

Geo-Reflections Series: 1

BEYOND BINARIES IN GEOGRAPHY: RURAL AND URBAN

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Introduction

Spatiality and spatial divisions are intrinsic to the study of Geography. The tradition of spatial division based on certain kinds of parameters intensified in Geography through the influence of dualism. Since then, the divisions and binaries have become significantly important in the study of Geography. These binaries are many—nature/culture; land/water; rural/urban—the list is long. In the system of binaries, we often take it for granted that these categories are fixed, non-negotiable and cannot transgress into each other. Now the question arises—can we really maintain these boundaries from the points of view of physical reality? These boundaries are in a real sense often fluid and each transgresses into the other. They are hybrid as well, where no clear cut character of one is visible; rather the mixed character of both is evident. Although there are many other binaries within Geography, this popular article is intensely focused on the critique of the hard and fast divide between rural and urban in population, settlement, cultural and economic geography.

I start with Settlement Geography, within which we learn these categories of rural and urban as places/settlements explicitly different from each other. Each and every country of the world has different methods of identifying settlements as rural or urban. One of the most common characteristics is the size of population of those settlements, while others vary between built up area, occupation of people and nature of economy, etc. In India, we usually classify settlements on the basis of population size, density of population and the occupation of people living in those settlements. We have fixed parameters and their tentative values which were set in 1961. These were probably very apt at that time. However, since then we have continued to use the same numerical values for each and every parameter to define rural and urban settlements in India. In 1961, the dividing lines between these two kinds of settlements were very sharp—nature of buildings (pucca/kachha), roads (metalled/unmetalled), infrastructure (presence/absence of water supply), services (presence/absence of sanitation, health and education), culture (differential way of speaking, interpersonal relations, food habits, dress, etc.), society (form and structure: advanced/feudal or orthodox)—each and every one of those characteristics would easily be detected as different from each other. However, many things have changed in the last eight decades since we decided the classifying norms of rural and urban in India in 1961.

Questioning Rural and Urban Livelihoods

Another problem lies in the process of understanding the livelihoods of rural and urban areas. When we go to a rural household and ask questions about livelihoods, we always try to focus on income sources. However, livelihood is more than that. Livelihood is a broad amalgamation of various elements such as assets (natural, physical, human, financial, and social capital); activities (strategies of use) and access to these (mediated by institutions and social relations). These three things together determine the living made by the individual or household. Although frameworks for livelihood analysis differ in their details, the basic elements consider resources (what people have), strategies (what people do), and outcomes (the goals people pursue). In understanding livelihoods, we have to focus on households rather than individuals, where different individuals might be engaged in different types of activities in different locations, either in rural or in urban areas.

Thus the problem lies in how we can make the differentiation between rural livelihoods and urban livelihoods. Should we consider the location of residence or should we consider the location of work? People have differential locations for their work and residences. Some people living in villages of Murshidabad district of West Bengal might be working in Delhi, Surat or in Thiruvananthapuram cities, and send money to their villages to contribute to the livelihoods of their families. Similar is the case of millions of rural-to-urban commuters who live in villages and work in towns. There are also significant numbers of urban-to-rural commuters from different cities of India to their surrounding rural regions. Now the question is, how do we categorize those livelihood strategies? Are they called rural livelihoods or urban livelihoods?

The situation gets far more complicated when we have several earning members in a family and some of them work in rural areas while some are engaged in non-farm work in cities. The livelihoods include all of those activities in a family and the problem arises when we try to put them into a single spatial category. Similarly, a family living in a city might have landed property in the village, where a big contribution to their livelihood comes from rural areas in general and from the farm sector in particular. Thus the reality is far more complicated than putting them into simplified binary categories of rural and urban livelihoods.

Commuting: An Element of Narrowing the Social and Cultural Gap

Up to the later part of the twentieth century, people used to stay near the places where they used to work. By the end of the century and moreover, with the spread of the neo-liberal economy all over the world, things started to change. Industrial houses no longer produce everything together. Outsourcing of goods and services has become the norm, cities have become more costly to live in, and the

development of transport has facilitated people to move for longer distances between their residence and workplace on a daily basis. In India, due to multiple reasons like non-remunerative farm sector and higher natural growth of population in rural areas, the rural people cannot get enough job opportunities in and around their villages. In contrast, the expansion of informal service sector economy in urban areas has created many job opportunities in towns and cities. However, these kinds of service sector jobs are often temporary in nature, without a proper job contract, and in most cases they are low paid. Therefore, rural people cannot afford to live in cities because of their low income and high expenditure for housing; they rather prefer to commute even for longer distances.

Both the quantum of such commuting, and the distance covered have increased enormously in the last two decades, and this has become especially possible because of the development of road transport in rural areas. These commuters play a major role in changing the social and cultural norms and practices in rural areas. They observe the lifestyle of city people and bring it back to their own native places. The immense increase in use of smart phones and exposure to social media has also impacted the changing social and cultural characteristics of villages, and has narrowed the divide between urban and rural culture. Lifestyle choices and consumption patterns are no longer as different between rural and urban areas as it was twenty years before. Moreover, the instances of commuting from urban to rural areas have also increased, as middle-class people can afford to stay in cities and they prefer to commute if their work places are located in rural areas. This group of people also helps to bring about some social and cultural changes in the rural areas where they work. Thus the social and cultural divisions which used to be defined as rurality and urbanity are narrowing down, creating problems for the binary categorization of rural and urban, and to conceptualize them as completely different from each other.

