The Rural-Urban Metamorphosis

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Abstract

Urbanization is as much as an impact as it results in transformation of land-use, environment and culture of communities thereby altering people's way of living prominently in the interface. Such rapid urbanization is transforming the spatial and social pattern of any city. This starts with extension of urban core towards the rural villages forming rural-urban interface, a spatial transformation on the urban periphery. The process leads to the formation of 'urban villages' which are service provider to the sophisticated core and account for the migration pull to the city. This article studies the National Capital Territory of Delhi and identifies the causes of change and its impact on the urban villages. The aspect of study is to understand the image of an urban village and its contribution to the development of a city. By this, the considerations for both the metamorphosis of the village and livelihood of the villagers will be analyzed and thus the drawbacks and necessities for a sustainable planning of the city region.

*Keywords: Urbanization, Metamorphosis, Rural-urban interface, Urban village, Sustainable.

Introduction

Conceptualizing India's Urban Villages

"An urban village could be defined as a village that has acquired urban character by virtue of reduction in its agricultural base by the process of acquisition of land holdings for public purpose or by its transformation into residential or industrial colonies".

These are one of the most prominent imprints of rural-urban migrants, also termed as "villages in the city", "villages amid the city", "villages encircled by the city". These terms describe rural villages that have been surrounded or otherwise encroached upon by urban expansion. These urban fringes surrounding cities have been referred to variously as urban outskirts, peri-urban areas, and suburban areas.

The emergence of these urban villages is result of a gradual process of transformation which begins at 'interface'. Now what is an 'interface' and where does it begins? There is land area of city where no rural uses exist and then there is a point or line where partial rural uses show up. It is at this the 'interface' begins. This point is the closest to the city limit and extends till area where most of land use is rural. It comprises of the inner fringe (periphery) and beyond. These areas are composed of highly productive, but mainly small holding agriculture with participation in non-agricultural occupations and high spatial interaction of economic activities. Figure 1 shows the beginning of transition at interface.

The transformation in the rural-urban interface occurs in following phases:

Pre-Transition Stage

Where the village is close to urban extension areas and gradually starts changing character.

Transition Stage

Where the village comes under the urban extension area and is characterized by very high sub-division outside lal dora (the legal line dividing built-up and agricultural land uses in a village) and as a result the agriculture domain diminishes, population increases with many urban and rural immigrants and the land values start showing increasing trend.

Post-Transition Stage

Where the villages in close proximity to surrounding planned development gets transformed and almost becomes part and parcel of urban areas with increasing inter dependencies on each other.

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While transformation the peri-urban area goes through certain major transformations. These are listed below:

**Peripheralization and Outward Pattern of Growth**

As stated above, this transition begins at interface, which is the area closest to city core and demarks the rural-urban dichotomy. The village, undergoing land use and occupational change becomes a magnet for pulling the in-migration as people move here in search of less congestion and financially more affordable communities. This leads to increase in density at the fringe area leading to Peripheralization, i.e., formation of high density development at the peri-urban area.

**Socio-Cultural Transformation**

'Hansson and Wackernagel' through their approach of territorial integration, described that the drive from Gemeinschaft (community or culture based) to Gesellschaft (city or economic activities based), which has contributed majorly to modernity, can be taken as an example of a concept of disembedding or discontextualization of society from nature. In Gemeinschaft societies human exchange and sharing is characterized as reciprocity and is dependent on the context where place and people both are involved. Whereas, in Gesellschaft, people perceive themselves as separated and human exchange is not determined by natural context or community goals. Traditional people live in reciprocal relationships, both with each other and with their surroundings. Reciprocal relationships are based on the criteria that whatever is given would come back to them and their offspring, in one way or the other. It reinforces and enriches a healthy relationship among all people and the environment in a local context. Through modernization, previously important relationships between populations and local ecosystems are losing their significance and local lifestyles are becoming less adapted to the existing context, e.g. soil characteristics, climate and culture.

**From Habitation to Congestion**

Urban villages can be found most commonly on the fringes of cities that have experienced significant expansion and received large numbers of migrants. While farmland in villages on city fringes may have been acquired by city governments, land for housing continues to be owned by village collectives and is allocated to village residents. However, many urban village residents have given up farming and have instead built or expanded housing to rent to migrants. To these villagers, rent has replaced agriculture as the main source of income. The village moves to congestion by undergoing through following phases:

- The farmers sell their land to the government or to a developer. Some of them fritter away their newly acquired wealth but most redeploy it in businesses that leverage the emerging urban landscape-transportation, labor contracting, supply of construction material and so on. Some of the more prosperous villagers buy themselves new homes and move out. However, they all usually retain their houses in the old village settlement. This settlement, dubbed as a lal dora area, is exempt from usual municipal and building codes. The former farmers use the exemption to build a mishmash of buildings with little regard for safety or ventilation. These become home to construction workers and other service providers who move into the area.
Thus, the village turns into a slum like settlement.

