

Rethinking Asian Studies

The Idea of the City in Asian Contexts

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Workshop Report

“Urban Democracy: Informality, Precarity and Modes of Survival”

Columbia Global Centre, Studio-X, Mumbai, India
10-11 December 2014

Co-Conveners:

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Workshop Context

The convenors of the urban component (Forum 4) of the IIAS program on “Rethinking Asian Studies in a Global Context,” Paul Rabé and Anupama Rao, have developed a set of three workshops that are envisaged as a platform for developing new methodological approaches for teaching and research on Asian cities. These approaches combine a strong sense of locality and regional knowledge that is the hallmark of area studies, with the global focus and competence-based disciplines of urban planning, architecture, and urban studies.¹

The workshop organized at the Studio-X Mumbai on December 10-11, 2014, was the second of three. Entitled “Urban Democracy: Informality, Precarity and Modes of Survival,” the workshop followed upon the first, which was held in New York in August 2014, under the rubric “Public Cities, Private Cities.” The third

¹ To that end, each of the workshops will prioritize the involvement of local participants, with a view to seeding longer-term conversations that might be developed through ongoing institutional linkages, or the establishment of informal networks between workshop participants. These issues would be explored more fully after the series of three workshops has come to an end (December 2015).

workshop will be held in October 2015 at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences in Shanghai, on the subject of “City Theory for the New Millennium”.

The workshops have developed into a space where scholars and practitioners with a strong commitment to case and field studies that privilege interpretive and ethnographic methods, come together with more nomothetically-minded practitioners who draw on big data, visibilization, statistical observation, and mapping technologies to generate spatial knowledge at the scale of the city, the region, and the nation.

These interdisciplinary collaborations have been fruitful for creating three particular sites of inquiry that have provided a focus for debate and discussion:

- 1) Built form, including architectural form, the politics of spatialization, construction, demolition and regeneration.
- 2) Social effects of political economy, with a focus on how development policies, speculative capital and primitive accumulation reorder notions of culture and development.
- 3) Institutions, actors, and effects, as a way to understand how activism, policy intervention and techno-social planning processes shape urban (in)equity.

What follows is a brief description of the workshops to date, which reflects the convenors’ commitment to using site-specific knowledge (not to mention access to key scholars, practitioners, and policymakers from the regions) for developing embedded urban knowledge for the twenty-first century.

The New York workshop addressed new challenges to planning and urban policy-making under contexts of neo-liberal spatial transformation, and had an explicitly comparative focus. This first workshop in the series focused on how historical legacies of planning, spatial segregation and informality have produced diverse urban landscapes that have tended to share a global commitment to the aesthetics of modernism, and the accumulative logic of private property. It focused on comparing and contrasting the rather different trajectories of urbanization in Europe and the United States, as opposed to cities in Asia through this optic. Given the rather diverse iterations of the Asian city, the relationship between space, and the idea of (private) property was a particularly keen site of discussion. Thus an important focus of discussion was to ask how property regimes have developed at the intersection of law and politics, and their impact on the history of urban planning in the twentieth century, and beyond. Comparisons across national boundaries, and a focus on diverse practices for “privatizing” urban space were explored in depth drawing on the example of New York, Chicago, Shanghai, and Mumbai in particular.

The Mumbai workshop looked into the similar challenges posed by informal processes and actors. It was concerned with the social consequences of the accelerated urbanization of ‘Asia’ in the twenty-first century, a process without historical precedent, and which has produced a number of crises in its wake from environmental stress, to issues of food security, and severe housing shortage. The

second workshop thus addressed issues of urban access and exclusion from the opposite end, as it were, and focused on informal housing settlements, largely labeled “slums,” as a specific site from which to explore the lived effects of top-down policy and speculative ideologies on the urban poor, or otherwise vulnerable.

The objective in Mumbai was to critically re-examine theories and policies relating to the subaltern city, i.e. the practices of survival, persistence and illegitimized existence found in the so-called “slums” and “ghettos” of colonial and late capitalist modernity, in order to find new ways of addressing these phenomena. While there has been a long tradition of scholarship on slums, the second workshop aimed to go beyond the existing dichotomous theories to seek new ways to frame the problem, while examining creative interventions at the level of housing policy and practice across Asian cities.

“Slums” and “ghettos” have been a refuge for disposable populations, including internally displaced persons, refugees, illegal immigrants—as well as the poor. But they are also sites of improvised and tenuous forms of sociality and social cooperation, political actions and claims—arguably forms of informal “democracy”—which either go unrecognized or become stigmatized as violence, crime, or unproductive and fruitless “mob” behavior. Encroachment, illegality, and the resort to informal livelihoods are sites of subaltern survival, and define struggles for recognition in the face of spatial exclusion and civic disenfranchisement. Thus, workshop participants focused on the voices and the experiences of the marginalized, with emphasis on varied strategies of protest, survival, and creative interface with state and municipal authorities.

