

Imagination of rural transformation, transformation of rural imagination?

R Ng Tock Mine
Ambedkar University, New Delhi, India

Introduction

What could be an imagination of rural transformation? For that, since we cannot enter minds at will, one would examine what is said and shown about rural transformation, what are the discourses that structure this notion, and explore what is rural transformation as it is defined by the different actors.

Some quick research reveals many definitions of rural transformation that are often implicit. It is linked to rural development, a notion more commonly used than rural transformation. A survey of literature shows that rural development is the term preferred by most policy makers of industrialised countries and by the drafters of UNDP and the World Bank. Policies from developing countries (like China, India, Malaysia, Philippines and many African countries, Somalia and Ghana), United Nations agencies like Ifad (which claims to be accompanying rural transformation for the past 40 years), Unido, ILO and UNESCO) and critics of conventional development tend to favour rural transformation. For example, the International Conference on Dynamics of Rural Transformation in Emerging Economies¹, was organised conjointly by Brazil, China, Chile, India, and South Africa. Malaysia's policies lean toward rural transformation, with the Rural Transformation Center (RTC), when it does not conciliate the two, with the phrase rural transformation development, or this present conference, 'Transformation for Rural Development.'

Rural development is often linked to economic growth and the development of assets, while rural transformation is more encompassing and leans towards human development. Rural development, at its beginning (1945-1975) has often been equalled to agricultural or agrarian development (Chambers, 1983).

The turning point in policy terminology, and official change of definition can be dated to February 1975, in a Sector Policy Paper on rural development by the World Bank which states; 'Rural development is a strategy designed to improve the economic and social life of a specific group of people - the rural poor. It involves extending the benefits of development to the poorest among those who seek a livelihood in the rural areas. The group includes small-scale farmers, tenants and the landless.'

Now rural development is used in a more holistic way, taking into account the industrialisation and tertiarisation of rural spaces, infrastructure, markets, social and economic well-being of the rural poor. To caricature, rural development has a stronger liberal economy and capitalist globalisation connotation than rural transformation.

However, the Declaration of New Delhi or the Cotonou Declaration on Rural Futures show that the two terms are often interchangeable. Rural transformation is also articulated to a myriad of

1 Organised in New Delhi, India, April 14-16, 2010.

concomitant and associated concepts: sustainable development, inclusive growth, agriculture, Green revolution, rural electrification, rural housing, farmers' market/organisations, ecology, tourism, peasants' movements and permaculture.

The oldest occurrence of rural transformation that I found in an academic work was an article by a Chinese scholar, Pi-chao Chen, *Overurbanisation, Rustication of Urban-Educated Youths, and Politics of Rural Transformation: The Case of China*.

Imagination and representation of the rural and its transformation: some assumptions

It is a tad paradoxical to find one of the first mentions of rural transformation in an article whose first word, and arguably, one of the main topics, is overurbanisation.

This paradox is reflected by the difficulties of defining the first term of rural transformation; rural. Most of the official state definitions, including India's, with figures and quantitative data, are what is not urban. Hence, maybe, the anxieties of the private sector to define and locate Rural India².

Indeed, we are much better at defining rural than urban, and that might be why, consciously or unconsciously, the definition of rural transformation is sometimes equal to urbanisation of the rural.

Berdegúe, Rosada, and Bebbington define the rural transformation as “a process of comprehensive societal change whereby rural societies diversify their economies and reduce their reliance on agriculture; become dependent on distant places to trade and to acquire goods, services, and ideas; move from dispersed villages to towns and small and medium cities; and become culturally more similar to large urban agglomerations.”

They add, the rural transformation is not about rural societies changing rather than *disappearing*. Rural transformation is the reorganisation of *society* in a given space, rather than about a *space* that empties as people and economic activity move away. The rural transformation is embedded within a wider process of structural change that involves the whole of a country and that sees a decline in the *relative* weight of agriculture in the overall economy, a corresponding increase in industry and services, migration of rural people to cities, and a transitory period of rapid demographic growth (Timmer and Akkus, 2008).

The researchers might have felt a bit sad and nostalgic for the rural societies, because after saying that they disappear, they finally rescue them from destruction thanks to transformation; “However, this process transforms rather than destroys rural societies, and in this chapter we are therefore concerned with the changes that take place in the rural space as such wider structural changes unfold.”

I would like to come back to this assertion; “[*The rural societies*] become dependent on distant places to trade and acquire goods, services, and ideas;” because, whether true or false, it seems to be characteristic of an underlying assumption often found with the rural and its transformation.

