



URBANISM IN SILCHAR: PERSPECTIVE OF LOUIS WIRTH

***Mahmudul Hasan Laskar**

Department of Sociology, University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya (USTM), India

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ABSTRACT

In general parlance area which is designated as town or city by state machinery have perceived as urban. Urban area is defined in the sense of demography that is a place having considerable size of population, political significance and economic and commercial importance. But there is inevitable need for researcher in understanding urbanism termed by sociologist like Louis Wirth in urban areas. Indian cities vary in terms of size, population and commercial and industrial activities. Urbanism of Delhi, Mumbai or Chennai and other metro cities does not exhibits in other small cities or towns, which is not due to their size but because of characteristic features associated with different cities. Cosmopolitanism is not necessarily an urban feature but manifestation of heterogeneous urban society, globalized urban culture of individualism and integration based on difference and extremely specialized secondary social relationship. The present paper is to look the nature of urbanism, extent of cosmopolitanism in Silchar town of Assam by taking the Louis Wirth theory of urbanism as approach of study. It is a qualitative analysis of the urban society based on theory and observation of the researcher.

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INTRODUCTION

The growth of cities and the urbanization of the world is one of the most impressive facts of modern times (Wirth, 1938). The rapid process of urbanization has developed many new urban areas and expanded existing urban centers. Urban areas are categorized by the administrative machinery in terms of population, density and economy. In sociology we are concern about the societal aspect of urban society, which is possible through theoretical approach like Louis Wirth's theory of 'Urbanism As a Way of Life'. The point where urban area ends urbanism may not disappear suddenly. The rural and urban areas can be demarcated through administrative definition but it is difficult to present where urban society ends and rural society begins. The fact is that a peripheral area of towns or cities appears as urban due to the effect of urban society. On the other hand rural features are visible in urban areas. Louis Wirth stated that the degree to which the contemporary world may be said to be urban is not fully or accurately measured by the proportion of the total population living in cities. The influence of city upon the social life of man is greater than ratio of urban population and it indicated

that the city is not only the dwelling place and the workshop of modern man but initiating and controlling center of economic, political and cultural life, which even can bring the remote parts of the world into its orbit and diverse areas, people and activities into a cosmos (Wirth, 1938). In the present study we are to assess the extent of urbanism in Silchar, an urban area of Assam. The societal differences of rural and urban areas have been the sociological interest, would indicate the distinction between urban society and urban areas and rural society and rural areas. The objective is to understand the urbanism as mode of life in Silchar.

METHODS

For our study theoretical approach of Louis Wirth was applied to observe the phenomena. Observation method was used to relate the theoretical approach in reality. The residential areas like Goniwala, Malugram, Tarapur, Rangirkhadi, Modurband, Vivekananda road and Link road were observed. This study was to formulate hypothesis for further research on urbanism in Silchar.

***Corresponding author: Mahmudul Hasan Laskar**

Department of Sociology, University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya (USTM), India

RESULTS

It has been found that sociologist like Louis Wirth focused on urban society or urbanism rather than mere urban areas in the form city, which is administrative and political. For him existence of urban mode of life is not obvious in city, we must take into consideration certain characteristics to describe the city. Perceiving sudden cease of urban way of life in a boundary line is abrupt and absurd. It was found that mode of life in Silchar town is partially urban. Though, a center of industrial activities, commerce and business, educational facilities, health and recreational facilities, Silchar town exhibited the mixed rural and urban social life. The town manifests as urban more in demographic sense less in societal sense. It was found that ideal typical characteristics of city forwarded by Louis Wirth are partially present in Silchar.

Discussion has carried out in the following headings.

