

Unit 1

What is Urban Sociology?

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Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you will be able to:

- discuss the origin and development of urban sociology;
- describe its subject matter and scope;
- explain the different approaches to the study of urban sociology; and
- discuss the relationship between urban sociology and other social sciences.

1.1 Introduction

Urban and Urbane are both derived from the Latin word *Urbanus* meaning “belonging to a city” and these were once synonymous in meaning. Urbane was borrowed first, from the old French term *urbain*, and it preserves the French pattern of stress. Subsequently, Urban was borrowed directly from Latin word *urbanus*. Urbane conveys the meaning of being “specialized, refined, polite or elegant”. These desirable qualities were considered to be the characteristic of urban rather than country folk. Urban refers to a city or town, which is directly opposite to village or country. A resident of a village is known as a folk and of a city is known as an Urbanite. More details about the concept of urban will be discussed in the Unit 2 of this block.

1.2 Origin and Development

Cities, appeared some ten thousand years ago. The scientific interest in the city is, however, a few hundred years old and the science of urban sociology is still more recent. What probably was the first book about the city possibly was written by an Italian, Giovanni Botero, whose *Delle Cause della grandezza della citta* appeared as early as 1598. Its English version was published in 1806 under the title ‘*A Treatise Concerning the Causes of the Magnificence of and Greatness of Cities*’. This book, of course, is now hardly more than a scientific curiosity and it cannot be said that it created a new science. It is only since the seventeenth century that the city has become an object of scientific enquiry and research.

The founders of political arithmetic and their successors, the statisticians, the students of population problems, the economists, and the historians

became interested in it and were joined by administrators, architects, planners, and social reformers; producing enormous literature. Urban sociology is indebted to these scholars. A few of the basic problems have been first investigated by such pioneers as Graunt, Ravenstein, Mayr, Supan, Buecher, Adna Weber, Willcox, and Hurd, but none of their works is truly urban sociology. Even after sociology had established itself as a new branch of science, its students took rare notice of urban phenomena. The first monograph written on the city was by a sociologist, Rene Maurier's *L'Origine et la fonction economique des villes*, published as recently 1910. As indicated by the title, its author approached the subject largely as an economist. The three early sociological classics – G. Simmel's, *Die Grosstadte und das Geistesleben*, a (The Metropolis and Mental life) 1903; Max Weber's, *Die Stadt(The City)*, 1921; and R.Maurier's, *Le Village et la ville*, 1929- were only parts of larger works. According to Hausserman and Halia (2005) “ it is fair to say that George Simmel was the first scientist to deserve the title of an Urban Sociologist”. He provided a sociological definition of the term ‘Urban’ and analysed the interaction between spatial density, social behaviour and economic differentiation. Some notable studies of that time include: Jane Addams' *Hull House Maps and Papers* in 1893, and Robert Woods' *The City Wilderness* in 1899. These were explorative studies, which laid the ground for later studies. Edith Abbott and Sophonisba P. Breckinridge in ridge in 1908 studied Housing in Chicago after Charless Booth in 1888 had completed an epochmaking study of life and labour in London. Rowntree in 1901 wrote *Poverty: A Study of Town Life and a study of destitution in York, England*. Both these studies were on a grand scale and made precise general formulation about city life.

Box 1.1 City and the Urban Phenomenon

“Fascination with the city, with the urban phenomenon, has existed throughout history. It is probably as ancient as the origin of the city itself and can be found in the folk wisdom as well as the more sophisticated social and political speculations of the majority of civilizations.

This preoccupation with the city-with its singularity, its strengths and weaknesses, its distinction from the countryside and a strong predilection to moral evaluation of the city-can be found in civilizations as diverse as the Jewish, Hellenistic, Roman, Christian, Indian, Chinese and Islamic. In all of them a highly ambivalent attitude is also found: on one hand appreciation of all the power, wealth, and potential creativity stored up within the city, and on the other hand fear of its corrupting influence contrasting with the supposedly simple virtues of the countryside. In consequence, all these cultures searched for some formula of the ideal city that would compensate for the negative aspects of urban life.” (Eisenstedt, S.N. of Schachar A 1987).

The real impetus came from Robert E.Park. His article “ The City”, which heralded the coming of a new era, was first published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1915. Unfortunately it received little attention at that time. Sociology was still a general science without much specialization.

