

## If I were to study a City... Govind Singh, Delhi Greens

If I were to study a city, I suppose I would first ask myself a rather simple question: *which city?* Or perhaps an even better question: *which part of the city?* For no city is one place. Every city is many cities at once. There are old neighbourhoods that carry memories of centuries, new colonies that appeared almost overnight, bustling markets, quiet residential lanes, industrial estates, university campuses, parks, wetlands, riverbanks, slums, gated communities and villages that have somehow remained villages even as the city grew around them... aka *urban villages*.

A city is not merely an agglomeration of buildings and roads; it is a living ecological system. Every city has its own geography that quietly shapes its destiny. There may be a ridge that directs the winds, a river that once gave birth to the settlement, floodplains that absorb the monsoon, lakes and wetlands that store water, forests and groves that moderate the microclimate and countless urban and semi-urban villages that remind us that the city did not emerge on empty land. I would therefore try to understand not only what the city has built, but also what it has inherited from Nature, and what it has chosen to forget.

Which commons have survived? Which have disappeared beneath concrete? How do birds, butterflies and other creatures find space amidst the bustle? Does the city still remember the ecological foundations upon which it was established? For unless we understand these relationships, we risk mistaking the city for a machine when, in reality, it behaves much more like a living organism whose health depends upon the well-being of all its interconnected parts.

Before I go any further, I would first like to know the true expanse of the city. Where does it really begin, and where does it end? Administrative boundaries may draw neat lines on maps, but cities rarely respect them. A city often extends far beyond its municipal limits into neighbouring villages, satellite towns, industrial estates, agricultural fields and forests. It is helpful to find the administrative map of the city and look for municipal "urban" zone or zones, the actual city, and its peripheral semi-urban and rural parts. While looking at this map, find out how many districts make up the city, and to what extent, in case there are more than one.

All the while that I am trying to understand the city limits, I remain mindful that the city spills beyond its municipal zones and district boundaries. Its people commute across invisible lines every day, its water arrives from distant catchments and its waste travels far beyond its limits. Even its food comes from villages hundreds of kilometres away just like its electricity comes from faraway power stations. To understand a city, I should also understand the larger region that sustains it and is, in turn, transformed by it. A city is not just its physical landscape, it includes the much larger ecological and social landscape that keeps it running.

I think I would choose a city that I know little about. Familiarity often convinces us that we understand a place when, in fact, we merely recognise it. A new locality would force me to observe carefully rather than assume. Before setting out, I would locate it on a map -- not merely to find my way, but to understand where it lies in relation to mountains, hills, rivers,

forests, highways, railway lines, airports and other neighbouring towns & cities. I would want to know how one reaches there, and what are the different ways of making that journey, and what are some areas where I can explore hotels & related accommodations falling in my budget!

Whenever I arrive in a new city, I become curious about its past. How did this place come into being? Was it once a village that organically evolved into a town, and later, a city? Or was the city settled by someone on a farmland, forest, floodplain or an industrial area? Or a mix of both? Who lived here before? Who lives here now? What stories do people tell about different parts of the city? Cities rarely erase their histories completely; they merely layer one history upon another. A careful observer can often read those layers in the names of streets, old trees, forgotten wells, shrines, monuments, markets and even in the direction of narrow lanes that existed long before modern roads arrived.

Then I would shift my focus to the most obvious inhabitants of the city: Humans! How many people call this city home? How steep is the decadal population graph? Who has lived here for generations and who arrived only recently? Are there migrants? Students? Workers? Families that have prospered? Families struggling to make ends meet? Who owns their homes, and who rents? What languages and dialects do people speak? What festivals do they celebrate? Do the neighbours know one another? Or do they hardly know each other at all?

Cities often give us the illusion that everyone lives independently. Yet beneath that appearance lie countless invisible relationships. Someone cleans the streets before dawn. Someone delivers milk, newspapers and vegetables. Someone repairs electric wires, someone drives buses, someone runs a roadside tea stall, someone collects waste, someone guards apartment gates through the night. Every neighbourhood depends upon people whose lives we often overlook. If I were studying a city, I would want to understand these relationships that quietly keep urban life functioning every single day.

I have always found landscapes fascinating which includes urban landscapes. Buildings, roads, parks, lakes, drains, markets, schools, hospitals, temples, mosques, churches, gurudwaras, flyovers, metro stations, playgrounds and vacant lots all become parts of a city's landscape. Yet none of these exists in isolation. Every building casts a shadow somewhere. Every road tells two stories; it connects places and people, but it also divides landscapes. Every park attracts birds, insects and people differently. Every market generates livelihoods, traffic and waste.

