The Village in the City, the City in the Village

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Many villages gradually get included in cities and urban people also migrate to villages transforming them into towns. Both phenomena require intensive study, including an examination of the defining criteria of a “town”, and the estimates of urban population.

A n important concomitant of urbanisation in India is that villages located outside the boundaries of a city get included in it over time. There are more than 300 such villages within Delhi now and every other city I know has such villages in varying numbers. There is no readily available count for the country as a whole, but I am sure it would be large. This phenomenon has been intensifying since the 1950s and is sure to intensify further. India is on the path of rapid urbanisation, and the urban development authorities of all cities are planning to draw more and more villages into their nets. The causes and consequences of the phenomenon therefore require careful analysis.

How a village gets included within a city is usually a long drawn process. It is necessary to recall that in most parts of India a village is made up of, first, a residential settlement (gaon-than or abadi area) where houses and huts are huddled together;¹ and second, agricultural fields, pasture (gauchar) land, water tanks and ponds, cart tracks, wasteland, and other open territory all around it.² The two together constitute a territorial unit called the “revenue village” (mauza in most parts of India) with fixed boundaries recognised for local administration.³ Often it includes, besides the main settlement, one or more small subsidiary settlements, or “satellite villages”, as M N Srinivas called them. On the other hand, a mauza may not have any residential settlement, in which case it is called a “deserted village”.

In the case of a village located on the periphery of a city, one piece of land after another gets sold to individuals, business firms, property agents, institutions, government establishments, and others in the city.⁴ Why the urban buyers buy this land is more or less known. But why a villager should sell his land is a matter of investigation. What are the motivations? What are the compulsions? What does a villager do with the money he gets by selling land? Is he wise or stupid in selling land?

When most of the agricultural fields in a village are acquired by the urban people, they demand urban facilities: paved roads, underground drainage, piped water, regular electricity supply, security, etc. Pressures build up on the municipal corporation and on the state’s politicians and bureaucrats to include the village within the city. Often the government, anticipating this development, works out a town planning scheme. The net result is inclusion of the entire mauza in the city.

Major Complication

However, there is a major complication. While the village lands get transferred and the urban style houses, shops, malls, cinema theatres, offices, and other buildings are constructed on them, the residential settlement of the village remains intact: narrow, zigzag, dusty, muddy lanes, little houses and huts, little shrines, the village accountant’s office, etc. The satellite settlements, if any, also remain intact. The pasture land, water tanks and ponds, wasteland, and such other public properties are transferred to the municipal corporation, but their use and care is always mired in controversies. The town planners prepare the physical plan of the landed area, but rarely, if ever, of the residential settlement. Welfare of the village in the city remains problematic. For example, a village included in Baroda (now Vadodara) city in the 1950s, which I know well, continues to have more or less the same old dusty and muddy lanes, just behind a row of large and tall modern buildings.

Many of these village enclaves continue with many of their traditional collective activities and even acquire special statutory status within the city, such as that of a village panchayat. For example, in my locality in Delhi, after the municipal corporation constructed a footpath on its side of the road dividing the city from the village, the village panchayat refused to allow the corporation to construct a footpath on its side. Another issue is whether the people in the village enclave pay the same taxes as those paid by the people in the corporation. For example, until recently in rural areas in most of Gujarat, while land revenue was collected...
on agricultural land from the villagers, no tax was collected on their house sites and other properties in the village settlement. These landed properties were not even measured and mapped, and their owners registered. Do these tax and other privileges continue after a village is included within the city? How are these privileges used for locating small workshops and factories in the village enclave? There should be an all India survey of the statutory status of these village enclaves.

The impact of these village enclaves on city life should be studied intensively. I may mention only one well-known impact. The village cows, buffaloes, donkeys, pigs and other animals roam around the city streets and even arterial roads. They cause traffic jams, and damage cars and other vehicles. Their droppings and urine foul the streets. They attack pedestrians, sometimes resulting in serious injury and even death. Recently a retired professor of Baroda University died when a cow hit him and he collapsed on the road. A friend of mine, who had set up a small research institute of urban anthropology in Ahmedabad, was killed by a bull near his home. Such incidents are reported in newspapers from time to time. The problem seems to defy solution. Cows are sacred and get fed by devout Hindus; they are overfed during festivals. They also eat all kinds of garbage, even waste paper and plastic sheets. The owners of these animals live in the village enclave. They have become a vote bank, and often behave arrogantly, sometimes even violently. They and their animals cannot be removed.

