

REFLECTIONS ON INDIAN URBAN GEOGRAPHY

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Introduction

Urban geography, which is comparatively of recent origin, is one of the most rapidly expanding subdisciplines of geography. It commands a very respectable position both in teaching as well as research being carried out in the Geography Departments of the Indian Universities and Colleges. Indian geographers have been busy producing enormous mass of literature in this branch of knowledge for the last three decades. The purpose of this paper is to present, only briefly though, the state of art and prospective research frontiers of Indian Urban Geography by examining its contour dynamics.

Indian Urban Geography: A Historical Configuration

India has a long legacy of urbanization. This, coupled with complex urban development in the varied historical, physiographic, economic and cultural setting have since long paved very colourful canvas and mosaics for the urban geographers to describe and interpret them. There is, however, no evidence to trace the root of Indian urban geography before 30s except of course two very important papers — one by Srinivasachari (1927) on the growth of the city of Madras and the other by Swaminathan (1928) on the sewage and city geography published in the Journal of the Madras Geographical Association.

These two papers proved as catalyst for several other geographers to fall in line and the Journal of the Madras Geographical Association which was later rechristened as the Indian Geographical Journal earned the credit and prestige of being the first journal in laying the foundation of urban geography in pre-independence India with the backing and support received from the geographers of Madras. The important contributors who championed this cause were N. Subrahmanyam, R. Dann, A. L. Sundaram, V. Koprachar, K. Nanjundappa, V. E. N. Rao, A. B. M. Pereira C. M. R. Chettiar, V. Tyagrajan and G. Kuriyan (Chatterjee, 1964). Their main focus of study was the port city of Madras but some towns and cities of secondary importance around the city of Madras having historical, religious or tourist background also received the attention of these geographers. The contributions of Deshpande (1941) on some aspects of towns and cities of Bombay province (now Maharashtra) and Prakashrao (1943) on the essence of town planning with a commentary of Cocenada town plan added some variations during this period. These were basically the study of man-land relationship which emphasized the importance of physical environment particularly the role of site and situation in the origin and evolution of towns. This preliminary phase of development in urban geography during the pre-independence period may

be referred to as foundation phase which has been basically 'descriptive' and 'ideographic' in nature.

The study of urban geography received great impetus during the post-independence period and a new era of development in this branch of knowledge was ushered in when the Indian geographers with their training from abroad joined teaching positions in the Indian Universities. This was also the time when some of the big urban centres like Calcutta and Bombay had started feeling the pinch of over-urbanization which involved some serious thinking. In addition, the growth of urban centres and urbanization due to pent-up energy released after the independence of the country as also the Second world War presented fairly good opportunities for urban geographical research. The initiatives taken by geographers at Calcutta and Banaras Hindu Universities during this period have been of immense value in promoting the cause of urban geography. Their main contribution lies in putting this sub-discipline on firm footing. The urban geographers of Calcutta who made important contributions are M. Guha, A. B. Chatterjee, A. K. Dutta, D. N. Mukerjee and N. R. Kar. The works of N. R. Kar and D. N. Mukerjee are especially worth mentioning as they reflect the application of modern methods and techniques of analysis. The Varanasi Centre led by R. L. Singh and his colleagues U. Singh and K. N. Singh etc. dealt with different aspects of specific towns with special emphasis on origin, growth, morphology, function and umland delimitation. The approach of E. Ahmad was however different as he attempted to describe the types and patterns of Urban Centres by relating them to physical, social economic and political factors in broad regional settings. His emphasis was on the study of comparative urban geo-

graphy (See, Chatterjee, 1964 and Gosal, 1972).

