



Decentralization of the Civic Realm in Mid-Twentieth Century Indian Cities

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This paper addresses the decentralization of civic institutions in large cities during the middle decades of the twentieth century in India. From the last decades of the nineteenth century and into the middle of the twentieth, the centrally-located Town Hall was the locus of civic engagement between (male, propertied) residents, the municipality, and higher authorities within the colonial government. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, following a period of rapid urbanization in India's larger cities, India's planners widely adopted American Clarence Perry's "neighborhood unit" plan as a model and mechanism for urban expansion. Perry's walk able neighborhood unit preserved an important space—both analytically and physically—for institutions of civic life, including schools, community centers, places of religious worship, and so forth. The latter were predicated on the neighborhood, rather than the city as a whole, as a distinctive and relatively autonomous milieu within which to cultivate the values of civic virtue and local self-governance. I argue that by adopting the neighborhood unit plan as a model for urban expansion, India's mid-century planners effected a massive decentralization of civic institutional space in the Indian city. This paper will develop a theoretical position for understanding what the implication of this decentralization has been for collective mobilization to address large scale issues in the Indian city.

KEY WORDS: Public space, town halls, civic life, public sphere.