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Spatial disparities in India: Introduction

- 1 Upon landing at Delhi international airport, European travellers can enjoy a seamless train connection into the city centre via a network of air-conditioned corridors. After a quick security check, you will be directed to the train station. A spacious and modern train will swish in, going underground as it approaches the inner reaches of the city. Once you've reached New Delhi's main train station, you might want to catch a connection to the *Yellow Line* train : the next stop to the South is Chandni Chowk, the business centre on Connaught Place, while the first stop to the North is Chawri Bazaar. Travellers are then smoothly transported up to the surface by an escalator. During your ascension, as the square of light above begins to grow, you will become aware of the sounds of the street – muffled at first, then increasingly loud. You will be intrigued by novel smells. Then suddenly, as you reach the surface, you will be hit by the reality of an altogether different India, with its street peddlers and cycle rickshaws: the reality of an ancient and densely populated Muslim city, with derelict housing and swarming urban markets, where wealth is often hidden from foreign eyes. This experience is akin to suddenly switching eras or planets: after an international airport and train that felt like a continuation of the North, travellers are suddenly immersed into the South. After discovering twenty-first century India, they find themselves travelling back to the twentieth: an era of poverty and informal trade, whose urban and economic practices stand in stark contrast with the “world-class city” model. At a first glance, one might not notice the changes that have actually affected the city's old centre and mistakenly see it as immutable. What does strike the eye is the obvious – and very real – social, cultural, economic and spatial disparities that exist between the world represented by this airport and underground network on the one hand, and old Delhi.
- 2 India has gone from one cliché to another: from being perceived as the land of slums and Mother Teresa to the status of “Shining India”, the country of cutting-edge IT and Mittal. But beyond caricature, are these two extremes mutually exclusive? There might be a share of truth in both of these aspects that coexist more or less comfortably within “emerging” India (Géoconfluences, 2015). In fact, these disparities might even encapsulate the very definition of an emerging country (Landy éd., 2010). They include

social gaps (growing wealth and a huge number of people living in poverty) as well as economic (the joint boom of IT and the informal sector) and spatial ones. This issue of *Echogéo* focuses on the latter: in Indian cities, slums are adjacent to luxury apartment blocks, and religious segregation is rampant (Sivaramakrishnan *et al.*, 2005 ; Gayer and Jaffrelot, 2011); the development of metropolitan areas leaves neighbouring rural areas in the margins; the creation of countless tax-free zones creates pressure on available land, with agriculture and food safety being neglected for the benefit of industrial and real-estate interests (Kennedy, 2010)...

- 3 Spatial and social inequality is growing, as wealthy groups and spaces are multiplying while the poorest remain a majority: like all emerging countries, India is an “iceberg country” (Landy, Varrel, to be published). Inequality is first of all spatial: in 1961, the GDP of Bihar, the poorest state in India, was 1.8 times lower than that of Maharashtra, the richest of the country’s federated states. In 2014, it was 4.6 times lower. As for social inequality: in 2009-10, according to the National Sample Survey Organization, India’s Gini coefficient was of respectively 0.28 and 0.37 in rural and urban areas. This should however be put into perspective: these figures (as well as being controversial in their calculation) are in any case much lower than those encountered in other BRICS countries¹. Additionally, space shouldn’t be relied on too much. Geographers are well aware that landscape can be deceptive. Indian slums are home to a large portion of the lower middle class, and well-to-do families with a large share of their capital invested in large cities can be found living in seemingly indigent villages.
- 4 The relations between the emergence process and spatial disparities do however remain to be analysed (Durand-Dastès, 2012). In the call for contributions for this issue of *Échogéo*, we ventured various hypotheses that were tested by the different papers we received.

Focal points of metropolisation in a few urban areas

- 5 Does the current metropolisation of urban networks cause a slow-down in small towns, with economic growth concentrating in just a few large urban areas? We know this not to be the case (Denis, Marius-Gnanou, 2011). Do small towns act as a growth engine for rural areas and contribute to non-agricultural diversification processes, although those have been very limited so far? Again, the answer appears to be negative. In this issue, C. Aubron, H. Lehoux and C. Lucas note that the cities of Gujarat, whether big or small, are unable to provide enough work for the rural workforce – whether or not the workers are relatively qualified. In Assam, E. Cremin and A. Hollé comment that physical access to the cities for rural populations is an issue in itself, due to the Brahmapoutre’s floods and course changes. This study highlights transport’s status as one of the weak spots in Indian growth (another one is energy, as highlighted by N. Mazzucchi).