It was still fighting for recognition, which it gained only slowly. In the United States of America, Urban Sociology got recognition in 1925 when the American Sociological Society devoted an annual meeting to Urban Sociology. The papers from this meeting were published by E.W. Burgess under the title, *The Urban Community*. Prior to this volume Park, Burgess and McKenzie had published a volume, *The City* (1925), which contained essays they had published in the previous decade. Indeed, these two works laid the foundation of the subject and this was further enriched by the students of Park and Burgess at the University of Chicago, which became well-known as the Chicago School of Urban Sociology.

In contrast, sociology is a relatively young discipline in India. It was only in 1920 that the first department of sociology was established at the University of Bombay by Professor Patrick Geddes. Although, during the decade 1914 to 1924 he made diagnostic and treatment surveys of some 50 Indian urban centers and brought out two volumes of *Town Planning Towards City Development* for Indore in 1918 (Boardman, 1976), Yet unlike Park and Burgess, his works could not lay the foundation of the subject in India. One of the main reasons was that, the subject of sociology was itself in its nascent form in India. The field of urban sociology remained unheard in Indian universities till 1960(Ganguli, 1965).

M.S.A. Rao (1974) considered two main reasons for this neglect: First, the predominant view among sociologists that the distinction between rural and urban sociology is not meaningful in India due to its lower level of urbanisation and, second, the argument that in the Indian context, there was no dichotomy between the traditional city and the village, as both were the elements of the same civilization. Satish Saberwal (1977) observed in his paper on " Indian Urbanism: A Socio-historical Perspective", appearing in a special issue of '*Contributions to Indian Sociology*'.

Over sixty years ago Patrick Geddes wrote his *Report on re-planning of six towns in Bombay Presidency* (1915), prior to his appointment as the first Professor of Sociology in the University of Bombay, Geddes occupied the Chair only briefly; and G.S.Ghurye, his successor, wrote on the '*Cities of India*' in the March 1953 issue of *Sociological Bulletin*. During the years in between and since, sociologists and others have off and on referred to urban phenomena in India; but this terrain has until recently remained singularly devoid of decisive intellectual landmarks: the key ideas which cutting through thickets of data, clearly show the road ahead.'(Saberwal, 1977:1).

1.3 Subject-matter and Scope

According to Erickson, urban sociology is a generalizing science. Its practical aim is to search out the determinants and consequences of diverse forms of social behaviour found in the city. To the extent that it succeeds in fulfilling this role, it clarifies the alternatives of organised social action in a given situation and of the probable outcome of each. In other words, Urban Sociology deals with the impact of city life on Social action, Social relationships, Social Institutions, and the types of civilizations derived from and based on urban modes of living. Louis Wirth has written extensively on urbanism and described the complexity of our subject-matter:

“The city is not merely the point at which great numbers are concentrated into limited space, but it is also a complex heterogeneity in almost every characteristic in which human beings can differ from one another. In this respect the city represents perhaps the most striking contrast to the social entities that we call primitive, folk, and peasant societies. Consequently, the methods adapted to the understanding of the population of the metropolis are strikingly different from those suited to simpler and more homogeneous societies. This accounts for the fact that in attempting to understand the city we have had to resort to extensive statistical inquiries to determine the human elements of which it is composed. They differ, as do all societies, in sex and age, but they show peculiar distribution of age and sex groups and great variations in these respects as we pass from area to area. They differ widely from one another in occupation, in view of the more extensive division of labour, which the growth of the market has made possible. They differ in wealth and in income, ranging from the extreme of affluence to the depths of the direst poverty and insecurity. The city, moreover, by virtue of its focal position in the complex of capitalistic civilization, has attracted within its confines the racial and ethnic stocks of all the world and has more or less amalgamated them and blended their traits into a new aggregate of hybrids, here mingling with one another and there segregating themselves from one another, here collaborating and there at war, but in any case building a complex of cultures unprecedented in human history. This heterogeneity of the human materials in the city is at once a source of ferment and stimulation and of the frictions and conflicts that characterize modern society” (Louis Wirth 1940).



A street in Delhi

Reflection and Action 1.1

Observe the society in which you live in the sense of its physical nature i.e. whether it is a village, town, city or a metropolis in terms of its physical infrastructure. Recollect about its culture, values of people, etc.

Now write a note of two pages on “My City/Town/Village” based on the features you have identified. Discuss your report with other students at your Study Centre and your Academic Counsellor.

