Challenges of Small Towns in Urban India

Prof. Kanika Bansal
Professor,
Chitkara School of Planning & Architecture,
Chitkara University, Punjab.

Received: Feb. 28, 2018 Accepted: March 31, 2018

ABSTRACT *In the present day undoubtedly, Indian cities and towns are the most important subsets that pimarily contribute to the country's piercing growth. In line to the rapid Indian Urbanization today, the Indian towns are also emerging in a unique way. They not only house good deal of population but may also be seen as evolving business hubs. The pace of development in towns has however, started to throttle the living conditions posing a threat to the original habitation of these towns which are not in line with the race of urban progress. In such a context, small towns can be exemplery places in terms of having their own social and cultural identity and a special way of life for their residents. Although they may be places with enliven public realm where pedestrians can be unhindered from moving traffic, promote and encourage local arts and crafts as well as traditional bindings to the past through local cuisine and local place specific produce, act as a platform where inhabitants may think broad but act indigenously, yet the race of urbanization challenges the individuality of the so called small urban places and intimidates their vitality and culture impacting the liveability and quality of life of its inhabitants. The aim of the paper thus is to define the challenges that are being faced by the small towns in India and appreciate the limitations of their growth process.*

Key Words: *Towns, Urbanization, Small Towns, liveability.*

Understanding Urbanization

While Urbanization is the increase in urban population, relative to rural population urbanism is a way of living that generally refers to the existence of distinct culture in urban areas. Universal urban areas are defined differentially by varied urban localities in with varying determinants such as size and density of population, amenities considered to be commonly available in urban areas, major economic activities of population, etc. The human settlement classification for planning purposes, its nomenclature and population range is redefined in the UDPFI guidelines as per the Table 1 as following:

S.no.	Population Range	Classification of Nomenclature	Local Authority (As per the 74th CAA)
1	5,000 – 20,000	Small town I	Municipal Corporation / Nagar Panchayat
2	20,000 – 50,000	Small town II	Municipal Corporation / Nagar Panchayat
3	50,000 – 1,00,000	Medium town I	Municipal Council
4	I lakh to 5 lakhs	Medium town II	Municipal Council
5	5 lakhs to 10 lakhs	Large City	Municipal Corporation
6	10 lakhs to 50 lakhs	Metropolitan City I	Municipal Corporation
7	50 lakhs to 1 crore	Metropolitan City II	Municipal Corporation
8	More than 1 crore	Megapolis	Municipal Corporation

Table 1: Classification of Urban Settlements

Source: Modification of the UDPFI Guidelines based on census classification and state experiences

Indian Urbanization

Indian urbanization primarily began to happen primarily in the years after Independence showcasing different trends of unequal urban growth through over- population in almost all types of urban areas like the metropolitan cities, uneven growth across urban agglomerations, and an absolute state of neglect of existing small and medium towns. The 1990's Indian economy liberalisation witnessed an unusual growth of 'mass cities' (as per figure 1) which triggered slums in mega-cities. With the unprecedented growth being experienced by the economically viable cities as well as the small and medium towns throughout India, wide disparities were seen in the quality of life, economic opportunities and flow of resources.

While the urban population inflated many folds, the urban centres doubled their number. A conversion pattern where the large-sized villages grew into towns, accelerated by industrial and tertiary activities seems to be the main issue in the process of India's urbanization. Generally the lack of employment opportunities which results in a low per-capita income, reduced secondary and tertiary (mainly due to poverty) activities scourge the people in small and medium towns of our country. Therby, many of these small urban areas are not capable enough to generate livelihoods and thus are unable to provide basic civic services and thus sffer instability in their economy. .

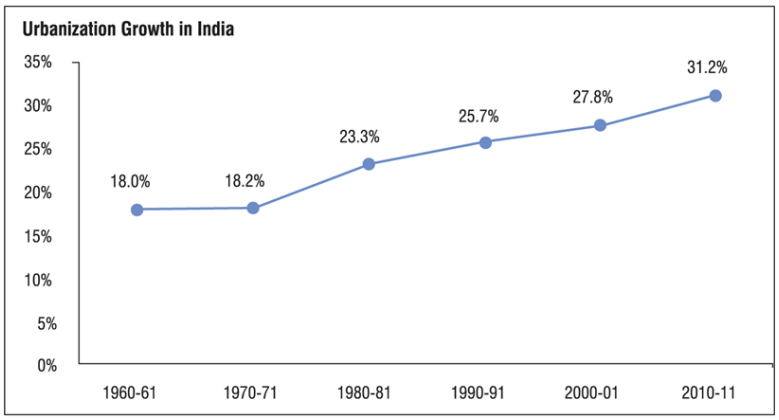

Fig.1: Percentage Growth of Urbanisation in India - As per the Census of India 2011

