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Planning the "Ruralopolis" in India: Circular Migration, Survival Entrepreneurship, and the Subversive Non-Farm Economy

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Abstract
Urban research has scarcely investigated the planning context of the "ruralopolis"—poor and predominantly agrarian regions of the Global South with very high population densities. Today, some of these regions are urbanizing, in the sense that elements of urbanism beyond density, such as a large non-farm economy, are emerging. This paper uses a case study of an Indian district in Bihar to investigate urbanizing ruralopolis settlements. I identify and discuss the planning implications of three distinctive features of their urbanization: circular out-migration, a non-farm economy rooted in consumption and survival entrepreneurship, and shifts in agrarian social hierarchies that present progressive possibilities.

Keywords
caste, demography, India, migration, non-farm economy, rural development, urbanization

Resumen
La investigación urbana apenas ha investigado el contexto de planificación de las "ruralópolis" (Qadeer 2000), regiones pobres y predominantemente agrarias del Sur Global con densidades de población muy altas. Hoy en día, algunas de estas regiones se están urbanizando, en el sentido de que están surgiendo elementos de urbanismo más allá de la densidad, como una gran economía no agrícola. Este artículo utiliza un estudio de caso de un distrito indio en Bihar para investigar los asentamientos urbanos en proceso de urbanización. Identifico y analizo las implicaciones de planificación de tres características distintivas de su urbanización: la emigración circular, una economía no agrícola arraigada en el consumo y el emprendimiento de supervivencia, y cambios en las jerarquías sociales agrarias que presentan posibilidades progresivas.

Palabras clave
Casta, demografía, India, migración, economía no agrícola, desarrollo rural, urbanización

摘要
城市研究几乎没有调查"乡村都市"（Qadeer 2000）的规划背景，比如南半球贫困且以农业为主的地区，人口密度非常高。 如今，其中一些地区正在城市化，从某种意义上说，超越密度的城市化要素，例如大型非农业经济，正在出现。 本文利用印度比哈尔邦一个地区的案例研究来调查农村城市住区的城市化。 本文确定并讨论了其城市化的三个显着特征的规划含义：循环外流、植根于消费和生存创业的非农业经济，以及带来进步可能性的农业社会等级的转变。

关键词
种姓, 人口, 印度, 移民, 非农经济, 农村发展, 城市化

Introduction

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Mohammed Qadeer coined the term "ruralopolis" to describe poor, agricultural regions of the Global South where human densities had already reached the level of many Western metropolitan areas (Qadeer 2000). He pointed to India's Lower Gangetic Plain (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal) and other regions—Java, the Lower Nile Valley, and northeastern Nigeria—as examples. Unlike other concepts of the semi-urban, these vast regions are not peripheries of a central city or interstices of a polycentric metropolis, but rather function as a decentralized network of towns, large villages, and small cities. Pointing to the "paradox of poor agrarian regions supporting population concentrations of urban magnitude," Qadeer argued that these "urban frontier[s] [were] ripening for spatial and infrastructural crises" (p. 1583). Yet the field of planning—despite its growing interest in small-town and rural contexts (Dandekar and Hibbard 2016; Frank and Reiss 2014)—has paid little attention to ruralopolises, and two decades later, knowledge of the social and economic dynamics that inform their planning needs remains scarce.

Today, many ruralopolises are urbanizing—in the sense that other conditions of urbanism, beyond density, are emerging. For example, geographers have identified dense and "rural" regions where non-agricultural employment, in addition to population, is growing rapidly, even as chronic poverty persists and out-migration continues to outweigh in-migration (Randolph, 2023; van Duijne et al. 2023; Sladoje et al. 2020), a phenomenon I have elsewhere termed "urbanization from within" (Randolph, 2023).[1] The emergence and growth of large, non-agricultural, nucleated settlements in ruralopolis regions is partly responsible for the enormous proliferation of independent towns and small cities throughout the Global South (Moriconi-Ebrard, Harre, and Heinrigs 2016; Mukhopadhyay, Zérah, and Denis 2020; OECD and European Commission 2020; Randolph and Deuskar 2020). Scholars of India in particular have argued that much of the country's urbanization is hidden by rigid administrative definitions, with states like Bihar far more urban than they appear in official data (van Duijne 2019). These trends should renew, and strengthen, Qadeer's entreaty to take seriously the planning needs of high-density regions located far from metropolitan areas and their peripheries.

This paper asks a set of questions aimed at addressing this gap in the literature. What unique challenges arise for planning in historically agrarian, high-density regions now experiencing the social and economic restructuring of urbanization? How does their agrarian heritage, and the fact that urban density preceded the advent of an urban economy, shape the planning context? Does urbanization driven by natural population growth, rather than in-migration, require a different approach to planning? I address these questions through a case study of the Begusarai District in the Indian state of Bihar, at the heart of India's Lower Gangetic Plain, a quintessential ruralopolis. Through semi-structured interviews and other qualitative methods, I investigate urbanizing settlements in terms of economic, social, and political dynamics that are likely to influence attempts to plan and govern their urbanization.

My findings elucidate three distinctive features that shape the planning context of urbanizing towns of Begusarai District: the prevalence of circular out-migration, a consumption-based non-farm economy built on remittances and survival entrepreneurship, and the persistent but changing role of agrarian social hierarchies. I discuss the planning implications of these features.