The publication of Singh's, Ph.D. thesis/ Banaras — A Study in Urban Geography in 1955 (Singh, 1955) established a very strong tradition of urban geographical research by encouraging several young geographers during sixties to prepare their doctoral dissertations on specific towns and cities. The easy access to data through gazetteers and census, descriptive methods and techniques and on top of that the special premium put on the doctoral degree for promotion and appointments in colleges and universities attracted a large number of young geographers in this field. These studies however followed Singh's approach which had the weakness of treating the city of Banaras as 'Island' and therefore suffered from the problem of 'isolationism.' The work of Manzoor Alam (Alam, 1965) nevertheless presents a departure from this trend as it shows variation in methodology and content. A few conceptual papers were also produced during this period. These cover a variety of fields such as urban geography in general (Prakashrao, 1957), concept and morphological aspects of twin and double towns (Prasad, 1958), Achutarao, 1967), functional classification (Lal, 1959 and Rafiullah, 1965), identification and concept of functional zones (Sen, 1959 and Dixit, 1961), concepts of primate city (Bhatia, 1962), umland, hinterland and city-region (Nath, 1962, Dixit, 1968 and Mahadev et al, 1969), urban fringe (Mukerjee, 1963), basic-non-basic concept (Singh and Singh, 1966), slums (Singh, 1966), application of rank-size relationship (Reddy, 1969) and concept of conurbation (Dwivedi, 1969). While these papers review the western concepts and ideas, some of them also demonstrate the methods and application. In any case these papers helped

to promote the conceptual foundation of urban geography in India. This period of development may be referred to as the 'phase of diversification' and 'synthesis'—'diversification' because of the consideration of different aspects of towns and 'synthesis' because the description and interpretation embarked upon the areal differentiation besides perpetuating the traditions of man-land relationship.

While the traditional descriptive approach of studying the towns in terms of their origin and growth, land use, demographic features, functional typology and unland delimitation continued, the nomothetic approach which aims at deriving generalizations and seeking patterns and orders emerged during seventies. The Central place Theory of Christaller, Rank Size Rule of Zipf and Nearest Neighbour Technique used by King provided the theoretical bases. The application and use of statistical techniques and some deterministic models became quite evident (See Alam, 1984, Misra, 1984 and Diddee, 1984). Although Prakashrao's book 'The Towns of Mysore State' (Prakashrao, 1964) served as a precursor in demonstrating the use of statistical/mathematical techniques in the analysis of urban pattern, the IGU Commission's symposium on Quantitative Geography held at the Geography Department, Mysore University in 1968 provided great incentive to the use of quantitative techniques in Geography in general and Urban geography in particular. But the Indian urban geographers, on account of the poor access to computer softwares and hardwares, confined mainly to the use of Standard Deviation, Location Quotient, Correlation and Regression analysis only. They have little realized the fact that urbanization as a phenomenon is very complex, varied and multidimensional and can be explained

only through the use of maximum variables with optimum functions. This trend of bivariate analysis continues even today. It is only recently that some multivariate techniques such as Principal Component and Factor Analysis have been used to identify the basic dimensions of towns and ecological structure of city areas (See Swaminathan 1977, Rajmohan, 1982, Reddy and Prabhu, 1986 and Sita and Brush, 1988).

Interestingly the analytical studies with positivistic underpinnings continue to attract the Indian urban geographers. As a result the studies on urbanization, rank-size rule, hierarchy and distribution form the most important themes of Indian urban geography even today (Sarkar, 1987, Bose, 1987, Taragi and Kumar, 1986, Singh, 1988). Of course a few process-oriented studies with behavioural perspectives have also appeared, only recently though. These studies are based on the analyses of spatial preferences, choices and perceptions of urban environment, quality of life and shopping behaviour etc. by human beings who are the key actors in the decision making process and bringing about the spatial changes in a built environment (See Desai, 1985, Kulkarni, 1984, Swaminathan et al, 1985, Soundaram, 1984, Panneerselvam, 1989). The volumes edited by Alam and Pokshishevsky (1976) and Mahadev (1986) are fairly good representative samples of the current trends in Indian urban geography. It is significant to mention that the researches in urban geography suffered a serious setback during eighties due to over emphasis and attention of geographers on 'Integrated Rural Development.' This is true that both rural and urban developments are interrelated and interdependent and one cannot be ignored for the other but this is also a fact that several important issues ema-

nating from the present urban scenario could not be taken up. Nevertheless the growing concern of Indian urban geographers is evident by the fact that they have been busy in exploring some important dimensions of Indian urbanization which have, hitherto, been unknown (Deshpande, 1980, Prakashrao, 1983, Krishan, 1980, Misra, 1986, Ram Chandran, 1989). Some of the researchers have gone far beyond the conventional studies and broken new grounds by focussing on the role of informal sector in the urban economy (Gopi & Kalpana, 1982, Misra, 1983, 1981 and Rai 1987) and the problem of urban health and housing (Jayasree & Gollerkeri, 1984 Prasad, 1985 and Misra, 1990). Such problem oriented studies have great policy implications and therefore need further refinement.

