Module 2.1: Defining the Urban in India

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<th>Name</th>
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Module Structure

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- Census and Statutory Towns
- Alternative Urban Definitions
- International Context of urban settlement
- Conclusion

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1
I. Introduction

The literal meaning of ‘urban’ comes from a Latin word called *urbs* meaning *urbanus*, *ie*, “city” or “town”, and has been in use since 17th century. The term city and town are often used synonymously and denote populations in a given area performing urban functions, *ie*, non-agriculture/non-primary sector activities.

Countries define settlements as urban depending on the concentration of population with a minimum threshold size in a given area. However, what is the optimum size for a settlement to be designated as urban? The urban planner Le Corbusier prescribed 3 million as the ideal city size though this number did not derive from empirical study (Pacione 2009).

Towns and cities can be seen to exist in a functionally interdependent hierarchy. The larger the city the greater the functions it can incorporate. Larger cities can also be more self-contained. Hence, the size of the city determines the urban functions it can perform. Population size and density is what distinguishes urban areas from each other and also from rural settlements.

Also note that in defining urban settlements, a minimum threshold population size is required in order to make a provision of urban services and amenities such as primary schools, parks, play grounds and local shops. The original idea (Perry, 1929) was to have a self-contained
neighbourhood as a unit of city. A demographic minimum population of 5000 was suggested from an urban design perspective.

This prescription only relates to the demographic dimension of the urban area and leaves out other important aspects of the urban phenomenon. Nation states, however, follow the most convenient approach in defining urban areas. Some countries have characterized the urban population in terms of socio-economic dimensions as well. India’s urban definition considers a number of features such as demography, density and socio-economic character of the population. Hence, a complex, but evolving definition of the urban has been employed in India.

Urban areas evolve over a period of time in complexity and cultural expression, so the definition of urban changes over time and space. The recent census for example saw a disproportionate number of “census towns” being reported (Kundu, 2011a, 2011b). The major difference between census towns and statutory towns are the nature of their respective local governance. Statutory towns are governed by Municipal Corporation/ Municipality/ Nagar Palika\(^1\) and census towns are governed by Gram Panchayat (village council), even though they meet the other criteria for being labelled as urban.

In the following section, this module tries to trace the evolution of the definition of the urban in India since before Independence. The next section analyzes alternative definitions of the urban in India. Section IV places the question of defining the urban within the international context. The last section concludes.

II. How urban areas are defined in India

Pre-independence era

The urban in Indian has been defined on the basis of its population characteristics such as the size of the population, the density and in terms of percentage of male population engaged in non-primary sector of economy. Table 1 highlights the evolving definitions of the urban.

In pre-Independence India, the following criteria was fixed to define the urban in India (Census of India, 1911; also see Bhagat, 2005):

- Every municipality of whatever size;
- All civil lines (not included within municipal limits); and
- Permanent habitation with continuous collection of houses of not less than 5,000 persons

Apart from these criteria, the power to declare any settlement as a town or urban area was vested with the Provincial/State Census Superintendent until 1951. The towns declared by the respective state census superintendant were religious towns, hill stations and other tourist places of national importance, military cantonments and other such strategic places, even when they did not meet the above criteria.

\(^1\)Nagar Palika is the lowest order of town as per administrative authority.
These criteria focused on minimum threshold population sizes but missed out elements such as area as well as economic characteristics. These criteria were administrative and bureaucratic in nature, and left considerable scope for discretion to the Provincial Census Superintendent. Equally, it ignored the demographic and cultural aspects of the settlement. The definition also emphasized the political and administrative setup over the socio-economic aspects of the urban population.

Under British rule, urban settlements were regarded as providing security, salubrity and administrative control under the district administration (Datta, 1994). Municipal areas were given more power to levy taxes under the direct control of district administrations. Revenue collection in rural areas was left to zamindars with limited autonomy. Local autonomy to both rural and urban areas was the greatest during 1919 and 1935 where local institutions were released from the district administrations. This made possible only after the Government of India Act, 1919 following the Montagu Chelmsford Report. However, the Government of India Act, 1935 again snatched the autonomy of urban local bodies and put it under the direct control of district officers (Datta, 1994).