- After about a decade, construction work in that particular area begins to wind down. The construction workers drift away to other sites. New migrants move in—security guards, maids, drivers and other people who work in the newly built urban space. The commercial establishments too go through a parallel transformation. The shops selling construction material and hardware are steadily replaced by shops selling mobile phones, street food, car parts and so on. For the first time, we see private and, occasionally public, investment in amenities such as common toilets. As the migrants become more permanent, they bring in their families from their ancestral villages. This leads to an interesting supply-side response—the “English Medium” school! In my experience, language is seen by the poor as the single most important tool for social climbing. Nathupur in Gurgaon is an example of a village that is currently moving from the first stage to the second stage. Next door, the village of Sikandarpur is slowly shifting to the next stage.

After another 10 to 15 years, the village goes through yet another transformation. By this time, the surrounding area is well-settled and open agricultural fields are a distant memory. We now see students, salesmen and small businessmen move into the village. Some of them may be the newly educated children of migrants but they are now a higher social class. The old villagers still continue to be the dominant owners of the land but they now begin to invest in improving their individual properties in order to elicit higher rents (after all, they now have a location advantage in the middle of the growing city). In many instances, the owners have become politically important enough to lobby for public investment in basic drainage and sanitation. In my experience, public transport connections have a strong positive effect on the economic dynamism of the slum. The shops upgrade themselves and the old street-food sellers become cheap restaurants. An “Aggarwal Sweets” is almost obligatory in the larger settlements.

- The final stage in the process of transformation is that the old village gentrifies. This can happen in a number of ways. Since the early nineties, Hauz Khas village has become a warren of boutique shops, art galleries and trendy restaurants. Mahipalpur, near the international airport, has seen an explosion of cheap hotels in the last decade. Similarly, Shahpur Jat has become home to a numerous small offices and designer workshops. In many cases, the old villagers have encashed their real estate and the ownership pattern has become much more mixed. The areas now grapple with the problems of prosperity such as inadequate parking.

**Character of an Urban Village**

They are generally located along the major-transport corridors. With the pace of land acquisition for urbanization many of these villages have been newly absorbed into the urban fabric but some are old and have been embedded in the city for generations. These are often tucked away behind a modern building complex. High-density living is a hallmark of urban villages. They make their presence felt in many different ways— as the source of vagrant cattle, as homes to armies of informal workers, as the place to visit if one wants to buy bathroom tiles or electrical items. They carry 5-6 times more the population density than the non-village areas and caters for mixed land use, with residential, commercial and also, industrial (small or household industries), based on the demands of the surrounding localities. Congested streets, narrow alleys, street line shops serving daily needs and poor planning strategies with no regard of the quality infrastructure are some of the basic characters inhabited in an urban village. In these villages, inefficiency in the use of land is high through large area under empty use (vacant land and farmhouses). The land degradation can be mentioned as “the reduction in capability of land to satisfy a particular use.” The deterioration of land in the urbanizing village is not because of built-up increase as it is concentrated at the *abadi* (the settlement area) and near it. It is the socio-economic degradation that takes place through large areas of land kept unused for long period.

“Unfortunately, the urban villages suffer from a lack of infrastructure such as sewerage, water, power supply due to non-development of infrastructure within these areas. The acuteness of the situation is magnified by the high population densities, and leads to horrible living conditions during periods of seasonal stress as in high summer or heavy rains.”

- Hindustan Times, 24 May, 2003, hindustantimes.com
Factors Supporting the Formation of Urbanizing Villages

High Demand for Land

Delhi has experienced exceptionally high population growth and spatial expansion. UN-Habitat’s latest study shows that the average annual growth rate in large cities in developing countries was 1.8 per cent in the 1990s (with the exception of a few Chinese cities like Beijing and Shanghai), while Delhi’s was 4.23 per cent for the same period.3 This exponential growth has had a severe impact on the city’s social and physical infrastructure besides leading to an acute shortage of housing.

