

Mumbai's Circulatory Urbanism

Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava
Institute of Urbanology, Mumbai/Goa

May 2014

Full essay published in "Mumbai's Circulatory Urbanism", in Marc Angélil and Rainer Hehl (Editors), [Empower! - Essays on the Political Economy + Political Ecology of Urban Form](#), vol. 3, 2014, Ruby Press, pp. 82 - 113

This essay is based on an ongoing study by the Institute of Urbanology. It has been funded by the Mobile Lives Forum, a research institute created by SNCF to prepare for and build mobility transitions.

The Limits of the Megacity

Conceptualizing Mumbai simply as a “megacity” or, as the United Nations calls it, a “large urban agglomeration,” is inadequate. Rather, it is a hub in a larger urban system. Seeing Mumbai from the point of view of the entire Konkan region (the Arabian Sea coast along the states of Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Goa, in western India) helps us understand how Mumbai’s realm stretches all the way to small towns and villages, and how important the city’s connections with those places are for Mumbai. Communication and transportation systems are making it easier than ever for people to “belong” to several places at once. A person can be rooted in his or her village of origin without sacrificing the social mobility offered by larger city centers. Nowadays, even those migrants who end up staying in the city usually maintain strong connections with their hometowns.

The connection between rural and urban in India is reflected in the Konkan story. While it cannot be denied that the development of infrastructure such as railways contributed to the urbanization of villages and towns, this urbanization was largely triggered by the impulses of the villagers themselves. As villages and towns urbanized, they also preserved their relevance to local populations, in part because they allow a lifestyle that is out of reach in the city. Circulation between the city and the village gives people access to big-city opportunities while preserving their sense of home, their identity, and their prospects back in the village. This has allowed villages to remain relevant in the age of the “megacity.”

Beyond the Urban/Rural Dichotomy

According to Anthony Leeds, the rural and the urban are not distinct entities.¹ Instead, the rural is a sub-category of the urban. Farming, he argues, is an urban activity; farmers are urbanites because they are economically, technologically, and institutionally connected to urban power centers. Large agrarian regions have historically been connected to urban industrial centers through tax regimes, trade, and political-legal systems. Narratives which oppose a modern,

¹ Anthony Leeds, *Cities, Classes, and the Social Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

industrialized, and networked urban world to a world of traditional villages evolving in relative economic and cultural isolation don't reflect the reality of contemporary India.

Understanding the miner, the lumberjack, and the fisherman as actors within local, professional, technical, institutional, and social systems, Leeds profoundly disturbs the neat division of the regional territories into urban and rural. This conceptual breakthrough questions the notion that cities are economic engines that must necessarily grow outward, swallowing towns and villages on their peripheries. This essay suggests that different scales of habitats can be, and often are, integrated and interdependent. Looking at the dispersed Konkan region as an interconnected urban system – even though a majority of the population depends on agriculture – produces a more nuanced framework for understanding the dynamics at work in the ongoing urbanization of India. It also demands that we rethink the role of mobility and individual choices in generating urban forms.

India is still predominantly rural and is projected to remain so for the next three or four decades. However, the simple urban-to-rural ratio hides an important fact: the existence and emergence of urban forms unrelated to density and urbanization. Rural-urban migrants, including those established in cities for generations, have a relationship with their villages that is not only historical, spiritual, and psychological, as pointed out by Ashis Nandy, but also practical; it remains very much alive through frequent family visits, financial investments, and institutional linkages.² Small towns are developing all over the country. They are often more smoothly woven into their rural hinterlands than large metropolitan areas are. Well-connected and networked regions make it easier for people not to migrate, but instead to navigate distances strategically for commercial and personal reasons.

The logic of frozen categories such as rural and urban does not do justice to the complexity of India. The subcontinent is not made up of one-way channels between bifurcated rural and urban sectors, but rather functions through a circulatory system of movement and exchange, in which the railways play a powerful role, as do road and electronic communication networks. This movement can be read into the vast literature produced on seasonal migration, into the statistics about declining agricultural productivity in rural India, in the investments being made by returning urban migrants, in the multiple ways in which households divide the roles of individual members across a range of sectors, and so on. However, the connection between this literature and urbanization has not yet been made. This could transform the way we visualize habitats and their spatial logics and open up our imagination to infinite new urban forms.

