

## A Quest for Urban Sociological Research in the Hill Cities of North-East India

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The word 'urban' was hardly used in the English language before the nineteenth century. It is briefly defined by the Shorter Oxford Dictionary as 'pertaining to town or city life'. It is derived from the Latin 'urbs' a term applied by the Romans to a city - more especially the city of Rome. Urban refers to a city or town, which is directly opposite to village or country.

Although urban population is widely understood to include the population resident in cities and towns, the definition of urban is, nevertheless, a complex matter. Population classified as "urban" varies greatly from one country to another. The delineation of areas as "urban" or "rural" is often related to administrative, political, historical, or cultural considerations as well as demographic criteria. As the United Nation Demographic Yearbook has indicated, definitions of "urban" fall into three major types: (1) classification of minor civil division on a chosen criterion which may include: (a) type of local government, (b) number of inhabitants, (c) proportion of population engaged in agriculture; (2) classification of administrative centres of minor rural division as urban and the remainder of the division as rural; and (3) Classification of certain size localities (agglomerations) as urban, irrespective of administrative boundaries." Even for census purposes, then, the definition of urban involves a multidimensional approach and the setting of arbitrary cutting points in differentiating "urban" from "rural". (Hauser, 1965).

### Urbanization-Its Definition

Many scholars have defined urbanization according to their own orientation and understanding. But there is a general agreement that urbanization is a complex socio-economic process closely connected with the scientific technological revolution, and that it exercises a growing influence on all aspects of society's life affecting the nature of economic development, the demographic, ethnic and many social processes. As a complex many sided

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process, its study requires a comprehensive approach involving many disciplines.

In the extensive literature devoted to the problem of urbanization numerous urbanization definition are used ranging from the terse definition determining urbanization as a mere growth of the share of the urban population in the world, or in a particular country or region, to an overall definition according to which urbanization is a world-historic process involving increasing concentration and intensification of human interaction and the integration of the forms of human beings activity which are becoming ever more varied. Urbanization is understood as a stage, as a result and at the same time a pre-requisite of the progress of human interaction, all socially vital activities, and society's creative potential.

According to Thompson (1935) urbanization is characterized by movement of people from small Communities concerned solely with agriculture to other larger Communities whose activities are primarily centred in government, trade, manufacture and allied interests. Hauser and Ducan (1954) characterize urbanization as a change in the pattern of population distribution. It involves an increase in the size of urban population, and growth in number and size of urban places with increasing concentration of population of such places.

Urbanization has been systematically treated by Hope Tisdale Eldridge (1956). He argued that "the process of population concentration" involves two elements: (1) Multiplication of the points of concentration, and (2) Increase in the size of individual concentration. It means an increasing shift from agrarian to industrial service and distributive occupations is a process by which the number of points of population concentration increases involving a shift from agrarian to non-agrarian occupations.

Urbanization, in the demographic sense, may be seen to indicate an increase in the proportion of urban population (U) to the total population (T) over a period of time (Bose 1978). As long as U/T increase, one would say there is urbanization. However, theoretically it is possible that this proportion remains constant over time in situation where there is absolutely no rural to urban migration and both the rural and urban population grow at the same rate. B.S. Khorev takes the term urbanization, as the first approximation, to mean the growing number of towns, especially large and super large cities, the increase in the share of the urban population in the country, that or in the population of the world. It is important that in determining the level of the social and economic development of regions, the stress is often placed on the share of urban in the total population. Also comparison of countries and regions using this indicator is highly conventional.

