

# 1 Characteristics of the City

To begin with, how do we distinguish between cities on the one hand and towns and villages on the other? Towns and cities that first appeared along river valleys, such as Ur, Nippur and Mohenjodaro, were larger in scale than other human settlements. Ancient cities could develop only when an increase in food supplies made it possible to support a wide range of non-food producers. Cities were often the centres of political power, administrative network, trade and industry, religious institutions, and intellectual activity, and supported various social groups such as artisans, merchants and priests.

Cities themselves can vary greatly in size and complexity. They can be densely settled modern-day **metropolises**, which combine political and economic functions for an entire region, and support very large populations. Or they can be smaller urban centres with limited functions.

This chapter will discuss the history of **urbanisation** in the modern world. We will look in some detail at two modern cities, as examples of metropolitan development. The first is London, the largest city in the world, and an imperial centre in the nineteenth century, and the second is Bombay, one of the most important modern cities in the Indian subcontinent.

## 1.1 Industrialisation and the Rise of the Modern City in England

Industrialisation changed the form of urbanisation in the modern period. However, even as late as the 1850s, many decades after the beginning of the industrial revolution, most Western countries were largely rural. The early industrial cities of Britain such as Leeds and Manchester attracted large numbers of migrants to the textile mills set up in the late eighteenth century. In 1851, more than three-quarters of the adults living in Manchester were migrants from rural areas.

Now let us look at London. By 1750, one out of every nine people of England and Wales lived in London. It was a colossal city with a population of about 675,000. Over the nineteenth century, London continued to expand. Its population multiplied fourfold in the 70 years between 1810 and 1880, increasing from 1 million to about 4 million.

### Activity

Can you think of appropriate examples from Indian history for each of these categories: a religious centre, a market town, a regional capital, a metropolis? Find out about the history of any one of them.

### New words

**Metropolis** – A large, densely populated city of a country or state, often the capital of the region

**Urbanisation** – Development of a city or town

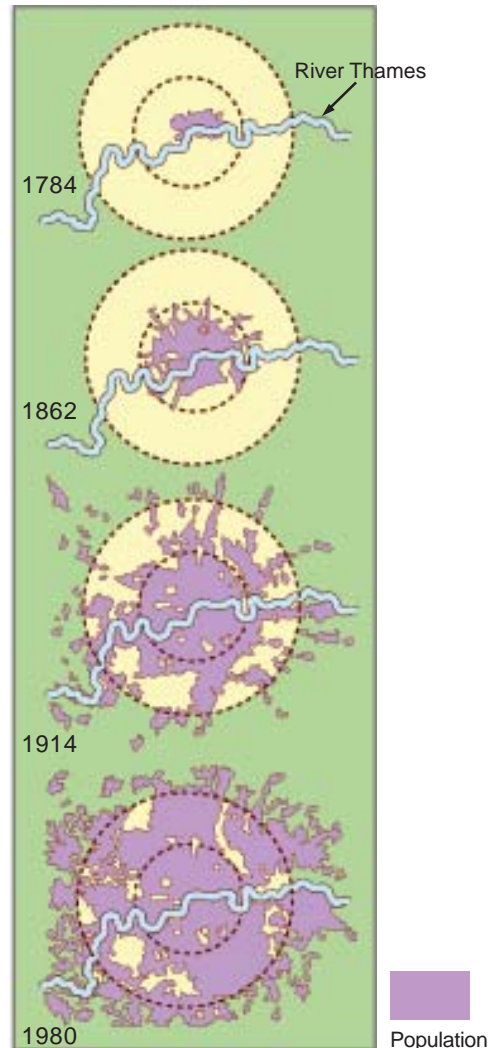
The city of London was a powerful magnet for migrant populations, even though it did not have large factories. ‘Nineteenth century London,’ says the historian Gareth Stedman Jones, ‘was a city of clerks and shopkeepers, of small masters and skilled artisans, of a growing number of semi skilled and sweated outworkers, of soldiers and servants, of casual labourers, street sellers, and beggars.’ Apart from the London dockyards, five major types of industries employed large numbers: clothing and footwear, wood and furniture, metals and engineering, printing and stationery, and precision products such as surgical instruments, watches, and objects of precious metal. During the First World War (1914-18) London began manufacturing motor cars and electrical goods, and the number of large factories increased until they accounted for nearly one-third of all jobs in the city.

## 1.2 Marginal Groups

As London grew, crime flourished. We are told that 20,000 criminals were living in London in the 1870s. We know a great deal about criminal activities in this period, for crime became an object of widespread concern. The police were worried about law and order, **philanthropists** were anxious about public morality, and industrialists wanted a hard-working and orderly labour force. So the population of criminals was counted, their activities were watched, and their ways of life were investigated.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Henry Mayhew wrote several volumes on the London labour, and compiled long lists of those who made a living from crime. Many of whom he listed as ‘criminals’ were in fact poor people who lived by stealing lead from roofs, food from shops, lumps of coal, and clothes drying on hedges. There were others who were more skilled at their trade, expert at their jobs. They were the cheats and tricksters, pickpockets and petty thieves crowding the streets of London. In an attempt to discipline the population, the authorities imposed high penalties for crime and offered work to those who were considered the ‘deserving poor’.

