

Workshop on Rural Urban Entanglements in India

Organised by:

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Rural Urban Entanglements in India

"Urban poverty is, for the most part, rural poverty refashioned within the city system. It is in this sense that we have to accept Lefebvre's view that the urbanization of the countryside involves a subsidiary ruralization of the city" (Harvey, 2009 [1973], 308)

"Unlike the experience of the Western world, the growth of urban centres and urban populations in India has not been accompanied by a decline of the rural... (T)he ground realities and the changing position of the rural in the larger social and economic life of the country cannot be captured through simple formulations such as Bharat versus India; the narratives of "crises" or even the new formulation of rurbanity." (Jodhka, 2016, 6)

"The long-term difficulty in India of finding an appropriate term and mode of governance for "rural" areas that are also "urban," is not simply a nomenclatural conundrum. The inadequacy of the rural/urban dichotomy, and its nevertheless stubborn durability, has long masked important and quite possibly unique urban processes in South Asia." (Glover, 2018, 56)

Rationale

The continuing importance of the rural in contemporary India is both demographic, with an ever increasing total numbers of rural Indians, and democratic, signaled most recently by larger allocations to rural programs in the national budget (Vasavi and Vijayabaskar, 2016; Economic Survey, 2018).

The village and the rural were a strong focus of sociological and development studies in India from the 1950s to the late 1980s. Then, with liberalization of the economy, globalization, and urbanization came the urban focus, which led to a relative neglect of the rural by social scientists over the last two plus decades. However, we are now witnessing growing recognition among scholars and policymakers that the urban and the rural are inextricably intertwined. A proper understanding of the dynamics of transformation in contemporary India requires conceptualizing the mutual imprint of one on another. Studying this takes on added significance given increased rural-urban movement to overcome the persistent job creation deficit, with an estimated 13-17 million reaching working-age annually and only 3 million jobs being created. Female migration to cities in India, for marriage, is at unprecedented levels at the same time as female labor force participation rates are decreasing leading scholars to ask if patriarchy is increasing. Diminishing opportunities in agriculture, land saturation in cities, and rising aspirations of the country's youth exacerbate these problems.

Proposed Workshops

Participants will share their current research, throwing light on rural-urban dynamics through discussion of structures, spatialities, mobilities, and identities. Theoretical frameworks and key concepts for conceptualizing urban-rural dynamics

including agrarian question/crisis, classes of labor, livelihoods migration, circular migration, marriage migration, translocal householding, commodity chains, rurality and urbanity, rural, urban villages, census towns and actor networks will be questioned. Each framework has a distinct intellectual genealogy and epistemology. Are these frameworks being deployed in innovative new ways? Are there new theoretical, methodological, ontological, comparative approaches? What are the political and policy implications?

The workshops have three objectives:

(i) To facilitate cross- institutional conversations between rural-focused and urban-focused educationists on the nature of rural-urban dynamics.

(ii) To discuss conceptual frameworks to better understand rural-urban dynamics

(iii) To gather resources—scholarly essays, research reports, literary, activist, visual materials— on rural-urban entanglements in India in order to develop curriculum, pedagogy, research internships, and public scholarship projects. The resource list or web site will be made available to academics, think tanks, NGOs, activists, and other interested parties.

Our hope is that these efforts will lead to the institutionalization of research and teaching in these fields and to the wide dissemination of this knowledge through public outreach.

Day 1: 27 April, 2018

Session 1 - 10:00 am - 11:30 am

Rethinking Rural-Urban Concepts, Trends, Theories, Methodologies

Castells in *The Urban Question* (1977 [1972]) cast aspersions on the cogency, purpose and ideological effects of the urban-rural distinction. Urban areas that are rural, and rural areas that are urban complicate the dichotomous categories urban and rural in India (CPR, *Cities of India*; Glover, 2018). Bernstein (2004) argues that the agrarian question is no longer the question of capital but of labor, which must now pursue their means of reproduction across different sites: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and self-employment. Trends meant to capture rural-urban entanglements in terms of employment, marriage, land, and migration invite new analytical, policy and political attention. How should we rethink concepts, theories, and methodologies to grasp at these transformations?