Even when the entire country is at the threshold of rapid urbanization, the problem becomes most acute in these towns with lesser population, slower growth potentials when compared with the bid urban areas. Small towns become more vulnerable to economic and development challenges because of their weak economic foundations, neglected governance, limited resources, poor planning and weak access to services. These towns are more often seem to be linked to their indigenous economies and thus have more diversity in the economic and governance system when compared with those of the metropolitan centres.

Small Towns

The term town stands for a non-rural locale with certain physical and social characteristics. It represents a complicated system of interaction between urban and rural neighbours. Indian towns have their own characteristics. They have varied factors of origin and growth and some have become significant for their religious, commercial, industrial and administrative features. There is no concrete line of demarcation between the big town and the small town besides population. In a way towns with a population between 10-50 thousands are labelled as small towns while the other ones having higher population than this are termed as big towns. In India small towns have been there for a very long time and the main incentives for their existence have been administrative, economic and to an extent cultural. Such towns usually have a traditional origin with a historical association. Zirakpur, as a small town can be ranked in this order. The number of towns has significantly increased from 5161 in 2001 to 7935 in 2011 as per the census of India 2011 (Figure 2).

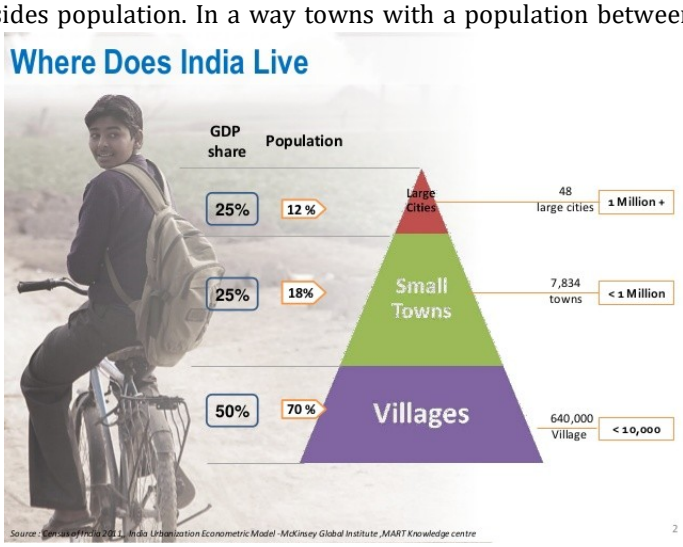

Fig.2: Comparative chart showing the population concentration in different types of settlements.

Only when the potential advantages of the small and medium towns are well identified and defined will the future be able to bridge the gap between large scale urban centre's, generating a stimuli for rural development. This will be the only attempt to integrate rural and urban economies and thus benefit the economic growth to deprived regions. India being a diverse country with vivid social set ups and political interventions, these towns can be the best way to bring about a radical change in the rural economies of rural areas by giving access to non-agricultural employment opportunities, services, facilities and incentives for the taking up agriculture as their prime occupation which ultimately would improve the economic opportunities and thus the standard of living within these very ignored small towns.

Challenges confronting the Small Towns in India

The shortcomings in the development of small towns in India, is rather acute and problematic. The reasons are historical, in the sense that modernization and urbanization occurred rather late, and in a laggard fashion; other reasons, include those of the pressure of population and consequent rise in demands on utilities and services of an unprecedented nature; thirdly, technological dispersion and applications have been retarded in comparison to the rise in demand for the same, even in very small towns, and rural communities. Thus, the awakening, awareness and aspirations are ahead of the pace of technology and organizational efforts. These three dimensions, namely, historical sequencing, the population pressures, and the time lag in technological fulfilment or provision, seem to cause the most acute problems in the towns.

