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Urban Concepts and their Impact on Census of Urban Places in India: A Temporal and Spatial Analysis



Mohd. Ekhalaq Khan

Research Scholar,
Dept. of Geography,
AMU, Aligarh



Mujahid ul Islam

Research Scholar,
dept. of Geography,
AMU, Aligarh



Umar Habib

Research Scholar,
dept. of Geography,
AMU, Aligarh

Abstract

Urbanisation is the source of modernization in the society. Waves of urbanization are disseminated from urban centres to the countryside. The process of diffusion of innovations takes place through the chain of urban centres. In every census, rural settlements are reclassified as urban settlements, which is an indication of transformation of rural economy into urban economy. This is the definition of "Urban Places" which allows villages to become the part of urban system. Rural settlements qualify a fixed criterion and then they are declared as towns. The process of reclassification of villages as towns is very slow in the country. The impact of this is that towns do not come into existence in adequate number. In turn, it deprives of rural economy from the innovations of modernization. Further, changes in urban concepts carried out by the census department of India, affects the enumeration of urban places in the country. One of the reasons of large variations in number of towns from one census to another and from one state to another is the concept of "Urban" and the degree of accuracy of its implementation. The present study explores temporal and spatial changes in urban concepts and their impact on the census of urban places and urban population.

Keywords Census, Spatial Analysis, Urbanisation, Modernization, Disseminated

Introduction

Process of Urban Enumeration in India

Population census the world over, is the basic source through which human population is available by types of settlements i.e., rural and urban. The work of Census Department of India is commendable in this regard. The concept of urban and rural settlements is also defined in the Indian Census right from the late nineteenth century when the first census operation was started in 1881 throughout the country. Since then, it is usual practice to list out places and their respective information, which are treated as urban and rural in accordance with a fixed definition adopted by the census authorities.

The 1951 Census Definition

It is important to note that the four basic components of urban definition adopted in 1901 census were retained in the definition of 1951, except with the addition of underlined instructions, as given below. A place is treated as urban if it possesses any one of the following characteristics.

1. Every Municipality.
2. All civil lines not included within municipal limits.
3. Every cantonment.
4. Every other continuous collection of houses inhabited by not less than 5,000 persons which the state census superintendent may decide to treat as a town for Census purpose, having regard to the character of the population, the importance of the place as a centre of trade and to the fact that it is undesirable to treat as town overgrown villages which have no urban characteristics (Census of India, 1951).

The Limitations of the Concept

The analysis of the definitions existing in 1951 has demonstrated several weakness. For example, in this census like the earlier censuses, the question of determining non-municipal towns was left entirely to the discretion of the individual census superintendents. As a result, there was marked variation in the standards applied not only from state to state, but also within the same state and from one census to another (Census of India, 1971). In 1951 census definition, the emphasis was on the existence of urban amenities at a place as one of the conditions for treating a place

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as urban. It was a loose aspect of definition because neither the nature of these services nor their necessary number, were laid down in the criteria. It was based on discretionary powers of census authorities. In this way every village having any of these facilities like electricity, filtered water or a school might be qualified as an urban unit. A scholar has rightly pointed out that if so then almost entire population of some states would be classified as urban, "modernization of villages and the elimination of the present disparities between the urban and rural areas can hardly be called urbanization" (Bose, 33:1973). To establish an objective definition of urban places, empirical tests were prescribed for distinguishing urban areas from rural areas in different parts of the country based on ideas common to all states, but the practice was not uniform; nor was it applied with meticulous uniformity. Further, in case of princely states, the definition of town was not applied judiciously (Census of India, 1961).

Definitional Change in 1961 Census.

The 1951 census could not be effectively successful in defining an urban unit but it provided a strong base for future process. Reasonably, the 1961 census has been proved to be a milestone in the history of urban definitions framed in India. For the first time, attempts have been made to frame a statistical definition and its uniform application throughout the country. The attempt has been greatly successful. A fairly strict definition of an urban area based on quantitative approach was adopted in 1961 census. Following three independent parts were the essentials for the criteria which defines as urban place (Census of India, 1961).

Part A: All the places with any following statutory position were automatically treated as urban:

1. Municipal corporation
2. Municipal area.
3. Town committee.
4. Cantonment board.

Part B: All other places which satisfied the following three conditions were treated as towns:

1. A place with minimum population of 5000.
2. A place with minimum density of 400 persons per square kilometer.
3. A place with minimum 75 percent adult male workers in non-agricultural occupation.

