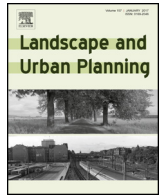




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# Patrick Geddes in India: Anti-colonial nationalism and the historical time of 'Cities in Evolution'

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Studies Patrick Geddes' influence among Indian elites as a planner in India (1915–1923).
- Geddes' ideas were only partially appropriated and failed to make a lasting impact on Indian political thought.
- Incompatible conceptions of historical time help explain the difficulty of using Geddes' ideas in the Indian context.

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### ABSTRACT

This article presses the case for planning theory to recognize the historicity of historical time, i.e. the argument that ideas about how the past, present, and future relate to each other are specific to particular life-worlds and cannot be treated as universal axioms. This argument emerges from a close analysis of Patrick Geddes' stint as a town planner and public intellectual in the Indian subcontinent between 1915 and 1922. Geddes regarded both city and society as products of an evolutionary process led by citizens themselves, and his work has been praised for his deep respect for Indian traditions and sensitivity to the needs of the poor. Scholarly writing on Geddes' work in India therefore reinforces the hagiographical depiction of Geddes as a tragically misunderstood visionary, rather than critically examining the limits of the theory of praxis contained in Geddes' contributions to planning. In this revisionist account, I demonstrate the link between Geddes' insistence on the continuity of historical time and his preference for "civics" (the realm of cooperative social action) over the conflict and contention inherent in "conventional politics". In contrast, nationalist elites in India operated on a discontinuous conception of time because of the deep schisms in the public sphere constituted under colonial rule. As a result, the interpenetration of "civics" and "politics" was necessarily an important part of attempts by nationalist elites to improve the living conditions of the urban poor.

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## 1. Introduction

Patrick Geddes' town planning reports in the Indian subcontinent between 1915 and 1922 constitute an important part of his contribution to the planning movement. During this period, he authored more than thirty such reports for cities across the subcontinent, and also taught sociology at the University of Bombay. In addition to his advocacy for diagnostic surveys and regional planning, his work in the subcontinent is also remembered for the principle of "conservative surgery" aimed at old and congested neighborhoods, and his call for greater involvement of citizens in the planning process. Among sympathetic commentators, his planning proposals and designs are seen as "culturally informed" and

sensitive to the needs of the native Indian subjects, as compared to the wholesale demolitions preferred by colonial-era sanitary engineers and planners (Goodfriend, 1979; Guha, 2011; Munshi, 2000; Tyrwhitt, 1947). Many of his critiques of dominant planning paradigms continue to resonate with planners and scholars of urbanization in post-independence India (Priya, 1993).

Geddes' original contribution to the development of some fundamental planning ideas, including his critique of "high modernism" and technocratic approaches to planning, is well documented in the literature (Hall, 2014, ch. 8; Scott & Bromley, 2013). The value of "conservative surgery" for planning in Third World cities was rediscovered in the 1940s by Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, who published a collection of extracts from Geddes' town planning reports (Tyrwhitt, 1947). These ideas were later popularized by John F. C. Turner, a student of Tyrwhitt, through his advocacy for self-help construction and in situ upgrading of spontaneous

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and informal settlements (Harris, 2003), as well as other scholars of Third World planning, like McGee (1976). As a result of Turner's success in influencing ideas about planning for informal settlements, these ideas became commonplace in the planning profession. In the U.S., these ideas were popularized by Jane Jacobs (1961), though she was not aware of her debt to Geddes and his pioneering work. By the 1980s, a consensus had been built within the U.S. planning profession against 1950s-style urban renewal and rational-comprehensive planning, and in favour of the "community" as the proper unit of "participatory planning".

In contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to Geddes' reception among Indian elites, nor have Geddes' intellectual contributions been systematically evaluated in the context of the dominant currents of political thought circulating in the subcontinent at the time. Indian elites in the early twentieth century were intensely involved in renegotiating the relationship between Indian society and colonial modernity (Chakrabarty, 2002). In this context, what promise of modernity did Geddes offer for the cities and towns of India, and how were these ideas appropriated by domestic political actors? In this article, I attempt to undertake a critical appraisal of this intellectual legacy by following the domestic career of Geddes' ideas through the inter-war period (1915–1935), during which the intellectual foundation for independent India was built. In effect, I seek to temporarily localize Geddes' work in the subcontinent and to situate it within its immediate intellectual and material environment.

In his study of urban politics in Bombay, Prashant Kidambi concluded that Geddes' planning ideas "triggered a short-lived burst of enthusiasm" among Indian elites, but that these ideas failed to "have a lasting impact" (Kidambi, 1920, p. 3). Why did Geddes' work fail to leave a mark on Indian political thought, despite his deep respect for Indian traditions and sensitivity to the needs of the poor? Geddes' biographers have suggested multiple reasons: the difficult prose in which Geddes' ideas were communicated, his eccentric persona, the novelty of his ideas (Meller, 1990, 331 p. 262), and the failure of Indian elites to depart from mimetic forms of colonial modernity that had taken root in India (Meller, 1990, p. 221). However, such accounts merely reinforce the hagiographical depiction of Geddes as a tragically misunderstood visionary who was "ahead of his time," rather than critically examining the limits of Geddes' planning thought when applied to the historical context he confronted in India.

