

Reading Kerala's Rural-Urban Continuum: A Cross-section From History to Contemporary

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Summary: *The article explores Kerala's rural-urban continuum, illustrating how urban and rural elements intertwine with the state's spatial landscape. It examines historical influences, such as agrarian practices and land reforms, that have shaped this unique settlement pattern. By analysing contemporary urbanisation trends and infrastructure projects, the article highlights the challenges of maintaining ecological balance while accommodating growth. Overall, the article delves into the complexities of Kerala's evolving identity as it navigates the interplay between rurality and urbanity, placing the rural-urban continuum as a state of being.*

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“The whole region along the coast is from one end to the other like a garden city where one can hardly walk a furlong without seeing some houses.... The villages in Kerala have no marked nodality.”¹



Figure 1. Rural Urban Bricolage - Palliyamoola, Kannur. Image : Google Earth

Imagine any urban area in Kerala... It is buzzing with commerce and activities...

... But just behind the third row of buildings, or sometimes even the first, there is, more often than not, a quiet neighbourhood of houses in individual plots, packed densely, interspersed with a few apartment towers here and there...

...A closer inspection and one could find agricultural fields, livestock farms, ponds or other everyday connections to rurality interlaced within this (semi) urbanity, lending it the visual qualities of the hinterland.

This rural-urban bricolage now serves as a hallmark of Kerala’s urban spatiality, in what scholars theorise as the ‘rural-urban continuum’. The term rural-urban continuum was coined by Chicago Anthropologist Robert Redfield in 1947 in the context of his studies on industrial developments in Mexico. By definition, the rural-urban continuum is a type of development pattern where there is no sharp distinction between the rural and urban, with *“various degrees of urban ranging from the urban core toward its hinterlands and further to the remote*

areas”², with *“peri-urban areas, ribbon developments/urban corridors, desakota, and ruralopolis”* being prominent forms of this type of settlement.



Figure 2: Aerial View of Palarivattom Metro Station, Kochi showing spread-out low density development. Image: “The Kochi Metro Map,” The Hindu, June 18, 2017.

Kerala’s urbanity is discussed as a paradox, scoring very high in terms of social development indicators, but showing low economic growth. While the state meets various benchmarks of urbanisation, the infrastructure facilities match semi-urban or rural standards at best. Of course, this varies from region to region.

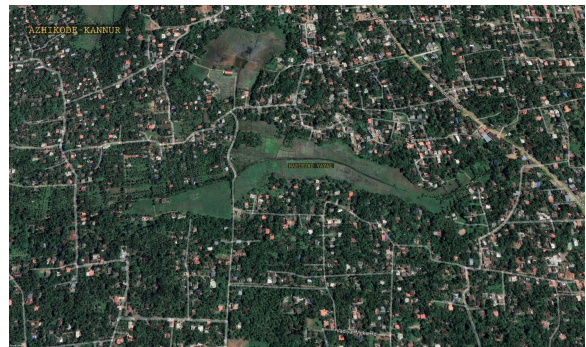


Figure 3. Residential development sandwiching 1.2 km stretch of Agricultural Fields - Narikund Vayal, Azhikode, Kannur. Image: Google Earth

What does it mean, to be in a state of rural-urban continuum?

¹ Kuriyan (1938-39: 141-142) in Mencher, "Kerala and Madras," 141 (1966)

² Cyriac, et al., "Rural-Urban Continuum Settlements," 1468 (2022).

The average Keralite lives a paradoxical reality; residing in a rural setting, at times, overlooking verdant green landscapes, wetland ecologies or luscious paddy fields, and commuting by private cars or buses to the urban area located anywhere between 10 to 30 minutes away. In heavily urbanised areas, these green spaces are, over time, disappearing, becoming objects of recent memory. Residents now recall from memory where a *thodu* (drainage pond) once was, where an apartment complex now stands; or shortcut trails through agricultural bunds and lotus ponds, now heavily built-in with new homes. Regardless, the Malayali home, however 'modern' or located in an urbanised area, maintains, in some way or the other, the connection to the landscape, and in essence rurality.

