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Trends Of Urbanization In India From The Ancient To The Colonial Times

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Abstract: The study is precisely an attempt to study the trends of urbanization in India from the ancient times to the colonial times. The paper is organized into two sections. The first section of this chapter is introductory in nature and will help us to understand the concepts and processes related to the process of urbanization. The second section of the paper discusses the long tradition of urbanization process in India right from the ancient times to the medieval times. It goes to discuss how with the advent of the British in India this process of urbanization will go under transformation and lead to the new urban forms. It aims to give insight into the 'urban universe' of the colonial community and into the physical-spatial urban forms into which this was translated.

I

There has been a considerable interest in urban history in the recent decades. Urban places have been an integral part of the society from the earliest times and urbanization as a subject of in-depth study, though a recent phenomenon, has become a popular field of research amongst scholars due to continued and considerable influx of population to the urban areas. The general purpose of studies of urbanization is to provide a broader understanding of the factors associated with the emergence and evolution of cities on one hand and the consequences of urbanization on the other- economic, physical, social, and political. Such general studies have the great value of providing a framework for the design and conduct of studies of individual urban places or specific urban problems, and they provide a background against which such studies may be compared and evaluated.ⁱ Planned development for urban future, industrialization and problems resulting from this are also now important aspects of urbanization. The great transformation now taking place in human society requires that the process of urbanization as an essential part of social transformation be thoroughly understood, especially since urbanization is occurring on the large scale and in the manner never experienced before. Urbanization in India has held the attention from the social scientists in the post-independence period. It was in the 1950s that the substantial urban studies in Sociology, Geography, Demography, and some other disciplines began appearing, but serious works in urban history took longer to make their mark.

What is then 'urban centre'? The multi-dimensional nature of the urban process defies a single definition of 'urban centre'. Here we run into real difficulties, for no universally accepted definition exists. About thirty definitions of urban population are currently in use, none of them totally satisfactory.ⁱⁱ However, the most relevant definition of the word 'urban' is as opposed to 'rural' and implies an activity that is divorced from the cultivation of soil and that is carried out in close association with kindred activities at fixed places. These activities in the broadest sense are cultural, commercial, industrial, administrative, and residential.ⁱⁱⁱ The process of a location initially becoming 'urban', through acquiring specific characteristics, with an increased concentration of people and functions of cities is called 'urbanization'.^{iv} This process involves two phases. One is movement of people from rural to urban places, where they engage in primarily non-agricultural occupations. Second, is the change in lifestyle that results from living in cities.^v

Some processes have played an important role in the growth of urbanization namely the development of religious centres, politico-administrative process, economic, geographic, and socio-cultural processes, transportation, development of educational institutions. Throughout the history of India, these processes are reflected in the growth of urbanization. For instance, according to ancient literature, a place without a temple was considered as a barren wasteland. For, this reason, kings initially gave much importance to the construction of the temple. Later, with the establishment of the administrative functions and construction of small palaces, these temple settlements grew as urban centres, recognized as important cities, though it may not be possible to equate such early cities with the present urban areas. Madurai, Kanchipuram, Thanjavur, Trivandrum, Rajahmundry, Coimbatore, Amritsar, etc. are some of the urban centres, which originated during ancient times with temple as nucleus.^{vi}

The administrative factor played an important role in the emergence, growth and decay of towns and cities in India. From about 5th century to 18th century A.D., urban centres in India emerged, declined, or even vanished with the rise and fall of empires like Patliputra, Ujjain, Vijaynagar, Delhi, Bijapur, Golconda, Madurai and Kanchipuram. The capital cities occupied a position of primacy among all cities. During the colonial period, the provincial capitals, the districts headquarters, and tehsil towns grew in importance and overshadowed the earlier urban centres like Calcutta, Pune, Mahabaleshwar, Ambala, Shimla, Delhi etc., are some of the examples of the politico-administrative factor.

Similarly, the economic process is another most important cause for the growth of an urban centre. The agricultural development and trading activities leads to faster urbanization. The hypothesis that can be put forth is that with the development of agriculture, more surpluses are generated in agriculture, which can be used either to raise the standard of living or to invest in industry and tertiary sector. As the life is considered better in cities than in the villages, because of obvious reason, there can be a tendency for the rich farmers to shift their residences to urban areas, or at least to establish some industry or service centre of their own. This leads to urbanization. Industrial factors also act as a pull factor for the rural population to the urban areas for seeking employment in industrial or tertiary sector.^{vii}

