



From the Village to the (New) City: New Town Design in Twentieth Century India

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This paper begins with an examination of how rural and urban society in India were conceptualized in relation to one another at different moments during the twentieth century, arguing that rapid urbanization during the middle decades forced important changes in those conceptualizations. If in an earlier period analysts saw the world of the village dweller as radically separate from that of the urban dweller, then rapid urbanization destabilized this idea and forced analysts to entertain the implications of there being a kind of “sliding scale” between the two. This discursive shift helped produce a new object of concern in urban sociology—that of the “villager in the city.” While this sociological object formed the core of numerous mid-century (and later) studies of existing large cities, “the villager in the city” played a more determinate role as a priori grounds for new town proposals than it did for perhaps any other model of urban growth. Despite often being seen as an emblem of South Asia’s modernity—one thinks of the role played by cities like Jamshedpur, Chandigarh, or Islamabad in nurturing this view—the new town idea was theoretically and socially conservative. New towns promised to nurture “inherited tendencies and habits” in their first-generation urban migrants, rather than force new modes of urban subjectivity. Like a number of other “modern” forms in twentieth-century India (including cinema, the novel, and modern party politics) new towns were designed in part to recapitulate the India village, or at least much of its social—if not physical—framework.