

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Reclaiming Small Towns

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### 1.1 Introduction

Most books dealing with cities start with international statistics on urbanisation. These figures underline the shift towards an urban world. For instance, it is common to begin by stating, after the UN, that since 2014, 54 % of the world population lives in cities, and that the least urbanised continents, Africa and Asia, are also those experiencing the most rapid urbanisation.

We also open with this important fact, because it underlines the point of departure of this book and its content that interrogates anew the definition of the urban, the scope of the urban world and the urban transition process itself. It brings

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to the fore issues involved in defining the frontier of the urban and its political dimensions, and it demonstrates the important (and to some extent increasing) role small towns play in the urban transition process. This book is part of a growing body of work that reclaims the diversity of the urban phenomenon beyond the global metropolitan cities and highlights the range of national and regional trajectories. It questions the restricted representations, existing measures and the explanatory models of urban expansion. This is especially important because these engender a blinkered view of urban development, dominated by slogans for competitive cities and, more recently, for smart cities. Indeed, even though international urban statistics do not disaggregate the category of “secondary” cities, they underline the fact that half of the world’s urban population lives in settlements below 500,000 inhabitants.

Though the term “small towns” needs to be defined precisely, we cannot deny their importance as objects of study, both for empirical and theoretical reasons. We endorse the claim made by Bell and Jayne that “What is lost as a consequence of the bias towards large cities is a full picture of urban form and function: the urban world is not made up of a handful of global metropolises, but characterised by heterogeneity. Studying small cities enables us to see the full extent of this” (Bell and Jayne 2009: 683). However, small towns are not solely placed in contrast to big cities. On the contrary, 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.

This is the purpose of this book which is itself located in a critical relation to a vision of global urbanisation reduced to metropolitanisation and competition between global cities. It aims to challenge the usual approach which sees the urban world only through the prism of very large cities. It acknowledges the various processes of demographic and economic agglomerations but contests the current dominant urban research which tends only to focus on megalopolises. This edited volume aims to offer additional perspectives on urban transition by focusing on small towns with populations below 100,000 people, approached from a multiplicity of academic disciplines, and linking macro and micro level analysis. In this, it constitutes a critical contribution to the current methods of conceptualising cities and urban planning. It also strives to contribute actively to the debates about the plurality of development models, to provide analytical tools for policy makers and to inform public policy debates on urban and regional planning.

Another of our goals is to contribute to the international dialogue on other contexts such as China and Asian and Latin American countries, where the process of in situ urbanisation and a renewed approach to urban-rural linkages is being discussed (Berdegué et al. 2015; Berdegué and Proctor 2014a, b; Christiaensen and Todo 2014; Zhu 2000, 2002).

This book focuses on India. The Indian case is an important one. Despite a low official urbanisation rate (31.1 % in 2011), 377 million Indians live in cities and this means that 1 out of 10 global urban citizens is Indian. Among them, around 150 million live in cities of less than 100,000 people and the share of these smaller settlements is increasing. These facts are often obscured by the very large and

conspicuous Indian cities, such as Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, which are among the 20 largest cities in the world. In other words, the process of urbanisation in India is oversimplified and this book seeks to contribute to unveiling its complex dynamics, in particular the widely unknown, badly documented and ignored expanding world of small towns and big villages.

To use the term coined by Gyan Prakash, there has been an “urban turn” (Prakash 2002) in the Indian literature. This large body of work has made important contributions to the understanding of the global South, post-colonial cities and, more importantly, urban theory (Roy 2009; Anjaria and McFarlane 2011; McFarlane et al. 2012; Benjamin 2008) but has remained focused on big cities. What we seek to do here is to initiate modestly a second urban turn by revisiting the realm of small towns which was an important topic of research before the early 1990s.

This book is not a collection of disparate contributions. It offers a mosaic of outlooks on small town dynamics that are the product of a common research framework and a 3-year research project. Our academic collective first met in the middle of 2009. We reached a shared conclusion that it was of great importance to reinstate small towns on the map of urban India. We agreed that we needed to straddle disciplinary boundaries and connect various scales of analysis using different data sources. The term “subaltern urbanisation” suited our idea of bringing the voices of smaller places and their inhabitants back into the limelight (Denis et al. 2012).

In Sect. 1.2 of this introduction we return to our argument on “subaltern urbanisation” and expound the theoretical underpinnings and the existing literature that shape our research. We then detail our methodology. The next four sections of the introduction present our research results based on the different chapters of the book, which is organised into four parts. Section 1.4 makes a case for a decentralised and non-hierarchical reading of the urbanisation process and its dynamics, relying mainly on the first part of the book. The next two sections largely draw lessons from the second and the fourth parts of the book. Section 1.5 demonstrates how the range of economic activities in small towns is historically embedded in social and political structures, as well as spatial relationships, shaped by culture and land tenure relations. Section 1.6 shows that small towns everywhere are sites of everyday economic activities that are reshaping urban-rural linkages and providing resources to help withstand underemployment, informality and poverty. The lens of governance in Sect. 1.7, based on Part III of the book, provides insights on the politics of urban classification and the outcomes in terms of infrastructure and public policies.

## 1.2 Why Study Small Towns?

### 1.2.1 *A Theoretical and Empirical Necessity*

The growing body of research on the “global South” has focussed essentially on large cities, be it the normative and prescriptive literature produced by international

organisations and think tanks, or the academic literature, including works produced in the areas of critical geography and urban studies. In the economic field, the New Economic Geography is influential, notably towards policy circles, as exemplified by the 2009 World Development Report titled *Reshaping Economic Geography*. It supported the revival of spatial policies favouring cities as engines of growth and special economic zones in order to create agglomeration economies, in the belief that there is a convergence and a universal process in the relationship between growth and urbanisation (World Bank 2009). Integration into the world economy is through large cities, which have developed innovation, talent and high levels of amenities (Glaeser 2010, 2011). The geography and urban studies literature does not adhere to this model and some of the criticisms are pertinent to the research agenda on small towns.

Among the many commentaries criticising the 2009 *World Development Report*, there is a consensus on the wrongly assumed connection between laissez-faire economics and pro-large cities policies of concentration and development (Bryceson et al. 2009) which are potentially dangerous in terms of creating regional inequalities and marginalising small towns (Rigg et al. 2009). They also reveal a lack of understanding of the variations in national policies towards development (Maringanti et al. 2009) and methodological issues regarding the measure of the urbanisation phenomena that obscure the role of small towns (Moriconi-Ebrard et al. 2010); this is partly because of the linear model commonly used to describe the rural to urban transition. The global economy, in contrast, is integrated via the multiple connections of varied types of settlements (Hart 2010).

A widely different set of criticisms, not directly addressed to the economic literature per se, is concerned with the constant reference to the cities of the “Global North” as the archetype to which all other cities are compared, and towards which they are expected to converge. In her landmark book, Robinson (2006) traces the history of this side-lining of cities of the South and calls for a shift away from the world city theory towards an understanding of the “world of cities”, which consists of ordinary cities. Roy and Ong (2011) take this forward by examining the practices followed by Asian urbanism in an attempt to build upon the theory from the South. The ability to recognise the many idioms of urbanism leads to a focus on diversity (Parnell and Oldfield 2014). However, this research on the urban global South remains located in large cities, paradoxically those that can compete with the iconic megalopolises of New York, London, Paris and Tokyo.

There is therefore a need to return to a more complete idea of the urban and this includes the study of the dynamics of small towns. As critics of the 2009 WDR pointed out, the restricted models, representations and existing measures of urbanisation lead to a distorted and simplified understanding of the world and national systems of cities and their evolution. In opposition to this dominant paradigm, and by no means ignoring the importance of agglomeration economies, we start from a more decentralised and less hierarchical world geography, of which small towns are an integral part. This implies looking at small towns beyond their demographic weight as sites of production and innovation.

To rethink urban theory seriously, it is necessary to move away from a “metrocentricity” bias (Bunnell and Maringanti 2010). We need to redraw the map, reinstating the small towns and big villages where an increasingly large number of people reside and build their livelihoods, slowly embracing the habits and lifestyles of urban consumption. Further, urban poverty is as high, if not higher, in small towns as in large cities, and we must pay attention to this, especially because it is, most often, slums located in large cities or on their peripheries which are commonly associated with urban deprivation. From a theoretical point of view, understanding the form and nature of “small town urbanism” is imperative to unpacking the role of small urban settlements as an interface functioning at different scales, without trapping them in a dominant and hierarchical view of the world, an abstract “planetary urbanisation” process (Brenner and Schmid 2011).

