

Problems and Opportunities in Urban Fringe Areas: Some Sociological Reflections

Dr. Divyanandan G.R

Assistant Professor Department of Sociology Government First Grade College Malavalli

Abstract

Urban fringe areas across the world are experiencing rapid growth and development. Their expansion has progressed in multiple directions and sectors, including trade, commerce, industry, education, administration, and more. Over the past three decades, advancements in information technology and biotechnology have transformed Indian cities into centers of high population density, complexity, and diverse progressive growth. Consequently, not only major metros like Bengaluru and Hyderabad, but also secondary cities such as Mysore, Mangalore, and Hubballi are facing a population surge due to migration and employment recruitment.

To cater to the incoming population working in these sectors, rapid construction is underway to provide essential amenities such as quality housing, education, healthcare, and markets. To facilitate this expansion through land acquisition, cities urgently require land in sufficient measure. As a result, urban centers are absorbing adjacent rural agricultural lands and villages into their folds.

This process has been ongoing for three decades, leading to a severe deterioration of the economic conditions of people living in these fringe villages, forcing them into dependence on the city. Furthermore, once these villages are fully integrated into urban limits, residents face immense challenges, often leaving former villagers feeling frustrated.

This paper throws light on the lives, problems, challenges, and available or missing opportunities of people in urban fringe areas. Highlighting the shortage of sociological studies that can identify the need for social justice and government policies while offering constructive suggestions, this paper emphasizes that the field of sociology and sociologists must reorient themselves in this direction.

Keywords: Rural-Urban Fringe Area, Social Mobility, Caste, Poverty, Land Acquisition, Social Justice.

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Definition of the Rural-Urban Fringe Area:

American land economist Wehrwein is considered the first scholar to define the concept of the rural-urban fringe area. According to his definition, the rural-urban fringe is "the area of transition between well-recognized urban land uses and the area devoted to agriculture." He identified that within this zone, land is being converted into urban patterns, while simultaneously retaining many characteristics and traces of the rural environment (Wehrwein, 1956).

The rural-urban fringe is a transitional region where the physical traits and social groups of both rural and urban areas coexist. There is continuous transit and transport of people, vehicles, and a wide variety of goods; communication networks here are modern and fast-paced. It serves as a confluence zone

between the expanding city and the villages it absorbs for its growth—a space where rural stagnation meets ongoing urban expansion and display.

Studies conducted by urban sociologists, urban planners, and other researchers have categorized and described this region in various ways:

Rememann (1960) classified it into Inner and Outer Fringe areas.

McKain and Burnight (1953) identified them as Suburban and Extended Fringe areas.

Myers and Beegle (1947) labeled them as True and Potential Fringe areas.

Russwurm (1973) identified four distinct zones instead of two, naming them the Suburban Ring, Urban Fringe, Urban Shadow, and Commuting Shed.

Decades ago, sociologist Punalekar (1992) conducted a scientific research study on the social changes occurring and likely to occur in the fringe areas of Surat city. He noted that the South Gujarat region, which had only 32 towns in 1971, saw that number rise to 41 by 1981.

Surat district recorded an extraordinarily high rate of urban growth (77%), which was even higher within the Surat Metropolitan Area (85%). Punalekar observed that it goes without saying that rapid industrialization was the primary driver of such swift growth and expansion in Surat. At the conclusion of his study, he called for an increase in sociological research in this domain. Emphasizing that researchers and policy analysts must refocus their attention on critical urban dynamics, he highlighted **several key areas:**

1. Land Market Dynamics: The mechanisms of buying and selling urban land, policy frameworks, and the specific role of state administration in regulating land markets.
2. Housing Systems: Urban housing arrangements, associated regulations, and the differential impacts these rules have on diverse social groups.
3. Protective Social Legislation: The role of protective laws—specifically benefits, educational access, and employment reservations—designed for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and other backward classes.
4. Employment & Gender Impact: The expanding scope of employment opportunities and its specific impact on women living in the urban fringe.

Impact of Urbanization on Villages and the Emerging Challenges:

In recent decades, urban expansion and growth across several Indian states have accelerated dramatically. Sociologists note that this rapid expansion gained momentum during the 1980s and has intensified even further over the first two decades of the new millennium. Economic factors have been the chief catalysts behind this shift; globalization, liberalization, and privatization have fundamentally transformed Indian cities. This is evident in major metros like Bengaluru, New Delhi, Mumbai, and Hyderabad, as well as tier-2 cities in Karnataka such as Mysuru, Hubballi, Belagavi, and Mangaluru.