An example of such a limitation is evident in the very problem of defining what is urban in India. Several scholars in India have addressed the conceptual weakness of rigid rural and urban categories.³ However, they have not built their arguments in a theoretical way, and so have been unable to move beyond superficial gestures like referring to “rurban” landscapes or “rural-urban continuums.”

As a result, policy makers still refer to India as a country with low levels of urbanization. According to the 2011 census, India is less than 30 percent urban, with slowing rates of growth in larger urban agglomerations. According to some projections, India will only be 60 percent urban in

² Ashis Nandy, *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability, and Indian Popular Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³ See, e.g., R. Ramachandran, *Urbanization and Urban Systems in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

2061.⁴ And yet the census indicates growth in small towns and a significant increase in non-farming economic activities in traditionally agrarian regions, including manufacturing, processing of agrarian products, construction, and other services. Investment by rural-urban migrants from cities in their villages of origin is also increasing. Significant rural-rural migration also hints at dynamism in erstwhile agrarian regions, which are generating income through both farming and non-farming activities. Even on a very small scale, a family may have members spread out across the country in a range of different economic activities. Different economic sectors can thus contribute to one family's income and provide them with social security.

The census points to increased rural expenditure in the country, due in part to urban migrants sending money home on a regular basis. These migrants are often from poor, "homegrown"⁵ neighborhoods of cities like Mumbai, which are increasingly being attacked as real estate speculation reaches new heights and the authority-developers nexus pushes poorer populations into the city's periphery to grab the land they live on.

Circulatory Urbanism

It is vital not to categorize habitats by identity (such as tribal, rural, or urban) or to set these terms in fixed narratives of belonging. It is equally important not to measure habitats in terms of distance and proximity, in linear ways in which technology alone becomes the main variable for enhanced connectivity. Instead, a more fluid and integrated understanding of these concepts is needed.

The unstable ideas of the city, the village, and the citizen and the peculiar way in which connections across habitats (at huge distances from each other) keep replaying themselves in new contexts is crucial to such an understanding. Existing definitions of the city are highly unsatisfactory because they do not give an account of one of the most fundamental aspects of urban life: the interaction between a multiplicity of contexts and people.

Leeds's idea that the rural is embedded in the urban is reflected in the biographies of train commuters along the Konkan coast. Talking to people on the train, it becomes clear that the relationship between village and city is neither unilateral nor dependent. The village cannot be reduced to a peripheral or outdated form, condemned to irrelevance in an urbanizing economy. Neither is the village being artificially preserved by a transportation infrastructure that allows it to function as a bedroom community for city workers. Nor is the village necessarily being absorbed in the sprawl of urbanization. Instead, the village is reinventing itself as an urban habitat, either within the city or as part of a larger system. It has a new relevance for many people who are able to organize themselves creatively along spatial-temporal and familial principles.

Most of the commuters on the Konkan railways are not moving back and forth on a daily basis. Many take the train a few times each month – or each year – for social or business reasons. Others organize their physical and personal spaces along professional and familial lines. Countless workers live in a shared room in Mumbai spending a few minutes a day on the phone with their

⁴ M.G. Parameswaran and Kinjal Medh, eds., *India 2061: The Future of India* (Mumbai: Cogito Consulting, 2013).

⁵ "Homegrown" is our term for neighborhoods that have been developed incrementally by local actors (residents and builders). Most of the settlements categorized as "slum areas" by Mumbai's municipal authorities are homegrown. Urban villages are also usually homegrown.

relatives and a few months a year at home in the village, hundreds of kilometers away. Many who are unable to afford an urban middle-class lifestyle in the city reproduce it in their village, bringing their urban imaginary to a space where it can be actualized.

