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Urban Sociology

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Recent development and emerging theories

I welcome all of you back to the course on urban sociology. Today, we will be finishing up with this particular module, the module two on contemporary urban India. And my last lecture for this week is on the 'recent developments and emerging theories of urban sociology.' As you can see from the title itself, it might sound this particular lecture might sound a bit deep and dense, because it will be having a lot of theoretical concepts contemporary and emerging theoretical concepts. So, I would be requesting all of you to go through all the readings that had been, that would be given to you at the end of this lecture, for a better understanding and I will try to introduce the central concepts of these theories to the best extent possible to all of you.

For today's class, we will talk about some of the contemporary theories as I was telling you in the field of urban sociology. We will start with discussing Partha Chatterjee's conceptualization of the political society and the civil society. We will then move on to Arjun Appadurai's theory on deep democracy which is also very heavily focused on the cities. Then we will talk about the 'Changing urban spaces and social structures as a result of agrarian urbanization' in a paper by K. Sivaramakrishnan and finally, we will talk about D. Parthasarathy's study on how temporal dimensions provide key insights into special, cultural and socio-political implications of globalization.

So, let us begin by talking about Partha Chatterjee's conceptualization of the civil society and the political society. According to Mannathukaren, this theory is very important because it gives us a way to understanding the vast domain of politics, which may fall outside the western notions of the state and the civil society. So, this is a very fundamental, and I would say, a very pragmatic and realistic vision of politics that he talks about - a vision of politics and the form of politics that characterizes many of the cities as we can see around us, primarily cities in India and that of the larger global south.

The word civil society is used as in a variety of contexts by, and by multiple actors, ranging from institutions, like the World Bank to NGOs as well as to the states these days. This civil society has its very strong origin in the classical social theory in modern Europe and should be interrogated very deeply for its strong relevance in the context of the Global South. In fact, Partha Chatterjee whose work I am introducing to you right now, is a very prominent post-colonial political thinker, very, very, who has very significant contributions to political science. And he has made path breaking efforts to question Eurocentric theorization first with nationalism and subsequently with civil society.

His ultimate goal is to develop a better vocabulary to understand societies of the South. According to him, civil society, I quote from his work here, “civil society refers to those characteristic institutions of modern associational life originating in western societies that are based on equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exit, contract, deliberative procedures of decision making, recognized rights and duties of members and other such principles.” But the majority of third world institutions do not meet these standards as many of these citizens, mainly the poor and the marginalized sections are merely citizens in name devoid of any rights, they are not regarded as members of the civil society by most of the states.

We can take for example, the squatters or the street vendors, whom he we have discussed about in the previous lectures. But there is a very interesting point to make here, that this particular and constant negation and rejection of rights and formal identities does not however, mean that they are immune from State’s control. They are largely regulated by many government and state agencies. And that is why they develop a particular political relationship with the state and the administration.

These sectors are also useful to the contemporary political parties, because they vote, they vote very, very proactively in the elections. And this is why Chatterjee believes that the domain of politics in post-colonial governments that cannot be captured by the category of the civil society requires its own category that he calls ‘the political society.’ Thus, for him, political society is a sector that lies between the civil society and the state. And it must be mentioned here, that this very, very contemporary category of the migrants that we have discussed about in the last class as well, they form a very important part of this particular political society, because of the very prominent negotiations and the constant processes of intermediation, that they are a part of, that they constitute in order to make their rights visible and make their claims hard in a particular urban city in a particular space that they are inhabiting mostly without any legal rights or legal entertainments.

Now, we come to another very popular and contemporary theory on urban governance, which is the concept of deep democracy by Arjun Appadurai. Again, a very very, I would say, a significant thinker who has made major and very thoughtful contributions on the urban theory, on the urban political and social theory. Appadurai believes that after 1989, the world was marked by a global victory of neoliberalism which increased flows of financial capital

across national boundaries and innovations in electrical communications and information storage technologies.

In his very important article, titled 'Deep democracy: urban governmentality and the horizon of politics' - I will share this paper with you. He describes how an alliance formed by three civic organizations in Mumbai try to address urban poverty by internationalizing themselves. They show time and again how urban poor groups effectively bring about poverty reduction better than local or national governments and even international agencies. These groups, as he says, are the instruments of deep democracy. They may be rooted in local contexts, but are able to make their voices heard within the globalizing forces, particularly in ways that can benefit them.

In this new global political economy, there emerged distinct alliances and divisions and one general distinction may be made among the different types of grassroots political groups. On one hand, there are those who have chosen armed, militarized solutions for their inclusion, recognition and participation issues. On the other hand, some have chosen a participation politics, I am sorry, a partnership politics that is a cooperation between historically antagonistic organizations such as the state cooperation and workers.

