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## RURAL GEOGRAPHY- PIONEERING VOICES BEYOND TIME AND TERRITORY

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### ABSTRACT

*Derived from the Latin term 'rus', meaning open land, rural areas traditionally denote settlements beyond urban centres, primarily associated with agriculture and sedentary lifestyles. Early human civilisation witnessed the transition from nomadic existence to permanent settlements, giving rise to villages as the foundational form of rural habitation. These spaces, shaped by historical, social, and environmental processes, represent a continuity of human occupation across cultures and geographies. The notion of 'rurality' became more prominent in the eighteenth century, encompassing the characteristics, conditions, and socio-spatial identity of rural life. Contemporary conceptualisations of rurality must therefore account for economic transformation, social restructuring, and the influence of global processes, while recognising the persistence of traditional rural characteristics. This paper critically examines conceptual and analytical perspectives on rural geography, tracing historical definitions, theoretical frameworks, and methodological approaches employed in its study. By integrating historical evolution with contemporary challenges, the paper provides a comprehensive understanding of rural spaces and rurality, offering insights for geographers, planners, and policymakers engaged in regional development, sustainable livelihoods, and socio-spatial analysis.*

**KEYWORDS:** Rural, Rurality, Rural Geography, Ruralisation, Rural-Urban, Globalisation.

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### INTRODUCTION

The term 'rural' can be described as a way of life exhibited in specific habitation. The origin of the term can be seen to have origin in the word 'rus', which connotes an open area (Ayto, 1991). This word tends to explain areas outside cities. Historical happenings and events have constantly modified the nature and aspects of human life, civilisations and habitation. It is clearly recognised that the rural and urban are two classified counterparts of human habitation. The beginning of human civilisation is observed in settled life. As civilisations flourished, human habitation started to develop and have evolved over millennia with human occupation of the Earth. This all came into being with sedentary occupation of land and the practice of agriculture in the most fertile regions of the world. Thus, started to develop the dichotomous rural and urban areas. The nomadic way of life gradually turned to settlements and villages can be outlined as the first kind of human settlements. It is the permanency of settlements that identifies the beginning of rural settlements (Bowen & Gleeson, 2018). Rural settlements are taken as the primary form of human occupation of the earth in a settled form. This expression is taken as the uniting factor

across cultures and spaces (Mandal, 1979). The rural is identified as a space which is integrated with the evolution of human habitation of the countryside. It has been suggested that the rural landscape has a strong bearing of its past and changes in its economic cannot alter it (Bunce, 1983). 'Rurality' is seen to be developing more in the eighteenth century as a concept which refers to the condition of being 'rural' (Woods, 2005). The French term 'ruralite' tends to explain the concept of rurality (Woods, 2011).

But what is rural, is not just limited to habitation. Industrial Revolution and capitalism can be highlighted as the benchmarks of human civilisation and along with the World Wars, have determined modern day human habitation more distinctively as urban and rural. Now what is more visible and recognised in the present day context is that the world is clearly recognisable as rural and urban; in which urban has evolved as the dominant counterpart in scale and processes (Bowen & Gleeson, 2018) and also culture (Cloke, 1997, 2006).

Industrialisation, capitalism and world wars have modified human civilisation to an unimaginable extent and the events which followed have modified human interaction with the planet and on the planet. Rise of globalisation and internet have proved to be the next identifying factors in ushering unprecedented changes in the current times and urbanisation is the characteristic feature of modern day living (Woods, 2017). The level of urbanisation in the world is about 56.5 percent, according to the United Nations (UNCTAD, 2022). This was different for the developed and developing nations. Rural regions of the world are observed to generate most of the world's food, are a source of energy in the form of fossil fuels and minerals for the industry (Woods, 2011). Urbanisation of the planet is sought to have obliterated what is rural and urban (Bernt, 2018).

The developed world had about 79.5% of urban population as a percentage of its total population while the developing nations had a share of urban population of about 51.8% in its total population (UNCTAD, 2022). It can be said that the land uses which are the main determining feature of rural areas, are now altered in regions next to the countryside. It is also mentioned that the rural does not seem to exist for the developed world in the light of their socio- economic sociology (Ilbery, 1998). Food production, water gathering and recreation can be seen as rural land uses.

Agriculture comes to the forefront as the main rural activity. Another interesting observation in this regard is that in the developed and developing world, the aspects of rural life are highly different. Herein, the so- called rural cannot be directly observed in developed countries such as the United Kingdom, USA and western European nations (Clout, 1972). Related to rural is the concept of rurality which is manifested in specific settings such as villages (Murdoch & Marsden, 2003). Rural spaces forward themselves as small scale and enclosed spaces. The rural spaces can be extremely pleasing and charming spaces and the communities appear to be private. The 'rural' in this scenario is marked by distinct rural setting and also that the rural society is becoming modern with passage of time (Murdoch & Marsden, 2003). As is highlighted above, rural has evolved and altered over a period of time and the countryside is broadly identified as rural; although no clear definition of rural is existent.