Most significantly, the job opportunities generated in these primary cities have drawn thousands of people not only from other towns, villages, and tribal pockets across Karnataka, but from all over the country. These employment avenues appeal across class, caste, religious, and gender lines—offering varying tiers of employment and income based on an individual's educational attainment, qualifications, and skills.

Housing Crises and Basic Amenities:

Providing adequate housing and essential civic infrastructure to this influx of job-seeking migrants has

become a primary responsibility of governments and urban local bodies. Attracting people to cities with the promise of better livelihoods and quality of life is not enough; urban administrations must also guarantee access to basic amenities, including shelter, clean drinking water, connecting roads, electricity, sanitation, sewage systems, schools, colleges, and market access.

In this context, several complex challenges emerge regarding urbanization and fringe populations. Ensuring adequate public health infrastructure, medical treatment facilities, and public transit systems are equally essential prerequisites that demand immediate governance focus and strategic intervention.

The Urban Fringe Environment:

As noted earlier, the urban fringe represents a spatial buffer zone—lands situated on the perimeter of a city that are not yet fully integrated into its municipal boundaries. Prior to urban encroachment, these surrounding rural areas functioned with traditional agrarian economies, local crafts, village culture, indigenous deities, traditional festivals, fairs, village panchayats, and tightly-knit community structures. Over time, as urbanization intensified and inner-city population density surged, new migrants began establishing settlements in peripheral zones, informal slums, railway margins, industrial belts, and vacant parcels.

Additionally, to accommodate employees working in major industrial units, public sector enterprises, and—since the 1990s—the expanding Information Technology (IT) and Biotechnology (BT) sectors, vast swaths of fringe land have been systematically converted into planned residential layouts.

According to Rao (1947), whenever structural and functional shifts occur within a city, its existing physical boundaries expand. Consequently, the surrounding hinterland may either be brought under municipal governance or remain temporarily under the administrative jurisdiction of local Gram Panchayats. In many regions, specialized bodies like Urban Development Authorities have been established to oversee these expansion zones—notable examples created under land acquisition laws include the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) and the Mysore Urban Development Authority (MUDA).

Sociologists such as Scaff (1966) and Connell (1976) emphasize that expanding urban centers depend heavily on continuous inflows of migrants. This migration may be temporary or permanent and is driven by a complex interplay of push and pull factors. Many migrants maintain active connections with their native villages or towns. Consequently, their interactions with urban life spill back into rural environments, triggering broader political, economic, social, and cultural transformations.

Sociological Perspectives on Rural Transformation:

Despite the rapid physical expansion of cities, comprehensive sociological studies examining the precise impacts on fringe villages remain limited, though M.S.A. Rao (1974) conducted pioneering work on migration dynamics. Similarly, scholars like S.C. Dube (1962), André Béteille (1970), T. Scarlett Epstein (1972), and McKim Marriott (1963) authored classic works capturing traditional village life, caste structures, and rural social systems. However, there remains an urgent need for targeted studies that focus on the ongoing disruptions and lived reality of fringe village communities.

When villages exist in close proximity to growing cities, residents undergo deep structural changes. Daily interactions, economic dependencies, and social or political engagements with the city profoundly affect fringe villagers and their households. Life habits, consumption patterns, and social behaviors are continuously reshaped. As Ramnath Singh (1989) observed, rural populations along the urban fringe do

not retain their traditional lifestyles in a vacuum; they adapt and alter them dynamically.

These forces transform rural residents both individually and collectively. External social pressures induce systemic cultural shifts. A review of Indian rural sociology shows that early literature concentrated primarily on internal village structures, caste hierarchies, local institutions, and intra/inter-village relationships. While F.G. Bailey (1964) and A. Aiyappan (1965) focused on socio-cultural processes, others like André Beteille (1965) and A.R. Beals (1969) examined political structures within rural society.

While those early studies often highlighted internal cohesion and traditional cooperation, Ramkrishna Mukherjee (1971)—through his seminal study of six West Bengal villages—shifted the analytical focus toward property relations, economic differentiation, and the emergence of social classes within rural structures.

Building on this transition during the 1950s and subsequent decades, researchers moved away from purely ethnic or anthropological frameworks to investigate changing dynamics between diverse social groups. Scholars such as Chauhan (1974), Dasgupta (1978), Harold Gould (1967), and A.R. Desai (1969) advanced this line of inquiry through empirical and critical paradigms. Their works brought into focus class conflict, inter-caste tension, dominance, out-migration of marginalized groups fleeing caste oppression, and rural-to-urban labor movement (Gore, 1968; D'Souza, 1970; Pocock, 1957).

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