**Post-Independence era**

The Census of India until 1951 defined an urban settlement based on municipalities and the population of the area. Major changes were brought about in the definition of urban areas in India after Independence. While the 1961 census marked the most thorough change in the definition of the urban, the 1981 census saw some further modifications. However, since then, the definition has persisted largely unchanged, even though the emergence of census towns challenges current measures of urbanization.

The 1961 census adopted a strict definition to treat all places satisfying the following conditions as towns:

- All municipal corporations, municipal boards, cantonments and notified areas.
- All localities though not in themselves local bodies but forming part of a city or town agglomeration.
- Other places satisfying all three following conditions.
  - Population exceeds 5,000
  - At least 75 per cent of the working population engages in non-agricultural pursuits
  - The density of population exceeds 400 persons per square km.
The new definition of the urban was based on stricter criteria, but still gave considerable authority to the census to declare settlements as urban. And for the first time, economic activity (agriculture vs industrial) became the basis of distinction between the rural and urban. It also added two new criteria, related to population density and workforce.

This definition was also found to be inadequate because administratively, settlements with population of less than 5,000 persons also could get municipal status from the respective state government on the basis of religious, tourist or military significance. Second, revenue villages may have 75 per cent male population engaged in non-agricultural occupations, but may not be legally/administratively recognized as towns. Third, even many rural settlements also met the density requirements.

However, the 1981 census allowed for places having distinct urban characteristics and physical amenities like industrial areas, special project areas, large housing colonies, places of tourist interest, railway colonies, etc. to be regarded as towns at the discretion of the Director of Census Operations in consultation with the concerned state governments.

In addition, the census chose to include only the male workforce in its calculation of the required 75% engaged in non-primary activities. This change came in for a fair deal of criticism because of its gender bias. Not least, the Census excluded “workers engaged in livestock, forestry, fishing, hunting and plantations, orchards and allied activities, making the definition of urban more industrially-biased” (Bhagat 2005: 63).

Two broad categories of urban areas recognized by the Census remain to be pointed out. The first category is known as statutory towns and they have local bodies like municipal corporations, municipalities, municipal committees, as in the 3 tier urban governance system in India. The second category of Towns is known as Census Towns and they are governed by Gram Panchayats. The next section analyses these categories in detail.

Table 1. Definitional Criteria for the Urban in India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Census Year</th>
<th>Definition Criteria for Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1      | Before 1951 | • Every municipality of whatever size;  
                  • All civil lines (not included within municipal limits); and  
                  • Permanent habitations with continuous collection of houses of not less than 5,000 persons  
                  • Any other settlement declared by the respective State Census Superintendent |
| 2      | 1961        | • All those places having urban local bodies e.g. Municipal Corporation, Municipality, Notifies Area Committee and so on  
                  • All those places having: |
1. Not less than 5000 population,
   2. A population density of 400 persons per square kilometre and
   3. 75 per cent of the workforce employed in the non-agriculture sector.

In addition to these, the Director of Census Operations, in consultation of the state government and the Census Commissioner of India, has the power to declare a settlement urban.

<p>| | | |</p>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>As above</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 4 | 1981 | • All the above criteria of 1961 with two additional changes:  
I. Instead of 75% overall workforce, 75% male workforce engaged in non-agriculture activities  
II. Excluded the workers engaged in livestock, forestry, fishing, hunting and plantation, orchards and allied activities |
| 5 | 1991 | As above |
| 6 | 2001 | As above |
| 7 | 2011 | As above |

Source: Compiled by the author

Quite a few studies have raised concerns about the definition of urban areas in India. A look at how various other countries have defined their ‘urban’ areas based on certain relevant criteria can help broaden the dimension for ‘urban’ in India.

