


Article

Negotiating Land in Rurban Bengaluru, South India

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Abstract: Recently, there have been calls to decenter theories of the urban to theorize the rural as a formative force. While recognizing that the urban remains structurally dominant, scholars point towards the interconnectedness of the urban and the rural under present capitalist transformation processes. We proposed to study recent urban–rural entanglements through the heuristic of rurban assemblages. We focused on rural groups and how they negotiate their integration and disintegration into the urban cosmos while remaining embedded within their rural context through the lens of land. This article adds to the debate on the contradictory meanings and uses of land in the context of land dispossession and commodification for urban and industrial development. The work specifically paid attention to the reshaping of subject–land relations and analyzed how implicit or explicit references to the city and the countryside permeate the construction of values and uses of land among the old and new social groups in the metropolitan region of Bengaluru, South India.

Keywords: rurban assemblage; rurbanity; land transformation; subject–land relationship; Bengaluru

1. Introduction

This work unpacked the term rurban. We discussed its potential to render visible struggles over ideas, practices, and spaces in a burgeoning debate on how the rural and agrarian are intertwined in an urbanizing world. Such an analytical endeavor faced the challenge to neither totalize the urban nor to downplay its force in shaping contemporary societies. Most importantly, we tried to avoid relegating the rural to a mere residual element, emptied from its specific formations [1–3]. Using the example of everyday land transformations in Bengaluru, we engaged “rurban assemblages” as an analytical heuristic to trace how social groups attach different notions of use, value, and identities to land and thereby construct competing and contradictory meanings and representations of the “urban” and “rural”.

After losing popularity from the 1970s onward, urban planning, human geography, and anthropology increasingly engaged the word rurban to analyze changing relations between the city and the village, the urban and rural, respectively. The term also entered policy discourse as a handy denomination for development questions that concern both the city and the village. A case in point is the Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission (SPMRM) in India, which was launched in 2016 with the goal to “preserve and nurture the essence of rural community life with focus on equity and inclusiveness without compromising with the facilities perceived to be essentially urban in nature . . . ” [4]. We use the term “rurban” as an analytical category to better understand the contradictions and ambivalences in people’s attachment and use of land and their implicit or explicit reference to particular ideas and experiences of “the city” and “the villages” [5]. In our empirical investigation in the southern part of the metropolitan region of Bengaluru, rurban assemblages manifest in competing uses, values, and identities that the rural population attaches to their transforming land.

Exploring the productivity of the term rurban is not easy. The urban theorist Henri Lefebvre already resisted attempts to merge the urban and the rural and label seemingly



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new spatial phenomena with the neologism “rurban”. According to him, the urban under capitalism had become hegemonic and constituted the dominant mode of socialization. A synthesis would suggest that capitalist urbanization consisted of a double movement in which the urban and the rural not only dialectically shaped but ultimately “neutralized” and suspended each other [6] (p. 119). Although we agree with such warning, we suggest that the term rurban may decenter the perspective away from a linear and gradual perspective of urban transformation toward an emphasis on ruptures, incompleteness, and contestations [2]. We approach the rurban from a constructivist perspective. That means that we do not wish to reify the urban–rural binary or assume a withering away of the rural amidst global urbanization. Rather, we are interested in how the “rural” and “urban” as two simultaneous reference points or metaphors shape everyday land transformations. With the category of the rurban, we do not intend to capture the “ruralization” of suburban residents of metropolitan areas or the adoption of subordinate “rural” everyday discourses, practices, and lifestyles in the context of urbanization. The term refers to the totality of found ideas, practices, and institutions of people and collectives interacting in a transitional area between the rural periphery and urban space with conscious or unconscious reference to both poles. Instead of denoting a territorial or geographical location or real empirical entities that would likely result in reifying an urban–rural binary, we understand the urban and the rural, respectively, as constructed markers of worldviews, discourses, and practices that unfold and acquire real meaning in peoples’ lives and spatial structures [7]. We thereby do not relegate the rural to a residual or obsolescent category but take seriously the call to analyze the specific and ever-changing relationality between the urban and rural [3] (p. 198). The term assemblage helps us to understand the relationship between the urban and rural not as given and predetermined but continuously evolving and changing.

This article presents four small case studies to analyze how people make meaning of land that is increasingly subjected to speculation, dispossession, and commodification. Through the theoretical lens of rurban assemblage, we studied how different social groups negotiate land uses and land values through implicit references to the city and the countryside [8] (pp. 189–190). We particularly revealed the (un)stable and contradictory linkages between urban and rural elements that enter and shape the way people navigate speculative land transformations in metro Bengaluru.

2. Literature Review

The term “rurban” first appeared at the beginning of the 20th century [9–11] but has since only played a limited role in international debates on rural–urban relations. The term is frequently used to describe phenomena that do not fit into the classical and territorial schema of urban–rural transition, which considers urbanization as a linear process in which rural land transforms into urban land. In the Global South context, rurban phenomena do not solely describe a particular geographical location of a physical and material space. Instead, and depending on the form of settlement, rurban phenomena describe all kinds of entanglements from urban and rural spaces to social practices to ideas or lifestyles.

