

## **Unit 17**

# **Traditional Neighbourhoods and Modern Cities**

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### **Learning Objectives**

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- explain the concept of neighbourhood
- assess the importance of neighbourhoods in modern cities
- explain more recent concepts like ethnoburb

### **17.1 Introduction**

From its inception Sociology gave importance to the analysis of social relationships.

With this tie between individual and family and between various families got prominence in Sociological literature. Scholars focusing on importance of groups in an individual's life also recognized the importance of neighbours. Neighbourhood is a community of families living in close proximity over a period of time and therefore influencing each other's life. In villages and small towns neighbourhoods provided a canvass of social

networks defining society at large. In large industrial cities neighbourhoods were seen as the microcosm of the larger world.

Today the social life of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is highly diversified. Do the metropolitan cities, global cities and world cities have any space for community ties and neighbourhoods? If yes, what kind of neighbourhoods would there be?

The title of this unit is 'traditional neighbourhoods, modern cities'. From modernist viewpoint, it was thought that with modernization, traditional neighbourhoods would be an anomaly. This unit tries to address some of the above mentioned issues in short. In a world defined by capital flows, information flows and cultural flows, how do individuals sustain socially? What are the defining principles of their community life? The time-space compression and immense mobility characterizes today's world cities and global cities. Then what is the nature of social networks?

## **17.2 Concept of Neighbourhood**

The Advanced Learner's Oxford Dictionary (1974, 1982) defines neighbourhood as 'people living in a district; area near the place'. According to Compact Oxford Dictionary and thesaurus, 'neighbourhood is a district within a town or city.' In Sociological literature, neighbourhood is 'a term used to describe localities in urban areas which are characterized by a common sense of identity and usually a common life style. (Lawson and Garrod: 2003, 178)

One of the very influential and popular schools of thought in urban sociology was the Ecological or Chicago school in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars like Park and Burgess, with the ecological orientation differentiated between localities within a city. Different kinds of land use, and the varied urban populations that occupied the city were

classified into separate areas. These “neighborhoods “ (Park 1915,580) or “natural areas” (Park [1929] 1952,196) had particular affinities or aversions to one another, resulting overall in an urban ecology- a spatial division of the city, that corresponds to the functional division of labor occurring within it. The examples of these areas were the central business district, exclusive residential areas, areas of heavy or light industry, slums, ghettos, immigrant communities, bohemians and “hobohemias” (Flanagan, 1999: 54).

Community studies, a sub-discipline of Sociology covered for a long time, empirical study of territorially defined communities like villages and urban neighbourhoods. According to Tuan Yi-Fu (1974), “‘Neighborhood’ and ‘Community’ denote concepts popular with planners and social workers. They provide a framework for organizing the complex human ecology of a city into manageable sub-areas; they are also social ideals feeding on the belief that the health of society depends on the frequency of neighbourly acts and the sense of communal membership.”

Charles Cooley, in his writings on ‘Primary group’ and ‘Secondary group’ where he discusses the development of the ‘Looking- glass self’ highlights the significance of the role played by neighbours in shaping the personality of individuals. Parents, neighbours and schoolmates are the three examples of primary groups that he offers. These according to him cast lasting influence on an individual due to their long term, close, direct, involuntary relationships characteristic of these groups.

The term ‘traditional neighbourhood’ denotes localities with ethnic enclaves or settlements of families with identical values, ideals and lifestyles. These are the places where relationships between neighbours are close, direct and intimate as opposed to the

idea of cosmopolitan heterogeneous urban settlements. The spatial features of these localities are imprinted with traditional architectural forms and practices.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the term neighbourhood suggested settlements of either the working classes or the bourgeoisie with similar occupational, economic and cultural background in major Western industrial towns.

### **Reflection and Action 17.1**

Observe the neighbourhood within which you are living. Do you think your neighbourhood is traditional or modern? Write down why it is traditional or modern keeping in mind the above description in about two pages.

Discuss your essay with other students at your study centre.

