

DEFINITION, NATURE AND SCOPE OF URBAN GEOGRAPHY

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Component-I (B) - Description of Module

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DEFINITION, NATURE AND SCOPE OF URBAN GEOGRAPHY

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Urban geography as a discipline evolved in the twentieth century. Over the time it has developed into a well established discipline which deals with the study of urban settlements within the framework of their geographical setting. One can say that the scope of the sub-discipline constitutes the study of origin of urban settlements, their morphology and its development, their functions in and around their environs. With the increase of population and these settlements emerging as the magnets of economic, social and political developments; the discipline had gained importance in social sciences. The earlier urban geographers mainly concentrated on the physical aspects of the cities and their situation. The main emphasis was on the relationship that existed between the location and the structure of some particular cities and their surroundings.

With time the framework of urban geographers changed and in present times two common approaches are identifiable. The first one mainly deals with cities as distinct phenomenon located on the surface of the earth. They usually study the distribution, size, function and growth rate of urban settlements along with the spatial interactions between different urban centres. The second viewpoint analyzes cities with respect to their morphology (layout and build up area) and intensity of land use within the city. Within this framework some writers have also started analyzing problems related to urban growth and development.

Over the period of time the scope of urban geography has extended and now basically includes the areal association of activities within urban places; the economic base of cities; patterns of distribution of the cities over the earth surface; distribution of different geographical phenomenon within the city and the spatial interactions of one city with the other.

In other words, it can be said that urban geography has a distinctive focus with its primary concern being the study of association of activities in urban areas, association of land use and other features. The main focus is on the interpretation of patterns and relationships among different cities as well as that between urban and non-urban places.

Various definitions have been given by different urban geographers to understand the nature and scope of urban geography. Few have been listed here to understand how the scope and subject matter of urban geography has evolved over time.

Dickinson (1901) defines urban geography as the study of a city directing the neighbouring region. He describes that the city behaves like a king in its hinterland.

For Mayer (1951) urban geography is concerned with the study of the economic base of cities with interpretations of the associations between cities as man's habitat and economic activities within the cities and its hinterland.

Harold Carter (1972) is of the view that as the geographer deals with the study of the uneven character of the earth's surface; and considerable proportion of population resides in urban settlements these settlements with its inhabitants and the buildings together are of special interest to the urban geographer. Moreover, the problems faced by the city dwellers are of utmost importance while studying urban geography.

Raymond E. Murphy (1966) goes a step further and states that the urban geographer always plays a dual role. Firstly, he examines cities in the context of location, characteristics, growth and their relationship with its hinterland and secondly, discusses city's morphology in terms of land use, social and cultural landscape, circulation patterns and also the components of the physical environment – all these in interrelation and interaction within the urban area.

This clearly states that that the process of evolution of urban geography is quite complex. Warf (2000) identifies six elements that form the base of urban geography. These are –

1. The Built environment
2. Human –environment relationship in an urban context
3. Social geography and social patterns in an urban context
4. City systems and functions: Macro scale
5. City systems and functions: Micro scale
6. Urban planning, policy and design

Whatever the case may be, the written literature clearly states that urban geography in recent years has become more of a combination of various approaches and considerations of the city. It has become interdisciplinary in nature rather than being compartmentalised within a structured geographical study.

Nature and Scope of Urban Geography

Aurousseau (1924) was among the first ones who gave an outline of the subject matter of the urban geography. He is of the view that since this part of geography embraces a large part of human geography it fails to be a specialized subject and therefore is not sure about the nature of urban geography. But after analysing various approaches he concludes that the regional study of towns and their functional study do form an important component of its scope. This gave impetus to the 'site and situation' and 'functional' approaches within this discipline.

The morphological approach gained momentum with the emergence of the Chicago School in the late 1920s. They paid attention to diverse social and economic factors that were responsible for the segregated land use in the city. Thus, now the scholars diverted their attention to the complexities of the cityscape rather than concentrating on the growth and layout of the cities. This gave foundation to the new urban geography where this discipline became more of an integrated systematic study. In the words of Dickinson (1947), urban geography is not about planning but is concerned with various factors which are inherent to the spatial and geographical structure of the city upon which planning should be based.

