# DIOGENES

# 'Being Urban' in the Context of Global Urbanization: The Case of India

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## Abstract
Western intellectual sources have dominated the social sciences to an extent that most definitions originate from a Eurocentric meaning system; words like urban, wild, nature, and culture being no exception. This paper interrogates and makes a critical assessment of what urban may mean in a non-western context, taking Delhi, the capital of India, as an example. It demonstrates that the meaning of a phrase, 'being urban', can only be understood in its historical, social/cultural, and political context; that the notion of a civil society, and meaning of terms such as public and private may be contextualized in varying moral universes and value systems to mean quite different things in different contexts. Overall the paper seeks to illuminate the futility of monolithic and reductionist constructs and value of situational and ethnographically constructed meanings of social and cultural phenomena. It demonstrates that even dichotomies like urban/non-urban are fuzzy and fluid, given the actual situation of real cities and their population; that a city is not defined by structure alone but by the people who live in it.

## Keywords
urbanism, Delhi, moral universe, public/private, civil society, history, cultural context

Some of the issues critical to theorizing the concept of urban are intimately linked to how 'being urban' is interpreted by people who are engaged in transforming urban places such as Delhi (India). Given that the urban is not a monolithic concept, it is essential to recognize the inner variations and possibilities of this rather generalized construct. In many orthogenetic cities, especially in the Third World, urbanization is engendered by and remains rooted in the rural or pre-urban cultures and values that persist even in the face of rapid globalization and apparent urbanization (Redfield & Singer, 1954).

The cognitive aspects of 'being urban' do not exist in a vacuum; they articulate in the context of pre-existing world-views, such as inclusive as opposed to exclusionary world-views, and to

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interpretations of rationality in 'moral' rather than in objective terms. In a glitzy and fast-growing metropolis like Delhi, public space may be informed by norms and values based on the western concepts of rationality associated with the kind of urbanism – as a way of life – described in the works of Simmel (2002 [1903]), Wirth (1938), and Mumford (1961). Using the urban/rural or culture/nature dialectic raises difficulties especially when the urban space is subjected to fast transformation in order to suit global (usually western) models of urbanization. The urban ideals of rationality and freedom usually associated with western industrial capitalism and with the attendant forms of urbanization may be dissonant with negotiations informed by the values and meanings of a pre-urban society that continue to be relevant in the new urban situation. Values related to gender, class, caste, race, religion, and ethnicity that are in contrast with urban liberalism may persist, creating underlying tensions which become painfully manifest in situations where the façade of normalcy is ripped apart; for example, as a woman is raped or a gunman goes on a shooting rampage.

Rather than taking their environment as 'given', urban dwellers negotiate and reconstruct space using what De Certeau (1984) describes as 'tactics'; that is, they use their moral and ethical resources to create a place of belonging. Therefore, layers and shades of 'being urban' need to be assessed through a qualitative analysis of how people cognitively filter and use urbanism in their daily lives. Classic anthropological ethnographic methods are particularly well suited to this exercise (Pardo & Prato, 2012).

## What 'urban' means: the case of Delhi

As one cruises around a city like Delhi, one finds many kinds of practices and scenarios that one may not be accustomed to seeing in a modern city of a developed country. Roadside squatters, vendors, street fairs, and farmers' markets are a common feature in modern cities like New York. However, in India, and particularly in Delhi, the use of public space takes on an entirely different dimension. Public space in Delhi, as in most of India, means that anyone and everyone can use it as they like. The streets can be used as playgrounds, as places for holding parties or religious rituals and festivals; in short, they can be used for anything a person, family, community, or group may deem necessary as part of their daily or ceremonial life. Civic life here is not defined in terms of governance or the state; it is not defined in terms of adherence to rules that would make life easier for all. Unlike in the West, all that is not individually owned takes on the guise of a 'commons' that can be appropriated for individual use. This notion of a 'no-man's land' or more aptly 'everyone's land' is directly related to the absence of cognizance of 'the state'; here the state is a shadowy entity that is only recognized in the form of the much-despised police and other law-enforcement agencies. This recognition of the law enforcer corresponds to the de-recognition of the law as an entity that occupies an abstract space.