In this paper, I offer a revisionist assessment of Geddes' contributions to planning and sociology that, I believe, better explains his limited influence on Indian nationalist thought. In my view, the main difficulty with Geddes' work is that it took for granted, as an ahistorical and Universal axiom, the continuity of historical time. As a result, Geddes' approach proceeded on the assumption that city and society were products of an evolutionary process of which the citizen-planner was both the subject and the object. In this scheme, civic participation and town "improvement" were inseparable. Such a scheme, despite its egalitarian character, was also remarkably conservative – if both city and society were the outcomes of the same evolutionary process, then social institutions of caste and creed had to be given the same respect as old city neighborhoods. Given this emphasis on evolutionary change, Geddes argued in favour of a more purposeful "civics" (the realm of cooperative social action) in the place of "conventional politics" (the realm of social conflict).

But nationalist discourse operated on a fundamentally different premise. Confronted with a public sphere that was deeply segmented, with deep structural barriers preventing citizen participation, Indian elites invariably developed conceptions of historical time that were fundamentally discontinuous (see Fig. 1). Having access only to a bastardized tradition and a plagiarized modernity, both co-produced in "heterogeneous time", (Chatterjee, 2004,

p.7) the task at hand for the nationalist movement was to articulate discontinuous pathways to return to a purer tradition while simultaneously attempting to "leap forward" to a more robust modernity (Chatterjee, 1997, p. 20). Geddes' theory of praxis failed to acknowledge, let alone address, the need for novel repertoires of action under such circumstances. Based on an analysis of multiple strands of nationalist politics, I demonstrate that attempts to bring about immediate improvements in the lives of the masses invariably led to a profound interpenetration of "civics" and "politics". In particular, I focus on the contributions of "Mahatma" Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru to nationalist thought, and demonstrate that though they were both influenced in part by Geddes' emphasis on "civics" and "conservative surgery", they also recognized that civic participation and political emancipation had to proceed hand in hand.

## 2. Conservative surgery and civic reconstruction in India

"Planning" in Indian cities in the latter half of the 19th century often consisted of cutting straight wide roads through existing neighborhoods, and the en masse demolition of "unsanitary" buildings – all this ostensibly for the sake of public health and sanitation, though also aimed at military control over the city (Oldenburg, 1984). In the early 20th century, several cities in British India were empowered by Town Planning Acts and Improvement Trusts so as to tackle the problems of squalor and ill health, but most of their policies and practices closely mirrored those of an earlier generation of sanitary engineers (Hazareesingh, 2001; Sharan, 2006). Geddes decried these practices as reminiscent of Haussmann's reordering of 19th century Paris and argued that they pay undue "obedience to the straight lines of the drawing board" and do not distinguish between sanitary and unsanitary houses (Tyrwhitt, 1947, p. 53). According to Geddes, attempts to "decongest" one area of a town without providing homes to the displaced only resulted in further increase in house rents, heightened congestion in other neighborhoods, and drained the coffers of municipalities (Tyrwhitt, 1947, p. 44). One instance of this is a scheme for Changar Mohalla in Lahore, wherein:

"Each and every one of the whole buildings upon the site is proposed to be swept away by this lay-out (save only the police office). Even two Temples, five Mosques, two Dharmashalas, not to speak of Tombs without number! . . . The valuable shops of Landa Bazaar are unhesitatingly demolished. . . Even the Horse Bazaar, though [it is] one of the immemorial Trade Centres of Lahore" (Geddes, 1972 [1917], p. 394).

As opposed to these "drastic" measures, Geddes' "conservative surgery" involved only selective clearance of buildings – typically those constructed with the cheapest building materials. Road-widening was not proposed unless absolutely necessary, nor was the essential layout of the neighborhood tampered with. Geddes understood that strict separation of land-uses would, in the Indian context, be no solution at all. For "here maker and seller are one: and his removal would entail genuine hardship and loss to trade with rise of prices to the consumer" (cited in Goodfriend, 1979, p. 349). Marketplaces and bazaars were to be left relatively undisturbed, and new thoroughfares created along alternate routes so that motor vehicles did not disrupt the functioning of bazaars (Geddes, 1918, p.158). Geddes also argued vehemently against proposals for the introduction of pipe-based water and sanitation infrastructure, since it was unlikely that it would serve most of the neighborhoods in Indian cities. Instead, he proposed the rejuvenation of existing freshwater reservoirs, and the establishment of sanitary gardens where human waste could be directly converted to manure (Geddes, 1918, p. 40–64).

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