Part C: Any other place, which according to the Census Superintendent of the state, possesses pronounced urban characteristics but does not qualify the Part A and Part B of the criteria, may be treated as urban in constitution with the state government. The concept of 'town-group' was evolved in 1951 but its use was limited to a city (population of 100,000 and plus). In this census it was used to all classes of urban centres. The term denoted a cluster of urban areas; it was an innovation of definition attempted in 1961 in statistical form. The need of framing this new urban term was the realization of the fact that in certain clusters of settlements the urban area is not confined to the notified boundary of one or two urban places but it encompasses satellite towns and cities, industrial towns or settlements close to the core town or city

which may even be surrounded by rural areas. Thus, these well-formed clusters of urban areas were treated as towns-groups. Facility of the road and rail transport and functional interaction among the constituents of the unit (town-group) were considered the main determinants of towns-group. A town-group emerged in two ways:

1. Town-group, which was made up of a cluster of neighbouring municipal towns only.
2. Town-group, which was made up of a cluster of municipal and non-municipal towns. In case where there was no clear articulation of extension, any town within a radius of 2 to 4 and sometimes of 5 miles of the periphery of the main and most populous city was empirically examined in respect of continuity and economic interdependence to determine whether the town should be incorporated in a town-group (Census of India, 1961). The Town-group was made up of individual urban units not necessarily contiguous to one another, but to some extent interdependent.

In 1961 census, the political and social conditions were conducive for a rigid urban definition and its uniform application throughout the country. The statistics which were presented separately for rural and urban areas for the first time in 1951 have been continued in 1961 as a basic stratification and the presentation of all statistics separately for rural and urban areas for the first time in 1951 have been continued in 1961 as a basic stratification and the presentation of all statistics separately for males and females. In the period from 1951 to 1961, three overwhelmingly significant events took place in the country which led to pave the way for the successful implementation of newly framed definition of urban places in the country. They included; the completion of two successive Five Years Plans in the independent India, the merger of Princely States with the central government, and, the Reorganization of States.

Definitional Change in 1971 Census.

The definition of a town adopted for the 1971 census was exactly the same as evolved in 1961 census, except one change. In the 1961 census the concept of 'Town group' was adopted which was vague and limited in use. This concept has been replaced by two new terms viz. 'urban agglomeration' (UA) and 'standard urban area' (SUA). Both the concepts refer to a contiguous urban area around a core town or a city but they are different in their structure and composition. They have been defined in the following way (Census of India, 1971).

Urban Outgrowths (UOGS)

An urban outgrowth is fairly a large urban area like railway colony, a university campus, a port area and a military camp as these urban areas grow outside the statutory boundary of the core city or town they are called urban outgrowths. These urban growths lie outside the statutory limits of the corporation, municipality and cantonment, etc but in most of the cases they fall within the revenue limits of the village or villages which are contiguous to the town. Since such areas are clearly urbanized it does not seem realistic to treat them as rural units. However, a few of them may not satisfy the

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prescribed eligibility tests to qualify themselves as independent urban units and thus deserve to be reckoned along with the main town or city. The impact of the implementation of this term was that tiny urban units being not able to qualify the prescribed test (Part B) were reckoned as parts of the main city under the following new concept.

Urban Agglomeration(UA):

The urban outgrowths are reckoned along with the core city or town and thus these all together form parts of an urban agglomeration. Accordingly, this continuous spread comprising the main city/town and these urban outgrowths which deserve to be treated as an integrated urban area, called urban agglomeration at the 1971 census. There are following different situations in which urban agglomeration (UAs) are constituted:

- (a) A city with a continuous outgrowth.
- (b) One town with a similar out-growth or two or more adjoining towns with their outgrowth.
- (c) A city and one or more adjoining towns with their out-growths all of which form a continuous spread.

In short, an urban agglomeration is a continuous urban spread which normally consists of a town and its adjoining urban growth. Obviously, the impact of this term was reduction in number of towns.

