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**Urban Sociology**

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**Lecture 1**

**Overview**

Hello, everyone. I am Doctor Amrita Sen, and I welcome all of you to this course on Urban Sociology. So, I am an assistant professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur. And this is an NPTEL course. This course would be jointly taught by myself and Professor Archana Patnaik from the same department.

By the end of this lecture for today, this is an introductory lecture, we will get a preliminary understanding of the various social processes that characterize urban life and the city. Today, we begin the class with a brief overview of what this course will entail and the importance of urban sociology as a distinct subfield within the discipline, within the larger discipline of sociology.

So, as you can see this forms the outline of today's lecture. We will start with an introduction and discuss what urban sociology primarily deals with. We will then move on to the distinct characteristics of urban society and how it is vastly different from the rural society. Finally, we will talk about the current pressing issues or challenges that we are faced with in contemporary urban society since more than half of the world's population currently live in cities. It is thus pertinent that we talk about these problems as they have become extremely accentuated and visible during the pandemic period that we are experiencing right now.

As is evident that this course primarily focuses on the city. So, what comes to our mind when we try to visualize the city? This is a very important question and I would like to start the very course with this very, very central and fundamental question that what comes to our mind when we talk about the city. We primarily think about different things like better jobs, modern infrastructure, shopping malls, places of entertainment, vibrant spaces in the city, and it goes without saying that the city looks aesthetic and alluring with places for both profit as well as for entertainment.

And another very interesting aspect of this question that I asked that what comes to our mind when we talk about the city, and I think many of you would be identifying with this, is that in a city from being someone you can very easily become anyone in the city because this is what the freedom of anonymity gives you in a city, the space of the city gives you.

But there also lies a contrast, a very important contrast. Cities are characterized also by different kinds of informal settlements like slums, the urban homeless, the street vendors, the beggars, and for millions of poor people, the city may be a very, very different kind of an adventure. So, there are different things, like there will be an everyday struggle for access to basic resources like food, like drinking water, like shelter.

And a majority of this population that we are talking about, the informality actors, live in overcrowded areas without adequate facilities like sanitation or drinking water supply. And thus, the city is seen to have a very different image when seen through the eyes of the wealthy as opposed to the poor. And there are several other dimensions as well that we would be coming to at the later stages of this course.

The city looks significantly different again when seen through other lenses, like the gender lens for instance where women would often think about safe places in the city and even for the young and the old. So, all, for all categories of people, as you can see, cities might be experienced very differently and very discreetly. And the main point is that everyone experiences the urban in their own ways.

As understood from the contrasting images of the high rises, for instance, against the slums, what becomes apparent is that in the age of globalization, this inequality that characterizes the city is increasing. So, in India, for instance, cities like Delhi are being restructured, as you all know, to fit the visions of the world-class city, so as to increase its importance, strengthen its position in the global economy.

And this restructuring often results in different kinds of segregation, segregation of different classes in the city. So, for instance, as we were talking about some time back, minority groups may get pushed out to the fringes, to the peripheries, while the more wealthier groups get a space in the central areas of the city.

Thus, talking about these kinds of residential segregation, in one sense, we can also say that the city is a great sorting mechanism. It picks people best suited to stay in a particular region. Then, there might be other kinds of people who might not have any place in the city to stay. For example, maybe the street vendors, who are often in the city considered to be embarrassing sights, who are considered as menace in the eyes of the urban elite, in the eyes of the planners.

And for this reason, for the very reason that they are popularly considered to be a menace, as eyesore, they are often evicted very ruthlessly, sometimes with no rights settled, no rehabilitation, and this is all done to make the cities look more aesthetic. Thus, arising out of many of these struggles, primarily coming from the informality actors, the public spaces in the city also become extremely contested. They might very easily become sites of political and social struggle. The kind of segregation and eviction that we are talking about often makes the city feel unwelcoming and not inclusive for a vast majority of people.

Thus, it is becoming clearer to us that through these examples, we can say that cities are not simply physical spaces, not only is the city shaped by us, but we are also shaped by the city. For example, one can definitely say that by living in a city we know how to interact with different kinds of people, how to move within the crowds, how not to draw unwanted attention or maybe how to conduct one's self while we are in a crowded place or maybe in some, any, any place in the city that is congested with people, with other communities.

The point being that urban space, and this is something that I would like to reiterate, the urban, the very urban space affects our own self our thought, our action, the ways in which we behave and almost everything. So, we can say that the city is conditioning us as residents at every moment in different kinds of pace. So, when we think about the city, most often we would feel that cities are vibrant with people from all walks of life bringing with them a piece of their history, adding to the vast heterogeneity, the diversity of the urban space.