The characteristic feature of urbanization gives rise to the definition of urbanization as growth of importance of towns and cities in the life of a country or a region conditioned by social and economic progress, as the concentration of economic and cultural activities in large urban centres. A large, dense and heterogeneous population gives birth to a new socio-economic phenomenon – the urban way of life or “urbanism”. It is precisely this phenomenon and its wide spread that are becoming the basic and inherent attributes of urbanization. In the words of Berezin (1972) “Urbanisation is a complex social process accompanied by the emergence of a specific way of life, which turns the cities into the prevalent form of organization of social activity in the present century and the centuries to come”. Thus, the concept “urbanization” implies changes:

(a) in the nature of people’s activities; (b) in the ratio between the population engaged in agricultural activities and the rest of the population; (c) in the population distribution according to types of settlements; (d) in the population concentration levels and the levels of concentration of human activities; (e) in the shaping of the urban way of life and its growing influence on the other sections of the population.

Concentrating the more dynamic part of the population and more progressive kind of human activity, all big cities are now acting as engines of growth and development. The global cities have emerged and are dominating in the region and the world over with the economic power. “Urbanization is characterized by movement of people from small communities concerned chiefly or solely with agriculture to other communities, generally larger, where activities are primarily centered in management, trade, manufacture or allied interests (Dudley Stamb, 1961).

### **India’s Urbanization Scenario – A Review**

The most striking feature of India’s urbanization is its long tradition. The emergence of early urban life was associated with the evolution of the Indus Valley civilization around 2500 B.C. (Dunbar 1951). Some temporal and spatial discontinuities in urban growth and spread notwithstanding, the urbanization process diffused to other parts of the country under the impact of varied forces operating during the ancient (from early times to 1206 A.D.), medieval (1206 to 1757 A.D.) and modern (1757 A.D. till date) periods of Indian history. For that reason, India’s urban pattern is a mosaic of segments belonging to the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods (Rajbala 1986; king 1976).

Thus, urbanization in India is not a new phenomenon. However, proper documentation of urban growth and related aspects began to be recorded along with the census survey only. The population growth in the cities as

well as growth of market towns occurred during the colonial period due to increase in commerce and commercialization of agriculture. The growth in small-scale industries resulted in the development of large towns. Cotton textiles and other industries caused the concentration on population location-based and in the development of urban centers. Thus, there was a gradual growth of urban areas in India. The development of trade, commerce, industry, transport, communication and construction etc. all led to a faster rise in the percentage of urban population. There had been some good studies –Kingsley Davis (1951), Turner (1962), Huser (1957), Sovani (1966), Ashish Bose (1970, 1973, 1975, 1992, 1993, 1998, 2001), Fisher (1972), Singh (1973), Premi, M.K. (1985, 1994, 1996), Ramachandra, R. (1989), Rao (1986), Mishra, R.P. and Kamalesh Mishra (1998), Sandhu, R.K. (2003), Kundu A. (1994, 2000) Sivaramakrishna et al (2005) – on the morphology of urbanization in India concentrating of issues such as increased urban growth in larger cities, inter and intra city urban variations, migration patterns, urban governance etc. Most of the studies on urbanisation are based on census data.

The processes of urbanization and urban growth have been studied by social scientists from various dimensions. The demographic studies concentrate on the rate of urban growth and related aspects. Studies on migration consider migration as significant factor in urbanization. Urbanization has far reaching effects on larger societal processes and social institutions such as family and kinship.

Kingsley Davis (1951) is one of the foremost to study the urbanization pattern in India using census data. Although his predictions did not prove to be correct, he made an attempt to predict the future course of urbanization and urban growth with the turn of the century in India. N.V. Sovani (1966) in his study *Urbanization and Urban India* argued that while Indian urbanization had many resemblances in form to that of the West, it differed from the latter in content. For him the process of urbanization in India (1970) Ashish Bose analysed the pattern of urbanization, its structural characteristics and some related problems. The focus of examination for K.C. Zacharia was the role played by internal migration in the process of urbanization. For this purpose he analysed the census data since 1901. Ashok Mitra (1967) in his paper, *A Functional Classification of Towns in India* attempts to make a composite classification of towns using a triangular coordinate technique on the basis of industrial classification of workers in the 1961 census. P.B. Desai (1969) studies the changes in the size and sex composition of India's population over a period of sixty years using census data. The work examines the relationship of sex composition with other demographic variable like age structure, migration, working force and the geographical distribution of urban population.

