Class, Caste, and Production of City Space in India

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Abstract

In this paper, we show how space in Indian cities is produced through social cleavages like class, caste and religion. Existing publicly available sources of secondary data impose severe limitations on any attempt to incorporate space into meaningful analyses of Indian cities. For example, the widely used National Sample Survey database does not contain information on spatial units within cities. While the decennial Census does contain such information, some key variables (e.g. income, detailed caste groups and occupations) are missing. We therefore rely on a spatially representative city sample survey that we designed and administered (in the cities of Hyderabad and Mumbai) that overcomes these limitations. This paper focuses on the city of Hyderabad. We implement a class-analytic framework inspired by Marx, also incorporating some prominent features of cities in the developing world, most notably, informality.

Our key findings are as follows. First, class explains a substantial proportion of income inequality, more than caste and religion. Second, space itself explains a considerable proportion of income inequality. Third, in terms of the interaction (socio-spatial dialectic), we document three different notions of city space, and their interactions with the social cleavages discussed above. Fourth, and what we believe is a fundamental finding, is that while urban inequalities are stark and rising, spatial co-existence of various groups (e.g. castes, classes, formal and informal production) is also pronounced. We call this co-existence - “grayness” of Indian cities, and it is much greater than the same for cities in the developed world (in this sense, Indian cities are less segregated), and we hypothesize that it is both due to the layered historical process that Indian cities have gone through, and the particular nature of capitalism in India and more broadly the developing world that produces further layering. The explicit analysis of space provides a deeper implicit insight into the way neoliberal capitalism functions in urban India i.e., while contributing to higher inequality, neoliberal restructuring also primarily attempts to decimate grayness, and thereby increase segregation in Indian cities.

We present a theoretical model of production and residence in a capitalist city to formalize some of the above findings. The model is able to demonstrate different possible patterns of spatial coexistence, of which Indian cities conform to one kind. Overall, our analysis and findings underscore the key role that space plays in contemporary capitalism, particularly in Indian cities.