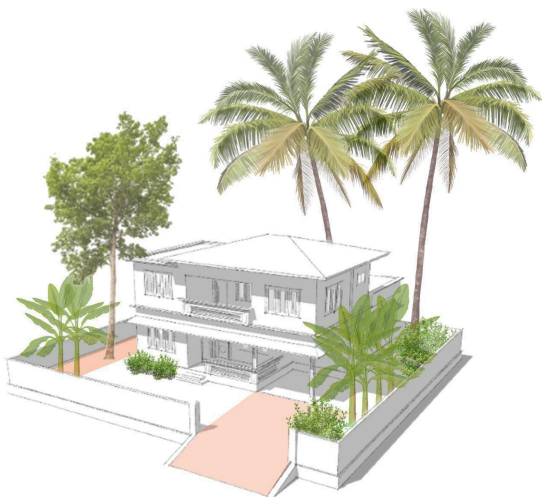


Figure 4. The modern home and the Garden. Image: Shruthi Ramesh

Here is a description of the ideal Malayali house by prominent anthropologist Joan Mencher (1966):

“The ideal Malayalee house is set in its compound with its food-producing trees (coconut, plantain, and jackfruit) so that the “dwelling space subtracts hardly anything from the cultivation space.”³

The relationship of the ‘veedu’(house) with the ‘parambu’ (compound), and in extension to the staple food-producing

trees (coconut, plantain, jackfruit and mango) that populate the *parambu* continues well into the 21st century. Today, this connection with the landscape becomes a representation of the rural-urban continuum at its smallest level.

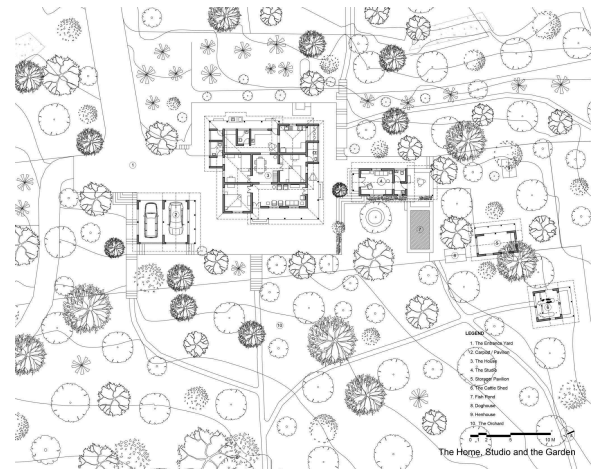


Figure 5. “The Home, Studio and the Garden” - Plan with the immediate context. An urbanising rural farmstead, near Thusharagiri Waterfalls, Calicut. Image: Ajay K Jacob / Thinking Dwelling Studio

Just as the modern urban home is in a continuum with rurality, the rural home engages in a complex continuum with the urban and rural, as it adapts to new urbanities. In a rural farmstead’s 21st-century adaptation to urbanity, one can also perceive the pursuit to maintain connections to its past ruralities, through the reinforcement of connections to the landscape.

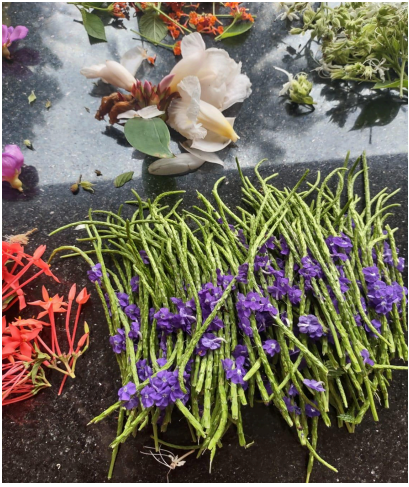
Talk to any urban Keralite, and they will tell you, starry-eyed, how they use coconut oil refined from the coconuts grown in their parambu, or sell homegrown mangoes, coconuts, cashew nuts, areca nuts in bulk, or give it out for ‘paatam’, for an additional

³ Mencher, "Kerala and Madras," 141 (1966)



Figure 6. “The Home, Studio and the Garden” - Section. A complex continuum: Evolving relationships between the orchard and the home; the rural and the urban. Image: Ajay K Jacob / Thinking Dwelling Studio

income, use curry leaves grown in their backyard for tempering, and so on. In many ways, rurality permeates the average Keralite’s everyday urbanity. Inversely, even remote and rural neighbourhoods bear resolute evidence of urbanity - the concrete roofs and corrugated sheets that keep the monsoons at bay, the modern building materials, high-speed internet connection and electronic appliances that satiate the desire for a modern lifestyle.



