Sebastian Homm

Global Players – Local Struggles

Spatial Dynamics of Industrialisation and Social Change in Peri-urban Chennai, India

Geographie

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Megacities and Global Change
Megastädte und globaler Wandel
Band 16



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MEGASTÄDTE UND GLOBALER WANDEL

herausgegeben von

Frauke Kraas, Martin Coy, Peter Herrle und Volker Kreibich

Band 16

Sebastian Homm

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Nokia buses carry workers to Sriperumbudur factory, 2012 © Sebastian Homm

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SUMMARY

This study aims at understanding the nexus of industrialisation and social change, profoundly transforming the peri-urban spaces surrounding Chennai, the thriving industrial hub in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. The region is currently, like other selected places in India, becoming integrated into the global economy at a staggering pace. The region is posited to undergo in particular two major transformations:

First, the actors that shape the local people's lives are changing from local to global. As increasing numbers of international companies (Hyundai, Nokia, Daimler etc.) construct their factories in Chennai's rural hinterlands and the employers change from local landowners to human resource manager of the 'global players'. Social hierarchies engrained in the social fabric of the rural hinterland are increasingly dissolved and replaced by new nets of power, tied together thousands of kilometres away. The up and down of the global economy now shapes the opportunities for the labour seeking residents in peri-urban Chennai. The integration of the region into world markets is not new, it was started by the early kings and merchants of South India over two millennia ago, exports were later forcefully directed by the East India Company. But the current scope and profoundness of globalised transformations is new and affecting ever more people and their 'local struggles' to achieve livelihood security.

The second transformation is a shift from rural to urban lifestyles, land use and occupational patterns. Far from being a uniform process, the peri-urban is integrated unevenly in the urban fabric of Chennai. Inhabitants of small towns now boast of their formerly remote living places as becoming 'like the city' or even 'small India'. Landowners readily abandon agriculture and collaborate with real estate agents to change their field into residential plots. In the peri-urban hinterland of today, one sees more plots for sale than paddy fields.

This study presents different aspects of the increasing globalisation of Chennai's hinterland and its transformation from rural to urban: it provides extensive material on the dynamic peri-urban labour market, land market and associated actors and institutions; it discusses the perspectives of different sections of society and asks who gains and who loses in the process. Approaching these transformations with Lefebvre's theory of the production of space allowed developing a comprehensive conceptual framework for the study. The theory proved in particular fruitful to provide a theoretical background for a notion of inclusive development. Inclusion refers in this study to the need to frame development as a process open for all sections of society, aiming at extending people's capabilities and empowering marginalized sections of society to access benefits associated with globalised transformations in peri-urban Chennai.

I INTRODUCTION

The South Indian state of Tamil Nadu has a particular strong economy and Chennai ranks as the fourth largest urban agglomeration in India.[1] Further, with the exception of city states (Delhi, Pondicherry), Tamil Nadu is the most urbanized, with 43.9% of the population (of a total 72.14 million) living in urban areas (Census of India 2011). This provides the background for the highly dynamic developments currently reshaping the peri-urban spaces surrounding Chennai. In this irregular, about 50–70 km wide belt of land, cars, telecommunication equipment and various other products are now manufactured and exported from there through the sea- and airport of Chennai which play a crucial role in facilitating the industrial dynamism. The peri-urban spaces are subject to increasing investment by international companies, the so-called 'global players'. The resulting globalised transformations, defined here as the increasing dominance of global actors in triggering and shaping change at the local level, are particular profound around the peri-urban town of Sriperumbudur and Oragadam village (both about 40 km west of Chennai). Comparing this region with its mature Chinese counterpart, the area is now referred to as "India's Shenzhen" in the Indian press (figure 1).

