

REIMAGINING THE URBAN-RURAL DICHOTOMY

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March 13, 2023 12:15 am | Updated 12:15 am IST

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The traditional dichotomy of rural and urban, and the accordingly mandated governance structure, seems inadequate to understand and act upon poverty, undernourishment, education, health, environmental management or even development. For, between the two extremes lies an intermediate settlement formation where rural and urban functions coexist without distinguishable boundaries. Such formations evolve due to interactions of a complex set of geographical, cultural, economic and historical processes. The rural-urban continuum or urban-rural continuum has drawn wide attention in recent years. Under this axiom, it is acknowledged that the transition from rural to urban follows a graded curve of development, and opportunities for social and economic development depend on one's location along this curve.

A 2021 World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, 'Economic and social development along the urban-rural continuum-New opportunities to inform policy,' advocated adopting the notion of urban catchment areas delineated along an urban-rural continuum. Identification of such areas would help understand urban-rural interconnections, which is important for making policy decisions across development sectors and for addressing issues related to environment and natural resources management. This would support geographically nuanced perspectives in development, required to address increasing spatial inequality.

A 2008 report of the Desakota Study Team, 'Re-imagining the Rural Urban Continuum,' was based on studies in eight countries around the world including India. It stressed on understanding the changing relationship between ecosystems and livelihoods under diversified economic systems across the rural-urban continuum as this has important policy implications at all levels. The term Desakota is an Indonesian usage to designate the formation of rural-urban continuum.

In India, Kerala is well known for the rural-urban continuum in the coastal plain. This was noted even by Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta in the 14th century. The trend further spread over the lowlands and adjoining midlands and highlands. Geographical factors supported by affirmative public policy promoting distributive justice and decentralisation have increased rural-urban linkages and reduced rural-urban differences in major parts of Kerala. In recent years, the rural-urban continuum has developed in various parts of the country, although the underlying factors propping them up are different from those noted in Kerala. The urban industrial interaction fields in India are spreading by linking rural areas and also small towns around the mega cities and urban corridors penetrating rural hinterlands.

In 30 years, technology and economic globalisation have increased mobility of resources and

people, and enhanced inter- and intra-country connectivity. The extension of transport and communication systems, improved access to energy, increased affordability private and public transport as well as penetration of economic and other networks into remote areas promote a rural-urban continuum. The barriers due to physical distance is melting as increasing rural-urban linkages have given rise to diffused network regions. Rural hinterlands are connected to multiple urban centres. The movement of goods, people, information and finance between sites of production and consumption has strengthened linkages between production and labour markets. As the pull factors grow, push factors driving populations out from both rural areas and urban areas are also intensifying. In the process, a mixed economy zone of primary and secondary-tertiary sectors has evolved.

The rural-urban continuum areas also witness changing ecosystems. Agriculturally productive lands are being given for other uses. Food security zones are being reconfigured. Areas for pollutant filtering are declining. There is an increase in waste dump, enhanced disaster risk, and elevated vulnerability. The access of local people to water, food, fuel, fodder and fibre from ecosystems is reducing. At the same time, intermediary market institutions are emerging to provide these goods, which has significant implications for the local people. There is also escalation of market value of land, which further marginalises them.

Discussions on social and economic development and environmental issues and their inter-linkages are not complete without acknowledging the rural-urban continuum. Viewing social and economic transformation through this lens will help identify challenges for improving both urban and rural governance and opportunities for enhanced access to employment, services, institutional resources and environmental management. The institutional connections between rural and urban areas operate at different levels for various development sectors. The key challenge of decision-making is to build rural-urban partnership. To achieve this, a systems approach is recommended where the city and the surroundings form a city region for which a perspective plan is prepared integrating rural and urban plans within a common frame. The city and the rural areas will finally move towards a post-urban world where the rural-dichotomy will no longer exist. It is important that the rural urban linkages are better mapped, for which satellite-based settlement data and its integration with Census data may be useful.

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