One striking feature is the presence of many animals like dogs, cats, monkeys, cows, and buffaloes in the public spaces. These animals have no particular owner but citizens make it their moral duty to take care of them as best as they can. In 2010, just before the Commonwealth games were held in Delhi, there was a massive drive to rid the city of its numerous stray dogs, which raised immense public indignation and was only partly successful as people prevented their 'neighbourhood dogs' from being taken away, generally thwarting the authorities' efforts to herd them off; for example, collars were put on many of these dogs to disguise them as pets. Much criticism was also directed towards the inhuman attitude of those in authority and their desire to please 'foreigners'. Citizens often use this view of the state as 'other' to emphasize its non-indigenous origin, its links with western colonial rulers, and its moral roots as incompatible with the indigenous ideas of the self.

Therefore, the streets of Delhi and its occupants, both human and non-human, make up a 'marginal' space in respect to the state, as it is creatively rationalized according to a 'different picture of the common good' (Das & Poole, 2004: 23). The state and its laws are viewed as opposed to a moral order based on a collective consciousness that derives legitimacy from a divine order and community and kinship norms rooted in sentiment, rather than the western concept of 'citizenship'. In this context, the definition of 'rational' is based on principles of inclusiveness, collectivity, a regard for the sentiments of others, and a fluid rather than a restricted view of space.

Community sentiments and religious values may override attempts at introducing so-called 'modern' infrastructures and standards. In 2013, a newspaper photograph showed a major highway in New Delhi[1] completely blocked by thousands of Muslims offering prayers in the month of Ramadan. From September to November, in what is known as the 'festive season', main roads and highways are blocked with impunity for the celebration of various festivals; instead of raising eyebrows or protesting, the public joins merrily in the celebrations. I once had the misplaced audacity to call the police when a neighbour camped in the public park adjacent to my house and started blaring loud music from a loudspeaker. The police came, but only to chide me, 'Are you not happy that your neighbour is celebrating? You should participate in their celebration, not complain!'

This illustrates well what Pardo (1996; 2000) has pointed out in his study of the *popolino* of Naples; that is, a morality which is situated away from how right and wrong are defined formally or legally. Thus, while the state in its bio-political rationale may deem stray dogs 'killable', people's morality revolts against what they view as unnecessary violence against dumb creations of God. To them urban space is not different from space in rural areas or the forests, and one should let 'nature' take its own course. It is noteworthy that the state also takes such action when 'exposure' to the global world makes it necessary to promote and maintain so-called 'international standards'. The officers who represent the state are, after all, drawn from the people; they do not live in a separate world.

## Belonging and the moral self

To understand the nature of a city it is important to understand the people who inhabit it. Several scholars of Indian cities, like Redfield and Singer (1954) and more recently Parry (1994; 2012), have argued that different cities have different characters because of their history or because of their nature, as for example the religious and industrial cities differentiated by Parry. The character of a city often depends on the mix of people who live in it, the nature of migrations, and its inhabitants' sense of belonging. In describing the industrial city of Mumbai, Chandravarkar (2009) tells us how labourers who come to work in the factories are mentally tuned to return to their native villages, viewing the city as a temporary abode. In India it is common for people to ask each other, 'Where do you come from? Where do you *belong*?' Most people would answer giving the name of their native village or town, even if they have long been living in the city. Thus, the physical presence in a city does not necessarily make people 'city dwellers' and 'being urban' may amount to a temporary, transient phase of life.

In cities like Delhi and Mumbai at least 40 percent of the inhabitants are constituted by a 'floating' population, that is by people who come and go. Even those who can trace urban roots for generations locate their moral selves in the place where they 'belong' and not in the city itself, which remains a no man's zone as far as the moral universe is concerned. An episode in which I participated is indicative. Once I took a ride on a form of 'public' transport which is known in Delhi as a three-wheeler. Knowing that the young driver was using a faulty meter to cheat me, I talked to him like an elderly matron and asked, 'Why do you do this, for the sake of a few rupees? Don't you know it is wrong to do such things?' The young boy turned around and said, 'Mother, this is

not my place; this is not where I belong. Why should I bother about morality?' Similar sentiments are often voiced by rickshaw pullers and other poor migrant labourers. As representative of an impersonal state, the city is seen as a place of moral vacuum; people carry their own morality, such as the Hindu concept of *dharma* or its Islamic version, *Imān*.