And very recently, I think this is also something that has become extremely common nowadays and is seen very frequently, that many people migrate from the rural areas to the urban areas for different kinds of jobs, primarily non-agricultural jobs. There are many social factors that may also act as a pull factor when it comes to people moving to the cities. And also, we know that cities are cultural centers. This is another factor which might bring a lot of people, which, which might attract a lot of people to the cities apart from the economic factors.

The fact that cities are cultural centers, they are looked at as places of freedom and opportunity, this attracts a lot of people, be it for education, be it for better standard of living. People come to the city, and as a result it is constantly expanding and is home to millions of people. But then, there is another question that comes to our mind. How is it that people still feel alone in a city that is so full of people, so full of activities which is apparently so vibrant, which has so many places of entertainment?

So, can we say that this pace of industrialization, urbanization has resulted in a drop in the frequency of interaction between people, maybe between strangers, and in this sense, urban areas as we all know are very different from the rural societies. In the rural societies, it is

usually, the societies are quite close-knit, everyone knows each other, they possess a community feeling. But on the other hand, cities are quite large, they are composed of complex settlements.

It is thus almost impossible for everyone to know each other. And it happens in our everyday lives that we see new faces when we go out, maybe for work, maybe for leisure, and this has resulted in the breakdown of many of the primary relationships that used to exist in the cities earlier. In cities, people come together for different purpose, maybe to reach a common goal, to meet certain ends, and usually we see that this particular group dismantles after the job is over, after the said goal is achieved.

And this very reorganization of the social relations has always very deeply disturbed urban sociologists about whom we would be talking in the next lecture. And but, then again, another question that I would like to ask here is, after speaking about and after discussing about all these contrasts and contestations, what is urban sociology, what is urban sociology all about, and why is it so relevant in today's day and today's age?

Now, according to the 2018 revision of world urbanization prospects, 68 percent of the world's population will inhabit urban areas by 2050. This is a projection, this elevates the importance of urban sociology, I would say, all the more. So, as a point of departure, we can say, that urban sociology is an attempt to systematically study urban life, lives in the cities, how individuals live together in the cities, how they interact with one another.

The urban is not simply the backdrop here but it is imbued with different meanings, with different identities. People attach emotion to the built environment. And in doing so, they turn physical places into social spaces. Public spaces like streets, for example, can be sites of different kinds of activity. Political expressions, protests, gatherings and whatnot. Social, political and economic struggles also manifest through the spatiality of the city.

And thus, in urban sociology, we thoroughly investigate a range of issues. So for instance, migration, looking at both rural to urban as well as urban to urban migration. Poverty, looking at the extreme inequalities in the city, people living on the streets and people living in the gated communities. Environmental pollution, how the consumption patterns of the city put strain on resources and the effect of automobiles on the air, the lack of waste management in the city. All in all, we can say that the urban society is distinct in its form and structure and needs to be closely examined to mitigate these issues.

Other very important features and challenges can also be discussed. So, for instance, occupation. Urban society, thus, is very distinct in terms of the diversity of occupation. There is a specialization of labor where people can work as artisans or as officials. There is also

increased social mobility in the cities. Then environment, the environment in the city is artificial or man-made concrete. We can find concrete jungles practically everywhere.

Thus, we can say that the cities are also a form of transformed nature. Size and density. The city in terms of size is relatively large human settlement with very dense neighborhoods. It is more often overcrowded and congested. Then, heterogeneity, in terms of people from different ethnic, racial, religious backgrounds who come together to stay in the city.

Social inequality and stratification, again, one of the most important characteristics of city life. In most cases, we find that power structures operate in a very, very subtle manner in the city. There is inequality in the city in terms of income gap, gender, health and a whole host of other issues. Cost of living in the cities are also quite high. Thus, stratification along class lines are more visible than others, and is prevalent in relation to housing and the condition of livability of the location.

With its unique features, now comes a new set of challenges. In urban society we are faced with a wide range of problems that are social, that are economic, that are environmental in nature. So, take, for example, economic implications. Every day we can see that more and more unskilled people migrate to the urban centers in search of jobs but the formal economy is unable, naturally unable to absorb this influx of workforce, and as a result most of these individuals have to work as informal actors within the informal economy to make their ends meet.