Figures 7 and 8. Homegrown flowers are traditionally used in Flower carpets during Onam. Image: Anoop P Rajendran

Kerala’s major festivals, Onam and Vishu, by design, entertain connections to rurality. For Vishu, a key custom involves the display of the bounty and abundance of vegetable produce that nature has bestowed upon the household. Onam calls for the collection of home-grown flowers from the home and the neighbourhood to arrange beautiful flower-carpet arrangements. With urbanisation, a market

economy has however emerged that displaces the locally procured produce with other commercial replacements. The commodification of flowers and vegetables over the 21st century takes over the humble rural essence of both traditions. This transition to specialised offerings, reflecting the urbanisation of rural processes is a hallmark of cities. (Cities are hubs of occupational specialisation, as theorised by German Sociologist Georg Simmel's 1903 seminal essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life").

The Rural-Urban Continuum is visible across various facets of everyday life.



Figure 9. Small-scale farming of commercial flowers for Onam at Mongam, Malappuram. Image: Anoop P Rajendran

One should wonder while travelling in a blue bus during their commute through the inner-city areas, why there are just as many, or rather, more, blue buses running in the inner-city regions than green buses.

How often have you travelled in a green bus within the inner city?



Figure 10. Blue buses in the Inner-city - near Mahatma Mandiram, Kannur. Image: Shruthi Ramesh

At least in Northern Kerala, it is a rarer entity.

If you are questioning the blue bus's affiliation with the rural-urban continuum, here is an explanation of its relevance. The buses coded Blue represent 'Mofussil' buses that run trips from the city to the rural or provincial areas. Buses coloured Green run within the inner-city routes. Additionally pink represents limited stops and white, tourist buses. Every time one travels to the inner-city areas on a blue bus, one is, therefore, acknowledging the extent to which the rural-urban boundary is blurred in Kerala. Further, the rural/provincial destinations of the Blue Bus are also, mostly 'urban' in nature. As exemplified here, the blurring of the rural-urban boundary is visible across varied facets of everyday life in Kerala.

The Spatiality of the Rural-Urban Continuum

Kerala's settlement pattern is unique. Here, the term 'settlement pattern' refers to the arrangement and distribution of buildings spatially and the relationship between the built structures. The state's residential settlement is dispersed uniformly all over the habitable area.

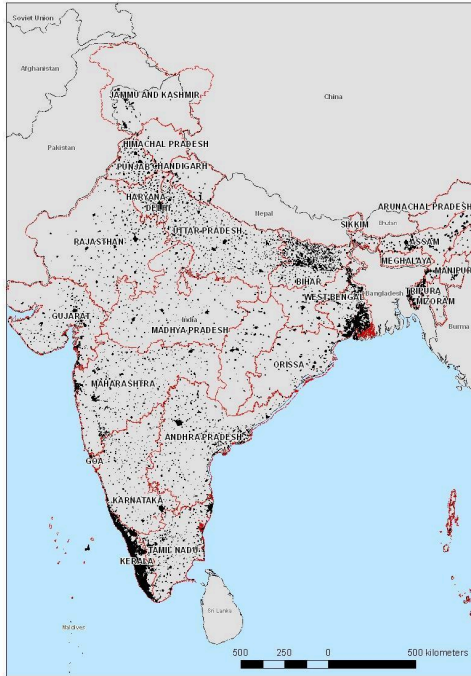


Figure 11. The distribution and physical extent of the urban agglomerations in 2001. Image: Denis and Marius-Gnanou (2010); cited data sources- Census of India 2001 and Geopolis geodatabase