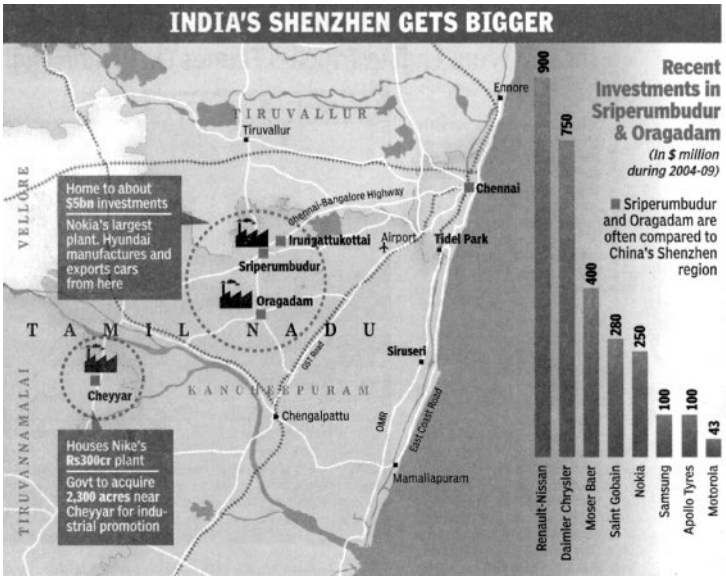


Figure 1: "India's Shenzhen gets bigger" (*Source:* Times of India, 05.09.2009)

1 Tamil Nadu had the fourth largest gross domestic product in 2011–2012 following Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh in descending order. The largest urban agglomerations are Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata and fourth Chennai. (Government of India 2012).

Mirroring the economic dynamism, the two districts adjacent to Chennai which include the peri-urban experienced a tremendous increase in in-migration from other districts of Tamil Nadu as well as other Indian states in the last decade. Population in Kanchipuram district (southwest of Chennai) grew by 38.7% and Thiruvallur district (northwest) grew by 35.2% in the last decade (2001–2011) (Census of India 2011), highlighting the attraction of the new economic opportunities associated with the industrial development taking place.

1 DEVELOPMENT AS GROWTH: THE WORLD BANK PERSPECTIVE

In its 2009 World Development Report 'Reshaping Economic Geography', the World Bank dedicated a special sub-chapter to peri-urban Chennai, which serves as an example for the economic advantages of agglomerations in developing countries (World Bank 2009: 13). However, peri-urban Chennai and the boomtown of Sriperumbudur are only dealt with rather one-sidedly: the benefits of agglomeration are praised and seen as responsible for the rapid industrial development of the area. The World Bank perspective remains tightly focused on economic growth, even admittedly so: "to keep the Report focused, several important aspects of the spatial transformation do not get the attention they would in a fuller study. The main aspects not considered […] are the *social and environmental effects* of a changing economic geography" (World Bank 2009: 34; emphasis in original). At the centre of the World Bank's perspective is thus a simplistic, economistic understanding of development as growth. This approach is based on concepts derived from New Economic Geography (Krugman 1991), where economic geography is reduced to questions of distance, spatial concentration and scale (Rigg et al. 2009; Sternberg 2009). This perspective reflects the development of the peri-urban only superficially, as small scale dynamics are overlooked and the perspective of the local people remains largely unnoticed. The World Bank describes spatially uneven development within a country as a regrettable, though unavoidable side effect of economic development. The relevance of existing governance structures, the disruptive potential of land markets and conflicts associated therewith as well as the tension arising from uneven development in the urban periphery are not accounted for. These problems are also ignored when describing Sriperumbudur, a boomtown in peri-urban Chennai (World Bank 2009: 13–14). The role of cities and further agglomeration in their peri-urban peripheries are instead touted as central to economic growth. The dominant economic forces of agglomeration, migration and specialization have profoundly transformed the economies of developing countries and the peri-urban are heralded the „developing world's most dynamic places" (ibid. 2009: 13). For an extensive discussion on how the World Bank sought to reframe economic geography with concepts from New Economic Geography, see Homm and Bohle (2012).

2 INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT: AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE FOR PERI-URBAN CHENNAI

The shortcomings in the World Bank approach are part of a broader gap in knowledge regarding the peri-urban. Although the peri-urban is now regarded as a focal point in understanding transformations reshaping the Global South, only limited empirical research exists as yet (McGregor et al. 2006: 7–9). This also applies for the related subject of 'rural-urban linkages/interactions' (Tacoli 2006: 3). Empirical research on the impacts of economic globalisation has concentrated either on rural or urban contexts, especially on mega cities. The peri-urban spaces in between, including small and mid-sized cities, are largely left unnoticed, even though they are experiencing the most profound and dynamic transformations. The shortage in field studies corresponds with an inadequate conceptual framing of peri-urban spaces (Adell 1999; McGregor et al. 2006). There is especially a lack of research which investigates the peri-urban dynamics from the perspective of the local people and their opportunities to realize new benefits from the rapid developments taking place. Existing studies in India about vulnerable groups in the peri-urban repeatedly complain about limited available data and postulate the need for further research (Brook and Davila 2000: 226; Dupont and Sridharan 2006: 13–14).