A continuous expansion of cities towards their peripheries and the appropriation of urban facilities by the hinterland have given rise to the several urban concepts, such as 'suburbanization', which refers to the tendency among the residents of the big cities in recent times to move from the central place to the outer side of the city.^{viii} Another concept is 'over-urbanization', which in simple words refers to rapid urbanization without sufficient economic growth to support it.^{ix} The main cause of over-urbanization is the pressure of population on land in the rural areas in these countries. Economic or "push" in the countryside mounts continuously and pushes out people to the cities in search of employment and livelihood. The rural-urban migration that leads to over-urbanization is mainly a consequence of economic push from the countryside, rather than the demand for labour by developing economic activity in the towns and cities, or what is called their "pull". Consequently, these migrants can only get employment in activities with very low productivity or swell the ranks of unemployed. Thus, the recent rapid rate of urbanization visible in Asian countries does not bespeak of a corresponding growth of industry but a shift of people from low productive agricultural employment to yet another section marked by low productivity employment, namely handicraft production, retail trading, domestic services in urban areas.^x

Urbanization in India is, by and large, still a fringe phenomenon a kind of partially integrated, semi-urban, slum squatter, stagnant settlements at the periphery of large urban, metropolitan centres. Urban fringe refers to the land lying between two or three miles from the existing town boundary. At times a fringe area is taken to be "a particularly problematic area quite close to a given city boundary". It is the fringe phenomenon in the sense that in its size, spread, impact and role in the processes of social transformation, it remains a small, limited, and weak phenomenon. Urban fringes are a result of rural urban interaction in a situation in which the urban sector does not possess adequate capacity to absorb and integrate the cast-offs from the rural sector. Additionally, processes of historical neglect of urban housing and grossly inadequate provision of urban infrastructure and civic amenities also contribute to the emergence of urban fringes. It is a factor also associated with the limited development of industries and modern socio-economic processes reflected in the persistence of a multicultural society. Owing to a complex of such factors and embodying their consequences, urbanization has not evolved into a decisive, dynamic phenomenon; it remains one of those incomplete, unintegrated developments which India's intimate relationship with more advanced capitalist world and the halting and lop-sided process of modern economic development foisted on her. It is in this sense that urbanization can be considered a fringe phenomenon in India.^{xi}

II

The most striking feature of India's urbanization is its long tradition. The Indian sub-continent shares, with Mesopotamia and Nile valley, a long history of urbanization. The first phase of urbanization in India is associated with the Indus valley dating back to 2500 B.C. The cities of this civilization flourished over a period of more than 600 years up to about 1700 BC.^{xiii} The urban character of this phase is recognizable in a hierarchy of settlement sites, in the planned cities, in the urban infrastructure provided at Mohenjodaro, their design, monumental architecture and orientation, apart from other significant archeological evidence. However, this early urbanism lived short and left no legacy.^{xiii} This was followed by a prolonged period of over a thousand years in which we have no evidence of urban development. It was only the 6th century B.C., which saw the emergence of second urbanization, i.e., The Age of Mahajanpadas.^{xiv} Unlike the first urban civilization, which mainly flourished in North-west, Punjab, Sindh, Western U.P., this civilization mainly flourished in the Gangetic valley of eastern U.P. and Bihar. It is often attributed to abundance of natural resources such as iron, and its effective use in making weapons and agricultural tools, which enabled the Magadhan rulers to equip with effective weapons and tools such as axes to clear forests and ploughs to plough deep. Apart from this, the alluvial soil of the Gangetic plains and sufficient rainfall were conducive for surplus production in agriculture sector. All this resulted in settled agricultural communities. Surplus in agriculture meant that the other people could concentrate in other activities, which led to diversification in occupation, rise of towns and use of metallic money boosted trade and commerce. The trade expanded from the Ganges valley to other parts of India, covering almost the whole of the subcontinent.^{xv} From this period onwards, for about 2500 years, India has had more or less continuous history of urbanization. However, we know from historical evidence that there were both periods of urban growth and periods of urban decline. The cities grew in number and in size during the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods (from 300 B.C. to 600 A.D.), both in northern India as well as in the extreme south. Cities declined and were largely neglected during the post-Gupta period that is from 600 AD to about 1000 AD in northern India.^{xvi} The prime casual factor in urban decay is traced to the decline of long-distance (maritime) trade, i.e. Indo-Roman trade and trade with Southeast Asia by third century AD, and the manifestations of the decline are seen in the absence of Roman coins after third century AD, a general paucity of coins, as well as the poor nature of the archeological remains of the post-Gupta in the northern sites.^{xvii} In southern India, on the other hand, urbanization attained a zenith during a period from 800 AD to 1200 AD.^{xviii}

