

Living in a Category

A History of India's 'Census Town' Problem from Colonial Punjab

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The 2011 Census revealed that the most dynamic sector of urban growth in India is taking shape within rural institutions, given the unprecedented growth of “census towns.” The long-term difficulty in India of finding an appropriate term and mode of governance for rural areas that are also urban, is not simply a nomenclatural conundrum. A brief foray into the travails of local self-government in colonial Punjab demonstrates important continuities with urban processes today, providing essential insights to securing more humane urban policies in contexts like the census town.

It has been almost 20 years since historian Gyan Prakash drew attention to a renewed interest in exploring city life on behalf of scholars of India, something he described then as an “urban turn.” This was a turn away, in part, from earlier nationalist preoccupations with India as a nation of villages, one in which cities were either “places of corruption and evil” in a Gandhian idiom, or abstract endpoints in a linear process of modernisation (which the village, too, might one day attain) as Nehru would have it. A postcolonial erosion of faith in nationalist mythologies coupled with the emergence of new, anti-elite, often violent, urban-based politics in post-liberalisation India, Prakash (2002) argued, brought questions of urban experience sharply into focus by the start of the new millennium.

The urban turn, if we can call it that, produced numerous scholarly, literary, and cinematic works over the last two decades that collectively transformed older assumptions about urban India and the roles cities have played in India's modern economy, culture, and imagination. These works have proffered a partial view, no doubt, one dominated by experience in India's most populous megacities—or the “metros,” especially Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Kolkata, and Hyderabad—which is also where most urban scholars, not coincidentally, lived and wrote from. And while concerns are occasionally raised about unwarranted projections of “metro” urban experience onto urban experience in general, the richness of discovery in this dynamic multidisciplinary field often made such concerns seem ungenerous, parochial even.

India's most recent census (2011) generated considerable excitement among scholars of urbanism in a way that makes those concerns seem less parochial, however. The census showed that population increased more in urban areas than it did in rural areas for the first time since the census began (reaching a historic high of 31% urban population overall). This was not the main source of excitement, however. Instead, scholars were most intrigued by the near tripling in number of a type of urban settlement called “census towns,” from 1,362 in 2001 to 3,894 in 2011 (GoI 2011: 2). According to the registrar general of India, census towns are settlements with a population of at least 5,000, density of at least 400 persons per square kilometre, and at least 75% of the male workforce involved in non-farm labour. Simply described, census towns are built-up settlements in rural areas that have reached a demographic tipping point beyond which the central government considers them to be “urban” for purposes of classification. For purposes of local governance, however, census towns are considered to be “rural,” since they have not been administratively declared urban by a state government.

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In India, states retain the right to designate a settlement as “urban,” and the criteria for doing so varies considerably from state to state; indeed, 11 states have no “clearly defined criteria” at all, including some of India’s largest and most urbanised states.¹ Once a state has declared a settlement urban, it becomes a “statutory town,” and is thereafter governed by urban—rather than rural—institutions (generically called urban local bodies).² Together, census towns and statutory towns (including urban outgrowths, or “transitional” areas) comprise all of India’s urban settlements as recognised by the central government. According to the last census, census towns now account for half of all urban settlements in India, and roughly 15% of the country’s urban population. Moreover, between 2001 and 2011, census towns accounted for nearly one-third of all urban growth. What the 2011 Census revealed, and what caused the excitement, is that the most dynamic sector of urban growth in India is taking shape within rural institutions. The modern experience of urbanism in India has been taking place, in part, in “rural” space.

Reversible Categories

In most Indian states, the same agglomeration of infrastructure, buildings, and people could be called either rural or urban. These designations are also reversible: the same constitutional amendment that gives states the power to recognise a settlement as a statutory town gives states the power to revoke that status and return it to rural local governance. Such decisions are driven by a number of political and financial considerations. For example, once a settlement is designated “urban,” it becomes subject to different (and higher) taxes, increased expenditure on schools, roads, and policing, and stricter controls over planning and building activity. Statutory towns are also ineligible to apply for the numerous, often lucrative, rural development grants offered by the central government. Currently, statutory towns have to raise approximately 70% of their own budgets, whereas villages and census towns receive up to 85% of their funding from the central government. All of this might dissuade a local community from seeking urban status.