It is the aim of this study to approach this gap in knowledge regarding peri-urban areas and highlight an alternative perspective on its development. The objective is to investigate the transformations taking place in peri-urban Chennai more closely, questioning the simplistic positive notion regarding agglomeration processes as expressed by the World Bank. The on-going changes are therefore explicitly documented, analysed and evaluated from the perspective of the affected local people on the ground. The study examines the manifold social, economic and spatial dynamics, often contradictory and laden with conflict, that shape the transformations and result in diverse, heterogeneous outcomes. The interactions of different sections of the peri-urban society, the interaction with the governance structures, and the relevance of traditional and new 'modern' value systems are considered in gaining a deeper understanding of the social dynamic linked with the rapid industrial development of an area that is still rural in several aspects. One aim of the perspective is to reveal changing patterns of social exclusion that result for the local population in the changing peri-urban periphery. Social exclusion relates to the exclusion from work or higher education, the exclusion from agricultural land acquired for industrial purpose or exclusion from making decisions about the development of the peri-urban spaces.

Another aim of the perspective is to reveal new opportunities emerging for the peri-urban people. The author therefore developed for this study a concept of inclusive development that highlights processes instrumental in empowering traditional disadvantaged local people to access benefits associated with globalised transformations. This perspective of inclusive development stresses the difference between linear economic growth and development as an open, inclusive process that furthers the capabilities of all people living in an area that is 'developed'.

This understanding of development is inspired by ideas put forth by Amartya Sen in 'Development as Freedom' (2000) where he highlights the importance of seeing development not as economic growth but as a societal process broadening the actual freedoms that people can exercise when fully developing their capabilities. This idea of development as freedom is captured in this study with the notion of inclusive development. Inclusion refers to the need to frame development as a process open for all sections of society and the diversity of capabilities that could be employed. Inclusive development serves as a general notion and the opposite of development that is narrowly framed as economic growth. Inclusive development is a concept to be used to critique the approach suggested by the World Bank. To summarize, this study has three overarching research objectives:

1. The study aims: *to identify actors and processes that are instrumental to globalisation in peri-urban Chennai.* This objective is followed to understand how peri-urban Chennai was turned into a production hub for the global economy through the actions of both local and international actors.

2. The study aims: *to identify mechanisms that lead to the systematic exclusion of marginalised parts of the local population from beneficial spaces of work and education in peri-urban Chennai.* This second research objective concerns the social dynamics associated with the transformations and the aim is to portray both traditional and contemporary forms of social exclusion and dominance limiting the opportunities of people living in the peri-urban.

3. The study aims: *to reveal opportunities for inclusive development and empowerment by documenting struggles of marginalized people to access benefits associated with globalised transformations in peri-urban Chennai.* This third research objective is followed to highlight the opportunities of the transformation when weaker sections of the society overcome traditional and contemporary forms of social exclusion.

3 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

Chapter II, *'Approaching globalised transformations with Lefebvre's theory of the production of space'* develops a conceptual basis to follow the research objectives in a theoretically informed manner.

Chapter III, *'Research design and methodology'* introduces four research perspectives that guided this study and explains the methods used to derive findings. The following three chapters (IV, V and VI) present the empirical findings. Each is dedicated to one research objective and informed by a particular theoretical approach developed in chapter II.

Chapter IV, *'Globalised spaces in peri-urban Chennai'* looks at how the peri-urban setting is reshaped by different actors. In sub-chapter IV.1, the different actors are identified according to their respective power and interests to participate in the creation of 'globalised spaces' – spaces that are instrumental in the pushing economic globalisation. This concerns mainly how the access of international companies was realized by the State Government of Tamil Nadu through

the instrument of Special Economic Zones (SEZs). The transformations that constitute the globalised spaces in the peri-urban are summarised in a thematic map (map 1, page 210). In sub-chapter IV.2, the booming area around Sriperumbudur and Oragadam at the western end of the peri-urban space, "India's Shenzhen", is highlighted as a regional example.

Chapter V, *'Enforced abstractions and spaces of exclusion in peri-urban Chennai'* highlights the realization of new regimes of exclusion that are currently enforced in peri-urban Chennai. Sub-chapter V.1 discusses the land acquisition for industrial purpose. A village study focuses on livelihood transformations following rapid industrial development in the area surrounding Oragadam village. Sub-chapter V.2 presents findings on the peri-urban land market where benefits are realized by insiders to the detriment of poorly informed peasants with small landholdings. Finally, sub-chapter V.3 highlights the privatized spaces of higher education that are established in the peri-urban. Here, engineering colleges cater exclusively to those able to pay the formal and informal entry fees and in return provide entry into the higher earning positions of the companies.

