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Sociology of Spatial Transformation

R.K. Varghese

The Kerala Sociological Society which started functioning in 1972 as a professional body of sociologists proudly enters into its 44th anniversary. Being initiated and nurtured under the patronage of its founding figures – late Rev. Dr. Jose Murickan S J; Prof. PKB Nair, late Dr. Mariamma Joseph and Prof. Jacob John Kattakkayam, the Society has had a continuous momentum for the last many years since its inception, to mobilise sociologists and social professionals all around the country for the cause of social sensitising with a genuine academic zeal. It is also praiseworthy to note that the KSS has been continuing the tradition of publishing its bi annual Journal “Kerala Sociologist” continually from 1985 onwards. It literally serves the function of theorising and disseminating knowledge related to contemporary issues of the society in general, and particularly, Kerala.

The KSS and its periodical functions such as conduct of regional seminars and discussions, regular observation of social events and publicising them through press and social media and other similar activities of social motivation have already won high praise in the academic world. It is really creditable to mention that the Kerala Sociological Society has been successful in organising its Annual National Conferences continually for the last 42 years in various colleges and institutes where Sociology is taught as a major discipline. Every year, a theme of contemporary social importance at the national or regional level is identified, and panel discussions, plenary sessions and paper presentations are being conducted, with the inclusion of invited resource persons, faculty members, research scholars and students. Besides its cherished academic purposes, our annual conference serves as an opportunity to a cordial and informal get together of the entire academic community of Sociology in Kerala.

It is my humble request and urge to all those who are interested in the discipline of Sociology and related branches of social sciences, to get associated with the Kerala Sociological Society and render their vital contributions to the community around us through this organised platform. I am very proud to be here to work with KSS as its president for the last two years and to deliver the presidential address on the theme of this conference "Sociology of Spatial Transformation".

A much significant and debated reality and issue of the social world today is the sociology behind spatial transformation. It has been one of the major areas of approach derived as a sub field of Sociology, which borrows from and associates with paradigms and theoretical postulates of such branches of geography as human, demographic, economic, social and feminist. The sociology of space examines the social and material constitution of spaces and initiates to understand the social practices, institutional forces, and material complexity of how humans and spaces interact. It follows an inter-disciplinary approach drawing theoretical traditions from various sources as Marxism, Structural Functionalism, Post Colonialism, and Social Interactionism.

The initial theoretical basis of the interest of social sciences on space has been founded primarily by English and French Sociologists, philosophers and geographers. The credit to George Simmel pioneered an authentic work on 'Sociology of Space' by the publication of the book "Sociology: Investigations on the Forms of Sociation" in 1908. Metropolitanisation and the separation of leisure spaces in modern economic societies were the main outcomes he used to relate with transitions in space. Later, the works of Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Manuel Castells, Edward Soja and others have emphasised on the structural or capitalistic determinants of space and its transition. Contrary to this, British geographer Doreen Massey and German sociologist Helmuth Berking highlight the heterogeneity of local contexts and the place-relatedness of our knowledge about the world.

History reveals that spatial transformation is a traditional reality and process in human world as old as the transitional developments ranging from the ages of Mohen Jo Daro, Indus Valley and other ancient Civilizations. They were so significant and of timely relevance in the circumstances and need of those days, but space transformation today, even in the common man's experience, is comparatively so magnificent in its intent. The early space transformations, thus, were incomparable with the recent times in its pattern and tempo. The very notion of space transformation in contemporary days is characterised by a heavy influx of developmental activities supported by technological advancements and scientific innovation. The sphere and range of which also is wider and all pervasive. Its

impact on the life and destiny of the populations today is incredible due to their greater vulnerability to it as it inevitably affects almost all avenues of their lives.

Transformation of space occurs in multiple ways. It may happen by the intervention of nature in the form of calamities and catastrophes. On the other hand, when space is conceived by man as an instrument of their physical attainments, it is artificially intervened and transformed as per their intentions. The second type of transitions may be classified as Survival, Progressive and Developmental, the after effects of which may be manifested as physical, environmental and socio - cultural. The Social impact of spatial transition is of much interest to social scientists as an issue of discourse and contravention.