Moderator: Pushpesh Kumar (University of Hyderabad)

Discussants:

Surinder S. Jodhka (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi)

Partha Saha (Ambedkar University, Delhi)

Vikas Rawal (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi)

Arindam Banerjee (Ambedkar University, Delhi)

Purendra Prasad (University of Hyderabad)

Abstracts:

Revisiting the 'Rural'

Surinder S. Jodhka

Rural revisits are often viewed as a way of mapping the changing dynamics of social, economic and political life in the Indian countryside. Underlying this view are some obvious, but problematic assumptions about the 'rural'. They invariably also extend to the presumed unique nature of the 'Indian social life' and often to the enterprise of doing empirical social science.

The first and foremost of these assumptions is the widely held belief that until the changes brought about by colonial rulers over a period of two centuries of their rule, "native" settlements were all rural; India being a land of villages. More importantly, this view also underlined the point that the Indian village had a design of its own, universally shared across regions of the subcontinent. Interestingly, despite its unique Indian character (orientalism?), it presumably resembled what the 19th and 20th century western social science conceptualized as the "traditional way of life". Village life was simple, static and autonomous. Even when divided on caste lines, the core of its economy was agriculture and members of every caste community were tied to the other

through the normative order of reciprocal jajmani-ties. Almost all of its residents lived and died in the village where they were born. Even when the larger political authority collected taxes from some of them, the villages were largely left to govern themselves.

As the idea of development began to gain currency during the later years of the struggle for freedom from colonial rule, the Indian village also began to be viewed as a site of deprivations, its economic stagnation being the chief source of India's poverty. The presumed significance of the first phase of "village studies" lay in their efforts at mapping the traditional social life of the village. Studying the village was not simply about exploring rural life, but it was also quintessentially studying India. From Gandhi and Ambedkar to Srinivas and Munshi Premchand, the Indian village was India in a microcosm.

By the 1950s, the idea of "traditional life" also began to be seen as a source of backwardness, economic, social and political. The second problem is closely tied to this view. For example, an underlying assumption in the "revisit project" is its ability to map change, visualized as a linear process of modernization and its desirability: economic growth (decline of agriculture or its modernization), decline of caste (move to class), and eventual outmigration of the rural populations to the urban.

Finally, the idea of 'rural' is almost always seen as the binary opposite of the 'urban', internally stable in its meanings and metaphors. Implying thereby that there is something generic about rural life and thus villages has a common design across regions of the sub-continent, and similar to the rurals elsewhere (the peasantry?) and its coupling with agriculture.

Drawing from my fieldworks in the states of northwest India and Bihar, I will try to critically examine these assumptions and propose other ways of approaching the subject, empirically and conceptually.

Village Studies in India – Still Relevant?

Partha Saha

Since 1950s, village studies by anthropologists, sociologists and economists have made rich contributions to our understanding of dynamics of village society and economy. Importance of village studies lies in the fact that they enrich our understanding of production, distribution and social structure along with its various nuances that play around in villages where majority of Indians continue to reside. Village studies in India have looked into issues of caste, class, gender, social relations, tenancy relations, credit market, labour market, and inter-linkages across different markets. These studies have contributed by providing important insights, and played a very important complementary role in explaining patterns and trends that are indicated in large scale surveys. In recent years, there has been renewed interest in village studies, and increasing global integration and increasing process of urbanization have added new dimensions and complexities to village studies. Expansion of urban peripheries has blurred the rural urban divide, and the influence of rural on urban and vice-versa has increased with the expansion of urban and peri-urban areas. Some studies have also

indicated to new forms of classification of spatial units instead of rural – urban divide. This presentation will take a brief look into some of the important village studies, highlight some methodological issues, and discuss some of the issues highlighted in spatial classification between rural and urban.