Chapter VI, *'Lived difference and local struggles for inclusion in peri-urban Chennai'* looks into the realization of access by the local people. The emerging industrial labour market is portrayed in sub-chapter VI.1. Next, sub-chapter VI.2 highlights the shifting relations between traditional dominant landowners and the agricultural labourers in the village of Ullavur. Finally, sub-chapter VI.3 elaborates the (missing) role of governance structures in enabling inclusive development.

Chapter VII, *'Conclusion: Peri-urban transformation and social opportunity'* provides a closing discussion of the research findings and an evaluation of the conceptual approach followed in this study.

II APPROACHING GLOBALISED TRANSFORMATIONS WITH LEFEBVRE'S THEORY OF THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE

This chapter introduces a conceptual framework to approach the globalised transformations in peri-urban Chennai. The framework is constituted by three conceptual approaches that correspond to the research objectives identified in the introduction. First, sub-chapter II.1 introduces a concept of 'globalised spaces' to highlight the instrumental nature of space for globalised transformations, defined here as the increasing dominance of global actors in triggering and shaping change at the local level. The concept of globalised spaces is needed to follow research objective 1: *to identify actors who produce spaces that are instrumental to globalisation in peri-urban Chennai.* Second, sub-chapter II.2 develops a theoretically informed critic of social exclusion based on a new concept of 'enforced abstraction'. This concept is then used to follow research objective 2: *to identify mechanisms that lead to the systematic exclusion of marginalised parts of the local population from beneficial spaces of work and education in peri-urban Chennai.* The aim is to portray both traditional and contemporary forms of exclusion and dominance limiting the opportunities of people living in the peri-urban. Third, sub-chapter II.3 develops a concept of social inclusion that highlights the role of the agency involved when challenging existing regimes of exclusion. Such a concept is needed to follow research objective 3: *to reveal opportunities for inclusive development and empowerment by documenting struggles of marginalized people to access benefits associated with globalised transformations in peri-urban Chennai.* The different conceptual approaches to analyse the globalised transformations are all based on the work of the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901–91) but some necessary conceptual innovations were introduced by the author.

The framework will serve as a tool to understand transformations of the peri-urban society through an analysis of the changing spatial arrangements that are constitutive for this society. For Lefebvre, the study of space was a tool to understand society. As he argued:

> "Schematically speaking, each society offers up its own peculiar space, as it were, as an 'object' for analysis and overall theoretical explication" (Lefebvre 1991: 31).

The framework is developed with the aim to conceptualize the peri-urban as an arena where strategies of actors situated at a global level intersect with the perspectives and actions of the local people. Struggles over exclusion and inclusion are in the centre of interest. Three aspects of Lefebvre's theory are therefore discussed in detail:

'Social space' is discussed as a concept to systematically understand how spatial arrangements are an expression of the power to produce specific spaces and regulate activities through constraints of access. Based on this notion of social

space, the concept of globalised spaces is introduced to capture the instrumental role of space to achieve globalised transformations (see II.1).

'Abstract space', Lefebvre's theoretical starting point to analyse the world-wide capitalist system, is developed into the concept of enforced abstraction to capture exclusionary, hegemonic arrangements of social space more generally (see II.2).

'Differential space', Lefebvre's notion of opposition against the capitalist system, is developed into the concept of lived difference. The concept allows the understanding of local people's responses towards globalised transformations not as simple opposition but as the active creation of new ways to secure livelihoods by overcoming new and also traditional barriers to social spaces that limit their capabilities (see II.3).

In the empirical chapters that follow, each chapter is informed by one of these theoretical framings. They are based on the theoretical framing, informed by specific hypotheses, and cover the different research topics of this study in a structured and theoretically informed manner. To summarize, table 1 relates the different empirical chapters with their respective theoretical framings, the leading hypotheses and research topics. The remaining chapter will substantiate the conceptual foundation that structures the empirical material of this study.