Urban Geographers have started their attempts to investigate into the impact of space transitions from the 50s onward, the research interest during this period was the study of spatial organisation, the internal structure of cities and the study of urban places and urban systems. The recent transitions in cities have started all over the world since 1970s, accompanied by economic liberalisation and globalisation. Many cities have experienced a marked process of spatial restructuring, technological transformation and economic changes. In order to attract more capital and global multi - national initiatives, cities are in a transformation process in terms of their economic and spatial structure and competing each other to maximise their material capabilities. Thus, the structure of the new cities have changed with the inclusion of new infrastructural facilities, institutions and agencies which provide modern services, advanced transport and communication networks, new housing systems, huge residential complexes, and sky scrapers.

Migration and Space Transformation

Migratory movements of segments of population to urban areas for reasons of differing kinds is one of the factors co related with spatial transformation. Migration has a two way significance with space transformation, i.e., migration may act as a determining cause of space transformation and space transformation, in many ways, attract people to commute or settle in these areas. The population projections published by the United Nations provide ample evidences to this. Over the period 2011-2050, the world's urban population is projected to increase from 3.6 billion to 6.3 billion. Much of this increase will be in the cities and towns of developing and less developed countries. Consequently, it is expected that half of Asia's and Africa's population will be living in urban areas by 2020 and 2035 respectively. Urban formation and concentration of population in urban centres indicate a typical form of space transformation mostly in unwelcoming

ways. This may result in population pressures, congestion, insanitation, and slum formation.

It is anticipated that the world's urban population will increase by 1.4 billion over the period 2011 and 2030. Of this increase, the share of China will be 276 million, while that of India will be 218 million. India will account for slightly over 15.5 percent of the increase in the world's urban population (United Nations 2012). This increase in urban population can be divided into three components: (a) natural increase in urban areas and related space transformation, (b) reclassification of rural areas as urban, and (c) net migration from rural to urban areas. There will be marked differences and variation in the importance of each of these components across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. At the global level, the current evidence suggests that in many countries, the rate of natural increase in population still accounts for over half of urban growth (United Nations Population Division 2008a).

Internal migration may also result in spatial transformation, both in urban and rural areas. In developing cities, squatter settlements and urban slums have been the principal locations receiving rural migrants. Labour camps or temporary rented apartments with congestion and space constraints enable them to survive. Many of whom are unidentified or never integrated and not becoming a permanent urban underclass. The formation and development of any informal settlement are often linked to changes in the economic activity of the surrounding area (Conway 1985, Gilbert and Varley 1990, Klak and Holtzclaw 1993). Turner (1968) suggests a two-stage settlement process for rural-urban migrants in urbanizing countries. New migrants initially seek deteriorating rental shelter, primarily in the central city but sometimes scattered across town for good access to jobs. As their income level improves, they may move to build peripheral informal shanties for residential stability or ownership and then upgrade shanty dwellings. Thus new spaces of housing settlements of migrants may be formed in such areas which are rather inaccessible, socially isolated and even partially notorious, where land price is comparatively less. Gradually such areas, due to its diverse and mixed cultural influx, may be developing as 'sub cultural space divisions'. Such communities remain typically marginalised in the host community for very longer duration. The periodical increase in the number of migrant population in Kerala is to be approached in this perspective too. The approximate number of migrant labourers in Kerala, as per a report submitted by the Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation in 2013, was 25 lakh, of which only 53,136 of them had been registered in official documents.

