A Review of Recent Urban Geographic Studies in India

Thakur, Baleswer, Prof. Dr., University of Delhi, Department of Geography, Delhi 110007, India;
Parai, Anindita, University of Akron, Department of Public Administration and Urban Studies, Akron, 44325 OH, USA

ABSTRACT: This paper reviews the changing nature of the growing specialized trends of urban geography in India since independence, with a particular emphasis to the 1980s and early 1990s. Urban geography has emerged as a major academic sub-field in India with active researchers at its frontier. The 1980s and early 1990s are characterized by a diversified and growing trend of specialization both in inter-urban and intra-urban research in urban geography. This diversification is most clear and pronounced in intra-urban studies where the emphasis is directed towards socio-cultural aspects of the city. Conversely, inter-urban research is concerned both with analysis of patterns and trends of macro level urbanization and the processes. Although model building is in its infancy, a few static, deterministic, probabilistic and dynamic models have been constructed. There has been severe limitations in the use of computers in India, particularly the large-frame ones, so the researcher there cannot use the large scale data on national level.

Urban geography has rapidly progressed in India developing into a well documented academic sub-field. It has attracted the attention of a large number of scholars not only in the country but also abroad resulting in significant number of publications since independence. The unprecedented growth of towns and cities in India as a result of the modernization process which has led to agricultural and industrial development has been the main cause of the incredibly rapid growth of urban geography in India. The fact that in 1991 “India had a total urban population of 217 million, 25.72% of country’s total” (Dutt and Sen 1992), provides a setting where both typical and atypical urban problems and characteristics are found. This paper reviews the changing nature of the growing specialized trends of urban geography in India since independence, with particular emphasis to the 1980s and early 1990s.

The Period of 1947-79

The post-independence era witnessed historical and morphological studies in the urban geographic field. Descriptive and unanalytical work on the origin and growth of individual cities, their internal structure in terms of generalized functional zones, and the relation of the city to its hinterland was carried out. Field observations were at a generalized level. These studies, influenced by British geographers, such as A.E. Smailes, O.H.K. Spate, R.E. Dickinson and Sir Dudley Stamp, were exceptionalist in nature. Such a pioneering contribution to the growth and development of Indian urban geography was the book on Banaras (Singh 1955), which provided guidelines to many geographers throughout the country. In terms of content and methodology, however, work on Hyderabad-Secunderabad (Alam 1965) represents a departure.


From the mid-1960s onwards, the center for innovative research shifted to three centers of learning: Delhi University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Osmania University. Emphasis was put on greater analytical research. However, other centers like Banaras, Mysore,
Calcutta, Pune, Bombay, Madras, Chandigarh, Allahabad, Utkal, Gauhati, and Patna continued to be important.

A noticeable development in the 1960s and the early 1970s was the increasing application of statistical methods in studies pertaining to patterns and trends of urbanization and distributonal aspects of urban settlements (Dutt 1966a,b; Reddy 1970; Thakur 1979). Studies on the locational analysis of central places, internal structure of cities and towns especially description and explanation of commercial and residential structure, intra-urban population distribution, and urban social ecology gained importance. Data were gathered systematically based on field observation. Detailed sample surveys were analyzed statistically and cartographically. The pattern of town and village settlements in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, believed to have developed from medieval Rajput-oriented territorial units (Singh 1968), explains the pargana and tappa headquarters which evolved as quasi-urban places with gaons becoming the basic settlement units. These settlements expressed spatial and hierarchical organization, and they remained so until the beginning of the 20th century. However, the conditions underwent drastic changes in the colonial era and significant departures occurred.

Research into the urban system analysis were few and the growth processes operating in Indian towns and cities had only just started to receive attention. One of the major achievements in this area in the mid-1960s has been the appearance of a deterministic model of market towns and spatial development (Johnson 1965) suggesting a town building effort from the bottom upward. His view is that the existing acutely smaller number of market towns is nowhere near enough to set in motion the transforming forces that are the sine qua non of a self-expanding development process. According to Johnson, India needs in the neighborhood of 12,500 to 14,000 market towns against a mere 1927 existing in the 1960s.

Perhaps most importantly, the rigorous testing of Christaller's theoretical formulation of the hierarchy of central places against the actual situation in India was undertaken in the search for central place systems (Berry 1969; Bhat 1976; Dutt 1969; Dutt et al. 1970; Mayfield 1963 and 1967; Singh 1979). The relationship between urban centers and rural development was studied in the context of growth centers and growth points (Ramachandran 1976; Sen et al. 1975), and the nature of linkages between villages and towns was explored (Ramachandran and Prakasa Rao 1969). The spatial patterns of population in Indian cities were examined with spatial reference to types of density gradients (Brush 1968) along with the study of the urban structure focusing on the identification and analysis of homogeneous areas based upon the social characteristics of people and land use patterns using factor analysis (Berry and Rees 1969; Berry and Spodek 1971; Singh 1975).

Transportation and cultural aspects received very little importance in the 1960s. The importance of railway commuting in a major city of India, Calcutta, for long distances and the intensity of bus commuters within a ten mile radius (Dutt 1964) was emphasized. Attempts to study the daily marketing characteristics with particular reference to spatial relationships for Calcutta (Dutt 1966) and Howrah City (Dutt 1966) were carried out. Calcutta's daily influence area was delineated based on field surveys, including journey-to-work, and available Census data (Dutt 1972).

Spatial analysis of urbanization (Lall and Tirtha 1971), characteristics of dwellings and spatial configuration of Delhi (Yadav 1979), peoples' perception of the city's landscape, inter-village and intra-village differences in the impact of metropolitan expansion, and preparation of long-term plans for metropolitan areas like Hyderabad (Alam and Khan 1972), Calcutta (C.M.P.O. 1966), and Delhi were developed in the 1970s. The primacy of Calcutta which distorted the system of settlement hierarchy in its hinterland was witnessed. It developed not as the node but at the cost of it. Such development was not an instrument of urbanization but of urban atrophy (Raja and Habeeb 1976). Based on cartographic and statistical analysis of primary data, a remarkable presentation of Bangalore was undertaken in the 1970s (Prakasa Rao and Tewari 1979). Pattern and mobility were the two important components of this study based on the present city form, past trends and future growth. Historical and morphological studies have long been one of urban geography's central themes. Physical and cultural factors responsible for the evolutionary patterns and morphological structure were analyzed for selected South Indian cities (Ramesh and Noble 1977).

A second area of interest within this intra-urban research was the study of evolution and structure of commercial ribbons developed along a single road for more than ten miles in Patna located on the bank of the Ganges river. Commercial ribbons, which were influenced by the riverborne trade along the Ganga and later by railroad development, have developed as specialized centers of commercial activities. For example, there are older ribbons as wholesale marts, central ribbons as centers of higher order shopping goods, new commercial ribbons as financial services and isolated ribbons as convenience goods (Dayal and Thakur 1976). Indeed, it is indicative of a distinct site-specific work reflecting the statement that as commercial ribbons develop along one direction, differences develop between older ribbons and newer ribbons.

Chattopadhyay and Raza (1975) developed a dynamic model of India's colonial/dependent economy with a view to linking dependent enclaves of the hinterland areas to the British metropolitan economy. This model is a significant contribution to the understanding of the colonial spatial processes causing regional disparities in India. A stage model of the transformation processes of fringe villages followed: (a) the rural stage, (b) the stage of agricultural land-use change, (c) the stage of occupational change, (d) the stage of urban land-use growth, and (e) the urban village stage (Ramachandran and Srivastava 1974).