This paper contributes to a wider ambition to shift the empirical geography of urban studies and urban planning to the contexts where most urbanization is unfolding. Nearly two decades ago, scholars called for a "Southern turn" in urban research agendas (Rao 2006), but urban research on the Global South has remained disproportionately focused on the largest metropolitan areas (Bunnell and Maringanti 2010; Mukhopadhyay, Zérah, and Denis 2020). Urban populations in the South, meanwhile, remain heavily concentrated in small cities, and much contemporary urban growth is occurring through the emergence of new settlements at the bottom of the urban pyramid (Randolph and Deuskar 2020). A mismatch between the geography of urban research and the geography of urbanization concerns planners as both a practical and epistemological matter (Randolph and Deuskar 2020). The urbanizing ruralopolis—"the future form of human habitat in large parts of Asia and Africa in the 21st century" (Qadeer 2000, 1601)—represents a context that is neglected in planning research but highly significant to contemporary urban transitions.

The paper is structured as follows. I place the ruralopolis in the context of a broader literature illustrating the importance of rural-to-urban in situ transformation in contemporary urban transitions. Next, I describe my case selection process and methodological approach. Following a description of Begusarai District, the findings section is organized into the three identified themes relating to migration, the local economy, and social relations. I then discuss the planning implications of my

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findings and call, in the conclusion, for broader research and action to promote inclusive and sustainable urbanization in ruralopolis regions.

Urban Transformations in the "Rural" Global South

Since the mid-twentieth century, when teeming "primate" cities became symbolic of "Third World" urbanization (Berry 1961), the perception that urban populations of the Global South are concentrated in the largest cities has proven durable (Henderson 2002; Sheppard 2014; World Bank 2009). However, innovations in the measurement of global urbanization patterns are casting doubt on this impression, as scholars begin to recognize the persistence, proliferation, and growth of settlements at the bottom of the urban hierarchy in many Global South countries. Using the Global Humans Settlements database, Randolph and Deuskar (2020) find that high-income countries actually host larger shares of their urban and overall populations in megacities of over ten million people than do low-income countries; the same is true for the share of population in cities with over one million inhabitants. Other evidence echoes these findings. The Africapolis project has found rapid growth in the number of small urban agglomerations in West Africa (Moriconi-Ebrard, Harre, and Heinrigs 2016), and several scholars in India have noted similar trends (Pradhan 2013; Swerts 2017).

Yet urban research agendas have yet to prioritize non-metropolitan geographies. Several scholars note the scarcity of urban literature on towns and small cities in general (Bell and Jayne 2009) and the non-metropolitan South in particular (Bunnell and Maringanti 2010; Cook 2018; Mukhopadhyay, Zérah, and Denis 2020; Zérah and Denis 2017). Nevertheless, the extant research on towns and small cities in the Global South outlines some of their salient features, including their important role in linking the rural and urban economy and reducing poverty (Christiaensen and Todo 2013; Gibson et al. 2017; Satterthwaite and Tacoli 2003); the spaces they create for women to negotiate with and against social norms (Naik 2022); their susceptibility to elite capture and inequality (Kudva 2015; Sharma 2012; Singh 2006); and the dense, intimate civil society networks that characterize their social and political life (Bryceson 2011; Cook 2018; Pasquini 2019; Sharma 2012). Planning research points to the dearth of resources, including human capital, for managing urban growth and environmental risks in towns and small cities of the South (Rumbach 2016; Rumbach and Follingstad 2019; Subramanyam 2020; Tuts 1998)—especially given that, in countries like India, their administrative status often lags behind their actual level of urbanization (Jain 2018; Pradhan 2013; van Duijne 2019; Zérah and Denis 2017).

While most research on in situ urban transformation focuses on the *peri*-urban, Qadeer's ruralopolis "is not an extended metropolis or a rural area being drawn into an urban orbit" (Qadeer 2000, 1590). As compared to earlier concepts of the "rurban," such as the desakota (McGee 1991), the densification of human habitats in the ruralopolis is not strongly associated with industrialization and agglomeration. Qadeer's concept finds resonance in the more recent notion of "subaltern urbanization" in India, which Mukhopadhyay, Zérah, and Denis (2020) describe as "vibrant smaller settlements—outside the metropolitan shadow—sustainably supporting a dispersed pattern of urbanization" (p. 582). I have shown in other work that many of India's rapidly urbanizing locations are experiencing population growth that is entirely internal—that is, natural increase independent of in-migration (Randolph 2023). This is a demography of urbanization that contradicts canonical models of urban genesis developed by urban economists, in which the formation of new cities invariably relies on in-migration (Henderson 1974).

Taken together, this literature indicates that some parts of the high-density, non-metropolitan Global South are urbanizing as agrarian villages transform into urban towns by the force of internal population growth and a social and economic evolution wrought by density. Much of the evidence comes from India, but similar trends are appearing in other regions too, notably Sub-Saharan Africa (Fox 2017; Moriconi-Ebrard, Harre, and Heinrigs 2016; Potts 2018). As these patterns contrast with the dominant understanding of the urban transition—structural transformation in the economy leading to mass rural–urban migration and the expansion of cities (Lewis 1954)—urban planning has yet to grapple with their implications.

