

Book review

Urban Studies

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DOI: 10.1177/0042098018813067

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Eric Denis and Marie-Hélène Zérah (eds), *Subaltern Urbanisation in India: An Introduction to the Dynamics of Ordinary Towns*, Springer: New Delhi, 2017; 614 pp.: 978-81-322-3614-6, £109.99 (hbk)

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While half the world's city dwellers reside in small and medium-sized towns (United Nations, 2018), the urban social sciences remain stubbornly focused on the planet's largest metropolitan areas. Among those studying the North, the global cities literature (Sassen, 2005, 2013) has re-energised the long-standing focus on cities such as London, New York and Paris. Neither has scholarship on the urban South, despite its critiques of urban theories emanating from Northern cities, turned its imagination much beyond major metropolitan areas. The implicit assumption seems to be that megacities are representative samples of the massive urban transformation underway across much of the world. The neglect of cities at the other end of the settlement size spectrum is not simply a failure of the academy to study the full universe of urban phenomena. As the evidence in this volume begins to demonstrate, it is actually a failure to grapple with one of the central forces underlying the rapid urbanisation unfolding in the Global South: widespread rural-to-urban in situ transformations are resulting in the proliferation of small urban settlements.

By recognising the importance of small towns in contemporary urbanisation, this book is a welcome corrective to the dominant narrative that imagines Southern urbanisation as a uniform process of villagers flooding into cities such as Mumbai, Jakarta and Nairobi. The volume goes further than that – approaching small cities as complex urban geographies that merit rich, interdisciplinary investigation along political, economic and sociological lines. The editors of the book interpret the emergence and persistence of small towns and cities across India as a contradiction of canonical economic theories – most notably the New Economic Geography (NEG). We discuss their perspective in this review while also describing our alternative reading of the trends unfolding in India's urbanisation process.

The volume consists of four parts: Part I locates small towns within India's urban system (Swerts, Pradhan) and relates them to trends in economic growth (Chaudhuri et al.), employment (Chandrashekar), and globalisation (Denis and Ahmad). Part II addresses questions of identity and belonging in small towns, with chapters illuminating the intersections between land, politics, culture, migration and economy in small towns. Focusing on issues of policy and governance, Part III raises questions about appropriate administrative structures for emerging small towns (Mukhopadhyay, Samanta); the way government schemes (Khan) and local government practices (Zérah) play out in small towns; and the

issue of women's participation in small town politics (Surie and Zérah). Finally, Part IV explores innovation and economic dynamism in small towns and includes detailed case studies of specialised clusters.

We find particularly important Pradhan's 'Unacknowledged Urbanization: The New Census Towns in India' – which highlights the importance of small towns in India's urbanisation process through a focused study of population data – and Swerts and Denis's 'Mapping Small Towns' Productive and Employment Configurations' – which goes further to examine the economic and employment landscapes of small towns. Pradhan's two central findings are (1) that rural-to-urban reclassification is more responsible for recent urbanisation in India than rural-to-urban migration, and (2) that a substantial share of the settlements being reclassified are far from the shadow of major metropolitan areas. As he points out, this does not mean that big cities in India are not growing or that they are losing their importance in the urban system; India seems to be witnessing a 'dual urbanisation' process, he claims (p. 54). Swerts and Denis ask whether small towns are 'places of relegation and coping strategies' or 'motors of growth' (p. 554). While they do not answer this question definitively, and while they find significant regional variation across India, a clear trend emerges: bigger cities are doing better than small towns on most economic parameters. As compared with India's major metropolitan areas, small towns have more precarious workers, lower incomes, and greater dependence on agriculture, a sector in which wages and productivity are low. These findings are important even if they are not surprising.

Based on these analyses, we see evidence of a bifurcated urbanisation process in India. Major cities such as Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore, with their foothold in the global knowledge economy, echo the literature on global cities – dense flows of capital, growing

wealth and rising inequality, and suburbanisation and territorial expansion. Meanwhile, another urban phenomenon, just as significant, involves the transformation of place – pockets of rural India experiencing natural population growth, densification, and specialisation of labour, and thus becoming urban. With multiple forms of structural transformation evolving concurrently and interacting with one another in complex ways, India's urbanisation story finds resonance across much of the Global South.

In the book's introduction, Zérah and Denis choose a different perspective to frame the work. They argue that the volume presents an empirical contradiction of the New Economic Geography (NEG). In their interpretation of the NEG, the theory predicts a process of accumulation of people and wealth in major metropolitan areas, a trend that they argue contrasts with the proliferation and persistence of small urban settlements in India. However, in our reading, the NEG does not prophesy the disappearance of small towns or suggest that urban systems will necessarily develop a 'top-heavy' structure. We believe, in fact, that the mechanics of agglomeration and density – emphasised by the NEG – might help to explain why urban livelihoods are emerging in rural parts of India that are witnessing population growth and densification.

We agree that the NEG might be contradicted – along with most theories of economic geography, reaching back to Christaller (1933) and Lösch (1941), that view urban systems as hierarchical, core-periphery structures – if the relationship between India's small towns and big cities appeared horizontal rather than hierarchical. But despite the volume's rich case studies of innovation and global linkages in Indian small towns, the data that Swerts and Denis provide in their chapter show the structurally higher concentrations of wealth in India's large cities. And while

globalisation and international migration have produced linkages between Indian towns and faraway cities such as Singapore (described in Denis and Ahmad's chapter), this seems more like a new genus of core–periphery relationships than a fundamental subversion of urban hierarchy.

Denis, Zérah and their co-authors make important arguments about the dominant emphasis on metropolitan-led growth and development. We concur that 'disturbances driven by metropolitan planning and regional investment strategies often destabilise small towns' economies' (p. 16), and that small towns ought to be seen as 'places set in multi-scalar flows, with their local specificity and agency' (pp. 10–11). Their assertion that 'accelerated economic growth based on concentration and redistribution is not a sufficient response to the challenge of expanding work opportunities and ensuring decent living conditions for everyone' (p. 29) speaks to critical policy debates in both the South and the North. We do not see these claims at odds with the NEG. They call for a reading of the NEG that attends to local specificities, challenges and opportunities – as is required with any theory – and a recognition of the role that small towns might play in vibrant, productive and equity-enhancing urban systems – a possibility the NEG does not deny.

Finally, we would have enjoyed a fuller discussion of the term 'subaltern' and the authors' reasons for considering urbanisation in small town India a subaltern process. The volume illuminates significant agency in small towns and paints a complex, multi-layered portrait of Indian urbanisation. This appears to contrast with the use of 'subaltern' in postcolonial and subaltern studies. For example, Spivak (2005) writes that 'subalternity is a position without identity,' 'where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action' (p. 476). We

suspect the authors of this volume intend a different meaning of 'subaltern'.

Our concerns notwithstanding, we believe this volume will be useful for a broad academic audience – urban scholars from economics, geography, sociology, anthropology, political science, cultural studies and history, and especially those interested urban transformations in the Global South. Scholars who study urban systems, rural–urban linkages, and territorial planning and governance will particularly appreciate this book. We find it encouraging to see serious scholarship emerging on non-metropolitan urban geographies in the Global South. As Zérah and Denis argue in the book's introduction, 'small towns need to be studied for themselves, as sites of urbanity, economic activities and social transformations and for their place in urbanisation, rural-urban linkages and the global economy' (p. 2).

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