Such entanglements include Southeast Asian forms of settlement and land management referred to as *Desakota* [12] and, in some cases, Chinese urban villages (*chengzhongcun*) [13] as well as forms of commuting migration into and out of metropolitan areas linked to traditional agricultural production [14,15] and informal settlements in the urban peripheries [16]. A common thread among these authors was the assumption of a “relationality” between urban and rural ways of life that unfolds in different social, economic, or cultural aspects [17]. In other cases, authors engaged the rurban to describe mechanisms of rural and urban inhabitants to cope with the contradictions of rural and urban transformations [18]. Rurban was also proposed as a program to reconcile urban and rural influences and forces in the face of peripheralization [19–22].

In this sense, rurbanization is often seen as traditional structures being gradually or partially penetrated by city-related modernization trends in the rural context, or, vice versa, the transfer of rural practices into an urban context. This may result in a mix of building

materials and typologies in villages [23] or the reinterpretation of the use of open space in cities for greening and urban agriculture [24,25]. It can also affect the social structure in villages as a result of migration, resulting in pressure on agricultural practices, the upward social mobility of migrants returning from temporary occupation abroad, and the changing social fabric of the rural population or of tourism [26–31].

In a European and mainly Francophone context, rurbanization may also denote a particular form of unorganized outmigration of urbanites diffusing into the peri-urban or suburban space [32–38] in an attempt to realize “a residential rurality, while keeping an urban lifestyle and a mobility stronger than that of the former rural people” [39] (p. 27, translation by the authors). One of the motivations is the perceived degradation of urban environments and a strong dispersion of the resident population and spatial fragmentation on the urban fringes [40]. This makes clear that rurbanization as a dynamic process incorporating outmigration from cities, new migration from peripheral areas, and the construction of second homes in rural areas [41] is clearly distinguished from suburbanization in that it is not mainly characterized by peripheral single-family homes but urban lifestyles and residential typologies embedded in rural spaces whose agricultural economic base is decreasing continuously [42–46].

Recently, the debate has been taken further by referring to the landscape aspect of urban spaces from a central European perspective. In this context, the notion of “‘rurban landscapes’ [. . .] stands for the fact that we can understand the landscapes surrounding us as changing (re)combinations of urban and rural practices, contexts of meaning, and spatial structures. The term is intended to help us focus on and uncover productive but also tense and conflicting relationships between urban and rural areas. [. . .] The term [. . .] stands for the exploration and understanding of the manifold entanglements of urban and rural practices, imaginations, projections and spatial structures. Terms such as ‘rurbanity’ [. . .] can only ever be auxiliary constructions that challenge an orientation and constant (re)positioning in urban–rural relations” [47] (p. 15f; translation by the authors). These definitions express a relational understanding of rurbanity as a hermeneutic category to be spelled out analytically on a case-by-case basis.

In a wider, policy-oriented context at the European Union level, the dynamics of urban development are stressed without a more precise concept of what distinguishes rurbanity from other concepts, denoting the spatial embodiments of rural–urban relations. Here, the focus is on the management of urban growth, the management of transformations away from agriculture, the ways of keeping urban areas considerably “green”, and the challenges of an accelerated change and increasing fragmentation of landscapes with considerable impact on their visual qualities [48–50].

In India, after early attempts at conceptualizing urban areas as “fringes” between urban and rural spaces [51], the term rurban has received popularity under the Modi-led government. The already mentioned “rurban mission” focuses on “census towns”, large villages that have grown economically into towns without adequate basic necessities and sociocultural amenities [52]. In this context, “rurbanization” is understood normatively as a conglomerate of measures aimed at directing the development of the suburban or even rural fringe with the help of providing additional public infrastructure and services and improving the linkages between urban consumers and rural producers of primary products, acknowledging the challenges of urbanization and the overburdening of major cities. The ultimate goal is to empower rural centers and to improve their development options, building on traditionally rural sectors of the economy, such as tourism, handicraft, and food production, to “lower the migration rate by developing village with a ‘rural soul’ but with all urban amenities that a city may have” [53], see also [54–57]. In more sophisticated approaches, they comprise integrated rural development and support the formation of urban clusters in the hope of easing the existing rural–urban migration pressure, generally building on smart city approaches [4,58–64]. In this sense, the use of the term resembles the concept of “decentralized concentration” in regional development studies [65–67] and

echoes earlier attempts at directing development in India [68,69] or other Asian regions to some extent [70,71].

3. Theoretical Framework

Henri Lefebvre [72] (pp. 1–2) argued that modern capitalist societies will be completely urbanized because of a restructuring of capitalism and decreasing significance of the agrarian sector and industrialization. Here, the survival of modern capitalism is preconditioned by the production of urban space that absorbs through the extension of borders as well as “corrodes the residue of agrarian life” [72] (p. 3). Building upon Lefebvre, critical urban theory conceptualizes capitalist urbanization as a dual process of implosion as a concentration of socioeconomic activities in urban agglomerations as well as explosion as the continuous absorption process of nonurban or agrarian spaces through dispossession and commodification of land [72] (p. 14) [73] (p. 167). Southern urbanism, an emerging scholarly field, now claims that critical urban theory does not sufficiently pay attention to rural spaces, practices, and discourses as active and not merely residual elements of capitalist urbanization. Southern urbanism is then a fruitful perspective to study the variegated ways that agrarian structures, rural economies, property relations, or caste identities come to be entangled with capitalist urban transformations [74–77] (Gururani 2020). Such urban–agrarian entanglements, according to the authors, unfold in so-called frontiers. These frontiers are “interstitial spaces” [78] (p. 27), sites of enmeshed social, political, and spatial processes in metropolitan regions that create a “volatile and active landscape, caught in the vortex of change” that is both a “place of potential” and “perils” [79] (pp. 41–42) where people are “are deemed backward, village-like” and “should be urbanized, disciplined, and recruited into productive regimes of economic growth and development” [79] (p. 42).

