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SPECIAL ARTICLE

Revisiting the City: The Relevance of Urban Sociology Today

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Events since the 1990s, with the advent of globalisation and the information and communication technology revolution in particular, have had a profound impact on cities around the world and have rejuvenated academic interest in the urban question. This paper makes a case for revisiting the city from a sociological perspective. Laying emphasis on the distinction between "locale" and "milieu" and on the community-cosmopolitanism dialectic in urban areas, it elucidates thematics for an urban sociology today. The paper further considers areas for empirical investigation, such as issues of citizenship and cyberspace, in the light of this dialectic. It concludes with a brief discussion on methodological considerations in studying the city.

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Attempts by social scientists to grapple with the reality of the city have repeatedly highlighted the inherent complexity of the phenomenon and have thrown up many concepts and theorisations (Saunders 1985; Flanagan 1993). Similarly, attempts by planners and administrators to deal with urban problems have revealed the limits to planned urban habitat change (Jayaram 1989; Dear 2000). It is hardly surprising that the intractability of the urban question in social theory and in urban planning led to cynicism.[1] In 1985, Peter Saunders (1985) confidently announced the death of urban sociology.[2]

In retrospect, Saunders' obituary for urban sociology was premature; it even turned out to be unfounded. The rapid unfolding of events since the 1990s – the breakdown of the erstwhile Soviet Union and the disenchantment with communism; the end of the cold war and the realignment of the international economic and political order; the rise of the European Union; the spread of globalisation and the associated information and communication technology (ICT) revolution, with attendant impacts on the movement of human beings, ideas, and capital; the rise of religious fundamentalism and the violence associated with it – have all had a profound impact on cities around the world and rejuvenated academic interest in the urban question.

What globalisation has done is to bring together urban centres, both within individual countries and internationally (Short and Kim 1999). This has been greatly facilitated by increased physical connectivity, via improved means of transportation, and efficient electronic connectivity, via television, mobile telephony, and the internet. Whether it is boom or meltdown in the economy, religious celebrations or racial attacks, democratic elections or military takeovers, no city in the world today can remain unaffected. This internationalisation of the city is both inviting and challenging at the same time. Conventional sociologists and postmodernists alike are revisiting the city (Dear 2000; Ellin 2006).

The City: Locale and Milieu

In revisiting the city, a distinction needs to be made between the locale (place) and the milieu (space) dimensions of the urban form (Dürrschmidt 2000). The locale dimension of a city, that is, its physical/territorial boundary, is demarcated administratively, even if arbitrarily. That is what we see on the map; that is what administrators define as the jurisdiction of the city. The milieu dimension, on the other hand, is identifiable in terms of the processes around which the city dwellers' lives revolve. These processes could be (1) social, involving groupings and intra- and inter-group interactions, with varying degrees of complexity resulting from size and composition of the population; (2) cultural,

referring to ways of thinking and acting; and (3) political, having to do with relations of power and control, though not necessarily in the formal sense.

Two points need clarification. First, the milieu dimension of the city is embedded in its locale dimension, but the milieu dimension transcends the locale dimension. That is to say, locale provides the physical context for milieu, but locale does not delimit milieu.[3] The cities are locales in which many milieux interact and new ones emerge. Second, the study of the locale dimension is important in its own right, just as it is in relation to the milieu dimension. But it calls for a multidisciplinary, if not interdisciplinary expertise, which conventional sociological training hardly provides in its urban sociology courses.

The primary focus of revisiting the city in urban sociology would be people and their culture, rather than on the physical dimensions of the habitat called the city. Focusing on people and their culture in the cities, the key issues appear to centre around (1) citizenship, local relations and cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and (2) the articulation and experience of community and identity, on the other. The dialectic of these two foci, namely, community and cosmopolitanism highlights the contemporary relevance of urban sociology. The scope of the new urban sociology is variegated, just as its thematics are vibrant. In what follows, an attempt is made to discuss these with special reference to India.