Case Selection and Methodological Approach

To better understand the social and economic context of an urbanizing ruralopolis, and the associated implications for planning, this paper uses a case study of a district in Bihar, India. Districts are approximately the size of counties in the United States, making them small enough to observe local processes of urbanization but large enough to study multiple settlements that are spatially independent. Moreover, in India, the district is arguably the most important unit of local government (Sabharwal and Berman 2013, 424).

To identify the universe of urbanizing ruralopolis districts in India, I first undertook detailed statistical analysis based on the Indian Census and the Global Human Settlements (GHS) database (Florczyk et al. 2019). I identified Indian districts that met three criteria: densification of population and built-up area in the top quartile of all districts (GHS data); non-farm employment growth in the top quartile of all districts (Census data); and location in a ruralopolis region. A more detailed description of the case selection methodology is included in a technical appendix. For the last criterion, I defined a district as being within a ruralopolis if it met two conditions, drawing on Qadeer's description:

1. Not adjacent to or containing a city of greater than 500,000 people (as of 2011 Census) and not containing a state capital.
2. District-wide population density above 400 people/km^2 (as of 2011 Census).[2]

Twenty-nine districts in India met the first two criteria. These are districts where the fastest urbanization is happening—that is, growth and densification of nucleated settlements combined with non-farm employment growth. A more thorough explanation of the analysis and the locations I identified is detailed elsewhere (Randolph 2023). Of these twenty-nine districts, twelve met the third condition—that is, they fall within a ruralopolis. This offers initial confirmation that urbanization of the ruralopolis is an important contributor to India's overall urban transition. From among these twelve districts, I chose Begusarai District based on several considerations: its location in Bihar, the state that hosts the highest number of urbanizing ruralopolis districts I identified; its range of differently sized settlements that are functionally distinct from the administrative headquarters of Begusarai City, enabling me to study multiple cases of urban growth; and its *lingua franca* of Hindi, the only South Asian language I speak fluently.

I made a reconnaissance visit to Begusarai District in October and November 2021 to conduct unstructured background interviews and identify field sites within the district. I selected four settlements—Bakhri, Bhagwanpur, Manjhaul, and Mansurchak—that host dense, nucleated populations according to GHS data; are spatially independent of the district headquarters; and were witnessing, according to local informants, rapid growth in their markets (i.e., non-farm economies).

During data collection in April 2022, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with twenty-four people across the four settlements, with the highest concentration in Mansurchak.[3] The interviews focused on several themes: employment and livelihood opportunities; migration; and social, economic, and physical change in the settlement over the respondent's lifetime. The interviewees were residents of diverse ages, occupations, and caste and religious groups. However, they were nearly all men; gender norms in many parts of north India make it difficult for a male researcher to speak privately with a woman to whom he is not related. To address this gap in my research, I collaborated with the female director of a local non-profit to co-lead five focus group discussions with women. These focus group discussions focused on the same themes as the semi-structured interviews. In addition to the interviews and focus groups, my research is informed by participant observation and background conversations with local and district-level government officials surrounding infrastructure, the farm and non-farm economy, and the implementation of central and state government programs.[4]

In analyzing the qualitative data, I began with a thematic analysis to pinpoint core topics in the interviews that related to my research questions. Having identified the themes of circular out-migration, agrarian caste relations, and the non-farm economy, I used content analysis to deduce more specific issues that would speak to these themes: for example, what work people do; what migration decisions they make; and how the built environment and social and political dynamics of the settlements have changed over time. Finally, I performed a narrative analysis to understand how people in the settlement interpreted the changes unfolding.

The biggest limitation to my methodological approach is the challenge with generalizability that is inherent to a case study. Begusarai District, while it was selected to be representative of a broader phenomenon—the urbanizing ruralopolis—may still have some unique characteristics that are not present in other areas with similar population and economic characteristics. Nevertheless, a descriptive case study is considered an effective method for establishing a research agenda, by identifying trends, patterns, and issues that can direct hypotheses in research with larger sample sizes (Flyvbjerg 2006). In this sense, it is an appropriate method to employ in analyzing a context of urbanization about which planning scholars and practitioners have limited knowledge.

Begusarai District and Bihar: The Context

Begusarai District lies in central Bihar, one of India's poorest and most underdeveloped states since British rule. Sitting atop rich alluvial soils irrigated by annual monsoon floods, Bihar lies in a region that is arguably the world's largest ruralopolis. The contiguous Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal, together with Bangladesh, constitute the lower Indo-Gangetic Plain. The region is home to nearly 520 million people living in a land area of approximately 520,000 km^2 (roughly the size of France).[5] Bihar alone hosts over 130 million people, though it is only the size of South Carolina and contains no metropolitan areas larger than its capital of Patna, home to 3.8 million people.

While it was once a center of political and economic power in India, Bihar's modern history is one of deindustrialization, impoverishment, and organized crime. The state's political economy is shaped by legacies of the exploitative *zamindaari* sharecropping system established in colonial times, which disincentivized capital investments in agriculture and aggravated caste relations (A. Banerjee and Iyer 2005). Industrial policies in both colonial and independent India disadvantaged Bihar, as they funneled investment toward coastal areas at the expense of inland industrial hubs (King 1990)—leading to "pauperization in the countryside" (Das 2018). India's 1960s Green Revolution, which boosted agricultural productivity through irrigation, hybrid seeds, pest controls, and mechanization (Dandekar 2016), largely failed in Bihar and other lower Indo-Gangetic states—generating a persistent "spatial rift" in India's economic development patterns (Balakrishnan 2020). In 2004, the *Economist* magazine, in an article titled, "An Area of Darkness," wrote that Bihar had "become a byword for the worst of India" (The Economist 2004).