As pointed out by Venkateswaran (1962: 287), in the South Asian moral universe the notion of *dharma* does not involve a uniform code of conduct; it is divided into *sadharana* and *visesa* or *svadharma*. *Sadharana* refers to one's general code of conduct as a human being. *Visesa* or *svadharma* refers to specific kinds of appropriateness, according to one's station in life (*asrama*) and one's *gunas* (character), and may be subdivided in line with many other considerations, such as *desa* (place), *kala* (time) and so on. Concepts such as *desa dharma* (location specific) and *kala dharma* (time or age specific) indicate that this is a relative, not an absolute concept. In its most essential definition, *dharma* can be understood as 'appropriate action'. Many kinds of action are evaluated in relative terms and the source of the sanctioning authority plays an important role in the evaluation of action as right or wrong. Although the state works through the legal framework and through formal institutions such as the police, most people regard both the state and its agents as corrupt and devoid of the moral right to impose sanctions. In contrast, people regard as most important the divinely sanctioned moral authority and religious sentiments that constitute their notion of *dharma*. Let me explain.

A considerable portion of big business in India relies more on word of mouth than on official documentation. Millions of rupees' worth of transactions are performed in what is known as the officially illegal '*havala*' trade, relying on the moral credentials of the people involved; these credentials are built around criteria that are quite different from those officially recognized. Paradoxically, people from the lowest rungs of society are often used as carriers for huge amounts of valuable goods; they are fully trusted by their employers and no item is ever reported missing, because the sense of *imān/dharma* is involved. On the other hand, most people do not see avoiding taxes as unethical. For example, in a raid on trucks carrying goods across internal borders, the police found large amounts of gold and precious jewellery in sacks hidden under ordinary merchandise like rice bags. Apparently, this is a routine way of transporting valuable jewellery without paying taxes.

Interpretative moral codes such as *dharma* need, however, a closed community for their implementation as there are no specific objectively laid rules for action. In the complex urban milieu, space for inappropriate action may open up if the state and its sanctions are not accepted and, at the same time, personalized ties are weakened. The rising cases of rape and sexual violence in urban areas indicate that the bodies of women are increasingly vulnerable to the conflict of values and confusion generated by too fast social transformation and the attendant changes in what are regarded as appropriate gender roles. The traditional models of *dharma* rooted in patriarchy, such as '*pati dharma*' (a woman's appropriate action towards her husband), may clash with the demands of an urban life style and may be construed as transgressions of the moral order that invite violent retribution. The city can then become a place of moral vacuum, where situational judgements can translate into destructive action towards the self and others.

## The 'urban' as a theoretical construct

Theoretically, one may distinguish between the physical characters of the city and its culture. On the one hand, urban means dense population, a specific architecture, roads, bridges, public buildings, museums, art galleries and so on. On the other hand, this concept focuses on atomized life style, liberal outlook, possibilities for creative rather than conformist behaviour, and an emphasis on the individual as opposed to the collective. Raymond Williams (1992), for example, has focused

on 'modern art', or 'modernism' in art, as a distinctively urban characteristic in addition to the impersonality and alienation of the city. Here, again, a very important cross-cultural perspective needs to be adopted. What we are calling 'urban' and taking as a definitional basis for 'urban anthropology' is largely based on 19th-century European scholarly perspectives on urbanization. However, anthropological works have added variety and nuances to the works of the early sociologists (Hannerz, 2002) and when one looks at the cognitive dimensions of being urban from a South Asian perspective, a number of models of 'becoming urban' may be discerned.

Historians of 'colonial' India, like Banerjee (2006), have shown how the process of modernization of the Indian élite in 19th-century Calcutta was largely built around a form of nationalism that centred on the seclusion of women and on becoming 'civilized' according to the Victorian model of British society. Bayley (1999: 218) has described the rich urban trader merchants who made visible their newly found urban élite status by reinforcing traditional values of marriage and caste. In the early 19th century, a large number of entrepreneurs who moved from rural areas to towns and cities took advantage of the new opportunities of trade and markets brought about by colonial powers. The only way in which these traders could establish their networks and build credible trading partnerships was by asserting their 'respectability'; they did so by observing a scrupulously *Sanskritic* life style, involving vegetarianism and adherence to caste norms and rules of marriage.