### III. Statutory Towns and Census Towns

The Directorate of Census Operation classifies towns in India into two types. Statutory Towns are notified under the law. Census Towns can be villages which have urban characteristics. The statutory towns are represented or recognized by the Municipal Corporations (Mahanagar Palika or Nagar Nigam), Municipal Committee (Nagar Parishad) and Municipality or Nagar Panchayat. They also include other urban areas such as cantonment boards, notified areas and tourist and pilgrim centers recognized by the respective state governments. On the other hand, Census Towns are defined by the following criteria

1. **A minimum population of 5,000**

2. **At least 75 per cent of the male main working population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits; and**
A density of population of at least 400 persons per sq. km.

There is also a third category, known as Urban Outgrowths, defined by the Census of India as, “a viable unit such as a village or part of a village contiguous to a statutory town and possess the urban features in terms of infrastructure and amenities such as pucca roads, electricity, tap water, drainage system, education institutions, post offices, medical facilities, banks, etc.” See Table 2.

A few implications of this distinction can be noted. First, census towns display an urban character and also add to the overall levels of urbanization, but are governed by the rural administration. This results in a lack of civic amenities and related infrastructure in these towns. On the other hand, statutory towns are recognized by the concerned state government without application of a consistent criterion. This leaves wide regional variations in the levels of urbanization which do not conform to actual urbanization patterns.

Why do state governments not declare areas which meet the criteria for census towns as statutory towns? To understand this, it is useful to pay attention to financial implications for the state government of declaring a statutory town. First, if the state government declares a settlement urban on the basis of the census criteria, it may lose the rural development grants provided to the settlement by both central and the concerned state governments. There are others costs as well. Urban settlements have to be financially supported by state-level urban development departments as their revenue base is very low due to their relatively smaller size and weak devolution of power for revenue generation.

What are the benefits of declaring a settlement as urban? On the one hand, if the state concerned declares large numbers of settlements as urban on the basis of both the census and state municipal criteria, its relative levels of urbanization will increase. This may help attract more investments - domestic as well as foreign direct investments (Kennedy and Zerah 2008). For example, the state of Tamil Nadu declared large number of settlement as urban in the decade 1991-2001 and registered a sevenfold increase in the level of urbanization even though the total number of the towns in the state had hardly doubled (Bhagat, 2005)

According to the 2011 Census of India, there were 7,935 towns (4,041 Statutory Towns and 3,894 Census Towns) in comparison to 5,161 towns in Census 2001 (3,799 Statutory Towns and 1,362 Census Towns).

Table 2 shows the number of towns and urban outgrowth during 2001 and 2011 Censuses. One of the remarkable changes during last census decade is the phenomenal increase in census towns in India.
Table 2. Numbers of UAs/Towns and Outgrowths in India 2001-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.No.</th>
<th>Types of Towns</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>Change (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Statutory Towns</td>
<td>3799</td>
<td>4041</td>
<td>6.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Census Towns</td>
<td>1362</td>
<td>3894</td>
<td>185.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Urban Agglomerations</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Urban Outgrowths</td>
<td>962</td>
<td>981</td>
<td>1.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tripathi, 2013

Concept of census town

The concept of a census town is not only found in India, but also in the United States and the United Kingdom, where these towns are termed differently. The rationale behind their identification is the same in all these countries, i.e. they are towns not with a legal status but with characteristics of urban areas. In India, these census towns often become invisible and are called “denied urbanisation” (Samanta 2014 or subaltern urbanisation (Denis et al, 2012). A similar concept to census towns is the idea of a ‘desakota’, meaning a ‘village-town’. Proposed by Terry McGee (1991) it has been applied to the countries of south-east Asia like Indonesia and other developing countries. McGee (1991) describes desakota regions as:

“Distinctive areas of agricultural and non-agriculture rural activity… emerging adjacent to and between urban cores, which are a direct response to pre-existing conditions, time-space collapse, economic change, technological developments, and labour force change occurring in a different manner and mix from the operation of these factors in the Western industrialized countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”

A very good example of a desakota region in India is the manner in which census towns are growing in the state of Kerala. The growth of these towns has given rise to a ‘rural-urban continuum’ between villages and urban areas; however this phenomenon is not significant in other states in India (Denis and Marius-Gnanou 2011).