Discussions in the Mumbai Studio-X space were centered on four session topics relating to various aspects of the subaltern city:

- “Between the formal and the informal”, touching on regulations, policy and planning, land grabs and urban dispossession.
- “Conceiving and intervening in the slum”, covering approaches to the “slum” by governments, donor agencies, civil society and market players; notions of power and identity; and collective action versus individual market opportunism.
- “Segregation and ghettoization”, examining how categories of social difference such as migrants, caste, religion and gender are used to produce social and spatial separation.
- “Housing and right to the city struggles”, touching on cultural and activist interventions on behalf of precarious and un-housed populations, emerging sites of “infrapolitics,” and experiments in utilizing public-private partnerships for spatial justice.

The workshop ended with a reception and public program entitled “Representing Asian Urbanity,” moderated by Jared Stark (Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Eckerd College in the U.S.) and featuring artistic interventions by literary theorist Emily Sun from National Tsing Hua University

(Taiwan), Mumbai-based documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan, and writer and cultural critic Jerry Pinto. The focus of this public program was to think about aesthetic representations of the city (song, literature, film) as constituting an important archive for understanding urban experience at a time of flux and great change across Asia.

Themes and sub-themes

Urban ‘regeneration’: State, speculative capital and land politics

Spatial reconfiguration either reinforces or unsettles power equations. The ripples of this reordering can be seen in the legal disputes, claims, counter claims and violence it generates. It is more pronounced when it comes to the question of mass housing. In her concept note Laura Dixit highlighted a historical case of a Housing Authority in Los Angeles that had proposed the first ever racially integrated and affordable public housing for a neighborhood in the 1940s. The threats to the racial power relations and the private developers were obvious. The project never materialized. Instead, the Housing Authority itself was brought down. In another part of the world, a few years later, an experiment in public housing was successful in its initial phase. The Nan-Ji-Chang Public Housing project in Taipei, built in 1950 by the Government of Taiwan, was a pioneer in ‘public collective housing’ (Te-Chun Chen). Today it stands as a site riddled with poverty, little maintenance and a rise in informal and illegal constructions. Housing histories have seen a remarkable shift since then. Discussions on the nature of these shifts predominantly featured in the first workshop session.

Land versus Property

The process of conversion of land to ‘property’ has historically been an important element in urbanization. The State plays its role in this process by legally codifying tenures and claims. This conversion is accompanied by a narrow policy focus on ‘real estate’ at the cost of broader urban land uses. Prasad Shetty explained in detail the state involvement in defining and making of property with reference to Mumbai. He described urbanization as densification of tenures and claims. It begins with converting land into a tenure claim. The revenue codes of different states define the owner as a holder of land. The owner is specified in the register of titles. For instance, the Town Planning Act of Bombay sought to turn land into rectangular plots and later ensured tenure claims. The square form became connected to one single owner.

Speculative Capital

Contemporary urbanization takes on a different character due to its scale, its urbanization mechanisms, and the nature of capital involved as well as capital

generated. Central to this urban production is the nexus between the state and speculative capital. It creates a certain kind of real estate market in which a majority of citizens are priced out from access to housing. This is most visible in the financial capitals of many Asian countries. In Mumbai, the host city of this workshop, the rise in the land and housing prices is the steepest in the world. Sanjoy Chakravorty in his paper attributes this mainly to the wide income and wealth inequality. As a result, a vast majority of the population lives in informal and precarious conditions. There are, however, many paradoxical processes at play. Amita Bhide explained how in the last ten years, especially in Mumbai, there has been an overwhelming interest by the state to house the poor through redevelopment schemes. On the other hand the social sector infrastructure in these spaces is crumbling- a sign of the withdrawal of the state from its welfare responsibilities. These developments, she argued, need to be seen in the context of the new land and housing politics and the mechanisms to effect the desired change.

Housing in areas defined as slums was earlier a process led by informal negotiations and networks. Today it is taken over by a set of formal and informal procedures, which Bhide states, tend to 'mimic the formal market' practices. This has not made things less vulnerable or transparent for the poor. Rather, in an era of redevelopment projects, the interests of the politicians, speculators and developers play a strong role. The developers work through the non-legal domain and use various means (violent/nonviolent) to push through their agenda. The relationship between the developers and the slum community involves both confrontation as well as co-option. The state enters as a facilitator and makes real estate feasible for the developers. Slums are declared as "difficult areas". There is no redress mechanism for the slum community as the local bodies, political parties and the developers are in connivance. The developers co-opt many local associations, youth groups, have their own watchdogs and take over cultural spaces through sponsorship of community programs. These methods are not free from conflicts and coercions. In regions like Mizoram (India), the new urban policies were not only altering old forms of housing practices but the slum redevelopment model was mechanically imposed without a realistic assessment of local needs and sentiments.