We followed Schmidt-Lauber and Wolfmayr [80] (p. 28) and their approach to *rurban assemblages* to make visible practices, discourses, and materialities through which both the urban and agrarian are lived, experienced, or imagined in frontier spaces. Rurban assemblages highlight the *blending processes* between urban and rural elements under capitalist urbanization processes [80]. Neither the urban and the rural nor the city and the countryside are previously defined but seen as socially constructed. We understand an assemblage as “some form of provisional socio-spatial formation [...] composed of heterogeneous elements that may be human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, technical and natural” [81] (p. 124). Assemblage thinking seeks to overcome binaries and hierarchies and to avoid a priori assumptions about a form of social spatial relations [81]. Assemblage thinking thereby emphasizes “the *interaction* between components that form the assemblage, and these interactions cannot be reduced to individual properties alone” [82] (p. 653, emphasis in original). Empirical analysis of rurban assemblages subsequently pays attention to the specific ways in which people construct certain images, ideas, and discourses or even identities and lifestyles as urban or rural [80] (p. 30). Regarding our study of land, we are interested in the continuous assembly, disassembly, and reassembly [81] of urban and rural features in the use, valuation, and meaning making of land as a source of identity. In this article, we propose that urban assemblages can be studied and read in everyday land transformations as they occur in urban peripheries. Specifically, we were interested in those rurban assemblages that are central to how people use, talk about, and infuse land with values and identities. We assumed that urbanization processes neither level urban–rural differences nor further exacerbate this dichotomy. Using the heuristic of rurban assemblage, we were specifically interested in how people fill the terms city and countryside or urban and rural with meaning, what roles these play in their everyday encounters with land, and what function they assume in them [80] (p. 29). We thus focused on individual subjects and their use of terms.

With this approach, we built on the literature that assumed that capitalist urbanization asserts itself in a historically geographically specific way and never fully incorporates or erases nondominant and nonhegemonic spatial forms, ideas, or social relations [83,84]. With the concept of rurban assemblage, we sought to carve out the “variegated, uneven, volatile,

contradictory, and emergent” elements [2] (p. 4) and intentional and nonintentional recombination of urban and rural features that shape contemporary global urbanization [76,85].

4. Methodology

This work asked how rurban assemblages are formed in the everyday experience of land transformations within the agrarian population. More specifically, it addressed the role of urban and rural areas in the everyday construction of value and use of land as well as rural identities. The empirical parts in this article describe four smaller case studies that exemplify the negotiation processes of forms of use, appropriation, and commodification of land and how they unfold in an assemblage of rurban discourses, practices, and material manifestations. With this research interest, we focused on the permeation of rurban assemblage in the everyday meaning making of land in times of capitalist urbanization and agrarian change in Global South contexts. An ethnographic approach was chosen as a fruitful methodological approach to account for our research interests in people’s experiences, meanings, and ideas. Ethnographic research stands in contrast to the positive science that usually operates within a decontextualized and detached setting with surveys and neutral observations as an essential method for data collection [86] (p. 5) and seeks to generate wider and more general claims from mundane and singular events [86]. Our empirical analysis drew from open-ended and ethnographic interviews conducted in the southern area of the Bangalore Metropolitan Region (BMR). The data were obtained as part of a dissertation project at the University of Kassel within the graduate program “BangaDyn: Rural–Urban Dynamics in Bangalore” during a total of 5 months of fieldwork between 2017 and 2020. The aim of collecting the most different forms of subject–land relationships guided the selection of interview respondents during fieldwork by the main author and his research assistants. During an initial exploratory phase, we conducted 25 semi-structured, qualitative, in-depth interviews. We generated four types of subject–land relationships from the acquired empirical material, highlighting different relations between the rural population and farmland in our field site. This article shows four different types of subject–land relationships by drawing from five additional ethnographic interviews and ethnographic conversations with retirees, land brokers, farmers, villagers, and businesspeople. On the one hand, this work looked at landowning farmers and landless agricultural workers and their relationship to the land after dispossession. On the other hand, we also included the “new” rural population, such as urban retirees, who increasingly move away from inner-city Bengaluru to our field sites to retire. We discussed these four typologies through the theoretical lens of rurban assemblages. Ethnographic interviews allowed for open questions and sought to generate longer stories or narratives of elements of people’s lives. While the initial questions covered occupation, household structure, and landownership, the second part of the interview asked how people experience agricultural change and urbanization and how their lives and the role of land have changed since the development of the industrial park. Such an open-ended interview strategy has some advantage over closed-ended questionnaires. Overall, they make it easier to approach possible respondents and acquire more in-depth information. At the same time, respondents have more control over the topics they like to discuss and the knowledge they wish to share. Open questionnaires in ethnographic interviews thereby contribute to a more trusting interview atmosphere. Mutual trust was necessary to give justice to a large part of the rural population’s concern that their sensitive information is shared with state and market actors. The recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed and translated from Kannada into English and then analyzed with an open coding strategy by identifying urban and rural features in the multiple meanings, ideas, or practices through which respondents construct and negotiate values and uses of land as well as identities attached to land.