Urbanization in India (Prakasha Rao 1983) deals with the process of urbanization in India. Giriraj Gupta analyses the major components of urban social organization such as structure, growth, culture migration, slums and various forms of mobility and interaction. Lakshmi Narayan (1986) examines the historical and demographic dimensions of the urban growth of metropolitan cities in India. Weinstein, J., (1992 urban growth Demographic and Socio-cultural prospects) studies the numerical and qualitative aspects of the growth of the Indian urban population with the benefit of data from the last 4 censuses of 1951-1981. Roy, B.K. (1993 Urban Growth in India: It's contemporary Relevance) examines the urban growth in India in general with relevance to urban agglomerations of major significance on the basis of the Census of 1991.

Despite its long urban history spanning over nearly five millennia, India remains one of the less urbanized countries of the world. When it entered the twentieth century, it was one-tenth urban; it was around one-sixth urban at the time of Independence (Krishan and Singh 1993). During the first half of the twentieth century, the process of urbanization was slow, registering an increase in the level of urbanization from 10.84 to 17.29 percent. On the other hand, the urban population increased two-and-a-half times, i.e., it increased from 25 million to 62 million. The latter half of the twentieth century has been the era of urbanization in the developing countries in general, and India in particular. During this period, although the level of urbanization in India increased from 17.29 percent to 27.78 percent, the total increase in urban population is about four-and-a-half times, i.e., from 62 millions to 285 millions during 1951-2001 (Singh 2001). India has the second largest urban population among the countries of the world. Although there are 285 million urbanites and 35 metropolises in India as per the Census of 2001, the urban phenomena have not received due attention from sociologists and social anthropologists. It has mainly attracted demographers, economists and geographers.

### **The North-East Region of India**

North-east India is the easternmost region of India consisting of the contiguous Seven Sister States and the state of Sikkim. Seven states commonly known as the "Seven Sisters". They are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

From times immemorial, India's North East has been the meeting point of many communities, faiths and cultures. The North-eastern states are very different in many ways from the other parts of India. These States have the maximum number of tribes living within. Many tribal languages are spoken throughout these seven states. The North-eastern states have the highest percentage of Christians. Territory-wise this region is the most sensitive

region-touching many countries like China, Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The ethnic and religious diversity that characterizes the seven states distinguishes them from the rest of India. For most of their history, they were independent, and their complete integration with India came about only during the British Raj.

Except for Assam, where the major language, Assamese, is the easternmost of the Indo-European languages, the region has a predominantly tribal population that speak numerous Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic languages. Hinduism is the predominant religion in this region. The proliferation of Christianity among the Seven Sister States sets it apart from the rest of India. The work of Christian missionaries in the area has led to large scale conversion of the tribal population. Christians now comprise the majority of the population in Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya and sizable minority in Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. The bigger states of Assam and Tripura, however, have remained predominantly Hindu, with a sizeable Muslim minority in Assam.

### **Urbanization Scenario in North-East India- A Bird's Eye View**

Though a vast array of papers and books have been produced in different aspects of urbanization in India, the number of studies relating to the North-East region of India is not numerous. However, a beginning was made. S.M. Dube (1971) carried out a project on the process of urbanization in the tribal areas of the North East. Goswami's 'Cultural Profile of Shillong' (1978) contains interesting papers on various communities, land system and city administration. Another book on Shillong focusing on geographical and spatial analysis, is contributed by J.P. Singh (1980). A.C. Mohapatra (1980) has produced a report on the growth of urban population in the North-East from 1951 to 1981 and has compiled data from census report on district wise and state wise urban population. Hill cities of eastern Himalayas by A.C. Sinha (et.al) (1993) examine the land relations, inter-ethnic issues and civic participation at the urban level among the hill states of the region. This study finds that most of the towns located in the hill states of the region such as Cherrapunjee, Shillong, Jowai, Tura, Dimapur, Kohima, Mokokchung, Aizawal and Itanagar were studied through an interdisciplinary approach in which Anthropologists, Historians, Geographers and few Sociologists examined the urban phenomena on a common format. Urbanization and development in North-East India by J.B. Ganguly (1995) was an outcome of a seminar, where various scholars had contributed on urban growth of this region. Shillong a tribal Town in Transition by Sutapa SenGupta (et.al) (2004) was also an outcome of a seminar volume on various area of the city of Shillong. Surojit Sen Gupta's "Urban Social Structure - A Study of a Hill

