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Abstract:

During a several year period in the early twentieth century, small towns in Punjab sometimes grew into large cities, but just as often they became notified areas (something between a town and a village), or even large villages. Notified areas became villages, or sometimes municipalities, and occasionally after lots of debate and discussion a village, notified area, or municipality simply stayed what it was. Importantly, the movement between categories did not necessarily depend on increasing or decreasing population, or on the presence or absence of “urban” or “rural” amenities or experiences. Instead, other concerns predominated, including decisions about how places and people should be taxed, whether or not a given place required simple or complex forms of government, and the degree of political mobilization enjoyed by the people in question. This paper suggests that urban experience in small town Punjab was therefore, in some senses, the experience of living under the regime of a “category,” as opposed to living in a particular kind of material milieu. The abstract category under which group life was organized created concrete effects, but the small town, the large village, and the municipality all shared physical features in common along a very broad continuum. This paper suggests that things like tax codes and the source of infrastructure investment may have shaped the experience of urban life more determinately than new building typologies, wheeled traffic, busy grain markets, or streets lit up at night.