There are potential advantages, too, however. Urban notification generally leads to a rapid increase in land values, easier access to networked services (communication infrastructure, water, sanitation, solid waste management, etc), and opportunities to apply for central funding earmarked for urban development, a category that has increased in recent years.³ Evidence suggests that cost-benefit analyses vary from state to state, and region to region: some states have kept the number of census towns high in order to benefit from central government rural development schemes; others have rapidly converted census towns to statutory towns in order to avail enhanced urban development funding from the central government (Bhagat 2005: 65–66). Predictably, the uncertainty that prevails in areas contemplating a transition often empowers dominant groups at the expense of those less powerful (Gururani 2017: 38). Establishing a physical boundary that conforms to the conceptual boundary between urban and rural space is an inherently political process.

While the recent pace and scale of change is novel, the phenomenon of rural areas “morphing” into urban areas—as one

prominent group of researchers characterised it—has a longer history (Mukhopadhyay et al 2015: 1). Ambiguity over what to call such places, and how to govern them, troubled the colonial government just as it has the government of independent India. Those efforts have persisted despite long awareness by many that the rural/urban dichotomy has been much easier to maintain ideologically than it has been to maintain in practice. While various legislative efforts have acknowledged the indistinctness of that boundary over time, all of them continue to work within the conceptual confines of a rural/urban distinction. For example, “nagar panchayats” in the 74th Amendment to the Indian Constitution (passed in December 1992), were a new institutional form meant to govern settlements “in transition from a rural area to an urban area.”⁴ However, nagar panchayats merely replaced (and collapsed) two colonial-era designations with similar purviews—the “notified area” and, in some states, the “small town”—while leaving the rural/urban distinction, that the both were predicated upon, firmly in place. The long-term difficulty in India of finding an appropriate term and mode of governance for “rural” areas that are also “urban,” is not simply a nomenclatural conundrum. The inadequacy of the rural/urban dichotomy, and its nevertheless stubborn durability, has long masked important and quite possibly unique urban processes in South Asia. A recent census artefact—the acceleration of census towns—presents an opportunity, and an urgency, to understand these processes more fully.

Colonial Local Self-government and Efficacy of Local Rule

The history of these urban processes is closely tied to the history of the categories we have discussed thus far. In the early 20th-century Punjab, the region I am most familiar with, making a distinction between urban and rural settlements and defining the modes of transition between one and the other consumed a lot of administrative ink, and produced a lot of political activity on the ground. In classic modernisation theory, societies “mature” as they grow more and more urban, and the transition from village to town to metropolis is a linear and irreversible path. In the early 20th-century administrative parlance in Punjab, this transition would be described as the transition from large village, to notified area, to municipality, each term designating both a distinct physical entity and a separate legal regime. By 1922, we would need to add the term “small town” to this list, since it too became a legal category of settlement.

In Punjab, however, the transition from one category to another did not always flow from rural to urban, or from small to large. Indeed, for a several year period at the beginning of the 20th century, small municipalities in Punjab sometimes grew into large cities; just as often, however, they became notified areas, or even large villages. Notified areas became villages, or sometimes municipalities, and occasionally after much debate and discussion a village, notified area, or municipality simply stayed what it was. Importantly, the movement between categories did not always depend on increasing or decreasing population, or on the presence or absence of “urban” or “rural” amenities or experiences as these were imagined at the time.

Instead other concerns predominated, including decisions about how places and people should be taxed, whether or not a given settlement required simple or complex amenities, and the social and political dynamics of the locale in question. Which is to say, first, that the category of the “urban” was never simply neutrally available, something always already there and obvious. And, second, that a wide array of considerations were engaged in the process of making a physical setting and collection of people into the urban form known at the time as a “municipality,” many of which continue to dominate decision-making today (Samanta 2014).

Each of the categories mentioned thus far—village, notified area, small town, municipality—emerged partially as an artefact within the institutional and ideological domains of local self-government as these took shape during the last two decades of the 19th century. At the time of their initial creation in 1882, urban and rural “local bodies” were seen as “instruments of political and popular education,” as a new institutional milieu where Indians could be trained—in the words of Lord Ripon—“in the conduct of their own concerns” (Wheeler 1917: 153).⁵ The new legislation allowed for limited elected representation on local boards alongside appointed authorities, in a measure designed to enhance the efficacy of local government. Few who observed their functioning throughout the colonial period, however, had much confidence that local self-governing bodies were either educational or efficacious.