I may narrate in this context the experience of the Delhi School of Economics (DSE) about the land on which it is located. After this land, belonging to the nearby Chandrawal village, was acquired in 1950 or so, its title was disputed. When I was the director of the DSE in 1973-75, I used to receive summons about it from the court. The peasants of Chandrawal also claimed the grazing rights on this land. They used to bring their cattle for grazing even during the teaching hours. Their women came to cut grass on the open spaces. After a woman had bundled the cut grass, she would ask one of our gardeners to lift the bundle and put it on to her head. The woman and the gardener, face to face, exchanged giggles. The Chandrawal peasants never allowed us to lock our gates, and threatened to kill our watchmen. The distinguished teachers and students were experiencing the village in the city.

The architectural, economic, social, cultural and political changes that take place in these village enclaves in cities should be a subject of research. It is easy to dismiss them as slums, but that would be shirking the responsibility of understanding the nature of this increasingly important segment of urban society. More generally, even after a village is included in the city, the problem of rural-urban linkage remains and makes the categories “rural” and “urban” even more fuzzy than we have known them to be for long.

Transformation of Villages into Towns

Just as the village gets included within the city, the city people and their culture also migrate to the village and transform it into a town. This is a very complex process.

It is well known that a settlement considered as a village at one census might become a town at a subsequent census. Since the 1961 Census, a settlement is normally considered a town if it satisfies three criteria: (i) a population of 5,000 or more, (ii) a population density of at least 400 per sq km, and (iii) at least 75% of the male workers should be engaged in non-agricultural work (Sivaramakrishnan et al 2005: 8). If it receives the state government’s recognition it becomes a “statutory town”; otherwise the census of India may recognise it as a “census town”. Sivaramakrishnan et al (ibid: passim) have discussed at length how these criteria have been applied differently in different states and at different censuses in the same state, making comparisons over space and time difficult. Recognition of a village as a statutory town is, moreover, a complex bureaucratic decision, often influenced by local political forces.

Of the three criteria, that of a minimum population is the easiest to apply, if the satellite villages are not ignored. The criterion of population density should not also pose much of a problem because in any case most village settlements have high density and would have more or less the same density when they become towns, although this requires calculation of density only for the residential settlement of the village, main as well as subsidiary, and not for the mauza’s entire territory.

Complicated Criterion

Engagement in non-agricultural activity, however, is a complicated criterion. First of all, one wonders why women are assumed as not engaged in non-agricultural activity, despite extensive evidence of their involvement in non-agricultural work in both traditional and modern India. How has this assumption survived despite the robust growth of women’s studies during the last 50 years is also a question. Second, sociological as well as historical studies of a number of villages in many parts of India have shown that every village in traditional India included, besides the peasant castes, many castes engaged in non-agricultural occupations, as artisans, craftsmen and servicemen. They included carpenters, blacksmiths, potters, weavers, tailors, traders, barbers, drummers, shoemakers, and skinners (Shah 2002: 56-66). The population of every non-agricultural caste was small, some having just one or two households, but the population of all of these castes put together was substantial – about one-fifth of the total population of the village. In addition, several castes, both high and low, included agricultural as well as non-agricultural workers. The Indian village should not be assumed as entirely a peasant community.

How does the non-agricultural population of a village increase to the extent that it satisfies the criterion of being a town? In a number of villages I know in Gujarat, the process is triggered by the increasing prosperity of the agricultural population, due to the availability of irrigation facilities, adoption of new crops – especially cash crops – application of new technology and favourable prices for agricultural products. The prosperity of the agricultural population in a village leads to changes in their lifestyle, which, in turn, increase the demand for goods and services supplied by the non-agricultural specialists living in villages, such that their
population increases. There are more traders, more potters, more tailors, more carpenters, more barbers, more priests and so on, usually immigrants from other villages. In modern times, a few new non-agricultural occupations have developed within the village, such as bicycle repairing, electrical services, and flour-mill operating, and some villagers commute to towns as industrial workers, peons, policemen, clerks, truck drivers, bus conductors, etc.