Urbanism: Theoretical framework: To understand urban society, Louis Wirth's urbanism is most relevant and fruitful. Louis Wirth stated that "a sociologically significant definition of the city seeks to select those elements of urbanism which mark it as a distinctive mode of human group life". It is argued that the characterization of a community as urban on the basis of size alone is arbitrary (Wirth, 1938). For adequate conception of urbanism as a mode of life we required to identify urbanism with physical entity of the city. We can't view city merely as rigidly delimited in space, because, manifestation of urban attributes do not abruptly ceases beyond an arbitrary boundary line. The technological developments in transportation and communication accentuated the role of cities as dominant elements in our civilization and have enormously extended the urban mode of living beyond the confines of the city itself (Wirth, 1938). The cities or urban centers have exerted greater role in the social life of the sub-urban and peripheral rural areas. The dominance of the city may be regarded as a consequence of the concentration of certain aspects like industry, trade and commerce, financial and administrative facilities and activities, developed transportation and communication and cultural and recreational equipment such as press,, radio stations, theaters, libraries, museums, concert halls, operas, hospitals, higher educational institutions, research and publishing centers, professional organizations and religious and welfare organizations (Wirth, 1938). The dominance of city over society persists because of extensive urbanization process. Urbanization is perceived as the extension of urban facilities and industrial activities in more and more areas. But urban society must be defined with the help of certain characteristics besides the material development of the area. Louis Wirth argued that urbanization no longer denotes merely the process by which persons are attracted to a place called the city and incorporated into its system of life. For him urbanization means cumulative accentuation of the characteristics distinctive of the mode of life which is associated with the growth of cities and finally to the changes in the direction of modes of life recognized as urban and modes of life is apparent among people, who have come under the influence of city. In his essay of urbanism as a way of life, Louis Wirth mentioned some characteristics of city to carry forwards further research. Among these characteristics some were supported by a considerable research and others may be accepted as hypothesis for which a certain amount of presumptive evidence exists but verification is required. First

characteristic of city is size of the population aggregate. It is pointed out the large numbers of people involve a greater range of individual variation. The greater number of individuals participation in a process of interaction result greater potential of differentiation among them. The bond of kinship, common sentiment and we-felling are the essence of rural folk society developed due to inhabitation of people together for generations tends to be absent and weak in areas of aggregate of diverse people from various backgrounds. So the social relationship in the urban areas is segmental in nature due to the absence of intensive relationship. Customarily urban people interact in highly segmental roles. Here individuals have distinctive role for the fulfillment of needs they tends to depend on numbers of people instead of one person as it exists in rural society. People perform the role as a part of organization by virtue of specialized and segmental activities set for fulfillment. So, contacts in the city are secondary rather than primary. The contacts of the city may indeed be face to face but they are notwithstanding impersonal, superficial, momentary and segmental. The reserve, insensitivity, sophisticated and emotionless outlook of urbanite manifested in their relationships may be regarded as devices for immunizing themselves against the personal claims and expectations of others. The extreme degree of interdependence and the unstable equilibrium of urban life are closely associated with the division of labour and the specialization of occupations (Wirth, 1938).

Second characteristic of city is density. It reinforces the effect of numbers in diversifying men and their activities and in increasing the complexity of the social structure. Louis Wirth stated that density, land values, rentals, accessibility, healthfulness, prestige, aesthetic consideration, absence of inconveniences such as noise, smoke and dirt determine the desirability of various areas of the city as places of settlement for different sections of the population (Wirth, 1938). The more a place is desirable for residential purpose in terms of above matters the more density is anticipated. Again people in the city are distributed in various areas and settlement is determined by numbers of factors. Urban population is distributed in more or less distinct settlements in accordance with some significant factors such as place and nature of work, income, racial and ethnic characteristics, social status, custom, habit, taste, preference and prejudice (Wirth, 1938). Third characteristic of city is heterogeneity. The social interaction of variety of personality types in the urban society tends to break down the rigidity of caste lines and perplex the class structure. This diversified individual personality and social relations among them persuade the more diverse and differentiated dimension of social stratification different from a homogenous integrated society. The intensive scope of mobility in differentiated social groups leads to fluctuation of individual's status in urban society. Membership in urban society is not acquired but achieved in widely divergent groups by virtue of individual's different tastes and interests regarding different aspects of social life (Wirth, 1938). Thus individual tends to be member of various social groups in urban society based on their interests and relevance. There is no system of automatic membership in social groups.

Nature of urbanism in Silchar town: Silchar is an urban center located in the southern part of Assam. It is center not just for being a district headquarter of Cachar but because of strategic location of trade and commerce, industrial activities, educational institutions and health facilities. Silchar is also a

center point for Karimganj and Hailakandi districts and Tripura and Mizoram states. As per provisional reports of Census India, population of Silchar in 2011 is 172,830; of which male and female are 86,884 and 85,946 respectively. Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Christian, Sikh and Buddhist share the population of 86.31%, 12.7%, 0.79%, 0.59%, 0.04%, 0.02% respectively (Census, 2011). There are no large scale industries or public undertakings in Cachar district and in Silchar. Some small and medium scale industries are functioning. Service enterprises such as Rice Mill, Chira Mill, Automobile Workshop, Beauty Parlour, Engineering workshop, etc. are working in Silchar and nearby area.