Thus, urbanism in India has often meant regression into the so-called 'respectable' status dictated by caste and patriarchy rather than striving to be liberal and individual. Banerjee (2006), Channa (2004; 2013), and Oldenburg (2002), among others, have shown how customs like dowry, seclusion of women, and greater adherence to caste norms marked the transition from rural to urban life, and indeed continue to do so.

Cities have existed in India since the early civilizations of Harappa; yet in the ancient texts there is no mention of any essential difference between city dweller and rural person. Usually, rural or urban were different locations in a person's life time; young people going to the city to earn a living and then coming back to spend their old age 'at home', in the countryside. So, regarding non-western situations, urbanism as a way of life needs to be problematized in terms of a cyclical, as opposed to a dialectical, philosophy of life, as it is also exemplified by the situational nature of the concept of *dharma*.

In the West, the rural/urban dialectic reached its height with industrialization. Since South Asia has been only a secondary recipient of the western-centric industrialization, the rural/urban division is yet to develop fully. In this region individualism was never a dominant principle. People who have lived in the cities for generations see no reason to change their life style or perspectives just because they happen to be in the city. Take, for instance, the caste group of Sheheri (city dwelling) Dhobis. This caste group, associated with the traditional occupation of washing clothes, have been city dwellers from many generations, part of the city of Delhi ever since it was founded by the Moghul emperor Shah Jehan in 1639. I have done ethnographic work in this community, finding no particular difference in their culture and life style from any other Dhobi who live elsewhere in the country, whether in villages or small towns. Their life is totally rooted in their community and is marked by co-operative, close-knit social relations, where group sentiments, family and kin values, and caste-based identities are far more important than anything that may be deemed as 'urban' (Pocock, 1960; Channa, 1985; 1992). This is not an idiosyncrasy of the lower castes; the high castes, like the Aggarwals and the Brahmins, show similar trends of community formation and social bonding based on caste and ethnic identities (Channa, 1979). Clustering is a significant feature of urban life in India and is found in practically every city; especially in the more cosmopolitan ones like Delhi, where people from many different regions have come to live. Ethnic clustering or 'natural areas' (Zorbaugh, 1926: 223) is found across the world but usually involves immigrants, as in the case of Chinatowns and ghettos. Most notable, however, in India, caste-based

clustering – the confinement, that is, of people of one caste and community in one section of the settlement whether urban or rural – is a ubiquitous phenomenon (Beteille, 1969).

In discussing urban anthropology in India, Chandravarkar (2009: 219) points to the lack of anything that can be described as specifically urban. Looking at the literature on urban cities in India, one can safely agree that 'the rural-urban divide has been notoriously slippery' (Chandravarkar, 2009: 208). However, the nature of the urban, of cities or of society in general, is not static; the city cannot be understood in isolation from its environment, its hinterlands, and its social and political contexts.

## Modernity and the city in India

While the earlier literature on cities in India had pointed to the existence of traditional elements and the flourishing of institutions such as caste in the prosperous urban centres, a study of present-day cities cannot be done without reference to neoliberal policies and the spread of global economic and market imperatives. The enormous increase in the population of cities like Delhi and Mumbai is also related to the destruction of forests and the deplorable state of rural hinterlands. The latter have been facing neglect and environmental devastation as a consequence of the spread of industries, especially those based on mining and the extraction of natural resources. These processes have hit at the livelihood and subsistence of millions of people who have become what Guha (2006) has called 'ecological refugees'; people displaced by dam building, deforestation, mining, and other activities directed at increasing the national GDP but not at protecting people's way of life. These displaced and uprooted people take shelter in the urban peripheries, swelling the ranks of the slum dwellers and homeless and providing cheap labour for the further expansion of the city.

In Delhi, the constantly expanding infrastructural development is made possible by migrant labour from the poor countryside. These labourers move from one construction site to the other and survive without any social provisions and services, like identity cards, which would entitle them to subsidized provisions, education for their children, and health care. In pursuit of good deeds, philanthropists may occasionally give them food or a blanket, in the same way as they would feed the monkeys and the dogs, but they do not engage in drawing the attention of the policy makers or the administrators of the city on the plight of these people. Writing about Mumbai, Chandravarkar states: 'The city's rulers did not doubt the wisdom of improving social conditions. But they approached the problem strictly within the parameters of dominant class interests and the prism of their specific perceptions of *how the poor might or ought to live*' (2009: 41). This applies equally well to Delhi, or for that matter to any other part of South Asia.

