

Reinterpreting the Social History of Urbanization in Modern India

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Abstract— This paper reconsiders the social history of urbanization in modern India by questioning the interpretive frameworks that have organized the field. Three assumptions are examined and found wanting: that Indian urbanization begins meaningfully with colonial port-city formation; that the trajectory of urban change can be read from aggregate demographic indicators; and that the colonial city is best understood as an imposition upon a passive indigenous society. Drawing on a historiographical survey, a reading of published census series from 1901 onward, and selective engagement with municipal and administrative records, the paper argues for a reinterpretation organized around three propositions. First, urbanization in India has been a process of restructuring older urban networks rather than of urban creation, with the colonial period marked as much by the decline of inland qasbahs and manufacturing towns as by coastal growth. Second, the striking demographic slowness of Indian urbanization — from roughly 10.8 per cent urban in 1901 to 31.2 per cent in 2011 — conceals rapid qualitative transformation in urban social relations, and aggregate figures are therefore a poor proxy for social change. Third, the colonial and postcolonial city was continuously produced through negotiation, appropriation and

contestation by its inhabitants, particularly its labouring poor, rather than by administrative design alone. The paper proposes that the field be reorganized around the study of urban social practice rather than urban form or demographic threshold.

Keywords: urban history, colonial city, India, urbanization, social history, historiography, municipal governance

INTRODUCTION

Few subjects in modern Indian history have accumulated so substantial a literature while remaining so conceptually unsettled as urbanization. The reason is partly disciplinary. Demographers have measured Indian urbanization and found it slow; economists have measured it and found it disconnected from industrial growth; historians have studied particular cities and found them dense with social meaning. These findings sit awkwardly together, and the field has tended to resolve the awkwardness by simply keeping the conversations separate.

The consequence is a persistent interpretive gap. If one reads the demographic record alone, modern Indian urbanization appears as a story of remarkable inertia: a country that took the

better part of a century to move from roughly one urban resident in ten to fewer than one in three. If one reads the social and cultural historiography of Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Lahore or Bangalore, one encounters instead a story of intense and rapid transformation — of new forms of association, new vocabularies of public claim-making, new spatial disciplines and new modes of resistance to them. Both accounts are accurate. Neither, on its own, is adequate.



This paper argues that the gap is not a data problem but a framing problem. The dominant frameworks of Indian urban history have taken the city as a container to be filled and measured, rather than as a set of social relations to be historicized. This paper proposes an alternative reading, organized around three revisions to received wisdom, and considers what a social history built on those revisions would look like.

Research Questions

The paper addresses four questions. What interpretive assumptions have structured the historiography of Indian urbanization, and what do they obscure? How should the discontinuity between the demographic record and the social-historical record be understood? To what extent were colonial and postcolonial urban forms produced by their inhabitants rather than for them? And what alternative organizing framework would better integrate the demographic, spatial and social dimensions of the subject?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The foundational reorientation of the field belongs to Bayly (1983), whose study of north Indian towns between 1770 and 1870 dismantled the assumption that colonial rule encountered a stagnant urban order. Bayly demonstrated the vitality of the

pre-colonial commercial town, the density of merchant and service networks linking bazaar to countryside, and the gradual reconfiguration — not simple destruction — of these networks under the East India Company. His account established that any adequate periodization of Indian urbanization must begin well before the port cities.

The most influential body of work on the colonial industrial city is that of Chandavarkar (1994, 1998). His study of Bombay's cotton textile industry and its workforce rejected both the modernization narrative, in which the mill turns peasants into proletarians, and the culturalist narrative, in which caste and village origin determine urban behaviour. Chandavarkar showed instead that the neighbourhood, the jobber, the credit network and the street were the actual sites where working-class politics was constituted, and that these were urban formations, not rural survivals transplanted into the city. His insistence that the urban poor were political agents rather than objects of administration remains the field's most consequential methodological legacy.

Gooptu (2001) extended this argument across north Indian cities in the early twentieth century, tracing how the urban poor developed distinct religious, associational and political idioms that neither nationalist nor colonial frameworks anticipated. Her work established that the urban poor were not merely present in the political history of the period but were among its authors.

The governmentality literature approached the city from the opposite direction. Legg (2007) analysed Delhi through the lens of colonial urban governmentality, examining how techniques of enumeration, segregation, sanitation and policing constituted the colonial capital as a governable space. Kidambi (2007) offered a parallel account for Bombay, tracing the emergence of a colonial governmental apparatus concerned with plague, housing and public order between 1890 and 1920, and showing how public culture formed in relation to and against that apparatus. Dossal (1991) had earlier documented the planning of Bombay in the mid-nineteenth century, demonstrating the persistent gap between imperial design and its realization.

