

# Urban Governance, diversity and social action in cities of the South

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## Institutions to Handle Cultural Diversity – On the essence of urbanity

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### Abstract

*The paper looks at the diversity of the prevailing cultural fabric in a Temple town in India (Puri) and a Sultan's town in the Sahel (Abéché). More precisely, it looks at some institutions which function as mediators in conflicts resulting from cultural diversity. It argues that the essence of urban life and of "urbanity" as seen by these populations is the (institutionally guaranteed) possibility to live cultural differentiation through conviviality.*

*In contrast, established political and economic interests at higher level tend to weaken mediating institutions and thus open the way to gate-keeper positions. Gate-keepers, in their search for individual profits, might be seduced to instrumentalise cultural conflicts at the expense of conviviality to the point of self-destruction. The study of autochthonous mediating institutions may show that they are essential for achieving the "good life for all", i.e. urban conviviality and solidarity.*

### What is urban?

The European concept of "urban" is dominated by economic considerations. This holds for the Weberian as well as the Marxian concept of "town". Civilisations have formed large and diversified settlements. The common denominator of all of them was, we were told, the search for material well being. The resulting tunnel view on scarcity, rational choice strategies and growth as an end in itself made us disregard the simple fact that each town not only is specific, but is proud to be so and to provide identity to its inhabitants. Our regard at economic data only seems to carry a blind spot as far as cultural data are concerned. Urban research and particularly urban planning is lacking a consistent theory of handling culture and all what goes with the concept of the "good life for all", i.e. the concept of conviviality<sup>1)</sup>. Conviviality does not necessarily mean affluence, but peace, well-being in self-awareness and trust in the future.

It seems that every known urban culture is an answer of its own – although preliminary and incomplete – to the quest for conviviality. In order to show that the problem is universal and to offer a fresh look, I have chosen cases of Indian and Sahel urbanity. I had the opportunity to become acquainted with these cultures to the degree just to be able to develop empathy and a feeling for their collective state of mind. So I could better understand certain reflections of previous observers of the respective cultural settings. But I also realized, that this approach had marginalized their studies in the current academic discourse.

Fortunately, this academic orthodoxy is challenged by the famous Chicago School and some others, too<sup>2)</sup>. They hold that

- diversity is primarily cultural before it becomes economic (if at all),
- continuity in diversity presupposes a kind of metastructure of institutions which mediate cultural conflicts,
- mediating institutions, in turn, presuppose ideals of conviviality and solidarity,
- the resulting process is self-organised and self-reinforcing in consolidating cultural entities;
- it treats these cultural entities as "selves" and may work unconsciously, but leads to the self-awareness of a collective "self".

Culture in this sense is more than artefacts and aesthetics, but includes handling of the “cognitive dissonance” between ideal and reality, the common good, conviviality and solidarity, and individual benefits. Consequently, mediating institutions are never perfect, but always in a rather precarious state.

### **Local cultures in historical perspective – a case from India**

I am not aware of a comprehensive in-depth study of the Indian urbanisation. Most aggregated accounts as well as case studies, although carrying a lot of information, shy away from specific cultural considerations<sup>3)</sup>. Although certain urban life-styles have an enormous impact, this is completely neglected. Religious practices in temple and pilgrims’ places e.g. have social, economic, spatial, architectural and spiritual repercussions which affect the life even of explicit “modern” towns, such as Chandigarh and Rourkela. In places of religious significance, like Varanasi, Pajad, Hardwar, Ujjain, Kanchipuram, Tirupathi everything including the economy is propelled by a thriving “religious tourism industry”<sup>4)</sup>.

Puri, on the North-Western coast of the Gulf of Bengal, is such a temple and pilgrims town of about 70 000 inhabitants. Situated on the way from Calcutta to Madras and dominating a large and fertile flood-plain it boasts of a history as the capital of the formerly far-reaching kingdom of Orissa. The present secular State of Orissa is ruled from Bhubaneswar<sup>5)</sup>, some 100 km north of Puri. Like the modern industrial town of Rourkela, some 200 km further, it draws attention to its post-independence urban setting. Puri, albeit its representativeness of traditional Indian urban life, has been studied (at least to my knowledge) only once, from 1971 to 1976 by a German-Indian team concentrating on ethnological aspects<sup>6)</sup>.