Definitions seem to provide a strong theoretical base to study and identify the rural. Rurality has been defined to be a concept, a discussion as well as a space in itself (Somerville et al., 2015). There seems to be an agreement that the rural is distinct from the urban and the transition of rural to urban is gradual, in continuum and also meshed. This also leads to the debate that the

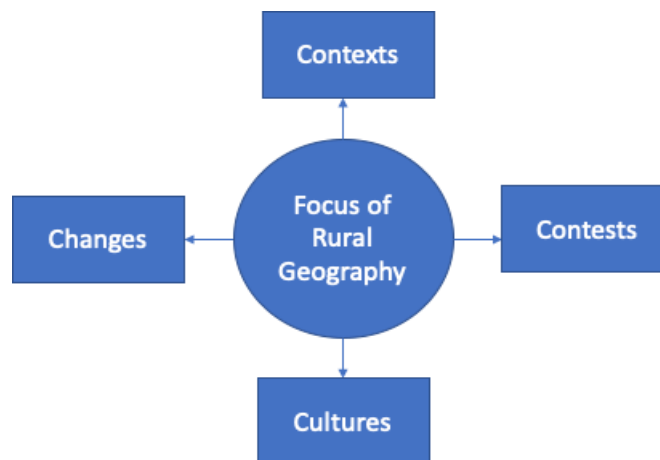
sociological issues of the rural and the urban can be termed similar (Cloke, 2013). Taken as synonymous to a less diverse economic base, intimate family ties, simplicity, and traditional way of life, the rural seems to represent simplicity (Prasad, 2003). Rurality is sometimes referred to as a mental or a social construct and the rural then is a world of social, cultural and moral values of rural dwellers (Hoggart, 1988; Woods, 2007).

Sociologist Fruows (1998) cites that rurality has discourses as that of policy, ‘agri-ruralist’ discourse, ‘utilitarian’ and ‘hedonist’; and the rural idyll (Woods, 2005). The policy discourse relates to government policies, agri-ruralist deals with the farmer as being the main creators of the rural space, the utilitarian dealing with the aspects of underdevelopment of rural areas and their consequent integration in the market space and the hedonist one as dealing with the ideal rural space as the one with leisure (Fruows, 1998).

**Rural Geography-** Geography is seen to determine the direction of rural (Lowe & Ward, 2009). The definition of the rural is seen as a dichotomy in geographical studies in which the rural and the urban are seen as two different entities. The ‘country’ and the ‘city’ are very common expressions used in literature. The rural is defined as a space with multiple functions (Woods, 2011). The ‘rural’ is defined as a ‘space’ and rural geography is seen to encompass several aspects of geography (Cloke, 2006). It is also emphasised that rural geography is not synonymous with rural settlement study. This rural space is more identified as compared to the urban setting (Ilbery, 1998). In the opinion of Cloke and Milbourne, rural is a multiplicity of spaces (Cloke & Milbourne, 1993). The significance of studying the rural has acquired newer dimensions in the context of globalisation and climate change issues. In this regard, it is also noteworthy that works on rural space have been very limited in nature (Woods, 2012). This has also led to the nature of the discipline as developing only as an outcome of the ongoing social and economic processes as posing impacts on the rural spatiality (Woods, 2012). The natural structures seem to overtake the human induced structures in what is defined as rural (Wheeler, 2015).

As is visible in Fig.1. The focal points of rural geography are identified in different dimensions. Yarwood classifies them as- contexts, changes, contexts and cultures.

**Fig.1. Studies in Rural Geography**

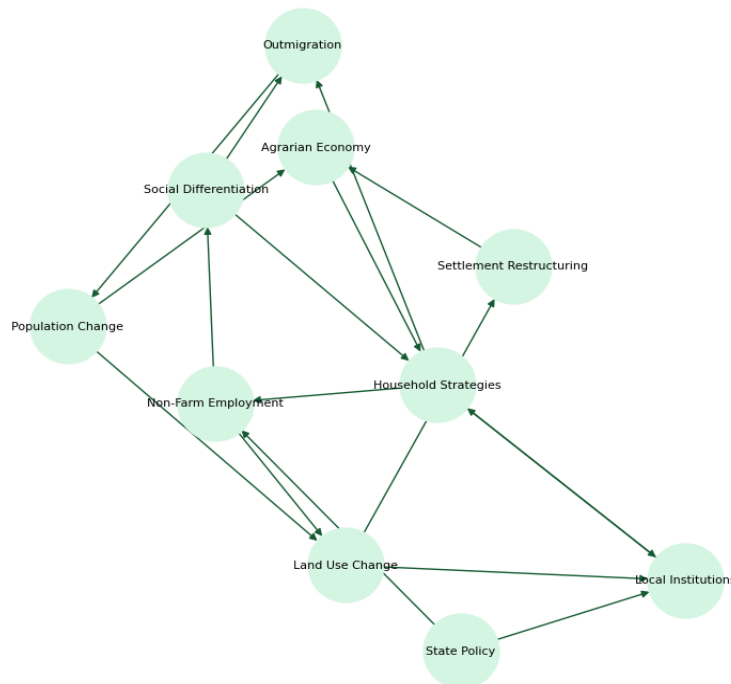


Source- Author, 2024; after Yarwood (Yarwood, 2023)