5. Research Area

We focused on a growing town and a dozen of villages approximately 30 kilometers from Bengaluru, the capital of the south Indian state Karnataka (see Figures 1 and 2). Our

field sites are located in the Ramanagara district. The district has undergone profound changes with growing industrialization since the early 2000s. Increased demand for farmland for residential and industrial development confronts farmers with land dispossession and more general agrarian insecurities stemming from falling wages, rising production costs, and climatic changes in the region. With specialization in information technology in the 1990s, nearby Bengaluru continues to be a prime city for real estate investment and land speculation. From 2000 to 2008 alone, the built-up area of “Asia’s Silicon Valley” increased by 27.18% while, at the same time, water bodies and agricultural land decreased by 15.62% and 0.65, respectively [87]. Farmers in the Bangalore Metropolitan Area are increasingly forced to relinquish their land-based livelihoods and face a lack of formal or informal employment opportunities outside of agriculture. Today, Bengaluru’s transformation of rural land into urban real estate is managed by an alliance of parastatal agencies and local business elites, professionals from international finance institutions, bilateral aid agencies, nonresident Indians living abroad, and internationally connected NGOs [88]. The following empirical examples, however, do not focus on state or capital actors but center on the rural population and their activities in preparing land for speculation and accumulation. We further traced the entanglement of land with rural features, identities, land uses, and narratives. We suggest that the rural assemblages that surface in land negotiations are deeply interwoven with the crisis of India’s neoliberal restructuring of the economy expressed in a lack of formal employment opportunities for a growing faction of dispossessed farmers. This “partial industrialization” is further coupled with continuous land speculation and investment by national and international actors resulting from ongoing liberalization of the land market that steadily increases the pressure to dispossess and exploit farmland for urban and industrial uses while failing to provide employment or development and material improvement to the rural population [89].



Figure 1. Location of Bengaluru (red) in the state of Karnataka (yellow) in India (grey) [90].

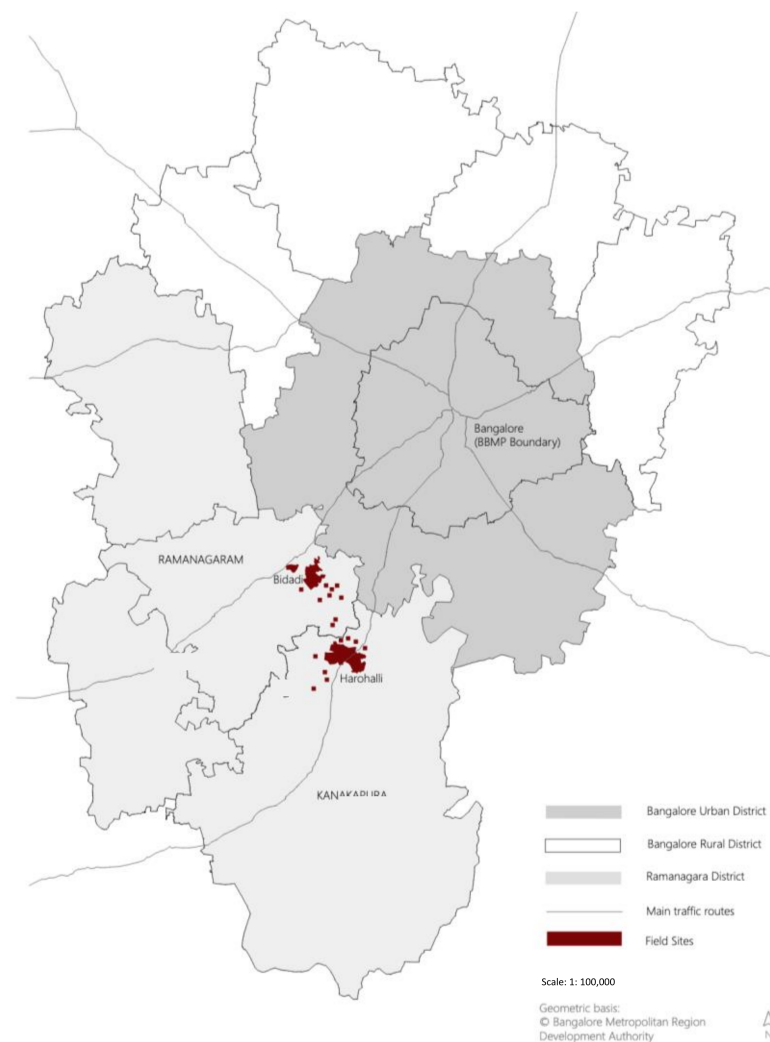


Figure 2. Map of the field sites in the Bangalore Metropolitan Region (authors produced, drawn by Lara Hartig).