Manufacturing, construction work, domestic work, all these examples of the informal sector can offer at least a means of livelihood for the poor people, primarily the migrants. However, the problem is that these sectors are mostly unregulated and untaxed. Thus, countries where economic activity is primarily concentrated in this sector, like that of India, fail to collect enough revenue through taxation. But this also means that the urban poor are also exposed to more oppression, to more harassment, exclusion from the local authorities who wish to take the advantage of the lack of regulations that characterizes the sector.

For example, the collection of hafta from street vendors by local police, who quote unquote, allow them to sit in a particular spot on the sidewalk or the footpath to conduct their business. Every city, again, is faced with different kinds of growing environmental challenges as all of us have tried to, have sort of started to experience in our everyday lives. Challenges like pollution, housing shortage, inadequate sanitation. Specially in countries like India, most of this burden of environmental challenges are borne by the urban marginals.

Caste and class boundaries cut across each other to limit access to basic resources like drinking water. Migrants often crowd in squatter zones where they live in shanties may be

made up of cardboards or sacking near the edge of the city, often near dump sites with very poor environment. Again, cities are overtly congested and with very less open space. On the top of that, the lack of green spaces, open spaces, parks or stretches of green land, increase the urban heat island effect, making the cities even warmer than the rural areas.

Pollution coming from cars, buses and other automobiles cause the air quality to deteriorate, and it has reached dangerous levels in cities like Delhi and Kolkata, which are now considered to be the most polluted cities in the world. Excessive generation of waste and dumping of waste in landfills is not only detrimental to the environment but also to those communities that live near the waste dump and informal waste pickers.

Urbanization also contributes to other forms of poverty such as the concentration of people in ghettos, in slums, especially in the developing countries. Ghettoization of the minority groups is also a common occurrence which tells us a lot about the socio-political climate of the city. Impoverished urban residents may be vulnerable to different kinds of things like food shortage, unemployment and crime.

As can be understood, the social, the environmental and the economic are connected and they interact in several ways in the city. And for this reason, they form the three pillars of sustainable development in the cities, which is the need of the hour, and the only way we can mitigate these problems. Thus, for sustainable development and the secure future of our cities, we need to be more aware that all these factors intersect with each other and have to be dealt together, not in isolation. One cannot only opt for economic growth at the cost of the social or the environmental.

And I feel that this can be better explained with a very, very contemporary urban challenge that is right now before us, and all of us are experiencing the effects of this challenge in different ways. In contemporary society, the ongoing pandemic, the COVID-19 has actually made these problems even more visible to the naked eye with the kind of impact it has on different people's lives in the city.

The cities of the global south have the world's largest and most rapidly growing cities. They have some of the densest communities and crammed neighborhoods where isolating one's self is practically impossible. One fallen candle can burn down a whole slum overnight. For instance, in one paper, as Sethi and Creutzig point out, a 10 by 10 non-ventilated room in Dharavi in Mumbai is shared by 10 to 12 people who work and sleep in shifts.

There is, thus, a need to invest in sustainable infrastructure required to make low-income housing safer, especially in the informal settlements. Other than this, there are many public health factors like lack of clean drinking water, sanitation facilities and food security as well.

There is lack of open space which makes the communities vulnerable to communicable and non-communicable diseases.

Again, during the period of lockdown, we saw that there had been so many socio-economic consequences. There was forced eviction of migrant workers by private homeowners, many laborers had to walk back to their homes as transportation facilities were scrapped, and many of them lost their lives. These problems serve as constant reminders for authorities to think about a systematic policy action towards sustainable urbanization.

Reducing housing redundancy by introducing additional property tax for those keeping an unoccupied second house may be a viable option, and is a prevalent norm in many advanced countries. Providing the low wage and informal workforce with social safety nets and insurances during a crisis like COVID is also a must.

Many informal workers who are dependent on their daily wage, suffered during the pandemic and were pushed out of the business because of the lockdown period. It is true that COVID-19 has magnified the deficiencies of how we manage our cities, but it has also given us a chance to rethink and redesign the urban spaces so that we are better equipped for the future.

To summarize briefly today's lecture, we can say that cities are experienced differently by different sections of the society, the city is a space of diversity and heterogeneity, there has been a breakdown of primary social contacts, the city is shaped by us and in turn we are shaped by, the city, the city has distinct features and rapid urbanization has brought forth its own unique challenges which are economic, environmental and social. In the next lecture, we will deal with some classical sociological theories to better enhance our understanding of the diverse perspectives and the visions through which the city can be understood, made sense and imagined.

So, these are the list of references that were consulted while making this lecture. That concludes our lecture for today. Thank you, everyone. We will meet again during the next lecture, which will be on the sociological theories of urbanization and key concepts. Thank you.