Research Paper History

Urbanisation in India During colonial rule and Historiography: Prospective sand Problems

Dr.V.Mallikarjuna Reddy | Academic consultant, Dept. Of History, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati – 517502. AP

ABSTRACT

Studies on urbanisation and urban centres during the ancient and medieval period have largely remained a neglected and relatively less explored field. Urbanisation is not a new phenomenon. Urbanisation is not a product. In this paper an attempt is made to assess the problems and perspectives in applying the process of urbanisation in India in interpreting the economic history, or otherwise known as "New Economic History" or "Urbanisation History", which means the application of the process of urbanisation to historical studies for attaining precision and perfection. Modern historians, basing their study in conjunction with records and data available and anthropological evidence, elements of change and continuity have been noticed in the post Mughal period i.e. colonial period in Indian society and economy.

KEYWORDS

In this paper an attempt is made to assess the problems and perspectives in applying the process of urbanisation in India during the colonial period in interpreting the economic history, or otherwise known as "New Economic History" or "Urbanisation History", which means the application of the process of urbanisation to historical studies for attaining precision and perfection.

Right from the ancient times till independence, India had been ruled by different communities under different reigns. As a consequence, several factors such as political, social, economic, religious and cultural had come to influence the growth and pattern of the urbanization of the country in varying degrees in different time periods. Of them, religious and cultural factors were the basis of the urban growth in the early and medieval era. Although, among the economic factors, trade was the major one to affect the early urbanization. However, clear definitions of trade and urbanization came to India during colonial period. It was found that trade and urbanization went hand in hand in colonial period. Hence the main objective of this paper is to study the growth and pattern of the trade under colonial rule and asses its impact on the urban growth and development in the pre- independent India.

Studies on urbanisation and urban centres during the colonial period have largely remained a neglected and relatively less explored field. Urbanisation is not a new phenomenon to Indian context. Urbanisation is not a product. It is a process in the course of history of mankind. There is tendency to follow the notion that " a town is a town, wherever it is" and that being a visual phenomenon the town to city should be made an object of study in its own right. As a result some of the works on urbanisation nothing more than compilations of lists of towns under various categories such as market, trade and commercial centres, political and administrative centres and religious centres. Sociologists look at it a as a process as well as instrument of modernisation and social change- a break from traditional past. Geographers look at urbanisation as a process by which human beings and their activities congregate spatially to give rise to towns and cities of various sizes-They also examine the internal structures functions and external relations of urban places.[1] Whereas Economists lay emphasis on urban centres as engines of economic growth. Hence it can be concluded that the study of urbanisation has to do with the economic, political, social and geographical processes that have shaped and are continuing to shape the basic character of urban life in India during the period under our survey. Urban history is a field of history that examines the historical nature of cities and towns, and the process of urbanization. The approach is often multidisciplinary, crossing boundaries into fields like social history, architectural history, urban sociology, urban geography business history, and archaeology. Urbanization and industrialization were popular themes for 20th century historians, often tied to an implicit model of modernization, or the transformation of rural traditional societies.[2] It is interesting to note that R.Champakalakshmi in her scholarly work[3] has rightly remarked "the concern with processes rather than typologies also brings us to the central issues in urban history namely, whether the visual presence of towns is a justification for treating what is " essentially a physical object" as a " social object" to be " turned into a focus analysis in its own right i.e. reified concept of the city as a decisive agency or independent variable in the process of social change or whether urban history should be pursued as " part of the analysis of those broad socio-economic changes with which history is concerned, i.e. those socio-economic changes which generate urban forms.

Recent scholars have shifted their focus from traditional political dynastic history to the study of social, economic and cultural history thereby recognizing the effect of socio-economic changes on the political developments of the time. Basing their study in conjunction with archaeological and anthropological evidence, elements of change and continuity have been noticed in the early Indian society and economy. It is an attempt to put in concrete terms what remains as a series of abstract ideas. In fact, historians, who were not convinced of the amount of precision available in historical studies, wanted history, should also make maximum use of the exploding scientific knowledge. In fact, increasing attention has been given to the studies in urbanisation studies.

