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Engaging the Urban from the Periphery

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The Co-production of Space, Politics and Subjectivities in India's Urban Peripheries

Shubhra Gururani and Loraine Kennedy

Introduction

- In her pathbreaking essay on modes of production of urban space in the global South, anthropologist Teresa Caldeira (2017) deploys the concept of “peripheral urbanization” to conjure “a problem-space that allows us to investigate logics of the production of the urban that differ from those of the North Atlantic ... as a means of exploring processes of both socio-spatial formation and theory-making” (p. 4). Along similar lines, in this special issue, we invoke the concept of the periphery to attend to diverse and heterogeneous forms of extended urbanization that are taking shape in India.¹ Instead of considering the periphery as a spatially fixed zone, hinged to the geographies of metropolitan centers, for instance, we mobilize the notion of the periphery as a conceptual and territorial threshold that allows us to explore the urbanisms unfolding across the country. For us, the periphery, or the peri-urban as it is often referred to, may be located on the edges of metropolitan cities and entangled with their regimes of labor, capital, and governance, or it may be further afield, in smaller towns and settlements and enmeshed with agrarian and rural rhythms and dynamics that propel such peripheral urbanization. Irrespective of their location, amid intense competition for land and other resources, peripheries have not only become key sites of contestation, social exclusion, and speculation but they have also come to embody hope and aspirations for diverse social groups. They are attractive to investors seeking to capture gains from rapidly rising land value, to migrants who come from rural areas to live and work in the peripheries, as well as to upwardly mobile city-dwellers who have placed their bets on materializing their middle-class dreams and aspirations in these urbanizing frontiers. Located materially and symbolically at the intersection of multiple modalities of rural, urban, and agrarian; of desire and displacement; of loss

and possibilities, the peripheries fully embody and give expression to Doreen Massey's (2005) conception of space as "the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity" (p. 9).

- 2 While at a theoretical level these characteristics are shared with space more generally, and with urban space in particular, we argue that the periphery in this conjuncture captures Massey's conceptualization of space particularly well and merits special attention. First, the processes unfolding in these dynamic spaces are driving India's urbanization trajectory through changes in land use, large-scale infrastructure projects and commercial real estate development, as well as through economic development processes rooted in local economies arising from the incremental, subaltern strategies of individuals and households. The last Census (2011) showed that growth is occurring across the urban spectrum and is not limited to metropolitan centers, where growth rates actually declined; both the peripheries of large cities and smaller settlements, notably Census towns, recorded faster growth (Denis, Mukhopadhyay, and Zérah 2012). Second, compared to earlier phases of urbanization, contemporary processes are inextricably linked to India's increasing global engagement over the last decades and peripheries are being produced through multi-scalar relations and interactions of local, regional, national, and transnational flows of capital, expertise, and speculation. Third, they are sites where diverse modes of governance overlap or intersect, often linked to their classification as "urban" or "rural," producing dissonance and jurisdictional gaps. Institutional fragmentation is mirrored by other types of fragmentation, most visibly spatial, the interpenetration of built-up area and open spaces that characterize the urban frontier (Angel, Parent, and Civco 2012, Hamel and Keil 2015). Relatedly, given that extensive tracts of land are acquired and converted for urban development, the peripheries have emerged as key sites of contestation over land and land regimes. And lastly, crucially, we argue that even though all spaces are dynamic and coproduced by multiple social-political relations, peripheries—owing to their pace and scale of change—are indisputably incomplete spaces, "always under construction," (Massey 2005:9), enrolling new actors and logics that steer social and political change, sometimes in unexpected ways, and thus offer a generative site for urban studies to reflect and analyze the complex processes that are coproducing the urban frontier.
- 3 Peripheries, in the context of extended (or planetary) urbanization,² have expectedly been the subject of increased scholarly interest and, as we discuss below, there is a growing body of work that has engaged with different aspects of peripheral urbanization. Moving beyond the conventional approaches that classify urban peripheries according to their degree of functional integration with the core city, or conversely, their primary connection to local agricultural systems or global production platforms (Friedmann 2016), the more recent writings have argued that rather than conceptualizing such vibrant spaces of change as a residual category, urban peripheries deserve attention in their own right (see, e.g., Roy 2011a; Denis and Zérah 2017; Mukhopadhyay, Zérah, and Denis 2020; Hamel and Keil 2015; Gururani and Dasgupta 2018; Arabindoo 2020; Kennedy and Sood 2016; Gururani 2020; Upadhya 2020; Wu and Keil 2020; Follmann et al. 2020; Coelho, Mahadevia, and Williams 2020). In conversation with this emerging body of scholarship, the specific aim of the special issue is to contribute to this research agenda by investigating the social-spatial processes and everyday practices that co-constitute the peripheries in contemporary

India. Adopting a capacious understanding of the periphery, the collection reflects on the heterogeneity of urban forms and analyzes multi-scalar and transversal processes of place-making as well as places-in-making and explores how periphery as a problem-space contributes to theory-making.