Defining rural geography stems from the concept of defining the rural as a distinctly observed landscape having ‘rural’ setting and virtues. A community based study tends to provide more scope to rural geography studies and was extended to Interconnections between the city and the country. The rural areas are seen as pertinent ‘sites’ for geographical enquiry. This is particularly because these sites are extensive and occupy space (Munton, 2008). Community studies were helped by ‘social physics’ provided by the quantitative revolution in geography too. It is seen that the shift from quantitative to the radical provided a deeper content to rural studies (Yarwood, 2005; Yarwood, 2023).

It is also argued that rural has no definition and specificity (Marsden and Whatmore, n.d.). It then become a matter of requirement to define rural (Munton, 2008). The beginning point of this is the observation regarding a lesser population, population density and land uses which are extensive in nature. Proceeding with this as the basic criteria, the definition of rural geography seems to revolve around the social, economic, land use and other geographical changes which stem from this. Rural areas can be seen as a distinct country- side with newer typologies as well (Lowe & Ward, 2009). It is also suggested that different aspects of population should be the defining criterion for ‘rural’ (Zapf, 1982). The definition and dimensions of rural geography studies seem to be highly influenced by the urbanisation of the world in which the rural can just emerge as an extension of the urban rather than being entirely independent in character on its own. In this light it is also mentioned that the study of the rural is becoming redundant (Clout, 1972).

**Fig. 2 Factorial Ecology of Rural Transformation**  
**Integrated Rural Transformation System**



Source- Author, 2024

However, the field of rural geography is seen as formless due to the operational factors. These can be seen as comprising of a system yet operating independently as is shown in Fig.2. In geographical analysis, the beginning point of studying the rural is its definition as a geographical set up. This is particularly marked by small settlements (Clout, 1972). The rural setting is evolving as is identified with multidimensional changes (Ilbery, 1998). Mc Donald emphasises that it is diverse and attempts to identify the multiple uses of the physical environment largely focussing upon the multiple land uses. In this study, agriculture, pastoralism, rural communities, services, land ownership, forestry, forestry conservation and the real and the perceived are considered (McDonald, 1988). All such dimensions related to historical concerns of the study of rural areas, space in geographical capacity, purposes of studying the rural.

In the current context, it is mentioned that the rural is evolving with the urban with regards to its economy, environment and sociology and it is also said that the rural does not even exist in the current context. This is shown to be more true for the developed nations of the world. Rural geography seems to arise from spatial context related to thematic concerns of the economic, social and environmental contexts of the rural (Ilbery, 1998). The study of the rural in geography can be divided into some broad heads on the basis of certain factors:

**Settlements-** This is a taxonomic study of rural settlements in which the focus is to attempt the patterning of rural space. These seem to reflect the historical evolution of rural spaces as exhibited by their settlements. The proponents of this concept advocate that the degrees of nucleation and dispersion are taken as the primary representatives of rural space. The geographic evolution of rurality is to be seen in its settlement patterns and its components as seen in occupation of land and land uses. The lines of difference arising out of nucleation and dispersion concepts form the base of studying rural settlements and also rural geography.

They are taken as an outcome of agriculture and also the ethnic structure of the rural society. The ethnic concern has also been neglected in favour of the study of rural settlements as an outcome of largely nucleated forms coming up due to defence requirements of the population initially residing in them. It has also been argued that the physical factors, social factors, economic factors as well political factors have all operated in combination to create the modern day rural. This idea also harps that the rural settlements not arise due to natural factors but by subsequent developments in the society as well. These come up as a combination of economic activities, size of farms, distance and diffusion processes related to population and ideas in that landscape (Bunce, 1983).

**Study of external factors-** The factors which operate in modifying a rural landscape are largely an outcome of commercialisation and urbanisation and are indicative of how the city controls the rural activities and structure. This has been highly influential in altering the nature of rurality. Historical examples exist in the form of feudalism in Europe to show that changes in internal structure of rural areas are influential in determining the rural settlements. The urban spread has been responsible for changing the rural landscape through an increased commercialisation. This is also seen to lead to the rise of new villages and towns as service establishments. Besides, this also caused an expansion of villages in the European society.

