

Traversing the socio-cultural identity of a water fowl habitat in Ernakulam, Kerala, India

Sanjose A. Thomas

Department of Sociology, Sacred Heart College (Autonomous), Kochi
E.mail: sanjosethomas.thomas065@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the socio-cultural transformation of Ernakulam from a water fowl habitat to an urban habitat in the late 1980's and the processes involved in this transition, which mainly included demographic, cultural, social and economic factors and attempts to redraw this identity construction in relation with the changing urban scenario in the 21st century. It also examines the impact of various social conditions that triggered this process and how they were overlooked by the policy makers in the spatial context of Ernakulam (Kochi).

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received on: 29-12-2022

Revised on: 27-02-2023

Accepted on: 04-04-2023

KEYWORDS

Socio-cultural transformation,
Water fowl, Identity construction,
Spatial context

Introduction

Ernakulam, which is also known as Kochi, is a southernmost district located at the centre of the state of Kerala and is one of the emerging urban centers of the state with high demographic dynamics and an ever-growing urban space along with an increase in infrastructural facilities. Kochi, or Ernakulam as the name indicates originally, is a marshy region with a number of ponds in varying sizes and shapes and a number of water bodies with elaborate water logging systems and other related habitats, which make it more of a water-based ecosystem than that of a dryland environment. Ernakulam, right from its inception and its heydays, was known as the 'Land of Kulam', which truly represents its identity beyond explanation.

Urban Spatial Transformation

Ernakulam started witnessing an urban sprawl in the late 1970's, and this process intensified by the 1980s and reached a new point of increasing urban spatial transformation by the late 1990s especially after the onslaught of liberalization and globalization. The changing demands of a growing economy and the growth of the service sector, along with the rapid expansion of urban centers of living in Kochi, witnessed an unprecedented change in the last decade of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century. This transformation slowly changed the ecosystem services within Ernakulam and started making it more viable for the emerging urban habitat. The large tracts of water fowl habitats were cleared for constructing houses and buildings and for the development of an urban landscape, which altogether transformed the spatial structure of Kochi and prepared it to become one of the biggest metropolises in India in another 40 years.

This trend had another dimension of social change, which was visible in the process of rural-urban shift and ensuing growth in the late 90s. The socio-cultural fabric of Kochi also underwent simultaneous changes as it witnessed a significant increase in migrants from almost all parts of India and a gradual change in the demographic trends. This increased the pressure on land and the slow but steady decline in water fowl ecosystems that paved the way for urbanization in the ensuing days. Water bodies (especially the ponds and marshy areas) were all cleared and were

replaced by man-made or artificial ecosystems that are designed for human habitation. Kochi always boasted of an inland navigable region, which is often designated as the canal systems of Kochi used for moving from one region to the other. These canals were the arterial channels of Ernakulam district as they ensured the movement of men, materials and resources across regions and even linked themselves to neighbouring districts like Alappuzha and Kottayam. These canals, due to increasing urban sprawl, got choked and destroyed, including the diverse ecosystem services supported by the same. The unprecedented growth of algal and marine organisms and the eutrophication of the canal systems triggered this process, along with other anthropogenic factors. As a result of all these, the water-based habitat of Ernakulam disappeared, and it gave way to the choking of the course of water flow into the sea and river systems. This ultimately led to a process of geomorphological and land use changes within the city and also created an atmosphere of unpredictability with regard to flood control in the present context. The cultural identities also changed unprecedentedly, and many people belonging to different ethnic groups came and settled in Kochi and started setting up their own mechanism of living. Increasing land prices and difficulties in finding appropriate dwellings created a plethora of housing schemes in and around Kochi, known by different names. The proliferating industry of housing infrastructure, especially in the late 1990's and in the first decade of the 21st century, soon converted Ernakulam into a housing hub and articulated a new real estate market, at least till the onslaught of COVID-19 and lockdown. The socio-spatial transformation of Kochi was so rapid and unpredictable that it now started spreading its tentacles to nearby places, including rural Ernakulam, cutting across the typical urban divide. This proceeds to the gradual urbanization of rural Kochi and the slow development of urban facilities even in slightly far places like Angamaly and Muvatupuzha.

Deconstructing the socio-cultural identity of a water fowl habitat

The socio-cultural fabric of a water fowl habitat is often not discussed mainly because of the delicacy involved in delineating it, especially when it is taken as the same as

that of a non-waterfowl habitat. The key difference lies in the point in which a water body brings in a difference, especially with regard to the lifestyle and means of living of the people, both men and women. The presence of many ponds and the large coastal area surrounding Kochi would eventually create a context favourable for shipping, fishing and marine development, which also includes a community dependent on the same. The large presence of various species of fish and molluscan species may trigger a marine business environment that shapes itself on this potential. Along with it, the presence of a harbour and the development of fishing may promote urban fishing activities and a life sustained by the same. This, coupled with the evolution of a city, may drive multifaceted dimensions of coastal life and city culture, both reciprocating with each other.

The sociological dimensions of this phenomenon are diverse and mutually exclusive as, on the one side, it facilitates an urban cosmopolitan culture, and on the other, it preserves and sustains a cultural mosaic typical of the coastal Ernakulam, which borrowed enormously from different sources like the English and French occupation

References

- Mathur RG, (1989), *The Making of a Town*, Rawat, New Delhi
UN Report (2009) on Urban Development
George MK, Boban Jose (1999), *Discourses on Urban Development*, Loyola, Thiruvananthapuram
Bhandarkar RG (2004), *Deconstructing the Urban Landscape*, Rawat, Jaipur

and from all the migrant cultures like the Jewish, Jain, Gujarati, Bengali and other platforms of cultural exchange. Thus, the cultural identity of Kochi got a form and a shape that underwent transformation, especially in the last 25 years or more and infused new developments into it. It is this cultural mosaic that shaped Ernakulam as it is now and which is slowly changing when the urban landscape also underwent changes in the meantime.

Conclusion

Sociology, especially urban Sociology is more concerned about this urban spatial transformation than any other discipline, and this assessment becomes relevant only when due consideration is given to the part played by water bodies and water fowl habitats in bringing in these changes and how the slow disappearance of the same also led to a gradual and steady decline in the urban land use pattern and way of living. It is also a matter of great Sociological imagination to deconstruct this discourse, which may help urban planners understand Kochi as a better space with great potential to live in.