Why transform the rural? Let's imagine the rural (in India): a village, fields, a few mud huts, at best some pucca houses, with a fridge and a television set. Buffaloes and goats. Maybe tractors and

2 On a search to define Rural India, I stumbled on the same effort by the Dhanlaxmi Bank, which launches a lancinant interrogation, 'Rural India, where is it?' by a metaphysical first chapter entitled 'The Search For The Real Rural India'

bikes. The rural is generally envisioned as the custodian of the roots and tradition.

The opposite of rural is, unsurprisingly, urban. The city is seen as a place of modernity, of movements, where things change quickly, a place of technology and innovation, where start-ups and universities are located, a capital where decisions are made.

Hence, it is not surprising that the ideas would be in the city. The city is constantly evolving and transforming itself. So, who should transform and why? The rural, because they are unchanged and traditional. In a linear conception of history as an evolution, with different and gradual stages, the village is the un-evoluted version of the city, the cosmopolite megalopolis capital city, the ultimate stage?

The city, in the relations of power that shape and structure our space, is the centre and dominate, the rural is the margin, the periphery. Even if the rural is a place of change and innovation, this structure of power might not legitimise and validate it. This is another reason why, in this conception, the rural should change, impelled by the 'ideas' of the urban. This vision is underlined by an urban economy of desire, since the city is better, all the citizens (should) have a 'desire of city'. This is why, animated by hope, they are leaving a miserable life in the village to join an even more miserable life in slums. In this perspective, rural transformation might have the structural effects of a protective strategy for the city against an invasion, a massive rural exodus happening now in developing countries. This 'desire of city' has thus informed policies and concepts like rurbanisation, coined by Narendra Modi when he was Chief Minister of Gujarat, which consists in preserving the 'soul of villages' by introducing urban conveniences and opportunities, to rural areas in an attempt to stem migration.

For many researchers, development goes, sadly or hopefully, ineluctably in the direction of homogenised global (urban) capitalism, and thus, rural transformation is the transformation of traditional rural societies into rural-urban, or some peri-urban kind of spaces. This imagination of the rural and urban is (fortunately) challenged, and the concept of urban transformation is slowly emerging too.

Most rural transformation definitions prudently only state that the rural is changing. Some definitions remain open. In *Rural transformation in tropical Africa*, Douglas Rimmer writes, 'to address the subject of rural transformation is therefore to study change in the ways of life [of most people in tropical Africa].'

Change in the ways of life does not refer to agriculture, nor economy, nor of an imagination that we would have had of the rural. No reference to any university disciplines compartmentalising, dividing, splitting or separating life, if not only to life in its entirety.

Paradoxically (and again), it is in a book on urbanisation that the most radical methodology to conceptualise rural transformation was enunciated, "Fundamental to any understanding of what the transformation of rural society means is an understanding of the cultural dimension of the transformation." Rural transformation is thus defined as a cultural phenomenon, "Rural transformation is a cultural phenomenon, a system of vision and values that identifies, interprets, legitimates, and appraises the facts of rural transformation for those living through it." Bruce Koppel adds, "Is the very term "rural culture" inappropriate or idealised, in which case it would be necessary to reconsider the appropriateness of the proposition that rural transformation is a cultural phenomenon."

It is possible to encounter various imaginations and representations of the rural and its transformation by researchers, policy makers, practitioners and private sector workers. Perhaps it is a blessing there are so many and diverged definitions.

However, the voices of the rural people are missing, except in a few select researches (like, maybe, *Village Voices: Forty Years of Rural Transformation in South India*, and research that attempts to be a participatory and collaborative effort). Even in those, they are always mediated through the researcher. Maybe the space to look at to encounter their voices, is in literature and in art?

Mediated voices of villagers

These transformations are apparently quite difficult to grasp for the people (or at least for me) who try to conceptualise them, accompany and improve them, or make policies. How do the people who live through these transformations actually see them? I did not find much information, getting hints leafing through a book, while reading through a newspaper, an article or in a documentary. Maybe the best place to know about it is the village. Thanks to Pradan, I had the privilege of being located in a village, for some time, and to hear the voices of the people living in this village. I would like to make an attempt to share these mediated voices, as I heard them through my own very limited experience.

The local narratives are themselves quite contrasted, between the lines of age and of those who stay/migrate. For young migrants, the village is seen as expanding and changing, and their tribal identity is no longer tied to a territory. A young couple, who had extensively migrated, in Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and Gurgaon told me, "Santals are everywhere, from Saudi (Arabia) to Kerala. There might even be some in your own foreign country."