Some Challenges of rural-urban transition in India

Arindam Banerjee

Occupational changes, associated with increasing rural-urban and rural-rural migrations, in India can be viewed in two different ways. One, it signifies new opportunities being created, albeit not in the old traditional way of formal, organized employment, but nevertheless having positive developmental impact on lives of people. The other way of viewing this is in the context of the persistent agrarian crisis, which is pushing people into new 'residual' sectors. The specific changes in occupational structure witnessed in India and the character of the 'construction' sector which has been the main sector where people have found new livelihoods seem to point more towards a distress-driven occupational change. In the context of this experience, it is important to examine and engage with the question of economic transition and what can be a feasible developmental strategy. An associated issue that needs to be addressed is the possible existence of contradictions within the dominant economic policy regime that does not allow a pursuance of such feasible strategies.

Identity of a Worker?

Complexity of Rural-Urban Processes

Purendra Prasad

While agriculture is not able to provide adequate income to the people who are dependent on it (not a new phenomenon), non-farm employment available in rural and urban India also is diverse and varies widely across the regions. Moreover, the employment both in rural and urban areas has increasingly become insecure, contractual and mobile. This situation brought forth more challenges to social science categories. Thus for example, there are neither pure agrarian nor pure non-agrarian categories for analytical purposes. There is increasingly hybrid or hyphenated categories that one needs to grapple with. It is here we need to understand how these hybrid categories of workers have become mobile, transit and footloose labourers engaging themselves in multiple jobs. This raises serious sociological questions about the concepts of rural, urban, agrarian, non-agrarian, formal and informal.

11:30 am - 11:45 am - Tea

Session 2 - 11:45 am - 1:15 pm

Mutual impact of the City and the Country

In Raymond Williams' book, *The Country and The City*, he traces, by reading literature and poetry against the grain, the powerful feelings that have been gathered and generalized about the country and the city: "powerful hostile associations that have developed of the city as an achieved center, "a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; and on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation." How does this mutual imbrication of country and city endure, providing improvisational templates for how migrants in informal economies 'learn the city', 'become urban', and 're-learn the village'; and how they subsequently re-imagine and re-work both through livelihood and life practices that constitute a bodily "cosmopolitics" (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003)?

Moderator: Purenra Prasad (University of Hyderabad)

Discussants:

Mitul Baruah (Ashoka University)

Rohit Negi (Ambedkar University, Delhi)

Diya Mehra (South Asian University)

Durba Chattaraj (Ashoka University)

Abstracts:

The Brahmaputra valley hazardscape and the rural livelihood crises

Mitul Baruah

Drawing on a broadly political ecology framework, this paper explains the processes of production of hazardous geographies and the transformation of rural livelihoods in the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam, with a special focus on Majuli river island. The rural economy in Majuli consists of predominantly agriculture, fishing, livestock rearing, and various handicrafts including pottery. However, due to the twin processes of flooding and riverbank erosion that have ravaged the island over the years, these livelihoods are in deep crisis today. As a result, the rural population on the island are having to out-migrate in search of jobs (and land), and those who are staying on are increasingly opting for livelihoods that are much more vulnerable and unsustainable. The support from the state as well as non-state agencies for livelihood stabilization on the island is little to none. Paying close attention to nature's materiality, the changing role of the state, and contemporary agrarian questions, this paper advances livelihood theorizations in political ecology. Overall, the paper attempts to address the following question: how can we understand and theorize rural livelihoods in (postcolonial) geographies that are at once subject to environmental hazards, capitalist and neoliberal development, and undesirable role of the state?

Regional Urbanisation in the Indian Himalayas

Rohit Negi

Over the last three years, I have led fieldwork that considers social-environmental change in the Indian Himalayas by focussing on the emergence of small towns across the region. Here, families invest expanding surplus to gain speculative foothold in towns, and to access education and other services. All manner of infrastructures are built, more or less in the absence of formal planning or state action, to support life and work in these towns. The paper asks: who moves to the town and why? Who designs and builds various parts of the town? And how do these 'new urbanists' engage with the place and with each other? The work thus sheds light on the production of space and experiences resulting from regional urbanisation in an ecologically fragile zone.