According to Leeds, economic specialization, institutional linkages, and technological penetration are all indicators of the degree to which a village may already be urbanized. It is equally true that its relationship to the city may well be part of its survival strategy – as a village. This is not as much because the village must define itself against the city as because it functions along with it. It is nearly impossible to find a village that has not historically been part of larger social, political, and economic dynamics.

It would be a real challenge to find a village on the Konkan coast where none of the villagers commute to other parts of the Konkan region or beyond. These commutes can be made on a daily basis, but they are more often weekly, monthly, or annual. The train in particular seems to be used mostly by passengers who travel on a monthly or yearly basis. Fewer than 10 percent of the people interviewed in six different train stations along the Konkan coast used the train for their daily or weekly commutes. Some 40 percent used it frequently – at least five times a year, but less than once a week. The remaining half used the train only occasionally (one to four times a year).

The rural-urban migration narrative, which is often used to explain the demographic explosion of Indian “megacities” and second-tier cities in the past decades, has obfuscated another important story – that of the regular, long-distance commuters who never sever ties with their villages, keeping active relationships with family and community. They go back often for personal reasons, to perform religious rituals, or to attend weddings. They are often investors in their villages, contributing to the agricultural modernization or urbanization of their habitats.

Sociologist Dipankar Gupta points out the inability of the census to take into account the multiplicity of roles that any one individual assumes.⁶ He argues that categorizing individuals in set roles and socio-professional identities invisibilizes the level of economic diversification and urbanization in rural India. It systematically represents the rural economy as dominated by farming when the reality is much more diverse. He gives the example of small machines that allow manufacturing to happen pretty much anywhere. These and a range of other non-agrarian activities, services, and technologies are transforming the countryside, seamlessly but fundamentally.

The linkages between the village and the city, established by family and community networks, add another layer to this complex story. A measure of the ability of families and communities to have one foot in the city and the other in the village – and of the way these economies come together through the bilateral transfer of skills and knowledge – may help us more deeply understand the resilience of the rural sector in India.

A Konkan Brand of Cosmopolitanism

In an essay on Cochin, Ashis Nandy, one of India’s leading cultural commentators, points out how historical factors made this city, on the Malabar coast of Kerala, a leading urban center that

⁶ Dipankar Gupta, "Beyond the Metropolis," *Seminar India* 629 (2012).

presented a regional reference point for a global cosmopolitan imaginary.⁷ He further argues that its history can be a guide for imagining a more inclusive cosmopolitanism even at a national level, challenging narrowly defined identities. While the Malabar coast is the focus of his study, many of his observations are also relevant to the Konkan coast, a couple of hundred kilometers to the north. This region's connections to shipping routes through the Arabian Sea and from there to the Middle East, East Africa and Southern Europe reveals a global orientation that played a crucial role in shaping the Konkan identity. It may have been most spectacular in Goa, Mumbai, and Mangalore, but even the smallest towns and villages were affected by the circulation of people and goods. Yet the enmeshing of the local with larger, globally oriented histories is so deep that it is not always articulated or expressed.

Mumbai, Dubai, and other cities visible in movies and the news are populating the urban imaginary of small Konkan villages. This is part of a larger, accelerating exchange of ideas and images that is redefining the sense of space and location in rural India. François Ascher writes about multiple belonging, expressing the fact that people often define themselves in more than one social space at once, and uses the notion of the "hypertext" to explain that people can go from here to there instantaneously. Thanks in part to the development of communication technologies, including of course the railways, the airplane, and the internet, people occupy an "n-dimensional" space.⁸

Rather than simply going from here to there and "switching" from one "code" to the other, as Ascher puts it, people increasingly occupy multiple spaces at once. Yes, they go back and forth, but they never fully leave one space for the other. The village is a real presence in the life and mind of a migrant worker in Mumbai who may have left his family behind. Even while in the city, he remains in the village through his social networks, his professional skills, and the frequent exchanges he has with his family back home. It is only because he has never left the village that he can endure the harshness of his city life.