At the core of this agenda, one essential issue is to speak across these two sets of literature at different scales, from the urban system to the human settlement. In the 1970s and 1980s, “small towns” was a vibrant site of research concerned with a number of important themes. To start with, we should mention the question of urban concentration and its relationship with growth, the disposal of agricultural surpluses and industrialisation, which led to intense debates on the role of small towns (Mera 1973; Gilbert 1976, 1977; Richardson 1976). Second, the function of small urban centres in rural-urban linkages was studied at length, with some authors underlining their contribution to a balanced network of places (Rondinelli 1983; followed later by Tacoli 1998, 2006; Gaile 1992). Others saw small urban centres as “parasitic islands of privilege” and arenas of class formation and elite capture (Schatzberg 1979) which benefit from a policy bias (Lipton 1977) or, in a more nuanced way, gain from the surplus generated by the green revolution (Harriss and Harriss 1984). Third, the cultural and social specificities of small towns were also pointed out (Corwin 1977). The debates generated by this strand of research greatly declined from the 1990s onwards with the onslaught of globalisation and global cities studies, coinciding with structural adjustment policies and the pro-market reforms. That is not to say, however, that research on small towns totally disappeared, but it was less abundant and more descriptive, including in India (Sharma and Sandhu 2013; Sharma 1989, 2012; Mahadevia and Mukherjee 2003). However, some authors pursued a research tradition concerned with the complexity of the urban (Hilgers 2012; Tacoli 2006; Hinderink and Titus 2002), including in India (Basile 2013; Harriss-White 2015).

### ***1.2.2 The Research Questions in This Book***

India is an ideal site to shed light on the function of small towns because of its role in global urban transition. An extensive review of the literature by our collective identified research gaps around the main questions the project chose to address, and confirmed that the study of small towns is a blind spot in urban research, explaining the lack of evidence related to our own research hypothesis (Raman et al. 2015).

The review pointed to the elusive definition of small towns, because different authors use different population thresholds to define secondary towns, small towns and medium towns. Within the ongoing contemporary urban research that is not centred on the 10 large Indian cities, the focus is either on emerging topics such as environmental governance (Véron 2010) or questions of urban planning and governance in secondary cities with above 100,000 people (Kundu and Bhatia 2002; Coelho and Vijayabaskar 2014; Kamath and Deekshit 2014). The exception is Harriss-White's recent edited volume (2015) that focuses on an urban economy at the lowest end of the settlement distribution over a period of four decades.<sup>1</sup> In our work we recognise small towns as settlement agglomerations with a population between 10,000 and 100,000 people, regardless of their official classification.

Our definition of subaltern urbanisation focuses on cities as a network system. We argue that the notion of "subaltern urbanisation" enables us to make visible and intelligible the bottom of the urban hierarchy. This provocative term qualifies our aspiration to abide by a tradition that chooses to look at the agency of the subalterns with an attempt to apply it to invisible spaces. At the beginning of this research we put forward a definition based on the agency of small settlements (Denis et al. 2012). Placing settlements along two axes defined by spatial proximity and administrative recognition, we classified settlements into four categories—denied urbanisation, invisible urbanisation, contested urbanisation and recognised urbanisation—which underlined the blurred frontier of the urban. We also demarcated this notion from other terms such as suburbanisation and exclusionary urbanisation, and in particular from the innovative concept, coined by Roy (2011), of "subaltern urbanism" which focuses on political agency and small-scale entrepreneurialism but is located in large cities. Our classification served as a heuristic tool in the analysis of the diversity of urban settlements, including big villages that fall within the category of denied and invisible urbanisation and in our attempts to verify the research hypotheses we had formulated.

Our first research question interrogates the real extent of the urban: in other words, where do we draw the line between the rural and the urban, in terms of administrative status, functional characteristics and the experienced reality of residents? It leads to the discovery of the role small towns play in the debate as to whether the level of urbanisation is properly measured: is India under-urbanised? The definition of urbanisation in India is unique and not always well understood. There are two types of urban settlements: the statutory towns (STs), which are urban local bodies as per the state municipal acts and Census towns (CTs). From an administrative point of view, CTs are villages governed by a village committee, but they are considered urban by the Census of India because they fulfil the three criteria that define an urban settlement: a population of at least 5000 people, a density of at least 400 persons per square kilometre and a minimum of 75 % of male main workers employed in the non-farming sector. Consequently, the percentage of urban population includes both STs and CTs. This means that around

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<sup>1</sup>For more details, refer to the literature review in Raman et al. (2015).

15 % of the urban population (54 million people) lives in dense, in-between settlements (CTs), dominated by non-farm activities but which are administratively treated as rural. Conversely, Denis and Marius-Gnanou (2011) estimate that the level of urbanisation in 2001 was around 36 %, and therefore on a par with the Chinese rate of urbanisation, a finding shared by Uchida and Nelson (2010) based on another methodology. This suggested that a number of large villages could be considered urban, confirming the need for a more precise analysis of the extent of the urban system (Denis et al. 2012).

Our second research question asks, what are the relationships of small towns with larger cities? Because small towns represent a significant share of urban growth, what are their relationships with larger cities and does the standard hierarchical urban model<sup>2</sup> provide a relevant explanation of the situation of diffused growth? The development of a global web of connections, characteristic of our epoch, is not merely a hierarchical process mediated by proximity and distance as in a closed system. Multiple leapfrogging and external investments destabilise the existing national and subnational system of cities and, in fact, contradict the classical model engraved in the Central Place theory as first conceived by Christaller (1933). Finally, in 2015, the International Monetary Fund (Dabla-Norris et al. 2015) acknowledged the negative correlation between the urban concentration of wealth and economic growth, despite its own discourse in favour of deregulation and liberal policies. These policies were known to increase inequalities and social and spatial polarisation but, according to the IMF, they were supposed to be transitory and hence to lead to convergence. In this context, we examine how subaltern interconnections within the system of cities counter the *laissez-faire* approach that envisions large cities as the only motors of growth.

What is the relationship between the proliferation of small towns and economic processes? Are they just the recipients of diffusion processes and of the (re)location of low productivity activities, or wellsprings of growth linked to local capabilities articulated to larger networks? This is an important question, particularly as policy circles are influenced by large consultancy firms which equate growth with metropolitan cities. There are contradictory trends with regard to the role of agglomeration economies.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, Lall et al. (2010), following Chakravorty and Lall (2007), highlight the correlation between growth and connectivity to the international market, which is strengthened by port location. Spatial transformation is also a result of the productivity gains on the peripheries of large cities (Vishwanath et al. 2013). Investments and public policies have tended to support this vision with policies such as the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban

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<sup>2</sup>The canonical hierarchical urban model supposes a pyramidal distribution of power and competences mirroring the city-size distribution; it leaves limited capabilities and agency to small towns that are considered, rather, as dependent on the redistribution of banal activities from larger cities. Large cities concentrate the most innovative enterprises.

<sup>3</sup>For a detailed discussion, refer to the literature review of this project, pp. 29–34 in Raman et al. (2015).

Renewal Mission (JNNURM) that encourage public investment in large towns (Sivaramakrishnan 2011) and incentives for foreign direct investments, concentrated in coastal districts, particularly those that have large cities (Mukim and Nunnenkamp 2012). This could widen the rural-urban divide. However, another strand of research shows a dispersal of economic activities (Ghani et al. 2012) driven by the search for lower labour costs, less stringent environmental regulations and available land, and Himanshu et al. (2011) underline the role of small secondary centres in urban job creation. Further, actual mobility rates do not support the common belief that people are flooding to large cities (Kundu and Saraswati 2012). The 2001 Census data shows that only 21 % of natural population growth in cities is caused by rural urban migration, leading Mukhopadhyay to qualify the urban transition as a process of morphing places rather than moving people (Mukhopadhyay 2012), which is consistent with the low level of job creation in large cities. This lack of opportunities, except for highly qualified permanent jobs, led Kundu (Kundu 2011; Kundu and Saraswati 2012) to discuss “exclusionary urbanism”. In the same vein, Jedwab and Vollrath (2015) suggest that megacities in India, as in most developing countries, are blocked in a circular “Malthusian trap”.