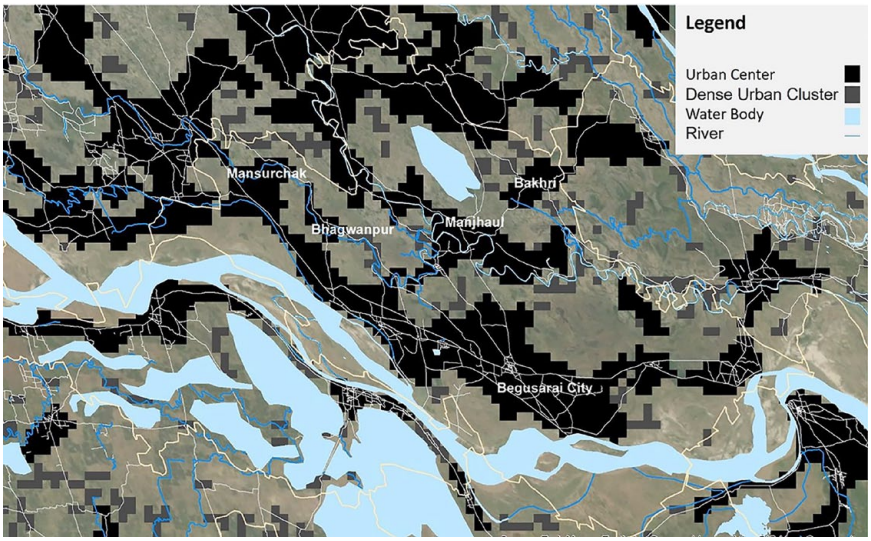

Figure 1. The urban morphology of Begusarai District, Bihar.
Source: Global Human Settlements (European Commission), ESRI, Mazar, Earthstar Geographies, GIS User Community.

Conditions in Bihar began to change with the election of Nitish Kumar, in 2005, as chief minister. Kumar's administration is widely credited with improvements to public service delivery, infrastructure, law and order, and management of public finances and government expenditure (Mukherji and Mukherji 2015). Some of the largest gains have been in electricity infrastructure, with major improvements to both access and quality; between 2014 and 2019, the average number of hours of electricity jumped from twelve to eighteen (Sudarshan and Greenstone 2019). Bihar has also benefited from a dramatic expansion in rural road infrastructure that has occurred across India; between 2005 and 2020, nearly 100,000 km of roads were constructed in Bihar through central and state government programs, according to the chief minister (IANS 2020).

Lying along the Ganges River, the city of Begusarai is the third largest in Bihar, and the district of Begusarai ranks fourth on a measure of infrastructure quality (Mukherji and Mukherji 2015). Although today the only major employer is a state-owned thermal power plant, the city and its adjoining suburb of Barauni were once a significant industrial hub. The district became a stronghold of the Communist Party of India (CPI) starting in the 1960s. Today, Begusarai is best known as the hometown of Kanhaiya Kumar, a national figure and left-wing political activist, who was once jailed by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. Ironically, the lineage of leftist leaders from Begusarai, including Kanhaiya Kumar, have all come from the local land-owning elite, the Bhumihar caste. The Bhumihars amassed power under the *zamindaari* system and retain significant control over the district's politics and economy (Begg 2019).

As economic and political reforms have taken hold in Bihar, Begusarai District has seen rapid growth in its non-farm economy. In 1991, non-farm employment in the district accounted for only 19 percent of the workforce, whereas by 2011 it accounted for 42 percent.[6] Most of this growth has occurred in settlements outside of Begusarai City, which has stagnated amid deindustrialization. In Bakhri and Mansurchak, approximately two-thirds and three-quarters of the local workforce, respectively, labored in non-farm occupations as of the 2011 census. In Bhagwanpur and Manjhaul, the other two settlements where I conducted fieldwork, the figure stood at about half in 2011.[7] Yet official data offer limited insight into the nature of this non-farm economy, making it important to investigate on the ground.

Morphologically, these towns are independent of the city of Begusarai. While all four towns have benefited from recent infrastructure investments, none lie on the major national highway that runs through the district, and only Manjhaul lies on a state highway, indicating their local, rather than national or regional, economic functions. Except for Bakhri, all are proximate to rivers that were once used for transportation. In Figure 1, the district of Begusarai is overlaid with the 2015 GHS classification for "urban centers"[8] (in black) and "dense urban clusters"[9] (in dark gray). The figure highlights that much of the district beyond Begusarai City, including the case sites, is already highly urbanized in either a physical or demographic sense.