Alternative Urban Definitions

The significant increase in number of census towns in India in the last decade has brought about an interesting scholarly debates on the Census definition of urban (Samanta 2014). Questions have been raised about the method adopted for census enumerations of urban areas, and the subsequent implications on data interpretation. Kundu (2011a, b) and Pradhan (2012) have brought up the possible challenges that urban planning will have to face in response to Census 2011 results.
Kundu points to census activism, which emerges from changes in the Census methodology, as the major reason for a large increase in the number of new census towns. One source of such census activism is that the Census of India counts individual census towns without taking into consideration already grown peripheries, or without noticing growth as a part of a settlement agglomeration consisting of more than one large villages governed by several panchayats. These practices have led to a wide gap in understanding what is actually happening on ground, and its measurement. How we define the term urban in India has actually become a major challenge in understanding the real urbanization scenario, especially in the transition areas like rural-urban fringes, census towns, large villages and urban peripheries.

Taking forward the debate, Pradhan (2012) argues along with other scholars (Denis et al 2012) that there is dispersed in-situ urbanization taking place away from the large urban agglomerations. This phenomenon is described as “subaltern urbanization”.

**Size classification of towns in India**

The Census of India distinguishes between different classes of urban settlements on the basis of population. Class I comprise cities with a population above 100,000 people and therefore include very large metropolitan cities; the lowest category (class VI) comprises settlements below 5,000 people. This distribution of urban settlements in different class sizes is mainly used to make comparisons of the evolution of India’s demographic structure overtime. However, it does not have administrative or governance implications.

Kundu (2012) argued that million plus cities are growing faster in the last three decades. But the numbers of small and medium class towns are growing faster than large cities.

**Table 3. Number of Towns and their share of population 2001-2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size Class</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>No. of Towns</th>
<th>Share of Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I 1 Lakh and above</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>68.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II 50,000 to 99,999</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>9.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III 20,000 to 49,999</td>
<td>1151</td>
<td>1905</td>
<td>12.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV 10,000 to 19,999</td>
<td>1344</td>
<td>2233</td>
<td>6.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V 5,000 to 9,999</td>
<td>888</td>
<td>2187</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI Less than 5,000</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4368</td>
<td>7933</td>
<td>99.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census 2011; Census, 2001, Provisional Population Table
Table 3 shows the number of towns and their respective share of urban population in India during 2001 and 2011 censuses. There has been substantial increase in the number of towns during the last decade across all classes. This can be attributed by increase in small and medium towns namely class III, IV and V towns in India. Though the number of Class I towns has also increased, its share of the population has declined during the last censuses, though there is an absolute increase in the population in India’s large class size towns.

IV. International Context in Defining Urban

The definition of an urban area or a city changes from time to time and place to place. The United Nations has recommended that places with more than 20,000 inhabitants living close together are urban. However, different countries compile their urban statistics still on the basis of different standards. These differences make comparisons of urbanization levels difficult. These difficulties are compounded by the fast growth of cities in the developing world, particularly South Asia.

Context: National and International

The census organizations of various countries classify their respective population into rural and urban population on the basis of the definition of an urban center, which takes into account the local conditions. It is difficult to standardize the definition of urban centers to make them universally applicable, because the conditions prevailing in different countries are highly variable.

The United Nations (1958) has attempted to classify the various definitions used by different members countries into five principal groups on the basis of various criteria used (see Table 4). Group I consists of those countries which define an urban settlement on the basis of historical, political and administrative status. Consequently, the centers of administration like shi and ku (in Japan), municipios, district, communes, are treated as urban centers. Group II consist of those countries, which use a numerical threshold population criterion to grant urban status to a settlement. In the case of such countries, a specific minimum size of population is considered as the basis to define an urban area. The countries falling in this category may not follow the standard threshold point of population size, because the socio-economic and political conditions are likely to be different. Nevertheless, it may be stressed that a country should not change the minimum qualifying size of population frequently so as to maintain the comparability of international urban data.