As rightly pointed out by Chandravarkar (2009) and also Channa (2010), the concepts of caste and class dominate in the minds of policy makers, who operate by their own stereotypes about the 'marginal', not by the urban/modern values of liberal social justice. Even the most modern ideas about infrastructure-building completely bypass the needs of the poor and the marginal because of the underlying influence of ingrained values of caste and class, which regressively refuse to be eliminated from the minds of those in power. Thus, we have the growth of two or more kinds of cities within urban entities like Mumbai or Delhi. There is the Delhi of the marginal, the poor, and the lower castes/class and the Delhi of the élite, the rich, and the 'modern'. Often the stereotype of 'being urban' is attached to the latter and not the former category of people. People who occupy marginal positions thus feel no commitment to the so-called 'modernity', which, they realize, was never meant for them.

This class differentiation is very important in understanding the nature of the urban, especially in a setting like India where the truly 'urban' characteristics that are often equated with being 'modern' – again understood as possessing a degree of individualism, independence, literacy,

accomplishment, rationality and so on – have more to do with caste and class than with one's physical location in the urban area. To be 'urban' often means to be westernized or élite, literate, sophisticated and so on; but it is an artificial construct. Only a few people living in the city are anything near to this ideal type. For instance, basic literacy is an (almost essential) precondition for navigating a busy city, allowing people to read road signs and signals; but a very large number of people in a city like Delhi are totally illiterate. At bus stops there are many who cannot recognize the number of a bus or even tell the time.

Only very recently, following the economic liberalization in 1992 and the inroads made by the western media in the country, Indians have truly become exposed to the western way of life, in which as I have mentioned they dwell only partially. Thus, the younger generation remain rather fuzzy about 'being urban'. They regard 'being urban' as synonymous with discarding some so-called 'old values'; nevertheless, in spite of leading the so-called 'fast life' of the city in terms of dating, going out to restaurants, and even having 'one-night stands', most so-called 'urban and modern' young people who live in the cities consent willingly to have their marriages arranged by their parents and accept forms of ritual gift-giving that have taken on astronomical proportions because of the global market. High levels of sexual crimes, suicides among the young, and a general depreciation in the psychological well-being of most people who live in cities indicate that few are comfortably adjusted to the status of 'being urban'.

In 2013 there was a drive by the Delhi state administration to involve some high-profile people in eulogizing what they referred to as 'My Delhi' on television and in other mass media. The people invited who heaped praises on Delhi as a city were all upper class, highly educated, and often high-profile individuals. However, ask a common person on the street, and few would have any sense of identification with the city; for many it is only a place for making a living or a quick buck. In fact, 'urbanity' has become a label, designating a particular way of life that one has to adopt; it does not come naturally to most people, it is not brought about by simply being a part of the city.

To conclude, let me summarize the questions that I have raised. Firstly, I have queried whether we can define the 'urban' beyond certain physical characteristics universally associated with the structure of the city. Similarly, I argued that the city as representative of the state and its laws is a shadowy area. Secondly, since the cognitive dimensions of 'being urban' are deeply embedded in the social, cultural, and historical context in which the physical city is situated, we need to ask whether it will ever be possible to define 'urbanism' as a way of life, as was attempted in early 19th-century Europe. Thirdly, I have asked whether it is possible to separate the manner of development of the city, its population, its economy, and even its infrastructure from an assessment of the way in which the non-urban parts of the globe are treated by state policies, the global economy, and environmental transformations. The urban and the non-urban are part of the same global environment and one cannot be isolated from the other. Movements of populations, markets, and environmental issues are all interconnected; thus, the 'urban' can hardly be viewed as a stand-alone entity. So, ultimately, we have to come back to anthropology as a holistic discipline and to the view that urban, rural, and other categories are not separable but enmeshed into human history and social evolution.

## Note

1. This highway is busy day and night with heavy traffic.

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