Urban Housing: Informalization and "Slumification"

How we define 'slums' plays an important role in shaping research and intervention goals. Slums are often examined by their housing quality and intervention is reduced to the housing question. Such a view, however, eclipses the broader world slums entail. The issues of education, water, health, sanitation and security are just as crucial as housing itself. Two broad views on the

possibilities and constraints of life in slums were discussed in the workshop. On the one hand, there was the view that slums are not simply degenerate spaces of living. The presence of entrepreneurial activities, the economy of waste and recycling, and the huge population engaged in the manufacturing and service economy in these areas, substantiate this reality. Slums are both entry points for migrants coming into the cities as well as solutions by the poor living in deeply difficult situations (Vincent). Slums are also sites of negotiation with the state. Hence, they are a product of policy and interventions. On the other hand, the idea of the slum as site of possibilities was countered. It was argued that slums exist within the context of larger unequal power relations, which constrain the scope for altering their realities.

The discourse of slums as ‘problematic zones’ often sets the tone of debate in academic and policy circles. Slums are spaces deeply linked to culture, politics and economy, and hence fundamental to understand the urban. Each slum has its own life history. In her paper, Amita Bhide identifies slum as a site dense with memories of different communities migrating, struggling to survive, and investing the sheer physical labor in turning a barren land into a place of shelter and home. They are spaces of living and work. They are zones of politicization and identity formation. Every political party in Mumbai has a ‘slum wing’. It points to their significance as a site of electoral mobilization and engineering electoral mandates. Sanjay Chakravorty, in this context, asked how political parties get groups to vote against their economic self-interest. What valorization techniques and identity categories are mobilized? How do these then filter into the everyday relations and vice versa? A contextualized reading of slum in this manner could perhaps forge new directions in theoretical understanding, developing relevant policies and shape meaningful interventions.

Urban Experience: Segregation, Ghettoization and Resistance

The urban social and the built form interact in manifold ways and alter each other. The corresponding degeneration of the spatial and social form indicate deep fissures and tensions in the way this link is evolving. Precarity in everyday survival and housing signals this degeneration that often translates into experiences of violence. Old as well as new marginalities are hardening and redrawing the urban social boundaries. They are not simply outcomes but inherent in urban visions.

Cosmopolitanism

How cosmopolitan then is the urban? The fault line in this image today is most conspicuous in the spatial segregation. It involves geographical confining or pushing the urban poor to certain parts of the city or its outskirts. Additionally,

polarization based on identities- religious/ethnic- is a systematic process seen in the everyday as well as extraordinary events of violence. This has resulted in community zones of protection in the form of ghettos. Nida Kirmani argued that it is important to draw connections between the ethnic/religious violence with the local and global economic insecurities. Speaking in the context of Karachi, Kirmani said that the stigmatization of localities, unemployment, discrimination and unjust targeting of young men is producing new kinds of violent masculine culture. Similarly, Varsha Ayyar commented that a city is as much a site of abuse and humiliation for Dalits, as caste discrimination persists in resettlement areas of Mumbai. The term 'urban poor' therefore can be inadequate in addressing identity-based marginalization. Women and children are worst affected as their experience of violence is layered. They also struggle to access basic welfare amenities.

On the other extreme end of the urban pyramid are the gated communities with their own private supply of water, electricity, markets, health and security services. In a scenario of extreme social differentiation, what then shapes the sense of belongingness to a city? Xiangming Cheng deals with this question in the context of Shanghai, China. The state-centric explanation of urbanization tends to associate the image of a clean city (with no signs of poverty in the city landscape) to a strong state. He explains, in his concept note, how informality and poverty do exist in a hidden form and calls this a process of 'shallow urbanization'. The state policy bars the migrants from settling as permanent residents, by denying them right to property or access to public education and other welfare services. Cheng argued such an urbanization based on exploiting migrants is bound to fail. He proposes a greater access of public space and cultural institutions and (in the Chinese context) accelerated implementation of *hukou* reform for a better social and emotional integration of urban migrants.

A Shrinking Space for Resistance

In recent years there have been instances of small and big "push-back" and resistance, in Seoul and Taipei, against neoliberal urban renewal projects by the citizens and activists. But the overall disabling situation (in other Asian cities) of urban poverty has produced deep obstacles to practices of political formation as well as a shrinking space for resistance. Considering the enormous power structure that dominates the life of urban poor, some discussants expressed deep skepticism about the transformative potential of everyday resistance. Rao suggested the need for a realistic assessment of actual space for resistance by critically examining the impact of civil society groups and instrumentalization of knowledge. Speaking in the context of cases in Taipei, Liu Hsing said, the desire to profit from speculative economy exists from top to bottom. The community

also wants to benefit from urban regeneration. Furthermore, a slum dweller may not always think in terms of community interest but prioritize the immediate family interest. For an activist or a planner, intervention poses a big dilemma.