Our next research question stems from the growth of small towns and the Indian employment story: how do small towns contribute to the growth of the Indian economy? There are concerns related to the quantity of jobs available, the nature and the location of these jobs and the ability to harness the window of opportunity generated by the demographic dividend with the ensuing arrival of cohorts of young workers on the labour market. Jobs in agriculture are declining rapidly but the salaried workforce remains limited, with a high persistence of jobs in the unorganised sector (Ghani et al. 2014). On the other hand, the highly touted growth sectors, such as IT, are not creating the large numbers of jobs required to absorb the existing and future workforce. Existing studies suggest that small towns play a role in rural job diversification with the rise of transport and construction activities (Denis et al. 2012). In other words, despite contradictory evidence regarding the economic and spatial dynamics at work in the last decade or two, there is sufficient evidence to argue that a significant share of the Indian economy and jobs is located outside large cities. A corollary question, therefore, relates to the governance of small towns, the levels of services and infrastructural support these small towns receive, because the literature clearly indicates a very low level of infrastructural services and of administrative capacity (Sharma 2012; De Bercegol 2016).<sup>4</sup>

Assuming that small towns are sites of economic activity and even innovation, a related question asks what kind of capital can actors mobilise and for which activities? What are the articulations between local economic practices and global flows of knowledge, capital and innovation (both organisational and industrial)? What economic activities characterise small towns, from the resilience of older industrial clusters and trade in agricultural products to new clusters of economic

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<sup>4</sup>For a detailed discussion on this debate, refer to the literature review of this project, pp. 29–34, in Raman et al. (2015, pp. 85–89).

activities around real estate, or educational and health institutions, where land plays a central role as a source of capital? Are these settlements, sites of informal small-scale diverse activities, dependent on daily wages and casual work, also linked with mobility, seasonal migration and remittance flows? Studies looking at capital formation and its circulation in small towns have already demonstrated its embeddedness in complex social structures (Harriss-White 2015; Raman 2014, 2017)—see, for instance, the illuminating case of the Gounder caste in the textile cluster of Tirupur, as revealed by Chari (2004).

Our final question, following Massey (1991), contests the widespread idea that small towns are sites frozen in time or sites of backwardness associated with fixity and parochial societies. On the contrary, we assume that some of these settlements can be locations of economic innovation and social change, even though their development indicators remain weak. In other words, what kind of social change characterises small towns in terms of migration, social mobility, shifting power relationships or transformation of lifestyles and aspirations, among others? This stand defines understanding localities as “the intersection of social activities and social relations and, crucially, activities and relations which are necessarily, by definition, dynamic, changing” (Massey 1991: 275). Small towns are also sites of a form of rural or subaltern cosmopolitanism (Gidwani 2006) with economic and political entrepreneurs able to straddle the urban and the rural (Jeffery 1997). These actors have been neglected, as urban research has focused on large cities with their organised urban middle class (resident welfare associations, environmental associations...) that is perceived as new and socially dynamic. This creates a distorted view of social transformation and of the far more complex ongoing social churning. This book therefore aims to analyse social transformation from below by allowing inhabitants of small towns to speak out. Such a posture invites us to view small towns as “total” social facts (Mauss). For us, small towns are at least as complex as large cities.

### **1.3 Methodology: A Collective Research Project with a Multi-pronged Approach**

Many of our hypotheses emanate from theoretical debates but they have also emerged from the results of a previous research project called e-Geopolis. This aimed to refine the United Nations’ efforts to build comparative data sets to measure urbanisation worldwide. In the e-Geopolis project a settlement agglomeration is considered a unit of contiguous built-up areas less than 200 m apart, as captured by satellite imagery. Further, building on a longitudinal series of Census counts for locality populations, the database aims to provide growth trends that qualify the urban settlement structure and its relationship with economic development (Moriconi-Ebrard et al. 2010). The UN provides almost no data below the 500,000 population threshold, whereas the geo-database we developed and used enables an

understanding of the lower urban settlement hierarchy. In the case of India, it clearly highlights the role of these settlement agglomerations, with a minimum population threshold above 10,000 people. These results were later confirmed by the rise of CTs in the 2011 Census (Denis and Marius-Gnanou 2011). The role of these lower settlements led to a series of discussions among a set of researchers from varied backgrounds interested in going beyond the study of large and global cities, or concerned with the broader transformation of the system of cities.

This convergence of questions and disciplines gave rise to the SUBURBIN project,<sup>5</sup> which resulted in this book. The French National Agency for Research and several partner institutions in India financed it.<sup>6</sup> The methodology of this project proposed a common set of research questions but chose a participatory and iterative research method at the crossroads of geography and economics to create a fruitful dialogue between the macro and micro perspectives of the project. Consequently, the methodology is totally constitutive of a research posture that aims at “shifting out of metro cities and towards small towns”.

This research also positions itself as a combination of both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the diversity of urbanisation trajectories in India. It is conceived as a multidisciplinary, back-and-forth theoretical dialogue, and an all-India level analysis, using large existing data sets, geo-spatialised economic data and field monographs located in both STs and CTs. The research thus rests on a dual approach: on one hand, economic and social indicators provided by large existing statistical databases have been used to develop a precise and comparative analysis of towns with less than 50,000 inhabitants; on the other hand, field monographs provide for a qualitative analysis of the observed dynamics. Our approach raises a set of empirical and theoretical questions.

One methodological question is the relevant scale of analysis. There are inherent limitations because most of the existing statistical data sets do not allow for an economic analysis at a scale smaller than the district (see Chandrasekhar 2017). Consequently, for economic trajectories, urban data aggregated for districts have remained our main units of analysis. In terms of qualitative fieldwork, the different chapters reveal the varied choices made by the authors; some of them focus on one specific settlement, others on a number of towns or a cluster of towns, but all of them extend their analysis to linkages with their surrounding settlements, whether rural or urban.

We also decided to keep the field research component open and exploratory, as well as susceptible to changes on the ground. The common practice was to see small towns not as isolated objects but as places set in multiscalar flows, with their

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<sup>5</sup>See the project website: [www.suburbin.hypotheses.org](http://www.suburbin.hypotheses.org).

<sup>6</sup>The project was coordinated by the French Institute of Pondicherry and the Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities in New Delhi and involved the following partners: The Centre for Policy Research (New Delhi); the Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi); the School of Planning and Architecture (New Delhi); the Department of Geography of Burdwan University (West Bengal); the School of Social Sciences (Indian Institute of Technology of Madras); and the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research in Mumbai.

local specificity and agency. Importantly, small towns are not considered easier to decipher because they are “small” and we departed from a bounded vision of locality belonging to an old tradition of village anthropology. From our perspective, small towns are analysed as an open observatory of changes (economic, social and spatial) through a focus on urban practices on the ground.

The choice of sites was an important step in the project, as they were to reflect diverse demographic trajectories (growing or declining towns), economic activities (industrial, natural resource based, tourism...) and regional variations (from poor to rich states with varied institutions). Not all the case studies are presented in this volume but those that are not published here helped to reinforce the results (Table 1.1).

In addition, this research depicts complex realities and interdependencies and the chapters do not shy away from these difficulties. They show that multiple stories

**Table 1.1** Case studies from the SUBURBIN research project

	Case studied (this volume)	In other publications of the project
Economic expansion, industrial location, mobility and job	Kartarpur (Punjab) Tiruchengode (Tamil Nadu) Parangipettai (Tamil Nadu) Malpe (Karnataka) Kullu (Himachal Pradesh) Abu Road (Rajasthan) Machlipatnam (Andhra Pradesh)	Ranipet (Tamil Nadu) CTs (Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal)
Integration into the global economy, value chains and innovations	Tiruchengode (Tamil Nadu) Parangipettai (Tamil Nadu) Machlipatnam (Andhra Pradesh)	Kumily (Tourism, Kerala)
Governance and Urban classification	Barjora (West Bengal) Pasighat (Arunachal Pradesh) Five small towns (Haryana)	Singur (West Bengal) CTs (Eastern India, Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand) Malegaon (Maharashtra)
Linkages with metropolitan areas	Malpe (Karnataka) Kartarpur (Punjab) Parangipettai (TN), Machlipatnam and Pedana (Andhra Pradesh)	Siliguri (integration into larger regional settlement)
Urban-rural relationships	Pasighat (Arunachal Pradesh) Abu Road (Rajasthan)	Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh) Malda (West Bengal) Gudur (Andhra Pradesh)

(continued)

**Table 1.1** (continued)

	Case studied (this volume)	In other publications of the project
Linkages between capital, land and caste and social networks	Tiruchengode (Tamil Nadu) Pasighat (Arunachal Pradesh) Temple Towns (Tamil Nadu)	

*Note* The case studies conducted as part of this research project or by members of the research team are the following: (1) on Ranipet, family businesses and local economic development in small towns, Marius-Gnanou and Subramaniam (2014); (2) on CTs of Eastern India, Singur and Bhopal, see in references, respectively (Mukhopadhyay and Zérah 2015; Samanta 2014; Gupta 2013); (3) the other research was conducted by master's students from the School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi: A. Viswam on Kumily, O. Sengupta in Malegaon, A. Bannerjee in Siliguri, A. Roy in Malda and V. Vamsi Krishna in Gudur.

can be recounted (as revealed by the two chapters on the town of Tiruchengode written by Tastevin [2017], and Raman [2017]) and that inter-subjectivity matters in the encounter between researcher and inhabitants.

