

EXPLORING ASIA:

ASIAN CITIES — GROWTH AND CHANGE

URBAN AND MEGACITY ASIA

By Dr. Anand A. Yang

Job and Gertrud Tamaki Professor, Director, South Asia Center; Co-Director, Global Asia Institute, The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington.

Editor's note: This article is the first of five featuring pieces by Dr. Nathaniel Trumbull, Dr. Anu Taranath, Dr. H. Hazel Hahn and Dr. Kam Wing Chan.

The Delhi of my childhood was a city of about a million and a half inhabitants. Over the last 50 years, it has been transformed by the rapid urbanization sweeping across Asia. Almost four million by 1971, its population multiplied to more than 12 million in 2001 and more than 16 million in 2011. The current estimate of more than 20 million ranks it among one of the 20-some megacities in the world, with a metropolitan area of more than 10 million people.

As with most Asian cities, Delhi's burgeoning population is partly due to migration. People converged on it in the late 20th century and have continued to do so in waves of several hundred thousand per annum in recent years. The city is a destination because it promises employment and higher wages than in the hinterland. As an economic, political, social, cultural and transportation hub, it also attracts all kinds of people, not just the poor from the countryside.

In addition, as India's capital city—and the political center of previous regimes—it has always drawn the attention of rulers intent on leaving their architectural imprints on its built environment. As Nathaniel Trumbull's article on Ashgabat and Astana in Central Asia reveals, the public spaces of capital cities are often the "playgrounds" of leaders.

Cities—as Delhi exemplifies—invariably pay a high price for rapid urbanization. Familiar are their struggles with issues relating to housing, sanitation, power, water, health, pollution and transportation, especially as they impact the poor. So are their slums and rising rates of urban poverty. Policymakers nevertheless continue to dream of cities as engines of economic growth that can pull people out of poverty, an optimism not

substantiated by Anu Taranath's cautionary tale of the people left behind in a seemingly "shining" Bangalore.

Urban development has also transformed the physical environment of most cities in other ways. Suburbanization has greatly extended their urban limits, encompassing, in Delhi's case, its neighboring rural areas. Spatial expansion, however, has not eased such problems associated with massive urbanization as congestion, pollution, safety and health issues, as well as traffic gridlock. Old Delhi, interestingly, has seen a revival of the rickshaw trade, which once dominated Hanoi, as Hazel Hahn's piece on colonial Vietnam illustrates.

Chinese cities—Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, to name three—have similarly experienced unprecedented growth in recent decades. In the early 1980s, Beijing was home to nine million; today it has more than 20 million, 12 million of whom reside in its metropolitan area. In the last three decades, its numbers have doubled. Shanghai, too, has surpassed 20 million; its booming populace the product of double-digit growth almost every year since the early 1990s. And during that same period, Guangzhou shot up from fewer than 3 million in 1980 to almost 10 million by 2000; it currently stands at 16 million. As Kam Wing Chan's article highlights, the growth of China's large cities is part of an epic rural-urban shift that its government is attempting to manage through social engineering.

Asia's other megacities—of which the region now has the most in the world—narrate much the same story of staggering population increases and urban development. Consider, for example, Tokyo, the world's largest megacity. More than a million strong by the mid-18th century, it counted more than three million by the early 20th century, six million plus by the mid-1930s and 10 million by the 1960s. Tokyo proper has a little over 13 million today. Greater Tokyo is closer to 35 million, or 25 percent of the country's inhabitants, more people than the population of such countries as Afghanistan, Nepal, Malaysia, Taiwan and Sri Lanka.



Japan, Tokyo, Shinjuku, Tokyo Metropolitan City Hall in the center, aerial view

Seoul, too, acquired a large populace early on. At the end of the 1930s, it already housed one million; by 1990 its denizens totaled 10 million, or roughly 25 percent of South Korea's overall population. The Seoul metropolitan area, a much larger territory, now claims more than 23 million. However, both Tokyo and Seoul—their core and not larger metropolitan areas—have been losing numbers in recent years because of outmigration and declining natural growth stemming from low fertility rates and an aging population.

Growth—but without the shrinkage—also characterizes the megacities of Southeast Asia. As the political and social center of Indonesia, as well as its economic, commercial and transportation hub, the capital city of Jakarta is home to almost 10 million inhabitants—close to 28 million if the count includes its greater metropolitan area. Similarly, Manila, the capital of the Philippines, has fewer than 2 million inhabitants but almost 25 million in the greater metropolitan area. Both cities, furthermore, are living examples of the benefits and burdens of breakneck urban development.

No doubt, rapid economic growth in Asia will continue to swell its roster of megacities. So will its secondary cities and towns where urbanization is profoundly reshaping the lives of even larger cohorts of people across the region.

