URBAN MODELS AND INDIAN REALITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no other sub-field of Indian Geography has received so much attention as Urban Geography (ICSSR, 1971, 1983), and yet there seems to be little comming out of it as a contribution, theoretical or practical, to the understanding of the Indian phenomenon. Umlands, morphologies, functional densities and gradients, 'urban hierarchies' and the like have been studied with reference to many Indian cities and towns; and there has been recently a rousing interest in urban slums. But most of such studies are attempts to fit in Western concepts into Indian realities. It is obvious that we must study our urban realities first, identify problems and do some empirical research before we attempt generalisations, models and theory building. This short communication aims at highlighting some problems that merit investigation.

MODERN TECHNOLOGY AND URBAN GROWTH IN AN ECONOMICALLY BACK-WARD SOCIETY

'Push' and 'Pull' factors are advanced as main causes of rapid urbanisation in our country. But how far has modern technology abetted this growth needs to be understood. The first impact was that of the railways, then came the more powerful impact of modern industry; a force which continues even today to cause rapid urban growth. These have undoubtedly stimulated econo-mic production for the country as a whole, but have not ameliorated the conditions of the majority of the urban dwellers. The case with which immigrants can throng a city and live in it as pavement or slum dwellers, must be to a good extent attributed to modern transport and the deceptive attraction of employment in factory industry. Specific studies of such migrations are necessary.

The ways in which modern technology encourages rapid urban growth, but fails ro serve it even at the basic minimum, can be identified, housing, water supply, sanitation, roads, lighting notoriously falling short of the growing urban needs, because it takes time and money to provide them, while inmigration movements are sharp and sudden. Further, disposal of sewage by it fluents implies a heavy demand on the urban water supply. The self contained flat encourages social isolation and inward outlook in the urban dwellers. High rise building technology escalates traffic congestion; deep, piling for foundations has lead to putting good fertile land to raise urban buildings. All this suggest that studies must be conducted as regards the process and patterns in urban structure and ways to avoid the bad impacts of modern technology on urban growth, and search for a technology that would suit the ethos of the Indian city.

URBAN RESIDENCE AND INTRA-URBAN MOBILITY

While there are several studies of urban densities and locational differentiation largely based on castes, there are no studies of intra-urban mobility or shifts of population. Turner's theory relating to housing priorities does not seem to be tenable in the Indian context (Quoted by Schenk, 1986, pp. 176-178). Movement "from core to periphery" concept, too, does not fit in. For understanding there fascinating and important aspects, it is necessary to appreciate the following characteristics of the Indian urban scene : (1) residents are conditioned, over a long period, to reside in a crowded manner, (2) they are still bound by traditional caste adhesions (Eg. the Pols in Gujarat Towns, Galli or Aali in Maharashtra towns); (3) Rent control acts have pegged them down to the old residential structures with nominal rents. Hence, it is rare that residents from older areas shift to the urban fringe or to suburbia. While crowding and perception have been studied recently by Anjana Desai (1979) and Kulkarni (1984) in relation to Ahmedabad, similar studies need to be made in other cities to arrive at some empirical generalisation. Studying a caste enclave is another field of study which is challenging. But little is known about the outlook and behaviour of these residents. Do people who make good in life leave their caste enclave? Do poorer people residing in it get the support of the better off neighbours? These and similar questions need to be answered.

THE URBAN RESIDENT ON THE MOVE

It is inevitable that the urban resident must commute since his place of work and place of residence are in most cases situated far apart. What are the travel patterns of (a) tycoon , (b) an office going clerk, (c) a labourer going to his construc-tion site or to a factory? What is the conveyance he uses? A car? A public transport bus? A bicycle? On foot? How much does he know of his city besides the narrow belt of perciption between his residence and his place of work? How long does he take to reach and come back from where he works?

URBAN BEHAVIOUR AND URBAN SPACE USE

How do changing social values and habits influence the use of urban space is a little studied aspect though it has assumed important dimensions in city life. Let us take the case 'fast foods' served on the pavement sides. The Deccan Gymkhana (Pune) commercial area burtles with this activity in the evening from about 7 PM to 10 PM, when almost all shop frontages that get cloud for the day are opened up for 'Pav-bhaji' eateries; by the following dawn there is no trace of their activity. About twenty years ago such eating would have been frowned upon. Hawkers, peddlars, roadside dhabas and pan shops are on the increase much to obstruct the pedestrian for whom the foot paths are meant.

TRAFFIC PATTERNS AND INTENSITIES

This is yet another little studied but important aspect of our urban life and it has very much to do with our standard of living. Cars, a standard feature of mobility in Western cities, are small in number as compared with buses, scooters, bicycles and pedestrians, yet they use more per capita road space, much to the detriment of other users. In spite of a rapid increase in scooters, bicycles and auto rickshaws, the man who covers his distance on foot is still in majority in our cities. It is he who needs to be studied and given adequate relief in city planning.

EPHEMIRAL SPRAWLESS AND HIGH RISE STRUCTURES

Almost all Indian cities and towns show this stark contrast. The urban fringe is a ribbon growth of hastily raised structures of shops, hotels, and residence, in course of time they acquire a stable form by use of brick, cement concrete etc. These seem to defy all urban planning as could be seen along the Chinchwad stretch of the Pune-Bombay road. On the other hand, the old core and its surroundings of the older part of the town is getting severe jolts by way of urban renewal; demolition of the old, irrespective of its historic buildings and association, and construction of high structures, leading to heavy traffic congestion. And both in the older parts and the new fringing sprawls, slum make a starting appearance wherever there is an open strip.

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

It is obvious that civic values and social attitudes have charged a good deal for the worse. Modern life in the Indian cities is almost the law of the jungle, everyone taking care of himself and not bothering about others. Lack of neighbourhood feeling and concern for clean and healthy surroundings are conspicuous by their absence. There is no social control — 'public opinion' — on behaviour. How can these values be re-included among the citizen is a proper field of enquiry. This, however, implies, that the urban society needs to be studied in aspects which are not revealed by Census data, but can be identified by field investigation.

POLICY, PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Government policies — State, local/municipal vitally influence the planning and development process. In our urban studies these have not received the attention they deserve, and our studies tend to become "Glass house pieces."

All these examples would show that there is much to understand about the Indian city; and instead of superficial attempts to put the Indian city in the straight jacket of Western concepts and labels, it is first necessary to identify and study our specific urban problems and compare our findings with those relating to Western cities. Only then, it would be possible not only to make conceptual/theoretical contributions to Urban Geography, but to contribute effectively to urban planning.

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