Finally, each field research and study of data analysis opens some doors although some potential avenues remain unexplored, but each chapter attempts to present a coherent narrative, either of the town studied or of the larger urban and economic dynamics analysed.

## 1.4 The Relevance of a Decentred and D-hierarchised Approach to the System of Cities

### 1.4.1 *Structurally Dispersed Demographic Growth Within the System of Cities*

“Small towns<sup>7</sup> constitute 90 % of the total number of Indian cities and one-third of the urban population”, as highlighted by Swerts (2017). They were home to 134 million inhabitants in 2011, 10 % of the Indian population. Our results contradict the dominant vision of rapid metropolitanisation, where the demographic growth of small towns is driven by their proximity to, and incorporation in, extended metropolitan regions. Although this may be evident in some regions such as Haryana (Punia et al. 2017), this is not the case in all the states. Our research establishes that not all the relations within the system of cities can be explained solely based on notions of hierarchical relations, dependencies and the trickle down process. There are other mechanisms at work and individual trajectories of towns, embedded in their historical pathways, are essential elements of differentiation, whatever the location.

<sup>7</sup>Here, small towns are all agglomerations of between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants in 2011.

The study of the sudden emergence of numerous CTs in 2011, already discussed in previous publications (Denis and Marius-Gnanou 2011; Pradhan 2013, 2017, updated contribution), underlines that less than 40 % of them are close to large cities and that they account for one-third of the urban growth between 2001 and 2011. Another tier of urban growth is because of natural growth, and the third tier is the result of rural to urban migration and an extension of urban areas (outgrowth notably).<sup>8</sup> However, as Pradhan (2017) shows reclassification of rural local units (villages) as urban local units (CTs) is, and will be, a major driver of urbanisation in India: an in situ urban transition, that is to say villages becoming towns, is at work. This process of urbanisation without residential migration is an essential motor of change which, in the case of India, is more influential than rural to urban migration (Chandrasekhar 2017; Sharma 2017).

As highlighted previously but revisited more precisely in Swerts (2017), there is an idea that, over the last 50 years, the growth rate and the size of the city are not correlated (Sharma 2003; Schaffar and Dimou 2012; Swerts and Pumain 2013). The larger cities are not growing significantly faster than the rest of the system of cities. The growth is distributed throughout the system, including over the smaller urban units. As in an arbitrary model, each urban locality has the same growth opportunities whatever its size. Nevertheless, besides the random aspect of the growth trends at the scale of the subcontinent, regional and subregional differentiation, associated with differentiated economic trajectories and the demographic transition are important, far more so than the location, evaluated in terms of accessibility or proximity to large cities (Chaudhuri et al. 2017; Pradhan 2017). Therefore, despite a slight population concentration in favour of the larger cities during the last century, the weight of small towns remains important, not to say constant (Swerts 2017). The canonical and supposedly universal process of urban convergence, based on the assumption that a proportion of small towns have to decline whereas the remainder must become medium to large urban units or merge into extended metropolitan areas, is not confirmed in the case of India. Pradhan and Swerts demonstrate that the burgeoning of small towns will also characterise the urbanisation to come, as it will be measured in the 2021 Census.

### *1.4.2 Dynamics of Employment*

The temporality of the urbanisation in India today, during a phase of internationalisation and coalescence of the world's productive systems, along with the high global mobility of the value chain, driven by cost reductions, to some extent

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<sup>8</sup>For instance, the area under the Bangalore Municipal Corporation almost doubled between 2001 and 2011.

explains the fact that small towns are not disappearing to the benefit of large metropolises. On the one hand, their industries are integrating into internationalised production systems. On the other hand, small towns constitute a large and fast growing market, as large numbers of people are not moving to large cities. Most of the small towns remain ordinary market towns which serve a subcontinent dominated by the weight of its rural population.

Several chapters converge to show how, in a context of structurally limited residential rural to urban migration (Sharma 2017) and very limited job creation in the formal sector (Chandrasekhar 2017), small towns constitute places of adjustment where people cope with regional conditions and opportunities, and with poverty and uncertainty, mobilising their kinship networks and family resources (Swerts and Denis 2017).

Research demonstrates the role of localised dynamics and regional clubs, looking at rich, poor and transitory Indian states (Swerts and Denis 2017). It confirms the importance of assembling local competences, skills and capital to enhance the dynamism of small towns or groups of towns (sub-networks), as illustrated in the textile (Sridharan 2017), furniture (de Bercegol and Gowda 2017) or truck assembly industries (Tastevin 2017), as well as the agro-industries. These macro and micro studies point to the importance of the meso level in understanding the Indian urban system of settlements. If state policies and economic histories matter in the differentiation of local trajectories (Chaudhuri et al. 2017), there seems to be another, intermediary scale which cuts across state boundaries and appears to be even more important. We observe that a specific district or group of districts share common trends vis-à-vis small towns (Swerts and Denis 2017). Localities can be even organised as networks, sharing industrial production and entrepreneurial values, embedded in the religious landscape and caste hierarchies (Raman 2017; Sridharan 2017). They are often privileged sites that attract investments in tourism (Mehra 2017), education (Raman 2017) and industries (Chaudhuri et al. 2017; Swerts and Denis 2017).

Whatever the diversity of trajectories, our results also highlight that a large majority of small towns remain strongly connected to their hinterland and dependent on the dynamism of the farming sector, as the analysis of the sectorial GDP per district, carried out by Swerts and Denis, reveals. In the first instance, they serve the rural population and they also constitute privileged places where people cope with job destruction in the farming sector (Chandrasekhar 2017) and agricultural underemployment, which leads people to engage in pluriactivities, inducing temporary or pendular work migrations between villages and nearby towns (Sharma 2017; Guérin et al. 2014). From this perspective, they can be conceived as buffer areas or transitional environments.

Indeed, large cities are linked with higher non-farming sector wealth creation at the district level, whatever the sector, ranging from industry to banking, via construction and services, either private or public. Nevertheless, because of the large diversity of regional contexts, combined with the extremely populous cohort of small towns, many small towns experience unique trajectories of growth or belong to specialised clusters (Swerts and Denis 2017).

Chaudhuri et al. (2017) demonstrate how small towns' demographic trajectories and economic profiles differ, depending on their regional location. Those located in the club of rich regions evolve differently, and their characteristics tend to converge with those of the larger cities rather than replicate the features of small towns located in transitory and poor states. Various chapters highlight the growing role of small and medium towns in India's economic growth, especially in the poor and transitory states. Chaudhuri et al.'s approach tends to demonstrate that, based on the observation of regional trends over a period of 20 years, "there is no inevitability about large agglomerations driving growth and inequality in a globalised and fast growing economy".

With wide regional contrasts, numerous small towns are characterised by an overconcentration of marginal workers, who find employment for less than 6 months a year. This is the situation in the Indo-Gangetic valley, notably in Bihar. In this region there is also a high concentration of small towns, which, for the most part, remain driven by farm employment (Swerts 2017). These regions contrast with more urbanised and rich states such as Tamil Nadu, which is characterised by a far higher concentration of permanent workers than the national average—this shows the importance of the resilience and adaptability of the industrial clusters in the development of south India (Raman 2017; Sridharan 2017; Swerts and Denis 2017; Tastevin 2017). It also confirms previous research findings that underlined the manner in which the mobilisation of agricultural surplus plays a structuring role in shaping the diffuse process of urbanisation characterising southern states such as Tamil Nadu (Rukmani 1994).

To sum up, both our quantitative and fieldwork-based results question the stylised figure of small towns in the canonical system of cities, where they are only considered to be transitional entities. The dominant paradigm presumes that the largest metropolitan areas gain increasing weight, whereas small towns decline. On the contrary, India appears to be in the process of combining a more de-concentrated, diffused and less hierarchical system of cities that associate rural and urban opportunities and innovative small-scale enterprises connected to labour-intensive workshops, comparable to the *Citta Diffusa*, observed notably in the Veneto region of Italy.