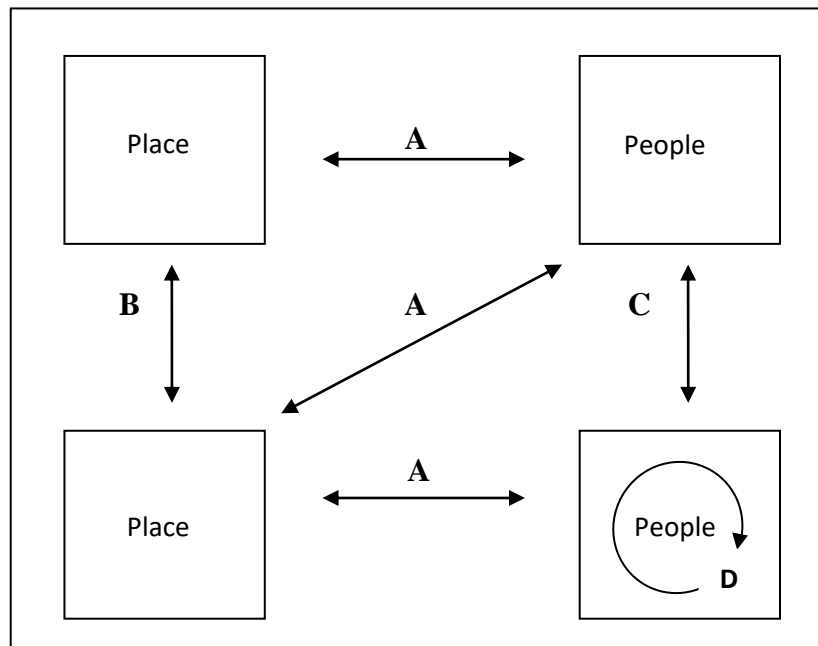
With planning gaining emphasis, functions too became important as now location was understood through functions that are what a town does or did in the past. The functions now also determine the pattern of city's growth and development. When urban geography started crystallising into a well define systematic study; came the quantitative revolution. Model building came into existence and theory had to be tested in reality; which usually involved statistical techniques; the most significant example being Christaller's central place theory (1933).

Quantification although transformed vague descriptions into crisp models through which theory could be derived, it did not last long and collapsed. It became evident that explanations conceived at the initial level were not enough. The scholars moved towards what is called the behavioural approach. This approach was deep rooted therefore provided better and satisfactory answers. Now the studies were dominated with the studies of behaviour of the consumer and choices of the residence along with people's perception of the city and the opportunities it offers.

After the Second World War, the urban geographers acted more as consultants to different planning organisations and moved away from the "social conscience" approach which dealt with the study of spatial inequalities in urban settlements. Johnston (1977) correctly identifies three branches within the urban geography that were the result of these changes in the form of three different approaches. The first one is based on nomothetic philosophy and is quantitative in nature, where the geographer documents the spatial organization of the phenomenon. The second approach is behavioural in nature as it studies individual activities within their paraphernalia. The third approach is radical in nature as it stresses on inequality and constrains that the society imposes on the behaviour of certain identified groups within the city.

The above account clearly depicts that over time urban geography has become less unified and so it has become very difficult to compartmentalise its scope. Nevertheless one can delineate the thrusts of the urban geography (Northam, 1975) as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1
Thrusts of Study in Urban Geography