Research objective	**Theoretical framing**	**Hypotheses** (abbreviated)	**Research topics**	**Chapter of this study**
Understand processes leading to globalisation	Globalised spaces	Globalised transformations are realized through globalised spaces	Industrial politics, Special Economic Zones, land use changes, industrial development	IV
Identify mechanisms of exclusion	Enforced abstraction	Exclusion is realized with dominant spatial arrangements	Land acquisition, commodification of the land market, privatization of education	V
Reveal possibilities for inclusive development	Lived difference	Inclusion and empowerment are realized in new spaces of lived difference	Livelihood transformations of local people, contested spaces for work & education, inclusive development	VI

Table 1: Research objectives, theoretical framing and research topics

The conceptual framework developed in the following sub-chapters is based in particular on Lefebvre's theory regarding 'The Production of Space'[2]. The framework also considers relevant interpretations and applications of Lefebvre (Schmid 2010) in particular regarding economic globalisation (Brenner and Elden 2009b) as well as everyday life in the context of urbanisation in the Global South (Bertuzzo 2009). The conceptual framework builds on the idea that Lefebvre's work is especially suited to provide a background for linking micro-level studies with global processes (de Haan 2008). As argued by Chakrabarty in 'Provincializing Europe' (2008) every case of transition to capitalism is unique and contingent on local conditions. Thus caution is needed when transposing European social theories to the analysis of foreign situations. The work of Lefebvre is therefore engaged here to unravel the blueprint, the fundamental arguments formulated in works at different points in time and societal contexts, with the aim to gain a framework applicable to nowadays dynamics (see also Schmid 2010: 17). This study aims at proposing a perspective on social change that allows criticising general notions of development as being either inherently positive or negative. Development is seen as a geographically and historically contingent process that engenders new forms of exclusion but also provides the opportunity to overcome established forms of dominance and achieve new pathways towards human security (Bohle 2009). Such an approach follows a central argument put forward by Lefebvre who was adamantly opposed to formalized, undifferentiated concepts that lead to interpretations of social realities according to a systematic structure (Charnock 2010). Lefebvre argued against simplistic scientific ordering:

> "Now all systems tend to close off reflection, to block off horizon. This work wants to break up systems, not to substitute another system, but to open up through thought and action towards possibilities by showing the horizon and the road" (Lefebvre 1996: 65).

Accordingly, Lefebvre's theory is not used here as a closed theory. Instead inspiration is gained from his thinking to derive a new perspective on the nexus of industrialisation and social change and to better understand the intricate struggles of global and local actors in Chennai's peri-urban spaces.

Chapter III complements the conceptual framework developed in the following sub-chapters. It suggests a research design and practical research perspectives that allowed the theoretically informed implementation of empirical fieldwork conducted for this study.

2 Most quotes are from 'The Production of Space' (first published 1974, English translation 1991). Quotes from this book are abbreviated hereafter with PS, a practice introduced by Schmid (2010).

1 GLOBALISED SPACES IN PERI-URBAN CHENNAI

International investors are producing new spaces in peri-urban Chennai on a massive scale (Homm and Bohle 2012). Aided by the State Governments of Tamil Nadu, huge Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have been created that now serve as exclusive enclaves of industrial production to satisfy the demands of the global market, in particular regarding cars and telecommunication equipment. But just as agriculture this industrial production needs a site to be realized. Seemingly unrelated interests (making cars vs. agriculture) eventually become conflictive as both actions require the limited space of Chennai's peri-urban hinterland.

The Special Economic Zones around Chennai are regarded in this study as a prominent example of what is called here globalised spaces. In the factories located in these exclusive zones, international companies were given the power by the State Government to determine the working conditions for the local workforce, produce products mainly for export and realize benefits for the international shareholder community. These globalised spaces are central to globalised transformations defined here as the increasing dominance of global actors at the local level. This study explores the production of space that enables international companies to increasingly transform the peri-urban hinterlands according to their interests. This process will be analysed with:

Hypothesis 1: *Globalised transformations are realized through globalised spaces. These spaces are produced by the State Government in conjunction with international companies and are designed to fit the interests of global or national actors*.

In particular, chapter IV will follow this hypothesis and document the changes in the peri-urban as well as highlight different processes of producing globalised spaces. The analysis explores different aspects of their creation: where are they physically located, and by which means are they accessible in terms of infrastructure? Which regulations were invoked to realize the accessibility for the international companies? What are the emotional images to legitimize the creation of the zones? To understand the production of these globalised spaces the next section (II.1.1) further elaborates the making of globalised spaces.

1.1 The concept of globalised spaces

The identification of globalised spaces aims to identify mechanisms that accompany the extension of the globalised economy into peri-urban Chennai. Globalised spaces are defined here as follows.

Definition of globalised spaces: *The term globalised spaces refers to peri-urban areas which are strategically produced by global actors to realize benefits. They are created through the integration in international value chains and the enforcement of new regulations that serve the global actors, and are physically separated from the surrounding territory.*