



# Urban Dynamics and the changing language of Space: a case of New Delhi

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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to study discursive representations of urban spaces within Indian urban development practice with a case study of the capital of India, New Delhi. This is an effort towards crossing traditional disciplinary boundaries and enhancing transdisciplinary research. Words changing over time can be taken as clues to the historical development of the relationship of society to urban space. The data for this work has been collected through various channels, ranging from newspapers, municipal documents, the internet, literature and historical works. The city of Delhi is characterized by its complexity, plurality and hybridity. With a variety of issues of concern in India's urbanization, the city environment is one of the most important issues shaping urban development at present in Indian cities. It is interesting to note that there is a shift in the languages that frame the environmental issue. There is a rapid interest in reporting on the city in newspapers and the media, and scores of online platforms in Delhi. An urban discourse has emerged involving people from all walks of life.

**KEYWORDS:** language, urban development, environmental issues, institutional framing, Historical evolution.

## INTRODUCTION

Urban geographers have long been interested in the power struggles and conflicts between various actors and stakeholders over urban space. In conjunction, discourse analysis has been employed by academics as a penetrating method for uncovering urban policy processes and dynamic power relations with increasing attention to the roles discourse, ideology, and representation play in framing, legitimizing, and facilitating the agenda of urban actors, stakeholders, and growth coalitions (Short et al. 1993, Wilson 1996, Mele 2000, Marston 2002, McCann 2004, Wilson and Wouters 2003 and Jacobs 2006).

Inspired by the writings and theoretical underpinnings of Michel Foucault (1980), discourse-based research in urban growth politics attempts to provide critical analysis of texts in an urban political arena in which various interest groups seek to establish particular narratives, rhetoric, or discourses as a method to pursue political objectives (Lees 2004; Waitt 2005; Jacobs 2006). Foucault's studies of relations between knowledge, discourses, representations, and power have had a particular influence on research within geography (Fyfe and Kenny 2005; Jacobs 2006).

Although the linguistic, representational, or discursive turn in urban research has "swept powerfully through the social sciences" (Jonas and Wilson 1999, 8) and is "growing as more and more researchers seek to integrate the study of language and culture into urban geographical analysis" (Lees 2004, 101), the multidisciplinary approach has not escaped debate and controversy. But Waitt (2005) emphasizes that the methodological strength of discourse analysis lies in its ability to move beyond the text and subtext to uncover issues of power relationships or internal mechanisms that maintain certain structures, which in turn function to produce

particular understandings about the world that is accepted as truth. An analytical focus on discourse prevails in studies that examine the city as a site of complex social, political, or economic processes, and a consideration of discourses about the city "does not require an abandonment of the analytical focus on urban form and spatial practices" (Mele 2000, 629-630).

There is now a wide body of work which has explored urban growth from a discursive perspective, and has illustrated the ways that discursive formations and structures shape policy processes and outcomes. This paper is also an attempt towards discursive representation of urban spaces within Indian urban development practices. It tries to give greater attention to the question of representation and language and emphasizes that this is an effort towards crossing traditional disciplinary boundaries and enhancing transdisciplinary research. Within the contemporary discourses of urban manifestations, the conditions of cities within the Indian subcontinent, as they enter the threshold of a global era have begun to connect and reverberate with the changing dynamics of cities across the world. Like numerous cities all across India, multiple layers of historicity juxtaposed over one another and their simultaneous living existences within the urban fabric of Delhi have created complex dynamics of form, function and structure at every instant (Chopra, 2008).