Urban Knowledge: Past, Present and Future Directions

Politics of Categories

Categories used for urban analysis opened up debates on politics of knowledge, its production and circulation. An oft-repeated concern, across sessions, was the applicability or generalization of certain terms, such as the slum, the subaltern, precarity, and the informal/formal. The term 'slum' was also considered problematic as it was derived from a Western historical experience and tends to homogenize varied informal living practices. Some countered that the term does hold analytical value and should also be open to meanings drawn from local experiences. It would be more insightful to see how people are engaging with this term rather than completely dismissing it. How do slum dwellers negotiate their insecurity through different idioms of citizenship and human rights?

The usefulness and accuracy of the term 'precarity' was hotly debated in the Mumbai workshop. If 'precarity' is simply an absence of certainty, then the world has always been precarious. As commented by Rohit Negi, 'we live in the reality of unintended outcome'. It is a condition that has existed in all of the historical time and not peculiar to the present. The real problem, he argues, was academe's overwhelming inclination to perceive the world through Western theories of planning. Precarity then comes to be seen as a condition that has not fit into the promise or narrative of planning. He suggested that we should not study what we consider planning to be (and what we consider cities should be) but what cities really *are*. There is a need to emphasize more the ethnographic approach rather than creating models and looking for deviations.

Comparison as Methodology and Politics

Many cities have common histories and multiple connections, and hence there seems to be a good scope for comparison. But what are the parameters for comparing varied urban experiences? Anant Maringanti proposed an idea of comparative work that allows ideas to travel to different contexts. The other view was to look at comparison as a way of analyzing one's own experience and drawing connections in different contexts, as a way of discovering similarities, differences, the universal and the particular.

Linkages

Instead of boundaries shaping our views of the urban and rural it was thought that their linkages can be more insightful in examining the nature of urbanity and rurality. Underlining the need to recover more rural stories, Dixit mentioned the case of Kathmandu, Nepal, where urban migrants are spending their earnings in new construction activities in the villages. Thus, the movement to the urban is also reconfiguring the rural space. Linkages therefore have to be seen from both directions and not merely from urban to rural. Anant Maringanti expressed his interest in exploring these linkages through territorial and governance frontiers; movements of people and commodities; and circulation of resources. The urban is a frontier where ideological battles are taking place. These battles are then taken back to the villages through migrants. Maringanti called attention to the long tradition of intellectual work on these links through agriculture and mode of production debates, which now have been largely ignored.

Rethinking Asian Urbanity, Rethinking History

Complicating the question of categories, comparison and linkages further, Rao raised an important issue of how to think of theory and reality in relation to the existing set of models that are relegated as case studies and examples? The history of the making of Asia itself complicates the question of comparison, linkages and categories. Asia has not been thought of as urban in existing academic theories. Our understanding of the urban itself is based on 19th century formations. Asian urbanity as it is understood in the academic and policy world echoes the Cold War politics. Asia itself is a Cold War construct. What then unites the diverse geographies of Japan, China and South Asian regions like India that are bundled up into the same category of Asia? What does Asia itself mean? What have been the implications in the intellectual and policy world of this idea? Rao suggested that perhaps our understanding of Asian urbanity would remain incomplete if we do not look at the notion of comparison—where it comes from and what it does. It requires a critical relook at the making of Asia and, more importantly, an understanding of developmental history.

Directions in Urban Research

New themes as well as future directions in urban research were proposed through the discussions and the concept notes. Some principal themes raised by the workshop participants are summarized below:

- Studies on elite negotiations with power regimes are as significant for our understanding the dynamics and structures of dominance (Neha Sami).

- Urbanization is seen purely from the lens of negativity. It also needs to be understood through the lens of possibilities (Sanjay Chakravarty).
- Studies on slums should look into their relationship to the material configurations and connections to other infrastructures in the city (Laura Dixit).
- Empirically grounded research is needed to analyze the workings of the speculative economy, its networks, linkages between agents and their response to economic crisis.
- How are the urban local bodies and the local administrative units being used to achieve progressive ends; Between the realities of victimhood and domination are the narratives of innumerable actors who are constantly living a precarious life, struggle to escape from poverty and hope for an upward mobility; Research should focus on this vast section; Urban planning needs to be seen from a critical lens. Drawing further from Dipesh Chakravarty, 'urban research needs to provincialize urban planning' (Rohit Negi).
- There is a need to theorize the new politics of land & the property regimes the state gives rise to; and the implications for those priced out (Anupama Rao).