

On Urban Security and its Inversions in Delhi

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Historically, urban centres always had a complex character. While their centrality to political power can barely be overstated, this very feature lends itself to multiple, overlapping and contradictory narrations and expressions. Alongside political centralisation came the necessity of economic control by urban centres rooted in its increasing distance from processes of production, physical as well as ownership of the means from production. Such evolving urban landscapes also created their own social structures – variously labelled as the nobility, the clergy and the merchant (princes). To this was added, with industrialisation, a layer of owners of capital which have had a multilinear relationship to all other classes and social groups that have populated the urban over the past many centuries. All these processes – the political, the economic (including industrial and mercantile), and, the ever changing social – necessitated ‘security’ as a leitmotif of the evolving and the growing urban centres to secure all manner of hierarchies and control from challenges, disruptions and overthrow. This is not to argue that the urban has been characterised by stasis but to merely underline that the location of the general population has been relatively peripheral. Public policies for security in the urban locations have therefore been chiefly concerned with the richest, politically-central and therefrom socially dominant sections of the populace and integrated areas of cities.

Contrariwise, the aforementioned transitions and growth in urban centres has also been marked by a very large numbers of people migrating from the hinterlands as well as from other urban areas. In the absence of such massive migration, growth of industrial and financial capital was impossible. The early years of liberal (Benthamite?) politics and thinking attempted to address such threats through a series of social legislation and public policy – what Polyani dubbed as the Double Movement. This brief backgrounder is not intended to flatten out the long and complex history and politics in the urban but is only a device to acknowledge the roots of such politics and policy. Further, this also foregrounds the significant difference that the contemporary urban demonstrates. The liberal script beleaguered as it is by both internal and external challenges is unable to secure the urban for the vast majority of the populace – unlike the innovations in politics of representation and policies of aspiration that it was able to engender in the 19th and 20th centuries.

It is against this background that it is propounded that urban in the first quarter of the 21st century is marked by five interlocking but heuristically discrete features:

(a) Security and securitisation

The peculiarity of policy and politics around securing the urban in the recent times has been geared towards minimising (and shifting) risk (pace Ulrich Beck!) and not towards ensuring security for the vast majority of the urban population. Reflecting the angst of the urban middle classes (and that of the politico-economic dominant sections), the securitisation of risk is retributive in nature and creates the foundations for the marginality that it so engenders.

(b) Marginality and exclusion

New forms of marginality and exclusion (in addition to and alongside the well-documented socio-economic marginalisation of the poor) is a distinctive feature of the contemporary urban. Such marginalisation often maps to politics of exclusion on new axes such as those of social classification, origin, language, religion, gender, and even, employment – all features that were supposed to have been evened out or become irrelevant in the impersonal of the urban.

(c) Discipline and surveillance

At once deriving from and reinforcing the above two are drastically different patterns and capabilities of surveillance and discipline that are of course a function of changing technology but is more crucially a function of changes and defensiveness of the liberal script. Owing to the absence of a serious contest articulated by liberal politics, its fears, dysfunctions and even aspirational values are instrumentalised to entrench a very exclusive urban order.

(d) Capital accumulation and inequity

Closely related to these is the entrenchment of inequity which while not being new, demonstrates at least two new features: retrenchment of inequity seems to be the currency of contemporary accumulation accompanied by the inability of liberal politics and scripts to articulate a different form of aspiration of emancipation and progressive politics.

(e) Political populism and liberalism as container frame

The aforementioned patterns in the transformation of the urban have facilitated the emergence and growth of a populist register that lies at the root of these changes. However, the growth of such populism is not merely a rejection of values of liberalism. It reflects the continuing pursuit of the same promissory notes of liberalism but is a reaction to belied promises under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

The paper will examine such pattern of contemporary urban security with the help of select examples from Delhi.