Words take on meaning only when they are actually used in the context of discourses that may carry many different intentions. The words of cities are created and transformed, they travel and take root, and they adapt or disappear and are forgotten at varying paces. Words changing over time can be taken as clues to the historical development of the relationship of society to urban space. The task of understanding the words used in urban context in a vast country like India is a complex task. India writes in many languages and speaks in many more voices. There are over one thousand mother tongues in India and several major languages out of which 22 languages are recognized by the Indian Constitution as official language. In India with a long tradition of multiple cultures and a long history of urbanization, Hindi words and also Urdu words of Persian origin are used with emphasis on urban development and planning. It is worth mentioning that these words have acquired special meaning in the process of their use that now have general acceptability across a large number of regions and languages. Currently, some of these words are in use along with their corresponding English words. However, for several of these that describe specific local phenomena, appropriate English equivalents do not exist. Kundu (1999) suggests, "English for planners", nevertheless, is often supposed today to be the comprehensive common reference for all. In the case of Delhi, through continuous juxtaposition over time, multiple layers of historicity have imbibed processes of hybridization, making Delhi a product of hybridity which is well reflected in the language used for urban developmental concerns.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The entire framework of this research has to be understood with two background concepts: a) the very process of urban systems is very dynamic and countries like India have a great colonial impact. Cities like Delhi in particular have multiple layers of historicity, and b) India is a highly multilingual country and Delhi has always been a city of dramatic population changes. It has been one of the most desired destinations for the fleeing population coming into and out of the city, conquering armies and traders attracted by its wealth and a rural population looking for work and opportunity. Delhi is thus home to various classes of People. It has a cosmopolitan society where there are people from every nook and corner of India, making the city very multi-linguistic and multicultural. Hence the effort is towards understanding Epistemology- obtaining knowledge of the development of urban language in a holistic, relational, dynamic and active way, historically and interculturally. The study is a **Pragmatic inquiry with an Axiological sense** to reflect and take a more accurate account of reality and see how language is changing to address the problems of urban areas affecting its citizens. In recent decades, the democratization of urban development and city planning is taking place at a very fast pace. Strategic planning, multi-stakeholder partnerships and public participation have now become the key communication issues in the urban development sector. This "participation revolution" implies that technical information has to be made available to the wider audience since the general public is now being increasingly viewed as the provider of local urban knowledge and expertise. In order to facilitate communication between different stakeholders of urban development, the use of **Ontologies** needs to be studied. This also calls for a

study of the **Standardization** of city words which are aimed towards facilitating communication and reducing confusion.

In an investigative and analytical framework a brief inquiry into the following questions has been attempted: a) participants of discursive communication i.e. who is exercising the power, whose discourses are being presented and who is the 'ideal subject' or audience, b) contents and forms of texts and talk – examine how the events are presented, c) medium of communication - written, spoken, sign language or the new media, d) modes of communication i.e. exposition, argumentation, description or narration with focus on the social relations evolving with it. In order to accomplish the above-mentioned analysis and assessment, data and related information has been gathered from various channels of public communication. These are in the form of newspaper reports and articles, documents by the municipality and related agencies, web publications, historical documents, as well as public posters.

## THE CASE OF DELHI

Delhi, the capital of India, is situated in northern India and stands on the west bank of Yamuna River. It is spread over an area of 1483 sq. kilometers, and has a population of around 14 million. Delhi has the most effervescent history among other prominent cities in India. Archaeological Survey of India states that Delhi was the capital of seven empires in Indian history. It has been built and rebuilt more than seven times at different sites in and around Delhi. All seven cities have contributed to a surviving concretion of history, culture and richness despite frequent invasion and destruction by Central Asian and Persian rulers and British colonization. Rulers have always chosen to build anew rather than add to an existing city, so the development of Delhi was a patchwork. Through all its disjointed parts the city expresses multiple identities and contested domains of existence and realities.

As suggested by Teller (2007), it is important to keep in mind that the evolution of a city's shape and its components are usually not static. Not only does the urban form transform but also the evolution of its conceptualization changes over time. Around the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the military role of the city literally collapsed the world over and the production activities grew rapidly and cities soon became the "exchange centres." A number of morphological transformations in the form of the suppression of defence walls, the opening of large avenues for facilitating the movement of goods and people and unprecedented growth of the building blocks to accommodate the incoming population appeared. The city's role and nature too changed and hence the emergence of some new "urban concepts". In contrast, some specific medieval urban patterns or royal places demonstrated remarkable stability over time even though the "urban systems" of which they were a part changed radically. Over time, the delineation of boundaries between rural and urban too became less resolute. In countries like India, the process of urbanization was completely modified by British colonization. New Delhi has been the outcome of comprehensive planning efforts throughout history as the capital state of various empires that have ruled the city all along, visible even today through its physical fabric.

