UNIT 1 WHAT IS URBAN HISTORY?*

Structure
1.1 Introduction
1.2 What is an Urban Centre?
1.3 What is Surplus?
1.4 What is Urban History?
1.5 Urbanism as an Interdisciplinary Project
1.6 Urbanism and Comparative Method
1.7 Historiography of Urbanism
   1.7.1 Modern Studies of Urbanism: Henri Pirenne and Max Weber
   1.7.2 Study of Urbanism in the USA
1.8 Urbanism and Modernity
1.9 Urban Histories and the ‘Cultural Turn’
1.10 Summary
1.11 Exercises
1.12 References

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Today more people live in cities than in villages. This was not the case even in the beginning of the twenty-first century. As we turn our gaze backwards we find that a very small percentage of population lived in cities in the pre-modern world. Then there was a time when cities did not exist. People lived in forest settlements and agricultural villages. About five thousand years ago cities emerged in Iraq, Egypt and the Indus Valley. As an evolutionary marker in human history the emergence of cities was an irreversible change in the sense that although individual cities rose and fell, the city as a form of habitation continued in one or another area. And today we have reached a stage when people in cities outnumber those in villages. Such a fundamental change in human history needs to be studied.

From the earliest to the latest, cities have been the greatest points of concentration of humans and their social relationships. As concrete expressions of the concentration of women and men they have displayed the glories of urban art and architecture in temples, tombs and palaces. Public spectacles, religious and military processions and philosophical disputation were part of the experience of the city. Cities have also been the scenes of violence, crime and the exploitation of urban masses (Southall, 1998:8-9). There have been religions focussing on crises and miseries caused by urbanism and there have been religions that shunned the urban space. Once the city came into existence, nobody could be indifferent to it. In fact the city seems to penetrate the very structure of biological evolution. Alley cats and dogs are animal denizens of the city with an outlook as urban as those of the human counterparts (Martindale, 1966:10).

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1.2 WHAT IS AN URBAN CENTRE?

Mohenjodaro and New York – two cities separated in time and space could not be more different. Yet both are called urban centres. The concept of an urban centre should be able to encompass the great variety of forms. Compared to rural settlements urban centres have a larger population, higher population density and greater social heterogeneity. Important members of the urban community engage in activities that are not directly related to food production. These activities consist of social, cultural, industrial, commercial, religious, artistic, educational, military, political or administrative functions. Such diverse activities require people having different kinds of skills. This leads to increasing degrees of specialisation. Craftsmanship and trading are distinct but interdependent activities. Similarly, personnel of administration and political control might be connected to each other. People of complementary professions tend to stay close to each other since it makes for more efficient transactions. Translated into spatial terms, such clustering leads to increased density of population. Individuals performing economic, religious and political roles need each other to survive. But their ties are defined not by kinship but by mutual utility. Individuals and groups that coordinate various specialised activities tend to concentrate power. For example the state is the greatest coordinator of diverse and sometimes conflicting demands of different interest groups. Officials like kings, ministers, generals and priests who blend the needs of heterogeneous groups manage to concentrate considerable power in their hands. Thus coordination gives rise to vertical hierarchies of powerful and powerless classes. Consequently, every urban centre is characterised by the presence of the powerful rich living in the lap of luxury and poor outcastes performing unpleasant but necessary tasks like cremating the dead, cleaning streets and in some cases even removing night soil.

The primary functions of an urban centre are activities like administration, ritual service and trade. Urban centres are home to rich and poor, rulers and the ruled, buyers and sellers, craftsmen and traders (Wirth, 1938:360-366). In many pre-modern cities the larger proportion of the population was engaged in agricultural activities. However, the city was recognised and remembered not for its agricultural produce but for the presence of kings or temples or markets.

Hunting-gathering communities who populated the planet earth for a long time never produced an urban centre. Agricultural communities that emerged about ten thousand years ago did not produce urban centres for the first five thousand years. It was in the wake of developments in the field of social organisation and technology that urban centres sprang up for the first time in some of the areas where agricultural communities lived. Urban centres emerged in agricultural societies that were socially stratified and politically organised. They also had craft specialists in their community. Societies based on political domination by a small group claiming monopoly over the use of force are called state societies. Urban centres emerged when rulers, craft specialists, merchants and the rich people in such societies converged in a small geographical area. The functions of these groups determined the nature of the settlement. As the historian, Braudel, points out, the most obvious characteristic of a town is the way it concentrates its activity into as confined an area as possible, cramming its inhabitants closely together and obliging them to crowd through streets sometimes too narrow for traffic, and eventually to build upwards (Braudel, 1989:180-81).

