

Research and Writing the ‘Urban’ in Indian Geography: A Critique of Pathways

Geo-Reflections-7

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Abstract

This piece of popular writing investigates the factors that influence the underrepresentation of urban geographers in mainstream urban studies scholarship in India. The factors I note down here are from my subjective experience of being in the field, both as an urban geographer engaged in teaching urban studies courses offered by an Indian university and as an urban studies scholar having experience working in collaboration with urban studies scholars from other disciplines on many different projects. The problems, as analysed, can be categorised into three broad heads: spatial pattern and scale, methodology, theoretical grounding and critical analysis. These three factors are not stand-alone, and the other two often influence one. Although the ideas I have introduced here come from my personal experience, I have tried my best to make the observations bias-free through the methods of reflexivity. Through this reflexive writing process, my personalised experience and observations are cross-checked to overcome the limitations of subjectivity. This popular piece may be useful for scholars of urban geography in India who believe that we collectively can take our discipline to a much higher level of scholarship.

Keywords: urban geography, India, scale, methodology, critical analysis

Introduction

After being engaged in research and teaching in urban geography for nearly three decades, one question often bothers me—Why don’t we, the urban geographers, show up in a big way in mainstream urban studies scholarship in India? Is there something seriously wrong with our

work? Despite having a huge number of scholars engaged in research and writing within the disciplinary perimeter of urban geography taught in many geography departments in Indian universities, we are usually given a miss in the list of urban scholars in India. This article, written in popular mode, searches for the reasons for this phenomenon as

¹Invited Article

observed over the years. Understanding and analysing these reasons is a form of soul-searching for me. Although the ideas I bring here come from my journey in both teaching and research in the field of urban geography, I have tried my level best to make the observations bias-free through the methods of reflexivity. Through this reflexive writing process, the personalised experience and observations are cross-checked to overcome the limitations of subjectivity.

This writing might help me and my fellow scholars of urban geography in India understand our mistakes, guide us to collectively learn, and elevate our discipline to a much higher level of scholarship.

Geography as a discipline is coherently holistic, and urban geography as part of the curriculum is no exception. 'Urban problems and prospects' and 'Urban issues and challenges' are generic terms often used in seminars and conferences organised by universities, colleges, and different associations of geography to accommodate the maximum number of papers. However, these generic terms become problematic when used for edited books often developed from such conferences and seminars. This gives scholars the opportunity and freedom to write about any aspect of the urban situation but simultaneously kills the agency of critical writing as there is no control over the quality of such writings. These books usually go to the printing press without a rigorous

peer review. The number of such conferences and seminars is increasing at a fast rate, and so is the number of papers presented. This also means an increase in the number of papers each scholar writes annually. If the scholar is engaged in teaching, his/her time for writing is limited, but the number of publications cannot be reduced. It has become a normal demand from India's Higher Educational Institutes (HEI). We live in a superfast academic world where writing 20 to 30 papers per year has become a normal expectation from HEI for various kinds of national and international scoring done by different ranking organisations. These organisations prepare lists of 'leading scientists', and having one's name added to such lists is both prestigious and lucrative, spurring many scientists to join the race. Sitting on the boundary wall between natural and social sciences, geographers compete with the natural scientists in this race.

This model of research and writing usually takes a heavy toll on the quality of the publications. Young urban geographers entering the field of academic writing have started developing models from their scanty empirical research, whereas in the 20th century, accomplished urban scholars used to create one or two models during their lifetime, using their long experience of understanding cities through their longer-term grounded research. Theory and model building was a long-term affair in the career path of

urban scholars. Machine learning, an improved version of software-based analysis and programming, has become the new *mantra* for developing models without much understanding of the real world. Whenever I encounter scholars using machine learning in urban studies and ask for clarification on their observed model (a model completely disconnected from the empirical reality), their prompt answer is: 'this is the result I got from the software-based analysis'. Scholars who use such software-based models do not even know about the logical algorithm of the models, which actually refers to the process of how the specific model works and under which circumstances. Sometimes, I wonder about this particular trend of knowledge—is it the scholar who is learning or the machine itself? These model-building practices are also regressive in terms of scholarship, as they bring back positivism as the dominant philosophy in urban geography, which has been challenged by urban critical geographers for a long time, since the 1960s and 70s.