Three of the four settlements studied are currently governed by *gram panchayat*s, or village councils. While these councils reflect traditional forms of village governance dating to precolonial times, they were formally recognized as the official unit of rural self-governance through

an amendment to India's constitution in 1992 aimed at democratic decentralization. Despite the aspiration to devolve political power and financial resources to directly elected *gram panchayat*s, they have few sources of revenue generation (e.g., taxing markets and religious pilgrimage sites) and remain heavily dependent on fiscal transfers from the central and state governments—limiting their autonomy (R. Banerjee 2013). Although the councils are responsible for formulating economic development plans and implementing central government schemes such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), they remain subservient in most ways to state governments. Only in the largest and most urbanized of the four settlements, Bakhri, has the state of Bihar established an urban local government (*nagar panchayat*), which holds basic powers of property taxation and land use regulation. Bakhri also enjoys a marginally higher level of services, such as street lighting and wider roads. A range of political economy factors—including the additional resources required for maintaining an urban local body—prevent faster municipalization of settlements such as the other three covered in this study (Samanta 2014).

Distinctive Features of an Urbanizing Ruralopolis

Circular Out-Migration

Among the most prominent elements of Begusarai District's social and economic landscape is the widespread practice of male out-migration for work in other parts of India. Destinations include metropolitan regions such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore, as well as wealthier agricultural states that are less labor-abundant, such as Punjab. When asked about employment, a common refrain repeated by residents of the district was that local options are minimal and therefore most people in search of wage work must leave.

These migrations, especially among low-income and low-caste households, are almost always temporary. It is rare for young men to leave with the intention of settling permanently elsewhere. As Irfan,[10] a return migrant who had lived in Delhi and Mumbai, commented:

> How will we live there, when our heart is here? We go there only for hard work, with some goal, like to solve a problem at home. Someone will think: if I stay there for six months and earn 10,000 rupees per month, then I will earn 60,000—enough to cover two debts of 30,000 each.

Manohar, whose father is currently working in Delhi, explained the migration as seasonal:

> After the wheat harvest, working class people here will not find work, so they will start to move out again, to the cities. In the big cities, you will work hard for four to six months, earn some money, and then return when there is farm work.

By the official data, Begusarai District sees similar levels of out- and in-migration. According to estimates generated from National Sample Survey data, 2.9 percent of the district's 1991 population had out-migrated by 2011, while in-migration over the same period was equivalent to 3.8 percent of the 1991 population—a net migration rate of less than 1 percent.[11] These government data underestimate the actual scale of out-migration, which, given its temporary nature, goes unrecorded depending on when migrants or their origin households are remunerated (Chandrasekhar, Naik, and Roy 2017). Although a hint of this trend does lie in the official data: 3.5 percent of the district population reported in 2008 that they had migrated seasonally—for between one and six months—in the past year.[12] In addition, it is evident on the ground that much of what is recorded as in-migration is likely to be *return* migration; only one interviewee had been born in a different (neighboring) district, and none was aware of any trend of in-migration from elsewhere.

At first glance, it appears counterintuitive that one of the most rapidly urbanizing districts in India would see such high volumes of out-migration; *in*-migration is generally assumed to be the demographic vehicle of urbanization. However, there are two ways in which circular out-migration contributes positively to urbanization in the settlements where I conducted my interviews: (1) Because the migration is circular, and because it generally involves only one or two household members, it does not act as a demographic drain. In a context like Bihar where fertility is still higher than replacement, natural population growth is thus not constrained by out-migration, and "rural" settlements continue to fill up and fill in. (2) Settlements like the ones studied can sustain a larger, denser, and more non-agricultural population than their local economy would otherwise support, because households are arbitraging their labor across an expansive economic geography.

To use a metaphor, if internal population growth is like the steam inside a pressure cooker, circular out-migration acts like the whistling valve, relieving demographic and economic pressure. In Manohar's words,

> I've told my father many times to come home, but he says, "if I live at home, running the house will be difficult. How will we survive?" My father also tells me that if things don't work out here in Mansurchak, I can come to Delhi too and look for work, whatever kind of work suits my skills.

This also illustrates a common claim among interviewees: for those without high levels of education, working in a big city is not an aspiration, but a fallback plan when local livelihood options are exhausted or supplemental income is required.

An Entrepreneurial, Yet Survivalist, Non-Farm Economy

The growth of the non-farm economy and the shift to non-agricultural land uses are also linked to circular out-migration

Table 1. Non-Farm Enterprises of Mansurchak, Bihar.

Category	Types of businesses	
Retailers	• Fruit and vegetable vendor • Dairy • Ready-made garments store • General store • "Cold drink" store (sodas, snacks, and other fast-moving consumer goods) • Mobile phone store • Petrol pump • Party supply store	• Gift and toy shop • Electronic appliances store (televisions, speakers, refrigerators, washing machines, fans) • Sewing machine retailer • Hardware and construction materials supplier • Fertilizer supplier • Lumber shop
Service providers	• Car and bike mechanics • Tailors • Blacksmith/metalworker	• DJ/recording services • ATM/financial services • Xerox and printing services
Hospitality	• Chai stall • Sweet shop	• Small restaurant (4–6 tables)
Education	• Tuition center (tutoring) • Coaching center (preparation for government civil service exams)	
Manufacturing	• Furniture • Religious sculptures (*murti*)	• Commercial kitchen equipment • Metalwork

Source: Author's field observations.

in Begusarai District. As Ikhlak, an elderly shopkeeper and informal historian of Mansurchak, explained, circular migration has been spawning land investment and non-farm economic activity since the 1980s. At that time, the families of low-caste laborers from Mansurchak and nearby villages who had migrated out of Bihar to work in coal mines began buying land located near the road:

> In that era, the children of those people had the courage to say, "Our father has money, let's buy land, let's start a business, run a shop." . . . This is the main reason this area is as developed today as it is: outside money came from people retiring from coal mining. Even today you will see that those families have a lot of land here.