Reading Rural-Urban Entanglements via a small town: the case of Kullu

Diya Mehra

In this presentation, I will attempt to read the question of rural-urban entanglements, via Kullu, Himachal Pradesh, a small town in which I did fieldwork between 2010 and 2013. The presentation will be in three parts, the first will consider broadly received understandings of the relationship of rural hinterlands to urban centers, and consider how and why the case of Kullu cannot be placed within such familiar rubrics, which in many ways assume large ontological differences between large metropolitan areas and rural lives. The second part of the presentation will consider why such ontological distances fade in the context of small Indian towns such as Kullu, despite the fact that it is a fast growing area in economic terms, suggesting then that rural-urban entanglements can take a myriad of forms. The third part of the presentation will address the question of the town's youth who in many ways are narrativized by townfolk as the agents that will reorient the town (and also the countryside) towards the normative, mainstream, and large, Indian metropolis, as indexical of a singular, desirable modernity.

What Lies Between

Durba Chattaraj

Follow a highway and it becomes difficult to tell where the city ends and the country begins. Corridors that lie betwixt and between ask us to rethink these concepts, and they throw up hints of new ones. Artists often do the same work — of asking us to rethink our ways of seeing the world, and guiding us to new visions. In this talk I'll examine the work of four South Asian artists who have worked on villages, cities, and the spaces in-between, interspersing their art with insights from my ethnographic research along highways that connect the rural and the urban — NH-117, NH-2 and NH-8 B. In piecing these things together we can come up with an alternate narrative of urbanisation in contemporary India.

1:15 pm - 2:00 pm - Lunch

Session 3 - 2:00 pm - 3:45 pm

Subaltern Lifeworlds

Aman Sethi's *A Free Man* (2013), Sarah Pinto's *Daughters of Parvati: Women and Madness in Contemporary India* (2014), Claire Snell-Rood's, *No One Will Let her Live* (2015), and Bhargupati Singh's *Poverty and the Quest for Life: Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India* (2015) offer us glimpses into nuanced senses of the self and the ethical struggles of people "between life and death." In the contemporary moment, when selfhood is exceeding the contours of "the victim," "the madwoman/man", "the poor," or "the laborer," how do we theorize interiority without falling back on neoliberalism, capitalism, development, and other universalizing, macro-logics of the human? How may subjectivity be discerned through desire, dignity, aspiration, and erotics, as well as mental and emotional wellbeing?

Moderator: Sumangala Damodaran

Discussants:

Mukta Naik (Centre for Policy Research)

Pushpesh Kumar (University of Hyderabad)

Shireen Mirza (Ambedkar University, Delhi)

Priti Ramamurthy (University of Washington)

Abstracts:

'The city means work, the village means home': Narratives of survival, struggle and aspiration among rural youth working in marble factories in Kishangarh, Rajasthan

Mukta Naik

Viewing rural-urban entanglements primarily from the perspective of youth employment, we present the case of Kishangarh, a town of about 150,000 people in Ajmer District, Rajasthan. With the world's largest marble processing industry located here, Kishangarh has become an employment centre for unskilled rural youth from villages nearby. At the same time, educated youth from the city look towards Ajmer, Jaipur and beyond for opportunities for higher education and work. Our qualitative enquiries reveal that these multiple mobilities juxtapose the rural and urban in complex ways. Rural young men in Kishangarh block view working in the marble factories in Kishangarh as non-farm manual work necessary to supplement the meagre and uncertain income from agriculture and animal rearing in this arid countryside. For a few with enterprise and/or access to capital, entrepreneurial ventures in the marble industry in Kishangarh represent an opportunity for economic mobility despite the lack of higher education. The city means work and wages, it represents better opportunities to educate their children, but a lasting engagement with the city is not desirable for

these rural youth. They cite attachment to land, embeddedness in rural society, and higher costs of living as reasons to maintain a rural base. How do we make sense of this separate and yet juxtaposed experience of the rural and urban? How does it impact our thinking on spatiality, governance and politics?