Looking at the urban dynamics historically, urban systems emerged out of the economic and social needs of the kingdom and so did they in India. As the kingdoms expanded and prospered, with political stability urban centres evolved. Cities in medieval India were few, but they were large and impressive and Hindi and Urdu words of Persian origin are abundant in the official documents, laying down the foundation of urban governance in the country. It is worth mentioning that these words have acquired a special meaning in the process of their use and now have general acceptability across a large number of regions and languages. Some of the legal and administrative provisions adopted during the British period were based on those of their predecessors and currently, some of these words are in use along with their corresponding English words. Urdu still remains a powerful and major language of expression in this city and has been recognized as the second official language of Delhi along with its script for all official purposes.

During colonial rule, there was some breaking of the continuum of urban evolution if one looks at the history of Delhi as a city. This discontinuity happened in two ways: a) the city grew by the policy decisions of foreign governments, which were not necessarily based on the spatial interactions with the region; b) the physical form and social cultural forms along with the values of the city changed. There were several British buildings as a

towering British physical presence. The city was structured in a hierarchical form depending on socio-economic criterias. With the passage of time, this disparity got institutionalized and also reflected in the terminology. Several terms describing the urban space as a negative space and several spaces within urban got defined with negative expressions. Words like, *Jhuggi – Jhonpdi, Basti, Gandhi Basti*, are few words which signify slum settlements having temporary structures or dilapidated or tottering physical units. These capture the unhappiness but apathy of this elite class towards slums as well as their apprehension about their adverse impact. Besides these, people residing in the slums developed their own vocabulary for describing the city life in general and their own existence in particular. This, in several ways, reflected their sufferings, helplessness and anger. Scholars believe that the process of urbanization has remained structurally the same in the post colonial period -the foreign elites being replaced by local elites and so the importance of negative city words has not diminished.

Urbanization has increased rapidly since 1911 when Delhi became the capital of the country. The pace was accelerated during 1941-51 when the country attained independence and was partitioned and refugees started settling in Delhi. The majority of refugees which came from Pakistan were Punjabi speaking Hindus. As time passed by, Punjabi and Urdu along with Hindi became the most popular languages of communication in Delhi. The Punjabi language is more of a communicational language with little input in urban official texts. Overtime, Punjabi in Gurumukhi script and Urdu scripts have become the second official languages of Delhi for various official purposes. Thus the urban space of Delhi has given differential space to different languages in order of: Hindi –the official language of Delhi, English- the working language of Delhi, Punjabi- the second official language in Gurumukhi script and Urdu also the second official language in Urdu script.

For more than a decade after Independence, Delhi continued to sprawl in all directions, producing a series of disjointed settlements. As part of planned development several new words and concepts became operational and tried to define Delhi in new forms and boundaries- Master Plan of Delhi (MPD), Delhi Development Authority (DDA), Delhi Metropolitan Area (DMA), Union territory of Delhi (UT) area a few examples. From the seven historic cities of Delhi, the city became a part of the National Capital Region (NCR).

Besides being the capital city, Delhi is an important administrative unit of the government of India. At the social and physical level, Delhi is a multilayered fragmented city, with each fragment contributing in its own way to the city fabric. Today, Delhi is home to various classes of People. It has a cosmopolitan society where there are people from every nook and corner of India. This makes the city very linguistic and multicultural. Delhi is the symbol of old and new India, an India which is growing rapidly. Though it continues to be the political and administrative capital of the country through ages and has retained its stronghold as the ‘center of power’, today, the city is part of a global political and economic scenario and is subject to market based forces of capitalism. It is being confronted with new challenges of growth and change both from massive internal demands and intense external pressures of globalization. Present day Delhi is undergoing the transition similar to other cities of developing nations with a galore of problems-related to infrastructure, migration, pollution— belonging to a class of problems called “wicked problems”, as defined by Professor Horst Rittel of Berkeley.

As noted above, some specific medieval urban patterns in Delhi demonstrated remarkable stability over time even though the “urban systems” of which they were a part changed radically and changed its conceptualization over time. The classic example is of *Kuchas* and *Katras* of Delhi in the famous Chandni Chowk area of old Delhi (Shahjahanabad). These urban structures in medieval times were one of the most glorified places. This was the only place from where the retail network of textile in north India was controlled. Today, the fortune of this place has fallen apart and the *Katras* of Delhi are the biggest notified Slum area of Delhi due to its tottering physical conditions.