The same pattern of investment by return migrants continues. Many people in Mansurchak point to a new "mall"—more of a miniature department store, which opened in the summer of 2022—as evidence of its rapid development. The owner worked for two decades in a rice factory in Punjab. He used his savings to finance a local political career and secure a loan to finance the construction of his new store. Another return migrant, Rajkumar, runs an enterprise manufacturing commercial kitchen equipment, which employs about twenty-five people. He gathered the knowledge necessary to run the business by working for a decade at an industrial bakery on the outskirts of Delhi. While he gathered about 300,000 rupees (~$3,800) in initial startup capital—around 20 percent from his own savings and the rest borrowed from relatives—he claims that it was the skills and self-confidence he built working away from home that enabled his success.

These stories are inspirational, but a more structural analysis of the non-farm economy in these urbanizing settlements raises several concerns. First, whether they are run by return migrants or not, the bulk of non-farm businesses are various forms of survival entrepreneurship. The typical business employs no full-time workers, and the typical business-owner views their work as a last resort; they lack agricultural land and view farm labor as a nonviable livelihood—either because of its low remuneration or because of the feudalistic caste relations that persist in agriculture. For example, Kamlesh, a resident of Bhagwanpur and a return migrant, runs a small fast-food stall. Profit margins are so slim that on some days he earns nothing at all. "Yes, sometimes God gives us something, good money, like 200 or 400 rupees [in net profit] (about $2.50 to $5) and we use that money to buy rations to last us 10 or 15 days."

Second, the non-agricultural sector is largely composed of service providers and retailers; Rajkumar's is one of the few manufacturing enterprises. Table 1 shows the range of non-farm businesses I observed over several visits to Mansurchak, while Figure 2 is a photograph of the central market area of the town. The settlements I studied function mostly as market towns, located at strategic junctions where they serve the consumption needs of a proximate population (with the exception of Bhagwanpur, whose growth is more specifically tied to co-located sub-district government offices). Third, these settlements exhibit very little cluster development or sectoral specialization. In Mansurchak, there is an old community of artisans who create *murtis*, statues used in Hindu religious ceremonies, and in Manjhaul there are several businesses that manufacture *ghumti*s, small wooden structures out of which roadside vendors run their shops. However, these examples of local specialization are few in number and limited in scale.

Figure 2. Mansurchak's bustling, informal non-farm economy.
Source: Author.

Vikas, a hardware store owner in Manjhaul, provided his own analysis of the underlying cause of the non-farm economy's growth. The market around him, he claimed, has grown not because of *vikaas* (development or progress), but rather because of population increase alongside a lack of viable livelihoods. "It's because unemployment persists that the market has gotten this large. In my family, there are five brothers, and not one of us has a job. So what will we do?" The result is an oversaturation of barely profitable businesses competing over limited demand.

The growth of non-farm employment in Begusarai's urbanizing settlements, therefore, can be tied to two competing narratives: a vibrant, if bootstrapped, local economy led by the skills, capital, and ingenuity of return migrants; or an amalgam of self-employment coping strategies among surplus laborers. While my research provides evidence of both, the lack of specialization and the limited growth of tradable sectors—in which wages, working conditions, and productivity tend to experience faster improvement (Storper 2013)—raise serious concerns about the economic sustainability of these settlements and their capacity to enable economic mobility.

The Subversion of Caste and Religious Hierarchies

A vital thread linking the trends discussed so far—circular out-migration and the rise of an entrepreneurial, if survivalist, non-farm economy—is the central function of traditional agrarian social relations. During fieldwork, the issue of caste and religion emerged subtly but persistently as I questioned why urbanization was occurring more in some settlements than others. A narrative that surfaced was the role of "*ekta*" (unity) in spurring the growth of market towns. Several interviewees intimated that Mansurchak and Bakhri—the two most urbanized settlements of the district, outside of Begusarai City itself—had experienced non-farm growth because of their demographic composition. While many parts of Begusarai District are dominated by members of the Bhumihar land-owning caste, these two settlements contain a more diverse population, with high concentrations of lower caste and Muslim households.

Several mechanisms link non-farm economic growth to a settlement's caste and religious composition. As several interviewees explained, places in the district where Bhumihars hold the most power have historically seen more "*rangbaaz*," or bullies, which made them unsafe for non-farm business activity. To put it mildly, these upper caste groups were not interested in a flourishing non-farm economy: not only would this open channels of wealth creation outside agriculture, over which they had control, but it would also erode the supply of farm labor on which their wealth depended. Multiple interviewees explained that in Mansurchak, the lower caste (Scheduled Caste) and Muslim population "cooperated" to resist the "bullying." The local non-farm economy, in this sense, is subverting traditional hierarchies. This also helps to explain why people like Kamlesh, despite their struggle in running a barely profitable business, prefer this to farm labor, where they may still be subjected to intimidation and indignity.