Impact of Globalisation

Globalisation and tremendous economic changes all over the world lead to significant changes in urban patterns. As a result of the changes, new urban spaces are formed through novel initiatives and modern enterprises, many of them in an unplanned way which in turn result in spatial imbalances, hazardous transport systems and congestion. Unlike their counterparts, developed countries have initiated an economic restructuring process to overcome this crisis. Consequent to the resurgence of financial capital activities and competitive economy in third world countries, new office building areas, service sectors and new land uses have been emerged in strategic locations. Transition of such areas as centres of communication and information technology and newly emerging spaces of employment, have led to the development of new office spaces, IT parks and business complexes. These centres have undergone speedy transitional processes and turn to be urbanised. By this, the concept of city has developed a new content and form in the contemporary era. This change is found to be realised not only in the developed countries but also the areas of developing countries too. For instance, many cities like Hong Kong, Singapore, Beijing, Shanghai, and many others of other developing countries have become important centres of the global economy, similar to many western cities like London, New York, Paris and Los Angeles. Even such centres in the Middle East as Dubai, the business capital of the United Arab Emirates, has emerged as a regional centre in the world global economy.

Spatial Inequalities, Class, Caste and Gender

Social research investigations have revealed that there are identified 'centre' and 'peripheral' regions in cities which are differently possessed and habituated by people in different economic and social strata. This spatial inequality is found to be co related with other material possessions and utilisation of facilities and consequently indicate class differentials among them. Ward level differentials of the same also indicated by Census of India's (2011) ward-level urban data statistics.

India's prevalent caste structures also have long been recognised as a basis for social and spatial segregation and inequality. Steady urbanisation and transitions in the economic and cultural ambience of cities are believed to have undermined the primacy of the existing caste system (Rao 1974). Park and Wirth says that, as groups and individuals acclimatise to city life, creating a blend of intermingled social and urban spaces they have cut across, weakened and altered previously rigid social structures (Park 1967; Wirth 1938). The study of the magnitude of spatial segregation in the 10 largest cities of West Bengal (Ismail Haque 2016) analyses

ward-level data from the 2011 Census and reveals a high degree of spatial segregation by caste. In each of these cities, caste-based spatial segregation is more pronounced than segregation by socio-economic status. The study also discovers a significant negative correlation between wards with a greater proportion of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population and household access to public, private and aspirational goods.

It is also observed in sociological literature that due to patriarchal dominance, males are taking primary advantage from the positive benefits of spatial transformation. Due to traditional denial of access to education and outside contact to women in our society, a large proportion of them are remaining behind, and in most cases, alienated from such avenues as capital mobilisation, entrepreneurship, employment, migratory movements, social participation and leadership. Being deprived of the above spheres of life, most aspects of spatial transformation and urbanisation only aggravates their miseries. Anonymity of city life due to complex spatial transition increases the incidence of cruelties against women such as sexual assaults, rape, harassment, social segregation and domestic subjugation. The more complex and diversified the areas of life, the more risky and perilous would be the possibilities of abuse of women. Unfortunately, the marginalised and economically deprived among them are often inclined to decline as targets of commercialisation and profiteering.

Ecology, Climate and Topography

It is a fact that such developments part of urbanisation and metropolitanisation processes as extension, invasion, and succession may cause significant bearing on topography, environment, and ecology, the nature and gravity of which rest on the kind of land use and the nature of spatial transformation involved within. There are varied theoretical viewpoints related to this issue. Some view spatial transformation as a natural process and an inevitable requirement of human progress. Accordingly, only through timely topographical and ecological alterations in a balanced manner that human societies could maintain its balance. Others put the blame of its negative impacts on capitalism and its craze for material acquisition. Whatever be the interpretations, no human society is ever found in the universe with complete stagnancy and stabilisation. Whatever feasible changes necessary are to be adopted without affecting the normal course of the ecology and society, and what is inevitable is to develop suitable survival strategies to maintain its balance.

Space Transitions and Social Ecology

Social ecology is one of the major expanses where spatial transition wields its determining impact. The collective life and social and communal activ-

ities of people are in direct proximity with the areas of their habitation and the avenues of connectivity and accessibility available to them by which they are linked with such areas. Channels of interaction as person to person, person to group and groups to groups are directed and realised by spatial recompenses. Distance and geographical barriers are dogged by the nature of spaces and are altered and affected by the transitions in space. Adaptation and compatibility with such components of space as geographical, climatic, topographic, and environmental conditions are to be decidedly deterministic. Technological applications suited to space conditions are also vital. Solicitation of alternate technology to ensure sustainability of space and its facilities and resources; and adoption of survival strategies are also to be reckoned with.