Table 1. Type of Industry

Type of Industry	Number of units	Employment
Agro based	190	837
Cotton textile	21	92
Woolen silk & artificial Thread based clothes	06	26
Ready-made garments and embroidery	20	60
Wood/Wooden based furniture	35	111
Paper and Paper products	39	201
Leather based	03	13
Chemical/Chemical based	03	12
Rubber, Plastic & petro based	06	58
Mineral based	57	433
Metal based (Steel fab.)	05	27
Engineering units	100	583
Repairing and servicing	110	345
Others	50	305
Total	645	3,103

Source: MSME Brief Industrial Profile of Cachar District, 2012

It has been revealed from the above table that only some micro, small and medium scale industries are functioning, which employed 3,103 numbers of people. Silchar, only significant urban center of entire Barak Valley is not able to pull people for employment. People of surrounding areas are residing mostly for the reasons like availing educational facilities and communication. Education and health facilities such as Assam University, NIT, Silchar Medical College, Polytechnic, some private hospitals and some good schools and Colleges located in and around Silchar have made the town more attractive. Transport and communication facilities boosted by Kumbirgram Airport, which is well connected with Silchar town and besides it Railway station and ISBT functions as facilitator for the people. So people prefer to live in and around the town permanently as well as temporarily. Rural people and even the people of neighboring districts and states aspire to settle in the town because of business and commerce, education and transport and communication.

Size of the Population Aggregate: Urbanism of Silchar was assessed with the help of Louis Wirth's characteristics of city. The size of aggregate of population of the town is considerably large. In contradiction with Louis Wirth's model of urban society, people of Silchar town have been bounded by religion, language, kinship and ethnicity. People are distributed in areas of town on the basis of religion, language, ethnicity and kinship. Solidarity among the members of various groups is determined by common and shared community sentiments. The solidarity developed from specialized division of labour is less visible in town. Kinship tie is strongly followed and embraced greatly by the people.

Considerable number of population in every residential area is residing for generations with some newly settled members. Consequently people formed clan group and shares same mode of life as it is visible in rural areas. In contrast to spatial segregation in terms of economic status, taste and preferences people of the town are segregated in religious line. Both Hindus and Muslims are living in much ghettoized residential areas. The segregation and ghettoization have resulted social differentiation, which further reinforces spatial segregation and ghettoization of people. Anomic situation arises very frequently not because of role conflict, emotionlessness and freedom in urban setting. But anomic situation arises due to intolerance and outburst of religious and community sentiments.

Density: Density is increasing but settlement of people keeping on segregating and selective. Here more density does not mean more diversity of population rather unification of community in areas. Hindus and Muslims are purchasing land or taking rent on areas residing by respective communities largely. Kinship tie is also major factor for pulling people from rural areas in a place. It was found that main reasons of increasing density are migration of working professionals in various organizations and departments, availability of educational institutions and scope of business.

Heterogeneity: Society is relatively less heterogeneous, as there are fewer personalities involved in social interactions. It is neither fully homogenous as rural nor heterogeneous as exists in industrial society. Individuals have divergent interests and participation in various organizations but kinship and community are also playing determining role in this regard. Population is less differentiated on the basis of division of labour but personal community attributes. So Silchar is urban in demographic sense but society yet to be called urban.

Conclusion

It has been concluded that urban mode of life is influenced by rural characteristics not because of the size of the town but due to lack of specialized division of labour, lack of differentiated role and lack of interaction among diverse personalities. Louis Wirth's characteristics are loosely attached with Silchar town. Silchar has manifested it as a place of non-agricultural economy, architectural building design and houses, good communication, shopping outlets and luxurious cars. Society is not fully heterogeneous rather sign of homogeneity is partially visible. Heterogeneity tends to minimize the domination of social disorder. The heterogeneous urban society corresponds to less rate or almost absence of communal conflict, ethnic conflict and family feud. But that does not mean individual's detachment from kinship and community rather progressive trend of society.

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