City" (2006) examines the urban social structure, pattern of group behavior, nature of its modernity and the impact of urban development of the most cosmopolitan city of North - East India, that is Shillong.

### **Tradition of North-East's Urban Scenario - A Brief Review**

In the emergence of New towns in North-East India it has been noticed that gradually the smaller towns have grown in size yielding their numbers to higher classes and consequently, the bigger towns are increasing in numbers and correspondingly their proportion to total urban units continued improving in each of the census years. Another important feature of the pattern of the urban population of the region is that it is biased in favour of big towns particularly after independence. This is to be seen in terms of the rapid increase in the physical number of big urban areas, as also in the percentage increase of the population of big towns. Also the major portion of the urban population in the region resides in the capitals of the states.

Some of the important factors which are contributing to the rapid growth of population in urban centres of the region are:

1. Better job opportunities;
2. Better social services such as medical, educational etc;
3. Better transport and communications;
4. Migration of the population from the rural areas to urban areas;
5. Migration of the population from other states of the country and also influx of refugees from the neighbouring country; and
6. Concentration of developmental activities in and around state capitals and major towns.

In the north-east, the British rule had another effect, which carried important implications for urbanization and urban growth trends related to Modernization and social change. The new administrative system, educational system, transport and communication system and industrial growth all had influence on the social organization. In a way, the colonial rule was also responsible for the rise of political and social reformers coming forward and trying to introduce changes in the society.

It should be noted here that the North-East is a neglected region. Of the vast chunk of mainstream urban literature available in the post-Independence period, very few studies have attempted to examine the issues of North-East urban dynamics. The bulk of urban literature talks of only the 'major states', of which the north-eastern states (except Assam) are not a part. As a result,

there is heavy shortage of literature in the North-East with reference to the dynamics of urbanization.

Urbanisation in the North-Eastern region has a long history that started before the advent of the British. The earliest urban clusters were mainly the capital cities built by different rulers. They were essentially rural in character, made up mainly of palaces, high walls, temples, pavilions, etc. With the advent of the British and subsequent colonization on Indian soil, centres for collection and other related activities started, along with the development of administrative activities. At a later point of time, the partition of India affected the towns by changing their population size and area.

Under planned development in the post-Independence era, administrative units were reorganized and decentralization activities initiated. It was in this context that, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a tremendous acceleration in the level of urbanization in this so called backward region. Thus, the distribution of urban population in the North-East is as top-heavy as in mainland India. The implication may, however, be different in the North-East. This is a region that is mostly hill terrain, which may not permit scope for lateral expansion of cities as in the plains. Moreover, the majority of the region's cities are not planned; they grew historically as trade or administrative centres. The small and medium towns, particularly class III, IV and V, however have the potential for planned development to accommodate the rising urban population in the region.

Taking the whole of the North-East as a unit, it can be seen that the region witnessed different urbanization levels before and after Independence. The underlying factors were many. First, the massive, post-Independence reorganization of the administrative and political boundaries resulted in the creation of new states like Nagaland, Arunachal, Manipur, etc. Secondly, the region attracted impressive development projects from the State and Central governments. Thirdly, the contribution of Christian missionaries in the terms of upgrading the quality of lives of tribal was no less noteworthy. They invested heavily in the education and infrastructure sectors, playing an important role in enhancing urbanization levels. There may be several other important forces that have acted and reacted in the region which the urban planners need to explore in order to direct the region on the path of sustainable development in the long run.