### **17.3 Neighbourhood Studies**

As Wellman and Leighton (1979:363) have pertinently argued, 'Urban Sociology has tended to be neighbourhood sociology.' What they meant by this was the collapse of urban sociology into study of small networks, direct social interaction and small scale studies of how sense of community evolves.

In social geography 'neighbourhood studies' signified an important branch, wherein study of specific localities with shared architectural forms and shared socio-economic and cultural features was undertaken. It was observed by these studies that certain neighbourhoods showed certain housing patterns and certain lifestyles. These studies were significant in the context of two factors: in the emerging Western industrial metropolitan cities, social commentators and Sociologists with functionalist orientation had predicted a loss of shared values. Secondly, neighbourhood studies falsified the

assumption that in modern cities ethnicity would lose its importance, as most of the neighbourhoods were based on race and ethnicity.

In the field of Urban Sociology, scholars belonging to the Chicago School took up neighbourhood studies. Looking at processes of adaptation and competition, they focused on creation of separate neighbourhoods on class lines. Some focused on ethnic ghettos and enclaves. These places were preferred destination of first generation immigrants. Ethnic links made occupational and social adjustments easier. For this purpose they undertook detailed observations for months together to create classic neighbourhood profiles. Participant observation, life history and survey were the preferred techniques. (Spates and Macionis, 1982:46,47)

Park, Burgess, and their followers contributed to the theoretical and methodological aspects of the new field called urban sociology. America witnessed emergence and expansion of many large cities in the beginning of the 20th century, and therefore, manifold study of the urban subject matter was a need of the hour. Also, it was believed that the American way of life was based on industrialization; human spirit of achievement and this modern urban world was expected to create new identity of 'modern human being'. In reality, however, ethnic enclaves emerged in all big cities of the world and social networks played a very important role alongside wealth and power. Burgess, in the analysis of his famous 'concentric zone theory', pointed this out. (Burgess, 1967: 50) The famous diagram illustrating the land use and distribution of population in Chicago city argued that manufacturing activities determined the nature of city life in America in the early 20th century. As the city grows it gets divided into sub-communities, which are spatially segregated into zones or sectors.

Wellman and Leighton (1979:363-90) discuss the reasons why neighbourhood studies substituted community studies. First, the neighbourhood provided itself as an easily accessible research site to urbanists. Secondly, neighbourhood was the building block of the city, which was the aggregate of many such neighbourhoods as per the ecological school. Third, administrative officials imposed their own definitions of neighbourhood boundaries while attempting to create bureaucratic units. Fourth, urban sociology's particular concern with spatial distributions had tended to be translated into local area concern. Fifth, many analysts have been concerned with the conditions under which solidary sentiments can be maintained. These scholars acknowledge the fact the genre of 'neighbourhood studies has produced hundreds of finely wrought depictions of urban life and they have given us powerful ideas about how small scale social systems operate in a variety of social contexts'.

Rex and Moore as Saunders (1981) observes it, took works of the ecological schools as the starting point of their theory. They argued that in the initial settlement of the city, three different groups, differentially placed with regard to the possession of property, become segregated from one another and work out their own community style of life' (1967, p.8). The upper middle class owning relatively large houses are located near the business and cultural centers, but away from the industries. The working class rents small terraced cottages are bonded by economic adversity with others in the same situation experience a strong sense of collective identity and mutual support. The lower middle class rent their houses but aspires the bourgeois way of life. These three groups signify not only three kinds of neighbourhoods, but also three different lifestyles and value

structures. Their occupational positions, access to property ownership and resultant consumption and cultural preferences are significantly different.

Rex and Moore, while forwarding their theory of space, focus on conflicts over housing. They point out that the direction of migration is from inner city area to outer limits of the city. Basing their analysis on the study of Sparkbrook in Birmingham they illustrate that working class neighbourhoods decline into 'twilight areas' with a concentration of the immigrant population. This happens alongside a parallel development: increasing desirability of suburban middle class housing for the lower middle class. As a result of this suburban spacious housing becomes a scarce commodity.