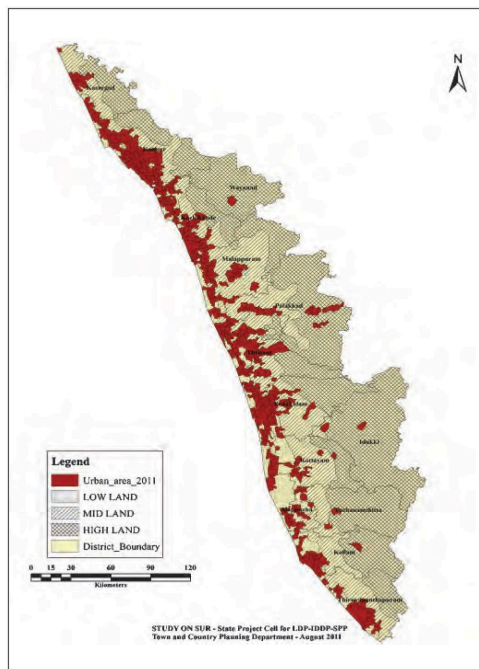


Figure 12. Spatial Distribution of Urban Areas 2011. Image: State Urbanisation Report, 2012, Department of Town and Country Planning. This leads to a uniform distribution of population density regardless of the

distinction between the urban area and the rural area, making the state one of the most densely populated states in India, at 859 persons per sq. km, as per Census 2011. The distinction between the rural and the urban, the city and the countryside, is often blurred. This idiosyncratic settlement pattern and modality of urbanisation is often referred to as the 'rural-urban continuum'. Unlike, and in contrast to the rest of India, where the settlement pattern consists of concentrations of nucleated settlements surrounded by rural hinterlands, the settlement pattern is a mosaic-like mix of urban and rural activities spread all over the habitable area.



Figure 13. Ribbon Type Development Pattern in Kochi. Image: Swatches by Shruthi Ramesh (2018); Data Source: Structure Plan of Central City (Kochi)- Variations, 2007.

Scholars studying the rural-urban continuum⁴ observe commonalities in the settlement pattern between Kerala and other rice-bowl regions across Southeast Asia (Indonesia, South Korea, parts of China etc). They attribute the type of rural-urban mosaic wherein agricultural and non-agricultural activities and land uses

⁴ Cyriac, Firoz, and Rajendran, "Rural-Urban Continuum Settlements," 1-15 (2022); Firoz, "Development Pattern in Kerala" (2004); Casinader, "Desakota in Kerala" (1992).

coexist to a unique phenomenon called the 'Desakota' model settlement pattern⁵. 'Desakota' refers to a very interesting type of settlement pattern. First coined by Terry McGee in 1990 as a neologism of the Bahasa (Indonesian) words 'desa' meaning village and 'kota' meaning city, it references the unique urbanisation traits in Indonesia.

In Kerala, it is common for commercial uses to concentrate as a single layer along main roads, forming a 'ribbon type development'. Beyond this ribbon are dwellings made in individual plotted arrangements, dispersed all over the habitable area⁶. Even in highly urbanised cities like Kochi, these small residential plots can cover up to 70% of the overall land utilisation⁷. This ribbon-type development is especially common along highways and other arterial roads, often connecting small and medium towns, resulting in an undisrupted continuation of the urbanity from the urban to the peri-urban, well into the hinterlands. Even a highly urbanised junction such as Vytilla consists of a single row of commercial activities, with residential settlement behind. Further, this residential settlement has vacant plots as the interior road network is disconnected. It is difficult to imagine that the busy Vytilla junction has a large number of vacant plots beyond the first row of commercial buildings.

*"In Kerala, the inclusion of the contiguous built-up villages within the urban agglomerations has the effect of substantially increasing the agglomerate area: one-third of the State appears completely agglomerated with less than 200 meters between constructions."*⁸

⁵ Mathieu Pauchet and Sébastien Oliveau, "Kerala: A Desakota?," in *European Population Conference* (2008); Srikumar Chattopadhyay, "Urbanization in Kerala," *Geographical Review of India* 50, no. 2 (1988): 8-25.

⁶ Firoz, "Development Pattern in Kerala" (2004).

⁷ Ramesh, Shruthi. "Re-imagining Vytilla as a mixed use transit oriented district for Kochi.", CEPT University, (2018).

