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Urban Villages

Lessons for village-centric urban growth

ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the construct of village as opposed to a city and agricultural land, as a result of prevalent land systems and revenue mechanisms in the Indian state of Punjab. It traces the evolution of urban villages in Chandigarh as excluded places from the realm of planning, since the colonial era to its nested co-existence within the urban fabric. Reflecting upon the lessons learnt in the process - the potentials offered and challenges faced, it explains factors responsible for their unique development trajectory. The paper concludes with suggestions for an alternative development pathway which can enable a smooth transition of the place from a rural, agricultural settlement to an integrated node within the city.



BACKGROUND - VILLAGES & PLANNING

The delineation of villages in northern-Indian provinces, with particular respect to the state's planning apparatuses, can be traced back to pre-colonial times. This process was a result of subjecting the existing agrarian settlements to changing land systems and revenue mechanisms. Around the sixteenth century, the Mughals had introduced a patwar system for the assessment and procurement of revenue from the agricultural produce. A *patwari* - an appointed village accountant, was entrusted with the task of surveying and maintaining a village field map, known as a *shajra*, along with a field register (*khasra*). The latter bore the names of the proprietor and cultivating labor, the crops grown and means of irrigation along with demarcations of individual properties (Powell, Henry. 1892: p39). After the annexation of Punjab by the British, the patwar system was adopted for its extensive reach and the quality of data furnished by the *patwaris*. Over the second half of the nineteenth century, modern cadastral survey methods were employed while the process and terminologies of the system were institutionalised by the Punjab Land Revenue Act (XVII) of 1887 and continue to be in existence till date.

Within these territories, the inhabited areas of a village were charted as excluded spaces throughout British rule of India as well as in the decades following its independence in 1947. As the primary objective of the colonial government was to maximise its revenue from the farmlands, a decentralised control was exercised over the villages with the help of cartographic exercises and the *patwar* system. In their documentation of land systems during British India, Powell & Henry (1892: p557) take note of the villages as being exempt from the levying of land revenue. Human habitation itself was confined within a rigid boundary, defined by the Revenue Officer in conjunction with the village patwari, preventing any construction related to non-

farming activities beyond this limit. No mapping of properties within these boundaries was conducted, which included privately owned land as well as land for village commons. In the years following the independence from British rule, and the consequent partitioning of the Punjab province, land reforms were executed to consolidate and defragment landholdings. Agricultural properties were redrawn, oriented to cardinal directions, and surplus land was allocated to tenant farmers and refugees from West Punjab. Even though the village limits were expanded, the young nation's government followed in its predecessors footsteps in viewing the villages as enclaves within the revenue generating land.

THE MODERNISATION PROJECT

The post-independence period gave rise to a rich debate with regards to the sites where the state should focus its energies, both as a nation-building measure as well as for its attempts to trigger social modernisation. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi (1939) envisioned a modern India from a perspective of the villages, as spaces with resilience and a potential for development. For him, cities were connected with everything he regarded as cancerous for the Indian civilisation - modern machinery, politics; even as his utopian visions required modern science and technology to “refashion” the village of his dreams. Nehru, India's first prime minister on the other hand approached the ‘city’ and planned urbanisation as a catalyst for modernisation. Even though he did believe that modernisation of villages hold the key to restrict rural to urban migration, his sites for development were neither located in small villages, nor in major cities, but in the relations between villages and cities (Prakash, 2002: p3). To affect these relations, he sought state-sponsored, large scale planning as an instrument to address these issues. Furthermore, as Glover (2012) argues, these ideas fostered a distinction between ‘improvement’ and ‘development’ with regards to the sites in consideration, the village and a city, respectively. He

writes, “Improvement is addressed communities tied together through bonds of kindship, culture and shared history in a particular place; development, conversely, is concerned with the proper distribution of ‘beings [and activities] on a territory’ in accord with normative standards and goals.” It was Nehru’s socialist ideology and his belief in planned ‘development’ that came to dominate the chosen paths for independent India’s modernisation project in the second half of the twentieth century.

The need for a new administrative capital for the eastern half of the Punjab province provided an opportunity for Nehru to realise and demonstrate this ideology. In his oft quoted speech, he wanted it to be “a new city, unfettered by the past, a symbol of the nation’s faith in the future” (Prakash, 2013: 12-52). Le Corbusier, the chosen architect for the new city of Chandigarh, had concomitantly asserted the role of experts in addressing the goals of modern urbanism, as highlighted in the Athens Charter (1943) along with other members of CIAM in early twentieth century.¹ Nehru’s imperatives meshed perfectly with Corbusier’s normative visions for a modern city (Perera, 2004: p179). Chandigarh as well as various other state-sponsored mega-projects - dams, steel plants and their townships, were thus developed within the ideological framework that these “modern temples”, urbanisation and industrialisation would usher a new age for India.