Community-Cosmopolitanism Dialectics

There are multiple sources of this community-cosmopolitanism dialectic. To start with, there has been a phenomenal growth both in the number of cities and the number of people living in them.[4] In developing countries, much of the growth in the urban population is not due to natural reproduction within the cities; it is due to rural-urban migration.[5] What is noteworthy is that there have been important changes in the origin and destination of migration flows. There has been a change in the gender profile of the migrant population, with an increase in female migration that is independent of marriage-related relocation. Overall, there has been a greater heterogeneity in the city's population. "The theme of city life", as Richard Rodrigues observes, "is the theme of differences" (quoted in Dear 2000: 2).

The migration of people from rural to urban areas, and the movement of people between these two areas generally, have been facilitated by a communication revolution. The last two decades have seen a rapid expansion of railway and road networks in India. Far-flung areas of the country have been linked to metropolises and urban centres with direct railway connections. Besides the Government of India's national highways project, called the "Golden Quadrilateral", the state governments have been improving the state highways linking urban centres. The improved means of transportation have meant increased facilities for movement of people and goods, considerable reduction in journey time, and greater exchange between urban centres and their hinterlands. Contributing further to the last consequence has been the remarkable spread of electronic media of communication like the television, to some extent, the internet, and mobile telephony.

The engine behind these developments are, no doubt, the nature of and trends in economic development that has been taking place in the globalisation era, especially after the adoption of the policies of liberalisation and structural adjustment by the Government of India. Traditional industries – for example, jute in Kolkata, textiles in Mumbai, and the public sector in Bengaluru – have declined, and new ones such as information technology (IT) and the IT-enabled services in Bengaluru,[6] financial services and commercial cinema in Mumbai have shot into prominence. The changing economy has reinvigorated cities like Chennai, Hyderabad and Pune, fostered conurbations, as in the case of Gurgaon near Delhi, Hosur near Bengaluru, and so on, and given a fillip to growth in many a small town. Not only has production technology and distribution management changed, the consumption patterns of urban dwellers have also undergone change. Consumerism, consumer society and so on are the new terms used to designate this change.

The city, which has always been a visible marker of civilisation, has become even more so. The greater visibility of the city is seen not only in terms of the extent and variety of assets it possesses, such as industries and business houses of varying sizes, a vast administrative machinery, specialist hospitals and educational institutions, architectural heritage sites and skyscraper buildings, gated colonies and squalid slums, flyovers and metros, but also in the nature and vibrancy of its lifestyles and culture such as pubs and malls, performing creative arts and commercial cinema, nightlife and crime, sport spectacles and mega events. The city has attained heightened observability and become an extraordinary source of dreams, aspirations, and illusions. Naturally, it acts as a magnet not only for public and private investment, but also for a rural population, as an island of promise in the midst of despair. Interestingly, it is this observability of the city which makes it a site for terrorist attacks.

Paradoxically, contrary to the analytical prognoses of classical sociologists and social thinkers (excluding the pessimist Vilfredo Pareto), with the advancement of science and technology, rationality and law, and the march of industrial capitalism, the bearing of religion on social life has not waned. The consensus mustered by social scientists in the decades following second world war that modernisation and secularisation would replace religion with faith in science, education, and the rule of law has turned out to be unfounded. Starting in the 1980s, it became evident that religion was not on the retreat. There have been aggressive ethnic and religious mobilisations of various hues, including Buddhism and Hinduism, which were once seen as otherworldly, acquiescent, and docile religions. Globally, cities have become the sites of multiple religious movements, conversions, and cults representing a variety of global evangelist and indigenous traditions. Both new television and internet and conventional press media have been used for such representations. It is in the context of these developments that the dialectics of community and cosmopolitanism are being played out.

Briefly put, urban modernisation has not engendered secularisation of social life. It appears that equating urbanity with modernity, or urbanism with secularism, has resulted in grave misunderstanding of ethnicity, religion, and identity in urban areas.

The paradox under reference cannot be explained either by essentialist concepts of the ecological school or the deterministic assumptions of the political economy perspective. Understanding and explaining this paradox of urbanism needs new conceptual tools and theoretical forays.

The rapid urbanisation and urban migration of rural populations has aggravated existing problems and brought in their train new ones. Overcrowded housing and slums, overloaded transportation services, overstretched medicare facilities, substandard civic amenities, the breakdown of urban governance, and so on, have all been researched at length. Similarly, governmental and policy initiatives and programmes for addressing them have been reviewed and evaluated.

