The Lecture Contains:

- Port Cities of India: Urban Planning in early British period
- "The factories" Some important characteristics of the new cities
- Defence and commerce
- Reference
What was the nature of urban planning during the early British period in India?

Urban historians recognize two types of city building process—organic and planned. The planned city is based on a predetermined grid imposed by a central planning authority. Organic cities were driven by rules of exigency of people’s lives. They are created vis-à-vis how people use space.

In India, the major port cities were established by the East India Company. In the formation of these cities one can see in the modern times the dominance of the sea route over land route which was made possible due to innovations in navigation technology. The underlying factor for building the port cities was commercial advantages in terms of overseas trade. The cities shared certain morphological features that reflected the conditions under which these cities were built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The three port cities established by the British were: Madras (1640), Bombay (1664) Calcutta (1690).

The cities were prior to the establishment of the empire in 1757. These cities are distinctive as they share similar morphological features. These are hybrid cities in certain sense, which were founded on the basis of the needs of commerce and industry.

In India planning ideals were to be found in the vastasastra. But they were rarely realized in practice. One example was the 18th century city of Jaipur. There is a road running east to west and two roads running north/south—dividing the city into nine parts. This was the system prescribed by the vastupurusha mandala. Mandala being the ground plan of sacred and secular building as well as city plan. The builder of Jaipur Majaraja Jaisingh II was also acquainted with European science. In short, scholarly opinion is divided as to which tradition was decisive in the conception of Jaipur.
The port cities have an imperial and pre-imperial phase. The imperial phase is well-documented but here we shall see how these cities designed in the first place.

- They were meant to be in most cases European cities transplanted on an alien Asian soil.
- But first and foremost they had to accommodate a large Indian population. They were the producers of the goods that the British exported.
- An interesting characteristic is that the planners/architects were English and the masons and labourers were Indians—new material such as *chunna* was used.

Completely controlled by the East India Company these fortified factories were erected at village sites leading to the development of hybrid towns that had their own distinctive characteristic.

**Unlike the traditional organic cities the planned city had a few new characteristics:**

- More uniform lay-out within the walls.
- Streets intersect at right angle to make communication quicker. (Unlike the Ahmedabad *pols* where roads are winding but quickest way to reach is from the terraces of the row houses in the different localities.)
- The roads led to, in the context of colonial cities, to the fixed central space occupied by a building or symbolic importance.
- But Madras and Calcutta grew in a more organic manner.

The problem of creating completely planned cities is that an uninhabited area and central planning authority has to be present. The colonies provided that opportunity. However, when the cities were built the motive of the East India Company was *profit* rather than *glory*. The English port cities in India were established for *trade relation*. They were called ‘*factories*’. These trading stations were meant to provide accommodation for *Company agents* and people working under them. They also became the bases from where the Company exercised their military and trading activities and expanded inland.

- One important characteristic was that these cities were *multinational*. The Company encouraged people of different caste, creed and nationality to settle down. The population was informally segregated into *European and Indian* parts. Europeans lived around the fort, the nucleus of the city, and Indians on the periphery. Chennai had weavers who produced the essential export commodity called chintz (calico cotton) which was essential for the survival of the city. The weavers also preferred the greater security of the city. In Madras this segregation was formalized with the construction of a wall in 1661. In Calcutta no such formal division existed. Indians simply lived to the north of Fort William. No such distinction could be enforced in
Bombay because Bombay was a discontinuous series of islands and European and Indian population was scattered all over.
Apart from economic incentive the other consideration behind building these cities was defense. Therefore, most important architectural feature of these cities was defense. These cities were surrounded by hostile local population on one hand and European rivals on the other. With the advent of gunpowder, the design of fortification completely underwent innovative changes. The system of fortification was brought from Britain. The work on Fort St. George in Madras begun in 1640. But the defense system was unplanned in the port cities. Lying between two bays it was not conducive for withstanding sustained attack.

Calcutta was the last of the port cities to be founded by the English. It had an access to a rich and fertile and well-populated hinterland and over a period of time became the largest of the three ports. Fort William was built for Calcutta in 1712. A defensive ditch was dug in 1742 to protect these settlements from invasion by bands of Maratha cavalry (referred to as bargi in local language). The defense of the fort was also not supposed to be great and after the British were defeated in 1756 it was said by an observer that many old buildings had better defense than Fort William.

Building port city on coast makes economic sense but even more than that it makes sense in terms of defense. It is interesting to note that the chief danger was from the land than the sea and therefore it always had the strongest defense towards land.

The fortress was placed on the water's edge suggesting that in the case of danger they could have escaped through sea route. Kosambi and Brush point out how after the attack and occupation by the French Madras underwent certain important spatial changes. The fort was strengthened and enlarged; the ‘Black Town’ was demolished to create an esplanade. Thereby an unobstructed defensive zone was created on the inland side. The authors develop a schematic spatial model of these port cities.
The principal components area a fort adjacent to the commercial waterfront, an open esplanade around
the fort, separate European and Indian residential sectors with Western or Indian commercial areas,
other residential zones for immigrant Asians and Eurasians, a peripheral manufactural zone adjoining
the Indian sector and an outlying military zone bordering the European sector. Very little is known about
the Indian parts of the city apart of their being marked on the map. The early history of the cities is of
the European parts. These cities always had a civil and military stations known as civil lines and
cantonments and administered separately.

Bombay was the second of the English port cities to be established. The site consisted originally of
seven islands that were over a period of time merged by filling the salt marshes. It was acquired by King
Charles II from Portugal in 1661. It was transferred in 1667 to the East India Company. The fortified
factory of the Company situated on the shore adjacent to the natural harbor emerged as the centre
point of urban development. Around it the residential and commercial area grew in a semicircular
manner and it was enclosed within a wall with three gates. Within the fort area there developed two
distinct areas, the European sector on the southern side and the crowded Indian sector to the north.
The Indians residing in this area were by and large from Gujarat which was the commercially a well-
developed region. These settlements were diverse in terms of religious diversity—Hindus, Muslims, Jain
and Parsi settled down to take part in the commercial life of the city.

The subsequent development of the city took place following the contours of the coast and with
relatively little thrust on the interior. Even today Calcutta suffers from development along a north
south axis causing intolerable traffic congestion. It was quite recently that the city planner recognized
this problem and development was undertaken in the eastern side of the city—Salt Lake. This was done
to relieve traffic congestion in the city centre. Even in Madras where there was more chance for
expanding into hinterland the city grew mostly laterally. Finally it could be said that though these three
cities had their distinctive features they also shared a certain urban morphology that was unique to
these three cities.
Module 6: Urban Planning and Design
Lecture 36: The Planning of the Pre-Imperial Cities of India: the Port Cities

References


Further Reading