Another mechanism is political. As Rajesh, who runs a local non-profit, explained, "where there are multiple viable parties, there is more development . . . where there are more Muslims there is more of a multi-party system." In places where one political party has historically dominated—which, given the links between caste, religion, and political participation, tend to be locations dominated by Bhumihars—local politicians have faced less competition and, therefore, less accountability. For example, infrastructure investment, an important driver of economic development throughout Bihar, is more evident in demographically diverse places. Several interviewees pointed to the poor road conditions in the settlement of Bacchwara—which historically was dominated by the CPI due to its majority Bhumihar composition—as evidence of this relationship between demographic diversity, political competitiveness, and infrastructural improvement.

A final link is through migration itself. While official data, given their general failure to capture variety in forms of migration, do not enable an analysis that links the nature of mobility—temporary versus permanent—to other migrant characteristics—such as education, caste, or income, my interviews indicated that the temporary and seasonal migration that prevails in these settlements is undertaken mostly by those of lower caste backgrounds. Wealthier groups, such as the Bhumihar, also migrate, but their movement is more likely to be permanent, education-related, and (eventually) involving the entire household. Circular out-migration—and the urbanization it spurs through population persistence, the genesis of non-farm businesses, and land investment—is commonly practiced by those without the means or education to establish themselves permanently in a metropolitan labor market. The urbanization observed in the case study settlements could truly be considered "subaltern" in this

sense (Mukhopadhyay, Zérah, and Denis 2020) and contrasts with the way that urbanization reinforces agrarian hierarchies elsewhere in India (Balakrishnan 2019).

Planning the Urbanizing Ruralopolis

The imperative for scholars and practitioners to consider the planning needs of ruralopolis settlements, given their high densities and rapidly transforming economies, has only grown since Qadeer coined the term. The characteristics of urban growth I have identified point to a unique planning context defined by out-migration rather than in-migration; a survivalist non-farm economy built on consumption, remittances, and return migrant entrepreneurship; social relations structured by an agrarian past; and a lack of local planning institutions.

First, the population dynamics of these settlements—with high levels of circular out-migration, very little in-migration from elsewhere, and sustained natural population increase—differ profoundly from urbanizing environments in which most planning knowledge is generated. From a land-use perspective, we should anticipate future urban growth in ruralopolis locations that have high levels of temporary out-migration combined with above-replacement fertility, holding all else equal. Some features of urbanizing places dense with in-migrants, such as widespread tenure insecurity, may be less salient in these locations–suggesting that planners should focus more on other housing-related issues, such as households' access to finance for incremental construction and upgrading. High levels of circular mobility also present obstacles for designing participatory planning processes, such that the voices of those who are frequently absent are not excluded. Participation must also be facilitated with attention to the specific social dynamics at play in these environments; whereas urban politics are often framed as conflicts between long-time residents and recent migrants (Caldeira 1992; Ding and Loukaitou-Sideris 2023; Hyra 2015; Slemp et al. 2012; Yiftachel 2000), other social cleavages are likely to play a more significant role in locations like the ones profiled in this article.

Second, the economic context of such locations introduces specific challenges. Planning in these environments must grapple with an urban economy that is almost entirely informal. Most research on informality has taken place in settings where large formal and informal economies exist in parallel (Roy and AlSayyad 2004), but the non-farm economy in places like Mansurchak is almost exclusively informal. Moreover, while Global South cities with large tradable sectors often host high concentrations of informal *employment*—that is, wage workers employed informally or in an informal firm—survivalist entrepreneurs like Kamlesh are *own-account* workers, neither employee nor employer. These differences point to a different policy problem: rather than incentivizing firms to formalize their workforce, planners and policymakers must confront the deeper structural challenge of creating employment in the first place.

Economic development planners are accustomed to promoting prosperity and job creation by attracting capital from elsewhere; enhancing the competitiveness of local tradable industries; or developing the skills of the local workforce. But in the case I have profiled here, economic growth is fueled by the earnings sent or brought back by migrants, which generates a consumption-oriented local economy. And much of the local workforce has built skills, usually informally, through migrating out and gaining experience in distant labor markets. The challenge for economic development planning, therefore, is to transform remittance-led growth of an unspecialized and non-tradable local economy into more prosperous forms of economic development that can generate high-quality opportunities for workers. This could entail, for example, creating ways for return migrants to channel their savings and skills into productive investments—that is, to make stories like Rajkumar's more common. One significant constraint to achieving this goal is the nature of who leaves temporarily and who leaves permanently; while the former group is much larger, my research suggests it is a population with less formal education. Economic development strategies, therefore, must account for a local workforce whose skills are primarily learned informally and on the job, rather than in institutions offering formal certification.

Third, the social dimensions of urban growth add another layer of complexity to planning in these environments. In development theory, agrarian wealth and non-farm economic activity in rural areas are thought to reinforce one another through a symbiotic relationship (Satterthwaite and Tacoli 2003). However, in Begusarai District, subaltern non-farm economies are growing with limited patronage of wealthy landowners. Economic development and environmental planning should still seek to promote symbiotic growth of the farm and non-farm economy, but this goal must be mediated by sensitivity to feudalistic social relations: agrarian elites may resist the growth of the local non-farm economy, and groups oppressed by agrarian social hierarchies may rightfully object to laboring in the agriculture sector, regardless of what it promises them economically. Caste is an institution specific to South Asia, but there are broader implications here. Traditional agrarian systems of social stratification are likely to be determinants of where and how urban growth occurs in ruralopolis regions, even if their role morphs in the course of the urban transition—echoing Balakrishnan's (2019) concept of "recombinant urbanization." As mentioned above, the relevance of these agrarian institutions is only reinforced by the lack of in-migration from elsewhere, which might otherwise restructure them. At the same time, if the patterns I have described in Begusarai District—a non-farm economy propelled by subaltern groups—are evident in other ruralopolis

geographies, then these places may present progressive possibilities for the empowerment of marginalized groups.