At the same time, he takes the city and its dreams back to the village with him. The middle-class home that he helped build in Mumbai, the streetscape he experienced in Dubai, and the shared aspirations of his neighbors all contribute to produce an urban imaginary that may eventually be expressed in the village when he builds a home there for his family. The architectural style that is emerging in many small Indian towns and villages is thus part of a hybrid local-global vernacular that brings many influences together in the actualization of a dreamed object.

Although Mumbai is an overwhelming presence in the Konkan urban system, the Gulf states have been an equally powerful influence on the lives of people there. Remittances from migrants, mostly of Muslim background, have a major impact on the Konkan region. New houses, religious and educational institutions, and businesses are developed and sustained thanks to active links with places such as Mumbai, Dubai, and Qatar. These were initially dependent on water-based, then on train-based, and finally on air-based systems of travel.

Nandy shows that Cochin's historical template (built on diverse experiences thanks to global trade) brought exotic and local moments in close proximity to produce a special cosmopolitanism that continues to shape the city even today. In the same way, the Konkan region reflects a locally rooted cosmopolitanism. It is tempting to see enhanced mobility as being destructive of this

⁷ Ashis Nandy, "Time Travel to a Possible Self: Searching for the Alternative Cosmopolitanism of Cochin," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 1, no. 2 (November 2000): 295-327.

⁸ François Ascher, *Métapolis: Ou L'avenir Des Villes* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1995), 50-51.

experience, especially in terms of changing lifestyles and architectural styles. However, as Nandy points out, it is mobility and movement that produced this special fabric in the first place and, whatever one does, the ongoing changes cannot be explained by a shift from something traditional or static to that which is new and dynamic.

This makes it difficult to justify many changes – negative or positive – as purely emanating from one or two variables, like the railways or improved communication strategies. What is more realistic is to step back and see the ongoing transformations within a larger and deeper canvas.

To read the rest of chapter, please purchase the book and support independent publishers!
The full essay is published in Marc Angélil and Rainer Hehl (Editors), [Empower! - Essays on the Political Economy + Political Ecology of Urban Form](#), vol. 3, 2014, Ruby Press

Bibliography

Ascher, François. *Métapolis ou L'avenir des villes*. Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1995.

Castells, Manuel. *The Informational City: Economic Restructuring and Urban Development*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

Dunn, Edgar S., Jr. *The Development of the US Urban System*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

Gupta, Dipankar. "Beyond the Metropolis." *Seminar India* 629. 2012.

Harvey, David. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. New York: Verso, 2012.

Jacobs, Jane. *The Economy of Cities*. New York: Random House, 1969.

Kaufmann, Vincent, Manfred Max Bergman, and Dominique Joye. "Motility: Mobility as Capital." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 28, no. 4 (December 2004): 745-56.

Kerr, Ian J. *Engines of Change: The Railroads That Made India*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007.

Leeds, Anthony. *Cities, Classes, and the Social Order*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

Lynch, Kevin. *City Sense and City Design: Writings and Projects of Kevin Lynch*. Edited by Tridib Banerjee and Michael Southworth. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.

Nandy, Ashis. *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability, and Indian Popular Cinema*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

- Nandy, Ashis. "Time Travel to a Possible Self: Searching for the Alternative Cosmopolitanism of Cochin." *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 1, no. 2 (November 2000): 295-327.
- Ramachandran, R. *Urbanization and Urban Systems in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Sharma, Suresh. *Tribal Identity and the Modern World*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994.
- Shivdasani, Menka and Raju Kane. *The Konkan Railway: A Dream Come True*. Navi Mumbai: Public Relations Dept., Konkan Railway Corp., 1998.
- Srinivasan, Roopa, Tiwari Manish, and Sandeep Silas. *Our Indian Railway: Themes in India's Railway History*. New Delhi: Foundation, 2006.
- Webber, Melvin M., John W. Dyckman, Donald L. Foley, Albert Z. Guttenberg, William L. C. Wheaton, and Catherine Bauer Wurster. *Explorations into Urban Structure*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964.