PROCESS OF URBANIZATION IN INDIA: A COLONIAL LEGACY AND
THE POST-INDEPENDENCE CHARACTERISTICS

Component-I (A) - Personal Details

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Component-I (B) - Description of Module

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PROCESS OF URBANIZATION IN INDIA: A COLONIAL LEGACY AND THE POST-INDEPENDENCE CHARACTERISTICS

1. INTRODUCTION
Urbanization, the spatial facet of the industrial and scientific revolution of the past two hundred years, has attracted the attention of scholars, social reformers, and politicians since about the middle of the 19th century. Urbanization, on one hand, deals the study of cities and city systems, on the other hand, conceptual distinction between the studies of urbanization. In simple words, urbanization can be described as a process of change as it occurs when there is change in the different conditions and relations within the society. In the field of demography, the level of urbanization is measured by the percentage of population living in urban areas. In order to understand this process one needs to examine the factors that initiate and sustain this process, as well as of its implication in broad general terms.

India experiences most characteristic features of urbanization among the developing countries. According to the 2011 Census, urbanization in India has increased at a faster rate than expected. This is an over turn of the declining trend of the level of urbanization as observed during the 1980s and 1990s. Another important aspect is that for the first time since independence the absolute increase in the urban population was higher than that in the rural population. This can be attributed to many fold increase in the number of towns and also the concentration of population residing in the urban areas. The number of urban agglomeration/town has grown from 1827 in 1901 to 7935 in 2011; while, the total population in urban areas has increased from 2.58 crores in 1901 to 37.71 crores in 2011. This data clearly shows that India is experiencing a gradual increase in the trend of urbanization. These trends of urbanization as experienced by India are discussed in the next sections. But before that one needs to understand the concept of urbanization and urban areas as conversed in the next section.

2. The concepts of Urbanization and Urban Areas:
Since the inclusion of the notion of “modernization” into the concept of development, cultural anthropologists, psychologists, and other behavioral scientists have expanded
the interdisciplinary search for an improved understanding of urbanization and its impact on society. Urbanization is the field studied by all the social scientists; there are three interpretations of urbanization -

1) Behavioural
2) Structural
3) Demographic
4) Geographical

1. **Behavioural:** The first one to start the study of urbanization in 1938 when Louis Wirth published a paper called “Urbanization – a way of life”. He said (that all the urban studies were denoted to city level studies and it was very quantifiable work where they were measuring certain dimensions of the cities), that “of cities is not enough there should exist a theory of cities which should be based on the behavior of social groups”. There are three things within the city which affect the social groups-

   a) **Size** (relations between the different members of the city): The city has a big in size and people are segregated from each other. Due to this the relationship between two persons becomes impersonal and is characterized by competition rather than complementary or friendly. Because the city life leads to *anomie* i.e. one is lost in a crowd.

   b) **Density:** Cities have very high densities and this leads to great contrasts where wealth and property live side by side. And, this ultimately leads to mutual exploitation.

   c) **Diversification:** There are too many different types of people come and live in the cities thus, breaking the caste and creed rightly/boundaries because the ability to earn is less rigid. But, it also leads to a lot of role confusion and conflict.

2. **Structural:** Urbanization is the process when agricultural communities are transformed into industrial communities and because all the industrial communities live in urban areas, it is also a process of urbanization. This is a result of industrialization and economic development. So they are trying to see how occupational structure takes place (agricultural- non-agricultural).
3. **Demographic**: Rural settlement being transformed into urban settlements. So they try to understand this from the point of view of migration and thus, deal with population mobility. For them urbanization a process which takes place because of-

- Growth of individual towns
- Multiplications of towns

4. **Geographical**: The spatial analysis is to understand all the different phenomena in space and their distribution.

In simpler words, urbanization can be defined as “as a process which reveals itself through temporal, spatial and sectoral changes in the demographic, social, economic, technological and environmental aspects of life in a given society. Urbanization is a progressive concentration of population in urban unit (Kingsley Davis-1965). In order to have a better understanding of the urbanization process in India, it would be appropriate to examine which settlements are treated as urban by the Census of India. There is no standard definition of urban; it varies from country to country (United Nations 2009).

India’s urban areas are defined on the basis of two criteria. First, the state government grants municipal status – corporation, municipal council, notified town area committee or nagar panchayat, etc – to a settlement. Such settlements are known as statutory or municipal towns in the census definition of urban areas. Second, if a settlement does not have an urban civic status, but satisfies demographic and economic criteria, like a population of more than 5,000, a density of 400 persons per square kilometer and 75% male workforce in the non-agricultural sector, it can be declared urban.

