Urbanization in Southeast Asia*

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It seems doubtful whether one could give a satisfactory picture of the city in Asia as being different from that in other parts of the world. It may be argued that the differences between cities in Asia are so striking that it may be believed that there will be relatively few common features, and perhaps more similarity of some of them with cities outside this region. This may be true; it is therefore our purpose to see whether there is any common bond among cities in non-homogeneous societies rather than to see whether there is anything typically “Asian” in the cities in this part of the world.

It is on purpose that the smaller and medium-sized towns are not discussed, as they are less typical of city life and have had little attention from social scientists. Only a few months ago (December 1962), the first seminar was held on the role of the small town in Asia, organized by the Unesco Research Centre at Delhi, and little research appeared to have been done on this subject. However, even the cities could do with a little more. Fortunately, a number of studies are now being made, in some Asian countries, of large cities but also of smaller centres.

The phenomenon of urbanization is very important in Asia, although the extent of urbanism is still the lowest in the world, excepting Africa: 13% of the population lives in towns (9% in Africa) as against 21% of the world population. But Asia’s share of city population (1950) is the largest in the world: 33.7% as against 26.5% in Europe (without USSR) and 23.8% in the American continent, 11.2% in the USSR and only 3.2% and 1.6% in Africa and Oceania respectively. More important, the process of urbanization, of urban growth, is fast in Asia: of the world city population no less than 47.5% was living in Europe in 1900 and only 21.9% in Asia, which shows that the process of urbanization was much more rapid in Asia than in Europe in the first half of this century.1

This rapid growth, as well as the colonial situation in SouthEast Asia, has

* Much of this article has been derived from the author’s Introduction to The Social Implications of Industrialization and Urbanization, Five Studies in Asia, Unesco Research Centre, Calcutta, 1956. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily represent those of Unesco.

led to the lack of homogeneity already mentioned. The heterogeneity of Asian cities is already shown physically when one considers the striking differences, not only between the different quarters (which is not unusual although less pronounced in homogeneous cultures) but within the quarters. Somewhere in a fashionable street one may see a sort of hole in a garden wall or some corner where a tailor or a cobbler is busily doing his work on a surface of a few square feet, or a tiny shop may be installed. Next to tall modern buildings, low and dirty shacks seem to wait for demolishment which may take a long time. In the heart of the city one may find semi-rural islands of clusters of small houses in tiny fruit gardens, just outside a busy city street with modern stores and offices.

Traffic in these cities is one of the major problems. Bullocks and cows may quietly cross the main roads, rickshaws, buses, handcarts, bicycles, cars, carriages, trucks, tramways and innumerable pedestrians help to create unsolvable traffic problems. The roads, overcrowded and narrow already in the city centre, become still more so by protruding wooden or bamboo constructions of numerous stalls put in front of the more permanent shops. Racks of goods are hung against the walls, the roads are full of people offering their cheap articles displayed right on the pavement, or on small folding tables, or carrying them on a tray or in their hands.

This is certainly a far from adequate picture of a busy city in Asia, leaving out the noise, the many colours, and the smells, but it may give an impression of the disorderliness and the bustle of such a place. There is also another feature, more particular for India and especially Pakistan, less so for the other countries of the area discussed, namely, the relatively few women in the streets. These are men's towns. Not only because of the disproportion between men and women (there were only 596 women to 1,000 men in Bombay in 19511, but also because of women not usually showing themselves in the street.2

In the buildings the overcrowding may be even worse than outside. It is not necessary to remind the reader of the findings of the Indian Industrial Commission of 1917 or of the Royal Commission on Labour of 1931, or the more recent report of the Health Survey and Development Committee (1946) which all pointed out the terrific overcrowding in the labourers' quarters in Bombay, Calcutta and similar industrial centres. The situation had not changed very much in 30 years as may be seen from the following quotation from the 1946 report:

"The filth and squalor which we saw in the ahatas of Cawnpore or the bustees of Calcutta are indescribable. A dark, dingy room of about 10 feet by 8 feet in size, built in such a manner that neither light nor air can enter it and

1 Census of India 1951, Vol. I, Part I-A, p. 56. The same figure approximately applied to Calcutta, but the situation was not the same everywhere. In Madras, for instance, it was as high as 921. Moreover, the 1961 Census showed that the proportion in Bombay had increased to 665 per 1000.
2 Walking through the busiest part of Dacca one morning between 10 and 11 a.m., the author saw innumerable men but 17 women only.