- 4 The common thread that runs through the collection is the authors' attentiveness to the "relational constructedness" of politics, places, and subjectivities (Massey 2005). By focusing on *co-production*, the special issue emphasizes how relational processes that involve a range of different actors—state agencies, workers, investors, households, builders, real estate intermediaries, business owners, migrants—, with varying capacities to influence outcomes on the ground, interact with each other and how they recalibrate multiple relations of power to produce peripheries in diverse ways. Thus, the authors are attuned to the politics and diverse modes of governance that underpin these processes in specific places: the capitalist (and criminal) impulses of land grabbing and accumulation, the influence of neoliberal-inspired policies, the dominance of landed castes and upwardly mobile middle-classes, as well as the forms of resistance and agency of subaltern actors. A focus on co-production or relational constructedness offers a grounded, more comprehensive analytical lens, compared to "hegemonic" approaches, which tend to assume homogenizing effects of capitalism and colonialism (Ong 2011).³ The papers show that alongside the more visible transformation of the built environment, other processes such as the circulation of migrant labor, the shift in occupations of landowning groups, or the residential cohabitation of diverse social groups, all contribute to a re-scripting of social relations and the forging of new subjectivities. In tracking such social-spatial changes, the special issue responds to Caldeira's call to renew the concepts and categories of urban theory and suggests that to simply characterize these processes as "urban" would be to overlook the complexity and heterogeneity of the changes taking place and limit the potential that the space of the periphery brings to urban theory.
- 5 This intellectual project started with a conference panel focused on critically questioning key categories and concepts of the urban analytic.⁴ In taking the conversation forward, we bring together the work of both established and early-career scholars to highlight the diversity of current scholarship on the emerging forms and processes beyond the "city." In bringing together case studies from regions in North and South India (Telangana, Haryana, Karnataka, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh), as well as a comparative discussion on Hyderabad and Chengdu (China), the special issue is attentive to multiple regional and trans-local politics that coproduce urban peripheries. At the same time, it is cognizant of the historically sedimented colonial relations of land, property, and law that continue to play a vital, and even constitutive, role in how the social-spatial geographies of the urban are being remade at this political-economic conjuncture. Taking their departure points from a range of disciplinary perspectives to problematize the periphery (anthropology, sociology, geography, planning, economics), the papers also draw on various methodological approaches and sources, ranging from ethnographic fieldwork, colonial archives, land records, real estate data, which will be further discussed below. Interested in forging a conversation with comparative urban approaches, the collection ends with an essay by Xuefei Ren reflecting on the significance of peripheries for urban scholarship more generally.

- 6 Before we turn to a discussion of the papers, we first situate in the next section our core research focus in relation to existing literature in urban studies. We then discuss the methodological challenges and possibilities offered by the periphery as a conceptual and territorial threshold. Lastly, we highlight the key thematic areas explored in the papers, briefly describe each contribution, and present some potential directions for future research.

Situating peripheries, frontiers, hinterlands within urban theory

- 7 As is widely acknowledged, the bulk of urban expansion globally is taking place, not in metropolitan centers but in hinterlands, suburbs, agricultural fields, transport corridors between major cities and coastal edges (Angel et al. 2012; Keil 2017). Such peripheries are witnessing unprecedented urban growth and transformation and constitute the new frontiers of urbanization. Along with the category of periphery and peripheralization, as discussed by Roy (2011a) and Caldeira (2017), there are comparable designations that have been deployed to capture the diversity of extended urbanization in India, including hinterlands (Arabindoo 2020), suburbs (Keil 2017), subaltern urbanization (Denis and Zérah 2017), peri-urban (Dupont 2007; Follmann et al. 2020), greenfield and frontiers (Balakrishnan 2019; Kennedy and Sood 2016; Gururani and Dasgupta 2018). Rather than attempt to present a comprehensive review, we limit our discussion to the bodies of literature most relevant for the papers in the special issue.
- 8 From an economic and political geography perspective, one established field of scholarship interprets changes occurring in urban peripheries through a framework of global economic processes. It analyzes some of the major strands such as planetary urbanization, state rescaling (or restructuring), financialization of urban production and speculative urbanism. The assumption is that as the capitalist economy expands, capital seeks out places with the highest returns. In this context, urban peripheries in the global South emerge as key sites for investments, whether directed toward the integration of global production chains, infrastructure mega-projects (Kanai and Schindler 2018; Kennedy et al. 2014) or property development, including speculative real estate (Denis 2011; Searle 2016; Halbert and Rouanet 2014; Raman 2016; Rouanet and Halbert 2016; Goldman 2011, 2020). Such peripheral spaces are attractive for a variety of reasons, including their relative proximity to city-based human and capital resources and transport infrastructures, relatively cheaper land and under-regulated governance regimes. Various actors, state and non-state, domestic and international, target these peripheral spaces for establishing projects.
- 9 At a theoretical level, the spread of neoliberalism is considered to be at the origin of this trend because it advocates smaller government and privatization of services and the allocation of resources via the market. As states adapt to global economic conditions and strive to compete, they undertake economic and political restructuring, a process whereby new economic geographies emerge alongside new state spaces (for India, see Kennedy 2014; Anand and Sami 2016; Williams et al. 2021). These broad trends are considered to be instrumental in shaping contemporary urbanization processes, especially as they are conceptualized in the formulation of what has been described as “extended urbanization” whereby the urban becomes generalized,