As prosperity increases and the lifestyle acquires many elements of urban culture, the prosperous village attracts a number of workers from nearby towns and cities. In central Gujarat, this had happened in a considerable number of villages during the pre-industrial, pre-modern times. While all categories of non-agricultural workers found in villages were also found in cities, usually in larger numbers, the cities had in addition their own special categories of non-agricultural workers: (a) a variety of businessmen, especially wholesale merchants, bankiers, and jewellers; (b) skilled artisans and craftsmen, such as weavers of high quality cotton textiles, silk weavers, dyers, printers, gold and silver smiths, braziers, bangle-makers, cutlers, masons, lime-workers, wood-carvers, leather-workers, saddle-makers, and oil-pressers; (c) specialised service persons, such as washermen, grain-parchers, rice-pounders, florists, and betel-leaf sellers; (d) cultural specialists, such as priests, preachers, musicians, dancers, artists, and bards; and (e) prostitutes, eunuchs and such other marginal groups. These workers were Hindus as well as non-Hindus.5

A prosperous village would attract many of these urban workers to settle in the village, leading to coexistence of the rural and the urban in the same settlement. Such a process of urbanisation had begun in central Gujarat at least during the 16th century, and by the time the British began to rule over the region in the 19th century, at least half a dozen such settlements existed in the region. One such settlement I know well had two clearly recognisable parts: (i) the original village with a predominantly agricultural population and its dependents, and (ii) the newly developed part populated by a number of immigrants from towns and cities, both Hindu and Muslim, practising a variety of urban occupations. The latter was marked by a zone of bazaar streets.

Until recently, the dominant rural people did not allow their women to visit this zone, and therefore many merchants, especially cloth merchants, jewellers and goldsmiths, carried their goods to the rural people’s homes for selling. During the modern times, gradually, the people in the original village receive education and engage in new occupations. Usually, such a composite settlement also becomes an administrative centre, which leads to the addition of people involved in administration. The entire process leads to reducing the percentage of the agricultural population over time, and the settlement receives the status of town.6 Thus, contrary to the general view that urbanisation involves migration of people from the village to the city, it also involves migration of people from the city to the village.

An understanding of this process requires us to take into account the role of the pre-industrial, premodern urban centres in modern urbanisation, including transformation of villages into small towns. This, in turn, requires us to reject the widely held view that India was a land of villages. After all, India had a number of urban centres, large and small, throughout its history since the time of the Indus Valley Civilisation, and they influenced rural society.

**Estimate of Urban Population**

This analysis of the transformation of villages into towns has suggested certain factors that lead to underestimation of the number of towns and their population: (i) if the density of population for a village is calculated for the entire area of the revenue village (mauza) rather than for the residential settlement alone, the figure will be low, (2) if women’s engagement in non-agricultural work is ignored, the total number of non-agricultural workers will be low, (3) if the workers engaged in traditional (i.e., pre-industrial, premodern) non-agricultural occupations, in towns as well as in villages, are ignored, the total number of non-agricultural workers will be low.

Y K Alagh (2012) has argued on the basis of a statistical analysis of census and other data, with a special focus on Gujarat, Punjab and Bihar, that India’s urban population has been underestimated to a very large extent, and this has led to unrealistic policy decisions by the Planning Commission. He has further argued that this underestimation is due to the failure to recognise a number of villages as towns despite their having urban features.

Apart from underestimation of the numbers of small towns and their population, there is also gross neglect of the study of small towns. Most villages have greater interaction with nearby small towns than with a distant large city, and every small town is in turn a part of the larger urban network. A deeper understanding of this entire network is therefore necessary. Unfortunately, the images of urban society in India are derived, mainly, if not exclusively, from the study of large cities. Consequently, there are false images of the relation between the rural and the urban society and, in turn, of Indian society and culture in general. This needs to be corrected.

**NOTES**

1. This is called *lad dora* area in Delhi and the adjoining states.

2. There are also what sociologists call “dispersed villages” in large tracts in various parts of India, where every dwelling is located on its own farm, and only a close inquiry would reveal boundaries between one village and another. Such villages are not considered in this article.

3. “Mauza” is an Arabic word introduced in village administration in India during the medieval times.

4. For a discussion on this “peri-urban” area at some length, see Shaw (2005).

5. For an account of these urban workers, as well as of traditional urbanism, see my 1988 essay on rural-urban networks.

6. A poor village might also become a small town due to an exogenous factor, like the location of a railway station near the village, which would attract non-agricultural people from nearby villages and towns to settle in the village.

**REFERENCES**