1.3 WHAT IS SURPLUS?

If we examine urban centres as units of settlement, they perform specialised functions in relation to a broader hinterland (Trigger, 2003:120). This relationship of interdependence,
favourable to the urban centre, usually emanates from its advantageous geographical location (location on trade routes, control of natural resources etc.). Rulers, priests, craftsmen and traders depend on agriculturists to produce their food. Historically, pre-modern cities have mercilessly exploited their rural surroundings. Given the primitive state of technology, agriculturists produced small quantities of grains that could barely take care of the requirements of the producers. Part of this produce was siphoned off to cities. The food that is siphoned off to cities is called ‘surplus’. ‘Surplus’ does not mean the produce over and above the requirements of the cultivators. Rather it is the produce brought to the city from the village. This mobilisation of ‘surplus’ might take the form of tribute to an urban deity who might be believed to own the land, the source of all produce. It might take the form of taxes imposed by the king or it might take the form of exchange in return for goods supplied by craftsmen and merchants from the city. Thus, laws, traditions and belief systems backed by military force were used to transfer agricultural produce to cities. Commenting on the towns of medieval France, the historian Braudel said, ‘Any town of unequivocally urban status would be surrounded by a ring of bourgs, each of them linking it by extension to the Lilliputian world of villages...Every town, small or large, would have a supply zone on which it was dependent. A town was like a huge stomach, drawing on not one but several successive areas and zones of influence.’ (Braudel, 1989:182-185)

Given the fact that a large number of people with diverse professions stay in the city, the relationships among the residents are impersonal. Also, the inhabitants of such a settlement satisfy an economically substantial part of their daily needs in the local market.

Many social scientists regard urbanism as a dependent variable. According to them urban centres reflect the economic aspect of a broad range of changes taking place in a given society (Fischer, 1975:367-373). Other scholars feel that the city acts as a ‘container’ meaning that the concentration of rulers and ruled, merchants and buyers, priests and devotees in a small geographical area brings in a qualitative change in the urban space. This leads to the creation of a new landscape. In the city are concentrated the innovations and changes that occur in the larger society. It needs to be emphasised that the idea of concentration extends beyond the mere aggregation of population to include its more profound social, cultural and politico-economic implications, since these are even more highly concentrated (Southall 1998:8-10). In other words, the city is the hub of power, the site of control. As has been stated by Braudel, the town stood above all for domination. When we try to define or rank it, the basis is its capacity to command and the area it commanded (Braudel 1989:181). This observation underscores the centrality of power in the formation of urban centres.

The coming of the city represented a transformation in the relationship among humans rather than between humans and nature. This transformation in the relationship among humans is called emergence of the state. The human groups that existed earlier were called kinship-based societies. Kinship-based society is usually called ‘tribal society’. Tribal societies are organised on the principle that all the members of the community are related to each other. The natural resources available in the area are collectively owned. Consequently, tribal society does not create structures where wealth or resources are concentrated in a few families. In state societies, the web of kinship systems is modified to give opportunities to a few families to hoard wealth and enforce special control over human and natural resources. States, unlike tribes, are based on the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of kings, priests and traders. Unfettered by local kinship networks, kings and traders create networks of exchange with kings, chiefs and craft persons of distant lands. The powerful members of state societies are hungry for various
craft products because exotic goods from distant lands add to their prestige and power. So, the powerful members of state societies enforce communication between settlements for the purposes of mobilisation of food and minerals. They want mobility of population for the purpose of production or warfare. The physical spaces where the state societies emerged sometimes developed into cities. That is why scholars believe that the coming of cities was related to a transformation in the realm of social organisation. There could be states without cities but there was no city without the state.

For a historian, the validity of the exercise of studying urbanism is that urban centres were like lighthouses which give us an entry into the happenings in the past. Our understanding of the beginnings of such important processes as the emergence of the state and class can be better understood if we study the process of urbanisation. Also, the theme of urbanisation connects us to the study of a process which occurred in many parts of the world across time and space. This means that we move out of the insularity of history and effectively learn from other disciplines like economics, sociology, anthropology, demography and literature. Any society which has cities is an urban society.

The origin of cities is associated with a form of organisation that is characterised by impersonal contacts. Such contacts and transactions are difficult to sustain through individual memory. The language of a king’s command or a merchant’s exchange needs to be precise. Even minor errors of verbal command can turn it into Chinese whispers. Thus, written records came to play an important role in impersonal transactions. Many instances of early urbanism are, therefore, associated with the invention of writing. A written text could carry the instructions of the powerful to places where they themselves were not present. In a non-literate context every instruction was tied to the specific context of its utterance. Writing was a true universal, a form of conversation in which speakers and listeners did not sit face to face. It could transcend the boundaries of memory and forgetting. The instructions of kings, holy men and merchants could travel to distant lands. Writing made possible the storing, freezing and dissemination of knowledge. This could be used for agreements between merchants, recording the commandments of a king for the people he controlled, or announcing religious sermons in their unadulterated form. Writing, thus, opened the possibility of new forms of organisation of political, economic and religious structures.