R.M.Adams suggests that the urbanisation is the result of reliance on widely different food resources and occupational specialisation[4] Geiden sjobeg thinks that economic prosperity also contributed for the rise of urbanism but at the same time he disagrees with the view that it was the only factor for the rise of urban phenomena. He further states that even the economic endeavour requires the support of well organised power structure and asserts that cities can never flourish in the absence of a state. Thus the state is of primary importance while the economic considerations are of secondary importance in the urban growth.[5]

From the time i.e with the beginning of the Sultanate era, Muslim rule saw greater urbanization with the rise of many cities and urban cultures in India . The biggest impact was upon trade, resulting from a common commercial and legal

system, extending from Morocco in the west to Mongolia in the north-east, and Indonesia on the south east. While Southern India was already in trade with Arabs in Medieval times, Northern India found new opportunities in setting up of important centres of trade and industries such as Delhi, Lahore, Bombay, Ahmedabad, Sonargaon, and Jaunpur etc. During two hundred years of Mughal rule, the urbanization of India, received a further impetus, as the world had expanded to maximum extent possibly in the pre-Colonial era and India was then the second largest economy in the world

However, the situation changed completely with the gradual intrusion, monopolization and, finally, colonization of foreign traders, particularly, European traders in the Indian foreign trade which resulted in the process of urbanisation in the post Mughal era, i.e. colonial period. In fact, European traders started penetrating into the Indian economy in the pre- colonial period, particularly, with the establishment of Portuguese supremacy in the coastal regions of India in the mid – seventeenth century. [6.]

But, the greed for monopolization of Indian trade had caused war between the European companies such as Dutch, Portuguese, French and the British. Of them the latter power became successful to transform the country into a colonial economy. It, therefore, became increasingly difficult for Indian traders later to continue their sea-borne trade.[7] The situation took a different turn from the second half of the eighteenth century when East India Company emerged as political power in India. The Company started dominating trade and industry of India with the gradual emergence of British entrepreneurship in industries of indigo, salt, tea, coal, jute, cotton, iron and steel, textiles, sugar, cement, paper, matches etc. British entrepreneurship further created a favourable atmosphere of trade and industry by providing adequate .infrastructure in transport such as roads and railways, ports, telegraphs, electricity, insurance, banking, and education. Insignificant places until then, became trading and administrative centres, and finally emerged as major urban centres, namely Madras, Bombay and Calcutta.

There were also fundamental changes in the commodity composition of trade after Industrial Revolution in Europe which had a noted impact on the pattern of trade and the consequent urbanization in India. As a consequence, India, which initially supplied manufactured goods in the pre- industrial period, began to export raw materials and primary commodities, importing, in turn, finished consumer goods and certain industrial goods [8]

Hence, the establishment of the British rule brought fundamental economic transition in India, transforming agriculture from subsistence to commercial with the introduction of cultivation of variety of new crops such as tobacco, groundnuts, indigo, jute, tea, coffee etc. and gradual mechanised industrialization of the economy. The development of transport and foreign trade was the ultimate result of such economic transition which paved the way for new systems in urbanisation in India.[9]

Thus the process of urbanisation and creation of cities in colonial India can be described as a breaking of the continuum. This discontinuity happened in two significant ways. One, the growth of cities determined by exogenous factors like the setting up of a giant trading centre, or a massive public sector project or a national or multi-national company etc. i.e. the creation of a physical and social structure which is often alien to the region. New urban centres, established through policy decisions of a foreign government or that of one of a few multi-national companies, brought in not only a different physical form but also new social values and culture. Similarly, but possibly to a lesser extent, cities and towns set up by the colonial government, responding to domestic policy needs, were different from those evolving over the time through spatial interactions within the region. They were mostly linked to the outside world and responded to exogenous factors. Urbanisation, thus, broke the continuum in space and made rural and urban settlements disparate entities

From the above discussion it is clear that factors namely i.e industrial revolution in Europe and need of raw material to suit the needs of industries and other political necessities like creation of administrative divisions for changing pattern of urbanisation and trade under colonial rule are responsible for the emergence of new urban centres and their growth. This resulted in social mobility in great way in colonial India

But what is needed in this process of analysis for interpreting history, is accurate data, which can provide reasonably accurate knowledge of occupational and cultural groups, the social structure of community and population mobility under the new environment. It is viewed that it can be a highly useful method of getting at the "grass roots" and seeing the hitherto unsuspected patterns at the mass level, when adequate data are available.

In this connection it is important to note the warnings of William O. Aiydelotte [10] who has warned of two steps: Collecting data on the basis of certain assumptions and making inferences at the conclusion. The raw data frequently suffer from in exactitude and incomparability. "Near watertight compartments" usually are not available for purposes of classification. Hence it can be said that while employing the process of urbanisation as a tool to define history the historian shall take utmost care.

It is interesting to note that too much of analysis of urbanisation in history makes it dull and boring-the pleasure of reading is lost, recapturing the past becomes a taxing and vexatious affair. Analysis and classification of urbanisation is good, but in a limited way, to a limited circle, to a limited area-i.e. to micro level but not to macro level of studies.

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