In 1911, Lieutenant Governor of Punjab William Mackworth Young described the achievements of self-governing local boards and municipalities up to that time as “more or less a farce,” a sentiment shared by pro-government and oppositional groups alike for what turned out to be similar reasons.⁶ All would agree, for instance, that local government remained circumscribed by the power of veto still firmly retained by colonial authority; that the only coveted positions on local boards and committees were nominated, not elected, ones; and that the liberal prediction that local involvement would generate a more sympathetic opinion of British rule was naïve in the extreme. All would also have to concede that local bodies had amassed a dismal record of achievement in those categories of activity they exercised their limited sovereignty over—primarily sanitation, policing, and schooling. A big source of the problem concerned the procurement of adequate funds.

The Tax Code and Urban Experience

As remains true in most parts of India today, issues of taxation and revenue played a key role in deciding whether an agglomeration of people and buildings would be considered “urban” or “rural” in colonial India. In colonial Punjab, the primary source of municipal income came from the levy of octroi, an indirect tax on goods brought into a local area for consumption or trade. Government grants, house and land taxes, taxes on the use of water, vehicles, and lighting, taxes for conservancy (or keeping streets and open spaces clean), tolls on roads or ferries, and the ever-contested “dog” tax comprised other sources of municipal income, but octroi was the core component of municipal revenue for most of the colonial period. This meant

that municipalities, in some sense, were those places where goods flowed in from outside and stopped, at least for a while.

In villages, there was no levy of octroi, and no house or conservancy tax. Instead, in addition to taxes on agricultural produce via the regular revenue settlements, many large villages charged a *chaukidari* tax, a small amount levied from each household in the village to pay for a village watchman and sometimes, for minor sanitation measures. A “notified area” (which existed in Burma, the United Provinces, Punjab, Central Provinces, and the North-west Frontier Province) lay somewhere between the village and the municipality. Presaging India’s current definition of census towns, notified areas were defined as settlements having a built-up area or bazaar with a population of less than 10,000 people, and an economic base not wholly subsumed by agriculture. Unlike villages, notified areas were obligated to provide some of the amenities required of municipalities, including rudimentary sanitation, school(s), dispensary, and a small police establishment. To pay for these things, funds for notified areas came directly from district boards (raised by an additional cess on land revenue), but also sometimes from residents in the form of house tax, taxes on lighting and water (where these were provided), and so forth—though not, as with municipalities, from the octroi. Just for comparison, in 1901 there were 138 municipalities in the Punjab, 52 notified areas, and just over 36,000 villages (GoI 1907: 355–56). Then, as now, urban settlements existed in a sea of rural villages.

As is true in India today, all of these designations were fluid; district commissioners had the discretion to change the status of any settlement from one type to another. In 1907, several small municipalities in the Punjab—including Jamki, Qila Sobha Singh, Zafarwal, Narowal, and Daska—petitioned to be converted into notified areas. Though moving from municipality to notified area was seen by some at the time as taking a step backwards, representing a reduction in prestige, traders in small municipalities felt structurally disadvantaged by strictures imposed on them by the architecture of municipal finance.

Since only municipalities levied a tax on trade (the octroi), notified areas located close to municipalities attracted traders and manufacturers seeking benefit from proximity to urban markets while avoiding payment of tax. This, in turn, had a negative impact on the municipality nearby. As one official from Sialkot division wrote, in 1908, “the feeling in commercial circles in all the small towns, is that octroi drives away trade.” The municipality of Qila Sobha Singh attributed its “dwindling importance” to the growth of nearby Kalaswala, a notified area not subject to octroi. Traders in the town of Zafarwal petitioned to convert for similar reasons. Anticipating that their petition would eventually be approved, several of Zafarwal’s traders removed their taxable goods from town, hiding them in “wells and neighbouring villages.” Their plan was to return the goods once the octroi had been abolished. If a municipality was small enough, and trade slow enough, the financial impact of municipal forms of taxation was enough to drive trade elsewhere. As a result, de-notification became a goal for many towns in that situation; attempts to conceal goods from tax officials, like those by the traders of Zafarwal, became common enough that

one official recommended making the announcement of change in status without “giving previous notice.”⁷