1.4 WHAT IS URBAN HISTORY?

Today urbanisation refers to population shift from rural to urban areas. In the historical context, urbanisation also referred to the process by which the rural world spawned a new kind of settlement called the city. The study of urban history is an attempt to study both processes. Urban and rural do not refer to separate and distinct processes. Once the city was invented, ‘rural’ simply represented a form of specialisation. Cities cannot be understood without their rural hinterland and rural peasantry cannot be understood without discovering its links with the city. So, the study of urban history automatically becomes the study of change in legal-institutional, demographic and cultural processes. Urban history is an enquiry into the economic, political, social and spatial systems that created this form of settlement. A city needs to be placed in its regional, national and trans-national context.

1.5 URBANISM AS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PROJECT

The study of urbanism requires a comparative and interdisciplinary method of study. Interdisciplinarity is important for studying urban history because this field has evolved
in the last hundred years by learning from various disciplines. Urban studies have repeatedly breached boundaries of disciplines. For example, a simple issue like water supply to the city of Delhi could show how the city has pulled water not only from the Yamuna but even from the distant Ganga and Beas rivers. An understanding of the water supply system would require us to understand how Delhi is able to override the water requirements of the local populations of various areas to slake its thirst. It will also require a study of unequal water distribution to different areas inside Delhi. The study would require not only an understanding of water flows from forests, mountains and rivers but also an understanding of negotiations of power and skills of engineering. Similar studies can be made about the supply of electricity to Delhi from different parts of north India. We shall also need to understand what Delhi gives in return for the resources it consumes. So, a study of the modern urbanism in Delhi needs an understanding of power structures, engineering practices and ecology of the region. Social science disciplines like sociology, economics and political science could deepen our understanding by focusing on the negotiations of power and wealth between Delhi and other regions and among the denizens of Delhi. Yet, such a study would not be complete without studying the experiential and cultural landscape of Delhi. Such a study would require an understanding of literature, art, photography and film. So the rich texture of urban studies is the product of an expanding and eclectic source base.

1.6 URBANISM AND COMPARATIVE METHOD

The attempt to identify, analyse and explain similarities and differences across societies, nations and continents is called comparative research method. It involves the creation of comparable datasets and a search for conceptual and functional equivalence. Such a method might lead to a deeper understanding of urbanism. Comparisons across time or space broaden our horizon and give us a perspective about the past. This method leads to a focus on empirical data collection. It is crucial for understanding what is common to all cities as well as what sets them apart. Such a study helps us observe continuities and change in urban processes. Comparisons over long periods of time and across space help historians understand long term patterns and changes. The long term continuities have been called ‘structures of everyday life’. They could include food habits, routines of waking, work and sleep, shapes of houses and modes of dress. The comparative method also gives us insights into the interaction between large global processes and local processes. Urban historians have discovered that all cities need resources like food, raw materials and manpower that are not locally available in sufficient quantities. Cities also need a viable economic function, access to wider commercial networks, organisational stability and security provided by political authority. Comparisons show how becoming globally urban is a new phase in world history. They also show how urban life has spawned new sets of problems related to not only institutional organisation but also to issues of the sustainability of this mode of life.

The divide between rich and poor is one of the abiding characteristics of urban centres. This is seen in the unequal distribution of wealth, spatial segregation and persistence of a socio-cultural divide. While rapid urbanisation and fluctuations in the rate of growth in modern times dramatise the rich-poor contrast, a comparative method indicates that competition over land, labour and capital is intrinsic to urbanism. This in turn leads to discrimination against the poor. Cities not only discriminate against the poor, they also marginalise women, religious groups and social minorities. However, local experiences of different cities indicate that they have fought discrimination and marginalisation with varying rates of success. So, marginalisation is not the last word in the landscape of evolving urbanism of modern times.
1.7 HISTORIOGRAPHY OF URBANISM

Modern studies of urbanism began in the late 19th century as an intersection of arts, humanities and social sciences. There was an attempt to understand the experiential nature and the built environment of the city. Every city had an independent personality and at the same time it was part of a larger system of urbanisation. The historian Hobsbawm compared urban history to a ‘variety store’ in which everything was up for inclusion. Many historians believed that urban history did not have a field of its own and was merely a stage for larger historical processes. Yet, urban history is distinctive in one fundamental way from social or economic history – it approaches the city in its totality – the way a city is planned, designed, built, inhabited, appropriated, celebrated, despoiled and discarded (Hayden, 1996:15). A city is treated as a play of all these variables in a given historical situation. Its landscape, imaginary and real, is the creation of its inhabitants. Thus, denizens of the city are accorded an agency of their own. The study of urbanism shifts focus from kings and conquerors to also include common people and the marginalised like prostitutes, untouchables and trans-genders.