5.1. Empirical Part

Focusing on land transformations opens a fruitful perspective to trace rurban articulations in urbanizing regions. The past years have witnessed growing attention to the transformation of farmland into a speculative asset and urban real estate in India. Studies showed how global and local urban and rural forces combine and subjugate farmland to urban logics of use and exploitation through economic and extra-economic forces [89,91,92]. Other studies emphasized how the agrarian population shapes land acquisition processes and local land markets [93]. Class, caste, and gender hereby determine the selective involvement of the agrarian population in grounding urbanization and industrialization in rural regions [77]. Farmers, for example, help negotiate conditions and compensation for land dispossession [94], become part of the urban land market as land brokers, money lenders, or real estate agents [75], or informally build rental apartments that allow them to live as rentiers [95]. The urban land market allows the landowning factions of the agrarian population to access new, nonfarm livelihood opportunities [96] and thereby also tackle the increasing agrarian crisis with declining income and increasing input costs. Land transformations, from land sales and forceful land acquisition, thus become viable options for farmers in urbanizing regions [88]. How the agrarian population ultimately experiences urbanization, absorbs old agrarian formations, and benefits from the commodification of farmland, however, is highly dependent on class, caste, gender, and religion and is also shaped by historical agrarian structures, economies, and identities [97]. Against this

backdrop, the following four case studies discuss how different groups among rural populations negotiate the value and use of land by making reference to ideas and images of the urban and the rural. We thereby sought to better understand the contradictions and ambivalences with which the rural population shapes and encounters rural to urban land transformations.

5.2. *The Discovery of the Countryside by Urban Pensioners*

Industrialization made our field sites attractive for migrant laborers and also increasingly for retiring city officials and businesspeople as a place to live. After exhausting years in “noisy” and “dirty” Bengaluru, as some retirees said, the green now beckons for the last stage of life. Retirees buy farmland for the construction of grand houses from willing farmers for whom farming is no longer profitable or who wish to buy a house in the city themselves. Other retirees buy farmland to practice agriculture. The discovery of farming among urbanites fits into a broader quest of highly educated, urban, middle-class employees for an “organic, natural, and sustainable lifestyle” [98] (p. 72). The aspiring agriculturalists are generally inexperienced with agriculture and motivated by “organic smallholder farming, no-input cultivation, self-reliance, indigenous crop varieties or native cattle breeds, and a retreat from city life” [98] (p. 74). Their motives are the search for a meaningful activity (farming) on the land, a quiet lifestyle closer to nature, and the desire for a secure investment in land for future monetary gain, as land is one of the most attractive investment opportunities in India. Organic farming, therefore, underlies the deeper motive of land ownership and long-term investments, bequeathing farmland to children and grandchildren later.

When retirees buy farmland, they speculate on the continuous urbanization of Bengaluru’s hinterland and hope that the farmland becomes part of a residential area in the zoning plan to yield higher land prices. However, retirees’ farming activities do not only serve speculative purposes where land is reduced to an object of investment. Farmland, their premise is, must be cultivated and used. Two kinds of changes were noted. On the one hand, farmland was put to a new agricultural use. Retirees usually do not cultivate grain, corn, or finger millet, as is usually the case in the area. Instead, they grow orchards with mangos or coconuts, frequently cultivated as ecologically and soil compatibly as possible—something that requires much more labor and input costs. What motivates retirees is not the amount of agricultural produce from their land but how their farmland is used.

Contrary to what Beelen observed, urban officials and businesspeople in our case were less concerned with actual farming. Even if a passion for plants articulates a longing to work with their hands and less with their heads, paid agricultural laborers performed the actual farm work. Pensioners commonly merely supervised and thereby resembled other landowning farmers primarily directing agricultural workers. Owning agricultural land and tilling it allows retirees to assume a new identity. Retirees thus see themselves as “peasants”. This example shows how pensioners negotiate agricultural land use, recreation, leisure, and speculative land acquisition, only superficially removing the logic of profit through their endeavors for recreational purposes.

The above-described land practice differs from speculative farmland purchases in Bengaluru’s metropolitan region in the meanings and usages attached to the farmland and less to the underlying accumulative logic. In the cases of speculative land purchases in our field site area, farmland often remained fallow until a master plan allowed for official agrarian to urban land use change. In other cases, and for a limited period, farmland still served the purpose for agriculture, but with the goal of maximum yield. Sometimes, farmland and agricultural production served to provide buyers with a “farmer identity”. This identity was then instrumentalized for political purposes in the context of voter mobilization among farmers. Such speculative land sales were almost exclusively subject to instrumental rationality, aiming at a maximum exchange value and most efficient use. In this first example, we tried to carve out how this purely instrumental relationship to farmland as an investment object was entangled with discourse and practices that

emphasized ideas of rural preservation, rural aesthetics, or the desire for nonalienated work.

5.3. *Brokering Land, Selling Local Knowledge*

Land brokers or intermediaries in India are integral to rural transformation and link sellers and buyers to facilitate or obstruct land deals [99]. The worsening agrarian crisis and land expropriation for industrial projects ensured that farmers in our examples either sold or lost their land. With the lack of earning opportunities in the secondary and tertiary sectors, land brokerage emerged as an auspicious primary or secondary occupation for Vokkaligas. Vokkaliga is the term for the landowning agricultural caste in South Karnataka. In Karnataka, Vokkaligas belong to the dominant agricultural caste, being numerically outnumbered but having local political and economic influence. However, with 1 to 2 acres of land, they have relatively little agricultural land. Land brokerage can be understood as a rural phenomenon insofar as, in the activities, questions of agrarian identity and power are negotiated in times of urbanization and agrarian decline. Land brokerage presupposes urban and rural knowledge: those who want to sell or buy agricultural land turn to local brokers that have good connections to the district collector who decides on the transaction. More crucially, local land brokers have situational knowledge about potentially willing sellers and the “atmosphere in the villages”: debts, marriages, personal difficulties, or crop failures explain why farmers want to sell their land, sometimes at short notice, or at least consider doing so. Local brokers track down potential sellers, sometimes proactively by asking for rumors of financial difficulties in the village. Even though local land brokers are not in particularly “loved”, they are trusted more than outsiders. The fact that farmers are also ambivalent toward local land brokers lies in their experience of being cheated and in cases where brokers deliberately drove up prices to secure a higher margin.