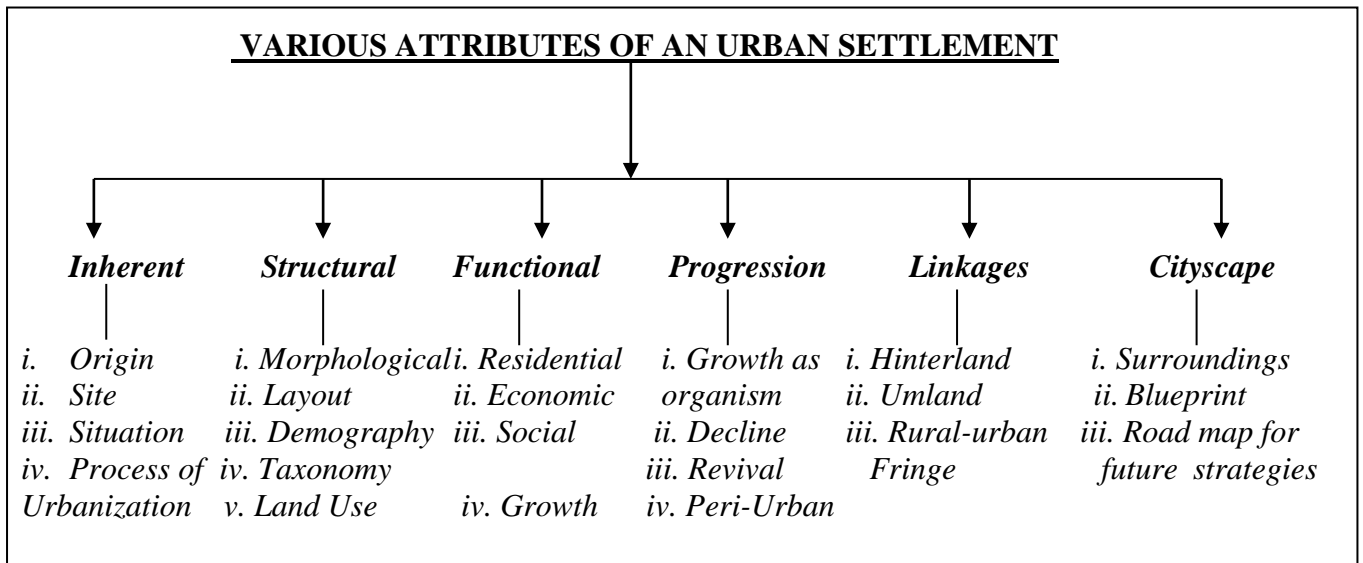


Source: R. M. Northam (1975) Urban Geography, pp.5

Through this diagram he indicates the different inquiries that urban geography should look into. **A** involves relationship between a place and its people; **B** deals with association between different places; **C** is concerned with the study of relationship between people of different places and **D** is associated with the relations that exist within one place or among the people of one particular place.

Emrys Jones (1966) outlines various attributes of cities. In his words, a city is a geographical reservoir of roads and dwellings, a centre of commerce and administration, a type of society, even the cultural form of the mind of the urban people or the way of life style. Various attributes that can form the scope and content of this sub-discipline of geography have been summarized in the following diagram –

Figure 2
Various Attributes of an Urban Settlement



In India, one of the leading scholars in urban geography has been Prof. R.L. Singh (1955). He stressed on three concepts under the scope of urban geography, these are:

- (a) physical structure of the city,
- (b) stage of city's historical development, and
- (c) processes that affect the city structure

ICSSR, in the fourth survey of geographical research shows that during the period 1976 and 1982 the urban geographers in India focussed on the following topics that come under the umbrella of urban geography. These are - trends and patterns of urbanization; Urban hierarchical order; Inner structure; Capital; Land use; Functional classification; Slums and squatter settlements; Rural-urban interaction; The rural-urban fringe; The interaction between the Umland and the city and surrounding settlements; Urban environmental problems like Pollution, Poverty, Crime and quality of life; Urban Infrastructure; Urban governance; Tourism; Urban planning and urban metropolitan problems.

Meaning of Urban Place:

The most important and immediate problem in deciding what 'urban' is? It is different from its equivalent, that is, the rural? In everyday life, we know that the difference between rural and urban is dependent on the function of that settlement that is in the former the main function is agriculture while in the latter the population by large is engaged in non-agricultural activities. In spite of this basic and predominant difference it is still difficult to define urban settlement as the process of urbanization is dynamic in nature. It becomes very difficult to confine the term in a

water tight compartment. The work becomes more cumbersome as 'an urban place' is defined separately by different scholars and agencies. For example, Anderson, a sociologist defines “*urban*” as a way of life or a condition of man that is characterised with certain attitudes like superficiality, ambiguity etc. But, for, geographers it is much more than that. They perceive urban in terms of location which has following features – (a) the population density of such a settlement is relatively more than that of general population, (b) most of the dwellers are engaged in non-agricultural economic activities and (c) the centre acts as a hub of social, cultural, administrative and economic activities.

Dickinson (1948) states that an urban settlement can be regarded as a man-made habitat on the surface of the Earth; where economic activities are separated from the soil and are carried out in association with similar activities at a fixed location. For Northam (1975) city is a locale with a relatively large population living urbanism as their way of life.

Even the United Nations Demographic Year Book (United Nations, 1990) has given many examples, in which different countries that define demographic are included. The United Nations Organization defines permanent settlement with a minimum population of 20,000 in the form of an urban location. But in many countries, Botswana (5,000), Ethiopia (2,000), Argentina (2,000), Israel (2,000), Czechoslovakia (5,000), Iceland (200), Norway (200), Portugal (10,000), Japan (50,000), Australia (1,000), India (5,000), etc.