These settlements witness organic unmonitored growth without the provion of the basic public amenities and infrastructure and most of all lack sewage and waste water disposal. They also go unnoticed and largely ignored by the national and regional level governments as they are unable to meet the growing demands of these settlements with their limited resources available. In addition they face huge challenges of coping up with congestion, aggravated chaos, increased levels of pollution and societal issues as they grow haphazardly even in the absence of basic facilities. In the post 1960 years, small and medium towns' urbanism has witnessed the following characteristics:

- The planned development phases of the Five year (and Annual) plans have produced a centralization of the planning process, partly with the union government, and otherwise with the state governments. The former controls a major part of the funding, while the latter controls the technical and executive agencies. The local governments have been plagued by a diminishing series of initiatives, and capabilities as concerned with the developments within the small towns.
- Structurally, the cores of town and cities have suffered from the problems of intensification, in regard to demands on land utilization, transportation systems/traffic capacities, public facilities and utilities, and general amenities like parks, playfields and open spaces, as well as natural resources within the town, such as, surface water reservoirs, underground water, and even fresh air, and quiet environments.
- To compound this problem, to a large extent, public incapacity, public apathy, and private caprice have contributed to these developments. Many of these fringe settlements are likely to be no better than the slums of yester year, in the near future.
- Regulatory measures, attitudes and processes are rather limited, poorly organized and exhibit poor evolutionary in these small settlements at an urban level.

Zirakpur, a small town of Punjab showing the lack of formal planning processes impacting the quality of life and the standards of living in small towns of India

Zirakpur, Punjab

Zirakpur, in Punjab is seen as small town in close proximity to Chandigarh experiencing rapid growth, named after a small village in the core of the group of villages which collectively form this town. Simultaneous to the Chandigarh's expansion, these villages reduced in size gradually and ultimately fused to become a small town. Massive land conversions from agricultural to residential colonies was seen when the population grew to as much as 1,50,000 in 2010 as compared to 25,000 in the year 2001 beginning from the first village Baltana, that offered planned residential colonies.

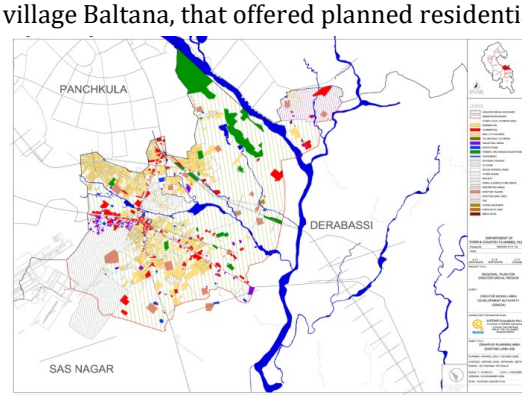

Fig.3: Land Use map of Ziarkpur. *Source: Draft Master Plan for Zirakpur, prepared by Town & Country Planning Department, Punjab.*

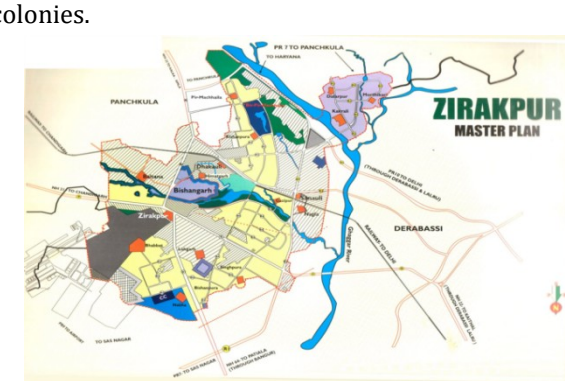

Fig.4: Master Plan, Zirakpur. *Source: Draft Master Plan for Zirakpur, prepared by Town & Country Planning Department, Punjab.*

The land use plan clearly indicates the pockets of old villages as shown in figure 3. These villages with time are expanding in a haphazard manner with an unplanned and unprecedented growth. The proposed master plan (Figure 4) aims for an overall planned development in the entire Zirakpur Local Planning Area through proposals of high end townships and residential colonies but has very less or infact not considered these existing towns which are the roots of the town. The proposed development strategy for the town of Zirakpur will be as a corridor which will be in context to the existing built up area but nothing has been so far laid out for the developments of the existing old abadi areas of the town which disclose the identity of the town.