Land brokers in rural areas are usually not registered and have no official license; their activities are informal and covert. One case involved a dispossessed farmer who earned part of his income from land brokerage. Externally, he embodied his identity as a farmer by having a large bumper sticker on his new SUV that read “Peasant”. His house was large and showed an impressive outward spanning porch roof. When asked about the sticker, the land broker explained the pride he took from being a farmer rather than a land broker. While his attachment to agriculture was earnest, his self-identification as a farmer was also a strategy for him to remain unrecognized as a land broker:

M.S.: If somebody asks you about your occupation, what would you say?

P1: Agriculture.

M.S.: Agriculture.

P1: We cannot say that we work as real estate agent. We cannot do real estate work. Because in school, they ask about the father’s occupation.

M.S.: Why is it so?

P1: Because we don’t have an official office. There are some rules [to follow]. Real estate means there are certain rules made by the government and we need to follow those rules, and to follow those rules, we need money in crores. We are not those big agents; we work in small scale.

The “peasant identity” is a way to hide the informality of their activities. This is because anyone who wants to enter the land business officially in Karnataka must buy expensive state licenses. The conversion of farmland into urban land in our case was organized by small scale intermediaries: farmers, who were dispossessed by industrialization and needed an alternative source of livelihood. On the one hand, their identity as agriculturalist is informed by caste belonging. However, their peasant identity also has the purpose of masking their activity as land brokers. This illustrates how intermediaries enable urbanization processes by navigating agrarian and urban interests. More crucially, land brokers themselves must negotiate their own post-agrarian lives.

5.4. Rentierism and Farmland: Land-Based Caste Identities

This section deepens questions of land-based caste identities and points to their role in shaping *urban* aspirations among farmers. Historically grown, land-based caste identities among Vokkaligas remain effective in their negotiation of urban–agrarian change. The decline of agriculture and labor shortages as well as the prospect to benefit from the land and housing market motivated many Vokkaliga families to sell their land, exit agriculture, and leave the village for good. Vokkaligas in our research area left their villages and moved to nearby towns to reinvest their land money by constructing apartment complexes. Several families we talked to settled down as rentiers. Most of the apartments these families rent out are occupied by skilled and highly educated migrant laborers, such as engineers or chemists. One farmer described his motivation for building a house as a “desire” to be remembered after his death. He disliked the idea of “parking” his money in a bank.

Vokkaligas’ shift from agriculture to rentiership accompanies an ambivalent reshaping of caste identity. If families sell and part their land, they will often keep a small fraction of land. These small parcels of land are not large enough to support the livelihood of the family. They allow maybe for some additional food supply. Crucially, however, the remaining land is to give justice to caste expectations. To families, selling land feels as if it is an act of betrayal. In several instances, primarily husbands from the Vokkaliga caste reported having experienced feelings of shame or even never returning to the village after selling the land. Being an agriculturalist by birth, keeping land uncultivated or even selling it counters deeply rooted expectations and traditions. Vokkaligas, the conviction goes, are deeply connected to the land (*Boohmi*), the premise for caste consciousness. Selling or losing it then causes “unexplainable pain.” The active cultivation and utilization of land determines Vokkaligas’ success in maintaining their caste identity. A young entrepreneur who grew up in a farming family described how his father made sure that Vokkaligas did not leave their land idle:

“In addition, what would you tell me if I’m not doing anything? Are you Vokkaliga? Are you real Gowda? You should never let your land be like that. So, that respect and pride is there. Therefore, you cannot afford to lose that...Okay, if you’re keeping your land empty and not farming, not doing that farming, it is truly treated as, you know, disrespectful . . . The expectation [to own land and keep farming] is set by, let us say, seniors who are living around you. Say, of my dad, my dad’s age. Okay, if he sees a land there is not much being grown, so he will go out, he will take out 5 minutes in the evening. He will go to their doorstep and tell them why you are not growing anything. He is gonna suggest. Okay, so those suggestions were brought with respect, at par in the past. Now, the days are also changed. Okay, I don’t want to do it, man. I see no returns; I don’t want to do it. If you want to do it, you take it. I have no issues. I don’t want to intentionally keep it, you know, in idle. I don’t want to do it because I’m not seeing any return simply. You do it. And, you give me whatever the best you can give me at the end of the year. I’m happy to give that land on lease or rent. I don’t even consider this as a lease or rent. You just do it.”

The prevalence of land-based caste identity does not stand oppositional but complementary to a calculative and exchange value-driven relationship to land. Experiences that emanate from land-based caste identities (one could argue with Williams) are incorporated and preserved by emerging urban and industrial capitalist hegemonies [100] (p. 122). This example shows how farmers negotiate their land-based caste identities amidst growing urban aspirations and the wish to exit agriculture. However, urban life in an apartment building and rental income are offset by the expectations of agrarian caste groups. By retaining a piece of land, former farmers continue, at least symbolically, their agrarian life and can thus, in part, meet the demands of their caste identity.