Home, Alienation, Relocation, Attachment: Understanding Sexual Migration and Bodily Practices of Trans Lives in Western India

Pushpesh Kumar

The paper delineates natal home as a simultaneous site of alienation and attachment for kothis- a transgender community in South Asia. Based on the experiences of kothis of small towns in southeastern Maharashtra the author attempts to understand the how kothis feel alienated in their parental home and many a times compelled to leave home. The network of kothis facilitate fellow kothis' migration to metropolitan city Mumbai; relocated in Mumbai the kothis experience 'liberation' under the anonymity of the city and finds the regular income through 'sex work'. Life gets reorganised and the desire to cross dress is fulfilled while the trans-community-life provides respite from the everyday oppression of the natal home. But, the limits of the 'freedom' offered by trans-life in the city of migration engender certain nostalgia and attachment for the natal home. The paper through interviews and stories depicts the relocation and passionate urge to reconnect with the natal home. It also dwells upon certain bodily practices which are very central to the process of dislocation, relocation and renewed attachment to the nostalgic home.

Continuities in Halalkhore Labour: Caste and Waste Technology in Bombay

Shireen Mirza

I focus on how Dalit and Muslim labour engage with waste and sanitation in Mumbai, to understand ways traditional forms of power enable development of waste technologies and modern practices of urban infrastructure. In what ways does social and traditional arrangements of power and authority that construct caste labour align itself with the development of urban design and allied waste technologies? While pursuing this question, this presentation interrogates the understanding of 'urban' as a kind of place that is discreet, distinctive and a territorially bound settlement. Once we recognise that the category of the urban emerges in the sociospatial relations of capitalism, that are at once both territorialised and generalised, the located landscapes of the urban as a city-form (such as city-region, metropolis or megalopolis) invites further attention. Here, a critical reflexivity within urban studies interrogates the collapse of the urban as city forms that are ontologically distinct from the nonurban 'other' (the peri-urban, sub-urban or the rural). Tracing the historical development of waste technologies in Mumbai as being shaped by traditional socioeconomic configurations in caste labour, I speculate on this rural-urban continuum, in which entangled circuits of labour, commodities, cultural forms, technology, energy flows and bodies constitute the contemporary.

Agrarian Questions in Urban India

Priti Ramamurthy (and Vinay Gidwani)

The agrarian question, at its core, has always been about economics- has capitalism taken hold of agriculture and changed agrarian social relations, and politics—can agrarian populations be organized in worker’s movements? The answer, proffered by a range of theorists, is that the spatio-temporal disjuncture between agriculture and capitalism--the misalignment of the crop cycle with capital’s circuits of production, the difficulty of organizing “family” into surplus producing laborers, and peasants’ irrational attachments to land and community, for instance--troubles the resolution of the agrarian question in both its economic and political guises. Recently, scholars, Bernstein (2004) most notably, have suggested that regardless of whether capitalism has formally subsumed agriculture or not, it has been transformed so that the agrarian question of capital should be replaced by the agrarian question of labor. Contemporary capitalism has produced a fragmentation of labor such that to survive different “classes of labor”-- combinations of own account cultivation, sharecropping, self-employment, wage, contract, and unfree labor-- necessarily span the rural and urban informal economies. The political question now is how diverse “classes of labor” spread across varied geographies can be enrolled in workers’ movements? In this paper, informed by the impossibility of considering agrarian questions in isolation from their urban entanglements, we ask what it may mean to ask agrarian questions in urban India. We argue that rural migrants’ orientations to the agrarian inform their embodiments and social understandings of laboring and work in urban informal economies in ways that recall the spatio-temporal disjunctures of agriculture. Based on a selection of oral histories with male and female rural migrants to informal economies in Delhi and Hyderabad, we demonstrate how their social and structural locations in the agrarian context, regional patriarchies, and the degree of social provisioning by the cities to which they move shape the dynamics of social reproduction and their relative success in becoming urban, forming translocal households which straddle the urban and rural, or returning to the village. We contribute to the scholarship on informal economies and agrarian questions by entering into the still hidden abode of social reproduction to provide humanizing accounts of subaltern life worlds. To the resurgent Marxist feminist scholarship on the current crisis in social reproduction, which has paid insufficient attention to the entanglement of rural and urban lives, we draw attention to this enduring phenomenon in much of Asia. Finally, alternate political imaginaries of labor and care become visible if we ask agrarian questions in urban India.