1.7.1 Modern Studies of Urbanism: Henri Pirenne and Max Weber

The beginnings of systematic studies of urbanism were connected with the period that witnessed phenomenal growth of urban centres as a result of industrialisation. Much of this interest was related to anxieties about urban problems caused by overcrowding, poverty and unsanitary conditions as well as the attempt to create a more planned society (Shane, 2016:13). These writings would sometimes be coloured by nostalgia for the lost idyllic world of the past. The city was considered the root cause of moral and physical decay. From the beginning of the twentieth century, historians like Henri Pirenne traced long term patterns of change as part of the urban revolution in Europe. Pirenne focused on the study of institutional processes that connected Europe and Asia. According to him, the European cities that emerged after the tenth century were the result of opening of trade routes with Asia. He interpreted the crusades as a covert war for opening trade routes. To him the decline of feudalism in Europe was directly related to the new forms of organisation that emerged in medieval cities. Pirenne had defined the European city as part of the big picture that redefined the histories of religion and feudalism.

Max Weber saw the transactional and depersonalised nature of modern economies and social relationships as the explanation for the ‘life of lonely crowds’. Weber excavated a deeper history of urbanism by pointing out that the European city of the Renaissance represented a unique form of organisation that had no precedent in history and no parallels in China, India or the Arab world. He pointed out that in the pre-modern world cities the world over represented a system of institutions dominated by political power. Apart from an urban community cities included fortifications, a market, a court and powerful professional groups that enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy. What distinguished the Renaissance city was that it was controlled by merchant associations rather than kings or priests. These cities, having wrested power from the political elite, laid the foundations of capitalism. There have been debates about the nature of pre-modern cities and the dominant scholarly opinion seems to suggest that pre-modern cities were dominated by the political elite and that the economy of the city was subservient to politics. This impression is strengthened by the fact that the most important cities of the pre-modern world like Rome, Constantinople, Baghdad, Delhi or Beijing were political capitals in the first place. On the other hand, New York, arguably the most important city of the last hundred years, is not a political capital. That is why
scholars characterise pre-modern cities as ‘parasitic’ and modern cities as drivers of growth. The value system of pre-modern cities was governed by kingship, kinship, family and religion. In modern cities rational and instrumental values become more important and alignments and conflicts along class lines become more pronounced. Such discussions easily move into debates about industrialisation and deindustrialisation in colonial India.

1.7.2 Study of Urbanism in the USA

In USA, the Chicago School experimented with new ways of understanding urbanism. They made the city of Chicago their field of observation and put special emphasis on scientific measurement, quantification and comparison. Urban life was believed to be embedded in its wider geographic and material environment. Scholars like Louis Wirth studied urbanism in socio-psychological and historical-structural terms. It was shown how land use had changed with different patterns of industrialism and changes in the social structure.

The tradition of ‘Cultural Ecology’ that emerged in the 1950s tried to understand urbanism as a consequence of dynamic interaction of humans, environment, technology and social structure. Scholars trying to understand the process of urbanisation in places like Sumer, Egypt or the Indus Valley systematically worked out the interplay of environment and culture. Concerns about climate change have made historians aware of the environmentally destructive role of cities. That is why scholars like Jacobsen and Adams could explain the decline of Sumerian cities as a result of excessive use of water from irrigation channels. These irrigation channels turned productive agricultural fields into salt marshes (Jacobsen and Adams 1958). Arguments have been made about the decline of the Harappan civilisation being caused by ecological imbalance.

The space that a city needs to meet its requirements of water, electricity and waste disposal has grown exponentially in the last hundred years. The connection between the built and natural environment is visible in the engineering of natural water sources. The Romans created elaborate networks of aqueducts and waterways to take care of their water and sanitation requirements. This required control over water reservoirs of neighbouring areas and engineering solutions. It also required resolution of legal and political issues related to ownership of land and water bodies. Scholarly discussions have, therefore, included issues of unequal access to natural resources and social justice. The huge appetite for natural resources found in modern cities has made it a subject of environmental history and the discovery of ‘inconvenient truths’.