Another complication with octroi financing applied to small towns with a rather different problem: too much trade, no matter what their size was. According to the tax code at the time, if goods were stored temporarily in a municipality for onward shipping within 90 days, and not used for local consumption (these were known as “through consignments”), then octroi charges could be completely refunded when the goods shipped out. Small towns that served primarily as depots for through consignments often found themselves unable to capture sufficient revenue to make ends meet. This was the situation in many of Punjab’s new canal colony towns—like Gojra, Chuharkana (Farooqabad), Toba Tek Singh, Chak Jhumra, Jaranwala, Tandlianwala, and Sangala—towns that were purpose-built to collect and export grain. While the government realised some income from selling or leasing plots in these newly planned towns, there was often little ongoing income from goods taxation.

The town of Sargodha in the Lower Jhelum colony provides a good example of this scenario.⁸ Sargodha was planned and built near the turn of the 20th century, and entered the colonial economy as a notified area. In 1914, at the beginning of World War I, Sargodha was made the headquarters of Shahpur district and given municipal status. At the time, Sargodha’s population was 8,849 people. Like other market towns, Sargodha required regular and high expenditure on road maintenance and sanitation due to the high volume of cart traffic plying its roads and animals, carters, and itinerant traders lodging overnight in town. Most of the grain that went through the town, however, was on its way to Karachi for eventual shipment overseas; a number of European and Japanese firms kept shipping agents in towns to buy grain from the local brokers who acquired it directly from nearby villages during harvests.

Prior to becoming a municipality, the notified area committee of Sargodha worked creatively to shore up its finances. The committee eventually passed a tax on wheat, ginned cotton, cotton seed, and *toria* (an oilseed crop), to supplement a tax on houses in the town. Even with these enhanced (and decidedly unpopular) taxes, several spatial components of Sargodha were supported by more distant agencies: the school and dispensary, for example, were under the control of the district board; bridges and roads in Sargodha’s civil station were funded and maintained by the public works department; and the town’s orchard and recreation ground were supported by the irrigation department. When Sargodha became a municipality in 1914, all of these expenditures fell to the town itself. Faced with recurring shortfalls, the municipal committee decided to impose taxes on through consignments that were never intended for local consumption.⁹

Specialised market or “mandi” towns like Sargodha, geared primarily to the storage and trans-shipment of agricultural produce, often required a combination of sources to supply their financial needs. The town of Moga, in Faridkot district, was constructed between 1904 and 1906 as a grain market town and, like Sargodha, entered the colonial economy as a notified area. Trade grew rapidly once the town was complete, and unregulated extensions to the market grew in size and

number. As the town grew, so too did its need for sanitation, water, lighting, and roads. In 1919, Moga became a municipality like Sargodha. However, Moga grew and prospered through a combination of government grants and private enterprises: after acquiring municipal status, the district board continued to maintain its roads, the town’s schools were self-supporting, and the small hospital in the town actually turned a profit thanks to the entrepreneurial skill of a local patron.¹⁰

A third scenario was one in which a town’s economy was large and important enough to subordinate taxation to styles of business sophisticated enough to avoid it. This was the case in Ludhiana, a major node in the capitalist agrarian economy of Punjab where large quantities of grain were stored for export. Ludhiana’s traders had sufficient capital to wait on favourable prices in the market, which meant that much of the grain was kept longer than 90 days, or beyond the maximum time for receiving a refund on octroi. Because of this, Ludhiana’s traders, like traders in other major municipalities, collected the octroi directly from zamindars at the time of purchase, anticipating that they may hold the grain beyond the 90-day limit. If the grain sold early, traders would simply pocket the refund themselves, removing it from municipal coffers altogether. In large and more complex markets, the octroi—which the Ludhiana commissioner described as being so small as to have “no effect on trade” at all—was less flexible than the practices traders used to minimise or avoid it.¹¹ Whether the city ever gained access to octroi income or not was literally left in the hands of traders.