In writing too many articles and book chapters, the reading and research time is compromised. A 'Publish and Perish' group of paid journals are on the rise, and edited volumes have become the preferred version of the book for publishers as they can sell the book by individual chapters to maximise profit. Reading one full book in one go has probably become an old-fashioned idea. However, superficial and scattered

reading does not take us anywhere in the scholarship. I have often observed that urban geographers quoted Henry Lefebvre's (1996/1968) ground-breaking work, "The Right to the City", to mean the citizen's individual or community rights to the city's services and infrastructure.

If we check the list of urban studies experts in India, we, the geographers, are the minority. Yet, the maximum number of papers presented in seminars and conferences under the discipline of geography belong to the domain of urban geography. This led me to think about and analyse what we are missing out in the research and writing within the field of urban geography. The big, data-oriented studies of urban India are predominantly under the domain of urban economics. On the other hand, good, in-depth, grounded studies on Indian cities are often done by scholars from other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, political science, planning and architecture.

As I understand it, the problems of research and writing in the urban geography of India lie in multiple factors, which I would like to discuss under a few broad categories: a) spatial pattern and scale, b) methodology, and c) theoretical grounding and critical analysis.

Spatial Pattern and Scale

Urban spaces are often studied in urban geography as discrete spaces, meaning that we treat the urban as separate from the non-urban—the peri-urban and the rural. This is the legacy of Burgess's model of the

Chicago school, which drew distinct urban boundaries from the rural and made specific zones within the city. In understanding cities in isolation, we often forget that studying one city/town disconnected from the other urban and non-urban areas in the neo-liberal world is not only difficult but next to impossible. In his studies, Neil Brenner brings up the question of the scale of urbanisation again and again. He argues (2019, p.14):

"The city is only one element within and expression of the multiscalar, polymorphic and restlessly mutating geographies of capitalist urbanisation. These are constituted through the relentless *implosion* of sociospatial processes into dense centers of population, infrastructure, and economic activity and through the equally dynamic *explosion* of sociospatial relations across of vast territories, landscapes, and ecologies...."

In the theory of planetary urbanisation, Brenner and Schmid (2012) also claim that urbanisation is no longer limited within the territorial limit of the urban spaces; rather, the rural and the hinterland are also part of the urbanisation process. Brenner (2019, p.15) argued that we need a multiscalar yet territorially differentiated conceptualisation of urban space itself and the geographies of urbanisation to decipher the variegated patterns and scales in which the sociospatial processes work. Thus, in understanding

urbanisation and cities, we need both up-scaling to have an extensive idea of how the urban is connected to other urban and non-urban areas and down-scaling as well to analyse how micro-level socio-spatial processes work even at the level below the well-defined territorial limits of a city, i.e., wards.

In the studies of urban geography in India, we are limited in both levels of scale. In studying a city, we cannot go beyond the territorial limit of that city because we study it at a fixed scale, considering the city as a discrete independent entity. We also do not find it applicable to understand how socio-spatial processes operate at a very micro level within a city, such as a small neighbourhood. This limitation is bounded by our focus on the spatial pattern rather than the spatial process, and in doing so, we fall back heavily on maps and diagrams. Making maps in the traditional sense requires territorial boundaries and their divisions, be it the boundary of a town or the boundaries of the wards of a town/city. For ease of making maps and diagrams, we prefer either remotely sensed data or quantitative data collected from the field through a structured questionnaire survey. However, these kinds of data never lead us to understand the economic, social and cultural transformations happening in a town/city. To understand those processes, we need a multiscalar approach beyond the traditional representation of maps, diagrams and high-end quantitative techniques. Neither of these helps us

understand urban processes, which is an agglomeration of various social, economic, and political forces. Understanding processes in an urban setting, which is highly dynamic in nature, starts with the 'how' question—and this 'how' question cannot be answered with the help of high-end statistical techniques or GIS platform-based modelling. The answers to this 'how' question can be obtained by conducting well-grounded research using qualitative methods and the critical analysis of phenomena.