Urban Economy in Rural Locations

Whenever we think about the economy of a place, theoretically, we make a clear distinction in the nature of that economy by labelling it as rural economy and urban economy. Urban economy is linked to industrial and tertiary sector activities and in contrast, rural economy is linked to farm and allied activities. However, this traditional distinction does not exist in reality these days. The people in rural areas are no longer solely engaged in farm activities due to the declining returns from the farm sector and increasing use of technology in farming. A major share of the rural population is engaged in expanding service sector activities either in rural areas or in nearby urban areas. Commuting of rural people has increased multiple times in the last two decades in the direction of nearby towns and cities. Circular and semi-permanent flow of labour from rural to urban destinations has also increased

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significantly due to the increasing demand for labour in the city's expanding informal service activities. Therefore, even people still living in rural areas may no longer be engaged in farm sector activities.

In the globalizing India, industrial activities are no longer just a part of the urban economy. Industrial activities have started to be anchored in rural areas along the transport corridors connecting big cities and ports, but at the locations away from cities. Cities can no longer afford to allow the pollution of different kinds generated by industries. By shifting industries away from cities, they can also bypass many other stringent rules that need to be followed in urban and peri-urban areas. Moreover, land has become very precious because of the burgeoning real estate market in neo-liberal India and therefore, cannot accommodate industries in and around cities. The new industrial activities are increasingly taking place in rural areas, thus changing the original morphology and socio-economic structure of those settlements which are neither purely rural nor absolutely urban in character. The changing landscapes and morphology of these settlements are making them fluid in between rural and urban. They look like urban settlements, but are not urban in the statutory sense.

The problem of blurring boundaries between rural and urban is more frequently encountered when we think about smaller cities. These cities in most cases are based on the local economy which is not comparable to the economy of the big cities. These local economies are so enmeshed with the surrounding rural areas that it becomes more complex to understand. The signs of rurality or urbanity are not at all visible at the superficial level. For example, Hazaribagh town of Jharkhand seems to be a mining town. However, none of the mines are located even in the periphery of the town. At the superficial level it would look like a market town, but a little research into the economy of the city will reveal that mining and industrial activities located in the surrounding rural areas control the overall economy of the city. The people engaged in mining, especially all the white collar workers, live in the city and the surplus from the mining sector economy is being invested in the commercial and real estate sectors of the city. Thus rural and urban economies are intricately linked to each other and drawing a clear cut boundary in between them becomes difficult. In most cases both these kinds of economies are again linked to the global forces in neo-liberal India.

Fluid Categories: In-between Settlements

Among different settlement categories of India, two are completely fluid. These are Census Towns and Town Panchayats. These kinds of settlements are literally in between rural and urban, and challenge the binary of understanding categories. The first one is defined as a settlement which fulfils the threshold conditions of being designated as urban following the norms of the census of India, but

administratively comes under rural areas, i.e., panchayats. To be declared a Census Town, a settlement has to fit three criteria: (i) a locality with a population of 5,000 or more, (ii) a population density of 400 persons per square km, and (iii) 75% of the male workforce in the non-agricultural sector.

There is another category of in-between settlement in many states in India called Town/Nagar Panchayats. The Town/Nagar Panchayats are small towns which are usually recognized as towns before they become a full grown municipality. Usually Census Towns of bigger sizes are recognized as Town/Nagar Panchayats in many states and the threshold population size of such settlements again varies from state to state. For example, in Jharkhand and in Bihar, the threshold population sizes for Town/Nagar Panchayats are 10,000 and 12,000 as specified in their respective state municipal acts. These Town Panchayats are governed by authorities with a status below that of a municipality. In some states, Town Panchayats are under the Ministry of Rural Affairs, whereas in others these are under the Ministry of Urban Development. Usually, these Town Panchayats provide basic services such as road maintenance, street lighting, water supply and sanitation. These are financed both by local bodies and by the state governments, with each state sharing the costs in different proportions. Provisions are also made for shared taxes between Town Panchayats and the State Government, to facilitate the development of such settlements. Moreover, these Town Panchayats also charge different taxes such as property tax, professional tax, license fees, surcharge on stamp duty, water tax and so on to provide better services.

In different states of India, where there is no provision of Town/Nagar Panchayats, Census Towns do not receive any kind of urban services as long as they do not qualify as municipalities. These settlements continue to grow as urban, while being governed by rural local bodies, which have a limited capacity to provide basic urban services such as water supply, street lighting and sanitation. The norms controlling the physical expansion of built-up area are also not very strict, as panchayats do not have any building rules at all. These Census Towns are, therefore, ideal places where unmonitored industrial, commercial and real-estate investments take place. Thus these kinds of in-between settlements always pose problems to the binary system of rural and urban as completely different categories.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is quite clear that boundary projects are problematic. This was detected long back by Critical Geography and recently by Hybrid Geography through the critique of dualism in Geography. The dualism caused a lot of harm to Geography, as the very foundation of Geography lies in the holistic approach of understanding both natural and human world as complementary to each other. However, in spite of those critiques, we continued to engage ourselves in the dualism through many binaries such as socio-cultural vs. spatial-analytical, natural vs. cultural, physical vs. human, land vs. water, rural vs. urban, and so on. The world has become far more complicated than it was fifty years ago, and to better understand that world, we need better approaches and methods which can help us to understand the different layers and shades of the human–nature relationship. Probably the days for developing simplified models and buying simple categorical divisions of things are long gone. We need to prepare ourselves to go beyond the traditional idea of Geography as a spatial science. Geography as a subject is blessed to have a position in between the natural and social sciences. The call of the day is to go beyond boundaries and bring the concept of hybridity in Geography, which would transcend boundaries and restore fluidity. This is a simple call for young geographers in India to think and to decide which path to follow, in order to make Geography into a discipline which can efficiently bridge the gap between the natural sciences and social sciences.