They feel they bring the city to the village (for example, in the form of a fashionable haircut) and the village to the city (like the typical dal they bring from the village), and that there is no point choosing between 'seher' and 'gaon', but rather a constant adjustment between the norms of the city and the village, and how one can play with it.

For the older generation, the narrative is different, with an emphasis on tradition and an unchanged practice, even if it is foregrounded in a tradition that might be recent and reinvented, such as the case of an arranged marriage.

I have re-transcribed a short conversation I had with Sunita when I realised that Nidhi, her daughter, had left. I had arrived only a fortnight ago in the village, in Jharkhand. It is a small tribal thola, where all the population, around 250 people, is Santali. I met Sunita who had mentioned her two daughters, Nidhi and Meenakshi, as if they were in the village. When I meet Meenakshi, a day after, she told me that Nidhi had actually left a few weeks ago to go back to Maharashtra to work. Sunita did not speak Hindi very well and mine is even worse, hence the simple conversations that we had. So the next day, when I meet Sunita, I wanted to resolve the misunderstanding that I assumed we had regarding Nidhi.

"Hey meya", salutes Sunita.

"Hey Sunita di. I thought Nidhi is here, but she left some time back."

"Hum, to, indeed, she has gone, lekin phir, but again she'll be back soon."

"She has gone back to work in Maharashtra?"

“Oh humm she'll come back soon, she'll get married.”

As she had acknowledged Nidhi's departure, I assumed that it was a language confusion, something I misunderstood, which was now clarified. Again a few day later, while looking at the white paintings on the walls of her house which are faded, Sunita says;

“Well, Nidhi paints nice,” she arranges that.

I think that, like me, she does not master the future tense, hence the present employed in her sentence. So I reply:

“Yes, when is she back from Maharashtra, next year?”

But again, in a slightly defiant tone, Sunita tells me, “Anyway, she is back soon.”

I thought she was really missing Nidhi. This pattern of ‘making as if’ she was there and emphasising her coming back happened every time I mentioned Nidhi's being away, and I started to think that it was not accidental but had a deeper meaning. Once, Sunita talked to me about her elder daughter, how she was raised at home, and later, got married and left for her sasural, where she now has a child. She never mentioned that her elder daughter had also worked outside as a domestic worker before getting married.

Sunita was not the only one to tell me a different story where women's migration for work was acknowledged but never spontaneously mentioned, and rather erased from the narrative. There was a generational gap, between the youth and kishori, who would rather emphasise migration, and the elder generation, who did not think it was worth mentioning it.

It was peculiar, as the narrative of the life of a good Santali and the reality in the village were quite different. A Santali man would grow up, get married, build his house in the village, cut wood and grow his food, while a woman's life would be relatively similar, except she works more (my interpretation) and leaves her village for her husband's village. The reality was that almost all the youth between 16 and 35 were gone.

Indeed, the village is undergoing great changes in its social structures and practice, for example through migration. Like this village, many villages in India have undergone huge demographic changes: most of the men of productive age are gone, temporarily or durably, and the village regular inhabitants are now children, elderly, and the women, *defacto* heads of household. Migration also concerns women, and the fact that a women can earn more than her remaining brother sometimes subtly unsettles the balance of domination.

However, in this case, the narrative has not changed. The migrating working women are hidden behind a veil of shame and silence and the head of the house is the absent man, even if it is his wife who manages the household. As a result of the distortion between the social expectations around the behaviour of a daughter, like listening to her parents, preparing to marry, working in the family's house and fields; her parents' duties to raise her as a decent girl and marry her off to a good party, and what is actually happening, she migrates and works outside, is a practice dischry. So their discourses put forward or backward certain events in one's life timeline to match with the normal acceptable social framework. When I mentioned to Meenakshi's mother “Your daughter is working in Maharashtra”, she answered, “Yes, she will soon come back and get married”, concealing the reality of her gone for work and putting forward her future (hypothetical)

marriage. They know what is happening, but they do not want to interpret it as a change, maybe because of the implication for women's position in the village. Thus, there is a discrepancy, a gap between the actual social practice of the community and the way they imagine, formulate and state their practice. Santalis have always lived like that and we will always live like that. In the elder generation, there was an imagination of tradition, whereas the youngest generation was much more enthusiastic and eloquent about the social transformation happening in the village.

What do we do when we carry in the rural imagination of transformation?