Negative views on the deteriorating physical quality of life in Delhi gained prominence in the eighties and nineties with the growing interests of multinational companies and international agencies in this city. The strategy of liberalization and globalization attracted several foreign companies into the country. The key problem was associated with the presence of slums sometimes in the center of the city which is where the proposed development of the commercial center was destined and their associated lack of hygiene, and lack of law and order. Their existence was often considered as a threat to prospective investment and, consequently, to the future of city growth. The national government gave high priority to improving the quality of the urban

environment through slum improvement/relocation/repair. Significant changes in administrative and institutional structure were introduced for this purpose. Slums thus became the focus of concern of academic research and also of policy debate. Concerns towards Cleansing, Congestion, Ventilation, Drainage, Conservancy and problems about noxious trades were oft repeated words in urban development of Delhi.

Massive importation of terminology and standardization of concepts took place at the initiative of international agencies like the World Bank, UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), the Ford Foundation, and UNCHS (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements), ADB (Asian Development Bank) etc. At times this standardization of urban terminology oversimplified the reality and clouded the specificities of local situations. But behind these standardized jargon, there was a package of schemes for providing shelter and services to people in slum areas or for relocating them outside the city. The Government of India also launched programs for low cost housing and slum upgradation in the sixties. Acronyms like *Janta* (public) quarters, EWS (Economic Weaker Sections), LIG (Low Income Group), MIG (Middle Income Group), and HIG (High Income Group) were designed to classify the beneficiary households and give them differential subsidies. Several Hindi terms like *Yojana* (Plan), *Niyojan* (Planning), *Awaz* (Housing), *Samiti* (Committee) etc. were employed in the formulation and implementation of schemes and projects through which the government sought to intervene. The names of the schemes in their abbreviated forms like IDSMT (Integrated Development of Small and Medium Towns), EIUS (Environmental Improvement of Urban Slums), UBSP (Urban Basic Services Provision), JNURRM (Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission) etc. have also become a part of urban vocabulary due to their use by planners, administrators and ordinary men and women alike.

Delhi is a true representation of urban conditions of several South Asian countries in its complexity, plurality and hybridity. The names of streets and localities in Delhi is a good representation and gives a picturesque idea about multiple influences, forces and pressures which have affected the urban vocabulary in its present form. The streets in Delhi have been named after the ancient Indian emperors, Mughal rulers, leaders of India's Independence movement, leaders of Communist and Russian revolutions, Poets, Marxist theorists, leaders of Anti- Apartheid movement and also reflect the forces of liberalization and Globalization.

This trend continues today and broadly, the city environment is the single most important issue shaping urban development. The questions in present times are regarding greater community participation in managing public health, issues of social justice, cause of the poor, slum dwellers and so on. Strategic planning, multi-stakeholder partnerships and public participation have now become the key communication issue in the urban development sector. This "participation revolution" implies that technical information has to be made available to the wider audience since the general public is now being increasingly viewed as the provider of local urban knowledge and expertise. It is also backed by significant legally-binding international agreements, as for instance the Aarhus Convention, which recognizes a right of access to information and public participation in environmental matters. Such conventions are applicable to the urban domain as "man-made environments".

In the last few decades, the citizens of Delhi have become acutely aware of the crises of Delhi's urbanism. Urban debates are now a part of Delhi's daily life. There are particular sets of discourses relating to building and zoning violations; traffic and transportation problems; intractable slum settlements; poor quality of water and sanitation services resulting in health issues; thousands of tons of untreated garbage being dumped every day; heritage and urban aesthetics being trampled upon as city faces the stampede of a billion people, and so on. There is a rapid interest in reporting on the city in newspapers and the media, the communicative space occupied by the posters at the bus stands, billboards, street signage and scores of online platforms in Delhi. An urban discourse has emerged. But this public debate is raw, confused, provocative, often half-baked-but it is here to stay. It involves people from all walks of life: scholars, activists, ordinary citizens and experts.

It is interesting to note that there is a shift in the languages that frame the environmental issue, a shift on two levels. The first shift is from the symbolic to the scientific. As Sharan (2002) notes, 'the local dignitary with the broom in hand promising to rid the city of its accumulated garbage is the thing of the past.' Instead, there is a new vocabulary on offer-pH values, clean fuels, suspended particulate matter, common effluent treatment

plants—these are the terms that increasingly saturate the media and public spaces. From billboards that provide information on SO<sub>2</sub> levels, to weather reports that report on pollution across the city, to the legal discourse that relies on expert committees to guide them on technical matters, all these signal an important shift in the conceptual association regarding environmental issues. People use scientific terminology like climate change, global warming, and CFLs. In terms of land planning words like encroachment, illegal constructions, green space, water conservation, rain water harvesting, conservation, preservation etc. are often repeated words.