To explain the problem in detail, we can take an example. We, the geographers, often use land use land cover (LULC) maps to show a city's land use land cover patterns and the changes therein. Scholars also try to predict future changes with the help of software-based model building techniques. This kind of remote sensing data-centric research does not tell us anything about the process of change in the land use and land cover of a town/city. It does not give us any information about whose land it is, who uses it, and for what reason. It also does not give us any information about who has access to those uses, how these transformations, i.e., land use land cover changes, are happening, and through which kinds of political and economic processes. We are too obsessed with the visible features of built-up areas and their spatial patterns. We hardly pay attention to the processes which bring about those transformations or changes in the LULC. Another example might be

the case of studying transport in cities. In the study of transport, we make maps of the streets of a city but do not consider that streets are worth investigating for uses other than for transport and their spatial patterns. The streets are multi-dimensional spaces of a town/city, having specific social, cultural, political and economic activities depending on their location in different parts of the city. The study of streets, therefore, can be a proxy for understanding a city and its socio-spatial processes at a very micro scale. The study of streets also poses a difficulty in conceptualising an area of study because it has a linear geometry instead of a polygon, the traditional idea of an area. Rather than facing those difficulties, we prefer to leave those out as not worth studying.

Another problematic in our question of scale lies in the conceptualisation of a representative sample. We still believe that even in a big city, our sample size of research participants should be representative enough to validate the claim of the entire city as a case. In the name of that representation and a large number of sample surveys, our in-depth understanding of a phenomenon gets compromised. If we want to have a deeper understanding of the socio-spatial processes in a city, we need to utilise both scaling down and scaling up, depending on the research questions and the objectives. However, in the process of scaling down, sometimes we need to focus on a very micro scale, which may not be eligible for

map making or fit for diagrammatic presentation, like we do when showing spatial patterns. Scaling down sometimes requires a change in focus from 'population' to 'people', i.e., from the mass to individual/groups or from the general to the specific. This change of scale is important to understand the cityscape. We need to understand who decides to develop a city and in which ways. Each and every space of a city is a 'produced space' and is constantly being re-produced. Urban landscapes result from continuous interaction between power groups with multiple cross-cutting interests. People from diverse backgrounds come to the city to work and live and sometimes they also share the same neighbourhoods. The enormous tensions between them and the resultant socio-cultural conflicts raise the question of differential possessions and dispossessions in the city (Banerjee-Guha, 2010). All these processes have enormous impacts on the landscape/cityscape we study in geography. If we do not try to use a multiscale approach in understanding the processes of city building and its transformations, then how can we claim a holistic approach in urban studies, which lies at the core of the discipline of geography?

Methodology

Because of the substantial influence of positivist philosophy and spatial science approach in geography, the common methods used in urban research within the discipline are dominantly quantitative techniques

and RS/GIS tools. For data generation from field research, we heavily rely on the structured questionnaire (easily transferable to digits) and perception survey (often used with a Likert scale to facilitate quantification) as the data collection methods. However, the structured questionnaire does not help us understand complex phenomena inherently linked to research issues in urban spaces. Instead, semi-structured and open-ended questions are more useful if we stick to the questionnaire schedule as a dominant research method. Moreover, the questionnaire method can only tell us about the perceived space and cannot capture the conceived and lived experiences of the citizens vis-a-vis research participants. Therefore, we need to question the traditional methods we use in our research to gauge whether those methods are efficient enough to understand and analyse the complex world of urban spaces.

We have to remember that going beyond the questionnaire method is important. Questionnaires only help us to some extent at the beginning of grounded research to get the background data or information about the communities we interview, and also help us to get acquainted with the research participants for in-depth research afterwards. Repeated visits and conversations with the research participants are essential for in-depth empirical research, which we often neglect to do. I often wonder why we, the geographers, cannot stretch our methods beyond the questionnaire.