Imaginations are images in our head, yet they have huge performative structural effects on the realities they pretend to describe, enunciate, arrange, interpret and order. How we see and imagine the things determine our knowledge of these things, how we understand, conceive and think them, and how we think and interpret things also determine how we imagine them. Knowledge is not neutral and the choices, conscious or not, that a subject makes to represent the world in one way or another determine the strategies to perpetuate or transform the world. In our society, the knowledge constructed and legitimate is an expert, scientific knowledge. This expert knowledge is not pure and desincarnated science that tells the truth about the world. It does tell something true, but this knowledge is inextricably related to the power exerted on the object of this knowledge, as knowledge is an exercise of power (Foucault, 1984).

In the case of rural development, this knowledge is invested by the institutions and the people who represent these institutions: researchers, policy makers and development workers when they interact with their clients or beneficiaries, the people to be developed. This system of thought and knowledge is an episteme, an unconscious structure that underlie the production of scientific knowledge at a given time and space. This episteme determines the boundaries of thought and language, as it also opens to new ways of thinking and acting about ourselves, it is constraining as well as productive (Foucault, 1966, 1969).

Our imaginary of development and of the world is structured by an economic imaginary (Escobar, 1995), where people came to see life in general through the lens of production, in terms of individual transacting in markets, production, growth, capital, progress, scarcity, consumption... This naturalisation and apparent objectivity of economy as a way to structure our world, our social institutions and thus the 'fabric of human life' in society is a feature of modern capitalism (Graeber, 2011). Even human relations become a matter of cost benefit calculation. Clearly this is the way the conquistadors viewed the worlds that they set out to conquer. It is the peculiar feature of modern capitalism to create social arrangements that essentially force us to think this way (Graeber, 2011).

The resistance of certain villagers to assimilate the basics of economical rationality and the virtue of modernity could be a form of resistance against this form of power. It is not to say that they are right, or that they are taking the right mean of struggling, but this struggle might hint at a conflict in subjectivity, a struggle against the submission of subjectivity (Foucault, 1982), a way to reject this subjection and reaffirm a new subjectivity, in the sense of being tied to one owns identity by a conscience or self-knowledge.

In this perspective, changing the way we see the world, reconstituting our subjectivity³ and

3 Regarding conversion of subjectivity and political transformation, this time from the point of view of the 'developed', I would like to underline here the conception of Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: 'But their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression. [...] To

following Gandhi, 'be the change that you wish to see in the world' is effectively changing the world. This transformation of imagination might concern the developing or oppressed, but also, and this depends on us, of the development practitioners. We might sometimes, unwillingly and unconsciously force those we pretend to develop, to acquire ideas and impose our imagination of transformation. This imposition is ethically problematic.

What might be needed is a transformation of imagination, not only of the villagers, but also of the practitioners, who, sometimes unwillingly, impose their, our imagination of transformation, subjugate instead of making subjects to. This imposition is a problem.

Why and how imposing a representation is a problem

The etymology of 'impose', im-; into, in, and -pose; to put, to place, reflects its definitions;

- To cause (something, such as a tax, fine, rule, or punishment) to affect someone or something by using your authority
- To establish or create (something unwanted) in a forceful or harmful way
- To force someone to accept (something or yourself).

Imposition, as the act of 'putting on', thus masking what is, is theoretically problematic for the search of what is reality. It is also strongly ethically (and legally) problematic to force or coerce by authoritative, physical or legal means. Not only in the sense of force, of physical and brutal force, which unfortunately still happens but is generally discredited as a mean, but in a more unconscious insidious and subtle way, but no less violent and disturbing: by the representation and imagination that the practitioners, policy makers, and 'clients' might have of the transformation, and enforce on themselves and the others.

This power is enforced by the way of thinking but also physical processes that institutions impose on the people constituted as objects, of the knowledge, and of the processes of administration⁴ (the planning, managing, monitoring, evaluating)

The expert discourse, while trying to help the villagers, subjugates them in the sense that it ties the individual to himself in the form of categories, classifications, norms or labels and submit him to others in this way. The villagers, by preventing, for example, competing discourses on change or economical surveys, express a refusal of a scientific and administrative inquisition which determines who one is.

Taking on Foucault's conception of power exercised through bureaucratic control, or disciplinary practices in institutions, Arturo Escobar identifies the role played by development in strategies of cultural and social domination (Escobar, 1995). Examining the daily work of institutions of development, such as the World Bank, with the Columbian government and the United Nations Inter-Agency Project for the Promotion of National Food and Nutrition Policy (PIA/PNAN), giving birth to the DRI (programme of Integrated Rural Development), the government's social policy for

surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognise its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity.'