As a temple and pilgrim center Puri is second in India. Only Varanasi is more popular<sup>7)</sup>. But unlike that town, Puri’s history is petrified in some of the oldest and some of the most impressive Hindu temple structures on the entire continent. It was founded around 1000 AC when a royal dynasty (still present) dedicated a large temple precinct to Jagannath, one of the incarnations of the Hindu-God Vishnu. Connected with this was a ceremony of feeding the believers with rice from the God’s table, a feature which celebrates the revolution which went along with the introduction of rice cultivation. By 1230 AC the king in power reinterpreted his role by declaring Jagannath the factual ruler and himself his trustee only. This made rise and grow a swarming court of priests and temple servants attracting many high-ranking pilgrims in medieval times and an ever growing number of ordinary believers hitherto.

Since 1500, the Mughal lords and later the British formed a strata of rulers to arch the Hindu society, leaving the Hindu philosophy of ritual purity untouched. Thus the Hindu hierarchy of the four entities or “castes” (Brahmans, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra) continued to branch out into more and more sub-entities each defined according to the principle of endogamy. This splitting of the Hindu society gave rise to numerous conflicts making religion to become a mediator. In this respect, the ritual of food-sharing with its overtone of conviviality is particularly convincing. It remained unique in India. Due to the fact that under Mughal and more effectively under colonial rule, the prospects of travelling improved significantly, Puri came into the reach not only for nobles, landlords and tax-collectors but for nearly everybody in India. Today a core population of about 12,000 priests and temple servants and an auxiliary population of another 40,000 serve about 50,000 pilgrims on normal days and 100-200,000 pilgrims at the more important ceremonies, especially at the procession when the sculptures of God Jagannath, his sister and his brother take their annual wagon ride through the town.

In spatial terms, the immense temple precinct, 24 side temples, about 80 monasteries, 138 sacred sites and the residential areas cover about 150 ha only. The main landmarks are situated along the procession road. During the rest of the year, this is the boulevard of prestigious shops and residences with the residential area in the background. Like in other Indian towns, this urban fabric is subdivided into neighbourhoods, in Puri called “Sahi”. They form a patchwork, originally stratified along the crit-

eria of castes and occupations. Today the potter, carpenter, carriage-builder, leather-worker and other Sahis are difficult to identify. Only the settlements of the “scheduled tribes” are clearly segregated. However, nearly all Sahis, traditional or recent, especially those of the lower and derided communities are demarcated in the minds of their inhabitants organised. In the case of need, they are able to make themselves heard through their representatives. This is shown in a study on the Vadabalija fisherman community<sup>8)</sup>, but other observers, especially those of the Puri Research Project of the 70s disregarded this structure completely.

During my visit in 1996 I had a number of conversations with spokespersons of Sahis (some of the lower caste community representatives being women). Although rather in passing and brief these talks provided some insight into the prevailing mind concept concerning communal life. First of all there is a language problem. English as lingua franca of commerce and administration is not used to exchange ideas of community. Oriya, the local language, is somehow diversified according to caste and Sahi. Telugu and Hindi are spoken by immigrants, not all of them identifying themselves with the town. The same holds for Bengal, Tamil and some Adivasi dialects from the hinterland. There is little reflection on what languages imply, each communities lives on its own. The main obstacle for conceiving of all-embracing public goods, conviviality etc. and for developing empathy lies in the Hindu concern for personal salvation through ritual purity. The affection to one’s family, temple, caste or Sahi is subordinate to this. With respect to “good life for all” the Hindu asks who is “all”. Consequently, the idea of the home-town being part of one’s identity is rare in India and even rarer in traditional places like Puri. The standard reaction to complaints concerning the urban environment is to invite the plaintiff to participate more seriously in religious ceremonies and thus become and feel integrated. Conviviality boils down to participation in rituals.

The Puri research team found the temple personnel’s treating of the pilgrims in essence business-like, partly corrupt and rather cynical. In fact they act like market vendors. The difference is that a conventional market is organized and run by a body who is responsible for public order, access, water and electricity, cleaning etc., i. e. for public goods in general. As market for spiritual goods the Temple lacks such a body. It functions rather informally by means of conventions and routines. Its technical preconditions are established in an unconscious, evolutionary process. The organism as a system has no awareness of itself and is thus unable to react quickly and systematically to its failures, learn for its future and develop a kind of long-term perspective. The resulting “disorganisation” injures the well-being of the visitors, obstructs the Temple as a place of worship and impedes the local population in their role as suppliers of services and local products and as inhabitants who share their daily life with the visitors. The relative autonomy of the temple and the monasteries undermine the municipal corporation’s limited responsibilities. Puri as a secular community has no “self”, a fact which undermines the problem-solving capacity of the Sahi communities, too. A concept of the “common good for Puri” is nearly in-existent. What for reflecting on cultural conflicts of the different communities and on the diversity from which they derive?