However, the last two decades have witnessed the emergence of new interest groups and initiatives. Citizen groups for developing the city have come into existence. There are many civil society organisations engaged in all activities from garbage collection and disposal to cultural promotion. There are citizen initiatives concerning voter registration, commuting, vigilance against crime, etc. Many of these initiatives and organisations are formally recognised by the government, and some of them are also financially supported by the government. However, there are parallel governance mechanisms in place, which are not recognised, and in some cases, are even illegal. For example, the phenomenon of gangs and their warfare in big cities, often dubbed the "underworld", is little understood. The same is true of the growth of urban violence resulting from gang warfare, communalism, ethnocentric assertions, etc.

Paradoxically, the success of the city appears to be its own undoing – the more a city improves, the more attractive it becomes, resulting in greater influx of population and aggravation of the problems. Urban problems, thus, would appear to be *sui generis* intractable.[7] One may recall here Henri Lefebvre's observation that "there can be growth without social development (that is, quantitative growth without qualitative development)" (1996: 177). Under these conditions, he argues that "changes in society are more apparent than real. Fetishism and ideology of change (in other words, the ideology of modernity) conceal the stagnation of essential social relations" (Lefebvre 1996: 177). It is in this context that the scope for a new urban sociology will have to be spelt.

Thematics of an Urban Sociology Today

The dialectics of community-cosmopolitanism imply that community and cosmopolitanism constitute two opposing polar tendencies. This parallels the dichotomous typologies suggested by early sociologists to grapple with changes that the European society was experiencing due to rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. The conceptualisations propounded by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies and the French sociologist Emile Durkheim readily come to mind.[8] Louis Wirth (1957) too alluded to this when he implicitly contrasted urbanism as a way of life to the rural way of life. However, what the dialectics of community-cosmopolitanism suggest is something more than the two contrasting types or an evolutionary trajectory (Tönnies and Durkheim). The dialectic draws attention to the inevitable contradiction that the juxtaposition of community and cosmopolitanism raises in urban existence.

The concept of cosmopolitanism is premised upon the assumption of what Lefebvre terms the "homo urbanicus" (1996: 97): (1) that city dwellers are atomised individuals with segmented personalities, (2) that urban life recognises the universal human by erasing differences, and (3) that the city offers inclusive citizenship and the "right to urban life" (Lefebvre 1996: 158).

The concept of community, as used in the urban context, no more refers to a spatio-temporal entity in which face-to-face interaction is by definition important. The definitional criterion of the concept of community now revolves around identity, which has to do more with imagined commonalities even among people who may not be personally acquainted, than with face-to-face interactions among people living in physical contiguity. Accordingly, we have such expressions as religious communities, caste communities, linguistic communities, migrant/diaspora communities, and so on – all hinging on "consciousness of kind" in reference-group terms.

We should hasten to clarify that under certain circumstances, face-to-face interaction can solidify and reinforce community identity. Wirth (1957: 53) long ago inferred "the spatial segregation of individuals according to color (sic), ethnic heritage, economic and social status, tastes and preferences". He postulated that this is a natural outcome of the larger size of the urban population, which involves "a greater range of individual variation" (Wirth 1957).[9] To Wirth, the sorting and segregation of the urban population follows a natural ecological principle. He did not consider the forces – economic, political, and social – which can result in voluntary seclusion or forced exclusion of the population on specific identity criteria. The Muslim ghettos in Ahmedabad,[10] Kolkata and Mumbai, the ethnic refugee camps in Chandigarh and Delhi, the linguistic enclaves among slum-dwellers in Bengaluru, and the changing composition of *pols* (traditional neighbourhood groupings) in Ahmedabad (Ray 2008) are cases in point. The point that is emphasised here is that communities come to be constituted; they need not be natural formations. These communities tend to be particularistic in their value orientation, and inclusive in relation to one another.

Viewed thus, it is easy to understand how community, emphasising collectivity, with its narrower and more rigid articulation of identity, and cosmopolitanism, emphasising differences and universal individualism, with its broader and more flexible articulation of multiple identities are polar tendencies in the city. Their dialectics (1) determine the everyday life of urbanites, (2) shape their aspirations and facilitate/hinder the realisation of those aspirations, (3) condition the articulation of their identities, (4) define the politics of identity and inter-community relations, and (5) constantly redraw the place-space configuration in the city. In what follows, we explore possible areas and issues for empirical investigation in light of this dialectic.