The worked out strategies proposes for future developments but the existing infrastructure remains largely neglected. While most of the cities are planned for their present and future developments, some parts of the cities may still bear an unorganized look. Figure 5 is a newspaper clipping which highlights the aspirations of the government for future development in lines to its immediate neighbouring city, the City Beautiful. On the contrary towns may or may not be planned for their future developments. As already exemplified, by looking at the master plan of the city beautiful- Chandigarh it also has a number of informal settlements surrounding its perimeter that are unplanned. In the pursuit of growth and development many of the original developments in these towns and cities wear an absolutely neglected look like the case of Zirakpur as they do not form an integral part of the planning processes carried out by the local and regional development authorities. Within these towns many of the age old buildings representatives of their times have deteriorated badly. These towns which were once cheerful places with plenty of open spaces and amenities have witnessed a sea change in their living patterns. The demography has responded to the change with an increase in the populations while the other facilities, amenities lack any upgradation adversely affecting the liveability of the area. Moreover, to cater to the development needs of the population growth these towns have witnessed haphazard developments compromising on the open spaces which are an important social element in such towns.

चंडीगढ़ की तर्ज पर जीरकपुर में भी कटेंगे सेक्टर : डिप्टी सीएम

जीरकपुर, लालडू और डेराबस्सी के मास्टर प्लान को दिया अंतिम रूप

Fig. 5: Newspaper cutting revealing the strategies developed by the authorities for future planning of Zirakpur

It is also seen through the above examples that although some development authorities are preparing the master plans of these towns like Manimajra, Zirakpur and Banur yet the plan does not propose to upgrade the standards of living within the original old community which has existed in these towns ever since the settlements began. The ineffectiveness of planning has become endemic across these small towns. As are the problems of neglected governance and political issues in all small towns, so are they evident in Zirakpur like the lacunas in the Master Plan where there is hardly any consideration given to the economic and social development as well as finances for the successful implementation of the planalong with the duration and the involvement of all stakeholders. There is complete lack of incorporating local development strategies which prove to be economical while planning as a result of which unrealistic plans which are nearly and impossible to implement are formulated in such settlements.

Conclusion

So, the questions that arise and need an immediate consideration are

- Are there any proposals or plans relative to land use mapping, educational infrastructure, healthcare facilities, community services that are linked to the quality of living of its inhabitants? Are there any spatial provisions like public playgrounds and parks, open green spaces, overcrowding and pollution control strategies which affect the livability of the users?
- Are there any economic opportunities that will motivate the younger generations to take forward the inherent legacy associated with these towns?
- Will there be a more active governance system to draft policies and guidelines and implement strategies that will help to explore the inherent advantages of these small settlements?

It thus becomes imperative to see that small towns which are the backbone of urban development in India bearing maximum economic potential are impertinently overlooked and and are therefore considered to be

insignificant components of our existing developments. Neither are they form a part of the planning processes nor are they being addressed and researched by scholars and town planners. In today's world of rapid urbanization, these towns are the missing link in our economic, cultural and education imagination. The need of the hour is to identify an outlook to make them economically and culturally more viable to contribute to the regional and national economy as a whole.

So the point is that what measures should be adopted for our small towns to grow into attractive, vibrant and liveable communities and economies when a likely migrant would choose to settle and cope up in these places and be better off than going to bigger where they inhabit as a part of slum dwellers.

Small towns in India are thus key sites for opening up an urban enquiry into the diversity of urban settlements and the role they play in the larger scheme of urbanization.

References:

1. Carr, T., Hill, C. H. M., Vanzerr, M., & Seskin, S. (2011). Recommendations Memo # 2 Livability and Quality of Life Indicators. *Transportation*, 1–22.
2. Cities, S. (2005). Pictures of the Future Livable and Sustainable Cities Indian Cities : Infrastructures for Everyone, (September 2011).
3. Close, P. (2014). An ignored boom in India, 1–2.
4. Das, K. C. (2011). The growing number and size of towns / cities in India : Emerging issues from 2011 census data.
5. Ghosh, J. (2012). The challenges of urbanisation may be even greater in small towns | Jayati Ghosh | Global development | The Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2012/oct/02/challenges-urbanisation-greater-small-towns
6. Sharma, K. (2012). Rejuvenating India's small towns. *Economic & Political Weekly*, *47*(30), 63–68. Retrieved from http://www.epw.in/system/files/pdf/2012_47/30/Rejuvenating_Indias_Small_Towns.pdf
7. Suri, S. N. (n.d.). Making Indian Cities Liveable : the Challenges of India ' s Urban Transformation. *Isocarp*, *Review 07*, 20–41.
8. URDPFI Guidelines. (2014). Draft URDPFI Guidelines 2014, *I*, 402

It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare; it is because we do not dare that things are difficult.

~ Seneca