A third strand attended to architecture, representation and the cultural production of urban space. Chattopadhyay (2005) read colonial Calcutta as a site where the ordering ambitions of colonial urbanism repeatedly encountered what she termed the colonial uncanny — the persistent illegibility of the city to those who claimed to govern it. Glover (2008) studied Lahore to show that the modern colonial city was materially and imaginatively co-produced by British and Indian actors, not imposed by one

upon the other. Hosagrahar (2005) advanced the concept of indigenous modernities, arguing through the study of Delhi that the categories of traditional and modern were themselves products of colonial urban practice rather than descriptions of it.

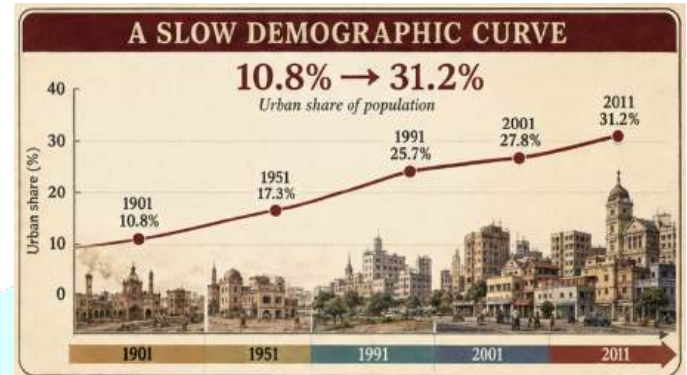
Kaviraj (1997) contributed a widely cited analysis of the transformation of public space in Calcutta, arguing that the colonial category of the public was received into a social order with quite different conceptions of shared space, producing enduring ambiguity in the practical meaning of public property. Hazareesingh (2007) examined the contestation of civic hegemony in Bombay, treating the city as a site of competing claims to urban authority.

For the postcolonial period, Nair (2005) provided a study of twentieth-century Bangalore, tracing the city's transformation through public sector industrialization to information technology and examining the changing terms on which different social groups could claim the metropolis. Prakash (2010) offered a reading of Bombay's twentieth-century self-imaginings, treating the fables the city told about itself as historical evidence in their own right. Rao (2013) studied apartment living in Bombay's suburbs, showing how the middle-class housing form encoded specific assumptions about family, propriety and citizenship. Anand (2017) examined water infrastructure in Mumbai to demonstrate that access to municipal services is negotiated through political relationships rather than distributed by administrative rule, a finding with substantial implications for how urban citizenship should be theorized.

On the demographic and comparative side, Davis (1951) produced the standard mid-century population study of the subcontinent, establishing the baseline figures against which subsequent urbanization has been measured. Heitzman (2008) offered a *longue-durée* synthesis of the South Asian city, and Kosambi (1986) studied the transformation of Bombay's urban form in the nineteenth century. Chaplin (2011) analysed the politics of sanitation in India, tracing the long persistence of differential service provision from the colonial period into the present.

Two gaps emerge from this survey. First, the demographic literature and the social-historical literature remain largely unintegrated: the former measures a process the latter does not recognize, and the latter describes transformations the former cannot detect. Second, despite the field's sophistication regarding the colonial city, the analytical break at 1947 remains largely unexamined, with colonial and postcolonial urban

historiographies operating as separate enterprises. This paper addresses both.



SOURCES AND METHOD

This paper is a work of historical interpretation and does not employ a sampling design or statistical inference. Its method has three components.

The first is historiographical analysis. The paper reads the corpus surveyed above not primarily for its factual findings but for its organizing assumptions — how the object of study is defined, where periodization breaks are placed, which actors are granted agency, and what counts as evidence of urban change. The purpose is to make visible the interpretive commitments that particular findings presuppose.

The second is the reading of published census series. The decennial census of India from 1901 onward provides the standard measure of urbanization, and this paper uses those published aggregates. Crucially, the census is treated here as a historical artefact as much as a data source. The administrative definition of a town has been revised repeatedly, and the criteria of population threshold, density and non-agricultural occupation encode particular assumptions about what urban life consists of. Changes in the recorded urban proportion therefore reflect definitional as well as demographic change, and the paper reads them accordingly.

The third is selective engagement with administrative and municipal records — municipal corporation proceedings, sanitary commissioners' reports, improvement trust records, and gazetteers — read against the grain. Such records were produced to document administrative action, and they register the urban population primarily as a problem to be managed. Read for their silences, their recurring anxieties and their

repeated admissions of failure, however, they become evidence of the practices they were attempting and failing to regulate.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Restructuring rather than creation

The first proposition is that colonial urbanization in India is better characterized as a restructuring of existing urban networks than as the creation of urban India.