The Urban Citizen: Contestations over Definition

With reference to a city, one could ask "who belongs to the city?" or "who are its citizens?" Apparently, this is an easy question to answer – anyone living in that city for a relatively long period (as

contrasted to a visitor or a sojourner) is its "citizen". A closer examination of the situation in different cities would reveal this answer to be facile; it is, in fact, invariably contested. In law, anyone born in a city or domiciled in it for a defined duration (10 years in Indian cities) is a citizen of that city. The citizenship that so accrues entitles its holder to certain rights, for instance, in admission to public educational institutions, allotment of public housing or sites and land for building houses, etc.

However, given limitations on resources, facilities, and opportunities in any city, and the resulting competition, the legal definition of citizenship is challenged in quotidian existence by those who call themselves "natives" of the city as well as by migrants. The citizens would like a more *exclusive* definition of the citizenship, restricting it by a rigidly defined "nativity" in terms of the language of the state in which the city is located. Thus, "Mumbaikar" (someone belonging to Mumbai) becomes coterminous with being "*Marathi Manus*" (Marathi people), emphasising the idea of "sons/daughters of the soil" in linguistic terms. The natives would consciously exclude not only those who have migrated to the city during the last decade, but even second and third descendents of original migrants. This exclusion has often resulted in aggressive street politics and violence targeting outsiders. The Shiv Sena movement against south Indians (derisively called Madraasi) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena movement against north Indians (mostly migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, derisively called Bhaiyyas) in Mumbai are illustrative of this phenomenon.[11]

The migrants, including those who have moved in only recently, would want a more *inclusive* definition of citizenship. After all, the city, by its developmental logic, is a conflux of migrant streams resulting in a unique culture. Most of them are the city's citizens "by adoption" (Dürrschmidt 2000: 3). Furthermore, it is they who toil for the general prosperity of the city, they would argue. They are citizens of the city by virtue of being there.

Interestingly, the legal definition of city citizenship is not a prerequisite for voting registration for the state assembly or Lok Sabha elections or even elections to civic bodies. Obviously, this is a bone of contention. The natives oppose voting rights to migrants and the migrants press for them, as this is the only element of political power that migrants have, even if it is available only once in five years. The emigrants, given their concentration in specific localities, constitute vote banks and they do vote en bloc; they have even been successful in getting their candidates elected not only to civic bodies, but also to state legislative assemblies. Given the heterogeneity of the city's population, no political party can afford to lose sight of such vote banks.

Contestations about citizenship are not confined to issues concerning the right to use of facilities, allocation of houses and sites, reservations in employment, and rights to political representation, etc. They spill over into symbolic space. Many cities in India have been renamed in the last few decades. Bangalore has become Bengaluru; Baroda, Vadodara; Benaras, Varanasi; Bombay, Mumbai; Calcutta, Kolkata; Madras, Chennai; Trivandrum, Thiruvananthapuram; and so on. Within each city, there have been demands for renaming the city's landmarks and streets. In Mumbai, Crawford Market and Victoria Terminus have become Jyotiba Phule Market and Chhatrapathi Shivaji Terminus; in New Delhi, Connaught Circus, Rajiv Gandhi Circus; in Chennai, Mount Road, Anna Salai; in Bengaluru, South Parade, Mahatma Gandhi Road; and so on.

The natives demand that priority be given to the state/regional language in the public realm – in educational institutions, civic ceremonies, official documents and on nameplates, signboards and hoardings. There have been cases where native vigilante groups have enforced this through violent methods. There is symbolic contestation about statues, too. In Bengaluru, the statue of Thiruvalluvar (a saint poet) had been installed but not unveiled in a predominantly Tamil-speaking area of the city for two decades. The reason is that the native Kannada-speaking activists wanted a quid pro quo – a statue of Sarvajnya, a Kannadiga saint poet, installed in Chennai, the predominantly Tamil-speaking capital city of Tamil Nadu!