blurring the conventional distinctions between different types of spaces (Brenner 2014). To counter the critique of determinism, i.e., that a common capitalist logic underpins these transformations, more recent scholarship in this vein emphasizes how historically and territorially entrenched social relations give rise to distinct forms and expressions (Shatkin 2017; Schmid et al. 2018). Still, the planetary focus of the extended urbanization theory has come under criticism for obfuscating differences that exist in “the lived reality of real people in actual cities” (Schindler 2017:3), with the risk of further marginalizing research on Southern cities and on urbanization processes in the global South more generally (Buckley and Strauss 2016).⁵

- 10 Like in other so-called “emerging” economies, India’s urban built environment has been impacted in manifold ways by inflows of global finance capital, especially after the real estate sector was opened up to foreign investment in 2005. One strand of literature has examined the precise ways that footloose global capital “touches down” in specific places (Searle 2016; Halbert and Rouanet 2014; Rouanet and Halbert 2016) and demonstrated the importance of a multi-scalar perspective to apprehend these complex processes. Far from being a mechanical top-down operation, this scholarship draws attention to ways in which the transformation of agricultural or forest lands into tradeable real estate takes place with the concurrence of several intermediaries, including local actors with knowledge and contacts. In particular, many national and subnational governments are actively supportive of these transformations when they are not initiating them. As Shatkin’s (2017) comparative study of the “real estate turn” in Asia has shown, state actors are often the only ones in a position to assemble land on a large scale, given the co-existence of various tenure regimes; they alone have the power to invoke eminent domain to expropriate existing residents. However, the relative power and propensity of states to use administrative machinery to develop land on the urban peripheries depends very much on the broader political regimes in place (Jenkins, Kennedy, and Mukhopadhyay 2014; Sud 2014). In India, subnational state governments have emerged as key drivers of change, investing in land development and connective infrastructure, and elaborating incentives for potential investors, including exceptional regulatory and governance frameworks (e.g., Sood and Kennedy 2020).
- 11 The concept of speculative urbanism, elaborated a decade ago for the Indian case by Goldman (2011), specifically aims to capture the entrepreneurial dimension of the state as it increasingly implicates itself in the business of partnering with capital and directing it into urban peripheries. As the subprime crisis in the global North redirected capital flows toward greener fields, notably in Asia, national and subnational governments were elaborating strategies to build “world-class” cities, eager to enlist private funds to bankroll megaprojects.⁶ Goldman, building on pioneering research on urban politics in Bangalore (Benjamin 2008; Benjamin and Raman 2006), examined the emergence of new “architectures” of urban governance, conceived to adapt to the demands of global investors. The contribution of this generative concept has been cogently summarized by Sood (2019), who argued, “[s]peculative urbanism can be said to embody urban governance as ‘investment strategy’; it represents the turbulent trajectory of world-class city-making projects in an era where the returns to capital are their primary driving force and metric” (p. 2026).
- 12 Another strand of literature, called “subaltern urbanization” (Denis and Zérah 2017; Mukhopadhyay et al. 2020), critically engages with some of the tenets of planetary

urbanization and more generally with mainstream urban theory, as part of a larger agenda to build postcolonial theory from the South, following Parnell and Robinson (2012) and Robinson and Roy (2016), among others. This scholarship draws attention to the significance of urban transitions occurring in settlements below 100,000 inhabitants, where approximately 40 percent of India's urban population lives, according to the last Census (2011). This dynamic body of research challenges metropolitan-centered scholarship by focusing on local agency and on settlement types in places that are usually considered marginal in urban research. It counters the view that urban expansion, and indeed economic growth and innovation, are dependent on state-led initiatives or global actors. Rather, on the basis of empirical case material spanning the breadth of the country, the research shows that endogenous social and governance structures form the basis of the evolution of small settlements, including their engagement with the global economy (Denis and Zérah 2017). This is important for our purposes as a reminder that “peripheral” is neither a dependent nor subordinate category; such places of peripheral urbanization “complicate the idea of the urban as networks” (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2020:3) and highlight the heterogeneity of the social-spatial forms that coexist and coproduce the urbanizing frontiers.