5.5. *Emancipating from Rural Oppression and Investing in Urban Land*

The last case looks at how casteless agricultural laborers attribute the possibility of their emancipation from caste oppression and rural power structures to the city. Urbanization in India is often seen as an ambiguous process for agrarian groups as liberating and oppressive. The city ostensibly provides an exemption from caste-based domination and dependency in times of prevailing servitude [101] (p. 54) and allows for an increase in social status and upward mobility [102]. This section explores how the landless rural population makes meaning of land and relates to landowning farmers.

This section focuses on a young father from a landless family who left agriculture. While his parents had worked as agricultural laborers under the Vokkaligas, he said, he was able to secure employment at a corporate bank in Bengaluru through education. As Dalits, his parents' past was characterized by caste oppression and high dependency on Vokkaligas, the father recounted: it was the time of separated food and glasses and no invitations of Dalits to the village festivals. The man explained that the reason for his ability to "emancipate" from village life and work at a corporate bank was his lack of farmland. Ownership of farmland is the reason for Vokkaligas' unchanged "traditional rural life". Land, the father explained, was the reason why Vokkaligas did not seek higher education and a meaningful life outside of agriculture. It was the lack of land that allowed Dalits to leave agriculture and become successful in the cities. Dalits had a great motivation to free themselves from agricultural labor, work hard in school, and strive for an excellent education to be able to attend a university in the city. While Dalits escaped rural life, Vokkaligas continued to stick to their land with no ambitions to study: "Vokkaliga have never seen the world" and they are "happy with their land and the village life". Many even leave school after the 10th standard (compared to Dalits, who finish after the 12th).

The farmland here stands for an attachment to the rural, portrayed as something backward. Dependence on farmland is contrasted with self-determined life through education in the city. The city as the locus of liberation and emancipation somewhat dissolved social hierarchies. This is also why the family did not invest their money in farmland nearby but bought urban plots in Bengaluru. Although this Dalit family saw the city as liberating and a place to invest, they remained attached to their village and wanted to stay there. Even today, the caste division between Vokkaligas and Dalits remains visible in the village structure. From this example, we can see how the negotiation of caste-based oppression via land reflects wider discourses on the status of the city and the village in overcoming social hierarchies [103].

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This article adds to the debate on the ambivalent and contradictory meanings of farmland in the context of land dispossession and commodification for urban and industrial development in metropolitan regions. It specifically paid attention to the reshaping of subject–land relations and analyzed how implicit or explicit references to the city and the countryside permeate the construction of values and uses of land among the old and new rural population (see Table 1).

The first case study focused on urban retirees and the specific practices of buying farmland for both ecological agriculture and long-term investment. Moving to the countryside, these new rural actors do not seek to exploit farmland through agricultural production as productively and efficiently as possible to reach the highest yield. Instead, farming serves the purpose of recreation and leisure, allowing urban retirees to pass their time in what they understand to be a meaningful way. This practice is confined to urban retirees alone. While these respondents view farming as a leisure activity, their practice remains tight to their larger and more abstract aspirations of long-term investment in an emerging urban land market. Urban retirees carry out their leisure activity until the farmland achieves the individually desired land value appreciation. At the end of this speculative process, farmland-as-recreation is finally inflicted on the capitalist process of commodification of agricultural land. Urban retirees, therefore, use farming to *meaningfully* bridge the time

until farmland is ripe to be harvested by abstract urban logics of profit. The first case study focused on three forms of land use: organic farming for the urban middle class, land as the basis for a meaningful life and leisure activities, and land as a source of long-term investment. Rural agricultural practices mix with seemingly urban notions of leisure and long-term investment. Land is thereby imagined as something natural and pure while simultaneously reduced as an urban object of speculation. We saw the construction of a binary of urban-as-society and rural-as-nature. The retiree himself then took a dual social position. On the one hand, he considered himself an urban retiree while, on the other hand, he strove to become a farmer. Out of this constructed binary, resulted the impetus to dissolve the contradiction between, on the one hand, an urban quest for exchange value and, on the other hand, use value and the desire to feel connected to land, nature, and healthy food. In this rurban assemblage, the urban manifests as an expanding capitalist force while the rural is seen as precapitalist that follows non-instrumental goals.

Table 1. Summary of subject–land relationships.

	Type 1: Urban Retirees	Type 2: Rural Land Brokers	Type 3: Rural Rentiers	Type 4: Agricultural Laborers
Use of Land	Ecological agriculture that caters to urban middle-class taste and is an object of investment.	Agriculture and tradable object for urban development projects.	Symbolic use for agricultural production and use for informal housing development.	No use of agricultural land. Urban land as object of investment.
Value of Land	Value of land emerges from future economic returns, healthy agricultural produce, and as a source for a meaningful life.	Strategic value of land to cover informal land brokerage and source of land-based caste identity.	Satisfaction of caste-based expectations and source of land-based caste identity; building of rental apartments to comply with agrarian change.	Agricultural land as an obstacle to human development, social mobility, and equality. Urban land as secure economic investment.

