For the first time since 1921, the urban population has risen more than the rural population. In his paper, P. Sainath explains that this huge turnaround to “despair driven” exodus of the rural poor to uncharted urban destinations due to the collapse of agriculture and related occupations. He rejects quickly two other possible causes behind this development, namely the natural increase in the population and the inclusion of new towns. According to his analysis, the rate of natural increase in the urban population has been fairly constant, and the rise in the number of new towns does not explain the strong increase in the urban population between 2001 and 2011, because the same process of rural-urban classification is supposed to happen each decade. Implied in his analysis is also the hint of a possible underestimation of the rural population, many of the poor migrants being “footloose migrants”, not captured by the census. In other words, the decline in the rural population may also be explained by who / what does not get counted. Much in the vein of “the process that is supposed to happen each decade”, the thesis of Sainath is that migrations, and notably “footloose migrations”, together are the main factors behind the urban phenomenon, and could be explained by the collapse of farming.

This thesis could be challenged on several grounds. First, a deeper look into the reclassification process of rural and urban areas would tell us this is a politicized process and an outcome of prolonged negotiations between the regional governments and the central government. There are instances of states resisting the proposed rural-to-urban reclassification. An example was the case of Kerala before 2011. The difference between 2001 and 2011 may well be linked to this sort of confrontation in politics, about which little information is available in the public domain. The point to note is that a literal reading of census numbers to justify the trends is questionable, when Sainath himself points out that rural-rural, urban-rural, and urban-urban migration patterns have not been captured. This is not to deny the phenomenon of footloose migration or the difficulties faced by these groups, but rather to underscore the fallacy in his conclusions based on a literal reading of the census. Without the economic and demographic
data at the local level, we are not able to say exactly what the weight of this reclassification process is. The issue is not only about what gets counted or not in a census but also how it gets counted. Second, his reading of “urban” in the two articles suggests an extrapolation of “urban” with “metropolitan”. The following trends counter such a reading.

First results show that the proliferation of small towns has played a major role in the urban growth during the preceding decade. The number of official towns rose from 5161 to 7935 during this period, an increase of 3774 towns, as against only 472 new towns upgraded between 1991 and 2001. This increasing number of new towns indicates that the inclusion of new areas may equally well be a vital factor in explaining the urban growth. If we just consider that all the new towns have 5000 inhabitants each (which is the minimum population size under the census town criteria), the total urban population growth due to this component is around 14 millions, which accounts for around 15% of the urban growth, more than double this component’s share during the previous decade (6.2%).

Moreover, if we consider the average size of the census towns, which have been upgraded between 1991 and 2001, the results become even more significant. This average is around 12 000 inhabitants, and on that basis the urban population growth due to this component during the last decade is a little over 33 millions, which accounts for more than one-third of the total urban growth. That is a fivefold increase in the share of the new towns in the total urban growth. Some hypotheses could emerge based on this size of growth. One would be that there is a strong turnaround in the urban growth with a significant trend towards a proliferation of urban areas. In that case, there is implied a significant slowdown in the general urban growth, without taking into account all these new towns. Another hypothesis would be that the census has identified new towns that are much smaller than before, a line of thought that might provide support to the thesis of census activism [Kundu A., 2011], and raise statistically the level of urbanisation. But, most probably, the two trends have worked in tandem, given the significance of the new emerging cities.

Next, the increase in the number of towns during 2001-2011 is more particularly due to the threefold increase in the number of census towns, whereas their number had decreased in the previous decade. The most critical criterion for the classification of a local body as a census town having been the percentage of employment outside agriculture, this strong increase in the number of census towns might imply a strong change in the economic basis of the small agglomerations. While a part of this economic shift may be attributed to a decline in agricultural activities, it may also point to a diversification in the economy of the small towns. Equating a decline in agriculture to a decline in small agglomerations appears to be a hasty and premature step. Thus, this changing pattern of employment in the small agglomeration could have a major role in the evolution of the rural-urban migration trend.

Finally, one other argument, coming from the NSSO migration data from 2007-2008, could be added. The bottom MPCE (Monthly Per Capita Consumer Expenditure) decile class has a much lower rate of migration than the top decile: 3% against 17%, for the rural male. This seems at odds with the increasing footloose migration, and, while not ruling out this kind of migration, we would do well to wait for the complete migration data before venturing out to take a measure of this process, and not rush to underestimate other kinds of migration.
The foregoing observations point to the changing pattern of the Indian urban system, where the small towns have begun to attract more migrants than has been the case with the metro cities. They show a better capacity to attract rural migrants, while the cost of living in the metro cities has become prohibitive for many of the poor. The decrease in transportation costs and greater availability of the means of movement in rural areas can also attract economic activities, which need cheap labour and fewer facilities, outside the metro cities, and not just move the jobs to them. The demographic growth of the districts where the first ten metro cities are located also supports this inference. As Kundu (2011) has already said, it appears that large cities have become less attractive to the prospective migrant. The graphic below shows that there is a significant decline in the population growth of these districts. The average growth of these ten districts shows a decrease since 1961, and this decrease has been especially strong during the last decade. In particular, Mumbai and Kolkata districts have recorded a negative growth, and Delhi’s growth decreased from 3.08% to 1.20%. This happened even though the Eleventh Plan focused on the country’s biggest cities in its strategy of investment through JNNURM, underlining the importance of agglomeration economies, as the World Bank report 2008 did.

Comparison of the annual growth rates of the districts in which ten largest metro cities are located with all-India growth rates [Various Census Reports]

These ten districts are: Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Ahamadabad, Pune, Surat, Kanpur

While there is certainly a changing pattern of urbanization in India, it cannot be entirely attributed to the phenomenon of “despair exodus” of the rural poor to the metro cities. The increasing number of new towns, predominantly small urban centres, in the 2011 census, and the decrease in the growth of the metropolitan areas suggest that small agglomerations have played a strong part in the growth of urbanization during the last decade. During the last 90 years, the annual growth rate of the ten districts already referred to, has always been higher than the Indian average except during the 1980s and during the last decade. This finding clearly confirms that the
bigger metro cities have lost some of their attraction, and that the rural exodus has benefited the lower levels of the urban system. Consequently, newer centres of attraction will continue to emerge, among which small and medium-sized towns will certainly have a strong role to play.

References