

Thinking about the 21st Century Indian City

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New ways of envisioning the slum, the informal economy, access to water, and the housing crisis emerged from discussions in “Towns, Metros, and the Indian Economy”, a conference held at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bangalore. The discussions emphasised the role of the informal sector and the poor in the urban economy, which will more or less determine the course of Indian polity and society in the coming decades.

Distinguished scholars, civil society activists, and policymakers gathered for two days at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IHS) in Bangalore in 2013 to discuss “Towns, Metros, and the Indian Economy”. In previous meetings on the Indian city organised by the Center for South Asia Studies (CSAS) at the University of California (UC) Berkeley,¹ questions about urban economic growth and the long-overlooked role of India’s rapidly transforming small towns within it had repeatedly emerged as central. This conference was a part of a long tradition of thinking about India’s urban future at UC Berkeley; a conference on this same theme took place more than 50 years ago on the Berkeley campus.²

Bringing the Urban Back In

The 21st century will be an urban century with much of this urbanisation taking place in Asian cities, especially in India and China. Ironically, however, in India since the 1980s, due to a larger rural electorate, cities have not dominated political imaginations and from the public policy agenda. Yet in the next 20 years, it is likely that India’s economy will move from a more than 50% urban economy to an economy that is two-thirds or even three-fourths urban. Thus, the greatest challenge today is to build an imagination of an Indian society in which cities have a central part.

Among participants in the conference, there was disagreement as to the basic definition of “urbanisation”. Partha Mukhopadhyay of the Centre for Policy Research stated that urbanisation is really about the transformation of places, not about the movement of people:

Only 22.2% of urbanisation in India is because of migration; a third is because of reclassification of villages as towns. India

is unique in using an urban definition that incorporates population size, population density, and the composition of the workforce. It is difficult to meet all three criteria, and as a result, India may actually be more urban than it seems. Further, growth occurs around large cities, not just in them.

Amitabh Kundu of the Centre for the Study of Regional Development disagreed with Mukhopadhyay by arguing that India is not particularly unique in its definition of the urban. In fact, he said, accounting for census activism, there may actually be much less urban growth than we think. In contrast to surprisingly low levels of migration, Amitabh Kundu said that an additional 410 million people will need to leave agriculture and be absorbed into urban areas.

Whatever the exact definition may be, it is clear that urbanisation carries with it tremendous potential for economic prosperity, the consolidation of middle-class aspirational lifestyles, growth of civil society and experiments with local democracy. But at the same time, this rapid urbanisation also presents significant challenges including the degradation of urban poverty and inequality, the inadequacy of infrastructure, and the ecological impact of stifling pollution and increasing carbon footprints.

This conference had three main goals. The first was to bring the urban poor and the informal sector into the discourse around existing policies that are in place to specifically address urban issues, but have failed to reach these neglected segments of the population. The second goal was to challenge existing definitions and dichotomies that often inhibit “out of the box” solutions to address concerns of the urban poor. And finally, the conference set out to recognise strategies currently employed by the urban poor as not only legitimate, but as innovative, and a model for other types of policy interventions.

Inadequate Frameworks

Even among existing policy frameworks designed to address urban issues, there is an urgent need for attention to the urban informal sector (the source of an estimated quarter of India’s GDP) and the urban poor. The informal sector has

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often been dismissed as insignificant, even though this is a sector of tremendous productivity and potential. Carol Upadhyaya of the National Institute of Advanced Studies critiqued dichotomous understandings of formal and informal economies, in which the formal is unmarked and the informal is presented as its “other”. “The two are not separate entities, but are deeply interlinked: through processes of neo-liberalisation, the public sector is fading and the corporate sector depends on informal sector labour”, she argued. A lack of effective political representation of the informal sector exacerbates its under-representation in India’s economic policy.

And just as the informal sector has been neglected in policy discussions, so have small towns, as the government continues to underinvest in them, even though they offer key opportunities for job creation and economic growth. Even under the existing 74th amendment (which guarantees statutory provisions for local administrative bodies in urban areas such as towns and cities), K C Sivaramakrishnan of the Centre for Policy Research argued that, “It (the 74th Amendment) has not helped small towns or megacities. Money is distributed without attention to what is needed, and urban concerns are reduced only to issues of real estate.” It is time for the 74th amendment to be revisited, higher thresholds for municipal status should be considered, and governance mechanisms should be clearly refined.

