Focus 54 – The Changing Face of Urban Informality - Class, Migration & Gender

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Abstract

Cities are rapidly changing, and so is the agency of urban infrastructure. It is necessary for policy discussions around urban informality to keep up with this changing pace. This paper begins by exploring how urban infrastructure plays an increasingly structural role in influencing the politics of inclusion & exclusion within a city. It further tries to explore how the definition of informality in an urban setting has moved beyond 'economic class' to include broader social paradigms of migration and gender. It has become increasingly important to question the agency of urban infrastructure, especially in the face of a pandemic. The paper concludes by suggesting ways in which policy discussions around gender and internal migration (especially in a post-covid world) should take into account changes in order to make urban centres truly inclusive spaces.

Key Words

Urban, Informality, Class, Gender, Migration, Women, Urbanisation

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Introduction

With limited resources available, expansion of infrastructure poses a grave problem in rapidly growing cities. Unprecedented pressure on resources brings out power geometrics which manifest themselves in the form of inequality and the politicisation of infrastructure growth. Although urbanisation generally contributes to economic development and hence to urban capacities, growing towns and cities in low-income countries often face severe urban housing, infrastructure and service deficiencies as well as forms of urban congestion (Tacoli, McGranahan, & Satterthwaite, 2015). It becomes necessary to strike the right balance between infrastructure deployment, network capacities, and pressures on demand and resource flow. The informal sector primarily consists of the economically underprivileged who live on the fringes of the society. In urban centres, services are often unequally distributed along class lines and access to services remains restricted to the topmost quintiles of wealth distribution. Pressure on resources in an urban setting bring out social hierarchies in the distribution of wealth. Cities are sites of capitalistic production and transformations. This inequality in resource distribution finds its roots in capitalism and capitalistic market distribution.

The increasingly political role that infrastructure plays influences the ways in which cities view different classes that co-exist within them. Social conflicts cannot be understood on the basis of class structures alone. These class structures are deeply rooted in the distribution of resources, quantum of investment, civic mobilisation and the social and political construction of infrastructure (McFarlane & Rutherford, 2008). A more inclusive model of social development requires policy discussions to actively involve the interests of the informality – the 'fringes' of the society. Informal settlements in a city are prone to health risks, livelihood risks, discrimination, environmental hazards and government risks (risks of eviction). This nexus between infrastructure, politics and inequality is an important tool for understanding the construction of cities, the above stated problems, and the construction of dynamic structures within. An active policy dialogue can help understand whether these dynamic structures suggest solutions to urban problems, or whether they offer a more integrated framework from which to derive methods for addressing these exclusions. Urban informality is not as static as it appears to be. The 'fringes' can at times be more perceived than obvious. In the event of post-

metropolitan urbanisation, geographical fringes of the city are often inhabited by the elites who live in gated communities. These elites find themselves in the higher strata of the political pyramid of infrastructure. In spite of these communities being informal subdivisions, legal ownership and market transactions lend a sense of 'legitimacy' to these structures (Roy, 2005). This is seldom seen in case of the economically and socially disadvantaged.

In understanding how cities deal with urbanisation, it becomes necessary to expand the definition of 'informality' to include discussions around other social groups like migrants and women.

Migration

The politics underpinning urban infrastructural transformation are rarely more evident or visible than in times of crisis or rupture. When water, energy or transport networks suffer extreme pressures or collapse completely, the underlying urban power geometries become somewhat more perceptible (McFarlane & Rutherford, 2008). The Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown in India brought up important questions with respect to the agency of internal migrants in the country's policy circles. Economic opportunities in urban centres attract migrants from far and wide. One of the obvious explanations for the net movement of people from rural to urban locations during the course of a country's development is that there are net economic advantages from doing so (Tacoli, McGranahan, & Satterthwaite, 2015). The delivery of public services that give a sense of social security is often tied to the place of birth. The drying up of economic opportunities owing to the lockdown and the absence of social security measures in these urban centres forced migrants to want to travel back home after the lockdown was announced. The absence of social security measures can be attributed to a great extent to the invisibility of internal migrants in India's policy discussions. These desperate attempts of migrants to walk back to their hometowns were seen as a result of there being little to no time between the announcement of the lockdown and the shutting down of interstate buses and the Indian Railways, and the absence of an immediate policy for economic grievance redressal of internal migrants stranded in urban centres.

The lack of proactive planning to accommodate rapid urban growth stems from policies intended to exclude migrants. While it is tempting to view slum development as an inevitable part of the urbanisation process - due to the strain on evolving local fiscal and land market institutions in the face of rapid development - it may be in part intentional, driven by local policies which intend to restrain in-migration by offering very poor living conditions for migrants (Henderson, 2010). Migration flows to urban areas will generally include a range of income groups (including individuals and households that are not low income) but they will also often include rural migrants pushed to urban areas by drought, livelihood loss or debt and (in many countries) conflict. These groups find it very difficult to look for affordable accommodation. They often find themselves concentrated in informal settlements in peripheral locations. The National Capital Region surrounding New Delhi sees lakhs of internal migrants travelling to the metropolitan area in search of economic activities and/or a better lifestyle. Migration aspirations and the imaginary that is constructed around migration drive migrants to live in the city irrespective of their social and economic positioning. The city's inability to provide for its fringes and resultant problems associated with rapid urbanisation need to be viewed from a broader lens. Rapid urbanisation associated with migration and the growth in informal settlements is not so much related to the rate of a city's population growth (and the contribution of net in-migration to this) as to the competence, capacity and accountability of its government (Tacoli, McGranahan, & Satterthwaite, 2015). The government should strive to implement labour laws so that migrants can obtain health insurance and social security in their employment places, thus providing better-quality employment for migrant workers.