The rationalist planning of the first phase of Chandigarh embodied the imperatives of Nehru and Corbusier in the form of a ‘state paternalism’. Sarin (1982: p58) discusses the extent of developmental and regulatory frameworks proposed by Corbusier’s team for a total control of the

¹ The Athens Charter was a manifesto about urban planning based upon the works of Le Corbusier and members of the Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM). It was highly influential in post-WWII new town developments around the world.

state in matters of urbanisation. According to Corbusier, she quotes, “all land within the plan area should be acquired, developed and sold by the government.” The objective put forth in support was to prevent land speculation and accumulation of wealth by private landowners and restrict unregulated urban growth. The master plan further required the state to exercise its legislative powers to ensure conformity in accordance with the designs. A semi-autonomous, non-elected parastatal in the form of a development authority - the Capital Project Organisation (CPO), was created to develop and manage the city. Also, a Capital of Punjab (Development & Regulation) Act of 1952 was instituted, vesting the Chief Administrator of the CPO with powers to specify zoning, legislate and enforce building controls and bye-laws, and in related matters of urbanisation. Consequently the CPO, through its exercise of eminent domain, acquired sixteen existing agricultural villages with their inhabitants compensated and resettled in other peripheral villages.

CONTESTING ‘RATIONALITY’

While Prakash (2002: p5) argues that such a power granted to technocratic elites and experts removed state-led “planning” from the scrutiny of democratic politics, the evolution of ‘urban villages’ in Chandigarh signify the opposite. As the subsequent phases of the new city were being developed, inhabitants of four villages located at its then southern periphery came together to form a *pind bachao* (save the village) committee in 1969. It led massive protests against land acquisitions and demanded their rights to retain their homesteads and possessions, places of worship and community areas, which enabled their communities to have a shared identity. The state was confronted with a choice between pursuing its modernisation project for aspiring subjects, migrating from other rural areas to a growing city and village communities, who had remained excluded from the same. The numerical dominance of the communities in a democratic

setup allowed them to resist the acquisition of the non-revenue areas within the village boundaries, although their farmlands were nevertheless acquired for urban development.

The confrontation between the modernisation project with traditional forms of settlement got manifested on various fronts in the ‘urban village’ typology - as a by-product of rationalist planning and a space between the extremes of formality and informality. Roy (2012: p149) in her paper on planning and informality argues that the legal apparatus of the state exercises its reproduces its power by deeming which spaces and processes are formal or informal, as well as what can be planned or is unplannable.



Fig. 1: Way finding signage at the entry point for Sector 45 showing Burail as an enclave, its existence unacknowledged by the planners.

Subsequent generations of government employed town planners and urban developers had encountered a novel situation, which contradicted the theories of modern urbanism as propagated by Corbusier and were internalised by his local team. In their attempt to arrive at a solution, a new periphery for the village was demarcated with the construction of a circumferential avenue. It once again repeated the process wherein the state's planning focus was limited to territories beyond the rural enclave. Even though the village physically became a contiguous part of the urban fabric, the Capital of Punjab Act, which was the prime instrument in regulating growth of the city, was not extended to encompass areas of the village within the revised boundary. The suspension of state legislature with respect to planning and development thus triggered an unregulated, accelerated village urbanisation process with the logics of the economy governing the resultant form and organisation of the 'new village'.

The following section analyses some primary, inter-related causes along with their desired and undesired implications emerging out of this nesting of traditional village settlements within a planned territory. It focuses on village Burail, the oldest and largest among all villages to which a majority of the *pind bachao* committee leadership belonged.

A. SUPPLY SIDE GAPS IN AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The modernist rational planning envisioned a city as a finite organism, with scientific, linear projections for population growth while the planning for development strived to curtail deviations and non-linearities. In Chandigarh's master plan, the planners had devised a system of state owned housing for employees of the administration to be appended by privately developed housing on long-term leased lots to be governed by the market. However, unpredictable influxes of migrating populations, a second trifurcation of Punjab leading to the city becoming an

administrative capital of three territories, resulted in an acute shortage of housing in terms of quantity and diversity. While the already overburdened state owned housing stock faced a surge of new applicants, property prices in the privately developed areas rapidly increased beyond the reach of middle and lower income groups. The latter especially were left with no choice other than having to reside in temporary squatter settlements or labour colonies, and wait to become eligible in order to apply for housing schemes for economically weaker sections.

Burail in such a scenario acted as a refuge to absorb the development pressures, allowing time for the authorities to raise the housing stock while preventing a proliferation and consolidation of slum settlements. It was favoured over the latter for it provided access to goods and services in its existing marketplaces, basic utilities as well as a close-knit community environment. Dormitories and tenements constructed by village inhabitants offered a well located supply of low cost rental housing, in proximity of places of employment without the need to depend on a still developing public transport system.

B. ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS

While the inclusion of Burail within the urban system spawned a host of economic activities, operating from within its boundaries, changing dynamics in the planned parts as external stimuli, the village witnessed several transformations in its form and on-going processes. Prior to urban development in the region, the villages formed a constellation of families mostly engaged in agriculture related activities. Its demographic mix primarily comprised of landowners and agricultural labour. With the acquisition of the farmlands and the loss of a source of regular income, entrepreneurial individuals set up trades and services to profit from a readily available urban market in its surroundings. Initially, these comprised of dairy farms within homesteads, small-scale workshops providing carpentry, metal related services aiding in the construction

activity, and storage warehouses for building material. Over the years, a growing number of bovines in the middle of the city led to traffic accidents, and contestations between village and city residents as green spaces meant for recreational activities were used as grazing fields. Enforced bans on rearing cattle within urban villages once again stripped off its inhabitants of their livelihoods. However, this time they capitalised on the difference in land values and invested in construction of retail, office spaces and bed-and-breakfast hotels. A majority of back-end processing jobs for the city's enterprises moved their base to Burail and other villages to save on overhead costs and benefit from the readily available labour. While the surrounding 'formal' fabric which remained adherent to the masterplan and its zoning norms, Burail in contrast, propelled by individual actions, constantly regenerated itself, and together with other villages acted as a network of specialised commercial hubs.

C. DIFFERENCE IN REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

A lack of stringent regulations to which the surrounding territory was subjected, catalysed the adaptability of urban villages and generated flows of excluded people and processes towards these enclaves. In compliance with the principles of CIAM, the Capital of Punjab Act empowered local authorities to control urban growth in the city with the help of architectural controls, land-use designations and density caps. It enforced a pavilionisation of programs, referring to the Athens Charter where the idea was propagated, for every activity to be housed in a separate building. Shane (2005: 47) takes note that such an ideology owes its lineage to the design of medical facilities, hospitals and quarantine areas. Any attempt for its application at an urban scale requires powerful control and implementation, yet it would fail in scope due to its spatial and temporal bounds. In Chandigarh, activities and processes deemed non-conforming by the governing legislatures for their co-existence with the city's fabric, flowed into the villages and

transformed their physical and social environment. Micro-industries, warehouses, workshops, repair centres and motor garages - posing nuisance in terms of air and noise pollution to the modern urban residents, began operating out of the densely populated, unplanned village. At the same time, migrant labour, urban poor as well as people indulging in activities that were unacceptable to the citizens sought refuge in these areas.

THE CHALLENGES

These processes and flows strengthened over time in the form of a positive feedback loop, as cheap labour and economic activities attracted each other. As a result, Burail as it exists today harboured, its own set of issues emerging from its unique trajectory of urbanisation and the interplay of forces responsible for it. A 'free-for-all' style of bottom-up development meant that footfalls, vehicular accessibility, lot sizes and the topography governed the density and land-use within its boundaries. Most of the commercial activities agglomerated in specialised ribbons along the external fringe of Burail, interfacing with the surrounding neighbourhoods. The spillover from these logistics intensive activities led to severe traffic congestions and prevents entry of vehicles other than cycles or two-wheelers within the village, further restricted by its narrow by-lanes and overcrowding. Haphazard developments and incremental additions, modifications to the built fabric pose fire hazards and lack structural stability. The fragile community fabric of the village, organised around *chaupals*, public spaces for socio-cultural gatherings, celebrations constructed and maintained by communities themselves, was destructed by an onslaught of migrants and commercial activities. Moreover, most of the its original inhabitants who fought against its demolition eventually moved out and settled in other parts of the city as Burail in popular perception came to be associated with chaos, unsanitary environment - a place for migrants, the urban poor, as well as unlawful citizens.

Such concerns about the village degrading into an urban backyard, taking on slum-like characteristics were not only limited to its average residents, but also members of the *pind bachao* committee leadership. My interactions with a few members who still reside in the village revealed their disappointment with the way things unfolded.² They mentioned that in retrospect, they would have rather had the entire village being acquired and demolished than fight for its existence in its current state. They had highlighted these concerns with the city's authorities which led to extension of municipal services over unacquired village areas in 1996 and framing of a separate village by-laws around 2010, to regulate growth within these areas. However, the enforcement of the latter is remains a major challenge and is close to impossible, as the village now is contested between multiple stakeholders, far removed from the erstwhile homogenous, close-knit agricultural community which took part in the civil society movement. Vested interests of business communities who want to exploit its legislative status and location as a prime real estate in an ever growing city resist such changes, whereas immigrant workers, who now happen to be in a numerical superiority, are ready to protest against changes fearing that a triggered gentrification process will drive them out.