Standard Urban Area (SUA)

A new concept developed in the 1971 census for the tabulation of certain urban data was the standard urban area (SUA). The aim to develop this new concept was to provide comparable data for a definite area of urbanization continuously for three decades to examine the urban encroachments on rural surroundings. The 1961 town-group was made of independent urban units, not necessarily contiguous towns, but interpedently to some extent. The impact of this new term was that the data for town-groups did not permit comparison from one census to another as the boundaries of the town changed and intermediate areas were left out of count. If data for SUAs be made available in the two or three successive censuses, they are likely to prove useful for studying urban expansion around large urban nuclei. The evolution of this term was found useful in studying the process of sub-urbanization. The essentials of an SUA are outlined below:

- a) It should have a core town of a minimum population size of 50,000.
- b) This contiguous area made up of other urban as well as rural administrative units should have close mutual socio-economic links with the core town.
- c) Probabilities are that this entire area will get fully urbanized in a period of two or three decades, following the process of sub-urbanization.

It is evident from the above statement that both urban agglomeration and standard urban area refer to a contiguous area around a town or city but following differences exist between the two. One, urban agglomeration of 50,000 and more people are treated as stand urban area; two, rural settlement are also reckoned with the main town or city in case of

standard urban area while an urban agglomeration includes only urban constituents.

Definitional Change in 1981 Census.

The new concepts of Urban Agglomeration(UA) and Standard Urban Area (SUA) developed for the first time in 1971 census continued to exist without any change for the 1981 census also. Another marginal change, however, has taken place in 1981 census too. In 1961 and 1971 censuses for the purpose of determining male working population, the male population engaged in activities like plantation, orchards, logging, hunting, fishing and livestock were treated under the category of non-agricultural activities whereas in 1981 census these activities were considered under agricultural category for determining required proportion (75%) of male working population. However, according to the census authorities the impact of this marginal change was negligible on the level of urbanization and could not affect comparability; after all it was a mistake which was corrected by census authorities. The impact of this change has resulted in the reduction of non-agricultural workforce though negligible in magnitude, which was considered as one of the essentials in the demographic test (Census of India, 1981).

Definitional Changes in 1991 and 2001 Censuses.

The concept of 1981 without any change or modification has remained operative in the 1991 and 2001 censuses. However, for the purpose of delineation of urban agglomerations during census of India 2001, following criteria are taken as pre-requisites (a) The core town or at least one of the constituent towns of an urban agglomeration should be a statutory town; (b) The total population of all the constituents (i.e. towns and outgrowths) of an urban agglomeration should not be less than 20,000 (as per the 1991 census). Census authorities have declared that to ensure comparability of 2001 census data with previous censuses and also to provide the basis for analyzing trends of urbanization, definition of urban unit of 1991 census was retained as such (Census of India, 2001).

Definitional Change and Its Impact

As mentioned earlier the census definitions of "town" remained almost the same for the period of 1901-51. Though the definition at national level was more or less the same yet its application was not uniformly maintained throughout the country and thus affected spatial comparability. Due to the lack of a statistical definition the classification of country's population between urban and rural was vague and rough; the true urban population was considerably higher than the figures shown in the census records; this position existed from 1901 to 1951. The census of 1951 had reported a large number of increase in the number of urban centres which was about 600, due to definitional factors. This has resulted in over-enumeration of urban population recording high annual urban growth rate of 3.47 percent in 1951. It was dismissed by demographers as it was also due to massive in-migration owing to the partition of the country in 1947. Further, the census superintendent had also discretionary power to treat such places as towns which had a population of 5000 and over. Many

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such places were not real towns and this practice has also resulted in the inclusion of many overgrown villages in the list of towns. The census authorities had also accepted the fact that the question of determining non-municipal towns was left entirely to the discretion of the individual census superintendent (Census of India, 971:3).