Disparities within rural areas

- 6 Can spatial disparities also be observed within rural areas themselves? The Indian countryside appears to be characterised by almost uniform poverty – with rich villagers moving out to the cities (Gupta, 2005). However, C. Aubron *et al.* argue that even in Gujarat, often presented as the epitome of Indian growth, some rural spaces are

still affected by poverty; but that this poverty is not socially uniform, as it is mostly caused by an uneven allocation of land and water. In the nineteenth century, the Brahmins left India's countryside to settle in the cities, freeing up some agricultural land. Today on the contrary, Gujarat's Patels (just like Andhra Pradesh's Kammas) emigrate to large cities in India or abroad but retain ownership of their land, mostly through tenant farming contracts: this system disproportionately favours the landlords and promotes the dominance of a rural elite.

Has “emergence” increased spatial disparities ?

- 7 Are the contrasts affecting India a recent occurrence, or is their presence fundamentally structural and as such more challenging? For instance, F. Durand-Dastès analyses the sustained efforts made by New Delhi to identify indicators of underdevelopment – leading to the definition of “backward” districts, which are the main beneficiaries of aid and development policies. This tends to show that the disparities pre-dated emergence. Yet far from evening out these gaps, economic growth has been strongest in regions that were already ahead. N. Mazzucchi shows how India's hunger for energy has played in favour of oil-importing coastal regions, to the detriment of Eastern regions located far away from the pipeline networks. According to F. Durand-Dastès, regional planning policies are unable to really make an impact to differentiations processes, as those have become deeply ingrained over a long period of time. In fact, such policies are currently being scaled down or even dropped. E. Cremin and A. Hollé discuss the presence of relatively large airports in Assam, in the country's remote North-East, which was made possible by policies requiring airlines to provide connections to these airports: however, although they did contribute to reducing the gap between India's megalopolises and Assam's cities, air networks are unable to reduce the gap between these cities and their hinterland. As suggested by C. Aubron *et al.*, migrating to a city cannot grant a family any more than a basic survival income, just about covering the maintenance of the family that has stayed behind in their village, but it can in no way sustain any form of personal enrichment or capital building. Their paper highlights Gujarat's exemplary status: this state has seen the strongest agricultural growth in the twenty-first century, and has a remarkable industrial capacity... Yet it cannot guarantee its population's food safety. Rural areas in Gujarat (and probably in all of India) are left with three solutions: to subsidise environmental services delivered by agriculture (biodiversity, eco-tourism...); to foster economic diversification in favour of truly lucrative non-agricultural activities; or, as suggested by C. Aubron *et al.*, to push on with actual land reform and promote development through small-scale farming (the “White Revolution” of milk). So many avenues that still remain to be explored more thoroughly...

Poverty as a competitiveness factor

- 8 Should “submerged” pockets of poverty be seen as a residue from the past – as cysts that are yet to be resorbed by the development process? Or are they on the contrary essential components of emergence? Is the informal sector an “archaic” universe? Or is it key to the competitiveness of export businesses? In China, *hukou* booklets have enabled the growth of eastern cities by providing cheap labour with poor access to

employment law. Similarly, India's slums might be necessary to the cost-effective operation of Mumbai and Delhi. Does the term "exclusion" really apply to slum dwellers, of which only 1 to 2% are beggars (Saglio-Yatzmirsky, Landy ed., 2013)? This question clearly brings up political stakes. Is emergence a process that fosters convergence in the long term, or does it rest upon the perpetuation of inequality? "Is global emergence compatible with national divergence?", asks E. Leclerc. A growth process that is based upon inequality is eminently fragile: this could have dire consequences on the functioning of the "largest democracy in the world". In order to avoid serious political problems in the long term, India urgently needs to foster regional and social "convergence" processes.