The impact of the feudal system is observed in different ways across the rural landscape of Europe. Commercialisation is cited to cause exploitation of the rural land and services. This is visible in plantation agriculture practice in the world (Bunce 1983). This trend is critically visible

as an aftermath of commercialisation and increasing economic influence of the city. Industrialisation has also been an influencing factor in this alteration.

Closely associated with this are factors of commercialisation of agriculture, intensification of commercial and capital intensive agriculture, migration of labour and industry out of rural areas leading to a subsequent weakening of the rural economic base. This has also caused the gobbling up of rural space by larger urban and service centers. Besides these factors it can also be said that recreational aspects and government policies related to multiple aspects of development are also influential in causing a change in rural areas (Bunce 1983). The rural idyll is seen as a dynamic concept (Bryant & Pini, 2010) and also arising due to competition (Pospech et al., 2015). It is also proposed that the greener environs and lack of noise of the city pulls population to rural areas as an ideal place for residence (Dam et al., 2002).

**Study of land use and competition-** The land-use examination of rural areas in the light of emerging concerns is a majorly evolving facet of rural studies. Recreation and concerns over the quality of the rural environment have directed an interest in this section. This is also an outcome of the competition in land uses largely propagated by urbanisation. It is also suggested that this struggle should be seen beyond the factor of urbanisation to issues within the rural areas itself. Power conflicts, planning and competition for space present new scenarios for examination in a rural area (Champion, 1983).

Champion cites Coleman's model of the Scape-Fringe to explain this dynamics. Coleman outlines these zones as: Townscape, Rurban Fringe, Farmscape, Marginal Fringe and the Wildscape. The basic trends in the rural areas in any case is that of losing the land to infrastructure and urban land uses with an increase in recreational and ecological value of rural areas. This also leads to the concept of land budgeting in which the rural land is also to be rationalised as per population growth and rising need of agricultural products. Land use trends require significant examination in the context of such concerns, energy demands, trade, land budgeting, land transfers, meeting nutritional needs through food production and other related aspects. The rural space also leads to the study of transition of rural space to the urban and vice versa as the fringe in which the transition of land uses is observed (Champion, 1983).

**Land use, landscape and demands of rural land as components of rural geography-** Clout (Clout, 1972) has identified the components of rural geography as comprising of land use, landscape and use of rural land as the main considerations in rural geography studies. Rural land is seen as an outcome of settlements in the rural area with the identification of farmland, forest, water bodies, and settlements as land use and landscape components. These are put to use as arable lands, grasses, scrub and woodland. This also includes non-farm population and adventure seeking population. The demand of rural land is with respect to food production, manufacturing, communication, housing, recreation, nature conservation, military concerns and extraction of minerals as well (Clout, 1972).

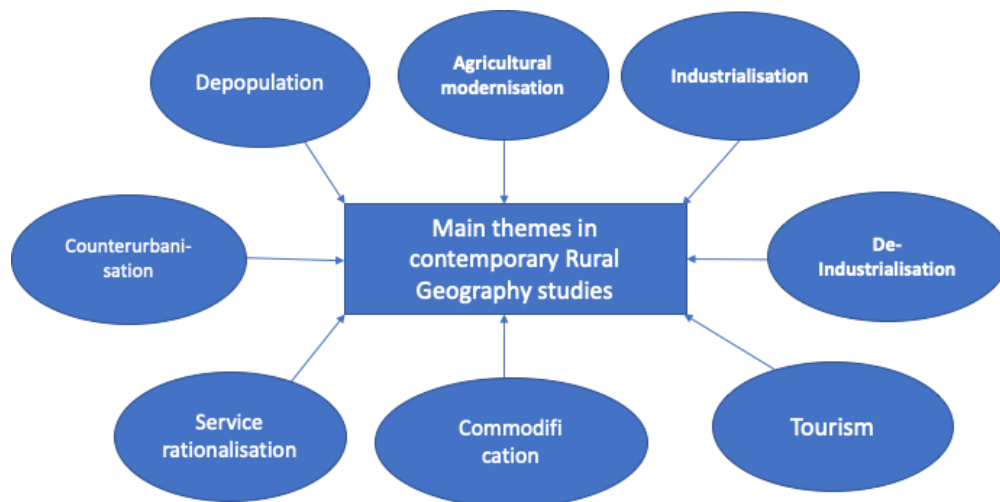
**Farming and conservation studies-** Conservation, land use management, protection of habitats and species and rural land are main considerations in this category. Problems arising out of pollution, pesticides, concerns for wildlife, scenic beauty, protected areas, preservation of ecologies, and issues of conflicting land uses can be covered under this (Champion, 1983).