In the second example, dispossessed farmers became land brokers by selling agricultural land to urban developers and investors for housing estates. Farmers-turned-brokers negotiated their land-based caste identity and covertly attempted to meet caste expectations and the demands of land-seeking investors. Land brokers used their rural knowledge for an urban mode of exploitation and simultaneously wanted to preserve their caste identity through agricultural land (and partly use it as a resource). Additionally, the second example manifested a rurban assemblage through different attributions of land. On the one hand, land was again an economic object that brokers prepared and made available to the speculative activities of urban developers. At the same time, agrarian land was a source of social belonging and land brokers rarely fully detached from the cultural and social dimensions of land. Brokers, on the one hand, used their local knowledge of the rural land market and agrarian social conditions to appropriate land for urban activities. At the same time, brokers had to maintain their identity as farmers to be able to engage in informal broker activity at all. Land brokerage was constructed as a hinge between the urban, which was, in our cases, partially seen as an intruder exploiting the difficulties of the agrarian population, and the rural, which no longer allowed for sufficient livelihood opportunities but was a source of strategic and caste-based identity formation.

The third case discussed the strategies of landowning farmers from the Vokkaliga caste to appropriate urban land for the construction of informal residential apartments. Vokkaligas' discovery of urban land as a viable resource to curb agrarian change and extract rents, however, had to be socially negotiated. While urban land became the new material basis for a post-agrarian life, farmland continued to secure land-based agrarian caste identity. People thus navigated between urban material opportunities and the wish to meet rural caste expectations. Agricultural land was no longer a source of monetary income but a prerequisite of symbolic and social recognition and membership within the

caste of agriculturalists. In contrast, urban land stood for an undetermined but more secure future, for which people only partially deserted what they considered their rural origins.

Last, we discussed the case of a landless villager and his way of remaining attached to the rural while at the same time seeking to outgrow and escape it. Through education and the securing of urban employment, we discussed how a Dalit constructed farmland as an object of ownership that stood opposite to notions of liberation from rural structures of power and domination. Urban land, on the other hand, promised prosperity and egalitarianism. In the last example, the city was seen as a place that is partially free from caste-based discrimination and oppression. As the daily discrimination in the village had decreased from the respondent's perspective, the village had also become a place of family and home. Unlike in the previous cases, agricultural land was not understood as a source of identity, political power, or income. Instead, agricultural land, as the countryside itself, was narrated as something backward in which the mere ownership of agricultural land prevented social advancements and an urban, emancipated life.

With the present study, we questioned transition narratives that reduce urbanization to its expansive tendencies and the loss of seemingly old elements. We, rather, stressed how the rural population differently engages with urban and rural narratives and images to make sense and navigate the transformation of land. In our analysis, we kept an openness and referred to the simultaneity and the flexible fusion of different discourses, practices, norms, and values related to land. Land transformations in peri-urban spaces, we suggested, cannot be analyzed in a linear fashion, where different notions of use, appropriation, and utilization, as well as identities or worldviews, supersede each other. We illustrated that the conception of land among the different rural groups blends urban and rural ideas. We showed how abstract capitalist notions of exchange value, private property, or instrumental rationality fused with experiences and identities, use values, or needs (see Lefebvre 1991:26) and how they were narrated in terms of an urban and rural binary.

In this article, rurban assemblages pointed toward the realization of different land uses and values through reference to the urban and rural. Rurban assemblages serve as a complementary perspective on the political economy of urbanization and account for the everyday negotiation and persistence of competing urban and rural images, narratives, and social constructions among the different factions of the rural population.

7. Outlook and Future Analysis of Rurban Spaces

Building on the discussion and conclusion of the previous section, we finally present additional empirical examples that we think are productive in studying the materiality of rurban assemblages. Rurban assemblages can be analyzed on political, cultural, social, and economic levels. However, urban assemblages are also realized in terms of lifestyles or manifest physically in the built environment, for example, in ownership, use, and shape of land; building and settlement structure; or open spaces. This last section, thus, briefly introduces a selection of possible empirical objects of future investigation to better understand rural–urban relationships in urban peripheries.

Rurban assemblages possibly unfold in the preservation of agriculture and other primary economic activities despite the gradual transformation toward manufacturing and service industries. In a rurban economy, a share of the workforce exploits both formal and informal agricultural and manufacturing or service industries to make their living. Regarding the disposition of land and the way land is made productive, rurban assemblages draw attention to the simultaneity of both the extractive management of non-built-up land (largely in the form of agriculture and horticulture) and the economic appropriation of built-up land through real estate. Location considerations thus unfold in two different ways. At once, land is evaluated according to its fertility and according to possible land value gradients that result from different centralities and built densities. Rurban assemblages then draw attention to these two forms of land utilization and value extraction. These take a physical shape, for instance, in spatial settings that show a partial development of agricultural land for settlement purposes with a simultaneous continuation of agricultural

uses in the immediate vicinity. In a rural context, farmhouses and (rental) residential buildings are built close to each other, but the farmhouse itself is also changing its form, reflecting the incorporation of elements of urban lifestyles. In extreme cases, livestock is kept in a garage or on the terrace of the urban-looking farmhouse. Existing buildings are topped up or annexed in the courtyard, not only to provide a living space for older people as in the village but also to benefit from the possibility of renting out individual rooms or apartments to immigrants in the spatial context of the family estate. Rural assemblages are also realized materially in suburban or peri-urban regions. Within these fragmented spaces of infrastructure developments and urbanizing informal settlements, agricultural cultivation emerges and continues to exist and ultimately realizes a mosaic and fragmented rural assemblage of different land uses and physical patterns. Brownfields waiting for urban development, devastated areas that can no longer be used due to the pollution of land, residual areas appropriated on a small scale and used for horticulture, informal traffic routes, extensively used military areas, trickle fields, landfills, and such are particularly noteworthy sites to discuss the materiality of rural assemblages.

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