### ***1.4.3 Small Towns as Cities of Unbounded Flow***

The narrative of dependence of towns on large cities relates to the notion of economics of agglomeration but the quantitative and spatial analysis conducted within the program point to the limitation of this explanatory framework. A first set of results corroborates the complexity and diversity of forms of urbanisation in India, and therefore disputes the dominant reading of the process as merely and mechanically driven by the agglomeration logic. It leads to the use of an explanatory framework that constantly conflates urbanisation and metropolitanisation.

Different logics, including those of agglomeration, coexist and the levels of autonomy and dependence on the largest metropolitan regions can vary. They can also fluctuate between towns (Punia et al. 2017; Swerts and Denis 2017) and between the actors within cities; for certain actors, being incorporated within the metropolitan dynamic and planning system is positive, whereas for others, such as the carpenters of Kartarpur, it is detrimental (de Bercegol and Gowda 2017). In other words, the level of connectedness and dependence (physical, social and economic) on the large metropolitan cities is an insufficient determinant to explain the dynamics of small towns.

In an open world, with multiple layers and scales of circulation of persons, goods, capital, information, ideas and innovations, diverse spatial and network configurations, a variety of forms of association and collaborative chains of production can extend from the local level to worldwide networking. Tastevin's (2017) unveils how local truck assemblers located in a small town are expanding their market abroad and innovating in production and trading after feedback was provided by new clients. The literature on subaltern globalisation and minor transnationalism (Lionnet and Shih 2005) has already underlined the importance of such neglected networks, which are not dominated by large transnational firms and mainstream flows, emanating from larger metropolises. Nevertheless, localised dynamics often continue to be understood as scenes of resistance to the advance of global capital and places reluctant to change. Benjamin's (2017) abounds with solid arguments to ground a critical perspective on the resistance paradigm, seen from the Malpe district of coastal Karnataka. This region with its centuries-old connections to the Indian Ocean is an active participant in the current globalised economy.

In this district, the metropolitan perspective, with its special economic zone projects, highways and other redefinitions of land use leading to expropriation, possibly upsets an extremely resilient subaltern economy. Large investors and regional planners conceive this ordinary but complex economy as a folkloric background and an anecdotic reminiscence of the past, despite its capacity to reactivate its global linkages, based on local and ancient knowledge—the capacity for instance, to capture a dominant position in the world fish market when Chile's access to anchovies collapses. Disturbances driven by metropolitan planning and regional investment strategies often destabilise small town's economies. Two cases in this volume reinforce and complement the observation made for Malpe district: Kartarpur (de Bercegol and Gowda 2017), where a dynamic cluster of carpenters is jeopardised by the extension of the plan for the nearby Metropolitan Corporation and Parangipettai (Denis and Ahmad 2017), a coastal town of Tamil Nadu, which is on the brink of being totally redeveloped because of the implantation of a mega-power thermal plant on its doorstep.

The manner in which small towns are capable of capturing these emerging opportunities to become part of transnational economic networks, their capacity for resilience and renewal along with their local societies and economies reveal the emergence of a major trend, and another sign of far more complex interconnections than the canonical hierarchic model of cities predicts. The economies of small

towns do not always follow the rationale of pure economics and the maximisation principle leading to concentration. We argue that a multiplicity of connections, including social interactions based on solidarities, rivalries, coalitions and conflicts, are at work here. They contribute very actively to India's integration in the world economy. These connections, some old and some new, are hooked on to existing or emerging economic value chains that are not bounded by regional and national barriers. This allows the flow of goods and persons, as well as the circulation of ideas and socio-cultural values. In such a framework, the connections made by these localities (whatever their size and distance from the metropolis) and their entrepreneurs are not necessarily mediated by the larger cities. This is clearly visible in the quantitative work at the scale of the system of cities (see Swerts 2017; Swerts and Denis 2017) and in several case study-based contributions (Benjamin 2017; de Bercegol and Gowda 2017; Denis and Ahmad 2017; Sridharan 2017; Tastevin 2017).

Our qualitative work provides substantial elements to penetrate the ways in which the dynamics of small towns are embedded in multiple interactions, circulations and connections, which are of a social, historical and spatial nature. The famous notion of "space of flows" (Castells 1996), used mainly in the context of global cities, is not limited to them; we find flows of the type described by Batty and Cheshire (2011): "physical and visible but many relational, social, and often invisible" connecting a network of small towns. Today, these circulations occur at the local or meso level between land, agricultural surplus and capital, as we can see in Parangipettai, Tiruchengode or Kullu. They function at the larger regional scale through trade routes, including old ones, and fuel their local economies. The vestiges of old historical circulation are also a fundamental asset in frontier and port towns such as Pasighat or Parangipettai. These arguments, extracted from unique aspects of small towns, also remind others, and us, after Abu-Lughod (1991), that globalisation is not a new phenomenon. Over the centuries, ideas, capital, persons and goods have been exchanged and many small towns are nodes on these transnational circuits.

Because of these long distance economic ties, small towns or small cities can be understood as very cosmopolitan places. Several chapters in this volume highlight this cosmopolitanism which can be characterised by the different ways in which people coexist, their sense of belonging (territoriality) and affective ties, similar to the "rural cosmopolitanism" in Gidwani (2006). These results bring about a shift in our vision of cities, replacing the idea of networks of cities by the idea of cities as networks. In other words, cities are unbound, and the fecundity of local dynamics makes them "extraordinary cities" or, in other words, ordinary cities restored to their rightful complexity. In these small towns, people contribute to shaping an economy embedded in the mobilisation of the social, kinship and natural and human capital found in their hinterland, and anchored in the unbounded networks to which their residents and entrepreneurs belong.

## 1.5 Reclaiming the Notion of an Embedded Economy

We focus now on the nature of economic activities in small towns and the process of economic development through an analysis of the actors' practices in mobilising capital, resources, skills and knowledge. This section draws mainly from Parts II and IV of the book, the former focusing more on processes and the latter looking at specific economic sectors. However, we also refer to other chapters in the book.

### 1.5.1 *From Long-Standing to New and Emerging Activities: The Economic Diversity of Small Towns*

Our collective results highlight the resilience and the development of a diversity of activities in small towns, based on traditional activities, natural resource extraction, manufacturing or services (including trade). Some examples of this are the fisheries in Machlipatnam (Sridharan 2017), the packaging of *tendu* leaves and *bidi* production in Abu Road that started in the 1970s (Nadkarni 2017) and the production of Kalamkari textiles in Pedana (Sridharan 2017). Manufacturing activities include the furniture industry in Kartarpur and the trucking industry in Tiruchengode (Tastevin 2017) and we find mining and extraction of natural resources in Barjora (Samanta 2017). Our panorama did not study small agriculture-based towns such as *mandi* (market) towns or settlements with agro-processing economic activities,<sup>9</sup> even though this category of small town remains dominant (see Swerts 2017).

This set of chapters corroborates the results of Ghani et al. (2012) concerning the factors behind the emergence or the resilience of this productive economy, but takes the analysis of the complexity of these economies further. Lower production costs are partly linked to the availability of a flexible and cheap labour force, in particular for low-skilled activities. The feminisation of labour drives down costs (in the fish industry in Machlipatnam, Kalamkari production in Pedana and *bidi* production in Abu Road) and there are examples of subcontracting, mainly to Dalits, in the Kartarpur furniture cluster. The maintenance of these forms of exploitation resonates with other research such as the work done by Harriss-White (2002, 2015) in the town of Arni (Tamil Nadu) and Kundu and Bhatia (2002) in Gobindgarh (Punjab).

Land is an important input into these economies, as highlighted by Raman in the case of Tiruchengode and Samanta in Barjora (Raman 2017; Samanta 2017,

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<sup>9</sup>Mandi towns have played a historical role in the shaping of the system of cities (see Haynes 1999) and a large number of small towns can still be considered "mandi towns". This, for instance, is the case of Hodal, studied here but from a governance point of view. Krishnamurthy (2012) has recently studied the role of Haldia as a mandi town. The case of Gopalpur in West Bengal studied by Mukhopadhyay and Zérah (2015) is the story of a small Census town whose growth is linked to agro-processing activities.

respectively). These two cases point to the advantages, other than the cost factor, of locating manufacturing in rural areas. In Tiruchengode, the expansion of the truck industry takes place outside the municipal zone, in the surrounding villages. Barjora, a CT, is one example of the manner in which cumulative investments create centrality in a rural area. Further, this enables entrepreneurs to avoid more stringent environmental regulations and leads to air pollution (in Barjora) and water overdraft, both in Barjora and Tiruchengode. It underlines the flexibility in governance offered by rural areas which can trump the benefits of being incorporated into an urban local body<sup>10</sup> (see Sect. 1.7).