⁸ Eric Denis and Kamala Marius-Gnanou, "Toward a Better Appraisal of Urbanization in India: A Fresh Look

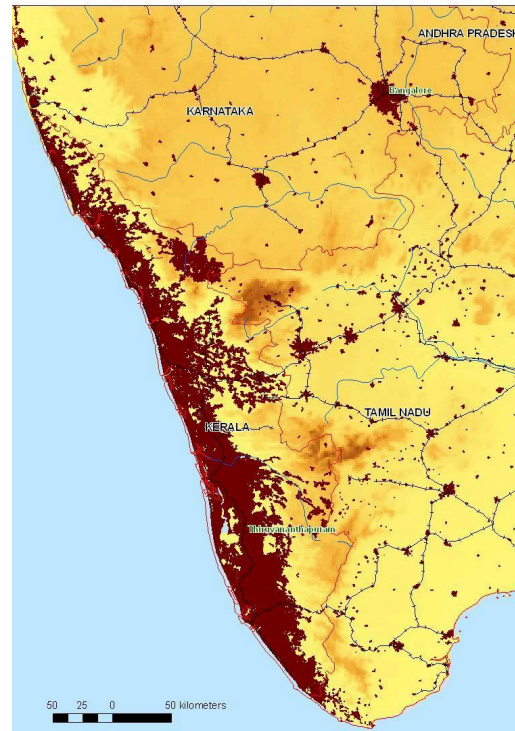
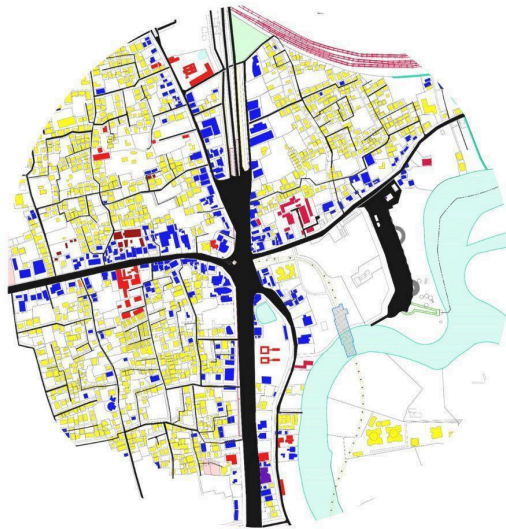


Figure 14. Desakota's settlements in Kerala in 2001. Image: Denis and Marius-Gnanou (2010); data sources- Census of India 2001 and Geopolis geodatabase

Historically, Kerala used to be a feudal agrarian economy. The rural-urban continuum in the state carries forward the lasting entanglements with its agrarian history. Colonial occupation and interference altered the course of this agrarian history. Further, the state-sanctioned aggressive reorganisation of land post-independence, as a consequence of agrarian reforms forever altered Kerala's settlement pattern and created a complex rural-urban system

at the Landscape of Morphological Agglomerates," *Cybergeo: European Journal of Geography*, 2010, 2011.

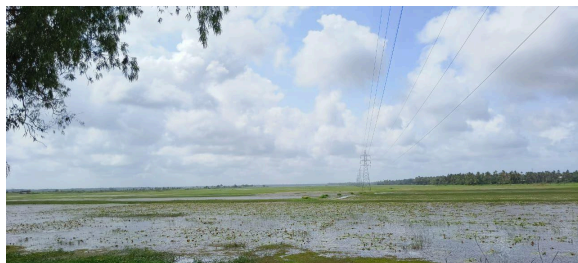


Building Use



Vacant Green Plots

Figure 15. Spatial Maps of Vytilla Junction - Building Use and Vacant Green Plots. Image: Shruthi Ramesh (2018).



Figures 16, 17 and 18. Kole Paddy Fields and Wetland Ecologies - Kanjani Padam, Perumbuzha, Thrissur. Image: Sayoojya Subran

How did Kerala's unique geography contribute to the rural-urban continuum?

The state's unique geographical disposition became a corollary to the scattering of the built fabric across the entire habitable area historically. The agrarian base facilitated the initial spreading out of the settlement. Geographically, the state is divided into three zones: the lowlands, midlands and highlands. Across the low and mid-land areas, sub-soil water was readily available which favoured the spreading out of the settlement and agricultural land historically.

