third tier of governance increasingly autonomous and participatory was passed. However, the larger municipal corporations with adequate finances were able to benefit from this act, whereas the municipalities in smaller towns have not significantly benefitted from it.

**11** After Khan (2017), we observed that in the ten major states, 71% of the central assistance has been committed to the big city UIG and BSUP schemes that account for 36% of the total urban population of India. Only 29% of the total central share has been committed to the remaining small- and medium-sized towns under the UIDSSMT and IHSDP, although these towns account for 43% of the total urban population. The scenario is similar in other states as well, wherein 65% of the central share has been committed to the big city UIG and BSUP schemes that account for 6% of the total urban population, whereas 35% of the total central share has been committed to the remaining small- and medium-sized towns under the UIDSSMT and IHSDP that account for 15% of the total urban population.

**12** For an introduction to a classical perspective on the emergence of a ‘meta-agglomeration’ in India, see Perez et al. (2019).

**13** <http://rurban.gov.in/about.html>