

UNWINDING CHAOS

OPERATIONAL STRUCTURE OF ASIAN CITIES

Semi-urban areas – The quiet participants

Rise of the west in the nineteenth century following the industrial revolution catapulted Western Europe and North America to the top of world economy. It pushed the Asian countries who were leading the engine of global GDP upto that point into obscurity. Advent of globalization and networked knowledge has brought Asia to the forefront of economic activities once again. Asian cities are becoming the centers of political and economic power world over (Lin & Rosenblatt, 2012). Countries like India were left far behind after the end of colonial rule and had huge ground to cover in terms of socio-economic development. Although it's the rural and semi-urban areas where the vast majority of the population still lives, emphasis has been put on the development of urban centers to boost the economy. Excessive centralization of industries and economic activities in large cities has created a major wealth gap between the urban and rural population (Shaw, 1996). While these urban centers have become the representatives of modern India, it is the relatively insignificant smaller cities like Kota that have been the quiet but active participants in India's growth story. Despite having been neglected in the due course, these cities have managed to significantly reduce the wealth by invigorating economic activities on their own.

Owing to its complex and diverse socio-economic structure, India has traditionally been a region where the society is stronger than the forces governing it. Constituting diverse

smaller groups with different ways of thinking and world views, it is a time consuming process to find workable solutions that are acceptable to large parts of society, if not all.

“You’ll have protesters, you will have people refusing to sell their land, they’ll be going to court over compensation and entitlements, the leftist parties will show up with red flags. Bollywood stars will come and conduct hunger strikes. However, it does mean that when change comes, everyone has been eventually brought along. It has been messy, untidy, it’s been problematic, there has been dissent but everyone comes along and the system moves.” (Tharoor, 2016)

As a result, setting the wheels of urban development in motion through government policies and organized efforts has historically proven to be less effective. What ensures the continued development of urban areas despite lack of effective policies is their operational structure which helps maintain a resilient approach towards constantly evolving urban landscape, without overtly relying on political or economic stability. The operational structure of these societies is a bond between sections of society with different world views and motivations but a common goal. It is this structure that starts the process of adaptation and active participation of society to the initiative taken by individuals within the society. It has historically enabled them to thrive and grow by adapting to the new normal established by the constantly evolving economic and political landscape.

In the crowded horizon of changing urban conditions, Kota stands out as a unique example owing to the fact that it has been in the process of constant re-invention over

the last five decades which has enabled the city to avoid getting thrown into economic decline on multiple occasions.

Inception – Rise of an industrial town

Situated in Rajasthan state, Kota used to be a traditionally agrarian town that was also known for its mining and handloom industries. Not having witnessed a major change in its economic activities upto that point, the town was stranger to the ideas of immigration, cultural mix and infrastructure development.

While major trade and commercial centers have been present in India since the earliest stages of civilization, a vast majority of its expanse is home to small towns and rural areas where societies are homogenous and adhere to very strong control over social behavior and economic activities. Businesses related to locally available resources such as metal ores, local crops or inherited skills have defined the identity of these areas for the longest time. But unlike major cities, attempts to introduce economic activities that are different from those being practiced traditionally are often met with stern opposition from the local populace.

Although reasons may vary from environmental to cultural, lack of respect to local communities' social fabric and traditions lie at the bottom of opposition as proposed changes from the governments are seen as imposing (What went wrong at Singur?, 2007). Journey of Kota is noteworthy in the fact that although it had never been known for anything other than its long standing tradition of agriculture, mining or handloom, the society welcomed cement, polymer and chemical industries with open arms and allowed the town to become one of the biggest industrial hubs in Central India.

The arrival of industries caused the first major shift in the identity of the town as its economic structure changed in unprecedented ways. Giant industrial buildings, gated communities and changing picture in the real estate gave a new architectural identity while the influx of migrant workforce weaved a new socio-cultural fabric. Large number of immigrant population resulted in a cultural mix and assimilation. Increased number of opportunities brought in by the industries increased the social mobility which is rarely observed in towns like Kota. Actively involving in the new economic framework, the society was able to mold itself within the changing urban identity rather than being a silent observer of this change. Looking at this transformation as a lens to study the changing socio-economic pattern, it is noticeable that the evolution of a homogenous agrarian society into an industrial town with complex economic activities can only be realized by the society's operational structure that is resilient towards changing socio-economic patterns and not necessarily by the governments' efforts to do so.

End of the beginning

Kota's Industrial era was the beginning of the set of events it has experienced since independence. We live in a world of relentless change and as the advent of globalization, poor handling of issues and internal troubles caused major industries to shut down in Kota, it sent the town in economic disarray in the early to mid 1990s (Sharma, 2019).

Kota's loss of identity as 'Kanpur of Central India'¹ stands as a testimony to the negligence faced by small towns in the post independence era. Because although initial efforts were made by then chief minister of state Mohan Lal Sukhadia for the industries to set up their plants in Kota in the 1960s, the town never enjoyed a sustained effort from political leadership to build on its potential by providing necessary infrastructure and policies that would attract other industries in the years that followed.