India has a top-heavy urban structure, with 23.5% of the urban population in cities with over five million people. Thus, because existing policies and frameworks are often limited in their scope, new visions, policies, and programmatic frameworks that can adapt to changing realities and capture the dynamism and mobility of India’s cities and small towns are desperately needed. For example, Debolina Kundu of the National Institute of Urban Affairs has found that even the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), whose goal is to upgrade cities through improved infrastructure and service provision to the urban poor, is biased towards bigger cities, at the

expense of small towns, which remain unable to access funds.

The only way to address this gap is to create a JNNURM-like programme, but one that is designed specifically with small and medium towns and the urban poor as its central focus. And any public-private partnerships for service delivery must include civil society alongside government and private developers: hybrid models will be required to provide tailor-made solutions and results.

Welfare regimes, specifically designed to uplift the urban poor, are, according to Om Mathur of the National Institute of Urban Affairs, “...difficult to measure, and the existing provisions are grossly inadequate”. Existing welfare policies were designed on the basis of financial partnership of three levels of government, which have aimed to engage beneficiaries as well as the private sector, as also address long-term sustainability. However, “Ultimately, welfare regimes have become a zero-sum game, with welfare regimes simply offsetting policy distortions”, he stated. With respect to welfare policies, Ananya Roy of UC Berkeley asked important questions such as, “How do contestations over urban space come into play – which urban do we mean when we speak of urban welfare regimes? If we can subscribe to a politics of patience when airports and highways are built for the affluent, why do we lose patience in relation to housing and infrastructure for the poor?” Roy reflected on the apparent disjuncture between a proliferation of programmes that seem to be on the books and the reality that very few of those in need are actually enrolled in these programmes.

As a specific example of this, Shrayana Bhattacharya of the World Bank closely examined the programme for old-age pensions in Delhi and found that households in which the head of the household was female, households in unrecognised slums, and households with disabled members were less likely to be enrolled in this programme. However, those with an existing bank account or ration card were more likely to be enrolled. Counter intuitively, those living closer to an area of high real estate value tended to have less access to

programmes, and having a local Member of the Legislative Assembly as a minister was related to a reduction in the likelihood of enrolment. To explain these results, Bhattacharya surmised that party cadre workers used to be incentivised to enrol recipients in this programme, now they no longer are; and since accessing politicians is costly for slum dwellers, many of those who ought to receive benefits are left out of the system.

“At the end of the day, systems of welfare provision are predicated on the assumption of rootedness to land”, Gautam Bhan of the IHS asserted. He pointed to the absurdity of geographical targeting in the context of persistent slum evictions. Those who move, he said, can take 10 years to get back on the welfare rolls. In response to these breakdowns in the concept of “proof of residence”, Bhan proposed an alternative organising principle: the “intent to reside”. Such a framework, he argued, offers the benefit of the doubt, and references a foundation of universal entitlement. Though the poor do have powerful visions for what they need, in the face of eviction, their voices have not translated into collective impact on policy.

Challenging Old Definitions

Old and trite definitions and rigid dichotomies are not useful in generating innovative policies or programmes to address some of the challenges of rapid urbanisation. To begin with, Upadhyaya challenged the dominant policy narrative about urbanisation, which, she said, is always one of urbanisation as crisis. She instead offered an alternative: rather than looking at cities in terms of concrete formations of economy or settlement, seeing them in terms of mobilities and flows opens up new analytical possibilities for tracing short-term labour flows, circular and temporary migrations, and connections between urban and rural spaces. Upadhyaya also emphasised the importance of changing class formations in describing the urban economy – for example, the circulations of both high-skilled and low-skilled workers, the emergence of a growing lower middle

class, and the important role of all these groups in making a city thrive. Taking it a step further, Mukhopadhyay argued against viewing certain occupations, such as manufacturing, as “low-skilled” and others such as services as “high-skilled”. These definitions have been used to justify a lack of training and vocational programmes that are on the decline in India, but sorely needed.

Smita Srinivas of Columbia University also questioned the usefulness of fixed, simplistic conceptualisations of the rural-urban transformation. Instead, she said, effective analysis needs to incorporate several dichotomies including, rural-urban, farm-non-farm, informal-formal, school-work, public-informal, self-employed-wage, and vernacular-English transformations. Individuals are a part of several groups, not just a member of a single category. These rigid definitions are often detrimental because for example, as was discussed by Bhan earlier, welfare policies that are based solely on place of residence do not reach many of the urban poor who are essentially non-existent on paper because they do not have a “formal” residence. Thus, “we need to rethink how entitlement frameworks and other policies might respond to the mobility of people and capital across spaces and work categories”, Aromar Revi of the IHS, asserted.