The answer lies in our disciplinary training. We do not train our Master's students to conduct research using qualitative methods and to write out of the data collected in the form of text instead of quantitative ones. Another problem linked to using qualitative methods is the scale and quantum of data. When we use qualitative methods, the area under research is bound to be small; the number of research participants will be smaller. This brings in the question of representation. We think that a small study area and a smaller size of research participants do not represent the case of a city. This claim comes from the idea of generalisation of observed phenomena. The idea of representative scale poses the problem of selection of research methods, and in that process, qualitative methods are often discarded. Unless we overcome the idea of generalisation in our research, we will not be able to welcome qualitative methods in studying urban spaces. Without the use of mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative), our studies will not be able to gain much depth in analysing highly complex and dynamic spaces like cities and towns.

In the process of empirical research, we have another limitation, which is interviewing one target group for a particular research. In that context, we often target the household for ease of getting answers from anyone present at home during our field survey. However, we cannot

target one group of citizens for in-depth research in urban spaces, as each and every issue is the output of complex negotiations between different stakeholder groups in the city. Without including the voices of each of these stakeholders, the analysis of that issue remains superficial and incomplete. Moreover, good writing demands critical analysis and evaluation of information. That information should be collected from multiple sources to verify the responses given by one target group against the others to develop an argument. Using only one category of data might lead to a biased argument, to avoid which we must interview different target groups associated with an urban issue.

Another methodological problem lies in the map making process itself. We think that map making is an essential part of research, and without maps showing the spatial variations, the study does not qualify as part of geography research. The process of traditional map making always follows some fixed boundaries, such as boroughs or wards in a city. To satisfy that process, we often collect data from different wards to make maps and try to project that those data represent the entire ward, vis-a-vis the entire city. For the sake of map making, our empirical research generates scanty data from each area of the city, representing neither the neighbourhood nor the city. For map making, we do not need the division of space in the form of administrative

boundaries these days, and it can be done at any scale. There are numerous methods of making maps, even at a very micro scale, with the help of a Google Earth image and the GPS locator of an Android phone. With the help of these simple tools, we can map various social and cultural phenomena and their spatial processes. Remotely sensed data are generated by a satellite placed in the earth's orbit, which can give us only an idea of the visible phenomena of a city. These kinds of data cannot provide us with the stories of lived experiences and the negotiations over claims of space in a city.

Text gathered through qualitative-ethnographic research is also a form of powerful data that we, the urban geographers in India, have yet to recognise. We need to use better methods to understand urban spaces and issues critically. If we are not open enough in our methods, such as using open-ended questions, informal interviews, informal conversations/discussions, participant and non-participant observations, and group discussions to explore the underlying processes associated with the spatial patterns of any urban issue, our works are not going to be acknowledged in a big way in the future either. To inculcate better methods, we must turn our focus from the 'spatial science' mode to the 'production of space' mode of critical urban geography.

Theoretical Grounding and Critical Analysis

The importance of empirics is overemphasised in India's current

writing of urban geography. Given the high dependence on empirical research, the theoretical background often weakens. The findings in research writing are often laden with observed phenomena and their spatial variations without linking those observations to a stronger theoretical framework. The balance between empirics and theories is usually missing in these writings. The articles based on the literature review become a mere description of the earlier research without much critical reflection on the existing studies. The articles based on empirical research hardly take note of the existing literature and relevant theories. Some lower-grade social science journals follow the structure of articles used in the natural sciences, such as 'findings' and 'observations', which does not allow a researcher to bring up critical reflections from the research in the writing process. Research and writing based on our observations, without linking them with the current theoretical debates, also weaken the merit of the writing, and limit the prospects of being published in good journals of urban studies.

Now, the question arises: Why is the theoretical grounding of our research so weak? The answer lies in our badly framed curriculum and the lack of critical reading and writing in those curriculums. Our curriculum is often not updated to capture the current theoretical debates in urban studies. Language also becomes a bar for our students, who are not proficient enough in critically reading

the current urban theoretical literature. Critical analysis demands critical reading and writing, but we do not train our students well in either of these respects. They tend to read everything as facts and never learn to question the writing of others. This non-critical practice develops from our bad teaching method of one-way lectures, without encouraging students to question everything they hear, read or learn. Critical analysis requires solid arguments backed by strong evidence from critical empirical research and verified data sources. To critically analyse any urban phenomenon, we need to know how it functions, understand that we need to consider all sides, and evaluate and critique available information from all sources.