3. **Urbanization in India: A Colonial Legacy and in Post-Independence period**

The story of urbanization in India needs to be studies in an historical context; a story of spatial and temporal discontinuities (Ramachandran, 1989). The earliest urban developments were confined to the Indus Valley and its adjoining regions. Other parts of the country were untouched by this process. In the early-historical period it was experienced in the Middle Ganga plains and the southern parts of the Indian Peninsula.
Similar picture is seen even in the historical period where large parts of the country were hardly affected by urbanization. In modern times these spatial discontinuities continue to be a dominant characteristic of urbanization in India.

The factors responsible for urbanization varied from time to time. In the pre-historic period urbanization was synonym to the origin and rise of civilization thus can be termed as a cultural process. From historical periods to the British regime, urbanization was related to the rise and fall of kingdoms, dynasties and empires; thus a political process. In modern times, urbanization is perceived as a process which is closely related to economic development and industrialization; thus an economic process. On the basis of these temporal discontinuities in the process of urbanization in India the urban history of India can be divided into five time periods. These are:

i) The pre-historic period (2350-1800 BC)
ii) The early-historic period (600 BC to 500 AD)
iii) The medieval period (600 AD to 1800 AD)
iv) The British period (1800 to 1947)
v) The post-Independence Period (after 1947)

In this module, we will be concentrating only on the last two time periods, as to understand the process of urbanization in present times, it is important to consider the factors that lead to this lop-sided urbanization. The urbanization of post Independence is characterized with over burden on class I and metropolitan cities that is metropolization where the top has become heavy.

**The British Period (1800 -1947)**

The British had a negative impact on the Indian urban morphology as the pre-British cities were on decline as they were hardly interested in the traditional industries of India. Moreover, introduction of railways resulted in the diversion of trade routes into different channels as every railway station became a point of export of materials for its hinterland, thus depriving earlier trade centers of their monopoly. Whatever the reason may be in a nutshell it can be said that India’s urban landscape went through a transformation during the 150 years of the British rule. The main features of this period include:
a) The creation of the three metropolitan port cities which emerged as the leading colonial cities of the world. All the older cities which were prominent in the Mughal period were reduced to small towns. These three cities became the leading administrative, commercial and industrial cities. The entire cultural landscape of these cities was of British taste which was of a sharp contrast to the urban designs of the Mughal period.

b) The creation of hill stations in the Himalayan foothills and in South India along with the introduction of tea and coffee plantations which resulted in the emergence of number of smaller settlements with distinct urban characteristics. Between 1815 and 1870 over 80 hill stations were developed in four different regions of the country to serve the four metropolitan cities of Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. These were – Shimla - Mussorie – Nainital near Delhi; Darjeeling – Shillong near Calcutta; Mahabaleshwar near Bombay and the Nilgiri – Kodaikanal area near Madras. The plantation settlements were another significant feature as although they were not large in size they had distinct urban features because of processing plants, residences of workers and associated commercial establishments.

c) The modification of the existing urban landscape through the introduction of civil lines and cantonments. These modifications were most noticed in the administrative centers of the British like the provincial capitals, the district headquarters and the tehsil level urban administrative town. The ‘civil lines’ was a new addition which was made of administrative centers, courts and the residences of the officers. Cantonments were fewer in number; built exclusively for the British officers and the army men. These modifications segregated the city and the gap between rural and urban increased many-fold.

d) The introduction of the railways and the modern industry which lead to the development of new industrial townships like Jamshedpur, Asansol and Dhanbad. The introduction of railways had an indirect influence on urbanization. Though, it led to the emergence of the metropolitan cities as the primary foci, it even brought unplanned urbanization as the city started
growing in an unplanned manner towards the railway station. Industrial
development as such during this period was very modest. Most of the
industries were concentrated near the metropolitan cities with exceptions like
Jamshedpur which emerged as towns after the establishment of Iron and
steel plant.

e) The improvements in urban amenities and administration during the British
rule were one of the major benefits that cities experienced during this time.
The facilities like piped water supply, street lighting, domestic electrification,
sewerage system, shopping areas, green spaces in the form of parks and
playing grounds were roped in; though these were restricted to the civil lines
and the cantonment areas. Most of the cities were deprived of these facilities.
Municipal bodies were set up in number of cities in 1881 but again these were
found only in areas where British population was residing. This again brought
segregation within the cities.