Urban sociology is one of the broadest and most eclectic of all sociological fields. It tends to overlap geography with its emphasis on spatial distribution of social institutions and social groups within the city; political science, with its emphasis on political behaviour, power and with decision making; economics, with its perspective on public policy, taxation, and public expenditures; and anthropology with respect to culture of groups. In many ways the interests of urbanologist (A specialist in urban sociology) and ecologist also overlaps with those of town and city planners, social workers, various other specialists in education, race relations, housing, and urban development and rehabilitation (Gist, 1957). Perhaps as a result of its eclectic nature, there is need to clarify and refine many of the basic concepts in the field: community, ecology, city, urban, urbanism, urban society, urbanisation, industrialization, modernization and so on. Currently, a major problem is that these concepts are loosely defined and used indiscriminately by the students of urban phenomena (Sjoberg, 1959). In order to define any of the above-mentioned concepts, we encounter a difficulty familiar to sociologists. There are very few sociological terms on whose definitions experts agree. The above mentioned concepts are no exceptions. Now let us discuss the concept of community and ecology.

Community: The term has many meanings. Sometimes it is used to denote a common habitat or the totality of all persons living in the same area. But frequently the term indicates more than merely a locality or its residents. Davis, for instance, stresses what he calls "social completeness". Accordingly, he defines a community as "the smallest territorial group that can embrace all aspects of social life....It is the smallest social local group that can be, and often is, a complete society". Mclver and Page approach the problem from a somewhat different angle, emphasizing relationships rather than social organisation: "The basic criterion of community... is that all of one's social relationships may be found within it.". We can indeed speak of a community if common habitat creates positive emotional ties between all residents or at least all groups of residents. It is characterised by feeling of belongingness and friendly feeling towards each other, cooperation is promoted and community can fulfil all its functions. In this instance we speak of complete integration of a community.

Ecology: In simple words, ecology is the science which studies the relationship between living things and the environment .The city like any other environment, is a conditioning rather than a determining factor. Habitat shows its influence in areas other than human life. Long before sociologists began their research in this field, botanists became conscious of the influence which physical environment exerts on the life of plants. The science studying the relationship between plants and their environment is known as plant ecology. Sociology, thus seems to have borrowed the term from botanists. Park "the father of human ecology", was the first to use the word, which soon gained currency.

The concept of ecology, as subsequently developed by McKenzie and others, has yielded very valuable results. Some writers have gone too far in their attempts to establish close analogies between plant and human ecology. The difference between the two areas are much marked than superficial. We should be clear that human beings live on the soil while the plants in

the soil. This alone makes close comparison impossible, for mobility is a striking feature of human beings. As in other fields of sociology, it would be a fallacy to depend on biological analogies.

There is no consensus about the scope of ecology. As usual, there are a variety of definitions which do not exactly coincide. Hawley, for instance regards human ecology as a science which deals with the development and organisation of the community; Gist and Halbert call it the study of the spatial distribution of persons and institutions in the city, and the processes involved in the formation of patterns of distribution". We can define ecology as the theory of the interrelations between habitat and human beings.

All other concepts mentioned above will be clarified in other units because those units are exclusively dealing with these concepts.

1.4 Approaches to the Study of Urban Sociology

Due to the complex nature of the problem, there is need to approach it from several directions. First, we are concerned with the relationship between the *city and civilization*, with the fact that the modern literate man is integrally wound up with urbanism and all that it implies. The task here is twofold: (1) meaningfully to identify the city and (2) to trace the origins of modern city life back to their antecedents. Cities have been seen in the wider context of the history of civilization by many scholars such as G. Botero, A.F. Weber, Spengler, Toynbee, Geddes, Ghurye, Mumford and Wirth. While Botero and Weber sought more specific causes and conditions for the growth of cities in different civilizations, Spengler and Toynbee generally considered world history in terms of city history. Geddes viewed the city as a mirror of civilization. Mumford and Ghurye have elaborated this idea in different historical contexts. Wirth also maintained that the history of civilization should be written in terms of the history of cities and that the city was the symbol of civilization.

While these ideas remained general, more specific insights into urbanism and urbanisation in the context of civilization were provided by the set of concepts worked out by Redfield and his colleagues. They developed a different perspective in the study of cities, by constructing a typology of city and working out its organisational and functional aspects. Distinguishing between orthogenetic and heterogenetic process, they argued that primary organisation consists in the transformation of the Little Tradition into the Great Tradition, and that secondary urbanisation introduced the elements of freedom from tradition.