- 13 Motivated by similar intellectual goals of tracking urbanization in countries like India that are predominantly agrarian, there is a new body of work on “agrarian urbanism” that highlights the relational dynamics between the agrarian and urban (Gururani 2020, Balakrishnan 2019, Cowan 2018, Gururani and Dasgupta 2018, Sircar 2016, Roy 2016). It forges an important conversation between agrarian and urban studies and argues that the urban question is intimately linked to the agrarian questions of land, labor, tenure, and livelihoods, and that only by attending to the constitutive role of agrarian regimes of caste-based control, authority, and exclusion can we begin to grasp the persistent rurality and uneven development in India. Gururani, for example, by focusing on urban villages in the city of Gurgaon on the southern edge of New Delhi has argued that urbanization in the peripheries pivots on the politics of land and caste (Gururani 2020). To analyze how the relational dynamics of urban and agrarian co-produce the periphery in the crucible of intense political contestations, this body of scholarship engages critically with colonial histories and the agrarian political economy of land and property (see also Nielsen, Sareen, and Oskarsson 2020). The key contribution of scholarship on agrarian urbanism is drawing attention to the centrality of land and how its complex relational dynamics, namely of caste and property, undergirds and coproduces the urban in its various dimensions, material and immaterial. It directs our attention to diverse social-spatial processes and practices of urbanization that depart significantly from the global North and calls into question the city-centrism and other standard assumptions of mainstream urban theory. In doing so, it demonstrates that the forces of urbanization do not assimilate or erase the spaces of rurality, the villages or the agrarian relations embedded in agricultural rhythms of land, labor, and livelihood but rather, the agrarian and urban sustain and co-produce each other and contour the unfolding landscape of the peripheries.
- 14 This broad overview provides a framework to anchor the papers in the collection and allows us to turn next to the question of how to study the peripheries through a discussion of research methods.

Researching the periphery: methodological challenges and possibilities

- 15 We started this essay by arguing that peripheries are the new frontiers of urbanization and as dynamic and emergent spaces, they are “always under construction.” But tracking and documenting spaces that are undergoing rapid social-spatial transformation pose a significant methodological challenge for social science research, which relies on firm conceptual anchors, borders, boundaries, and classifications. How can we map and analyze a landscape that is constantly changing? As researchers who study the periphery, we recognize that in these frenzied zones, plans and maps are continuously redrawn, new models/instruments of governance are introduced, agricultural and pastoral lands are rapidly turned into high-rises and highways, and local populations are confronted with the influx of new residents, all of which make the task of tracking unfolding urbanisms in the periphery thorny. Although all urban spaces are entangled in multi-scalar political economies, we argue that peripheries engage an even wider range of local and transregional actors and urge us to revisit not only the standard conceptual repertoire but also take seriously the question of method and research methodologies. Their study demands methodological creativity and innovation.
- 16 In acknowledging this challenge, some scholars have begun to build a more holistic, socio-spatial analytics for investigating peri-urban spaces, advocating a vigorous and systematic exchange between critical urban theory and geospatial sciences (Follmann et al. 2020).⁷ These embryonic efforts can be seen as a response to calls for building a more robust “urban science.” As Acuto, Parnell, and Seto (2018) note, “for urban science to be collectively greater than the sum of its parts, it needs to draw from all the sciences—natural, engineering, and social, as well as the arts and humanities—whilst linking directly into practice, and offering effective global assessments of the state of our planet’s urban condition.” (p. 2; see also Zérah 2020).⁸ Geospatial sciences typically use remote sensing and geographic information systems, for instance, to detect patterns and forms of urbanization in different places at various spatial scales, allowing precise measurement of diachronic changes in morphology as well as land cover and land-use change.⁹ Notwithstanding the contribution of geo-spatial techniques, social science research methods remain essential to fully capture the everyday practices and lived realities of old and new residents, of migrant workers, developers, bureaucrats, and a range of other actors who actively participate in making the periphery. As scholars track the spatiality of urban transformations, it is equally critical to also address the temporality of changes and as such locate the study of urbanization in historical conditions and the material relations that undergird them. Archives, oral histories, and memories, as papers in the collection show, are rich vantage points to gain a longer *durée* perspective and take into consideration the enduring legacy of colonial laws and property regimes that sediment urbanization. To capture the complex and often convoluted and contradictory processes through which spaces and subjects are co-produced, we suggest that in-depth grounded ethnographic lines of inquiry are highly generative methodological approaches. Since urban studies is generally focused on institutional dynamics, governance structures, and planning regimes, as well as on the analysis of macro-scalar politics and policies, we view the ethnographic turn¹⁰ as a welcome and much needed methodological intervention that

can help grasp the everyday practices of work, mobility, habitation, livelihood, and gain a grounded perspective on the local dynamics of power and politics. Among others, ethnographic attention can throw light on the micropolitics of caste, land, place, exclusion, and belonging as they play out in the peripheries and present conceptual openings for theory-making.