Community Studies is an academic area, which has concentrated on study of neighbourhoods. In most of the Western metropolitan cities neighbourhoods are organized around ethnicity. Hence community studies are conducted in neighbourhoods. Another sub-discipline, which focuses on neighbourhoods and their particularities, is Ethnic and minority studies.

Distinctive neighborhoods have well-defined boundaries that in a way isolate them from rest of the city. Especially suburbs with peculiar characteristics like luxurious housing and deteriorating slums; settlements of immigrants and ethnic ghettos get distinguished from other localities for a variety of economic and cultural reasons.

However, many scholars have questioned whether neighbourhood refers to a mental perception or a planning category? Suzanne Keller has shown that the concept of neighborhood is not at all simple. The administrator or planner may define it in terms of physical characteristics. But the resident's perception of the locality might be completely different.

As Tuan Yi-Fu (1974), puts it, the words “neighborhood” and “district” tend to evoke in the outsider’s mind images of simple geometrical shape, when in fact the channels of neighborly acts that define neighbourhood may be extremely intricate and vary from small group to small group living in close proximity. Moreover, the perceived extent of neighbourhood does not necessarily correspond with the web of intense neighbourly contacts.

The degree to which acknowledgement and assessment of a neighbourhood’s specificities depends on class of residents according to Tuan. It is observed that the extremely rich are more conscious of the boundaries of their physical territory as well as their cultural world. They devise ways to keep others away from their realm. Tuan states that ‘Middle class suburbanites can be even more sensitive of their territorial integrity, for their world, in comparison with that of the established rich, is more vulnerable to the invasion by “uppity” outsiders’ (Tuan: 1974, 75). He also observes that white immigrants from ethnic specific residential quarters are not as conscious of their territoriality and cultural identity as their coloured counterparts from slums for coloured population. This may be due to the fact the coloured population face hostility everywhere except in their locality.

Following the illustrious contributions of the theorists of Chicago schools with their detailed accounts of occupational and residential differentiation, neighbourhoods in Chicago were studied repeatedly by various scholars. Gerald Suttles (1968) in his study of a poor neighbourhood in Chicago, with various ethnic communities showed that there was a well-worked out social order based upon strong territorial identification. In a locality that Suttles called the “Addams Area,” growing numbers of blacks, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans slowly replaced Italians. Although each community had its



independent existence and ties, all ethnic groups shared territorial identification. In spite of tensions between ethnic communities, conflict and confrontation was avoided. Sometimes tensions between adolescents led to confrontations between Italians within and outside the neighbourhood. At such moments going beyond ethnic divisions, the entire neighbourhood got united against outsiders. Suttles (1972, 21-35) termed this as “defended neighborhood”.

Both Tuan (1974) and refer to Beacon Hill, Boston as a neighbourhood of those with exclusive access to peculiar kinds of residence, lifestyle and therefore a territorial boundary. While commenting on symbolism, imagery and perception of American cities, Tuan observes that Beacon Hill, Boston marked itself off from others by tradition, culture, social standing and economic power. He argues that though Beacon Hill matches ethnic quarters of some kinds, it is different in so far as it maintains its isolation through its presumed sense of superiority. Ethnic quarters, on the other hand take isolation to be the best means to cope up with threat. Beacon Hill began after the revolution as upper class suburbia. It was planned as a fashionable quarter for those with position and means. He compares Beacon hill with West End- another working class locality which sprang near Beacon Hill. The residents of the later neighbourhood were not aware of the territorial identity as those in Beacon Hill were. (Tuan:76)

#### **17.4 Neighbourhoods: Traditional and Modern**

Traditional neighbourhoods denote old parts of the city. In many American studies, these parts are referred to as ‘inner city areas.’ Immigrant population with low quality of amenities and dilapidated or deteriorating housing conditions, no governmental

investment, marks these localities. As the city grows the lower middle classes move out of the inner city areas and the new immigrants move in these dwellings with low rent. Architecturally, inner city areas show traditional styles and forms of using space. They facilitate older styles of interactions and social networks.