The noteworthy aspects of spatial transformation which are directly correlated with changes in social ecology are: (a) marked upsurge in density and concentration of population, (b) New patterns and lay out of houses and residential complexes within the locality, (c) diversification of land use and other economic and social activities within the area, (d) proximity and access to public services, leisure activities, marketing, health care services and other expediencies, (e) quality of public spaces and opportunities for public gathering and social interaction, (f) extend of human safety and connectedness of the place to other localities, (g) gender roles and notions of gender equality and gender justice, (h) recognition and practice of human rights, (i) secularism and communal harmony etc. Wherever spaces are transformed, the nature and gravity of the surrounding social world also undergoes significant alterations. Every segment of society, irrespective of their class, caste and religious differentials, share its advantages and also detriments if any. Their congregational life and group functionalities in a multitude of capacities, are found to be dazed by this transition. Primary group life may substitute for secondary and formal aggregations which are formal and mechanical, in the wake of a probable rural - urban change-over. New facilities and mechanisms available in such transformed zones are rather technically advanced and artificial, which in turn, assure them refinement, technical perfection and various other functional facilitations in almost all spheres of social life. The nature and gravity of the impact depend on the socio economic composition and physical characteristics of the area under transition.

Space Transformation in Kerala

The State urbanisation report of the Department of Town Planning, Kerala registered a massive increase in urbanisation from 25 per cent in 2001(99) to 47 percent in 2011(461). Major contribution of this increase was due to increase in number of census towns which are not governed by urban

local governments. High density plays a critical role in defining elements of urbanism and development of cultural and social organisation of cities. High density transforms spatial organisations mainly in three ways - infra-structural needs, changes in landscape and settlement system and restructuring of land economy and land uses. (Qadeer 2004). 91 per cent of these census towns are located within the 18 urban agglomerations of the state suggesting that these are part of a spreading urban spatial structure (Census 2011). Non-agricultural employment has grown at a much higher rate in rural areas, mainly into construction, and commercial. Employment in the tertiary sector also grew at a higher rate which, in turn, leads to an absolute decline in household manufacturing in the state.

The container terminal project at Vallarpadam in Cochin, the Smart City, the metro rail construction, the proposed Sabari Rail Project and national and state highways are instances of developmental strategies undertaken, which cause space transitions in the state. The positive and negative impressions of which are to be investigated in diverse perspectives. Certain trends of urbanisation by implosion has created land scarcity and increased diversity in land uses, in turn, lead to massive hike in land prices. Considering the above spatial features and transitions of Kerala, a systematic land use planning and infrastructure designing seriously taking into account the physical geography and local requirements are inexorable. In order to tackle the possible disparities due to spatial transformation and urbanisation in the state, a scientific waste management system and public engineering system for sewage and drainage facilities, and measures to improve all sorts of transportation systems including road connectivity, airports and waterways are also imperative.

Besides the academic attention of scholars and theoreticians, spatial transformation and its contributory socio economic impacts have to be made one of the important concerns of bodies of administration and governance including grass root agencies of administration. Possible spatial imbalances are to be anticipated prior to the implementation of developmental projects. Strong political will and capacity mobilisation are to be ensured from both political parties and governments keeping apart narrow concerns such as partisan mentality, profiteering and corruption. Civil servants and bureaucrats in responsible positions are to be made free in their official discharges to express their creativity and commitment. Concerted and collaborative efforts of various departments and government machinery are to be assured. Above all, the possible difficulties arising from dislocation and displacements, if any, to the local public are to be antedated well in advance and all possible measures of compensation and rehabilitation are to be devised after adequate conciliations with mass participation.

Note

*Presidential address delivered in 43rd All Kerala Sociological Conference on 'Sociology of Spatial Transformation' at The Zamorin's Guruvayurappan College, Kozhikode, Kerala on December 9th, 10th and 11th.

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