**Depopulation of rural space-** Clout highlights depopulation as a major concern for rural areas. Reduction in population in rural areas is an issue while discussing the rural- urban interface;

happening due to outmigration. Besides, if the population is not able to replace this gap biologically, then it is defined as a case of biological depopulation. This is less observed as a reason for depopulation of rural areas. Outmigration is the major contributor in this regard. Other kinds of migration observed are non- occupational outmigration and occupational migration. Non occupational category is movement of young population out of the rural area due to employment non availability in a dense agricultural area. Occupational migration is concerned with members of rural groups such as landless labourers and craftsmen. The changing economic structure of rural areas, industrialisation, and reduction in attraction of rural life can also be outlined as certain related factors. All of them are responsible for causing a reduction in agricultural labour. It is also noteworthy in this regard that the depopulation factor is an outcome of not only the economic push and pull factors but also to sentimental causes (Clout, 1972).

This point further focuses upon the aspects of location and distribution of industrial activities in rural areas. Declining population can also lead to the weakening of the existing industrial base of the rural economy. The role of technological developments has been highly contributory in causing such declined in rural economic base and activities. Examples can be given as to that of industries in rural Britain in the early 20th century. Shortage and poor quality of rural services are also highlighted as a cause of this. This is attributed to differences in rural societal structure which is seen as heterogeneous, differentiated as well as lacking in a community feeling. Clout (1972) also marks geographers as lacking in such an analysis of spatial differentiation. Depopulation is also credited to a feeling of lacking some kind of quality in rural life. As per this conjecture, rural dwellers feel that they lack certain aspects which the city dwellers possess. These basically relate to facilities in urban areas and opportunities available in cities. Education is forwarded as a major factor in this. Other set of factors highlighted are marriage associated migration of women, movement of labourers for construction of roads and railways and military purposes.

**Fig.3. Trajectories of Rural Geography (after Woods, 2012)**



Source- Author, 2024

Rural geography studies seem to delve upon the studies of the rural landscape in relation to the above mentioned and its broad themes can be seen to be evolving around traditional to contemporary transitions as is shown in Fig.3. The studies broadly relate to the aspects of:

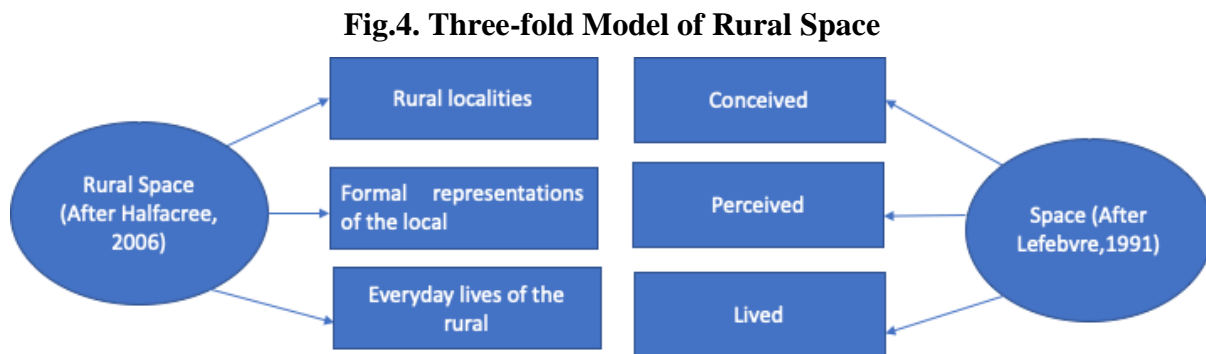
Change

Impacts

Responses

These all have been examined in the light of the changing nature of rural studies. In connecting notions of rurality, Ilbery highlights Cloke's work and identifies four phases. In the first one, rurality is associated with spaces and functions. The observation here is that population density is low and open spaces dominate the landscape. In the second phase, more dynamicity is the observation. Here, rural life can also be seen as a class struggle. In the third phase, post-modern notions of rural life reflect social, moral and cultural concerns (Cloke, 1997). The fourth phase relates to understand the rural through symbols. These approaches are seen as existing simultaneously and that no clear definition exists at global and cultural levels.

All the above processes are contributory in evolving the rural space as highlighted after Halfacree and Space in Fig. 4.