Factories employed large numbers of women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. With technological developments, women gradually lost their industrial jobs, and were forced to work within households. The 1861 census recorded a quarter of a million domestic servants in London, of whom the vast majority were



**Fig. 1 – The growth of London, a map showing its population in four different eras.**

### New words

**Philanthropist** – Someone who works for social upliftment and charity, donating time and money for the purpose

women, many of them recent migrants. A large number of women used their homes to increase family income by taking in lodgers or through such activities as tailoring, washing or matchbox making. However, there was a change once again in the twentieth century. As women got employment in wartime industries and offices, they withdrew from domestic service.

Large number of children were pushed into low-paid work, often by their parents. Andrew Mearns, a clergyman who wrote *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* in the 1880s, showed why crime was more profitable than labouring in small underpaid factories: 'A child seven years old is easily known to make 10 shillings 6 pence a week from thieving ... Before he can gain as much as the young thief [a boy] must make 56 gross of matchboxes a week, or 1,296 a day.' It was only after the passage of the Compulsory Elementary Education Act in 1870, and the factory acts beginning from 1902, that children were kept out of industrial work.

## Activity

Imagine that you are a newspaper reporter writing a piece on the changes you see in London in 1811. What problems are you likely to write about? Who would have gained from the changes?

### 1.3 Housing

Older cities like London changed dramatically when people began pouring in after the Industrial Revolution. Factory or workshop



**Fig. 2 – A Stranger's Home, The Illustrated London News, 1870.**

Night Refuges and Strangers' Homes were opened in winter by charitable societies and local authorities in many towns. The poor flocked to these places in the hope of food, warmth and shelter.

owners did not house the migrant workers. Instead, individual landowners put up cheap, and usually unsafe, **tenements** for the new arrivals.

Although poverty was not unknown in the countryside, it was more concentrated and starkly visible in the city. In 1887, Charles Booth, a Liverpool shipowner, conducted the first social survey of low-skilled London workers in the East End of London. He found that as many as 1 million Londoners (about one-fifth of the population of London at the time) were very poor and were expected to live only up to an average age of 29 (compared to the average life expectancy of 55 among the gentry and the middle class). These people were more than likely to die in a 'workhouse, hospital or lunatic asylum'. London, he concluded 'needed the rebuilding of at least 400,000 rooms to house its poorest citizens'.

For a while the better-off city dwellers continued to demand that slums simply be cleared away. But gradually a larger and larger number of people began to recognise the need for housing for the poor. What were the reasons for this increasing concern? First, the vast mass of one-room houses occupied by the poor were seen as a serious threat to public health: they were overcrowded, badly ventilated, and lacked sanitation. Second, there were worries about fire hazards created by poor housing. Third, there was a widespread fear of social disorder, especially after the Russian Revolution in 1917. Workers' mass housing schemes were planned to prevent the London poor from turning rebellious.



**Fig. 3 – Rat-trap seller, cartoon by Rowlandson, 1799.**

*Rowlandson recorded the types of trades in London that were beginning to disappear with the development of industrial capitalism.*

#### New words

**Tenement** – Run-down and often overcrowded apartment house, especially in a poor section of a large city

#### Activity

In many cities of India today, there are moves to clear away the slums where poor people live. Discuss whether or not it is the responsibility of the government to make arrangements for houses for these people.



**Fig. 4 – A London slum in 1889.**

*What are the different uses of street space that are visible in this picture? What would have changed in the conditions of working class housing in the twentieth century?*





**Fig. 5 – For the poor, the street often was the only place for rest, leisure and fun. The Illustrated London News, 1856.**

Over the nineteenth century, the elites became increasingly worried about drunkenness and squalor on the streets. Gradually, a **temperance movement** developed to fight against the evils of drinking.

## 1.4 Cleaning London

A variety of steps were taken to clean up London. Attempts were made to decongest localities, green the open spaces, reduce pollution and landscape the city. Large blocks of apartments were built, akin to those in Berlin and New York – cities which had similar housing problems. Rent control was introduced in Britain during the First World War to ease the impact of a severe housing shortage.

The congestion in the nineteenth-century industrial city also led to a yearning for clean country air. Many wealthy residents of London were able to afford a holiday home in the countryside. Demands were made for new ‘lungs’ for the city, and some attempts

### Activity

Imagine you are investigating the conditions in which the London poor lived. Write a note discussing all the dangers to public health which were created by these conditions.