TAKE-AWAYS

The stalemate situation in terms of development of the village area and addressing issues it faces currently, contradicts both the imperatives of the community to resist acquisition and those of the state that employs planning as an instrument of urban development. As it became a norm for planners to only acquire farmlands around villages, community groups inhabiting them and elected village local bodies ceased to engage with planning authorities. This has resulted in a spatio-temporal void wherein the development trajectory of village sites in urban peripheries

² The primary research work including face-to-face interviews with residents of Burail was undertaken as part of my undergraduate thesis project, 2011.

inevitably encounters a phase when rapid, haphazard growth takes place in the absence of supporting infrastructure, up until the village is surrounded by newer developments and it receives a municipal status. At this point, owing to an earlier attitude of apathy by the authorities and the village not being a focus of urbanism, a planning paralysis prevents them from intervening.

The case of urban villages in Chandigarh offers important lessons for planners and development authorities as they seek to plan for urban growth and development in regions all over the developing world, where dense pockets of existing agricultural villages surround urban centres. The typology itself is essentially a post-modern condition that emerges from the rationalist planning methodology, specifically associated with the modernist ideas of town planning which solely focuses on physical planning (Teotia. 2013: p2). In the Indian context, even though this model has fallen out of favour due to growing anti-acquisition movements for urban development, and with the introduction of land-pooling mechanisms for town planning schemes, the juxtaposition of new developments against existing village fabric continues to carve out urban villages. This is evident in more recent developments, both in new cities - administrative capitals or industrial cities, as well as satellite towns and expansion plans for existing cities.

The co-existence of villages in an urbanising territory stabilises the urban system. As explained earlier, these areas are repositories absorbing the in-migrating population, offer commercial services and goods as well as affordable housing. It also allows for the local population to participate in the development process and directly benefit from urbanisation. While the challenges emerging in process need to be addressed, the planning authorities to develop strategies for incorporating such potentials offered as lessons for future urbanisation. The debate between villages as sites for equitable, inclusive development - and a focus of state apparatuses,

has been reinvigorated - with national level policies such as PURA (Providing urban amenities to rural areas) and USP (Unified settlement planning). A successful implementation of these policies, especially for peripheral villages in urbanising territories to benefit from them, requires that the development authorities acknowledge their potentials and expand their scope to include these sites within their purview.

ALTERNATE DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS

In conclusion, the analysis of the urban villages phenomena warrants the need to explore alternatives which exploit the potentials it offers and addresses the consequent challenges that shall be faced. One such alternative applicable in the context of expanding cities and newer urban developments alike, is to enable the development of urban villages as a network of integrated nodes specialising in different programs and catering to a diverse mix of urban residents. This can be achieved by a multi-stage process, a combination of participatory, incremental planning initiatives within a larger, comprehensive framework for development. A foremost requirement for exploring alternative trajectories mandates approaching the existing agrarian settlements as ‘seeds’ for future urbanisation, rather than as ‘other’ spaces - outside the realms of urban planning and development.

Stage One: The first step would be to identify the critical stage itself, when a peripheral village undergoes stimulated transformations in response to urbanisation in the territory. For the authorities to identify this stage, charting of territories beyond the urban municipal boundaries needs to be undertaken. Spatial analytics mapping physical growth, census data on demographics and employment statistics - such as increasing ratio of non-agricultural workers to agricultural workers, etc. can aid the pre-transformation charting processes.

Stage Two: At this stage, the city authorities should prepare a ‘decision tree’, either internally or with the help of specialised consultants. Based on the existing socio-physical conditions of the village - housing stock, circulation patterns, demographic mix, etc., the decision tree would include potential trajectories to arrive at a set of medium-term goals. The latter would conform to the larger, prospective development plan which is prepared by development authorities for 15-20 year terms. While the goals can vary between density parameters, such as - high-density new development involving voluntary relocation, partial redevelopment, or medium-density in-situ developments; socio-cultural specialisations or commercial hubs, etc.; the trajectories may comprise of policy frameworks and role of various stakeholders, financing strategies, etc.

Stage Three: Engaging with the communities and their elected bodies, city authorities can then discuss the decision tree and the choice of a trajectory which the community deems suitable with regards to their aspirations.

Stage Four: Based on the selected trajectory, the city planners may then plan for newer developments in the areas surrounding the village in ways that shall foster symbiotic relations between the village inhabitants and newly settled residents. This must involve development of complementary programs - if village community opts for a high-density residential development, the surrounding area could include more commercial areas, etc. At the same time, development of utility networks and infrastructure to support the physical growth of the village and its future needs should be instigated.

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