Municipal finance was, thus, made precarious from the supply side by constraints on market volume and the complexity of market organisation. Finance was also structurally compromised on the expenditure side. Under the rules that governed the collection and expenditure of local funds, taxes were levied according to “rates,” which were based on a percentage of the value of taxable “things” (including land). Defining rates of taxation was an inexact art, however. It hinged on estimating the amount of goods (in particular, foodstuffs) a town or city consumed on an average as a percentage of all taxable goods. Each municipality also counted a number of “dependent villages” in its estimates of consumption: for larger cities, these were villages within a radius of 10 miles and for smaller towns, the radius was six miles. Revenue depended on the value of taxable things present in a town and on how visible those things were to the revenue authorities: the Punjab Municipal Bill, 1911 provided detailed instructions on how to visually inspect goods.

Rates of taxation, laboriously established, tended to be inflexible. Consumption standards for Punjab were first determined in the late 1880s, following Ripon’s reforms, and left unchanged for decades. This meant that over time they became insensitive to the changing fortunes and proclivities of individual towns. “The truth is,” wrote H J Maynard, deputy commissioner of Ambala in 1903, towns “vary greatly in the tastes and purchasing powers of their inhabitants.” Describing the old rates as unreliable, Maynard compared Ambala with Jagadhri, two towns under his jurisdiction that were taxed according to the same schedule of rates:

Ambala is an aggregation of agricultural villages with a big bazaar in the center of them, to which a number of modern factories worked by steam are beginning to attach themselves, because it is a place conveniently situated on a line of railway and the Grand Trunk Road. Jagadhir [on the other hand] lies four miles off the railway and on an unmetalled road ... it is the centre of an old-fashioned metal manufacture, which does not keep up with the times, and is the home of a respectable and well-to-do—but by no means enterprising—community of the trading class who take their ease in the shady gardens round the town, and doubtless dispose personally of a good deal of sugar and ghee, besides dressing in a style which demands a considerable importation of cloth [all taxable goods] ... in both cases, I suspect strongly that our standard of consumption is antiquated.¹²

Finally, while in most of the world at the time municipalities first estimated the cost of services they required and then applied taxes sufficient to meet their expenses, municipal finance in India worked in nearly the opposite way. Municipal revenue was delinked from the costs of municipal services, and nearly always to the detriment of services: “the Indian method is, taking the total sum likely to be produced by the prevailing modes of taxation, to arrange expenditure to the extent only of which the anticipated revenue will permit” (Wheeler 1917: 159). Structural problems with both the supply and expenditure of urban finance fairly assured that ends seldom met needs, even though needs were defined in the breach as the sum total of ends. Colonial urban local bodies were chronically underfunded as a result, and their activities were proportionately limited.

The ‘Small Town’ Solution

By the World War I, new ideas were being discussed for improving the Punjab system. In the United Provinces, Act v of 1912 enabled urban local bodies to charge direct fees to people who benefited from sanitary measures, house by house, according to the value of the land and houses they occupied. An earlier practice of applying a so-called *haisiyat* tax—a tax based on one’s status or position in society—as a way of adjusting for problems where wealthy people lived in small houses or where poor people lived in large ones, was eventually outlawed as unfair because it was seen as an income tax and thus, not something the province could independently levy. In 1914, a proposal was made in Punjab to adopt the system in use in the United Provinces. However, the fact that this system relied on unpopular “direct” taxation, slowed its acceptance in Punjab. It took seven more years to pass a legislation that systematised urban local body finance: the Punjab Small Towns (Amendment) Act of 1921.¹³

The act was designed to simplify the administration and financing of notified areas and larger agricultural villages by converting them legally into “small towns,” a designation that provided guidelines for sanitary oversight while avoiding the complex governance and financial apparatus of municipalities. The act also marked a conceptual transformation in how urban areas were perceived, by acknowledging that “urban” problems had begun to proliferate in non-municipal spaces. According to the act, *any* town, village, suburb, bazaar, or “inhabited area” — note the broad scope here—could be declared a “small town.” There were no restrictions on size of population or material qualities, and no exclusions based on styles of economic organisation—agricultural villages, too, could now become small towns.¹⁴

Once an area was declared a “small town,” a committee was formed comprising both appointed and elected members who were empowered to impose taxes and maintain a fund for “improvement” work. Small towns were normally excluded from the levy of octroi, though in some cases octroi schedules were also applied (Gupta 1926). Not all large villages opted for the new designation; in addition, mandi towns in the canal colonies were exempted since the assumption was that they would all become municipalities after an “initial period” of government subsidised management and growth (paid for primarily by the government selling plots in the new town). However, the act did result in considerable revision of the governance and finance of small urban areas in the Punjab: by the mid-1920s well over 100 “notified areas” had been converted to “small towns” under the provisions of the new act.