The above account clearly depicts that cities became the primary foci during the
British period. Even the centers of education were established in the form of schools,
colleges and universities. As a result an urban elite emerged which was soaked in
westernization. This led to the widening of gap between the rural and the urban which
continues to plague the social and political system of India even today.

The Post – Independence Period (after 1947)
The process of urbanization in the post-Independence period witnessed a new phase.
In this period this process was characterized with rapid urbanization which was
dominated with the mushrooming of one lakh and million plus cities. The major changes
that India has witnessed during this period can be summarized as follows:

a) The influx of refugees and their settlement in the urban areas of northern part
   of the country

b) The establishment of new planned administrative centers like Chandigarh and
   Bhubneshwar

c) The construction of new industrial cities and new industrial townships near
   major cities.
d) The rapid growth of one-lakh and million cities

e) The stagnation and in some cases the decline of small towns

f) The proliferation of slums and squatter settlements in the big cities and the emergence of urban-rural fringe

g) The introduction of urban planning through Five Year Plans and the improvement in urban governance through the 74th Amendment Act.

The process of urbanization in India is not at all different from other developing countries of the world; it is also characterized with uneven pattern of development of small towns and big cities within the system. According to the 2011 Census, the urban population grew to 377 million showing a growth rate of 2.76% per annum during 2001-2011. The level of urbanization in the country as a whole increased from 27.7% in 2001 to 31.1% in 2011 – an increase of 3.3 percentage points during 2001-2011 compared to an increase of 2.1 percentage points during 1991-2001. It may be noted that the Indian economy has grown from about 6% per annum during the 1990s to about 8% during the first decade of the 2000s (Ahluwalia 2011). This clearly reflects the power of economic growth in bringing about faster urbanization during 2001-2011. Thus in recent years urbanization in India has acted more as an economic process than a social or political one. The levels of urbanization and the pattern of urbanization is discussed in the next section.

4. Trends of Urbanization in India (1901 – 2011)

Urbanization in India has been relatively slow compared to many developing countries. The percentage of annual exponential growth rate of urban population reveals that in India, it grew at a faster pace from the decade 1921-31 to until 1951. Thereafter it registered a sharp drop during the decade 1951-61. The decades 1961-71 and 1971-81 showed a significant improvement in the growth rate (Table 1). But 1981-1991 shows decreasing trend which continued even in 1991-2001; in 2001-11 it shows a very small increase an over turn of the last two decades to the present rate (2.76%). The reason for the sharp drop in urban rate during 1951-61 was declassification of large number of towns during that decade.

When seen from the perspective of number of towns the data reveals that the number of urban agglomeration /town has grown from 1827 in 1901 to 7935 in 2011.
This process of urbanization in India shows in Fig 1. It reflects that in India there is an increasing trend of urbanization depicting that India is at stage of acceleration as the proportion of population in urban areas has reached to 31.16 per cent in spite of growth rate showing decline in the trend.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Census Years</th>
<th>No. of Urban Agglomerations / Towns</th>
<th>Urban Population In Per Cent</th>
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<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>1827</td>
<td>10.84</td>
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<td>1911</td>
<td>1825</td>
<td>10.29</td>
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<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>11.18</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>2072</td>
<td>11.99</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>2250</td>
<td>13.86</td>
<td>2.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>2843</td>
<td>17.29</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>2363</td>
<td>17.97</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>2590</td>
<td>19.91</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
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<td>23.33</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>7935</td>
<td>31.16</td>
<td>2.76</td>
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Source: Various Census Reports

Before we proceed we have to know why there has been such a tremendous increase in the number of towns. This can be related to the definition used in India. Scholars are of the view that India’s definition of urban areas is not something out of the
box rather it is restrictive in nature when compared to countries like Australia, France, the Philippines and so on where the population limit is between 2000 and 3000. Even if the cut-off limit is reduced will it provide the solution? In my opinion no because relaxation either in the population figure or in the density figures would just increase the percentage to a higher amount but that cannot be counted as urban growth. This is because in India there are large numbers of towns which have population more than 5000, but they fail in other criteria. Thus in India urbanization cannot be explained through definitions. The answer is in the colonial period where the urban process was restricted to port cities and administrative towns. The data clearly shows that till 1981 the trend was on the higher side but after that it has decreased; only to be increased fractionally in 2011. During this period the natural growth rate has shown declining trends. This means that the higher percentages are not the result of growth of towns rather the push to urban areas is from other sources, i.e., rural to urban conversion and rural-urban migration.