The standard narrative — pre-colonial towns decline, colonial ports rise, modern urban India begins — misdescribes the process in two ways. It understates the density and dynamism of the pre-colonial urban order, which Bayly (1983) established beyond reasonable dispute. And it treats the decline of inland towns as a passive residue of coastal growth rather than as an active historical process with its own causes and its own social consequences.

The reorientation of trade toward the coast, the reorganization of revenue administration, the collapse of court patronage following annexations, and the transformation of textile production all worked to reduce the economic function of the qasbah and the inland manufacturing town. What followed was not simply demographic decline but the dissolution of specific social worlds: the service gentry, the artisanal guild, the scribal and administrative classes attached to regional courts. These groups did not vanish; they migrated, reconverted their skills and reappeared in colonial cities in altered form. A social history that begins with Bombay and Calcutta cannot see this movement at all, and consequently reads as urban novelty what was in substantial part urban relocation.

The implication is a different periodization. The relevant transformation is not colonial urbanization beginning around 1800 but a sustained reordering of the urban hierarchy across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which growth and decline were two faces of a single process.

The demographic record and its limits

The second proposition concerns the relation between demographic and social change.

The census series records a strikingly gradual movement. The urban share of the population stood at approximately 10.8 per cent in 1901, reaching about 17.3 per cent by 1951, roughly 25.7 per cent by 1991, and 31.2 per cent by 2011. Measured

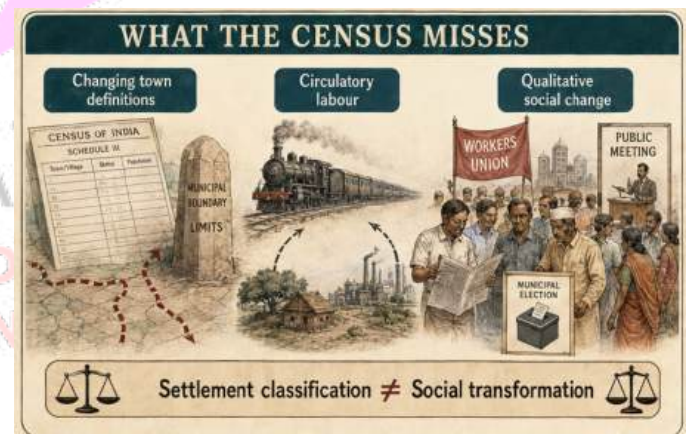
against comparable industrializing societies, this is slow. It has generated a substantial literature on India's supposedly deficient or incomplete urbanization.

Table 1. Urban share of total population, census of India

Census year	Urban share (%)
1901	10.8
1951	17.3
1991	25.7
2001	27.8
2011	31.2

The argument here is that this measure, taken as an index of social change, is misleading in three respects.

First, the definitional problem. The census definition of a town rests on population size, density and the proportion of male workers in non-agricultural occupations. Each criterion has been revised, and each encodes a judgement about what makes a settlement urban. A large village with substantial non-agricultural employment, dense social differentiation and daily circulation to a nearby city may fall below the threshold while functioning urbanly in every respect that matters to a social historian.



Second, the circulation problem. The Indian urban labour force has historically been characterized by circulation rather than permanent settlement — a pattern central to Chandavarkar's (1994) account of Bombay's workforce. A worker who spends most of the year in the city and returns seasonally to a village is urban in social experience and rural in enumeration. Circulation is precisely the kind of phenomenon a snapshot census is structurally incapable of registering.

Third, and most importantly, the qualitative problem. Between 1901 and 1951 the urban share rose by roughly six and a half percentage points. In the same period, Indian cities saw the emergence of organized trade unionism, municipal electoral politics, the modern press, communal and caste associations of an entirely new type, mass nationalist mobilization, and comprehensive regimes of sanitary and spatial regulation. The social transformation was of a wholly different order of magnitude than the demographic one. Gooptu's (2001) account of the political formation of the urban poor describes changes that leave no demographic trace whatsoever.

The conclusion is not that the demographic record is worthless but that it measures one thing — settlement classification — while the social history of urbanization concerns another. Treating the first as an index of the second is a category error, and it has produced an entire literature diagnosing Indian urbanization as pathologically slow when what is slow is the movement of a definitional threshold.



The city as negotiated production

The third proposition concerns agency.