Declassified Towns

The 1961 was a mile stone in the census history of India. The reason was the adoption of a rigid and precise urban definition along with several other improvements in the tabulation and enumeration in the census operations due to political stability in the country. There was a substantial impact of the new urban definition on the extent, trends and pattern of urbanization in India. A great changeover took place at this point. The first impact of the adoption of a rigorous definition was the declassification of 803 towns in 1961 which were treated as urban in 1951. At 1951 census, there were 3060 towns in the country while the corresponding figure in 1961 was only 2700 indicating a net decrease of 360 towns. Interstate variation were again significant showing decrease and increase in the number of towns due to the rigidity and flexibility in the application of new criterion. It was observed that in the states where the criterion of 1951 was also rigid to some extent there was no significant reduction in the number of towns, in 1961 census. On the other hand, those states where the urban criterion was loose in 1951 the impact of rigid definition was reverse and the reduction in number of towns was significant. The highest decrease of towns, 227 was recorded in Uttar Pradesh followed by Maharashtra (117) and Rajasthan (82). The minimum decrease of two towns was recorded in Kerala. (Table.1) The definitional change can also be explained in terms of functional classification of towns. In 1961, 600 towns were classified as agricultural towns. These towns were not actual urban centres but rural towns. The reduction in the number of towns was attributed to the definitional factors that overgrown villages were treated as towns in 1951. The rural characteristics of towns even after 1961 census also reflects the same fact that is, the rigid definition of 1961 could not be strictly applied. The major impact of rigid definition adopted in 1961 was the reduction of a large number of small urban centres having population below 10000 which were classified as towns in 1951. The number of these declassified towns was 803 with a total population of 4.4 million. It means that to obtain the actual figure of urban population of 1951 we have to deduct this number of towns from the published figure of towns. With the definition of "urban" becoming more or less stable (1961-2001) the rate of declassification appears to have declined significantly except the year 2001. As mentioned above as much as 803 towns of 1951 census were declassified in 1961 accounting for about 438340 population. In 1971, excluding Assam, 131 towns with population 147701 were declared as villages. In 1981, 96 urban units which were treated as urban in 1971 were treated as rural settlements with a population of 945891. Similarly the trend of declassifying towns continued to decrease in 1991

this time only 90 towns of 1981 census were declassified with about only 0.31 percent of total urban population. However, in 2001 the picture was reverse, this time as much as 440 towns of 1991 were derecognized as against 90 in 1991. It is important to note that if some rural settlements are classified as towns in one census year and in another census year they are disqualified and excluded from the category of towns it is due to weakness of urban definition. However, to some scholars the phenomena of declassification of towns can be attributed largely to the unstable economic base of small towns causing temporal fluctuation in the share of the non-agricultural workforce (Kundu et al, 1992:16). But to others the definitional factors may still be important in explaining a part of the increase in the number of towns during the seventies in case of some states as several of the Town Area Committees that were declassified in 1961 and remained so in 1971 and had regained their urban status in 1981 (Premi et al, 1977).

Statutory and Census Towns

It is the number of statutory/municipal towns in India that has always been significantly higher than the number of census towns. The reason is more than obvious that a place enjoying any statutory position or administrative set-up is automatically treated as urban. Of the total towns 5161 in 2001, a lion's share of 3799 accounting for about 73 percent of the total towns is occupied by the statutory towns, only 1362 are census towns. The disproportional distribution can also be seen in case of individual states. The highest number of statutory towns 721 was noted in Tamil Nadu against only 111 census towns in the state, followed by Uttar Pradesh being 638 against 66 census towns, Madhya Pradesh being 339 statutory towns against 35 and Karnataka 226 statutory towns against only 44 census towns. These figures indicate that in Tamil Nadu the statutory towns are seven times more than the census towns (1:7), the corresponding ratio between these towns in U.P., M.P. and Karnataka is approximately 1:10, 1:6 and 1:5 respectively. In other states where the total number of statutory towns is not so higher the ratio between census and statutory towns is still higher. For example, in Punjab there are only 139 statutory towns against only 18 census towns showing the ratio of 1:8. There are only two states out of 14 selected ones where the number of statutory towns is less than the census towns, they include West Bengal (123 and 252) and Kerala (60 and 99). The apparent reason of the wide variation in census towns and statutory towns is the difference in the criteria adopted. In case of the former the prime condition is the eligibility of the 'demographic test' and 'economic test' as well while in the later only administrative-setup is the eligibility for a place to be treated as town. In census towns the rural places have to qualify the rigid demographic test of at least 5000 population with 400 persons per sq. km density; and at least 75 percent male working population should be engaged in non-agricultural activities. Under this provision a rural settlement showing lack in any components of demographic and economic test cannot be treated as town. If census authorities are restrictive in applying the demographic