- 17 The papers in this issue, grounded in different disciplinary traditions, are positioned primarily within a critical and interpretive research paradigm and have adopted mixed social science methods to analyze the (trans-)formation of the urban periphery. Significantly, all of the authors have engaged in fieldwork, generating original, territorially anchored data bases on which to ground their analyses and interpretations. Indeed, as Upadhyya and Rathod's piece demonstrates, only fieldwork-based research can produce insights into quotidian practices, specifically the "small-scale, 'informal' and 'illegal' modalities through which agrarian land becomes real estate" (Upadhyya and Rathod, this issue, paragraph 13) Likewise, it is through intensive fieldwork that the authors have been able to investigate the subtle but powerful ways through which politics of land, accumulation, and dispossession intersects and is informed by the hierarchical relations of caste and community. Whether in rural Punjab (Rathi, this issue), or on the outskirts of Bengaluru (Upadhyya and Rathod, this issue), Hyderabad (Sood, this issue; Xie, this issue) or Delhi (Mishra, this issue; Sood, this issue), the collection highlights the potential of ethnographic methods and sheds light on how urban peripheries are co-produced through the social interactions of various groups, whether acting in concert or at cross-purposes. Both Mishra's and Rathi's pieces demonstrate the value of combining archival research with ethnographic research methods: for Mishra, to articulate the relocation of "polluting" brick kilns and the relegation of equally undesirable manual laborers to the urban periphery; for Rathi, to reconstruct how land tenure systems and peasant movements were instrumental in shaping the distribution of land among different groups, which in turn influenced trajectories of urbanization. The papers are discussed in further detail in the next section.
- 18 Comparative urbanism is another major stream of research that holds considerable promise for investigating the urban frontier. The exceptional dynamism of peripheral sites in the global South, despite occurring contemporaneously at a particular moment of globalization, demonstrates remarkably different trajectories, reminding us that urbanization is always a situated process. Yet, comparative methods can provide a basis for understanding how specific outcomes are produced in a given context. Numerous scholars are calling for a new methodological agenda in the field of urban studies, advocating for more flexible and creative comparative methods (McFarlane 2010). Robinson (2016) has provocatively asserted that theories of the urban can start "from anywhere," taking forward Roy's (2009) call for new geographies of theory and building on her own pathbreaking research on "ordinary cities" (Robinson 2006). Rather than restricting inquiry to formal comparative methods, which limit the scope for comparing in and from the global South, Robinson (2016) enjoins scholars to adopt a wider repertoire of tactics, building in particular on relational comparative methods (also see Ward 2010) and comparative urbanism (McFarlane 2010). From such a comparative stance, three papers explicitly mobilize comparative methods and/or rely on comparative insights for the analysis: whereas Upadhyya and Rathod compare processes unfolding in two localities within peri-urban Bengaluru, Xie compares selected peripheral areas in Hyderabad and Chengdu (China), and Sood contrasts modes

of government in the National Capital Region of Delhi with those in Greater Hyderabad. It is in conversation with these bodies of work that the papers engage the urban through the periphery, as we discuss next.