Our curriculum does not have much scope to develop critical writing skills either. The writing assignments, for the most part, include one Master's dissertation and the interpretation of maps and diagrams under their curriculum on quantitative techniques and map making. Because of the lack of training in writing as part of their learning process, they often write an interpretation of maps, diagrams or statistical analysis in the form of mere description, which is already observable from those maps, diagrams and statistics. The weak, uncritical writing practices limit their capacities in future research and writing. Critical understanding and analysis can only be possible when we explore the other disciplines

engaged in urban studies and try to adopt some of their methods besides our traditional ones. To understand urban spaces well, we need the lens of political economy and political ecology, specifically the neo-liberal economy and its associated nexus with the current urbanisation and environmental discourses. We are failing on these counts to analyse the urban effectively. David Harvey's works become important in these approaches. Moreover, Henri Lefebvre's concepts of the production of space and the right to the city have become very important lenses for understanding the current urban transformation processes. It is necessary to analyse how the city is being built and transformed and who has the right in that city-building process. Who gains and who loses in that process? The answers to these questions lie in the critical understanding of space and spatiality.

Conclusion

In teaching and researching urban geography, we mostly follow a reductionist approach. In that process, we create categories and try to understand each as independent and completely separate from the other categories. There are many categories, such as urban economy, urban transport, urban environment, urban infrastructure, urban climate change, urban services, urban governance, etc. If we try to understand and analyse any urban phenomena with a critical lens, we can easily observe that categories are never discrete, as each is intricately

linked to some of the other categories. They are deeply enmeshed in such a web that trying to single out one and investigate it separately would be a misleading proposition. Despite this, researchers still tend to gravitate towards the earlier concept of boundaries because of their high reliance on reductionism. In this process, the holistic angle of research gets lost. Here, by 'holistic', I mean the practice of checking things outside the perimeter of one issue and explaining how this is influenced by other aspects as well. Through this process, we can probably restore the quality of research and writing practices in Indian urban geography.

In research and writing about cities, we must quickly move from understanding spatial patterns to critically analysing socio-spatial processes to restore our claim to urban studies scholarship. If we hesitate to take that turn, we will lose out. Our dilemma lies in giving up the identity of this discipline as a spatial science, something many of us are obsessed with. We often forget that perceived space is not the only space we must be concerned about. Instead, we need to reconsider the biased relations with positivism, spatial science and quantitative techniques with which we will be unable to analyse beyond the perceived space. Henri Lefebvre's (1974, translated in 1991) work on the production of space can guide us on why and how we need to understand and analyse the conceived and lived spaces to understand and analyse an urban space.

We also need a rigorous reading of Edward Soja's (1996) conceptualisation of 'third space'. Traditionally, spatiality was confined to binary approaches of either 'seen', as concrete material forms to be mapped, analysed, and explained (physical/material space), or as 'mental constructs', ideas about and representations of space and its social significance (imagined representation of space). By critically re-evaluating this dualism, Edward Soja (1996) developed the concept of a third space, a creative combination and extension of the first two perspectives and an extension beyond those to new and different modes of spatial thinking. To understand the changes in urbanisation and the transformation in cities under the neo-liberal economy, we also need an extensive reading of David Harvey (2001; 2012) to get a strong theoretical framework of political economy for urban explanation. We need to clarify our conceptual and theoretical understanding of Lefebvre's lived space, the third space of Soja, and the Marxist interpretation of cities by David Harvey before our research and writing will be critical enough to reach the required quality in urban scholarship. We need to revise our content and methods of teaching urban geography and then focus on improving the approaches and methods of research and writing the urban. If we cannot act on these points soon, we will continue to 'miss the bus'. The choice is ours!

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