Second, the *physical mechanism* as a preconditioning force requires deliberation. This is the ecology of urbanism, a concern with the city as a physical object composed of streets, buildings, facilities for communication and transportation, and a complex of technical devices through which an area is transformed into a human community. This ecological dimension, a necessary approach, embraces those physical, spatial, and material aspects of urban life distinguishable from will, consensus, and deliberate action of a social psychological nature. The key question here is: Why do certain human types, groups, races, professions, and physical utilities tend to

move to certain areas in the city, and how does the configuration of settlement enter into social life? In case of Indian cities, especially in old cities like Delhi, Agra and Amritsar. The inner parts of the cities can be divided into Mohallas or traditional neighbourhoods which are exclusively inhabited by a particular occupational or caste group. All Indian cities have this pattern. The new or more recent parts of cities may be called as colonial and post colonial parts of the city. Usually these parts of the city are on the other side of the railway line, these are entirely different from old ones, here, people are grouped on the basis of income rather than caste or occupation. They are grouped on the basis of plot size also. The socio-economic status of an area can be determined on the basis of more number of bigger plots in that area and wider roads and available infrastructure. A poor residential area can be easily distinguished from such rich/posh residential areas due to its appearance and available infrastructure.

Third is the form of *social organisation*. This perspective deals with the basic forms of urban life that have evolved as a direct result of urbanisation. Sociology as a discipline has probably made its largest contribution to this dimension of the urbanisation process. The social organisation of the modern urban community can be said to include a huge and complex network of individuals, groups, bureaucratic structures, and social institutions, which is further differentiated into a complex division of labour. The unit of analysis can be ranked from the smallest and most simple to the largest and most elaborate, as follows:

The Individuals: The urban individuals can best be described in terms of patterns of personality organisation and individual life styles that are believed to have evolved in response to the conditions of urban life. Much of the early writings on the urban individual was based on the idea that the city produces distinct personality and behavioural characteristics that set urbanites apart from their rural counterparts. But recent writing on urban personality and life style has been more dynamic and has described mechanism for coping with or adjusting to the urban complex, or the techniques of urban survival (Lofland, 1973). The concern with the individual also brings into focus many socio-cultural dimensions, such as the positive or negative attitudes, values, beliefs, perceptions and symbolic attachments that have come to be associated with urban life.

Reflection and Action 1.2

Do you think you are an urban person or rural? List the attributes on the basis of which you have decided your personality.

Compare your answer with those of other learners at your Study Centre.

Primary Groups: These are small and intimate face-to-face groups, such as the family, couples, or intimate friendship groups. Some scholars feel that in large urban centres these groups would be swallowed up or destroyed, and that all that would remain would be segmented, impersonal, relationships thought to be characteristics of large

bureaucratic structures (Popenoe, 1973). Yet primary groups have remained a viable part of urban social organisation. While they appear to be necessary carry-overs from rural societies, their form and functions have changed in response to modern urban conditions. Such changes remain a focal point of much contemporary urban sociological research. Urban neighbourhoods fall in the middle range of urban social organisation, in the terms of size and complexity. They are larger and more complex than primary groups, but are more informal and less complex than large scale bureaucratic organisations. Sociologists do not entirely agree on the significance of local neighbourhoods for providing social bonds, arenas of social participation, meaning, or order to urban life at the local level, and there is a great deal of research and speculation on this topic.

The same can be said of social networks, which are much more amorphous patterns of interaction than neighbourhoods, as they are not necessarily tied to specific geographic location, and they remain at a somewhat more primitive stage of classification and explanation in sociological literature.

Voluntary Associations: Much has been said about the very high rates of participation in voluntary association in contemporary urban America. Much has also been theorized about their structural characteristics and functions. For now, it is enough to say that voluntary associations are also at the middle or intermediate range of social organisation, they are somewhat more formal and internally differentiated than neighbourhoods or networks, and that they serve both instrumental and expressive functions that are not adequately met by any other level of social organisation. They fill a gap in urban social organisation by creating new blends of both primary group and bureaucratic form of social organisation.

Bureaucracy: Most large-scale and complex government and industrial organisations in the modern world can be characterized as bureaucratic in structure. Typically, bureaucratic organisations consist of an elaborate network of specialized roles or positions organised into a hierarchical division of labour. Each position has a definite sphere of competence, with specified tasks, obligations, and a specified degree of authority or power. The table of organisation of bureaucracies defines the scope and limits of their function and such organisations are usually bound by a written body of rules that governs the behaviour of its members.