I would therefore try to understand the city's ecology. Where does the water come from? Is it sourced from rivers, reservoirs or underground aquifers? Where does rainwater go? Does it disappear into the ground, or rush through drains carrying plastic and sewage before entering a river? How many water treatment and sewage treatment plants does the city have? Are there ponds, lakes or wetlands that still survive? If so, how are they treated? If not, what replaced them?

Then there are trees. Which species are growing more frequently in the city? Are they native or exotic? Who planted them? Which birds nest in them? Which butterflies visit them? Which trees are cherished by residents, and which are considered inconvenient because they shed

leaves or obstruct parking spaces? One often learns as much about people by observing how they treat trees as by asking them questions. I would also keep my eyes open for life that many people ignore. Sparrows nesting under roofs, kites circling above markets, bats emerging at dusk, monkeys adapting to city life, stray dogs claiming territories, ants, spiders, dragonflies after rain, mushrooms appearing on old logs, all these are fellow inhabitants of the city. Cities are not merely human settlements, they are also urban ecosystems.

Then there is waste. Every city produces mountains of it every day. But where does it come from? Who collects it? Who separates it? Who recycles it? Where does what cannot be recycled finally go? Waste tells us a great deal about consumption, inequality and responsibility. One person's discarded object may become another person's livelihood.

Cities are also places of work. I would therefore want to know how people earn their livelihoods. Some work in offices, some in factories, some run shops, some teach, some drive taxis, some repair mobile phones, some cook food for others, some stitch garments, some sell vegetables and many work in occupations that are scarcely recognised despite being indispensable. How secure are these livelihoods? How far do people travel? How much time is spent commuting? How does the city reward different kinds of work? And who remains invisible despite making the city possible?

Suppose I were to live here. Where would I buy my food? Where would my drinking water come from? How would I travel to work? If I fell ill, where would I seek treatment? Where would children play? Would I walk comfortably through these streets? Would an elderly person? Would a child? Would a person using a wheelchair? Could I breathe clean air? Would I hear birdsong in the morning, or only traffic? Asking such questions transforms observation into understanding.

What about governance? People often blame "the authorities" whenever something goes wrong. But who are these authorities? Which institution maintains roads? What about human safety? Who looks after parks? Who manages water supply? Who protects lakes? Who regulates construction? Who decides whether a tree should be cut or conserved? How do citizens participate in these decisions? Do they participate at all?

Equally interesting is how people themselves organise. Do residents' associations function? Are there community groups? Are young people involved in improving public spaces? Do neighbourhoods come together during festivals, emergencies or environmental campaigns? Does anyone remember the old pond that once existed here or the grove that disappeared? Are there people trying to restore such places?

If I visited this city twenty years ago, what would I have seen differently? Would the skyline be the same? And what about twenty years from now? Will this city remain liveable? Will trees survive? Will groundwater remain? Will public transport improve? Will people know their neighbours? Will future generations inherit a healthier city? These are not merely environmental questions. They are questions about justice, memory, resilience and hope.

As I move through the city, I would remind myself that every observation is incomplete. What I see in one morning may not be true in another season. A street crowded during the day may

become deserted at night. A dry drain may overflow during the monsoon. A park full of walkers at dawn may belong to children by evening. Cities constantly change, and therefore they must be studied patiently. How would I carry out such a study? I doubt there is any one single method.

I would walk. I would walk slowly and often. I would sit in tea stalls, parks and bus stops. I would listen more than I speak. I would talk to shopkeepers, sanitation workers, security guards, schoolchildren, gardeners, street vendors, municipal employees, historians, environmentalists and long-time residents. I would sketch maps. I would note sounds, smells and seasons. I would photograph only after I had truly looked. I would read whatever history I could find about the place. I would compare old maps with new ones. I would revisit the same places at different hours and in different seasons. Most importantly, I would share what I learnt with the people who live there, for they are the true custodians of the city's knowledge.

And if, after all this, I realise that the city is far more complex than I first imagined; if I discover that every answer leads to many more questions; if I become a little less certain and a great deal more curious, perhaps my study has succeeded. For the purpose of studying a city is not merely to know the city. It is to learn how to observe, how to ask better questions, how to understand the intricate relationships between nature and society, and ultimately, how to become a more thoughtful citizen of the place we call home.

*Inspired by Deep Joshi's essay, "If I were to Conduct a Village Study..."*