Key thematic issues in this collection

- 19 As the literature section highlighted, a common thematic that prevails in all peripheries is the intense contestation over land. Amid soaring land prices and speculation, land has come to be traded or acquired in all possible—legal and extra-legal—ways and there is a broad range of stakeholders, besides the land mafia, who have jumped into the business: large and small land developers, local and transnational real estate companies, state agencies and politicians. As scholars note, the current trend is towards increasing commodification, bringing land not previously traded into the market and converting land use to non-agricultural uses (industrial, commercial, residential,...), which has resulted in a diminished and uneven role of land as a source of agrarian accumulation (Nielsen et al 2020; Balakrishnan 2018; Lerche 2013; Sampat 2016). Whether through market transactions or through state-led land acquisition, i.e., using the legal instrument of eminent domain, large tracts of land in the peripheries have been acquired for urbanization and other purposes.¹¹ As the papers show, these processes always unfold in articulation with local configurations of caste and class.
- 20 In focusing on the question of land as it is playing out in the peripheries of Bengaluru, **Carol Upadhyia and Sachinkumar Rathod** draw on their extensive ethnographic fieldwork with local land brokers and dealers and argue that the struggle over land is intimately connected with the entrenched politics of caste. Through a careful engagement with the recent debate on how the urban question in countries like India pivots on the embedded dynamics of agrarian relations, Upadhyia and Rathod emphasize the centrality of caste in analyzing uneven urban development. By “bringing in” caste and mapping how land is being acquired in small and incremental ways, the authors focus specifically on how the local Dalit groups carefully navigate the changing social-material landscape. They argue that in this political-economic conjuncture, caste is not just another vector of social difference, or basis of collective identity, which it of course is, but it is more than that. Through material and discursive ways, Dalit groups enter the world of land transactions and are able to challenge the social power of dominant caste groups, like the Reddys in the case of Bengaluru. The authors argue that caste certainly is a social structure of the agrarian economy but it also structures the land market, and is reshaped—and re-spatialized—as agrarian land is assetized and enters into urban circuits of accumulation. As they show, their key Dalit interlocutors, who work as broker-activists, do contest land grabbing by the dominant caste groups, but they also go beyond this and mobilize their collective caste identity to “hail the state” and demand their grievances be attended to. In offering a highly nuanced and grounded reading of the changing imbrications of land and caste, Upadhyia and Rathod describe how multi-scalar and transversal relations of power coproduce the peripheries in unprecedented ways.
- 21 **Ankita Rathi’s** contribution also engages with the entanglements of urban and rural dynamics and how the politics of land plays out in Patiala District in Punjab. Drawing on the colonial histories of agrarian change, the paper documents the passage of a

small town called Patran from feudal village in a princely state to a thriving agro-commercial town. Through archival research on land tenure systems, combined with household surveys and in-depth interviews with landholders, Rathi shows how the urban and the agrarian are co-produced in this particular setting. Extending the agrarian urbanism framework, Rathi argues that in predominantly agrarian societies like India, where relations of land and property are deeply entangled in caste hierarchies and exclusions, there is not a neat conversion from “agriculture land” to “urban land,” as standard planning theory would suggest, but rather a series of land-based negotiations, capital investments, and everyday practices of work, labor, and credit cutting across the rural and urban and simultaneously contouring the social and political geography of both. While the feudal land tenure systems are tenacious and cast their long shadow in contemporary land politics, the history of peasant resistance and intricate caste-based negotiations work to transform the agrarian urban landscape, although in highly uneven ways. Intersecting with changing rural aspirations and subjectivities, while the erstwhile farmers have migrated to urban centers their links with the village, especially caste-based ties, have not disappeared. In fact, as Rathi points out, rural spaces continue to sustain and co-produce unfolding urban dynamics and their attendant uncertainties.

- 22 **Ashima Sood** uses the term “speculative frontiers” to designate those unfinished, “conjectural” peri-urban spaces being shaped by real estate capital on the peripheries of India’s large metropolises. Opening with a conflict in Noida (Delhi - National Capital Region) between working-class residents of a *basti* (auto-constructed settlement) and those of a gated enclave catering to the upwardly mobile middle-classes, the essay explores divergent modalities of government in such edge settings. Such territories usually fall outside the municipality proper and the norms associated with representative local government, evolving distinct forms of “frontier governance.” Mobilizing an original database of over 7,000 large-scale private housing projects spanning the last decades (1995–2018), Sood shows that private real estate activity has concentrated in India’s eight largest metropolitan areas. Zooming in on the case of Greater Hyderabad and mobilizing a political economy framework to examine recent patterns of development in the urban periphery, she argues that a nexus of real estate-led growth and state-led infrastructure has given rise to particular modes of government that, inter alia, “valorize the interests of propertied groups at the expense of migrants and working-class communities” (Sood, this issue, paragraph 69). She argues that the frontier is hostile to claims made by vulnerable and migrant populations, undercutting the scope for occupancy urbanisms (Benjamin 2008). In an effort to advance a theoretical understanding of speculative peri-urbanism she elaborates a typology of the modalities of government—privatized, specialized and exceptional—as emblematic of those that have emerged in India’s urban peripheries.
- 23 **Pratik Mishra** in presenting an account of brick kilns and brick kiln workers from the vantage point of Khanda, a small village in Haryana, draws our attention to the question of labor and how peripheries are materially and socially produced. Khanda supplies millions of bricks to Delhi and the National Capital Region every year for the construction of a wide variety of buildings and infrastructure. The paper examines how the relocation of brick kilns has implicated Khanda in a series of temporary peripheral landscapes as metropolitan Delhi has continued to grow and expand. Mishra argues that exclusionary urbanization processes, in tandem with migrants’ mobility choices, produce migrant workers as peripheral subjects while contributing to the production