Urbanization attained a second climax during the Mughal period, when many of India's major cities were established. W.H. Moreland, the contemporary European, noticed the abundance of towns in the Mughal Empire. These urban centres were the centres of crafts production. Like silk weaving industry was localized in Cambay, Ahmedabad, and Pattan in the province of Gujrat; and the capital cities in Kashmir, Lahore, and Multan, while Agra and Fatehpur had royal *karkhanas*. Manufacture of woollens was localized in Kashmir, Lahore, and Agra; and these centres were also known for carpet weaving. Similarly, many cities were known as the centres of cotton textiles: Agra, Lahore, Multan, Sukkar, Thatta, Ahmedabad, Pattan, Baroda, Broach, Surat, Cambay, Burhanpur and Golconda. H.K. Naqvi in her work clearly demonstrates that industry and trade played a crucial role in the rise and decline of cities.^{xix}

One of the earliest structural elements of ancient cities was the walled citadel, often ringed by one or more settlements, with the wall providing protection to the ruling group contained within its confines. The citadel consisted of prominent structures containing the treasures of the society and surplus foods and provided the living space for the powerful and revered leadership class. The people inside this walled city were primarily engaged in non-agricultural occupations. The common masses lived in the lower town, who were primarily engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry.^{xx} The pattern continued to be followed in medieval period. Thick walls enclosed the medieval city; watchtowers and external moats added to its military defense^{xxi} with a notable contribution in the sphere of architecture. During the medieval times, K. Ashraf makes brief comments on the changing appearance of the cities. Spacious mosques, domes, gateways, and arches were added to temples, tanks, and massive buildings of the pre-Turkish town. Intersecting roads were connected with the main gates of the city wall, providing the main *bazaars* or shopping centres of the city. The special classes of tradesmen and guilds of craftsmen occupied the different wings of the *bazaars*. The city was divided into separate quarters for various social groups based on race, creed, caste or occupation. The scavengers, leather-dressers, beggars, and the like were made to live on the outskirts of the town and cities. Social differentiation was also reflected in the size and structure of the houses.^{xxii}

When the Mughal supremacy was at its height, it is noteworthy that it was during this time that the European nations also started making headways towards India to make money. The Portuguese were the first to establish new port towns in India- Panaji in Goa in 1510 and Bombay in 1532. They were followed by the Dutch- Machilipatnam in 1605 and Nagapattinam in 1658; and the French- Pondicherry in 1673 and Chandranagore in 1690. All these European settlements, and the European presence as traders in many existing Indian ports and inland cities, continued throughout the Mughal period but without having any marked impact on the level of urbanization in India.^{xxiii}

While undertaking the study of urbanization during the ancient and medieval times, a serious note was taken regarding the location of these towns. Mainly they were situated on the riverbanks like Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Patliputra, Prayag, Delhi, etc. Cities were located near rivers mainly for reasons of water supply, strategic location, and command over the agricultural wealth in the river basin.^{xxiv} Apart from the river sites, coastal port cities also existed like during the Harappan phase-Lothal, Bagatrav, and several other towns in Gujrat and on the Makran coast, had trade links with the Sumerians. Ports on the east coast of India developed at the same time, particularly in southern India. Puhar or Kaveripatnam, Korkai, Pondicherry and Nagapattinam were the earliest ports on the east coast. Trade with the Southeast Asia attained great heights during the reign of the Pallava and Chola kings from the 4th to the 12th century AD. Thus, east coast and west coast urban axes have developed and flourished in India from prehistoric times. Also, in ancient times a hilly location was preferred for cities from the point of view of security. Rajgir in Bihar is a classic example of such a town. In medieval times hill slopes provided good sites for forts. Hills and the associated forts and their ramparts form a characteristic landscape feature of several towns and cities in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The city of Golconda was a fort city on the slope of a hill. Gwalior, Jaipur, and Jodhpur were also known for their hill forts and palaces.^{xxv}

Thus, during the ancient and the medieval times, the towns and cities were located mostly along trade routes, seacoast, and rivers, in the valleys of mountains, and at points of contact between the hills and the plains. Thus, due to the natural advantages, constraints of the terrain climate and backward level of technology, these sites had the maximum concentration of urban centres in the early nineteenth century.^{xxvi}

However, the British brought about a marked difference in urbanization process when they entered the scene with their own principles of 'town planning'. In 1600 AD, the British came to India as traders and by the turn of the eighteenth century, they became the rulers of our country. The centuries of alien rule in India were bound to leave behind a rich legacy. However, with the advent of the British, towns were formed in new locations. Site differential was a marked feature of the evolutionary process of the towns under the British. Under the British, the centre of gravity of urban life moved from inland to the port cities and hilltop settlements.^{xxvii} Therefore, the last, but not the least important socio-cultural influence on Indian urbanization came from the British who ruled over India for nearly 150 years.