4 In her analysis of rural development projects in Malaysia, Ainwa Ong (1987) argues that what is at stake in these strategies, and programs, is an "entire biopolitics: a set of policies regulating a plurality of problems such as health, nutrition, family planning, education, and the like which inevitably introduce not only given conceptions of food, the body, and so on, but a particular ordering of society itself.", as quoted in Escobar (1995).

rural development, reveals a biopolitics, an extension of state power over the physical and political bodies of a population:

Rural development is about a bureaucraties that seek to manage and transform how rural life is conceived and organised. Like FNPP, DRI functions as a productive technique that through its very functioning relates certain entities in specific ways (capital, technology, and resources), reproduces long-established cultural fabrications (for example, the market), and redistributes forces with a significant impact on people, visibilities, and social relations. The organisation of factors that development achieved contributes to the disciplining of labour, the extraction of surplus value, and the reorientation of consciousness. These strategies inevitably bypassed peasants' culturally based conceptions. Beyond the economic goals, World Bank-styled integrated rural development sought a radical cultural reconversion of rural life.

This bureaucraties works for example through labels; "Labels determine access to resources. A key mechanism at work here is that the whole reality of a person's life is reduced to a single feature or trait (for example, access to land, or an inability to read and write); in other words, the person is turned into a case. Explanations are thus dissociated from the poor and easily explained as deriving from characteristics internal to the poor (Wood, 1985). The poverty problem is constructed so the whole dynamics of rural poverty is reduced to solving a number of cases with apparently no connection to structural determinant, much less to the shared experiences of rural people. The marginalisation produced by this given regime of representation is an integral component of institutionalized power relations, and this regime of representation contribute to structuring the conditions under which people think and live their lives. Thus, it blocks the political constitution of peasantry as a force to demand a new agrarian reform. This depoliticisation of the problem of poverty is a side effects, or instrument effect of rural development as a political technology.

Politically, DRI seeks to improve peasant living and production conditions without touching the terribly skewed land tenure system still existing in the country, or to put it in the context of World Bank discourse, the problem is thought to be characterised by exclusion from market and state policy, not by exploitation within the market and the state, as Fajardo believes is the case." This regime of representation produce and reproduce violence, while suppressing the voices of the peasants.

Foucault sees this struggle against the forms of subjection -against the submission of subjectivity becoming more important, even though the struggles against forms of domination and exploitation have not disappeared. Quite the contrary. (Foucault, 1982).

This can be countered by an increasing constitution of the local community into a subject of its own collective action. But how can a human being turn herself into a subject? We have to imagine and build up what we could be.

Another transformation is possible: collaboration, co-production of knowledge and co-development

Researchers and practitioners play a powerful role in shaping imagined futures and new possibilities. Some of the representations are dominant and denounced as imposing violence and marginalisation, others, often at the margin, can be seen as tentative to reshape new ways of thinking and performing change, for example the sustainable livelihood (SLA) approach, or the

ecology as an approach to reconceptualise complex dynamics of the rural, or because they seem to stem from the peasants of South America, the *buen vivir* or other indigenous conceptions of what should be their own life. This is where participatory development is important.

Development needs to be decentered, and development programs less directive and more informative. In this perspective of development, the developmentalist is not the only expert anymore, a space for indigenous knowledge system and co-production of knowledge can be opened.

Maybe as a new program methodology, a humble methodology of trial, error and rectification can be proposed, which do not see the 'to be developed' as 'to be convinced', and take into account their tentative to select, divert and hijack projects as a necessary element of a development project, without necessarily accepting them (Sardan, 2005), and explores 'drift adjustment', adapting to side-tracking and attention of instrument-effects, the side effects of the projects as possible principles for action.

Conclusion

Precise ideas, definite explanations, define notions, decisive representations and detailed plans of action might look like the attribute of a good (development) professional informed by a coherent theoretical framework. But an open imagination of the rural and how it can transform would allow ourselves to see, with new eyes, what are the actual transformations of the rural and imagine different and unforeseen futures, and let space for the uncertain, unforeseen, possible and the impossible to happen.

Remembering Derrida's distinction between the future and l'avenir, I carry the hope to be able to welcome the other, the hope the rural society has an avenir, and not a future, the hope that the rural transformation will be the transformation of a life reinvented by its own subject.

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