This situation is aggravated by the fact that the State Ministry for Local Government in Bhubaneswar exercises important prerogatives in decision-making especially on public goods and facilities. The tricky situation is that if the State civil servants are aware of certain problems of concern in Puri and take action, they retract still more decision rights, capabilities and self-esteem from the municipality. And since their interventions tend to be bureaucratic and supported by coercion, they are bound to fail to hit the local needs.

As to the public authorities, the population finds itself confronted with acts which neglect their cultural diversity. As to the economy they find themselves helpless. “Modernisation” of the temple business could mean transforming the Temple into a religious Walt-Disney.type entertainment centre, at least when following certain examples in the USA and in Singapore,. The consequences would be to make the local population fall into complete poverty.

## Local cultures in historical perspective – a case from the Sahel

The precursor of Abéché, the town of Wara, was founded around 1720 AC by a local war lord with religious ambitions who then declared himself “Sultan”. The town consolidated quickly as a point of rest on the pilgrims’ trail from West Africa to Mecca. It also became important as collection post for trading goods coming from the African interior (ivory, ostrich feathers, slaves), point of departure and arrival for the caravan routes crossing the Sahara towards the Mediterranean coast and thus as market. Wara collapsed around 1850 because of environmental exhaustion. The Sultan, a grandson of the founder, decided to shift the entire population to a more promising site some 60 km south-east. This became the new town of Abéché. The ruins of Wara can still be visited. They provide an example of the pattern of urbanisation formerly common in the region South of the Sahara (rather neglected in the scientific discourse) <sup>9)</sup>.

Just a few years after its establishment Abéché was visited by the German explorer Gustav Nachtigal in 1873. He gave a detailed description both of Abéché and Wara <sup>10)</sup> noting in particular its arrangement of a large number of separate compounds. These “Zaribe” being complemented by corresponding irrigated gardens for subsistence farming were inhabited by clans or groups of people of the same provenance, immigrants of that time. This pattern is still in use in that region and, in Abéché, still recognizable in the field names. The Sultan as religious and secular leader took responsibility for peace and public order and the well-being of his subjects. This job demanded administrative skill, religious authority and – from time to time – heavy coercive power. He expected the headmen of the individual compounds to follow his example leaving room for them to continue living their own culture. <sup>11)</sup> The French, after conquest of the region in 1909, did not change this handling of diversity. They reinterpreted the regime to make political power to become vested in institutions such as the municipality, the Zaribé and offices of the general administrative set-up, but not in persons. Legitimation was no more derived from religion but from the peoples’ material well-being. Since independence this principle of impersonality, although neglected at National level in Chad like in so many other African States, remained adhered to in Abéché. This state of mind makes the local administration subject of repeated interventions by the National government until today <sup>12)</sup>.

The colonial pacification of the countryside along with the introduction of European technologies (above all, trucks and water pumps) had brought about the safe movement of people and goods, a considerable increase in agricultural production in exchange for imported mass products. In Abéché water distribution remained carried out by donkeys carrying water bags. Public services such as refuse collection were brought on the way and public infrastructure components like primary schools, the French-Arab Highschool, the Bilingual Teachers Training College, a hospital etc. were set up. New immigrants arrived. The density in the quarters increased and new ones were added. What used to be island-like hamlets of clans or condominiums of immigrants became multicultural Zaribes, each of them spreading until the whole formed a continuous fabric of mud-structures.

The 45 Zaribe headmen were called to form a “Technical Committee” to deal with matters of common concern like internal access, roads, refuse collection, schools and the rest of the technical infrastructure. In order to come to terms with conflicts arising from the differences in custom and faith the Sultan was replaced by a special “Ethnic Committee”. Both panels developed a clear profile of self-awareness. The Technical Council derived particular pride and self-confidence from its successful work in the years from 1961 to 1975. This was the period when real power was transferred to the municipalities and the local representatives were elected directly. A new National Government however, quickly withdrew the law fearing that efficient local governments might undermine its own legitimation. By contrast, the affairs of the “Ethnic Committee” were not touched. Its appointed members like the former director of the Teachers Training College, State Civil Servants, now retired in their home-town, a prominent businessman etc. were distinguished and polyglot alumni of the Abechois Franco-Arab College. The committee accumulated considerable reputation, because its decisions were transparent, less arbitrary and altogether wiser than those of the Sultan in the past. It

also brought along an element of collective reflection. Their deliberations helped to increase self-awareness at municipal level and at that of the various subgroups. This way they reinforced the various collective “selves” – always with a perspective of public goods, conviviality and solidarity.