By most measures, these conversions were failures. Since small town revenue came largely from direct taxation of residents, rather than from the indirect (and more equitably distributed) taxation of trade, few newly formed committees were able or willing to impose taxes on their residents sufficient to pay for sanitation, schools, hospitals, water supply, or most other municipal services envisioned in the act. By 1927, only five years after the act came into effect, tax collection was in arrears in a majority of small towns in every district of Punjab—in some cases, committee members themselves were among the defaulters.¹⁵ The deputy commissioner of Jhang district spoke for nearly everyone else at the time when he wrote that “whatever funds are raised are generally absorbed by the establishment entertained for carrying on clerical and conservancy work.”¹⁶ In almost all small towns any substantial institutions or services, where present, were funded by district boards. By 1929, one official could write with confidence that “the people would agree to the abolition of the small towns in most places if they were given the choice.”¹⁷

Noting that “so far, the success of the experiment of instituting small towns has not come up to expectations,” the lieutenant governor outlined his understanding of the problem in a 1932 report:

it is not always realised that the first effect of a notification declaring an area as a “small town” is to deprive it of certain financial amenities which it has hitherto enjoyed. Before declaration the town or village in question will have been in the jurisdiction of the district board concerned. Being a place of some size it will almost certainly have contained a district board school, or schools, probably including middle classes. It may also have been chosen as the site of a district board dispensary. Not improbably the main road passing through the town will have been in the district board’s charge for maintenance purposes. The first effect of the extension of the 1921 Act to this typical little town will be to disentitle it from receiving these benefits from the district fund ... it is scarcely to be expected that the townfolk will exhibit enthusiasm for an administration under which they are compelled to tax themselves for benefits previously available at less cost.¹⁸

While the condition of chronic underfunding was common to small towns with little trade, and towns with ample trade alike, the new act did bring to light subtle differences among the urban formations taking shape. Those differences were described (just as they are today) in the language of a rural/urban dichotomy, a distinction already etched so deeply at the time that mere allusions to it sufficed. As early as the late 1920s, the Punjab government was keen to convert a number of

small towns into municipalities, arguing that municipal governance would be “more suitable for ... towns with a *genuine urban population* than the provisions of the Punjab Small Towns Act, 1921, which was enacted mainly for the control of small country towns with *populations more rural than urban*.”¹⁹ Just what each of these terms actually referred to was left unsaid.

For those towns thought to have a “genuine urban population,” municipalisation was hardly a panacea. A report on the working of municipalities in the Punjab during 1928–29, at first, drew attention to the unusual positive balance of income over expenditure that prevailed that year. This seemingly positive development “might be thought at first sight to imply that a period of stagnation had definitely closed,” wrote the report’s author, “and that an era of prosperity had opened.” However, he continued, “this is not the conclusion to be drawn from the reports.” Instead, the positive balance had been attained by the “starving of essential services and by adhering generally to a very low standard of municipal administration.”²⁰ The problem lay, in large part, with a familiar and chronic inability to capture sufficient revenue.

In Lahore, the province’s premier municipality, a sewage and waterworks scheme had lain dormant for 16 years so far owing to the municipality’s inability to come up with matching funds for a government grant that had long since been approved. In Amritsar, a city of some 2,50,000 people at the time, the sanitation wing of the municipality oversaw the operation of only one urinal, three latrines, and two refuse dumps (though in 1929 the city *did* destroy over 1 lakh rats). As for the quality of transportation infrastructure, the author of the 1928–29 report concluded that “there are few towns where one can pass from the roads maintained by the Public Works Department [that is, in the countryside] to those in charge of municipal committees without having it brought home to him that he has passed to a region of inferior administration.”²¹ This kind of dismal assessment of municipalities remains consistent straight through independence, with the exception that partition caused even bigger problems than usual in much of the province. Year by year, government officials attributed the poor state of administration in municipalities to factionalism, communalism, inertia, self-interest, and favouritism. The civil surgeon in Multan, to cite another problem, refused to attend municipal committee meetings, according to the district commissioner of that district, because he “dislikes noisy and discreditable proceedings.”²²