Middle classes and the rich population on the other hand inhabit outer city areas. These localities have more amenities, large plots of land, more services and are scarcely populated. These are more modern neighbourhoods with up-market styles and forms of spatial use. In some cities the traditional neighbourhoods have been preserved as architectural heritage sites. (In Sydney, for example, the old quarters have been turned into a tourist spectacle.)

As Sharon Zukin and others have pointed out cities in the post-modern era symbolize cultural spectacles. Discussing the case of Disneyland, she points out that parts of cities are now created, maintained and marketed as items of consumption. Cities showcase dazzling, grand architectural and material worlds, where viewers can interpret and reinterpret spatial reality in multiple ways. Cultural homogenization results from the standardizing impact of globalization imposing universal food, beverage and clothing styles.

In the global South, it is difficult to differentiate between traditional and modern neighbourhoods in the same way as in the U.S. of the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In Mumbai, for example, the older neighbourhoods with textile mills and lower class residences are recently converted into up-market malls and shopping areas. Here, the old defunct mill chimney exists along with plush multi-storied multiplex or mall. In many

south Asian cities, the inequalities between access to resources and livelihoods result in the simultaneous existence of polar worlds.

### **Reflection and Action 17.2**

On a weekend or holiday, take a trip to the surrounding colonies in your city town. (If you stay in a village then you may choose the nearby town). Find out the socio-economic status, occupation of the residents and infrastructural facilities available in at least three neighbourhoods. Are there people of different ethnic backgrounds living in the same colony, are rich luxury houses and small middle class residences found in same colony, etc.

Write a two page note on “My city /Town” based on the above findings. Share your report with other students at your Study Centre.

### **17.5 Neighbourhoods in Recent Times: Suburbs, Ethnoburbs, and so on**

In recent years works dealing with space, economy and culture have pointed out how ‘place internlised the market’ (Zukin: 1993) On the other hand, scholars like Sassen (2001) have theorized the ways in which the global economy is now controlled from a few cities, wherein financial services and speculative decisions are made. Though manufacturing is decentred through various continents, certain cities have emerged as ‘global cities’- global nodes of economic and technological flows. These writings have shown that local neighbourhoods are today influenced by transnational capital, technological and cultural flows (Zukin: 1993, Sassen: 1991, 2001). This means that study of urban phenomenon in terms of local community structures, territorially defined value systems would be irrelevant in the context of outsourcing and offshore production.

Anthony King (2005) has reiterated this in his recent book. He reminds us that suburbs meant an outgrowth of the city. “Today, however, in many cities round the world, there are not just sub-urbs but also supraurbs (suprurbs) or, alternatively, globurbs. By this we mean forms and settlements on the outskirts of the city, the origins of which – economic, social, cultural, architectural – are generated less by developments inside the city, or even inside the country, and more by external forces beyond its boundaries. The influences as well as the capital come from afar, either electronically, or physically, and not least through printed media.” (2005,97) he argues that today’s new kinds of suburbs sustain from outside state boundaries. Not just global forces generate these suburbs. Extending the concept of postcolonial globalization used by Hopkins (2002), he states, they are generated ‘more particularly, by those of imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, as well as the diasporic migratory cultures and capital flows of global capitalism- these are the postcolonial globurbs.’ (King: 2005, 97-103)