I used my periodical visits to Abéché from 1979 to 1985 to relate such observations and extensive informal conversations with the local people to various (often empathetic) accounts of French visitors<sup>13</sup>). It emerged for example that the population – around 70,000 with a perspective of considerable growth according to the official statistics - was extremely volatile. In good times the number could rise to 80,000 (which is already at the limits of the carrying capacity of that oasis-like location), while at periods of drought the number could drop to under 40,000 to live on a consumption of 3 litres of water daily. Such observations call into doubt the concept of a stable population residing in a given location and especially small-scale population forecasts based on the blind logic of demographics. It would be nearer to the reality to conceive the family as a set of individuals consciously reacting to restrictions and opportunities by moving along a mushroom-like root-network of affiliations (family or other) sometimes spread over considerable distances, in the case of Abéché as far as Mali and Senegal.

My observations confirmed that people who had lived in different places or have the perspective of being able to do so are inclined to consciously choose their home-town and build up a strong identification with that place. Quite a number of residents and of Abéchois who are forced to live elsewhere, confess strong affection for and identification with Abéché, with their Zaribe, their groups of pairs, their occupation etc. This affection is not a zero-sum concept. On the contrary, identifications with different social entities and the individual “self” are mutually reinforcing.

With these concepts prevailing it was fairly easy to organise a number of community projects such as reintroducing refuse collection, installing a system of municipal land taxation, introducing development, initiating environment-conservation measures and organizing the collective fight against ecological degradation<sup>14</sup>). However, the increase in autonomous collective problem-solving capacity rose suspicion of the political and economic surroundings. The National Government outlawed all financial transactions of the municipality and tried to interfere in each and every technical project through its field agencies or by using corruption. More surprisingly, parastatal companies came in using political connections and outright corruption to slash local business. Even a foreign agency of development finance ( in this case not the Worldbank but the German KfW) overruled local objections, suggestions and actions to follow its own preconceived ideas. At the spiritual level fundamentalist Moslems had come from Sudan and Pakistan to preach a “purer”, a “truly universal” Islam. Naturally, all these external forces met strong resistance from the local population led by the Ethnic Committee. Significantly their assessment of the local reaction was identical: they classified it as backwardness and inertia and the enlightened and common goods-minded committee as obstinate opponent to global progress.

### **Institutions for managing cultural diversity**

My examples may have turned out to be not as exotic as announced. In fact, cases of informal settings and formal institutions which deal with cultural diversity, conviviality and community solidarity may be found everywhere: in Barcelona, Sao Paulo, Philadelphia, Johannesburg etc. Looking at the concept of cultural diversity generally one could think of a continuum between heavy conflict on one end and high cohesiveness on the other, on which the position of each particular case is fixed only temporarily, being subject to internal efforts and external forces.

There is no doubt that the cultural diversity which is meant here, is rooted in local communities. Such communities have been subject to considerable research. However, the commonplace that every big town is a conglomerate of villages, has been rarely proceeded to the point of asking what it means, in terms of politics and planning, to be a cultural conglomerate. One reason for this disregard may be found in the concept of culture as a set of artefacts and folklore; this is the ontological misunderstanding in view of the fact that culture is dynamic: life-style and its continuous reproduction. Another

reason lies in the (Western) bias of an exclusively material value system; this economicist misunderstanding neglects the individual's rootedness in a community – be it a local one or the scientific community, be it strong and premeditated or not. A further reason may be found in the fear that any emphasis on cultural diversity is an invitation to repulse, disunity and conflict; this reaction reflects the distrust of unity-seeking politicians in the fascination differences and fashions exert on people; this is the political misunderstanding. Finally there is an epistemological reason; to acknowledge cultural diversity is an act which presupposes on the part of the observer to accept his otherness, to define his role as an outsider being observed from the inside.

Furthermore, there is no doubt, that mediating bodies do exist. They may be informal like in Puri or go unobserved. Elections for example often function as unconscious mediating institution. Or mediating institutions have a high profile like departments charged with integration or the Ethnic Committee in Abéché. Why are these institutions so rarely regarded and reflected upon? For those who adhere to ontological, economic or political misconceptions such institutions go disregarded because they cannot see a need for them. The second reason may be that by fulfilling their function mediating bodies come into opposition with political, economic and spiritual entities of a higher order. By defending conviviality and solidarity at local level they curtail what some people at national or global level aim at: profitable gate-keeper positions. They have understood that the parlance of efficiency and rationality is not sincere and honest. In return they themselves are denounced as foolish, frivolous or childish self-interest especially by representatives of National Governments and spokesman of the economy. Evidence and affection may cause observers to take the side of the defenders of urban diversity. But I should warn my readers: taking sides in this sense may invite the scorn of those actually in power.

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