Favourable labour and land conditions are not enough to explain the dynamics of small towns. The detailed case studies presented in this volume draw our attention to the roles that innovation and adaptability play, and to the vibrant entrepreneurship in these places. Tastevin's chapter (2017), based on an ethnography of the family of today's leading exporter of rig assembly to Africa, describes the manner in which artisans specialising in repairing vehicles gradually excelled at low cost reverse engineering, which led them to become manufacturers. Beyond technical skills, their ability to tap existing resources in the locality (human resources, connectivity etc.) and their keen comprehension of markets and networks supported their growth. As analysed by Sridharan (2017), this soft form of innovation, combined with external inputs, also fostered the Kalamkari industry in Pedana through the creation of new designs and the capacity to adapt to the demand in markets of larger towns. The endurance of the Kartarpur furniture industry is explained by an entrepreneurial ability to adapt to shifts in the labour market and the scarcity of locally produced raw materials by increased reliance on external resources and the demand for new designs from urban domestic and foreign markets. Thus, de Bercegol and Gowda (2017) estimate that, today, 10–15 % of the production is exported as compared to nil in the 1980s. These cases show diverse manners of reshaping the relationship to the national or international economy, and the influence of rising consumption patterns worldwide, which also have repercussions on aspirations in small towns, a topic needing further research.

This volume is also witness to the rapid emergence of new economic activities and their interlinked social and spatial changes. Tourism is reshaping the role of Kullu as an older hub on the way to Manali and the Barjora mining hub expands beyond the boundaries of the CT.

Two other important and emerging sectors are studied in this volume—the rise of private educational and health infrastructure and the real estate industry. In her work on Tiruchengode, Raman (2017) provides a subtle description of the manner in which land is mobilised and transformed to give rise to what can be called a “college industry” along the various corridors radiating out from Tiruchengode along the Attur-Rasimpode-Erode highway, or the Tiruchengode-Namakkal-Trichy highway. The description of these educational institutions, interspersed with vacant land, is a

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<sup>10</sup>See also Zérah (2013) on the entrepreneurialism in the villages of the NCR and the automobile corridor.

familiar sight for those travelling along highways in India, for example the Delhi-Meerut corridor in Uttar Pradesh, Chennai-Puducherry in the South, or those emerging in Haryana, alluded to by Punia and Zérah with the Palwal-Hodal corridor.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Raman's account is a first description of the manner in which rural lands are transformed outside metropolitan areas or regional capitals, and is completed by Trouillet (2017) who describes the creation of centrality around a triptych of temples, colleges and hospitals, led by strong real estate dynamics.

Indeed, most chapters mention the booming of real estate and the construction industry, which constitute a common feature of the transformation of economic, social and spatial dynamics in small towns. The process of land use change and real estate growth is a dominant feature of India's contemporary transformation and has been studied in metropolitan cities (Banerjee-Guha 2002) and their nearby suburbs (Gururani 2012), along highway corridors (Balakrishnan 2013) and in Special Economic Zones (Jenkins et al. 2014). The new regime of rising urban and rural land prices depicted by Chakravorty (2013) is visible in most of our case studies, and this edited volume adds to this body of work. It shows how transformation of land use is a locally produced process that occurs when wealthy families decide to sell their agricultural land to invest in real estate—in Parangipettai (Denis and Ahmad 2017) for example—or to set up businesses (Raman 2017; Tastevin 2017; Zérah 2013). It also transforms small towns spatially by extending them beyond their municipal boundaries, even in CTs (Samanta 2017), or horizontally and vertically in the larger Kullu municipality (Mehra 2017). This in turn leads to the emergence of new entrepreneurs such as the real estate agents in Haryana or Tiruchengode who often go on to become local political figures (Zérah 2017).

### ***1.5.2 Understanding These Localised, Territorialised Economies: Economy, Land and Belonging***

We now turn our attention to the manner in which these territorialised economies are shaped over time. This process takes place through a range of rationales or assemblages where land plays a central role. Despite their diversity, the various chapters, particularly those in Sects. II and IV, all discuss the complex and intricate array of dimensions that produce these economies, be they historical, territorial, social, cultural or symbolic.

We argue against a reading of land as it is usually presented in the mainstream literature, which understands land as a neutral entity. The relationship between land development and economic activity is not only a material one; it also has symbolic

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<sup>11</sup>McDuie Ra's work on Imphal (2016), a larger city, also highlights the role of secondary education and health institutions as drivers for growth.

and religious dimensions (Benjamin 2017; Trouillet 2017, respectively). In South Canara, on the one hand, large real estate developers use the purity of some sites to develop buildings in their vicinity, following practices that take the “sensitivity of territory” into account. On the other hand, the large expressways planned as part of the development of the entire western coast from Goa to Kerala, such as the Mangalore-Koondapur route, have to circumvent important local shrines to avoid disruption. In his study of temple trusts in Tamil Nadu, Trouillet shows how these trusts, which can own and buy assets, are important actors in the local economy through their different forms of patronage and control over space (through the location of retail shops and communities) and resources (through contracts). He also demonstrates how the symbolic and material dimensions are intricately woven together and are mingled with state regulations in the relationships between the creation of new temples and the capture of real estate value.

The notion of territory is neither merely functional (economic territory) nor solely political (control over resources), but is also social, cultural and religious. The accumulation of land, rapid turnover and land use changes, stimulated by external players, private investments and infrastructure developments, are motors of change. However, it is also around land that social status and a sense of belonging are structured. The neighbourhood you live in, the deities you worship, the temple you visit are a part of one’s notion of territory. For the residents of Kullu, this is linked to the *devtas* (gods) and the religious festivals that celebrate them. Raman (2017) uses the term “unified cultural and political-economic” region to describe the manner in which supra-local caste networks reshape the territory through circulation of land and money, the channelling of rural capital towards urban areas, and various modes of negotiation with the state (party politics, personnel and social networks, etc.). Land and financial capital are interrelated dimensions which Denis and Ahmad (2017) characterise as a subregional space of investment and social relations.

Benjamin’s work (2017) on South Canara is exemplary in the possibilities it offers for a reading of the different pathways and multi-layering of a socioeconomic development with its own agency and resources. First, it can be observed via the rapid social and economic changes that disrupt traditional power relationships, but did not escape totally the inherited sacredness of the land and the ritual associated with it. Second, we can see it through the prism of clear-sighted and public policies enforced by the state, to transform the regional economy. Third, the present transformations are embedded in a trajectory that should be understood by taking into account the region’s tradition of trade and economic openness dating back to the fourth century AD and exchanges with Africa, Egypt, South East Asia and China. It is revealed that any “external” development initiative is reworked by those local path dependencies still at work. He argues, and so do we, that these three narratives do not oppose each other but occur simultaneously, inducing an open-ended dynamic. They can be conflictual as well as woven together, and

combine to shape the emergence of small towns through non-commoditised practices and social formations that are historically constructed.

These simultaneous narratives are also visible in the skills and competences applied by the traders of Kullu and Kartarpur, through their long experience of straddling territories along the Indo-Tibetan trade route, the Lahore-Jalandhar artery on the one hand, and the Grand Trunk Road routes on the other. Prasad-Aleyamma (2017) argues that the story of Pasighat is co-instituted both by history and everyday practices. She also demonstrates how the contemporary economy cannot be understood without engaging with the specific historical governance structure of the tribal dominated state of Arunachal Pradesh which defined differentiated rights for the various social groups (for instance, land is alienable only to tribal groups, which shapes land markets in a particular way).

These different formulations, found in many chapters, attempt to describe how historical, cognitive, caste and social resources are mobilised and to identify the driving forces working towards creating a territorialised economy and a form of “small town urbanism”. We argue, further, that the focus on multiple logics and assemblages allows us to question the singular assumptions used to understand metro cities or agglomeration processes. Some of the forces that shape these larger cities, such as their rapid integration into wider market and public policies, also play a role in these small towns. Even these actors reject or neglect ordinary activities, which are not seen as modern. Consequently, they are reframed as environmental hazards, risks or illegal settlements.