Group III includes those countries, which grant urban status to their settlements, on the basis of local self-government such as municipalities, borough, chartered town, etc. However, the terms
used for local self-government vary from country to country. In India, the terms used are *Municipality, Municipal Council, Municipal Corporation, Notified Area, Cantonment Board*, etc.

Group IV includes those countries which grant urban status to their settlements on the basis of physical layout and availability of amenities. For example, if the settlement has proper street pattern, contiguously aligned buildings, public utility services like electricity, water supply, sewerage system, police station, school, health center, post office, etc, it can be classified as urban settlement. Group V includes those countries where a settlement is classified as urban on the basis of functions it performs, that is to say, a specific minimum proportion of its workers are required to be engaged in non-agricultural activities. In practice, however when it comes to defining an urban settlement, various countries have tried to combine these different sets of criteria.

**Table 4. Defining Urban: International Context**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group of Countries</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Defines an urban settlement on the basis of historical, political and administrative status.</td>
<td>Japan's Shi and ku</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Uses a numerical threshold population criterion to grant urban status to a settlement.</td>
<td>Nepal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>Grants urban status to their settlements, on the basis of local self-government such as <em>municipalities, borough, chartered town</em>.</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>Grants urban status to their settlements on the basis of physical layout and availability of amenities.</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 5</td>
<td>Settlement is classified as urban on the basis of functions it performs.</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled and adopted from United Nations (1958)

In the United States, the rural-urban distinction is based on the concept of an urbanized area; it ‘includes a central city and the surrounding urban fringe (suburbs) that together have a population of 50,000 or more and a population density generally exceeding 400 persons per square kilometre. All persons living in urbanized areas as well as in places of 2,500 people or more outside the urbanized areas constitute the urban population while the rest constitute rural population (Bhagat, 2005). On the other hand in countries like United Kingdom, Brazil and Sweden, urban areas are defined ‘on the basis of built-up areas’ (Bhagat, 2005). Continuously built-up areas are defined as urban in UK. Sweden defines urban area as a built-up area with at least 200 inhabitants where houses are at most 200 meter apart from each other, while, in Brazil...
‘urban areas are legally defined on the basis of buildings, streets and intense human occupation; this includes areas that have been affected by transformations resulting from urban development and those reserved for urban expansion’ (Bhagat, 2005).

If one looks at the South Asian cities, urban areas are defined on the basis of settlement size, administrative and political criteria. For instances, Nepal defines ‘urban areas on the basis of population size only; a settlement of more than nine thousand is declared as urban’ (Bhagat, 2005). In countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, a settlement is declared as urban, based on administrative criteria only, while the definition of urban in China is based on political criteria. As Bhagat (2005: 62) notes: ‘Urban areas comprise both town and countryside as determined by the extension of town government seats; non-agricultural populations living in the areas of town government seats enjoy certain benefits’.

**Conclusion**

Urban areas are not only the expression of physical entity or of its geographical extent, but of the activities performed therein on a demarcated contiguous area. Hence, it is difficult to define these areas with a set of standard criteria. In defining the urban in India, the Census of India follows a combination of set criteria which include demographic, geographical expression in terms of density, political or administrative and socio-economic characteristics of an area which is distinct from its rural counterpart.

As far as finding alternative criteria to define urban in India is concerned, the discourse is still open and no logical conclusion has been drawn so far in this context. The new urban turn in India is expressed by the trend of subaltern urbanization where a large number of urban settlements are devoid of statutory urban status and are being neglected in terms of basic urban amenities. Another issue in defining the urban is the size class. The past experience of the progress of size class towns and cities have been in favour of large cities on the cost of small and medium towns. Therefore, there emerges an urgent need to redefine urban in India.

The international context of urban depends upon their prevailing socio-economic and political conditions. The United Nations has grouped the countries into categories, based on the criteria through which countries define their respective urban area. However, the individual countries may choose a combination of these criteria to suit their urban landscape. In conclusion, it may be said that criteria to define the urban are fundamentally arbitrary. However, precautions need to be taken by the countries not to change the threshold population size in order to maintain the international comparison of urban data.

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