The demands for renaming cities, or monuments and streets, or for prioritising the use of the local language, as against the official language Hindi, or English, or any other, or for/against installing statues is more than a desire for erasing colonial memories or commemorating local heroes. It is the dialectic of community-cosmopolitanism at work. Such demands seem to counter cosmopolitanism;[12] underlying them often are atavistic tendencies glorifying a community or vilifying another, not infrequently based on a mythologised or imagined past, and on frozen memories.

The counter-positioning of nativist movements and cosmopolitanism appears to be more pronounced in cities where a larger section of the population consists of first, second, or third generation migrants who are visibly different from the natives. In brief, the answer to the question "who belongs to the city?" depends on "who *defines* citizenship?" Legal and the socio-politically contingent definitions of citizenship seem to vary. As a consequence, the city is the site of myriad articulations of identity and mobilisations of people. The issue of urban citizenship and citizen rights thus throws up a variety of themes and issues for sociological investigation.

Differences, Identities and Territories

Cities are generally heterogeneous in their composition: the larger the population of a city, the greater the heterogeneity of its population (Wirth 1957: 52-53). The identity derived from citizenship of the city would, therefore, be too homogeneous. Except when it is invoked by the natives, it is also tenuous and fragile. Only when a citizen performs a feat or is conferred an honour, or a team representing the city scores over another in a competitive event does citizenship become an identity, for example "Mumbaikar" invoked with pride. Similarly, when the city remarkably recovers from a natural disaster such as a flood or a human-engineered calamity like a serial bomb-blast, a reference is proudly made about the city's spirit of citizenship. The use of citizenship identity with a positive connotation is limited, though not insignificant. However, it is periodically invoked by the

natives ("we"/"us") whenever the migrants ("they"/"them") are viewed as a negative reference group. The consequences are negative, and citizenship identity takes a dent.

Given the heterogeneity of the city's population, we should expect that more non-city based identities would be ascribed or invoked in urban life. There are self-defined and other-defined identities for urban collectivities; correspondingly, there are assumed/ascribed stereotypes and eulogistic/pejorative labels. Apart from region, language and physical features, as in the case of migrants, religion, caste, class, gender, and sexuality may be invoked in identity formation. As is to be expected, a city dweller has multiple identities; she or he invokes, or responds to an external invocation of an identity or combination of identities depending upon the situation.

Those invoking identities, their own or especially of others, often have limited or no knowledge of the differences. Proclivity for prejudices acts as a smokescreen for knowledge. Due to this, invocation of identities is often mistaken. But once invoked, the identities and the stereotypes that go with them influence the behaviour of people. Even if one is knowledgeable, the process of judgment could be erroneous. Judging the behaviour of an individual by reference to the group to which she or he belongs, or judging an entire group based on the behaviour of an individual is fraught with danger.

To the extent that identity formation and invocation proceeds on such primordial lines as religion, caste, or linguistic affiliation, there is the inherent danger of essentialising or reifying ethnicities. Categorical distinctions in social situations result in allocating an individual to an ethnic category, behaving towards that person in a particular way, and rationalising/justifying that behaviour. Heightened interaction within the group and avoidance of others is one outcome. The feeling of security within the familiar, on the one hand, and the perception of threat from others, results in voluntary or forced exclusion and the formation of ethnic enclaves and ghettos. Violence exacerbates social distances and hardens the group boundaries. It is in this context that social space gets embedded in physical place.

It is true that territorial demarcation of communities and ethnic enclaves existed earlier too. In almost all traditional Indian cities, religious communities and caste groups resided in specific areas of the city, and many of these areas were even known by the names of those communities or castes. Society was more strongly defined by the caste idiom, and the idea of cosmopolitanism was yet to take root. However, in post-independence India, caste idiom is officially delegitimised and discrimination based on religion, caste, and gender is proscribed. Cosmopolitanism is the modern value premise, and the city is expected to be its harbinger. However, not only with notable exceptions have earlier segregated residential areas persisted, but there have also been newer articulations of segregation and exclusion. Since open discrimination is violation of law, informal insulation of residential colonies operates in housing societies, gated communities, and so on.[13]

Thus, who belongs to which part or area of the city and why, throws up several facets of urban life for sociological inquiry – the formation of urban enclaves, the nature of their interaction with other areas of the city, and the quotidian life of the people