Small towns at the other end of the spectrum—those referred to above as having “populations more rural than urban”—were also seen to require something different than what the Punjab Small Towns (Amendment) Act could provide. Writing in 1933, the district commissioner of Lahore district argued that “the real problem for solution is how to dovetail these small market towns into the administration of the rural areas. As market towns they are not exclusively self-contained urban units.” In language that would be wholly familiar to observers of urbanisation in India today, he concluded that “apart from the functions which the small market town exercises for the surrounding villages, part of the town is in reality an agricultural village.” For him, this suggested that small market towns should be taxed, either in whole or in part, as though they were agricultural villages. Whatever

the case, he continued, “the ultimate solution will have to be found in some partnership between the rural administration of the district board and the urban administration of the town.”²³

Despite the fact that every annual administrative report on the operation of small towns over the years concluded that they were poorly managed, underfunded, and administratively unsuited to the diversity of phenomena they oversaw, the Punjab Small Towns (Amendment) Act survived well beyond independence. While the act was in existence, a few small towns converted to municipalities, and a roughly equal number converted to notified areas, moving back to rural governance. In independent India, the act was finally repealed in 1955, and all remaining town committees were reclassified as third class municipalities. At the time, nearly 10% of small town committees had been superseded by the provincial government on the grounds of incompetency, persistent default, or abuse of powers.²⁴

Lessons for Urban History

Historians of urban experience, including those who brought about the “urban turn,” too often fail to consider how the legal context in which urban space is built, regulated, and maintained, shapes the fundamental qualities of that experience. Urban experience in small town Punjab was, and still is in many ways, the experience of living in a “category,” as opposed to living in a particular kind of social and material milieu. As we have seen, the small town, the large village, and the municipality all shared physical features in common along a very broad continuum. However, the abstract rules that separated one from another created concrete effects, shaping the decision to organise one’s livelihood on one side of a boundary or the other, for example, or the quality and extent of access one had to education, clean water, or medical attention. When we look to the materiality of everyday life as a clue to urban experience, therefore, we need to keep this in mind: the tax code may have shaped the experience of urban life more determinately than new building typologies, wheeled traffic, busy markets, or streets lit up at night.

Historians might also look at the recurring denigration of the state of sanitation, governance, and urban order—of the sort that filled sanitary commissioners’ and journalists’ accounts more or less continuously from the 1880s until today—as deriving far less from some cultural predilection towards disorder—as colonial and postcolonial pundits alike sometimes claim—and more as an effect of a flawed financial and governance model. Town space was in part a dense, dangerous, and unruly space, governed by administrators with inadequate means to organise and effectively operate it. Even in smaller towns, urban experience would entail pockets of degraded environment, insanitation, and state institutions that did not work but took up space. This would give municipal space the quality of being rule-governed but ineffectual.

This brief foray into the travails of local self-government in colonial Punjab demonstrates important continuities with urban processes today, and not only in Punjab state. In colonial Punjab, residents were said to prefer a lower level of services in exchange for lower taxes, and non-municipal “urban” areas (like notified areas or small towns) often enjoyed equal or better services (provided by outside authorities) than those they would

have to self-finance under municipal rules. Mukhopadhyay et al's work illustrates that in parts of India today, the situation has not changed much. The authors found little or no difference, for example, between the quality of services provided in towns governed by urban local bodies (statutory towns), and those governed by rural local bodies (census towns) (Mukhopadhyay et al 2015: 29). Similarly, chronic underfinancing of municipal bodies continues to plague most cities in India, small and medium statutory towns in particular (Kundu et al 1999). Though forms and sources of taxation have changed over time, these towns are still limited in the taxes they can raise, ill-equipped to administer services, and heavily reliant on states for transfers and grants-in-aid. As was true in the colonial period, administrative overhead—the cost of simply staffing local committees—still consumes the lion's share of revenue in many small and medium towns (Shastri 2012; Sharma 2012).

