

Deep fish

Revolution through redefinition

WILL redefining what is a town make a difference to the pace of urbanisation in India? The Centre thinks so, as it believes the share of the urban population is higher than the 2001 Census estimate of 27.78% and plans to reclassify urban areas. But is an urbanisation revolution possible through redefinition? Professor Ashish Bose of the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) is sceptical.

The rationale for this definitional change is apparently a UN study that states India doesn't recognise peri-urban areas—such as rapid unplanned settlements in the precincts of manufacturing hubs on a city's periphery—within its urban population and thus understates urbanisation. However, a more inclusive definition in the next 2011 Census is not enough, as the 2001 numbers will have to be reworked for comparability.

Whether this will show faster urbanisation is doubtful. For starters, there is no warrant for the perception that

transitional zones between towns and countryside aren't included in city populations. Censuses define cities as those with a population of 100,000 and adjoining areas are included in the larger concept of an urban agglomeration.

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minimum population size of 5,000; a density of 400 per sq km and 75% of their population engage in non-farm activities. This definition can't be used in states like Kerala, where rural/urban distinctions have been blurred by a continuum of economic activity. Other parts of India face the same problem.

Important villages, kasbas and tehsils play key roles in integrating rural and urban areas. A Ficci-ING report four years ago suggested that all villages and towns up to a population of 10,000—where the majority of workers engage in agriculture—must be classified as rural. But if this definition is adopted, the pace of urbanisation will only decline. However, Census officials have enough latitude to classify such outgrown villages as towns if they have a distinctly urban character. This element of subjective judgement also ensures that peri-urban areas that may lack clear administration and suffer from sanitation and water problems are included in India's urban population. Merely changing the definition of a town is unlikely to indicate faster urbanisation. Given the importance of this issue, Prof Bose feels that redefining what is urban shouldn't be left to bureaucrats but to thinktanks like the Planning Commission and NIUA.

Source: The Financial Express, July 19, 2007.