Below is an extract from Gibb's translation of Ibn Battutta's 14th-century travels across the Malabar coast. This description allows us to understand the historically rural skeleton into which urbanity began to be infused, paving the way for a system in the rural-urban continuum:

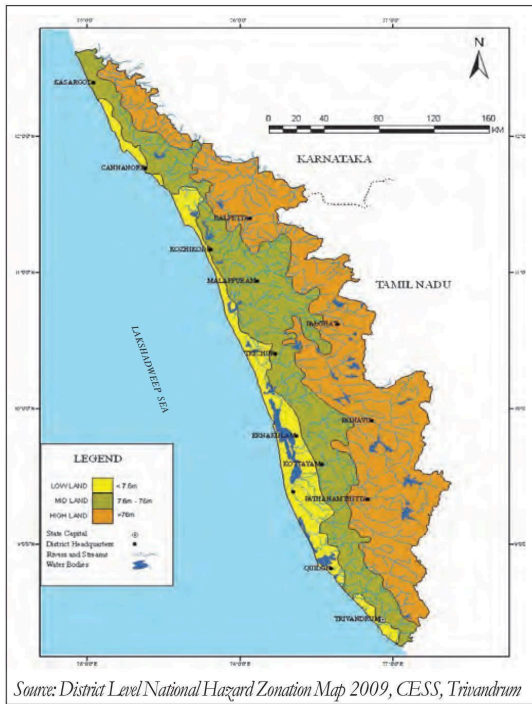


Figure 19. Geographical Regions of Kerala. Image: State Urbanisation Report, 2012, Department of Town and Country Planning, GoK.

“Mulaybar, which is the pepper country, extends for two months journey along the coast ... there is not a foot of ground but what is cultivated. Every man has his orchard, with his house in the middle and a wooden palisade round it.”⁹

Here, we gather a picture of a standalone ancestral homestead of an upper-caste Hindu, in a rural setting surrounded by orchards and other agricultural land. The fragmentation of these ancestral lands prevailed due to the dismantling of kinship systems and the associated partition of large land parcels into smaller fragments among kin members. Further fragmentation and redistribution of agricultural land among the lower classes and castes occurred after the implementation of radical land reforms across the state in the 70s. As a cumulative effect, these

⁹ H.A.R. Gibb, *Ibn Batuta: Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354* (London: Lund Humphries, 1929).

processes created smaller land parcels. From the 70s onwards, more stand-alone houses in individual plots started cropping up in these smaller land parcels. This became a corollary for the further scattering of houses all over the habitable area. Gulf migration (80s onwards) brought with it an influx of money that was invested in buying land and building more houses. These processes created a housing boom (90s) that exacerbated the scattering of single-family houses all over the habitable area.



Figures 20 and 21: The Emergence of the Single



Family home as the dominant housing Imaginary in Kerala. Images: Shruthi Ramesh

Rapid Urban Transformation and Rural-Urban Dichotomies

There is no hiding the fact that Kerala is witnessing urbanisation at a rapid scale. According to the State Urbanisation Report, the state underwent one of the highest degrees of urbanisation, at 47.72% in 2011¹⁰, while in 2001 it was 25.96%. This has been due, largely to a shift in occupation from agricultural to service and other tertiary income sources.

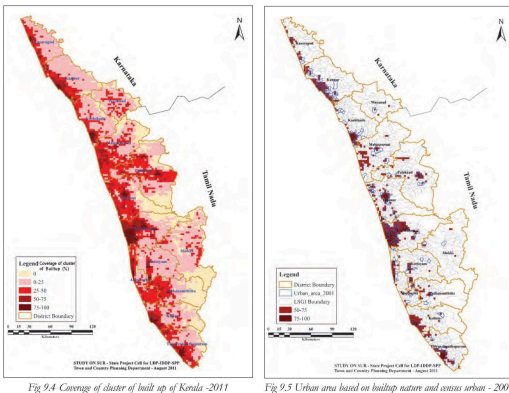


Figure 22. Urbanisation and Built Up in Kerala, 2011. Image: State Urbanisation Report, 2012, Department of Town and Country Planning, GoK.

Rapid rural-to-urban transformation through the conversion of agricultural land to accommodate large urban projects in the periphery of cities is an easily observable trend in the state. The CyberPark in Kozhikode became an urban catalyst that transformed the sleepy rural villages of Pantheerankaavu and Nellikode into a rapidly urbanised setting. Here we again see the hallmark of a city/urbanity in the ability to provide specialised services. The houses around the development have transformed into paying guests and homestays to accommodate the influx of the floating population. Local residents hold on to some qualities of their rurality while accommodating the urbanity which brings them employment or other monetary benefits.