### **Urbanization and Urban Society-North-East Scenario**

Truly speaking, the urbanization process can be demographic, ecological, political, economic, cultural, psychological and social at one and the same time. When habitation in any territory grows, it grows in several dimensions.

When it begins to take the shape of a city, the hitherto latent dimensions of the territory begin to manifest themselves in more definite patterns, social structures, system of relations, etc. Thus, if it is acceptable to the modern urbanologists, the process of urbanization is essentially a complex phenomenon of such varying attributes as demographic, ecological, economic, industrial and social-structural. In the process of urbanization all or some of these attributes may be found to be more or less prominent, depending upon the historical process of a given area. There can hardly be made any universalization about the simultaneous configurational development of these attributes. To analyze the process of urbanization in a given area, all these attributes must be separately examined and if anyone is found to be dominating, the process may immediately be underlined. Once the process is identified, it is natural to expect that it will culminate into the growth of a city. Thus, any one of these attributes may or may not be present in the process of urbanization. That is, there may be urbanization without industrialization or technological advance or the population concentration may be high without urbanization or low with concomitant urbanization and so on.

Geographical patterning of urban centres provides the key to the comprehension of the degree of socio-economic transformation pre-conditioned by the territorial attributes. They, however, assume greater significance in the promotion of an 'urban setting' as it is not only the territory of the city but also the spatial linkages between a large number of urban and rural settlements that contribute to the evolution of their distinctive socio-economic character. It is in this light that the distribution pattern of urban centres in the distinctive mountainous terrain of North-East to be analyzed. Despite a rugged topography the states exhibits a fairly even distribution of towns within its territory. It is indicative of the fact that the physical characteristics like physiographic and attitude do not have much bearing on either their distribution or their size.

As a matter of fact, though the administrative reasons have been the main cause of proliferation of towns, location along the important Highways has shown greater potential for growth. They also account for the development of a balanced structure of urbanization with regard to population size inspite of the fact that occupational structure of most of the towns do not conform to the urban norms. Neither do they show any tendency of diversification and structural shift from agricultural sector to others with the exception of the capital cities. It, therefore, clearly exhibits that urbanization in the states of North-East is merely an expression of quantitative growth without being accompanied by any qualitative change.

Very naturally, the demographic change that is taking place even in absence of adequate economic base, is found to have negatively affected both-

the villages as well as the towns. Villages suffer because they lose their most precious resource-human resource in working age group. Towns, on the other hand, are handicapped to exploit the potentials of their services. In order to assess the viability of urban agglomerations as instruments of transformation of socio-economic value systems, way of life degree of socio-economic awakening and level of social and economic interaction not only on macro but also on micro level is imperative. Despite of comprehensive Urban and Regional Development Acts to make provision for the regulation of planned growth and development of urban rural areas and regions in relation to economic development of natural setting and urban environment and archeological monuments and historical places within North-East the present pattern of urban development in the state is totally uncontrolled.

Duplication of authority and lack of co-ordination amongst various government agencies leave many things to be desired in an urban setting. As a result, benefits arising out of 'new and expanded employment opportunities, 'external economies of the towns' and the advantages of 'the economies of scale' in the provision of various services and 'attitudinal changes' are marginalized. Instead, problems of congestion, unemployment, housing, education, health and law and order are found to have adverse impact on the 'quality of human life' that urbanization promises. Rapid urbanization is the most important factor that impinges upon the housing situation in the north-eastern state. However, provision of basic services like water supply, transportation, lighting, sanitation etc. have not been able to keep pace with demands made on them and are disproportionately in short supply than should be permitted.

