

Introduction

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The concept of quality of urban life emerged during the late 1960's and early 1970's when the environmental crisis became a major national issue around the world. Since then the environmental psychologists are interested in the patterning of relationship between the human behaviour and the experience in relation to physical settings. The very nature of urban life, its people, social groups, institutions, activities, objectives and goals, requires that the concept of quality be a multidimensional one which subsumes a host of specific definitions varying in meaning and the extent of their application to the city and the inhabitants.

Urbanization served as an index of modernisation. Today, urbanization in the poor countries results much more from uncontrolled population growth and declining opportunities in over-populated rural areas. The continuous and swelling flow of people from countryside to city in the poor countries like India is creating a serious social crisis which affects the quality of life of the inhabitants. Urban pull has been replaced by rural push. Increasingly, urbanization is serving as an index of frustration and as an indicator of potential explosiveness of the urban slums being created the growth of slum*

*The master plans prepared for the cities, specially in India, have not provided for adequate land for people engaged in the informal service sector with the result that the poor are forced to squat on whatever vacant land is available. And given a total absence of organisation, the slum quickly becomes a living habitat where there is overcrowding, lack of sanitation, unsatisfactory drinking water supply, inadequate ventilation and poor civic services(Appendix-I).

is, however, inevitable. Since the metropolitan cities have a concentration of industries, offices and commercial establishments, migrants and the urban poor are unable to afford exorbitant market rents and are forced to live in slums.

Rapid urbanization in developing countries like India has thus brought enormous problems of housing shortage and even deteriorating quality of housing characterised with highly densed condition also. Hence, such countries have a special stake in the issue of crowding especially on the psychic and behavioural consequences of continued living in overcrowded settlements (specially in slums). There are certain significant reasons that distinguish crowding phenomena in developing countries - some of those features are as follows :

- (1) Constant and high rate of migration from rural areas to the prime city or other metropolitan areas. It is estimated that 35 to 60 percent of population increase in cities of developing nations are attributable to migration (Carstairs, 1984).
- (2) High level of unemployment and underemployment in the cities of developing countries.
- (3) Low level of housing supply in the urban areas (Absher and Lee, 1981).

- (4) The percentage of people living in single room and two-room dwelling units increasing and the percentage of people living in more spacious rooms is decreasing (Lin, 1983).
- (5) Land value constitutes a major portion of house building cost in most cities of the third world.
- (6) Occupancy rate (no. of people living per dwelling unit or per room) has been increasing rapidly.
- (7) While need for housing in the cities has been increasing considerably, effective demand for housing does not rise proportionately due to the poor purchasing power of people in developing countries (Report on L.C. Housing, Govt. of India, 1977).

The above facts indicate how overcrowding has become a somewhat universal problem in urban centres of most major cities of developing countries specially in India. It is only a common sense observation that people live under such high-density slums and mostly in low-quality environments not by personal choice but out of economic necessity. Overcrowding and environmental stress is mostly the price people pay for survival and for the satisfaction of the basic needs like food and clothing. Therefore,

there is an existence of situational force exercised on the people living in such conditions. The psychological and social impacts of such a "force" have captured the attention of social scientists, only recently.

The important question whether "living in high-density housing or living in overcrowded slum condition is harmful" is now being asked by social scientists in various fields including environmental psychology. Answer to this question is of far-reaching implications in understanding the environmental vicissitudes of human species in its constant struggle for survival and further evolution into higher and more creative level of existence. If highly densed or overcrowded slum environments are inflicting irreparable psychic damage to a large portion of existing group of human beings then there is sufficient reason for the social scientists to be deeply concerned with the problem.

Therefore, effects of high-density living in slum on human behaviour has been a topic of much interest to researchers in various fields like biology, criminology, sociology, anthropology, geography and psychology. Besides these professions like designers and city planners, social workers and journalists have found the issue quite relevant to their respective fields of practice.

In such context the present investigation is only an initial exploration into the vast and mostly untrodden field of "psychological dynamics of adaptation" to extreme density living conditions of slum neighbourhoods of the Calcutta city. The following significant questions are very much pertinent in this regard :

What are the direct effects of environmental stressors on human health and well-being, and what are the effects of coping with environmental stressors ? In order to seek some answers to the above note of interrogations a comparative study has been made here in terms of social and psychological effects on inhabitants who are living in slum and non-slum regions of Calcutta atleast for the last ten years.