3:45 pm - 4:00 pm - Tea

4:00 pm - 6:00 pm

PhD and MPhil Presentations and Comments

6:00 pm - 7:30 pm - High Tea

Day 2: 28 April, 2018

Session 4 - 10:00 am - 11:30 am

Visualizing Socialities and Communities

The difficulties of organizing rural migrants in urban India who are still embedded in agrarian imaginaries and switch urban informal economy jobs often call for creative capacities to think a politics otherwise (Thachil, 2014). We will hear about possibilities through curating and archiving oral histories, street performances, neighborhood walks, mapping and cross-class social events which provide the space for leisure and time to build socialities and communities (*Sounds of Resistance*, Goa, 2017; *Do Din* 2015, 16 and 17)

Moderator: Priti Ramamurthy (University of Washington)

Discussants:

Sudha Vasan (Delhi School of Economics),

Anant Maringanti (Hyderabad Urban Lab),

Radhika Chopra (Delhi University),

Sumangala Damodaran (Ambedkar University, Delhi)

Abstracts:

Migration, Mobility and 'Rurality' in Himachal Pradesh

Sudha Vasan

Mountain ecology, relatively equitable land distribution and state investment in basic health and education are rarely the combination that one associates with rural-urban migration. Yet, successful cash crop cultivation (horticulture and off-season vegetables) has contributed to out-migration of youth from many districts of Himachal Pradesh (HP) to urban centers within and outside the state. Incapacity of intensive mountain agriculture to absorb extra skilled labor and lack of alternative local investment opportunities for agrarian surplus combine leading to more investment in higher education of the next generation, and out-migration for education and skilled jobs. Demand for low skilled labor is high resulting in high in-migration from other regions of India and Nepal. This contrasts with rural-urban migration that follows agrarian distress in many other parts of India. Based on data from some villages in Kullu district that I have been following for the last two decades, I am examining what this means for the 'rural'. This outmigration is always imagined as temporary and often unaccounted for in surveys and yet significantly impacts the nature of the rural. I want to explore if

the concept of 'rurality' is an appropriate conceptual category that characterizes this condition, moving away from the dichotomy implied in rural/urban.

Reimagining Urban Research

Bhashwati Sengupta & Anant Maringanti

In May 2017, Hyderabad Urban Lab became a partner in a long term multi sited urban research network. The project brings together a number of strands in ongoing research to reframe cities as essentially sociospatial entities constituted by place based knowledges that are far in excess of what can be made explicit. Tacitness is the organizing principle of urban knowledge. In framing cities thus, we are not merely pointing to gaps between policy and implementation; or merely decentering modernist planning epistemologies, but we are suggesting that tacitness - the apparent impossibility of making explicit what we know about our cities - is the very foundation of contemporary urban development. This presentation will draw upon the last five years of research, pedagogy and public engagement done at Hyderabad Urban Lab to explore tacitness in multiple dimensions and outline the challenges ahead for a research agenda around tacit knowledges.

Visualising the By-lanes of Labour

Radhika Chopra

Visual ethnographies of Indian labouring lives are limited. Even less documented are the working lives of urban migrants on whose labour bazaar economies depend. What does the visual enable us to 'see' is a key question for my research. In prior research, I documented the working lives of male domestic workers, living in the shadow of their employers' gaze. What the earlier work indicated was the shadow lives within the 'domestic' domain. It compels me to move toward the literal and metaphoric 'shadow' economies of bazaars. As public spaces they are 'open'; but as spaces of labour they are in shadow and it is this aspect that remains to be explored. The ethnographic sites for my research will be towns and cities of Punjab – Jullundur and Amritsar. It is research that is yet to be done.

11:30 am - 11:45 am - Tea

11:45 am - 1:00 pm

Resource sharing and continuing the dialogue

Moderator: Sumangala Damodaran

1:00 pm – 2:00 pm - Lunch

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