Labour migrants usually move from rural to urban spaces in groups. These groups of migrants live together in informal spaces in the city and are left out of census – and, consequently, government schemes and activities. A more grassroots-focused approach towards looking at such informal spaces would contribute towards enabling such migrants and their problems to be a part of urban policy discussions. However, understanding migrant-specific policies is difficult without understanding the wider socio-economic conditions in which an urban centre thrives. Development strategies in several Chinese cities like Shanghai seek to reduce labour-intensive manufacturing in favour of high-level services and is

therefore making an effort to attract highly skilled migrants while at the same time discouraging low-skilled ones from extending their stay (Shen, 2015). However, adopting similar policies in India seems distant, as the economy in most Indian cities and towns is still heavily dependent on labour-intensive techniques of production.

Gender

Most investment in transport infrastructure is directed towards constructing roads, motorways, and bridges which service private forms of motorised transport, and not public transport. However, it is public transport that is most accessible to the fringes of society. Women usually rely more on public transport and walking than men do. Women tend to have far more complex mobility patterns around cities. They are responsible for all domestic-related (and often unpaid) work as well as participation in the paid labour market. This means price hikes for accessing public transport can disproportionately affect women over men, and women from low-income groups most of all (Kempner, 2019). Gender-inclusive infrastructure does not stop at more inclusive physical infrastructure. It is also necessary to view the structures that this infrastructure puts in place. Equal market opportunities, opportunities of inclusive growth, safety and security of women and transgender people are some factors by which to gauge the infrastructural readiness of the city to take on the urbanisation wave in a gender-egalitarian way. Smart and well thought of infrastructure can rise up the safety level of all genders in the city. Lack of adequate safety measures push urban gender issues with the likes of other under-represented and unrecognised informal structures that cities are replete with. The *2012 Delhi Gang Rape case* that involved rape and fatal assault of a 23-year-old woman in a private bus raised a number of questions about urban infrastructure in the national capital being unsafe and inaccessible for women. Facing widespread protests, governments at the centre and various states announced several steps to ensure the safety of women. However, most were to do with changes and alterations in the law to make rape and assault regulations stricter. A more bottom-up approach regarding a change in the state's attitude towards making urban infrastructure more accessible and safer must gain precedence over an institutional change in law. Another striking example that reveals this limitation is the increasingly high rate of acid attack instances on women in the country. Following petitions and PILs, in 2013, the Supreme Court

of India banned over-the counter sale of acid. However, acid continues to be available for purchase across the counter in retail stores of Delhi, owing to the regulations not being implemented by authorities. Cities put certain vulnerable groups, like poor women, migrant women and transgender people at a comparatively higher risk, thereby requiring more attention. Public spaces in cities usually lack exclusive washrooms and security screening facilities for people belonging to the third gender. These limitations hamper accessibility of urban infrastructure and public spaces for them. In New Delhi, the state government's proposed move of making metro services free for women brings up the question of whether economic resources alone impede women's access to public transport and services, or if there are larger games at play.

Furthermore, the feminisation of poverty makes the situation far worse for women. This has adverse effects on employment prospects for women. Although economic globalisation has over the years increased job opportunities for women - especially in developing countries in the Global South - by enabling them to break patriarchal structures, much of the work available to women is poorly paid, or demeaning, or insecure. This very characteristic of female labour at times leads to a disproportionate involvement of women in part-time, casual or home-based work for profit maximisation (Moghadam, 1999). The feminisation of poverty is an unwelcome feature of economic globalisation and it manifests itself in urban settings. Beneria Lourdes and Martha Roldan in their study on class and gender in Mexico City show how employers seek to increase flexibility and lower labour and production costs by subcontracting and thereby 'informalizing' a number of formal jobs (Beneria & Roldan, 1987). Making urban infrastructure more inclusive and accessible for all genders would require a change at the policy level.

Conclusion

This paper tries to explore the ways in which the understanding of informality in urban spaces should not be restricted to merely the economic class of inhabitants and instead include wider social paradigms of gender inclusivity, the discussion around internal migration policies, and the issues associated with these paradigms. This can be ensured by including adequate representation of grassroots

organisations working especially in the sectors of social inclusion, women empowerment and inclusive development in the policy making processes.

Secondly, institutional changes in legal provisions should be adequately supplemented with a bottom-up change in policy formulation around these issues. Cities are centres of growth, development, and progress, as well as hubs of culture and social amalgamation. In order to make cities truly inclusive spaces, it is necessary to expand the scope of policy discussions so as to bring in a framework to analyse the changing dynamics of urban informality.

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