of the urban periphery. Drawing parallels between the displacement of brick kilns from Delhi to peri-urban villages and the precarious migration of brick kiln workers, he highlights the tenuous relation of brick kiln workers to urban space and describes how spaces and subjectivities are relationally co-constructed. The paper draws on the work of Gidwani (2015) and Gidwani and Maringati (2016) and through ethnographic research evocatively captures the lives of laboring bodies that materially produce (peri-)urban spaces. Thus, Mishra reminds us that the periphery is “a heterogeneous category that has been traced across multiple sites and scales—at the urbanizing edges of expanding cities, disseminated across the fragmented physical and social structures of the core city, at distant sites of extraction along extended but discontinuous geographies of urbanization, and at the scale of the body, of socially stigmatized workers who do the hard, dirty work” (Mishra, this issue, paragraph 2) of city-building.

- 24 In the peripheries of metropolitan regions, both established and “new” residents of various backgrounds—ethnic, religious, linguistic, regional—find themselves inhabiting common residential spaces. **Liubing Xie** undertakes to study patterns of urban relationalities that emerge between different social groups in conjunction with the built environment. To do so, he juxtaposes selected study sites from the peripheries of Chengdu in China and Hyderabad in India, two megacities actively engaged in strategies to position themselves in global economic networks, to use comparison as a heuristic for examining urbanization across national contexts. Inspired by work on urban assemblages (Farias and Bender 2010), Xie deploys the concept of “assemblages of living together” to show how in the wider context of socio-economic change taking place in these sites, new configurations of sociality emerge. On the basis of preliminary field research, he identifies three emblematic configurations common to both sites: interspersed auto-constructed communities and gated communities; internal heterogeneity within residential communities; vertical cohabitation between migrant tenants and villager landlords. His exploratory research aims to interrogate how materiality, embodied in these distinct residential configurations, articulates with sociality. Xie shows how certain practices common to both cases, like the erection of physical barriers, are put in place to ensure social distancing and how certain forms of cohabitation engender or reproduce unequal relations of interdependence between social groups.
- 25 In the Afterword, **Xuefei Ren** undertakes to situate the collection in relation to the broad contours of urban scholarship in the last few decades. Hypothesizing a “peripheral turn” in urban studies, she observes that city-centric perspectives, as exemplified by the Chicago School’s concentric model of urban growth, have been progressively challenged, most notably by urban scholars studying the global South. These scholars have trained their sights on the periphery, such as suburbs, small towns, and the sprawling hinterlands outside metropolitan regions. Her essay goes on to discuss what can be gained by shifting the analytical lens from the city center to the periphery, and from Western cities to cities in the global South. Drawing on new scholarship on urban peripheries in India, Ren also identifies three major avenues for further investigation: comparative methodology, center-periphery relations, and “ways of life.”

Concluding remarks

- 26 This special issue has been conceived in support of the research agenda dedicated to the study of the periphery as a distinct “problem space.” We have argued that instead of a residual space, the periphery emerges as an important site of investigation and sheds light on “other” situated processes and practices that are central to understanding urban transformation in the global South and beyond. This collection of papers, focused on India, has demonstrated this in several critical ways. First, with regard to governance, it has underscored how overlapping administrative boundaries, often linked to “rural” and “urban” classifications, contribute to ambiguous jurisdictions and “voids” that tend to work in favor of powerful interests and against more disadvantaged groups. Cities, although not exempt from such territorial dissonance, do not generally face the same degree of institutional fragmentation as the periphery. Second, the question of land, its conversion and acquisition, and as an object of speculation, is critical in the city and in the periphery but in the latter, the frenzied nature of land transformation, especially the conversion of agricultural land to other uses, brings more directly into play the urban-rural interface as regimes of land undergo significant transformation. In particular, the question of land articulates in distinct ways with the complex politics and changing relations of caste on the urban frontier. It was shown that these agrarian-urban entanglements are critical for gaining an understanding of how, even as the entrenched relations of caste and land change, they remain constitutive of the caste-based politics of land, and how they inform the calculations of compensation and recognition, or not, of land titles. Third, in the rapidly changing landscape of work, mobility, and migration, there are new social-spatial arrangements of cohabitation that emerge and offer insight into complex relationalities that take shape in the periphery. Whereas migration and social heterogeneity are both mainstays of the urban experience, some specific features, already flagged by Caldeira and others, can be witnessed in the periphery, notably the distinct modes of production of space. Self-built neighborhoods co-exist alongside developer-built gated communities, and this residential cohabitation raises key questions about sociality. Thus, by presenting grounded analyses of the complex functional, territorial and social re-compositions playing out in the periphery, the collection not only directs us to the unfolding social-spatial dynamics of urbanization but it also provides an opportunity to anchor research on the periphery more prominently within urban theory.
- 27 Moving forward, one of the key contributions of the special issue is to invite scholars to remain open not only to new conceptual anchors and foster interdisciplinary conversations but to also reflect on our methodologies that may otherwise obscure certain (read subaltern) perspectives and experiences. Incorporating mixed methods that are collaborative, multimodal, and engaged, the special issue calls for research that is attentive to governmental maps and plans as much as to oral histories and memories to open up possibilities for future research design and a renewed understanding of the periphery and with it of the urban. Such comprehensive and slow scholarly work may yield reports and articles but it may also generate visual collages, documentary films, blogs, and multi-media installations that can allow us to continue to build up urban theory from the periphery. In other words, in centering the periphery as the site for developing a robust approach for investigating, interpreting