1.8 URBANISM AND MODERNITY

There has been a distinct tradition of studying urbanism as a site of modernity. The modern city as envisaged by planners has a top down approach with planned rows of buildings, regulated routes for traffic and scaled distances. Modernity is understood as the cultural concomitant of industrial capitalism with its notions of individualism and homogenisation of everyday practice. In Europe, the construction of town halls of monumental scale with impressive clock towers is understood as the imposition of a new time discipline. The town hall also symbolised a shift of power from traditional institutions like the church to a democratically elected town council.

Another stream of scholarship focussed on the built space of cities. It discussed the disappearance of streets and sidewalks and connected it to the disintegration of the urban community. These scholars examined the larger issues involved in the creation of super blocks and wastelands of deprivation that were neatly divided by freeways and
underpasses. The creation of parallel lives in suburbs and slums were part of a single process. There has been an attempt to understand the landscapes of roads, streets and buildings as well as the landscapes of the mind.

### 1.9 URBAN HISTORIES AND THE ‘CULTURAL TURN’

The study of Urban History has also seen a ‘Cultural Turn’. The ‘Cultural Turn’ signifies a shift to studying the experiential aspect of urbanism. Scholars tried to move away from grand theories and explanations in favour of local knowledge and localised explanations of change. These studies questioned notions of structural explanations in terms of global categories like economy or politics. Micro histories of localities, issues related to gender, sexuality, subjectivity, race and caste became the dominant concerns of a large number of historians. Rather than viewing the city as a fixed space within which the drama of urban life unfolded, scholars studied the process of the constitution of identities based on class, race, gender and sexuality. The material and symbolic spaces were being continuously dissolved and recreated in the lived life of peoples. They pointed out that people live in cities in local spaces created out of routine practices and a series of personal and impersonal networks. The Facebook or Twitter interactions are part of that network. However, most of this network remains elusive to authorities who might want to order and control these spaces. Cities have provided opportunities for the marginal to challenge the mainstream. Such deep currents of resistance are elusive and travel across porous boundaries.

Earlier, issues of gender had been absent from urban studies. Beginning from the 1970s, there has been an awareness of the history of masculinity in the construction and management of urban spaces. Scholars have pointed out that ideas about public spaces and domestic space are inflected with male centric ideology. It is a truism that individual houses are designed with clear division of male and female spaces. Modern planning seems to have replicated that pattern on a grand scale. Gender studies created new approaches to understanding the architecture and planning of urban spaces. The city was shown to be a predominantly male space. For example, the blindness of male ideologies could be discerned in the near universal absence of public toilets for women in most cities until the first half of the twentieth century. The urban space, according to feminist readings, could be visualised as a male space of lonely crowds and fleeting encounters.

Historians of urbanism have also discussed issues of governmentality which refers to the creation of an apparatus that disciplines and controls the inhabitants of a city. These apparatuses create mechanisms that instil the idea of government of the self, the family, and acceptance of government by the state. Scholars have shown that the practices of statistical surveys and mapping of urban population objectified the urban population. From the stand point of authority issues of public health which required provision of waste water management created a frame for control. Similarly, laying of streets ensured control over the circulation of population.

### 1.10 SUMMARY

Urban history has learnt from a variety of disciplines. Beginning its career as a minor description of memoirs about cities, it turned into a major discipline that provided insights into major historical transformations. It draws upon disciplines of geography, sociology, economics, history and literature. But as a discipline, its boundaries are blurred, with ongoing negotiations along its changing peripheries. What makes urban studies a
A challenging field is that it is not simply interdisciplinary but that its boundaries dissolve and joint efforts begin to look for new and unexpected answers. It remains committed to understanding the intersection of global and the local. Issues of environment and sustainability have become important in the current discussions on urbanism. The fact that urban studies relate to different streams of thought makes it a vibrant intellectual enterprise. Historians of urbanism continue to transcend boundaries created by disciplines. They continue to explore real and imagined spaces with their flow of people and invention of spaces. New York and Mohenjodaro might share very little in the experiential or imagined worlds, however, the patterns of control and the ability to invent new occupations make them cities.

1.11 EXERCISES

1) State the chief markers of an urban centre.

2) What are the processes involved in the creation of surplus? Discuss its role and importance in the emergence and sustenance of a city.

3) What is urban history? Why do we need to study urban history through the lenses of many disciplines?

4) Discuss the importance of comparative method for the study of urbanism?

5) Discuss the process of the emergence of urban history as a field of study by describing its historiography.

6) What are the ideas of Henri Pirenne and Max Weber on urbanism?

7) What were the innovations introduced by the Chicago School in the study of urbanism?

1.12 REFERENCES


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