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test then it becomes more difficult for a village to be treated as town. Thus the decline in the number of census towns may be attributed either to the rigidity in the application of the demographic criteria or the weak demographic and economic base of rural settlements due to which they are not treated as towns. Conversely, the places having some administrative setup are automatically treated as towns. This way is the easiest for the recognition of "urban" status. The reason is obvious; assigning the civic status to a place is the state-subject and all the state governments are not restrictive in making a place a civic body. Thus, the criteria under which the statutory position like corporation, municipality, town area committee and notified area committee are allotted, widely differs from one state to another. This problem was also disclosed by the census commissioner even in 1961 census. "In the absence of a central municipal law, these have always meant different things at different places." (Census of India, 1961). Prime consideration for treating a place as urban is the administrative-setup not the size of its population (Bose, 28:1974). However, assumption that all places with some administrative set-up possess distinct urban character is true in case of high rank administrative urban centres like corporation and municipality but the same proposition is not true in case of lower administrative places like town committee and notified area committee. It is the note of consideration that even after a lapse of a century the same problem comes in the way of identifying places as urban. There is an urgent need to formulate a central municipal law and its uniform application in all states to assign civic status to a place which actually possesses definite urban character. There is also the need of an in-depth study to examine the functional structure of these places with same statutory position in different states. The apparent reason of the inclusion of a large number of statutory towns in some states is that such states are liberal in assigning the civic status to the places but the reverse is also true that some states governments are rigid in doing so and in these states the number of statutory towns is not so high. Similarly is the case of census towns which are identified through demographic and economic criteria. Some scholars have also reported the same fact in the following way. "There are few states where the definitional problems seem to have affected the level and growth rate of urban population during the 1990s more seriously than others" (Sivaramakrishnan, 2005:19).

Functional Character of Towns

Functional classification of urban centres is an important aspect of the study to examine how far our cities and towns are really urbanized. The census department of India has functionally classified the urban places into three classes on the basis of the dominance and intensity of different function viz. mono-functional, bi-functional and multi-functional. If workers engaged in a particular activity of a place constitute 40 percent or more of the total workforce, the place is classified as mono-functional. It is remarkable to note that almost half of the UAs/towns of India (47.4%) had primary activities (agriculture and

allied) as the predominant or the leading economic function in 1991 (Census of India, 1991). So far as the interstate variations of these towns having primary activity is concerned it was observed that some large states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, Maharashtra and Karnataka have more than two-third of their total towns as of mono-functional character with primary activity. This indicates that these towns are not real in urban character.

Conclusion

The reliability and comparability of urban data at national level have been improved considerably over the years following the adoption of a statistical definition and its comparatively uniform application in the country since 1961. Now the urban data in India are temporally more reliable than spatially due to constant improvements in urban criteria over the subsequent censuses. Despite these improvements urban criteria in India is subject to criticism. There is need to follow census definition strictly through the country, to maintain spatial comparability. Further, likewise census criterion, we need a strict statutory criterion, for this we need a central municipal law. Presently, it is a subject matter which varies from state to state. Owing to this flexibility, there is wholesale administrative notification of statutory towns in some of the states; this has resulted slightly overstated enumeration of urban population in 1981. Further, in the era of globalization, there is feminization of work force. In view of this, to include only male working population excluding female working population, does not seem realistic. After all, the criterion of urban places applied in India, is still better than of many other countries.

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Table 1:
Number of Declassified Towns in Major States of India.

Nation/State	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
All India	802	131	96	93	445
Andhra Pradesh	74	37	1	13	79
Bihar*	5	5	14	2	11
Gujarat	74	11	7	2	63
Haryana	-	4	1	2	4
Himachal Pradesh	85	9	1	19	40
Kerala	36	15	32	1	41
Madhya Pradesh*	49	3	1	1	9
Maharashtra	127	-	13	11	23
Orissa	22	2	-	1	3
Punjab	15	3	-	21	3
Rajasthan	84	-	-	2	14
Tamil Nadu	-	45	13	3	61
Uttar Pradesh*	222	-	2	5	7
West Bengal	60	-	1	3	48

Source: Registrar General,Census of India for relevant years,,14 states together account for more than 90 percent of country's urban population,*Undivided states

Table 2:
Number of Statutory and Census Towns in Major States of India,2001

Nation/State	All Towns	Statutory Towns	Census Towns
All India	5161	3799	1362
Andhra Pradesh	210	117	93
Bihar*	130	125	5
Gujarat	242	168	74
Haryana	106	84	22
Himachal Pradesh	270	226	44
Kerala	159	60	99
Madhya Pradesh*	394	339	55
Maharashtra	378	251	127
Orissa	138	107	31
Punjab	157	139	18
Rajasthan	222	184	38
Tamil Nadu	832	721	111
Uttar Pradesh*	704	638	66
West Bengal	375	123	252

Source: Census of India,2001,Rural Urban Distribution;undivided states.*