Finally, these are settings where the local state is not equipped to shape the process of urbanization. As discussed above, three of the four settlements I studied are still governed by *gram panchayat*s (village councils), rather than urban local bodies. The local government not only lacks the capacity to shape urban growth, but the mandate to do so. Given that they have no authority to raise revenue from local firms, village councils have little incentive to encourage the development of a formal economy—notwithstanding the major structural challenges associated with doing so. Nor could they be expected to regulate land use when they have no authority to tax property. Revenue generation is a challenge in most Global South cities, but the urbanizing towns I studied are acutely dependent on state and central government funds, which are largely earmarked for specific programs. And as Zérah and Denis (2017) argue, when it comes to infrastructure planning, such places are often treated as blank spaces on the map among higher levels of government. Without major institutional reform aimed at municipalization or a sweeping effort to entrust village councils with more resources, autonomy, and capacity, it is difficult to imagine a local state capable of fostering urbanization that is inclusive, sustainable, or prosperous.

Conclusion

Davis and Golden (1954) once wrote that the urban transition equates to a "depopulation of rural areas." The opposite is true in ruralopolis locations like Begusarai District, which are filling up, filling in, and experiencing the social and economic restructuring of urbanization. Despite this trend, planning scholars and practitioners have limited knowledge of what shapes urban growth in dense, agrarian, non-metropolitan places. This paper has aimed to help fill this gap. I have argued that several social and economic features distinguish urbanization in this context: the predominance of circular out-migration and demographic densification led by natural population increase; a consumption-based local economy lacking sectoral specialization or formal economy firms; and the persistent relevance of agrarian hierarchies, against which out-migration, the non-farm economy, and urban growth act in subtle, subversive ways. All these characteristics shape the planning context.

This article is just one step forward in building a deeper understanding of ruralopolis urbanization. For planning scholars, an important task is to investigate the generalizability of this paper's findings to other ruralopolis locations in India and beyond. This effort will enable urban scholars to study variation in ruralopolis settlements and the social and economic change they are experiencing. Additional research can also support a more comprehensive analysis of the causes and consequences of urbanization in ruralopolis regions. While this case study has identified several underlying factors—for example, natural population growth combined with temporary out-migration and a remittance-driven non-farm economy—other methods, such as econometric techniques, could formalize these causal inferences and identify additional factors. As far as evaluating consequences, qualitative and quantitative comparative methods—for example, comparing urbanizing ruralopolis locations to settlements urbanizing through more "conventional" patterns of industrialization and in-migration—would help scholars, planners, and policymakers to understand the implications of this urbanization pattern for human development (Randolph 2023).

These research efforts will support practitioners in identifying and addressing the core planning challenges related to urbanization in ruralopolis regions. This paper already points to some of these, including the need to encourage greater economic dynamism and invest more resources and authority in the local state. However, there are likely many other planning challenges that are specific to places like Begusarai District, which may require their own planning approaches to address. Such a research agenda supports the planning field's broader aim of aligning the geography of knowledge production with the geography of urbanization.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. I use "rural" here in quotation marks given that, for many scholars and practitioners, the defining characteristic of rurality is low population densities. The places described in this article, by this simple definition, have not been rural for several decades.

2. This density threshold for the *district* is the same as the Indian government's density criterion for defining a *settlement* as urban. I reason that, if an entire district has already reached this density level, it should be considered to have urban-like densities, as per Qadeer's description.
3. I discontinued semi-structured interviews upon reaching saturation.
4. I did not record conversations with government officials due to sensitivities with speaking on the record.
5. These figures are calculated using 2023 population estimates from the Indian Census for Indian states (https://www.census2011.co.in/states.php) and from the World Population Review for Bangladesh (https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/bangladesh-population). They include the region's two megacities, Kolkata and Dhaka; however, even excluding these two urban agglomerations, the Lower Indo-Gangetic Plain contains at least 480 million people (using the Demographia Atlas for population estimates of the urban agglomerations of Kolkata and Dhaka; http://www.demographia.com/db-worldua.pdf).
6. These figures are taken from the Primary Census Abstracts of 1991 and 2011, available at https://state.bihar.gov.in/main/cache/1/Figures/Table-019.pdf and https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/40901, respectively.
7. Primary Census Abstract, 2011 (see Note 4).
8. A per the GHS, a square-km grid cell is classified as an urban center if it hosts at least 1,500 persons or is at least 50% built-up, and if it is contained within a contiguous group of grid cells that collectively host at least 50,000 people.
9. A per the GHS, a square-km grid cell is classified as a dense urban cluster if it hosts at least 1,500 persons or is at least 50% built-up, and if it is contained within a contiguous group of grid cells that collectively host 5,000-50,000 people.
10. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the respondents.
11. These estimates are based on the Employment, Unemployment and Migration Survey of the 64th Round of the NSS, available at: http://microdata.gov.in/nada43/index.php/catalog/117/study-description.
12. See Note 11.

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