Among the most enduring landscape expressions of colonial rule in India, which changed the existing pattern of urban settlements or the major contributions of the British to the Indian urban scene were firstly, the creation of three metropolitan port cities (Calcutta, Bombay and Madras), which emerged as the leading colonial cities of the world. Secondly, by the mid of 19th century it was understood that in all the great provinces of India lofty hills exist, available as health stations. The first hill station was established as early as 1815, and by 1870 there were over 80 hill stations in four different areas in India, serving the four major metropolitan cities of Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay and Madras. These areas were: (a) Shimla-Mussoorie-Nainital near Delhi, (b) Darjeeling-Shillong near Calcutta, (c) Mahabaleshwar in the Western Ghats near Bombay, and (d) the Nilgiri-Kodaikanal area in Tamil Nadu.^{xxviii} Therefore, as the hot season came, the eyes of the invalids among the European population in India turned involuntarily to the hills. By the end of the century, the summer exodus to the hills had become well established. Each provincial government had its own hill station: Bombay went to Mahabaleshwar from April to June, then to Poona until October; the Madras Government spent six months of the year in Ootacamund; the North-West Provinces and Oudh, later the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, removed itself to Nainital from May to mid-October; Bengal went to Darjeeling for four months; and the Governments of India and of Punjab itself went to the grandest hill-station of all, Shimla.^{xxix} These hill top towns were entirely new in terms of their location, layout plans, and infrastructure. These were perceived as independent townships with residential areas, employment areas, shopping centres, educational and health facilities and all the basic urban amenities such as water supply, sewerage and so on.

Thirdly, the British modified the urban landscape of the existing cities with the introduction of cantonments, institutions unique to India.^{xxx} According to dictionary of Ivor Lewis, the word, 'cantonment' has been taken from the French word 'canton' which means 'quarters. The word was constantly used in India, and so little used elsewhere. It was applied to military stations in India, built usually on a plan, which was originally that of a standing camp.^{xxxii} The cantonment or permanent military station was the institutionalized form of settlement for the military representatives of British colonial power in India from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. They built 114 cantonments situated throughout India. Over half of these settlements were located 'on the plains', some 5 per cent of them between 1,200 and 7,800 feet above sea level in the so-called 'hill stations and the remainder, a few hundred feet above the sea-level.^{xxxiii} The fourth form of urban settlements introduced by the British in India was the civil lines. The colonial rulers were not interested at all in thickly populated and unplanned Indian towns. They considered them as centres of anarchy and chaos and only sources of filth and diseases. Therefore, ubiquitous civil station was built as an accretion to the existing native town.^{xxxiiii} The European businessmen, Anglo-Indians and sometimes the military officers lived in the civil station, or the civil lines. The planned settlement of civil lines stood in sharp contrast to the indigenous town. Wide roads formed a grid and ran parallel to the central road, the Mall. The rectangles thus formed were further divided into regular plots of several acres housing the bungalows of officers, gradually the sites for building houses in the civil lines began to be sold by the government to the prominent persons, including the well-to-do Indians. The civil lines covered an extensive area yet had a low density of population. With its large residential plots, spacious one-story houses, broad-tree-lined roads, and generous provision of amenities, the civil station was comparable to an earlier twentieth century upper- or middle-class European suburb.^{xxxiv}

Fifthly, the 'colony' town, a planned model settlement, on the other hand, was created on an entirely different purpose. Founded at the specifically chosen sites in the canal; irrigated tracts, these centres combined features of the old and new towns, housing the grain market as well as other *bazaars*, light manufactures and residential blocks organized, interestingly, along caste or community lines. The colony towns had their suburbs in the railway station and the civil lines. Functionally, the new urban enclaves and towns showed a specific land use pattern whereas the indigenous but anglicized towns had an overlapping land use.^{xxxv} Sixthly, the introduction of the railways and modern industry led to the creation of new industrial towns such as Jamshedpur, Dhanbad, and so on.^{xxxvi} These towns were established to perform functions specific to colonial administration in India. This also represented a historical break from the earlier tradition in which various functions were performed from the same settlement.^{xxxvii}

Therefore, it can be said in nutshell that unlike the ancient and the medieval masters of India, they did not develop inland urban centres, instead developed the port cities and hilltop settlements due to their strategic locations. Hills also offered an additional advantage of offering salubrious climate where the invalid could recover at a faster rate. One of the major benefits of the British rule was the improvement in civic amenities in some, at least, of India's major cities. Piped water supply, street lighting, domestic electricity supply, sewerage, modern shopping areas and in some cases parks and playgrounds for recreation were established in number of cities. During the British period civic amenities were provided only in the civil line areas and the cantonment. The native city remained outside the pale of modernization. Urban administrative bodies were established to look after the civic amenities (and to introduce local or grass-root democracy) in several cities from 1881. These municipalities were primarily concerned with the collection of local taxes, the maintenance of roads, removal of garbage and night soil, primary education, and public health.^{xxxviii} Thus, it can be said that this process of urbanization went under a sea change under the British rule.

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