An analysis of the distribution of urban population across different class size urban areas reveal that urbanization in India has been top heavy or tilting towards large cities. The percentage of the urban population in 5-million-plus or million-plus cities here is higher than in most other countries of the region and has gone up relatively faster in the last three decades (Kundu 2009). An increasing concentration of urban population in Class I cities (those of population above 100,000) can also be observed over the past several decades (Figure 2). The percentage share of urban population in Class I cities has gone from in 26.0 in 1901 to 68.7 in 2001 to nearly 70 percent in 2011. It is often said that this is the result of faster growth rate experienced by these cities; but another reason that has been often ignored is that the number of class I cities in India has increased many fold. In 1901, there were only 24 Class I cities, increasing to 465 in 2011. Concentration of urban population in metropolitan (or metro) cities – cities having population of a million or more – is even greater. In 1901 there was just one city with over a million people with just 6 per cent of the total urban population. The number rose to 2 in 1911 and was so until 1941; though their percentage share in urban population went up from 10.6 to 12.0 in 1941. In 1981, the share was 26.4 which has been
continuously increasing to 32.5 in 1991; 37.8 in 2001 and 42.6 in 2011 (53 million plus cities).

**Figure 2**

Proportion of Urban Population in Different Class-Size Towns in India: 1901-2011

The scenario explained above can be explained through the dynamics that existed during the colonial period, essentially in response to the requirements of an imperialist regime. In the colonial period, the British has established their economy on the basis of strong commodity and population flows which were directed only towards either the port cities or the administrative headquarters. This weakened the regional forces which were established during the medieval period through the inter-settlement linkages and bi-directional movement of goods and services between the core and periphery. The four major urban agglomerations (UA) of Calcutta, Madras, Bombay and Karachi (presently in Pakistan) became focal points of economic activities. The pre-existing rural–urban interactions were gradually replaced by export–import oriented commodity flows. Now movement of population and goods was only needed to sustain the new urban centers (and the plantation fields). Thus the Indian agglomerations were not a product of economic development like their counterparts in developed countries,
In 1947, after independence our country witnessed structural changes both politically as well as economically. In the initial plans especially the Second and Third Five Year Plans enormous public-sector investment was done which restricted the urban hierarchy. However, regional disparities still persisted, despite the public sector playing a major role in backing the development process in the backward areas through proper investments. This was because in these regions a viable system of urban settlements could not be created that left their hinterland virtually untouched. The transformation of large cities from colonial to national capitals meant only an increasing concentration of low productive manufacturing and service activities that could find a foothold more easily due to the changed political economy. The pace of urban growth was rapid during the first three decades after Independence, but that led to informalisation of the urban economy and increasing deprivation in terms of basic amenities.

5. Conclusions:
To sum up the post-independence the urban scenario is characterized with dualism. The economically developed states attracted population in urban areas due to industrialization and infrastructural investment but only in and around large cities and upcoming industrial centers. An interesting feature which crops up is that even in the backward states the urban growth was rapid especially with regard to small and medium towns. This was the result of government investment in the district and taluka headquarters, programmes of urban industrial dispersal, and transfer of funds from the states to urban local bodies through a needs-based or what is popularly known as “gap-filling” approach. Another reason for the rural–urban migration into smaller towns from their rural hinterland in backward states can be explained in terms of push factors, owing to the lack of diversification in the agrarian economy.

The urbanization process in recent years has, thus, concentrated in developed regions and larger cities, with backward areas and smaller towns tending to stagnate. Large municipal bodies, particularly those located in developed states, tend to have a strong economic base, an advantage which clearly manifest in their high economic and demographic growth. The smaller towns in the backward states, on the other hand,
have languished economically and reported low or negative demographic growth, many of them even failing to meet the criteria for classification as urban centres. Rapid income growth has occurred in developed regions as well as in and around Class I cities. Understandably, poverty has become concentrated in remote regions and problem areas in terms of their socio-economic characteristics. While the developed regions have over time developed resistance to in-migration, the backward regions do not seem to have the capacity to export person-power with the skills required at the destination. Given this macro scenario, a slowdown in the rate of urbanization and the concentration of urban growth in relatively developed states as well as around a few global centers seems to be the logical outcome.