Appadurai gives us the case of three civic organizations who belong to this later group who have creatively used the forces of globalization to their benefit. The 'Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres' or SPARC is an organization formed by social work professionals who deal with problems of urban poverty in Mumbai, the NSDF or the National Slum Dwellers Federation, a very powerful grassroots organization. And finally, the Mahila Milan, which is an organization for poor women. These three organizations collectively call themselves the alliance and they are united in their concern to acquire proper housing and access to elements of urban infrastructure like electricity, housing, transport and land.

This alliance has by far the largest constituency, rendering them the highest visibility in the eyes of the state and the most extensive networks in India and elsewhere in the world. In the age of globalization, governmentality is to be thought a new because it produces new geographies of governmental relationship. Appadurai believes that Mumbai is undergoing a violent rewriting of national geography as there is an attempt to eliminate several marginal groups from its public sphere and the commercial world. About 40 percent of the population live in slums or degraded forms of housing and the rest of the city's land is for industrial middle classes to high income housing and vacant land held by state or private owners.

This population, this particular mobile population without any specific rights without any specific places to live can be called 'citizens without a city.' And they are a very integral part of the urban workforce. So, here lies the paradox. They are also called Mumbai's toilers, the poorest of the poor in the city of Mumbai. They primarily work in manual occupations,

almost always on a daily or piecework basis. They can be cart pullers, ragpickers, scullions, sex workers, car cleaners, mechanic's assistants, petty vendors, small time criminals and temporary workers in petty industrial jobs, requiring dangerous physical work, such as ditch digging, metal hammering, truck loading and the like.

They lack sanitary facilities, their temporary shacks may be demolished or the torrential monsoon can destroy their fragile shelter, their inability to document their claims make them invisible in urban life. They cannot demand ration food, municipal health or education facilities thus housing becomes the critical site of city's politics of citizenship. These organizations that are discussed before in his book, our generation of new forms of politics, one which Appadurai calls, the politics of patience.

SPARC contributed technical knowledge and elite connections to state authorities and the private sector. NSDF through its leader Arputham Jockin, who himself has a background in the slums and many of his colleagues brought a radical brand of grassroots political organizations in the form of Federation model to be discussed later. Mahila Milan brought the strength of poor women who had learned the hard way how to deal with police, municipal authorities, slum lords and real estate developers. They have distinct styles, strategies and functional characteristic.

The members of the alliance have also developed links with Quasi autonomous arms of the federal government, such as the railways, the port authority, and the Bombay electric supply and transport corporation and to the municipal authorities who control critical elements of the infrastructure, such as the regulations, governing illegal structures, water supply and sanitation. By a process of long-term pressure, negotiation and the politics of patience it avoids direct confrontation. It is based on a series of ideas that would slowly transform the conditions of poverty, a logic of patience of cumulative victories and long-term assets building.

This patience or long-term struggle is hard to maintain, because of the constant fear of massive demolishing of shacks near the railroad tracks. Here the author also briefly discusses three very vital organizational strategies that illustrate the ways in which technical practices are harnessed to the alliance's political horizon. They are self-surveys and enumeration, housing exhibitions, and toilet festivals.

The alliance has adopted a conscious strategy of self-enumeration and self-surveying. Alliance members are taught a variety of methods of gathering reliable and complete data about households and families in their own communities. In codifying these techniques for ease of use by its members, in the form of a series of practical tips, the alliance has created a revolutionary system that we may call 'governmentality from below.' They know the power of this kind of knowledge.

Since the state level government and federal entities lack the information, they do not know who the dwellers are, where they live and how can they be identified. These are directly quoted from the work called Deep Democracy written by Arjun Appadurai, where he actually by these three categories gives us a greater elaboration of the ideas or the ways in which democracy works in the contemporary urban society. But since the alliance is aware of the statistical numbers here, they are able to take control of the policy process. As data is needed to relocate and rehabilitate the slum population. They actively participate in the politics of knowledge.

Housing exhibitions is another technique by which the existing knowledge processes are challenged and reversed. The poor have the best knowledge when it comes to the materiality of slum life, its cost, durability, and legality, its design as well. Toilet festivals are again another element deprecating in the absence of good sewage system, ventilation and running water by definition is lacking, humiliating and it enables the condition of waterborne disease which can be life threatening. The toilet festivals feature the exhibition and inauguration not of models, but of functioning public toilets designed by and for the poor, incorporating complex systems of collective payment and maintenance with optimal conditions of safety and cleanliness.

But they represent another form of competence and innovation, victimization and humiliation are turned into technical initiative and self-dignification, material features of the deep democracy. So, as you can see that in all these lines that he is writing, he really goes deep into the idea of democracy. They have been able to establish links, as he says, among the Federation's in South Africa and Thailand. There are powerful horizontal exchanges that include activist leaders who are struggling to get media attention in their own countries may get success in getting the attention for local struggle in other countries as local politicians feel less threatened by the visitors.

