

A GIS-based Study on the Emergence of Small and Medium Scale Towns in Pre-Independent South India

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Abstract: The ratio of urban population in India crossed 30 percent for the first time in 2011 Census. The tempo of urbanization in India is, however, much slower than most of Asian countries. India, on the other hand, has a number of populous towns having millions of population. Mega cities like Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai), Madras (Chennai) and Delhi are typical cases. Such contrast between the huge mega cities and the other less developed towns can be explained as the result of exclusive growth of a few colonial towns at the cost of other indigenous towns during the colonial period. The Gulliver cities existing in India today are mostly the products of colonial formation.

The proposed paper will focus upon the demographic change and the (un-)growth of urban centres in Chingleput, a district surrounding Madras, during the period mainly between 1770s and 1871.

The reason of the focus upon this area simply lies in the fact that it has exceptionally good historical sources on population since the late 18th century. The tool to be utilized throughout is GIS or Geographical Information System, which seems to be most convenient tool for a study like the one attempted here.

The main sources to be utilized are village-level local records and the Census. Information of village-level population between the pre-colonial and colonial periods is exceptional and is hardly found in other Asian countries. By picking up villages in Chingleput, the presenter expects to indicate potentials of historical demography to characterize the salient feature of urbanization in India and Asia.

The presentation first shows the spatial distribution of villages/towns whose population were above certain level in the respective periods. This will be followed by another set of investigation into causes of the population growth rate between respective periods. The third will be an analysis of occupational composition of the settlements. This is to clarify the background of urbanization related to industry, religion and other factors. A look into the impact of transport system including railway and road will be also attempted. Lastly the findings will be summarized and some implication for similar studies in Asia will be presented.

Keywords: GIS, Urbanization, populous towns, Mega cities, colonial towns