Source- Author, 2024

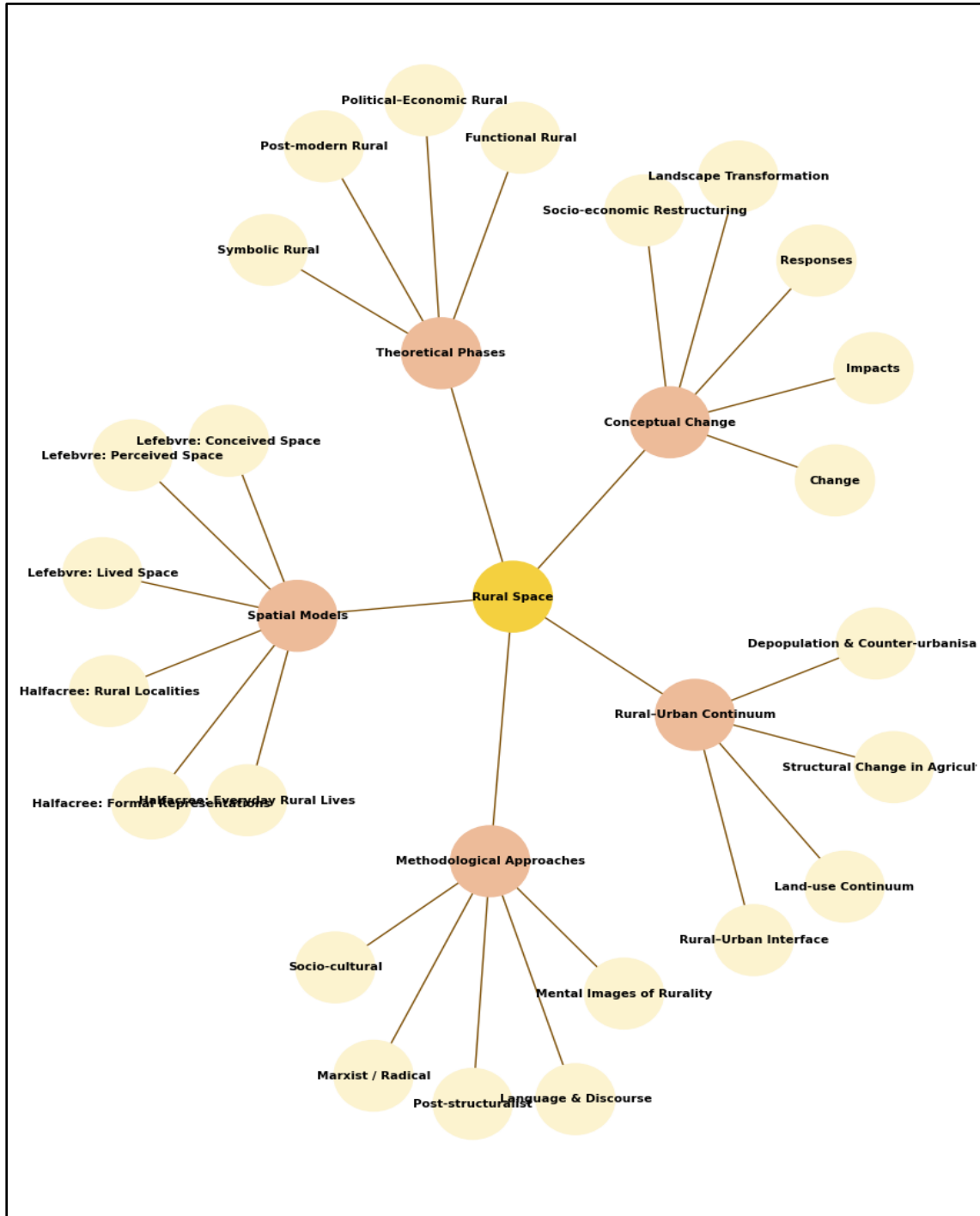
Lefebvre (1991) forwards that space can be divided into three categories: Conceived spaces, Perceived spaces and lived spaces (Lefebvre, 1991). Halfacree (2006) identifies rural space as comprising of a three-fold model for describing the rural space as - Rural localities, formal representations of the local and everyday lives of the rural.

Socio-cultural- This is seen as the one of the well-known yet undefined methods of studying the rural in geography (Philo, 1992). But still it incorporates in itself so many dimensions that it can be taken as a representation of studying the rural and its structure and functioning. Rural people, their way of living, and other related aspects are seen in this method of rural studies. This is also seen as a reductionist approach in which the other dimensions of rural population get neglected. The social aspects of the rural are seen as fractured as well due to numerous reasons.

Marxist/ radical- Propagated in the 1970s and 80s, this approach appeared as being oriented towards politics and criticality of existing approaches. These were also seen to be created to develop rural studies independently. Political concerns and class oriented studies were seen to be an integral part of it. This approach is called the radical or critical approach being influenced largely by Marx. It is likely to critically examine and analyse the existing with more criticality and develop a more fundamental idea to the rural. It is also suggested to be carried forward as a more applied form to rural geography in which the rural environment should be made more

aesthetically appealing and lively with prosperity being the main target (Ilbery, 1998). The geographical studies in this methodology aim at studying the aesthetic value of the rural landscape, to migration, service class infiltration and expanding housing and other facilities. Class and conflict are seen as an important part of this approach. Fig.5. show the evolving landscapes of Rural Geography studies.

**Fig.5. Transformative Concepts and Theoretical Frameworks in Rural Geography**



Source- Author, 2024

Post structuralist- This approach examines rurality on the basis of language and subjective analysis through words. These ideas lead to the formation of ideas on rurality. Rurality here is socio-spatial in nature and mental images are reflected in this notion. Rural areas need service provisions as well they provide services also.