### Source A

‘The children too must not be forgotten in the open spaces. The *kinderbank*, or low seat to suit their short legs, should always be provided and where possible spaces of turf be supplied with swings or seesaws, with ponds for sailing boats, and with sand pits where these can be kept sufficiently clean.’

*Source*

### New words

**Temperance movement** – A largely middle-class-led social reform movement which emerged in Britain and America from the nineteenth century onwards. It identified alcoholism as the cause of the ruin of families and society, and aimed at reducing the consumption of alcoholic drinks particularly amongst the working classes.

were made to bridge the difference between city and countryside through such ideas as the Green Belt around London.

Architect and planner Ebenezer Howard developed the principle of the Garden City, a pleasant space full of plants and trees, where people would both live and work. He believed this would also produce better-quality citizens. Following Howard's ideas Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker designed the garden city of New Earswick. There were common garden spaces, beautiful views, and great attention to detail. In the end, only well-off workers could afford these houses.

Between the two World Wars (1919-39) the responsibility for housing the working classes was accepted by the British state, and a million houses, most of them single-family cottages, were built by local authorities. Meanwhile, the city had extended beyond the range where people could walk to work, and the development of suburbs made new forms of mass transport absolutely necessary.



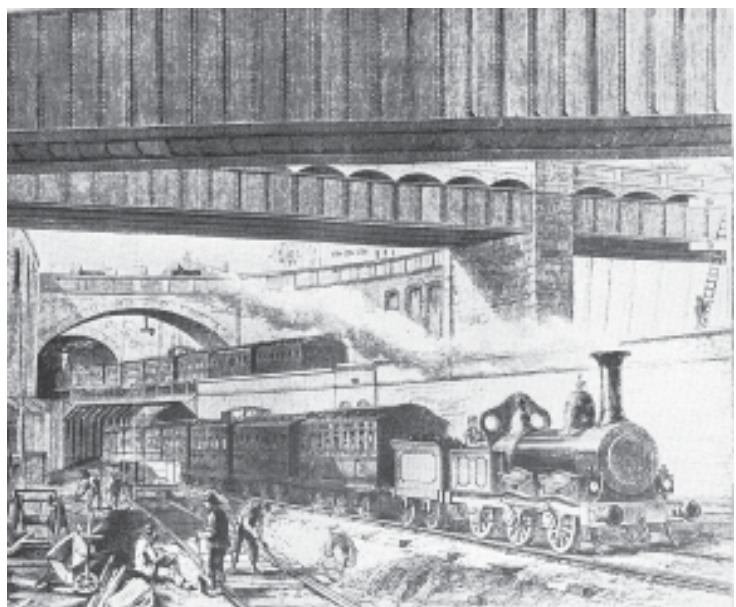
**Fig. 6 – New Earswick, a garden suburb.**  
*Notice the enclosed green space to produce a new community life.*

## 1.5 Transport in the City

How could people be persuaded to leave the city and live in garden suburbs unless there were some means of travelling to the city for work? The London underground railway partially solved the housing crisis by carrying large masses of people to and from the city.

The very first section of the Underground in the world opened on 10 January 1863 between Paddington and Farrington Street in London. On that day 10,000 passengers were carried, with trains running every ten minutes. By 1880 the expanded train service was carrying 40 million passengers a year. At first people were afraid to travel underground. This is what one newspaper reader warned:

The compartment in which I sat was filled with passengers who were smoking pipes. The atmosphere was a mixture of sulphur, coal dust and foul fumes from the gas lamps above, so that by the time we reached Moorgate, I was near dead of **asphyxiation** and heat. I should think these underground railways must soon be discontinued for they are a menace to health.



**Fig. 7 – Railway lines being laid in London, Illustrated Times, 1868.**

Many felt that the 'iron monsters' added to the mess and unhealthiness of the city. Charles Dickens wrote in *Dombey and Son* (1848) about the massive destruction in the process of construction:

Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; ... there were a hundred thousand shapes and substances of incompleteness, wildly mingled out their places, upside down, burrowing in the earth ...

To make approximately two miles of railway, 900 houses had to be destroyed. Thus the London tube railway led to a massive displacement of the London poor, especially between the two World Wars.

Yet the Underground eventually became a huge success. By the twentieth century, most large metropolises such as New York, Tokyo and Chicago could not do without their well-functioning transit systems. As a result, the population in the city became more dispersed. Better-planned suburbs and a good railway network enabled large numbers to live outside central London and travel to work.

These new conveniences wore down social distinctions and also created new ones. How did these changes affect domestic and public life? Did they have the same significance for all social groups?

### New words

Asphyxiation – Suffocation due to lack of oxygen supply



**Fig. 8 – London Underground advertisement for Golders Green, around 1900.**

You can see the Underground advertisement persuading people to move to green, uncrowded and picturesque suburbs.



**Fig. 9 – Cows on the streets of London, The Graphic, 1877.**  
Clearing streets was part of the project of building a modern city. In the nineteenth century, cows regularly blocked traffic on London roads.