Infrastructure and Housing

Not only do the urban poor and informal sector need to be integrated into existing policies, but a new vision of the urban needs to be created, not necessarily only by new innovations, but by recognising existing methods and innovations of the urban poor as legitimate, productive and important. As a first step, they need to be simply considered citizens of the city. Journalist Kalpana Sharma reflected on the lack of inclusiveness of the urban poor by examining the meaning of urban citizenship in Indian cities. “The often-heard phrase ‘citizens and slum-dwellers’ renders slum-dwellers non-citizens, even if they comprise 60% of the population in Mumbai and nearly half the population of Bangalore. These regimes of illegality and legality are justified on the basis

of convenience to the ‘citizen’. Who is then the citizen who is inconvenienced?” she asked.

A state-led intervention, the Rajiv Awas Yojana (RAY) under JNNURM, does call for a “slum-free India”, by starting with the recognition of the right of the poor to be in the city. RAY calls for slums to be brought into the formal system with an upgrading of basic amenities, and tries to address the problem of urban land and affordable housing for the poor.

Rohini Nilekani, chairperson of Arghyam, advocated for reconceptualising our approach to water and sanitation. “Water”, she said, “was once an organising principle for human settlements; now, water has to be brought to people at high costs. How can we imagine water supply for more than 6,000 towns? One approach is to recognise the informal sector innovation that is already taking place, although such innovations often do not fit into the imagination of planners, but are quite effective.” As an example, Nilekani argued for using local water first, organising rainwater supply at the community level rather than at the household level, and integrating planning around wastewater and other water sources.

A new understanding of the “housing crisis” was addressed by Bhan, who argued for recognition of the housing the poor have built for themselves, and the ways in which they resist and avoid informality. This issue can be framed not so much as a matter of housing policy, but as the reconceptualisation of property, which includes the conferring of property rights to the poor. Such security of tenure for the urban poor is crucial in India, where slum evictions have been commonplace. Mukhopadhyay also stated that we should see markets where they operate, paying attention to people’s informal ownership (and renting) of housing in slums, rather than being “insulted” by the form and aesthetics of slums. Finally, Revi said that the idea of the housing shortage and the idea that housing markets do not work are both myths, and that norms that refuse to accommodate forms of informality must be redefined.

As an example of how citizens’ movements are integral to this new vision, Liza Weinstein of Northeastern University discussed how the Dharavi slum sustains itself in the face of constant attempts at land grab. She highlighted entrenched power and durable spaces as dynamics simultaneous to dispossession, and analysed key elements of Dharavi’s durability, including centrality in economic and political networks extending beyond the slum, density of vibrant civil society organisations and political parties, fragmentation among state agencies, and the history of struggle embedded within the spaces of the slum. “Against powerful odds, the residents of Dharavi have managed to assert their ‘right to stay put’. Rather than a rights-based framework or broad right to the city, this right to stay put takes shape in the repertoires people use at smaller scales to respond to threats, constituting the durable slum”, she said.

Conclusions

It is almost trite to say that the Indian city is riddled with contradictions. As Lawrence Cohen of the UC Berkeley pointed out in his concluding comments, it is marked by simultaneous durability and insecurity – both themes surfaced again and again over the two days of the conference. “How might unexpected sites of durability, creativity, and experimentation be incorporated meaningfully into a liveable, sustainable collective vision for the future of the city? And how might configurations of state, civil society, and the private sector secure a framework for universal social entitlement within which the poor can stake their legitimate claim to inclusion?” Cohen asked.

Over the two days, the conference progressed towards a renewed sense of optimism about where Indian cities are now and where they might go. Conference discussions confirmed that the urban economy matters, and that the informal sector and the poor hold a central place within it. New ways of envisioning the slum, the informal economy, access to water, and the housing crisis emerged. The conference also produced a new vision of the city built

on the idea of circulation – of people, of multiple identities, of information. Participants also put into practice a new analytic framework, premised on a reconsideration of failure. Whom do failures fail for? And how do failures produce new sites for survival and

innovation? Where might the disjunctions between policy and its effects open up opportunities for new theory building? Such questions reveal a rich new terrain for analytical inquiry, policy formulation, and activism for the emerging Indian city.

NOTES

- 1 This conference series on the 21st century Indian city was funded by the Kanwal and Ann Rekhi Foundation. For more information about this series, see <http://indiancities.berkeley.edu>
- 2 The book published after this conference was *India's Urban Future: Selected Studies from an International Conference* sponsored by Kingsley Davis, Richard L Park, Catherine Bauer Wurster, published by University of California Press in 1961.