The prosperous industrial town was in reality dependent on the industries' ability to keep functioning on their own. Kota did not evolve as an industrial hub which was equipped with infrastructure and environment favorable for new industries and projects to make it their home. Infrastructure projects like construction of Greenfield airport have not yet seen the light of day (Dave, Nagaraj, Pande, Kazmi, & Maheshwari, 2005). Attempts to revive rapidly closing down industries failed repeatedly and new players to replace the existing ones never arrived owing to the absence of favorable conditions.

“For realistic assessment of urban policy in this country since independence, one must keep in mind the fact that much of what has been written on paper has remained ineffectual on the ground or at least has not affected a large part of the urban environment. Here I am referring to the small towns and non-metropolitan areas which for all practical purposes have grown on their own and in their own way.” (Shaw, 1996)

¹ Kanpur is a city in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh which has long been considered as epicenter of Industries in North India. Kota was called 'Kanpur of Central India' due to the significance it gained in the industrial sector of Central India.

Turning Point – Towards knowledge based economy

As the decline of industries was becoming apparent, Kota stood at the doors of a certain economic decline. But beneath the chaos of shutting down industries, unemployment and uncertainty, a new economic activity was taking roots in the town. The industries in their death had left behind a vast number of qualified professionals who in order to make ends meet started looking elsewhere for opportunities. When local students are coached by Prof. V.K. Bansal, a former JK Synthetics employee began succeeding in competitive exams, Kota quickly grabbed the attention of students outside the town (Mishra, 2009).

In an uneven economic landscape of India, most people in their lifetime earn only enough to educate their children and take care of themselves in old age. Holding an engineering degree means lucrative job offers and taking financial burden off of parents' shoulders for most of the students. Indian students therefore, are more inclined towards engineering studies than any other profession. As the success rates of engineering aspirants increased, Kota attracted students from across the country.

With increased number of students and soaring success rates, Kota saw the rise of hundreds of coaching institutes that sold the dream of entering into India's premier engineering colleges. Reeling under the burden of the recent economic downturn, residents of the town responded to the fast growing number of students and immediately aligned themselves with the coaching industry providing accommodation, food and other affiliated services to hundreds of thousands of students that arrived

every year. The quick turnaround led to the formation of an economy that built its identity as the 'Coaching Hub of India' in early 2000s.

The architectural and social transformation experienced by the city is an outcome of the bond between segments of society that have different motivations but a common goal. Coaching institutes attracted aspiring students to the city and invigorated the economic activities. But it was the social acceptance to the large floating population of students and infrastructure provided by the people of Kota that allowed the current economy to form in order for it to grow into the much sought after coaching hub.

As the old industrial parts of the city have slowly turned into the ghastly skeletons of its industrial past, large coaching institutes, hostels, restaurants, once small houses that now double as affordable accommodation and meal service centers have replaced them as the architectural representatives of Kota. Large advertisements, streets lined with shops that cater to students' requirements and urban spaces thus formed, define the way urbanism is experienced in the city today. Hosting students, intellectual work force and migrant laborers from all over the country, Kota can be seen as a geographical meeting point of cultural diversity. The architectural, demographic and cultural normal established by the economic identity of the city reminds of the ever changing nature of cities.

Its organic growth in the recent years born out of increasing demand from its coaching economy is not collinear with an urban planner's idea of a city. Having developed without any design, it lacks geometric logic. Seemingly ineffective from a planner's perspective, it is something that has happened through processes of informality rather

than an administrative logic. Although it may seem inept and inadequate on surface, it is functional but just enough to allow smooth running of activities.

This shift in economic activity from 'labor based' to 'knowledge based' however, cannot entirely be attributed to the need to achieve economic stability. Advent of industries decades ago had allowed the population to culturally socialize and mould itself into a resilient and productive society governed by prospects of social mobility, vulnerability and survival. It was this particular quality that helped Kota to accept and assimilate the floating population that has kept the economy afloat.

A city with dual identity

Kota's transformation from a dying industrial town laden with economic troubles to a booming educational hub is a result of the initiative taken by those within the society and active participation by the society to revive itself. In the absence of economic stability, active government policies and resources, Kota has been able to pull itself out of difficult situation and change the socio-economic, architectural and geographic identity when the society actively took charge of its economic revival.

Swollen to a city of over 1 million inhabitants, Kota exists today as a city with dual identity. While a large part of the city still identifies itself as an industrial town going through tough times, others see it as a booming educational hub. While a part of society has let go of its industrial past and is striving to maintain Kota's status as the coaching hub of India, efforts to revive the industry are still underway and industrial revival still remains a major political issue in the region. But even in the identity crisis that it faces, the city has managed to avoid getting thrown into obscurity.