But, the UN Demographic Year Book concludes: “There is no point in the continuum from large agglomerations to small clusters or scattered dwellings where urbanity disappears and rurality begins the division between urban and rural populations is necessarily arbitrary.” The review of these definitions reveals that the following characteristics can be identified to define a place in the form of urban. These are:

- (1) A place designated by the administrative status
- (2) minimum population
- (3) minimum population density
- (4) A concept of reconciliation or loose dealing settlement to join or exclude suburban areas
- (5) Proportion of non-agricultural occupations and
- (6) A functional character

In the case of our country (India), the census of 1981 has said the following places as urban:

- (1) Municipal, City Board, Cantonment Board / Notified Town Area Centres;
- (2) a minimum population of 5,000;

(3) 75 percent of men engaged in non-agricultural activities;

(4) A minimum population density per square km per person 400 or 1000 square meters per person;

Before accepting the meaning of urban and rural, two important facts should be kept in mind. One fact is that it is now impossible to identify the division line between rural and urban - two have been merged to spread in a way and a scenario has been presented that neither has been fully cultivated nor so in full tertiary activities.

Industrialization has been brought in large scale settlements which are not villages, but are the centre of settlement of agricultural population. Another problem is about the concept of urban, which is not static and changes over time with space. The proportion of population engaged in agricultural activities is the most effective measure. But in the modern times the proportion of population in rural areas is irreversible due to the arrival of capital and urban workers.

Thus, there is a point to conclude in this discussion that with the changing nature of both rural and urban, functional overlap has developed between the two, so the difference between urban and villagers have actually lost its meaning in reality. Therefore, one needs to know the properties of a Town; and to know this one has to understand the qualifications of a city. Many qualities of a city or city can be summarized as follows:

(A) Town is a kind of settlement, which has a much higher scope than a simple rural establishment.

(B) It does not represent the number of people in a vast area. But it represents a stage of civilization that is quite different from expressing rural lifestyle from a rural area.

(C) Their historical roots in cities and towns; Blache has mentioned that cities are especially near their origins (rituals, surnames, heroes, etc.) around the mythical halo.

(D) Towns and cities, along with the creatures of commerce and early events, politics like: Babylon, Athens, London, Paris, Delhi etc.

Basic Concept in Urban Geography:

To further understand the nature of urban geography, which became quite complex and hybrid by the latter half of the Twentieth century certain basic concepts need to be explored. These have been discussed in the following section.

Site-Situation Concept:

Dickinson's approach to a city is a natural start, but with the passage of time, the natural situation of the city has been utilized by the resources available and the area's adaptability and surrounding area. Its growth and expansion is sometimes spread to spread the natural site so that it can be made beyond recognition. There was little possibility of the development of true urban geography in this context.

The objective was limited and it was not possible to explain complex economic work and social order. It was further emphasized that the application of the 'site and situation formula was meaningless "where there was no historical interest on the site, because the situation was seen in the context of the routes and not the streams of the movement". Such examples dismissed the stereotype of 'site and situation'.

Concept of Ecology:

During the two world wars, the concept of plant ecology came into being and influenced geographical events. Robert Park (1925) through his book *The City* emphasised that due to increase in population in the city area, the ecological processes of the city have changed. Urban ecology affected relations with the surrounding areas of the city and it had an impact on people and their environment. Several studies emphasised on the opportunities and constraints posed by physical environment. Simultaneously the political and economic processes involved in the production of urban environmental infrastructures also became part of urban geography.

In recent years, the concept of urban ecosystem has become important component of this sub-discipline. Along with this the impact of urban societies on sustainable development has also been taken within its fold. These concerns have led to local scale initiatives.

Behaviouralism and Urban Centres:

Berry's argument about the city and its development is related to the behaviour of its consumer, which is the perfect alternative to the use of land. It depends on three variables, these are:

- (1) Value of residential unit - purchase cost or rent?
- (2) Quality of residence, and
- (3) Relationship with work and place of neighbourhood?

Family income is an important component for the selection of site in the city, and it relies on the capabilities of its users to interact with space. As a general trend, it is clear that people with almost one-income groups make their choices for similar place. In the context of India,

social relations and behaviour are the products of values and culture. This gave birth to the 'Mohalla' or the community of the similar behaviour.

Concept of Radicalism:

An important aspect of the urban world is the concept of 'total change' brought into play by the development new infrastructure like metro; it has completely changed the idea of consumers. These reactions also influence urban planning and the capitalist cities were now bound to think on the rights of the people. Radicals believe that they provide the fundamental base on the lines of market inequality and thus provided alternative systems of 'socialist city' - the planning centre and the central direction for equality.

To conclude the discussion, urban geography is more than a mix of different approaches. This is probably near a systematic geographic study rather than multi-dimensional analysis of its purpose. Now urban geography has become less unified and so it becomes more difficult to present a neat structure. Whatever the argument may be the fundamental concern is spatial and that also with relation to the description and explanation of pattern is core and that makes it important even for urban geography like other sub disciplines.