All over the state, we see similar examples of multi-speciality hospitals, industries, shopping malls, large institutions and even airports serving as urban catalysts that catapult the rural areas they are plopped onto into urbanities that cater to their specific needs. The opening of the Kannur International Airport in 2019 for instance pushed the transformation of the nearby rural areas and small towns. Commercial and hospitality establishments catering to the needs of the airport started mushrooming. Kerala's severe land crunch, specifically the unavailability of cheap land in inner-city areas and the smaller size of available land parcels warrant the choosing of these peripheral sites.

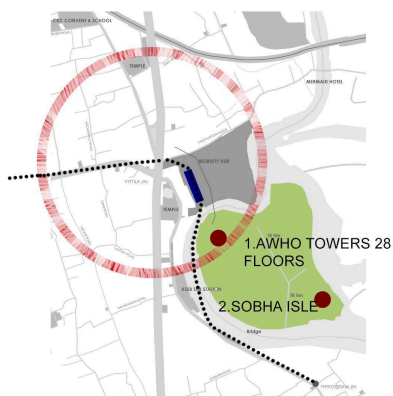


Figure 23. CyberPark nested in greenery and rurality - Calicut. Image: Shruthi Ramesh

Due to the significant crunch in the availability of larger land parcels, many large-scale urban projects are planned at the precipice of ecologically sensitive areas, often encroaching on these areas in the process. The Vytilla Mobility hub is situated in an ecologically sensitive riverine ecology. The nearby riverine island - Silver Sand Island became the location of high-rise apartments of the Army Welfare Housing Organisation, and later commercial developer Sobha. Such highrise development often mushrooms flouting environmental regulations.

¹⁰ Department Of Town & Country Planning, Government Of Kerala, "State Urbanisation Report", 3 (2012)

VYTILLA: SILVER SAND ISLAND



Figures 24 and 25. High-rise towers of AWHO in Silver Sand Island with metro construction in background, Vytilla, circa 2018. Image: Shruthi Ramesh (2018).



Figure 26. Aerial view of Vytilla Mobility Hub (bottom right) with the nearby environmentally sensitive area. Image: Shruthi Ramesh in Ramesh (2018).

The scale of these transformations is so large, and its impact so overbearing and disastrous to the ecology that the state often takes drastic measures to curb such developments. Excessive conversion of paddy fields and unrestricted construction

activities happening in the Kuttanad region (Kerala’s rice bowl region, with below-sea-level farming) came under the radar after the devastating 2018 floods.

Amendments were made to the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act 2008 to provision for failsafes that restrict unauthorised conversion of paddy land for construction purposes. The demolition of the Apartments at Maradu Kochi for flouting the CRZ norms is another case of state action against destructive urbanisation.



Figure 27: Aerial view of Mini Bypass Road Calicut with new developments on the left and Sarovaram Bio Park to the right. Image: “Aerial View of Sarovaram Biopark,” Kerala Tourism.

Puzhakkal Padam in Thrissur is another ecologically sensitive area that has witnessed extensive urban transformation. Today, the lush green Kole Wetland ecology stands juxtaposed with Sobha City and other large-scale infrastructure developments at Puzhakkal. For an ecologically fragile region like Kerala, rurality is connected to the ecological well-being of the state, and in turn benefits urbanity. A balance between rurality and urbanity is essential for other reasons as well. Andrea Cattaneo, Senior Economist at Food and Agricultural Organisation elucidates how a rural-urban balance is critical for food security in the city. This is however framed from an urban-first standpoint, wherein the rural has evolved as a supportive ecology for the urban. The rurality also lends a unique charm that attracts tourists to explore God’s own Country.



Figure 28. Rural Activities meeting Urban activities - Maravanthuruthu, Kottayam. Image: "Maravanthuruthu, Kottayam," Kerala Tourism.

Future Continuum: Towards Sustainable Futures

The rural-urban continuum continues to evolve in Kerala's context. The state's rapid urbanisation trends make one question what new forms of the continuum will be produced, in a state of added pressure for the equitable distribution of resources. In about fifty years from now, what could the rural-urban continuum look like? What new imaginaries of the continuum would have emerged?

Acknowledgements:

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