According to Clout (1972), the definition of rural is very contested and this problem arises due to conflicting matters in question as observed below:

Issue of defining the rural and rural people

Issue of rural and urban in terms of geographical, historical and socio-cultural aspects

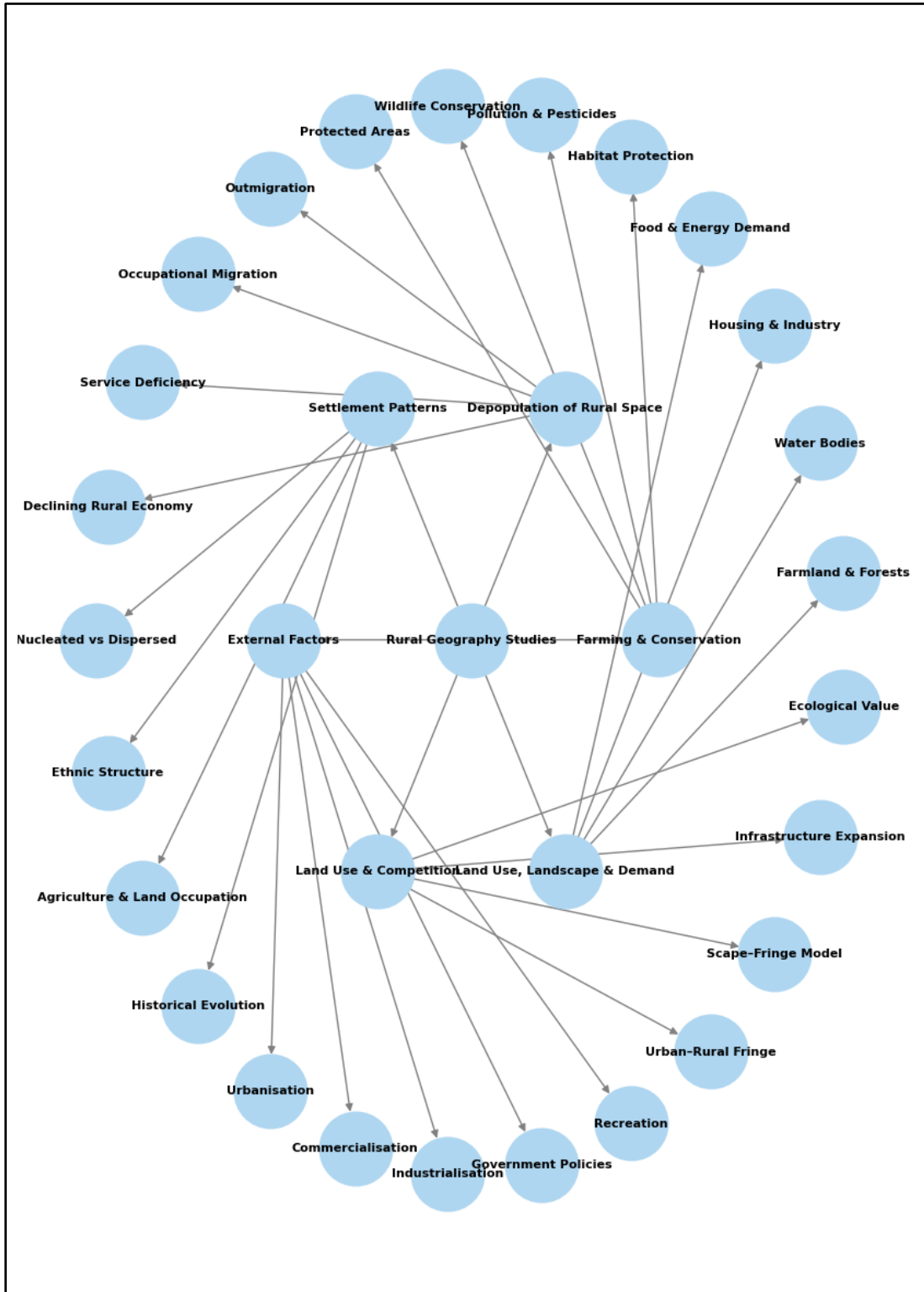
Issues arising out of the modern classifications of what are rural conditions and activities

Differences in the definition of the rural and urban because of criterion dissimilarity applied throughout the world (Clout, 1972). Clout (1972) identifies these as the extent of rurality and urbanity. This is based on the aspect that the rural and the urban merge into each other and, hence, exist in continuum. Authors such as Pahl have indicated that the rural and urban can be identified on the basis of differences in land uses rather than in terms of any social variables. This actually presents a confusing stage of study (Pahl, 1966).