Governments and private stakeholders' areas of interest tend to be cities that enjoy interconnected geographies, geographic potential and infrastructure. These factors play the most important role in determining feasibility and long term growth of economic activities. This has historically led to the growth prospects of cities and their geographic locations being collinear. Kota's growth story is unique in a fact that it was the geographic location of the town and availability of resources that allowed the industries to make their way to Kota. But the coaching industry that emerged as a response to economic decline made Kota a prominent geographic location. The effectiveness of Kota's coaching culture has allowed the relatively ill-equipped third tier city to be the most sought after destination for the brightest students and connected the town geographically and culturally to all corners of the nation.

Kota's emergence as a coaching hub goes much beyond reviving its own economy. Contribution made by a vast number of qualified professionals in the nation's economy can be traced back to the time spent by them in Kota. This magnanimous impact made by a city going through an economic downturn showcases the ability of a society to carve a niche for itself on the grand stage of economic and geographic landscape without outside help.

Coaching economy – a mixed blessing

Although Kota has emerged through long periods of uncertainty, the city stands as a paradox in the vista of rapid social and economic transformation. Even after developing a knowledge based economy, education in Kota continues to remain a shadow education industry. Even after having become a significant geographic location in the education sector, no major educational institutes or universities have been established in the city which can solve the issue of economic uncertainty in a sustainable manner. The role of existing schools and colleges is reduced to nothing more than a legal necessity. As world has become more connected, India is witnessing a rise of coaching hubs based on 'Kota Pattern'² across its expanse which threatens its status.

The economic growth brought in however, is not without unintended outcomes and coercions. Rising student suicides call for a reassessment of its coaching culture (Poonam, 2016). Farmers' distress, shrinking number of skilled handloom weavers and lack of strong representation has been a major electoral issue for decades. The revival of closed down industries still appears to be a distant dream. In a bid to revive and boost its economy, the pre-existing problems have lingered for a long time without any real solution and traditional economic activities have been neglected in favor of coaching. Limited by the lack of government policies and framework to sustain its economic well being, Kota continues to be a city that experiences economic boom and trouble at the same time.

² An informal term frequently used to address the coaching system in Kota that emphasizes on rigorous routine of studies and periodic tests to prepare students for competitive exams

A view of the forthcoming

Predicting the future is a futile exercise as our vision of the future tends to be limited by our knowledge of the present. However, a closer look at the recent developments provides a small window to look at the direction the city might be heading into. Students' suicides have drawn attention from all over the country and have become a harsh reality that can no longer be separated from Kota's identity. The concerns raised over it are now calling for an upgrade in the city's coaching culture and architecture by incorporating recreational activities and better living conditions to bring down the stress levels of students. This may revolutionize the culture of education in India that has always been a subject of criticism.

Although at a much smaller scale than before, industries continue to exist in Kota and a small group of industrialists views the city's student population as a contributing force to research and development work owing to their science background (Edwin, 2019). If implemented effectively, the city could emerge as a meeting point of educational and industrial worlds, intertwining two different economies together. It may help revive its industries and add another facet to the culture of education while instilling entrepreneurial spirit in the students at an early age. Speculative as it may be, the future economy thus formed could emerge as a never seen before kind of model.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inadequacy of Indian cities and Kota is no exception. The lack of infrastructure to support and sustain the migrant population has resulted in large scale exodus of students and migrant workers from the city and Kota stands at the doors of economic decay one more time (Kota student issue solved, focus now on migrant workers: Geh .., 2020). Distance learning and online coaching

may become the new normal established in the post COVID-19 era. Apart from the competitive environment that creates favorable conditions for students to focus on studies, it is the coaching model of Kota that makes it the first choice of students across the country. Kota based coaching institutes could continue to further their influence through online programs and continue to be the center of the coaching economy which could present an opportunity for the city to achieve distributed urbanity.

In a nutshell

It is unfair to view and fit a city like Kota into the concepts of 'First world' and 'Third world' cities, considering the circumstances under which it functions. The study of this particular urban condition tells us that Kota's constant reinvention of itself, although unique, is not an isolated example. It is the story of a socio-economic and cultural transformation of urban landscape all over India. Although the diverse social structure makes policymaking a difficult and lengthy process, the deep rooted respect for different world views ensures that whenever change occurs, it occurs as an inclusive change that addresses all segments of the society. Despite all the differences in ways of thinking and world views, segments of Indian society have bound themselves together with the operational structure that allows them to find solutions that may not be ideal but ensure that city living and urban conditions continue to evolve for the better without losing time to wait for structured inclusive change to occur.

As we travel through time, we are beginning to uncover the operational structures of Indian societies and the process of policymaking is getting easier and more effective. Although the driving forces behind the transformation are seen everywhere, Kota itself

is a unique example as its survival and growth is ensured by an island economy that cannot be adopted everywhere. But as an entity unknown to the outside world, the city perfectly embodies the narrative of India's arrival on the global stage. Unlike mega cities such as Mumbai or Bengaluru that are seen as representatives of Modern India, Kota is a brand that signifies the values of hard work, tenacity and adaptability. It stands in stark contrast with the conventional model of global cities for it is far from perfect and chaotic on surface. But beneath this surface lies an operational structure that enables it to take small steps towards perfection.

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