- 9 The situation is not however totally bleak: E. Leclerc stresses the importance of "hybrid" spaces and relations, and refuses to only talk in terms of dichotomies or urban explosion. Even a technopole like Cyberabad, with almost "Californian" characteristics, is well integrated within the city of Hyderabad of which it forms part both functionally and morphologically. E. Ponceau-Goreau delivers a study of nursery schools in Tamil Nadu and Pondichéry. She shows that market liberalisation has caused a boom in the number of private schools which, regardless of the schools' cost or quality, has in turn contributed to improving schooling rates. The schools flourished in the urban sprawl, settling in new neighbourhoods or small towns within the metropolitan area. The State, which is traditionally very active in Southern India but has a realistic view of its limited capacity, has been supporting the development of the private sector by subsidising it. With families making huge investments in education, will this result in improved education for the population of India, creating a more solid basis for economic growth than the availability of cheap labour? Or will the new graduates simply join the already huge ranks of the unemployed or underemployed?

A new model of "postmodern" cities?

- 10 India could appear to be – like perhaps other countries – in the process of inventing a new, "postmodern" urban model, characterised by its contrasts and informal practices. For a number of reasons that include India's propensity to "forget" its cities (Louiset, 2011), a number of spatial and social morphologies are considered by urban planners, decision makers and even some researchers as "marginal" – and therefore bound to disappear. On the contrary, C. Guéguen and E. Leclerc's articles on Kolkata and Hyderabad provide a few insights into the functioning of these cities: chaotic as they might seem, one could still say about them "And yet, they move". However if one adopts, even passingly, a historical outlook, it becomes apparent that the very terms of the debate need to be questioned. Chandigarh, whose planners included Le Corbusier, and all the "new cities" of its generation from New Delhi to Gandhinagar, are exceptions: the political authorities that founded them imposed their views on hygiene and planning with such authority that these cities are still today fairly similar in structure to Western cities. The rest of Indian cities, whether Islamic cities, temple-cities or *bazaar*-cities, never corresponded to the standards of urban planners – whether those were foreign or Indian. For this reason, E. Leclerc refuses to use the term "postmodern": according to him, to quote Latour, "Indian cities were never modern in the first place."

Blurred scales

- 11 If one thinks vertically, postmodernity is perhaps more to do with the unilateral withdrawal of the State (both federal and federated) for the benefit of decentralised and globalised levels of power. Since the late 1980s, India has experienced two parallel and in no way mutually exclusive movements: economic liberalisation – sanctioned by the 1991 reforms – and devolution – with the Constitution amendments of 1992. The old Nehru State, with its aim of promoting “modernity” and “development” might appear entirely dismantled. And yet the articles presented in this issue tend to prove that this is not the case. This is not a zero-sum game: despite the demultiplication of stakeholders, the State retains its role within a complex rescaling of governance modes (Kennedy, 2013 ; Jenkins *et al.*, 2014). The largest discrepancies do not always stem from economic liberalisation and globalisation, partly because New Delhi is still reluctant to allow the federal states too much freedom. L. Kennedy demonstrates this by analysing tax-free zone policies, which allow the federal government to indirectly regain some form of control over the states: prefects (or “development commissaries”) are in charge of managing the zones, as part of a “political strategy aimed at bypassing regional authorities, which are deemed by New Delhi incapable of meeting its needs in terms of economic performance”. This blurring of scales in the context of an opening up to the world is also visible, although less directly, in C. Guéguen’s analysis of the regeneration of Kolkata’s Chinatown district: in this case, nation-States (China, Singapore, India) are working as partners or antagonists with transnational communities (the Chinese diaspora), an Indian state (West Bengal) and Kolkata’s city authorities, to allow some urban districts to gain heritage status. Only one scale is poorly represented in this case: the local population, who are hardly ever consulted.
- 12 It is important to stress that disparities are much more pronounced at a local scale than at a macro scale. There is a lesser income gap between Bihar and Goa than between a slum dweller and their neighbour living in a plush district of Mumbai. This of course is the case in any country in the world: disparities become more visible the closer you zoom in. However, these scale effects are particularly striking in India in comparison with Brazil or China, where regional inequalities are more pronounced. The gap is relatively narrow on a national scale, but remains abysmal on a local scale.

NOTES

1. See for instance <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>

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Thèmes : Sur le Champ - Sur le Terrain