Paradigm Shifts: A Critique

Paradigms are the conceptual matrices with built in characteristics of epistemology, ontology and methodology. They represent the basic framework, a broad based model or a general body of knowledge within which a discipline functions. Paradigms do not get lost. When one paradigm replaces the other, it is called 'paradigm shift'. The paradigms which have paved the conceptual canvas and projected the philosophical perspectives of urban geography, are explorative, environmentalism, regionalism, spatial system, behaviouralism and structuralism. While the first three, commonly referred to as traditional paradigms, operated prior to the Second World War, the other there are contemporary paradigms which have been in vogue after the Second World War (Misra, 1989). Viewed in this context, the Indian urban geography too has witnessed paradigmatic shifts ever since its birth during thirties. It began with environmentalism or man-

land relationship by studying the site, situation and evolution of towns and imbibed the philosophy of regionalism or areal differentiation through its morphological/functional zone studies during fifties and sixties. This ideographical approach was replaced by spatial system paradigm projecting the nomothetic approach and positivist philosophy during seventies and eighties. While the effect of spatial system paradigm continues, a few man-man relationship studies (or behavioural studies) focussing human behaviour, preferences and perceptions have also started evolving now. What is conspicuously missing is the work based on structuralism which is the current focus of the western scholars (Misra, 1989). 'The two important variants of structural imperatives which directly influence the urban geographic research are known as political economy approach and urban managerialism. The political economy approach examines the role of government policies and private capitalism to the extent they affect the growth and development of city structure. The concept of managerialism underlines the importance of urban management and class conflict in studying the social formation and allocation of resources in city. This assumes that there is an intermediate level between the bottom and top structures. This intermediate level is represented by the urban managers and gatekeepers who contribute enormously to the intra-urban disparities by way of production and distribution of already scarce resources' (Misra, 1989).

We find that there has been some sort of time lag between our researches and prevailing paradigms. We have neither been able to catch the paradigms of western world on time nor have we been able to evolve new ones in our historical and cultural context.

Thematic Contents: A Review

The thematic contents of Indian urban geography have developed within the framework of two popular approaches — (a) Cities as systems and (b) System of cities. The first approach, which derives its theoretical stimuli from the land use/urban growth models developed by the Chicago School of Sociologists, emphasizes the study of internal structure of urban areas such as land use system, factorial ecology and social area analysis by treating the towns and cities as regions by themselves. The second approach concentrates on the study of spatial patterns, city size, hierarchy, functional classification and rural urban interaction by treating the towns as points on space. The Central Place Theory of Christaller (Baskin, 1966) with its modifications by Losch (1954) has been used in the second approach for measuring the departures and deriving the generalizations. The *ICSSR Journal of Abstracts and Reviews in Geography* puts the papers of Indian urban geographers into eleven major groups: (i) general, (ii) urbanization, (iii) growth, distribution and patterns, (iv) land use and morphology, (v) economic structure and base, (vi) social structure, (vii) city region and city interland relationships, (viii) functional classification, (ix) urban planning, (x) urban system and (xi) quality of life. A little more subtle grouping has been done by Alam (1984) who has identified seven major themes in his survey of research in Indian urban geography. These are (i) pattern and trends of urbanization (ii) morphology and evolution of towns (iii) city region and hierarchy of urban settlements (iv) functional characteristics and classification (v) urban economics, policies and administration. While the last three sections have been very weakly represented,

there is absolutely no major work having system approach.

The Indian urban geography has wide coverage but it is heavily influenced by the uncritical acceptance of western concepts and ideas without realizing the fact that West is West and East is East. (Raju, 1985, Reddy, 1989 and Markandey, 1987). It is neither theory oriented nor policy oriented. Its major weakness lies in the absence of enough empirical data to provide inductive base for indigenous theory building. The works of the most of the Indian urban geographers do not touch the real issues. Reality forms only part of introduction.