Social institutions: These are the largest and most abstract modes of social organisation within the urban community. In the most general sense, social institutions consist of widely accepted patterns of behaviour and expectations that evolve or are created as long-term solutions to the recognised needs of a community or society. Such basic institutions as the family or religion are pre-urban in their origins. Although their forms and functions may have changed drastically as a result of rapid urbanisation, they continue to serve at least some of the recognised needs of modern communities. According to Boskoff, major urban social institutions recently have been acquiring a greatly extended radius of influence and control in terms of geography and population. Since they tend to be the practical

source of both stability and social change in modern urban communities, they are central to our understanding of current urban problems and of the many efforts to solve them.

Fourth is the social problem *perspective*. In one way or another, almost all contemporary social problems have been associated with the process of urbanisation. Thus, a diverse set of problems such as those relating to crime, mental illness, broken family life, poor housing, poverty, unemployment, class conflict, racial and ethnic conflict, drug addiction, pollution, and a host of others are often grouped together under the ominous title of “the urban crisis”. This tendency has been so pronounced in recent times that the temptation often arises to treat such problems as synonymous with the city itself. But to do so is misleading, because the city is much more than a simple compilation of its recognised social problems. To describe cities in terms of their problems is akin to trying to describe human being in terms of their diseases! Neither it is accurate to suggest that urbanisation is the main cause of most contemporary social problems. The relationship between a very broad and general social process such as urbanisation and the much more concrete examples of social problems such as just listed is very difficult to observe directly, and the chain of events by which these two levels of social behaviour can be said to be even remotely connected is complex and indirect. Nevertheless, the city and the metropolis are the settings in which many social problems have developed or intensified, and to understand these problems in their urban context is important.

In these four areas the sociologist enters into the picture of urbanism with the fundamental, all-pervasive question: *How can men obtain consent in the city without consensus being involved?* The heterogeneity of city life arising from great population density and division of labour allows for the concern of sociology since it gives rise to a diversity of individual types and collective behaviour.

1.5 Urban Sociology and Other Social Sciences

In Urban Sociology the focus is on human beings rather than on spatial patterns, on non-material culture rather than on physical objects, on groups rather than on areas, on social institutions rather than on infrastructure and on social techniques rather than on technology. This also shows that how urban sociology is different from geography, political science, economics and other subjects. The field of urban studies has been subjected to multidisciplinary research involving all the disciplines mentioned above besides history, demography and social anthropology and of course, sociology. Urban sociology is a specialised field which forms a part of urban studies. The urban sociologists of the 1960s and 1970s stressed on interdisciplinary approach and comparisons, accompanied by debate and discussion about the appropriate objects of analysis and core methodological issues (Milicevic, 2001). They mixed political activism with studies on the city and an emphasis on social conflict, power access to and control of resources and the systems of production, consumption, exchange and distribution. In doing so, they remained faithful to what have been

identified as core sociological issues (Park, 1972). If geographers and historians had 'space' and 'time' the sociologists had 'structure' and 'culture' in the unfolding history of urban studies.

1.6 Conclusion

The urban sociology refers to city or town, which is directly opposite to village or country. Urban sociology deals with the impact of city life on social actions, social relationships, social institutions, and types of civilization derived from and based on urban modes of living. In the early part of the 20th century, the subject was fighting to gain foothold. In 1925 it got recognition when American Sociological Society devoted an annual meeting to Urban Sociology. Afterwards it developed as an important branch of sociology. The first department of sociology was established in India at the University of Bombay by Professor Patrick Geddes in 1920. He had done substantial work on Indian towns from 1914 to 1924 but the field of urban sociology remained unheard of in Indian universities till 1960. It is one of the broadest and most eclectic of all sociological fields. Due to its complex nature, it needs to be approached from several directions such as; 'city and civilization', ecological, social organisation and social problem approaches. It differs from other social sciences because its main focus remains on social structure and culture.

1.7 Further Reading

Rao, M.S.A.(Eds), (1974). *Urban Sociology in India: Reader and Source Book*, Orient Longman, New Delhi.

Sandhu R.S., (2003). *Urbanisation in India: Sociological Contributions*, Sage, New Delhi.