Now, many of these exchanges provide face to face meetings with key leaders and allow them to progress rapidly in making more long-term strategic plans for funding, capacity building and what they call scaling up. Last, but not the least, is the circulation of the internal critical debate, where members of the SDI ask questions about who handles the money or why are there not more women in the meeting - very important questions.

Now, in a nutshell, the paradox that democracy has to function within the boundaries of the nation state through elected government, judiciaries and legislatures and the ways in which it can be done is shown here on mostly how the poor or the marginalized take help or assistance from the global links to forced administration in recognizing universal democratic principles. This very effort to create a democracy without any kind of borders is something that Arjun Appadurai calls the deep democracy.

Another very unique perspective is given to us by K. Sivaramakrishnan, who says that agrarian urbanization has accelerated in the last few decades after economic liberalization. And with this fast rate of economy growth, the city has to pool in more resources, which comes from the rural areas and does extraction of rural natural resources has increased to feed the demand of the growing urban population. At the same time, rural landscapes are slowly becoming transformed by expanding infrastructure, new industrial ventures and urban sprawl. But all these processes have also led to more pronounced forms of social inequality and historically marginalized groups like the Dalits and Adivasis, who are actually suffering greater dispositions and livelihood precarity.

When we talk about urbanization, we usually we miss out the impact it has on the countryside or the non-city areas, this is something that he elaborates on. For example, many Marxist scholarship talk about transfer of people and land, food minerals to cities for the making of urban centers but how agrarian landscapes are being remade because of urban provisioning is something that is often overlooked. Say for example, the excavation of sand from rural areas to support urban construction industry or the practice of commodity agriculture. These are some of the most visible instances of the remaking of rural areas, through forces, through very prominent forces of urban growth.

Pollution and waste, which are some of the exports from the cities also remake the countryside. Extreme violence from the government agents and their private collaborators on these issues are also relevant examples to substantiate this claim. It is said that after the economic reform of 1990s, there have been vast number of mobility workers into cities and towns from the rural areas. And the effect of this has been a systematic disinvestment of agriculture by the central and state governments.

Rural industrialization is another aspect of agrarian urbanization that has increased inequality drastically. It has brought destructive industrial ventures into areas already impoverished in the past, where labor and nature are estimated to be really cheap.

Another aspect that Majumder and Gururani find is that even when land is not being used for farming, it still retains its value. It provides class and caste distinction. Majumder and Gururani note the contradictions inherent in the hyper active land markets and the land speculation that is rampant in many parts of India since economic liberalization. They observed that losing land to industrial ventures can spark anxieties around both upward and downward social mobility, which is measured in locally salient caste hierarchies and their reliance on land relations.

Low growth agriculture results in informal migrant work and becomes the main recourse for the rural poor. The Dalits and Adivasis suffer greatly from the worst forms of dispossession.

Upadhyay points to the flawed nature of these land reforms and titling which result in the state led land grab from underprivileged farmers to serve urbanization projects like the most fitting example can be the smart city building for instance.

So, this is yet another work by Professor Parthasarathy as I was talking about and this work is called the temporality, the public spaces and the heterotopias, where he says that major time space interactions are taking place in the city of Mumbai. And this time space interaction is largely about how global forces are largely impacting the informal sectors as we have already discussed in the previous lectures primarily in the lecture on globalization, where we actually discussed on how many of the informality actors are being significantly influenced and are also absorbed within the larger global forces, within the larger economy in multiple ways.

And in this work, he also mentions that the public space is actually an arena of social as well as political groupings. And in this particular discourse, he mentions that many of the environmental discourses are being used to limit the poor's access to the urban spaces. The cities as we can see with more influx of migrants into many of the cities like Bombay, the city is, many of these cities are being made and remade in multiple ways by the migrants who are coming in and thus along with the very temporality and the changing public space, the city can also be seen as a space for different kinds of struggle not only direct confrontations, but also nuanced form of conflicts towards the creation of a particular utopia.

So, coming to the conclusion, let us quickly summarize the main points discussed. Political society enables us to understand the political practices of the poor in the Global South. Deep democracy helps us to rethink on the forms of governance and governmentality in the age of globalization. Agrarian urbanization shows how the countryside or non-city areas are also affected parallelly by the process of urbanization. The exploration of the temporal dimensions is necessary for understanding the spatial, cultural and socio-political aspects of globalization in the Indian cities.

So, all the works that have been discussed in this lecture are there in the references and again, I would like to request all of you to go through all these references for a deeper understanding of the concepts that have been discussed in today's lecture. Thank you for joining these two modules with me. The next two weeks of lecture on the course urban sociology will be taken up by Professor Archana Patnaik who will be starting with the topic of Smart cities and Urban life. Thank you once again.