At another level, the ‘public’ language is more of individual conduct. There is a new optimism which believes that managing the environment is as much an individual responsibility as it is a state responsibility. Several drives and campaigns enrolling individual effort/support are a common sight in Delhi. May it be a drive to clean the Yamuna, refusal to use plastic bags, encouraging school students to plant more trees, resist littering and so on. There is a new emphasis on self-help and caring for the self (yoga, exercise, safe water, Reiki, etc.) addressed to the middle class health. As against the west, where the discourse on public health is argued to be related to individualism, consumerism and victim blaming and a new politics of citizenship (Peterson, 1997), in the case of Delhi, the languages of the self and public are intermeshed in a complex manner.

Along with the shifts in language, another noticeable characteristic of urban environments is the new institutional framing in which courts have come to play a role (Sharan, 2002). In a paper titled, “Coordinating Interdependence: Governance and Social Policy”, Denis Saint-Martin writes, We are witnessing a move away from hierarchy and competition as alternative models for delivering services towards networks and partnerships. The role of government (is) shifting to a focus on providing leadership, building partnerships, steering, (with) the emergence of negotiated “self-governance” in communities, cities and regions, based on new practices of coordinating activities through networks and partnerships, (and) the opening-up of decision-making to greater participation by the public. In the case of Delhi, it is seen very clearly. The use of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) as an instrument of justice marks a shift of the center of gravity of justice from traditional individualism to community orientation (Anand, 2001). All these have played an important role in recent environmental concerns raised. Whether these legal innovations have been successful or not in getting environmental justice is a contested issue—but the fact that legal innovations have taken place as an aid to urban developmental concerns.

Another helpful institutional support in the hands of the common man in India is the Right to Information Act (RTI) 2005. Right to information is increasingly being recognized as a necessary condition to achieve accountable, transparent and participatory governance and people-centred development. While in India, a conducive legal and constitutional environment in support of this right always existed, as reflected in the Constitution and various Supreme Court judgments among others, it was the work of the civil society organizations at the grassroots level and their strong advocacy that led to the enactment of right to information legislation in India - first at the sub-national and then at the national level. This has greatly increased the accountability of government bodies as they are committed to keeping full transparency and being on guard from a very vigilant media. In other words, the law operates publicly and the issues of public health/ public good receive full validity in public opinion with the help of institutional support.

In recent years, there has been a sea change in urban governance in the country. The economic liberalization initiated in the country followed by decentralization measures adopted by all tiers of the government has resulted in the gradual withdrawal of the State and increasing private sector participation in capital investment and operation and maintenance of urban services. The amendment in the constitution has led to the growth of middle-class activism through the resident welfare associations (RWAs) and Market and Traders Associations (MTAs). Their involvement has been broadly in areas of operation and management of civic services, capital investment in infrastructural projects, planning and participatory budgeting, and maintenance of neighbourhood security. In fact, efforts have been made to institutionalize them as partners in the development process, through government-led programmes like the Bhagidari in Delhi. The scheme, defining itself as “a citizen–government partnership” (Bhagidari website) is designed to facilitate dialogue between residents and city administrators in order to develop a localized form of participation that extends civic engagement beyond elections, focusing primarily on the quality of urban services. Importantly, their functioning has been restricted largely in the

middle-income and posh colonies. Correspondingly, the informal settlements, which house the urban poor, are unable to exercise their voice through the same form of activism.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and evaluations of several elements of discursive communication, some broad conclusions can be drawn. Urban words changing over time give a good sketch of society's changing relationship to urban space. In the case of Delhi, a popular discourse by ordinary citizens has emerged powerfully urging the democratization of urban development. The voice of activism, although, at present is restricted to the higher and middle-income groups and with the urban poor being marginalized. Present-day Delhi is being confronted with new challenges of growth and changes both from massive internal demands and intense external pressures of globalization leading to excessive geographical expansion and economic diversification. Under such pressures, both the city and its citizens are under immense strain and thus the languages of the self and public are intermeshed in a complex manner.

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