Prospective Research Frontiers

Indian urban geography has moved forward but a lot more remains yet to be done especially in the light of emerging urban scenario of the country due to massive growth of urban population. During the last two decades i.e. 1961-71 and 1971-81 the urban population grew by 37.9 percent and 46.2 percent respectively. Despite being urbanized only by 24 percent, India's urban population is the fourth largest in the world after China, Soviet Union and U.S.A. According to 1981 Census the total urban population of the country is 160 million which is likely to grow to 361 million by the turn of next century (United Nations, 1980). There are about 3300 urban centres classified into six classes, and several rural settlements have swung in favour of urban centres to join their group in not too distant a future. The urban morphological structure is represented by 218 class I cities which encompass about 60 percent of the India's urban population. This has several important manifestations such as crowding, unemployment, tertiarisation, ruralisation, growth of informal sector, deteriorating public utility services,

poor quality of life, pollution and problem of transport, slums and squatter settlements etc. called urban dilemma. It is our greatest dilemma that Indian urban geography has not focussed adequate attention to describe, explain and evaluate the processes underpinning this urban dilemma. The roles of urban geography are descriptive in the sense that these seek to depict accurately the spatial expressions of urban conditions, explanatory, in that they need to investigate cause and effect relationships, and evaluative in that they need both to recognize the inequities arising from the spatial allocation of scarce resources and to identify those alternative states which might more closely satisfy the criteria of efficiency and/or social justice (Herbert et al. 1982).

Some of the urban issues which need to be given priority treatment and thereby form the prospective research frontiers for developing theoretical and policy oriented studies in Indian urban geography may be following:

1. The western theoretical myth that urbanization is a product of industrialization needs to be probed in the Indian context. The empirical evidences have shown that tertiarization is the most important process of urbanization in developing economies (See Raza 1980 and 1981). This phenomenon of tertiarization without industrialization seems to be fairly well pronounced in the growth of small and intermediate towns (Misra, and 1986). This mushroom growth of informal sector which provides employment to more than half of the India's urban population is closely associated with the process of tertiarisation. Yet another significant development which has been noted in the Indian towns and cities is the process of ruralisation (Misra & Misra 1983) These are inter-related

phenomena. The implications of these developments have to be carefully watched, analysed and evaluated within the framework of political economy, social structure and economic background to understand the rural-urban dynamics in India. Such studies may help to evolve the alternative models of urban regional development which may be economically viable, socially acceptable and culture specific.

2. Rural-urban interaction as a theme, has, since long been the thrust of Indian urban geographers. In the present context, however, it is not enough to confine this study only to delimitting the city-region. There is need to study the spread/backwash effects by examining the role of towns and cities in the regional development process.

3. The Indian urban system has not been studied with system approach. As a result the concepts of multiplier, feedback and spillover have not been taken into consideration. Thus urban geographers can make significant contribution in explaining the Indian urban systems by applying these concepts. The simulation and diffusion models can also be fruitfully applied to explore the possible state of art of future Indian urban systems.

4. The housing and land markets provide yet another potential field in which Indian urban geographers can make significant contribution. There are several dimensions of housing and land markets which are unknown e.g. the roles played by urban managers (planners, private and public institutions and bureaucrats etc.) and gatekeepers (housing societies, estate agents and financiers). They are key actors responsible for artificial demand housing and the price hike in land values. The analysis of their roles vis-a-vis the spatial variations in the land values and

housing forms the major area of research in a built environment. The urban geographer's role is to study these at length and identify the entry points where the planners and policy makers can intervene to provide the shelter for low income groups.

5. Slums and squatter settlements are the most important realities of the Indian urban scene. Nearly 23 percent of the Indian urban population live in slums. This ratio is about 32 percent in case of class I cities. The squatter settlements which are also called popular or spontaneous settlements cover all forms of the

housing sub-market through which low income groups find accommodation. It is important that we should study to know how and why low income, illegal and quasi-legal settlements develop and to what extent they provide shelter for the cities' population and what are the problems of their inhabitants.

6. The analysis of urban ecology and environment forms one of the current thrust in the urban geographical research. However mere quantitative analysis is not enough; it should be studied with structural imperatives in order to understand the functioning of city as a system.

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