From the demand side, millions of rural migrants working in cities have generated enormous demand for inexpensive housing. Most rural migrants are excluded from the formal housing market because of the following reasons:

1. Without urban household registration they are not eligible for low-cost affordable housing subsidized by city governments.
2. They cannot afford “commodity housing” in the private housing market.

Therefore, migrants most commonly live in employer-provided housing such as factory dorms or rent rooms in urban villages.

Low Income

The low income of households cause urban deprivation and diminish human capability. Hence, it accelerates growth of uncontrolled urban settlements. A study conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) shows that Delhi’s share of the urban population was 4.9 per cent in 2004/05, while its share of income was 10.6 per cent in relation to urban India, i.e., the share of income was 2.2 times higher than its population share. Another study shows Delhi has become richer: its per capita income increased from Rs. 44,200 in 2001/02 to Rs. 51,604 in 2003/04, and the average value of a household’s assets also grew from Rs. 92,000 in 1981 to 7.47 lakh in 2002.6 This data reveals that Delhi’s citizens have a higher economic status overall in relation to other parts of the country. However, the darker side to this story is that inequality has been increasing among urban Indians. This can be demonstrated by increasing the Gain coefficient, which is the measure of inequality used most frequently. This varies between 0 and 1, where 0 represents complete equality and 1 stands for complete inequality (i.e., one person has all the income, while none of the others have any). The Gain coefficient for urban India increased from 0.39 in 1995/96 to 0.43 in 2004/05, which is a rise of roughly 15 per cent in a decade. The proportion of Delhi’s population living below poverty line has increased by 87 per cent from 1.55 million in 1999/2000 to 2.29 million in 2004/2005. The proportion of Delhi’s population living below poverty line in 2004/05 was 14.7 per cent of total population in Delhi, 6.9 per cent of rural and 15.2 per cent of urban population. This means, population below poverty line grew by 87 per cent, in just five years.

Low Supply

From the supply side, as cities expand, municipal governments are motivated to acquire farmland for urban use. To minimize compensation for villagers’ housing and relocation and to ease the process of land acquisition, city governments tend to acquire farmland only and leave or return the land designated for housing- lal dora (reserved housing sites) to village collectives. Typically, these “rural” land parcels are spatially scattered and receive no public services from city governments. But because villagers are not required to pay a land lease fee for using these parcels, the cost and rent of housing built on such land is low and especially attractive to migrant workers who cannot afford high rent. To maximize rental income, villagers build high-density houses and add floors and structures haphazardly and even illegally, resulting in slum-like living environments.

Land Tenure Security

In the absence of tenure security, people are afraid to invest in their housing and allied services, which means poor environments continue to exist. The lack of tenure security results in exclusion and the denial of credit and services to disadvantaged groups as well as in psychological problems among dwellers. Appropriate land-tenure mechanisms are cited as being a prerequisite for efficiency and equity in the land market, otherwise they will result in corruption and a loss in public revenue. The settlements in Delhi are listed here in order of their degrees of security, starting with the highest and ending in the lowest: planned settlements, resettlement sites, designated slum areas, urban villages, rural villages, regularized unauthorized colonies, unauthorized colonies and JJ clusters.
Implementations Deficit

A policy document entitled “National Urban Housing and Habitat Policy 2007” has also instrumented policy for inclusive growth by allocating urban resources—mainly land and housing infrastructure—to economically and socially marginalized sections of societies. But paradoxically, these noble policies could not materialize fully at ground level; hence they failed to address issues in spite of the good intentions underlying them. The implementation deficit should be minimized for inclusive and sustainable development.

Conclusions

Urban villages epitomize not only the landscapes but also the complex processes of rural-urban migration. Many rural villages situated on the fringes of cities have been encroached upon by urban expansion and are inhabited by large numbers of migrant workers. Their housing conditions are poor: rental units in urban villages are overcrowded, facilities are inadequate and poorly maintained, and social problems are rampant. The above findings suggest that migrant workers choose urban village housing that is small, overcrowded, and poorly served not because they cannot afford better housing but because they are not willing to consume in the city. Due to barriers to urban housing policies and associated benefits, labor market discrimination, and social segregation and inferiority, most migrant workers consider the city as merely a place to work but not to live.

As a result, they are motivated to circulate between sites of migrant work and their home villages, and to save their income or expend it on rural households in their home villages rather than on consumption in the city. Thus Sustainable
Development in this article will be defined as "the co-evolutionary and co-adaptive approach to development for communities where the actors of the community mobilize and practice ‘intelligent’ use of natural resources to ensure minimal environmental externalities, social coherence and economic prosperity".

References