## **1.6 The Ordinary Nature of Small Towns: Banal Economies, Urban-Rural Linkages and Access to Urban Resources**

It has become a mantra to associate cities with engines of growth and the previous section highlighted the presence of productive economies in many small towns. However, this small town lens brings to light the number of very ordinary and banal exchanges and activities in urban localities. These activities are not always commoditised, nor do they generate a large surplus for accumulation. Small-scale household or informal activities are conspicuous by their presence in all the settlements studied, whether located in rich or poor states. Because of their all-pervasive nature, some of them, mainly trade, commerce, construction and transport, are only mentioned in passing in some chapters that focus on other dimensions, but they all refer to this scale of activity.

First, commerce and trade located in markets, for example the “bazaar”, remain a major occupation in small towns, continuing their traditional, historically constituted function as a site of provision for rural areas, as Mehra (2017) shows for Kullu or as traditional market towns such as Kartarpur (cereal) in Punjab, studied by de Bercegol and Gowda (2017), or Hodal in Haryana. However, the expansion and the

diversification of shops (groceries, chemists, construction materials and mobile phones) is taking place everywhere, from Barjora in West Bengal to Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh or Parangipettai in Tamil Nadu. These markets provide small town citizens and neighbouring villages with access to new forms of consumerism, notably for women (Surie and Zérah 2017). They can also be understood as a site of local sociability and access to some form of public space. To some extent, some of these petty shops are just places where their owners can interact with friends outside the household sphere. They may also extend their commercial façade towards more informal activities, such as money lending.

Thus, these bazaars are a marker of a very banal transformation of the Indian urban landscape which is resilient, constant and likely to grow (Mukhopadhyay and Zérah 2015) and the expression “market as a mode of self-urbanisation” embodies a universal process of transformation in small towns (Mehra 2017).

Second, markets also contribute to shaping spatial transformation as well as to two other non-remarkable areas of activity—the construction and transport sectors. Quantitative data provided by Chandrasekhar (2017) and Sharma (2017) respectively, clearly point to these two sectors (as well as storage and hotels) as sources of employment, along with other non-tradable activities. Field studies mention para-transit vehicles that enhance connectivity between rural and urban settlements, as is also the case in the poorer states such as Bihar (Mukhopadhyay and Zérah 2015). Construction materials are found in all markets and feed into the expansion of built-up areas, not only through more visible real estate activities but also in the form of in situ urbanisation, whereby some categories of residents build their housing over time. This phenomenon explains the expansion not only of STs (such as Tiruchengode, Parangipettai, or in Haryana), but also of CTs (Samanta 2017). Finally, in many of the small towns we studied, the persistence of traditional caste-based activities, such as the collection of *tendu* leaves in Abu Road (Nadkarni 2017) or the fishermen in South Canara and Andhra Pradesh, shape a type of informal, household based economy.

Third, our results shed some light on the contemporary form of rural-urban linkages. On the one hand, the nature of transport connectivity has been transformed through large projects, such as highways or government programmes to build roads. Regional connectivity has increased in all the states and reduced the gap between small towns and their hinterlands.<sup>12</sup> The nature of commuting can no longer be characterised by a rural-urban movement (Chandrasekhar 2017; Sharma 2017, respectively) and it straddles the urban and the rural as we can see from the *tendu* leaves economy in Abu Road, or the migrant dormitories in Haryana. A renewed form of urban-rural linkages is also found in the education sector (Tiruchengode, Barjora and Hodal towns) which shows that movement between the rural and the urban is not linked solely to marketing and jobs but also to the shift towards small urban settlements in search of schools for children. For instance,

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<sup>12</sup>For a detailed analysis of linkages between connectivity and regional integration, see the case of Bhopal (Gupta 2012).

people may keep their rural property but come and settle in towns such as Barjora (Samanta 2017), a process comparable to previous structural changes that took place in villages and small towns, such as the residential migration of dominant castes. This trend has to be related to the expanding casual job environment, where pluriactivity stimulates the advent of the rural-urban continuum (Punia et al. 2017).

Finally, small towns are sites of urban resources that include education, electricity (as a support for children's education and small household economies) and better overall facilities which explain why a number of inhabitants live in a small town but keep their property in the village (Samanta 2017). In our sample towns we observe different forms of social mobility involving enterprising individuals who use the opportunities of local governance to access the state and further their business interests. Some enter small-scale real estate businesses (Raman 2017; Trouillet 2017; Zérah 2017). Others open up shops with new types of products, as in the case of a young entrepreneur and MBA graduate in Kartarpur (de Bercegol and Gowda 2017). Tastevin's (2017) recounts the family history of the TVS export company that began with a blacksmith leaving his village to escape a crime. Through these examples, we discover a range of actors capable of harnessing opportunities through political channels or productive economies that do not often appear in recent work on large cities. This disrupts the manner in which small towns are sometimes described and understood as non-modern and sites of backwardness that cannot escape a mediocre future. This is not to deny the pervasiveness of caste hierarchy and patriarchy which many chapters highlight (see, for example, the ambivalence regarding women's labour in Sridharan [2017]) and the low level of urban services (Zérah 2017; Samanta 2017) that cripple these places, although we find the growth of small shops emerging as a substitute for other employment options. A specific study of the opportunities available to different social groups and their ability to cope with the tribulations of life in a small town would allow us to qualify these intermediary groups better. Although this is beyond the scope of this book, it still points towards the role of public policies, and therefore of governance, in providing better living conditions.

## 1.7 Multiple Readings of Governance in and of Small Towns

Uncovering of the nature of governance in invisible urban settlements is a central element of this research. India has a unique definition of the urban, which is both functional and administrative (Mukhopadhyay 2017). Small towns straddle this borderline: some of them are recognised STs and governed by an urban local body, whereas others are functionally urban but remain governed as large villages. Our research is the first to study both these types of settlements and to raise, at the outset, the question of the relevance and outcomes of this divide, as well as that of its significance in terms of public policy, in particular the question of district planning, in view of the blurring and dissolution of rural-urban borders.

### ***1.7.1 Politics of the Rural-Urban Classification and Outcomes in Terms of Public Policy***

There is a clear demarcating line between CTs and STs. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment on rural decentralisation governs the former, whereas the latter fall under the governance structure defined by the 74th Constitutional Amendment on urban decentralisation. This split has important governance outcomes in terms of flow of funds, types of public schemes and regulations, which also depend on the state level implementation of the amendments. Earlier, we argued that the politics of classification was an important area of research, and that to some extent CTs would have greater autonomy (Denis et al. 2012: 59) thanks to their rural status and lighter regulatory structure. For instance, owners can decide the use of their land without requesting permission, although this is not feasible once a settlement is declared urban, and stringent urban by-laws and rules regarding change of land use start to apply. Further, taxes are much lower in villages compared to urban local bodies, and rural schemes, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), the world largest programme of this nature, are a strong incentive for settlements to remain rural. Being urban is perceived as a means of accessing funding for networked urban services, such as water and sanitation even though Khan (2017) demonstrates that small towns have not benefitted greatly from the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), the main aid programme for urban areas. These trade-offs clearly exist, they are debated locally in CTs and urban aspirations vary as they are shaped by state regulations that determine the rules for becoming urban (Samanta 2013) along with the social and local power structures (Mukhopadhyay and Zérah 2015).

This book questions the nature of governance and the importance of having an urban status, but it is in no way resolved. Samanta (2017), in her work on the Barjora CT, and in a previous work on Singur (2014), argues that rural status is one of the reasons behind a governance crisis, in particular in terms of the provision of urban services. She therefore explores governance options and considers that the best option for these settlements would be to become urban, or at least to break away from the division between urban and rural planning, and to look more holistically at development planning. In contrast, Mukhopadhyay (2017) provides a negative response to the question as to whether administrative status matters. Using Census data for 2001 and 2011, he compares STs with a population below 100,000 people, CTs in proximity to a large city and other CTs, based on the provision of a number of selected services (water, sanitation and banking). His results demonstrate that there is no significant difference in service provision, whether the settlement is urban or rural, perhaps with the exception of small towns located far away from large towns. He also further shows that small CTs might even be more urban than small STs in terms of their level of amenities. In other words, this close look at national level data suggests that other factors, apart from status, matter.

