India’s urbanisation is far from slow and its extent is much greater

FROM THE IVORY TOWER

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More than 50 per cent of the world’s population today lives in cities and towns for the first time in history. The big question is when will this historic transition occur in India? The share of the urban population is less than a third of India’s population. But there are social scientists who seriously believe that the extent of urbanisation is much higher. Unconventional and new data sources are ambling “against reality”. On the other hand, India is also considered to be “an extremely reluctant urbaniser”, according to the CEO and MD of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor Development Corporation.

India’s urbanisation is actually far from slow and is expected to much greater, argues Prabha Mulukpadyal of the Centre for Policy Research. At a recent workshop titled “Suburban Urbanisation: Movement of People, Transformation of Spaces”, he elaborated that this process reflects a tension between two paths—a metropolis-centric agglomeration dynamic driven partly by country-to-town migratory movement and the other involving the transformation of existing settlements that are dispersed across the country. Where does suburban urbanisation fit into this narrative?

Suburbanisation refers to the second path, notably the transformation of settlements that are independent of the metropolis and autonomous in their interactions with other settlements, local and global. India’s sectoral shift away from agriculture to industry and services is reflected in its spatial pattern of urbanisation with firms located in the bigger cities and metropolitan areas in export scale economies. But urbanisation has also been driven by the boom in census towns—separatements that have crossed the thresholds of three specific urban characteristics, according to the Census of India. A village becomes a census town if it has a population of 2,000; density of 400 per square kilometer; and 75 per cent of its male population is in non-agriculture occupations. The transformation of such settlements is referred to as process of de-sire urbanisation. Due to such reclassification, there were 2,532 new census towns between 2001 and 2011, accounting for 50 per cent urban growth over this period (see Ramu Chian Pradhan’s “Unacknowledged Urbanisation: The New Census Towns of India”, Centre for Policy Research Working Paper No. 2, July 2012). Significantly, 1,628 of such census towns fulfilled three-fold criteria in 2011 itself. There may be more such settlements in 2012, indicating higher rate of urbanisation.

Suburbanisation should result in smaller settlements outside the metropolis shadow, indicating a pattern of urbanisation that is extensive, widespread, economically and autonomous. Suburbanisation in a joint paper with Eric Dens and Marie-Florence Zenou recently published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. Many of today’s large towns were relatively small in the past—again pointing to the vitality of small towns. Indian Suburbanisation of the 430 odd towns in 1961, 43 experienced a blinding annual growth of 47 per cent for 50 years since then. While many of these are in the peripheries of the metropolis, 10 of them do not belong to this category and are widely dispersed geographically—Nashik, Bhimtal and Amravati in Maharashtra, Amritsar in Uttar Pradesh, Surat and Vapi in Gujarat, Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi in Delhi and Mumba in Maharastra.

These 10 towns, naturally, are candidates for a deeper study as to whether they fit the profile of suburbanisation. The central theme is known for its powerhouses industry that boomed owing to the mastery of large textile mills in Mysore and Ahmedabad. Mysore, Surat and Vapi—possibility of setting of George of Wisconsin—is certainly not independent of the coal industry and is a match that developed to exploit the resource. Whether or not there is anything radical about all of this growth is each town exemplifying the million mirages engulfing beyond the big metropolitan.

Suburbanisation certainly is a work in progress. To better understand how agents construct this world, Mulukpadyal mentions the ongoing research work titled “URBAIN” that entail joint work with many other researchers. Currently, the focus is on places like Shakam and Shami in Himachal Pradesh, the Udipi region in Karnataka, the Salem region towns of Tiruchengode and Namakkal, the further cluster of Veer in Tamil Nadu, to name a few. It is through detailed field and words-based research of more than 18 months that India’s rapid urban transformation can be better understood.