The governmentality literature, at its strongest in Legg (2007) and Kidambi (2007), has established with precision how colonial administration sought to make the Indian city legible and governable. But an account attentive only to administrative intention risks reading the archive at face value, and the archive was written by the administrators.

Read against the grain, the same records testify persistently to failure. Sanitary reports record ordinances repeatedly reissued because they were repeatedly disregarded. Improvement trust proceedings document schemes abandoned, diverted or

captured by interests they were meant to displace. Municipal proceedings register a continuous struggle over the definition and enforcement of encroachment. This recurrence is not administrative incompetence; it is evidence of a population that occupied, adapted and rebuilt the city on terms of its own.

Chattopadhyay's (2005) colonial uncanny names this condition precisely — the city's persistent illegibility to those claiming to order it. Glover (2008) and Hosagrahar (2005) demonstrate its material dimension, showing that colonial urban form was co-produced by Indian builders, landowners and residents whose choices are visible in the built fabric even when absent from the planning record.

Kaviraj's (1997) analysis of public space extends the point conceptually. The colonial category of the public arrived in a society organized around different conceptions of shared and common space, and the resulting ambiguity was not a transitional confusion but a durable settlement, one that continues to structure how urban space is used and contested.

The postcolonial evidence is continuous with this. Anand's (2017) study of water infrastructure in Mumbai demonstrates that access to a basic municipal service is secured through sustained political negotiation between residents, engineers and local intermediaries rather than allocated by administrative rule. This is the same structure of negotiated urban production that the colonial municipal records document, operating under a different sovereignty. Chaplin's (2011) analysis of sanitation traces the persistence of differential provision across the same divide.

This continuity constitutes an argument against the periodization break at 1947. The transfer of power changed the legitimating vocabulary of urban governance profoundly — from imperial improvement to developmental citizenship — while leaving the underlying structure of negotiated access substantially intact. A social history organized around the practices by which urban residents secure shelter, water, work and standing would treat 1947 as one event among several rather than as the field's constitutive division.

Toward a Reorganized Framework

Taken together, these propositions suggest reorganizing the field around urban social practice rather than urban form, demographic threshold or administrative design.

Such a reorganization would have several consequences. It would extend the chronological frame backward, treating the eighteenth-century restructuring of urban hierarchies as integral rather than preliminary. It would treat the census as a source requiring historicization rather than a baseline requiring explanation, and would ask what the changing definition of a town reveals about changing official conceptions of urban life. It would place the practices of the urban poor at the analytical centre, following Chandavarkar (1994) and Gooptu (2001), on the grounds that these practices produced the city as substantially as any plan did. And it would treat 1947 as a change in the legitimating language of urban rule rather than as a rupture in urban social organization.

It would also reframe the persistent question of India's slow urbanization. On the account offered here, that slowness is substantially an artefact of measurement. The social relations characteristic of urban life — dense occupational differentiation, monetized exchange, circulatory labour, associational politics, contested access to collective infrastructure — extend well beyond the settlements the census classifies as towns. The question is not why India urbanized slowly but why a measure calibrated to settlement classification was ever expected to capture a transformation in social relations.

Limitations

This paper is interpretive and its claims are correspondingly qualified. It engages a historiography weighted heavily toward a small number of large cities — Bombay above all, then Calcutta, Delhi, Lahore and Bangalore — and the propositions advanced here may hold differently for smaller towns, for regions outside the presidency heartlands, and for princely-state urbanism, which remains comparatively understudied. The reading of administrative records against the grain is a method with well-known risks: absence of documented compliance is not proof of resistance, and the inference from recurrent regulation to persistent evasion is plausible rather than demonstrative. The paper offers a reframing to be tested against archival work, not a set of findings established by it.

CONCLUSION

The social history of urbanization in modern India has been organized around assumptions that its own best scholarship has quietly outgrown. This paper has argued for three revisions. Colonial urbanization restructured an existing urban order rather than creating one, and the decline of inland towns belongs to the same history as coastal growth. The demographic

record — from roughly 10.8 per cent urban in 1901 to 31.2 per cent in 2011 — measures settlement classification rather than social transformation, and the apparent slowness of Indian urbanization is substantially an artefact of that measure. And the city, colonial and postcolonial alike, was continuously produced through negotiation and contestation by its inhabitants, a structure of negotiated access that persists across the 1947 divide and argues against treating that divide as constitutive.

What follows is a research agenda rather than a conclusion: the study of small-town and regional urbanism on its own terms, the history of urban circulation as a form of life rather than an incomplete transition, the critical history of urban enumeration itself, and sustained work across the 1947 boundary on the practices by which urban residents have secured what cities have never straightforwardly provided.

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