This has important implications in terms of policy issues. Regarding funding, in her chapter, Khan (2017) presents new and detailed evidence that the funds

allocated by the JNNURM favoured large towns, both in terms of their volume and proportion of population, as compared to the large population of small towns. She therefore argues that, considering the level of services in small towns, this funding instrument would have been more useful for the latter. The question of planning brings us to Samanta's discussion of various governance options. Beyond the sole question of services, the existing level of rural-urban connectedness and the spatial outgrowth for productive activities that expands outside demarcated boundaries (Sects. 1.5 and 1.6) create a need for a development planning carried out in larger spatial units that are more suitable than the village or the town. The sub-district could be one such unit, defined through district planning. This is an important debate because district planning committees exist and administrative and financial resources backed them. Finding solutions to ensure more efficient district planning, which is a concern, as Zérah (2017) shows for Haryana, could be a feasible and acceptable proposition in the existing institutional set-up, rather than seeking more radical solutions that call for abolishing the rural-urban distinction in the decentralisation laws. Thus, the debate among authors in this volume underlines the relevance of further research, but, most importantly, the urgency of discussions about policy options for small towns and large villages, including the type of financial interventions.

### ***1.7.2 Multiple Readings of Local Governance***

Considering local needs through regional planning is even more important in view of the weakness of local governance. De Bercegol shows that, in Kartarpur, there has been no computerisation since 1999 and no recruitment has been allowed. In Haryana, locally elected representatives can only hire sanitation workers on a contract basis. These local representatives are powerless before the district administration, and all the narratives in Zérah's chapter (2017) qualify the district commissioner as "the owner" of the town. Skills, knowledge of planning rules and procedures are partial and inadequate among councillors, and even more so among women councillors. Women are disempowered and turn into proxies for the males of their families, and are given even less responsibility than male councillors. Undoubtedly, the focus on Haryana, one of the most patriarchal states of India, might be the extreme negative end of the spectrum, but it underlines the disempowerment of local councillors. This disempowerment is not restricted to small towns, as literature on metropolitan governance has shown, but the lack of resources has aggravated it further.

In this book we argue that it is necessary to view local governance as an *in vivo* laboratory to understand the social transformations taking place in small towns. Surie and Zérah (2017) rely on the notion of multi-positionality developed by Boltanski, and the feminist literature on intersectionality, to show that the intersections of layers of gender, caste, language and social capital explain a complex process of elite capture on the one hand and violent struggles to destabilise

entrenched local power relationships on the other. Corrupt practices require influence and the ability to build coalitions, as we can see from Zérah's examples of the way in which contracts are awarded. This leads to social tensions that can vary from the pursuit of territorial and social control by traditional caste groups over the empowerment of lower castes in local politics, to the confrontation between old landed elites and organised migrants who unite to wield local power. In Pasighat, as demonstrated by Prasad-Aleyamma (2017), the conflict between the new elites and the Adi tribal group shapes the governance, and there is an attempt to undermine traditional tribal institutions and to create an urban local body that would reinforce the power of these new elites and of the regional state. In Kullu, Mehra (2017) reports on the seeming invisibility of caste-based discrimination in local politics. She points to the boundary line between the outsiders, the long-standing migrants and the natives, who are endowed with differentiated rights, resources and forms of citizenship, as is also the case in Pasighat. In other words, local political arenas are sites of battles over urban resources, but they are also there for social standing, the preservation of privileges and social status or for a legitimate status in the town. These struggles exist everywhere but need to be analysed locally, considering the depth of their specific social history. This would then contribute to understanding the rapid social changes that India faces, at the same time avoiding over-generalisation about mobility and the trajectories of social groups.

### ***1.7.3 The Metropolitanisation Effect***

A third important argument related to governance concerns the contradictory impacts of regional and state interventions and the strong, potentially detrimental effect of metropolitanisation. It is true that small towns are neglected, but they are also caught up in megaprojects, which require large tracts of land that lie in parts of towns and their surrounding areas. The influence of metropolitanisation is enacted in several ways: through master planning instruments that further alienate local bodies from decisions regarding land use as in towns such as Tiruchengode or Kartarpur or several others in Haryana; via large-scale infrastructure investments related to energy provision in Kullu (hydroelectricity), Pasighat (large dam) and Parangipettai (power plant) that result in social and spatial reconfigurations; and via spatial policies such as the special economic zones in South Canara district. We do not suggest that all these investments are misplaced and do not contribute to the dynamics of these small towns. A number of chapters in this edited volume point to the central role of the state in shaping small towns over time and, on occasion, in creating institutions to support productive activities. Nevertheless, we argue that these interventions reveal a thought process and a vision of the urban that is unable to grasp truly the reality of small towns.

First of all, large-scale investments not only produce new spatial configurations, especially in the hilly regions, but they also transform the social landscape with the arrival of new migrants, who also require and demand basic essential services from

the urban local bodies that are not equipped to cope with these rapid changes. Spatial transformation, such as ribbon, development would require much attention to district planning. Second, the master plan's instruments are imposed on small towns leading to "in situ" urbanisation. Sometimes state decisions generate inequalities, as the master plan can legalise some settlements whereas others are declared "illegal". Such occurrences intensify social conflicts and contribute to relegating local councillors to the role of mediators, or even brokers, who have to lobby for basic services. Instead of empowering the local governance institutions, they are redefined as a weak link in patronage networks. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, urban policy, as applied to small towns, seems only to consider these settlements in relation to the economies of large towns. They are seen either as an extension of a metropolitan city or as a flat and empty space. In South Canara (Benjamin 2017), spatial planning policies are superimposed on existing productive activities that are ignored when decisions to implement public actions are taken. In Kartarpur, de Bercegol and Gowda (2017) astutely show how the plan to integrate the town into the Jalandhar Master Plan reinforces the power of the regional government that sees Kartarpur as a location for an upper middle class suburb. As they say, it constitutes "an authoritarian urban project that reduces" Kartarpur to a commuter town and undermines the town's intrinsic value. The term "reduce" is aptly used to capture the vision of the urban that is currently the dominant viewpoint among decision makers at national and regional government levels, a vision that denies the reality of the dynamics of small towns.

## 1.8 Conclusion

Reinstating small towns on the map of social science enquiry is one of the objectives of this edited volume. The sole fact that such a large population lives and works in small towns vindicates our stand. However, beyond this somewhat moral argument, this book has larger ambitions in terms of reclaiming a different reading of the economy, where the role of large cities is not considered to be the only driver of growth, social change and innovation.

First, our studies, data analysis and fieldwork in different regions underline the diversity of the economies at work in these small towns and the importance of linkages, connections and circulations between people, ideas, assets and reciprocal relationships. In these localities, people find jobs and create activities that range from the very innovative to the most banal; these constitute different avenues of integration into the world economy. Small towns are places where people adjust to the non-farming transition of the economy. Therefore, small towns are essential and resilient locations today, but to some extent they also incarnate India's future. Tomorrow, we argue, small towns will have an important role to play in coping with the major challenge of providing jobs for the fast growing share of the population of working age. Our position is thus in contradistinction to the dominant new economic geography (NEG) theory, which only prioritises the unlimited

development of large urban and economic centres. The premises of the NEG argument are the benefits of economy of scale, attraction of talents and an innovative environment. Although these are certainly important for the creation of more wealth, they are not the only determinants of locational choices made by companies. Furthermore, accelerated economic growth based on concentration and redistribution is not a sufficient response to the challenge of expanding working opportunities and ensuring decent living conditions for everyone.

Second, this volume also emphasises the multiple readings of the “territorialised system” revealed through India’s small towns by underlining the resilience of a robust and diverse urban system of cities, which is partly rooted in a long history of urbanisation. This system, reshaped by local economies, social transformations and spatial restructuring, creates an urban environment where people live, a place of various forms of urbanity. This encompassing vision of “small town urbanism” blurs the dichotomy between rural and urban and we observe the importance of the sub-regional environment and a sense of belonging to a community that goes beyond the feeling of being part of the town. Caste and community kinship, among other relationships, are materialised in spatial practices and shape territories through appropriation, access and circulation of various assets.

Finally, by turning the spotlight on small towns and large villages, and by combining macro-data and fieldwork studies, we also hope to do two important things. The first is to provide and disseminate analytical tools that can be used by policy makers and inform public policy debates, especially as small towns have fallen off the public policy radar and their governance certainly requires greater attention. Some recent developments seem to be moving in this direction. The Indian central government’s recent announcement and creation of the Rurban Mission indicates a concern for these specific settlements and acknowledges the growing reality of a “hidden urbanisation”. This is the term used in a very recently released World Bank report entitled *Leveraging Urbanization in South Asia* (2015). However, though this report underlines the feeble attractiveness of large cities in India and perturbs the World Bank’s previous position on large cities, it falls short in its understanding of their dynamics. Thus, our second major intention is to conduct further research on these topics, in various disciplines as well as across disciplines.

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