As disagreement over what should be done about the recent growth of census towns suggests, the problem of identifying

appropriate forms of governance for urban areas that lay beyond the city continues unabated. These debates continue to treat political and conceptual categories as though they refer to material configurations that remain, paradoxically, undefined. Colonial officials in 1920s Punjab felt no obligation to explain their conviction that some populations were “more rural than urban,” or that some places had a more “genuine urban population” than others. What Mukhopadhyay et al (2015: 29) write from contemporary experience has equal validity for the experience of historical actors: “trade-offs between remaining rural or becoming urban are not seen by the actors in a vacuum but are embedded in their understanding of what the urban signifies in their regional context.” Greater awareness of the historicity of these debates, and thus of both the continuities and discontinuities between colonial and contemporary practice, are essential to securing more humane urban policies in contexts like the “census town,” where social and environmental justice is long overdue.

NOTES

- 1 These include the highly urbanised states of Kerala and Gujarat, and the populous states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. See Pradhan (2017: 41). A useful table illustrating different states' criteria for defining urban local bodies is published in Mukhopadhyay et al (2015: 3).
- 2 There are currently three types of urban local bodies in India: nagar panchayats (population 11,000–25,000); municipalities (also called nagar palika with a population of 1–10 lakhs), and municipal corporations (also called nagar nigam or mahanager palika for cities with over 10 lakh population). Census towns, like villages, are administered by gram (village) panchayats.
- 3 Urban development schemes include the Smart Cities Mission, the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), and the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), among others. The JNNURM program was started in 2005. Since 2014, AMRUT has gradually replaced it. A useful summary of central government initiatives for urban development appears in Mehta and Mehta (2010).
- 4 See Government of India, The Constitution (Seventy-Fourth Amendment) Act, 1992.
- 5 Local self-government acts were promulgated in India's provinces from 1883 to 1885, following Lord Ripon's Resolution of 1882.
- 6 Government of Punjab, Boards and Committees Department Proceedings, September 1911, No 35, p 36.
- 7 Government of Punjab, Boards and Committees Department Proceedings, March 1908, No 55, pp 42–43.
- 8 For an interesting depiction of life in Sargodha during the early 20th century, see Tandon (1969: 157–62).
- 9 Government of Punjab, Boards and Committees Department Proceedings, August 1914, No 8, p 6; and Government of Punjab, Boards and Committees Department Proceedings, August 1914, No 22, p 11.
- 10 Government of Punjab, Boards and Committees Department Proceedings, April 1919, No 1, p 3.
- 11 Government of Punjab, Boards and Committees Department Proceedings, September 1902, No 32, p 179.
- 12 Government of Punjab, Boards and Committees Department Proceedings, December 1903, No 20, p 166.
- 13 Note that at the same time, the Punjab Village Panchayat Act of 1922 established panchayats for villages and imposed compulsory duties on them.

- 14 Government of Punjab, Boards and Committees Department Proceedings, 1917, No 1 (7), p 35.
- 15 Government of Punjab, *Report on the Working of Small Towns in the Punjab during the Year 1927–28* (Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing, 1929), p 1.
- 16 Government of Punjab, *Report on the Working of Small Towns in the Punjab during the Year 1927–28* (Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing, 1929), p 2.
- 17 Government of Punjab, *Report on the Working of Small Towns in the Punjab during the Year 1928–29* (Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing, 1930), p 5.
- 18 Government of Punjab, *Report on the Working of Small Towns in the Punjab during the Year 1932–33* (Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing, 1934), p 5.
- 19 Government of Punjab, *Report on the Working of Municipalities in the Punjab during the Year 1927–28* (Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing Punjab, 1929), p 1, emphasis added.
- 20 Government of Punjab, *Report on the Working of Municipalities in the Punjab during the Year 1928–29* (Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing Punjab, 1930), pp 5–6.
- 21 Government of Punjab, *Report on the Working of Municipalities in the Punjab during the Year 1928–29* (Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing Punjab, 1930), p 5.
- 22 Government of Punjab, *Report on the Working of Municipalities of Punjab during the Year 1929–30* (Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing Punjab, 1931), p 4.
- 23 Government of Punjab, *Report on the Working of Small Towns in the Punjab during the Year 1933–34* (Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing Punjab, 1935), p 4.
- 24 Government of Punjab, *Report on the Working of Municipalities of Punjab during the Year 1959–60*, Simla, np. The Small Towns Act was repealed in West Pakistan in 1970 following the passing of the Martial Law Repealing Ordinance under the government of Muhammad Yahya Khan.

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