Investment in infrastructure and developmental schemes to cope with the increasing demands is, however, possible only when the region is capable to generate resources for the same. It may be achieved by involving the ever increasing labour force in productive activities and enhancement in their productive capacity. It also necessitates a diversification of economy wherein a horizontal as well as vertical movement of labour in different sectors of economy is possible. Growth of urbanization concomitant with the growth of urban economy (secondary, tertiary and quaternary activities) must reflect such diversification where, in addition to the existing labour force, surplus from the primary sector of rural economy may also seek employment. A vibrant urban economy attempts not only to accommodate them but also to make room for new contenders though 'urban multipliers' and 'agglomeration economics'. Organized private sector and government undertaking, however should work in tandem to broaden the base of the urban economy.

With the growth of urbanization and changing economic systems inter-generational differences have become universal phenomena. It finds

expression in discordant notes on issues of social importance and established norms. Rapid urban growth and economic transition have perpetuated the conflict at a rate that traditional societies are unable to contend with. The difference of opinion between the old and the young and also the rural and the urban milieu, leads to perpetual tension having a destabilizing effect on the society. Rural society due to its conservative outlook is able to bear the brunt and steady the change. Dynamic urban society, on the other hand is left perpetually in a state of transition and north-east region is no exception.

The urban concentration of population in and around state capitals in a few towns in the region is posing serious problems. The general and common problems of urban agglomeration have already started showing their signs in the capital towns, such as problems of concentration, housing, safety etc. The unchecked or unplanned growth in urban towns; it is feared, will lead to the deepening of the intra-state disparities owing to the fact that most of the development activities are practically confined to the state capitals or to major towns. Decentralization of the process of urbanization in the region thus becomes imperative. The future urbanization process, therefore, needs to be provided proper direction and stimulus in order to promote economic growth, enhance availability of urban services to the surrounding areas to improve the quality of life in towns, and above all, to strengthen the federating role of towns in the region with impressive ethnic and tribal diversity.

### **Urban Sociological Research Priorities in the Hill Cities of North-East India**

With the increase of urban centres in the North-Eastern region, scholars got attracted to the study of urbanization (patterns, trends, policy programmes) and with the growth of emerging new towns. Some aspects of urban phenomena in the region have been studied by various scholars like, geographers, economists, historians, but no one has attempted to study urbanization from the sociological perspective except few, in these Hill Cities of North-East India. Therefore, in the North-Eastern region there lies an ample scope of urban research from the sociological view point, as in this region for a very long time cities have existed. Hence, it is suggested here that urban research from the sociological discipline should be taken up immediately. To mention some of the priorities in this field are -

1. Urban centre, urbanization and urban Growth;
2. Rural-Urban continuum;
3. Functional classification of cities;
4. Trends and pattern of Urbanization;

5. Impact of urbanization on Marriage, Family and kinship;
6. Urban Ethnicity;
7. Urban Neighbourhood;
8. Urban Formal and Informal Sector;
9. Urban Issues like Poverty, Slums and Environment;
10. Urban Governance;
11. Religion at an urban setting;
12. Urban environment;
13. Urban crime;
14. Urban health;
15. Urban migration;
16. Urban outlook and social change;
17. Rural-Urban contrast and so on.

Thus, urban studies should be taken up with the application of sociological techniques to present an intimate picture of the urban style of life, which is so much needed in the region.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, urban sociological research has got a very vast field in this region as urbanization forms a major part of contemporary life patterns which is slowly encroaching upon and engulfing the existing forms of rural life. To say in nutshell, research work can be taken up on a very broad area in the region which includes city life, its size, density and characters of its people, its spatial pattern and changes thereon; the type of relationship and social interactions found in the urban milieu. Thus, it is accepted that scholars should come forward to take up research on urban sociology in this region of India as a research programmes at the individual level, post-graduate field research programmes, doctoral programme, post-doctoral field research programmes and the large scale research project financed by different agencies at an early date.

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