These are not only truly rural or truly urban but mark a continuity. Social change is visible in different parts of this continuity as well as discontinuity. Closely linked to these are the structural changes involved in agriculture. (Bowler, 2013). Farm size, mechanisation and related agricultural practices indicate many dimensions of land uses. Land fragmentation is a major concern in this and also dictates policies related to agricultural reforms, economic benefits, mechanisation, farm enlargement, and others. Bowler (2013) has indicated these as being capable of causing structural reforms in agriculture.

At this level, Gilg suggests that two kinds of population categories are visible- primitive and ex-urbanite. For this, he highlights that the natural growth in rural areas is high in both the developed and developing world and that outmigration is not only a feature of rural areas but also that of movement to rural areas by urban population. Fig.6. shows the evolving sub-sections of Rural Geography in its multiplicity. Space, place and society seem to provide a context specific definition to rural. Besides, the definition can also be seen to have an imaginative connotation. The changing nature of agriculture and economic diversification has caused the variations in the existing 'rural' on the globe. Social changes have further augmented the removal of distinctions in defining the rural from the urban. All this has actually given rise to multiple spaces in which overlapping is visible.

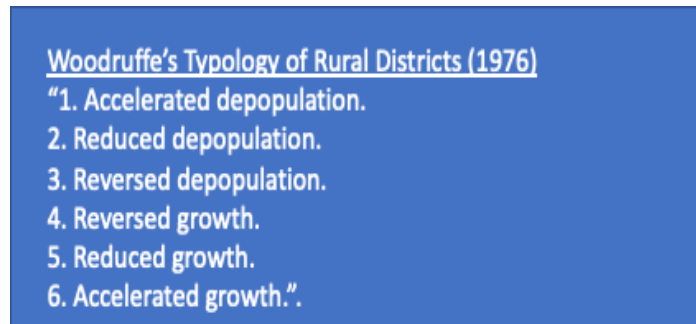
**Fig.6. Evolving Aspects of Rural Geography**



Source- Author, 2024

Woodruffe divides rural districts into six types based upon their trends in population change as shown in Fig.7. (Woodruffe, 1976). This is indicative of studies related to changes in rural population as arising out of depopulation and outmigration along with natural changes in rural population over time. (Gilg, 1983). Gilg identifies three scales to study rural population in geographical studies as- world scale, country and local levels. Gilg also highlights that at the world level, few studies exist on studying rural population.

**Fig. 7 Woodruffe's Typology of Rural Districts**



Source- Author, 2024

The local scale seems to be more favoured in geographic studies of rural areas. The local scale examined for population exhibits that depopulation is responsible for declining services in rural areas and these are located away from the urban areas. Migration studies and village to village studies are also a focus in this. Rural occupation examination is also significant with regards to the fact that service provisions of rural areas along with governmental policies are crucial factors in rural geography. The geographical focus can also be on the examination of density potentials of rural areas. Besides, the factor of migration is indicative of a circular, complex and interdependent system and not a single, linear one. Farming and agriculture are still seen as the main occupations in rural areas. But they appear in a declining mode with a loss of population due to this in remote rural areas; compensatory effect is seen in areas near to urban centers.

The social aspect of rural is what now defines rural as is suggested by Cloke (Cloke, 2006). Besides, the national and international politics operate on the aspatial factors and modify rurality. The open endedness in definitions is problematic for defining rurality as it leads to a very perforative landscape that can be defined as rural (Halfacree, 2006). It is also argued that agricultural restructuring and economic transformations have made the rural move towards non-agricultural pursuits. These influences are an outcome of the changing local and global processes. This had created landscapes of production and consumption as well. The mobility of the service sector and gentrification of villages is seen to be highly influential in altering rural society, economy and housing structure (Ilbery, 1998). Gentrification of rural areas seems to be an ever increasing trend and a cause of various kinds of transformations and displacement. It is largely seen as a hegemonic practice involving gentrifiers and displaces who are not equal in urban existence (Redfern, 2003).

But there is still recognition of the fact that the traditional rural has indeed been modified by constant forces of urbanisation (Marsden, 2006) and that studying the rural is only an aspect defined by convenience (Ilbery, 1998). To summarise the context of rural population studies, rural regeneration appears simpler when compared to urban areas. It is also noteworthy that this is in no way synonymous with industrialisation as a development alternative. Tertiary

employment is a major occupation of rural areas currently. Globalisation makes rural studies even more intense and a need of the hour (McDonagh, 2013).

Summing it up, the present day challenges of food and nutrition, climate change, employment, energy and above all the encompassing impact of globalisation are providing newer dimensions to study the rural and rurality. Evolving technologies, networks, provisions, and policies suggest multiple newer dimensions for the rural.

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2. The articles passed through screening at this level will be forwarded to two referees for blind peer review.
3. At this stage, two referees will carefully review the research article, each of whom will make a recommendation to publish the article in its present form/modify/reject.
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