and comparing the complex processes of urbanization, the collection strives to sustain and further the dialogue between different disciplinary approaches and also extend a call to experiment with diverse methodological approaches to study the urban in all its heterogeneity.

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NOTES

1. The authors are grateful to Ashima Sood, co-editor of this special issue, for sustained engagement on the topics discussed in this introduction. We also wish to thank the reviewers for their careful reading and constructive comments, which were very helpful in revising the initial draft. The usual disclaimers apply.
2. Planetary urbanization designates a body of theory, inspired by the work of Henri Lefebvre, elaborated notably by Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (see, for instance Brenner 2014; Brenner and Schmid 2014; Brenner and Schmid 2015). In addition to generating a large body of research, it has sparked critical debates in urban studies, a review of which is beyond the scope of this editorial introduction. See for instance, Roy (2016) and Storper and Scott (2016).
3. In Aihwa Ong's words (2011): "Any hope we have to grasp the particularity and variability of the great urban transformation demands situated accounts of how urban environments are formed through specific combinations of the past and the future, the postcolonial and the metropolitan, the global and the situated, but is not dominated by any single mechanism or principle" (p. 9–10).
4. The panel was part of the annual RC21 conference of the International Sociological Association held in Delhi in September 2019. The overall conference theme was "In and Beyond the City: Emerging Ontologies, Persistent Challenges and Hopeful Futures." Our panel, co-convened with Ashima Sood, was entitled "The Peri-urban Question: Renewing concepts and categories." The editors thank the participants of the panel, paper presenters, discussants and the public, for their rich inputs and the lively exchange.
5. In Schindler's words: "the epistemology of planetary urbanization risks re-centering the essence of urbanity to the North Atlantic. If urbanity is all-pervasive, it can be studied in one's backyard, so why bother researching it in Swaziland?" (Schindler 2017:2).
6. For scholarship engaging with the notion of world-class cities in India, see, for instance, Baviskar (2006), Kennedy (2007), Zérah (2008), Kennedy and Zérah (2008), Arabindoo (2011), Dupont (2011), Kennedy and Zérah (2011), Roy (2011b), Ellis (2012), Ren and Weinstein (2013), Schindler (2014), Das (2015), Follmann (2015), Ghertner (2015).
7. This agenda was advanced through the international research network COMPASS (2016–2019), coordinated by Loraine Kennedy (CNRS, EHESS), Karin Pfeffer (University of Twente), Fulong Wu (University College London), Peter Dannenberg and Alexander Follmann (University of Cologne).
8. Indeed, for some observers, academia has not sufficiently acknowledged just how critical urban-related issues are for addressing the world's most pressing problems including sustainable development; they contrast this to the policy domain, for example the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Agenda, which focuses explicitly on urban areas or city-led initiatives like the Paris climate agreement (Acuto et al. 2018).
9. Ever more sophisticated quantitative techniques are being developed and used for measuring and making comparisons on the basis on particular metrics such as fragmentation and integration. These include machine learning algorithms for developing fragmentation metrics in remote sensing communities, e.g. Anees et al. (2020). Also see <https://uwaterloo.ca/atlas-of-suburbanisms/about>
10. There is a growing body of urban research that integrates ethnographic approaches. See for instance Simone (2004); De Boeck and Plissart (2014); Anand (2017); Searle (2016).
11. It is important to recall that apart from governments, which use state machinery to forcibly acquire land from private owners or bring common lands into the market, other, "ordinary," stakeholders also take part in this broad transformation, including owners of micro-plots who sell them off to be subdivided for residential use (see, e.g., Denis 2018).

INDEX

Keywords: periphery, urban peripheries, peripheral urbanization, peri-urban, urban studies, urban co-production, ethnographic methods, global South, India

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