King sites the concept of ‘ethnoburb’ coined by geographer Wei Li. It means ‘suburban ethnic clusters of residential areas and business districts in large American metropolitan areas. They are multi-ethnic communities in which one ethnic minority group has a significant concentration but does not necessarily comprise a majority (Li Wei 1998: 479). This term was referred to describe San Gabriel Valley, in the eastern suburban area of Los Angeles County with more than 158,000 ethnic Chinese (from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and elsewhere), in 1990. This was the largest suburban Chinese concentration in the US. The ethnoburb, is ‘a new outpost in the global economy’, which emerges as an outcome of the ‘influence of international geopolitical and global

economic restructuring'. Changing national immigration and trade policies, local demographics, economic and political contexts also result in the making of an ethnoburb. He also discusses another category called Technoburbs (King: 2005, 106). Reflecting on the role of technologies in creating and maintaining suburbs, King refers to Silverstone and Robert Fishman (1987). Fishman comments on the 'new high technological post-suburbs growing along the edge of the old' and underscores "the home-centered nature of both physical and symbolic environments, as 'technoburb' and television promote their mutual interests, in their dependence on, and encouragement of decentralization (Silverstone 1997: 9)". It is through television that the ethnoburb is instantaneously linked with the 'countries of home', "the 'imagined communities' of ethnic recognition round the world"(King, 2005, 107). It acts as engines of suburban hybridization, reproducing in the process the 'ambiguities of modernity' (Silverstone 1997).

**Box 17.1      The Non Resident Indians**

It is observed that Indians in USA or UK tend to have close interaction with other Indians and Asians living there. They tend to celebrate their festivals; life cycle rituals, etc., within this close community. Most parents with grown up children prefer to arrange marriages of their children within their caste/ region and there fore often come to India for this purpose.

King's discussion of these contemporary processes shaping hybridities, bring to the fore transnational migrations, diasporic communities and decentralised production coupled with distantiated subjectivities.

## 17.6 Criticisms

As the discussion in the previous section illustrates, the phrase based on binary opposites of ‘traditional neighbourhoods in modern cities’ is not exactly relevant to describe or analyze contemporary urban phenomenon.

Earlier on in late 1970s itself, the tendency to associate urban neighbourhoods with communities was criticized. Wellman and Leighton (1979) have commented on the problems created by the entangling of study of community ties with neighbourhood in the following way:

1. The identification of a neighbourhood as a container of community ties assumes the a priori organizing power of space. This is spatial determinism.
2. The presence of many local relationships does not necessarily create discrete neighbourhoods.
3. The identification of neighbourhood studies with community studies may omit major spheres of interaction.
4. The focus on neighbourhoods may give undue importance to spatial characteristics as casual variables.
5. Many analyses have been over occupied with the condition under which solidary sentiments can be maintained. When not found in the neighbourhood, community is assumed not to exist.

These criticisms also hold true for the most part for the tendency to view traditional neighbourhoods in modern cities as repositories of ‘close, direct relations, the souls of the soul less cities’. Today residents of a neighbourhood might not attach territorial markers of identity as closely as they would attach other kinds of markers, for example, certain

kinds of music, participation in particular kinds of activities, etc. Moreover, there would be simultaneous emergence of multiple identities or switching from one marker to another. The geographical unit of space is not the solitary determinant of identity, lifestyle and ties.

## **17.7 Conclusions**

As mentioned above, today it is hard to find ‘traditional’ neighbourhoods in terms of architectural form and style except a few heritage sites or preserved neighbourhoods. The crucial question that students of urban sociology need to ask is whether a dichotomous pairing of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ can prove to be a viable analytical tool in the first place. Tradition is always a relative category – in terms of time and space. Modernity is also relative to time and space and is defined dynamically. The title ‘traditional neighbourhoods in modern cities’ poses a number of epistemological and methodological questions.

Without going into the details of the discussion of these aspects, we can certainly conclude that in contemporary metropolitan and non-metropolitan cities throughout the world intimate ties between neighbours are observed. But this does not mean that all neighbours share direct, intimate relations; neither does this suggest that intimate relationships can be sustained by territorial boundaries alone.

At the same time, there is enough evidence to suggest that neighbourhoods are not only geographical or administrative units imposed on maps; but many of them represent certain value structures, class-specific lifestyles and consumption preferences. In the developing world, these peculiarities are even more complicated by internal hierarchies of class, caste, race and gender.

In the first half of this century ecological school theorists believed in homogeneous structuring of neighbourhoods. Today, it will be adventurous to state so.

### **17.8 Further Reading**

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