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The Global Shapes the Local

Contribution to GTI Forum [Think Globally, Act Locally?](#)

Chella Rajan

Although thinking in global terms and thinking in proximate terms constitute two distinct conceptual frames, they can be related to one another. Indeed, doing so is essential to a Great Transition.

The local appears as the visible, familiar, and infinitely moldable set of experiences in one's everyday life, while the planetary (and, even more so, the global) seems abstract and symbolic, which can only be experienced through various representations of the pale blue dot. But if we were able to recognize, more clearly than we can now, the overlapping networks of connection between local actors and institutions and planetary-scale processes, we could fill out the continuities more constructively.

Let me try to illustrate with the help of an example from South India. My colleagues and I at the Periurban Initiative work with youth in a hamlet that is multiply "bypassed" by a highway, gated industrial and residential communities, and surrounding water bodies and cultural sites. It is difficult to get more "local" than Katchipattu (population: 5,000), whose largely unemployed or underemployed youth are mostly twiddling their thumbs on cell phones. Their parents used to work as tenant or landless farmers, weavers and other craft populations. Most are Dalits (formerly known as "untouchables") and best described as being members of the precariat.

Now, with a major highway blocking natural drainage from the nearby lake, increased weather variability, the growing sense among erstwhile farmers that their children might benefit from a technical education, and a spurt of investment in the form of Special Economic Zones, an entirely new assemblage of socio-technical elements is in the making.

Indeed, the familiar twin set of planetary processes—globalization and climate change—have objectively diminished the life chances of Katchipattu residents, only a few of whom seem to recognize linkages between their present predicament and large-scale forces. Most young people are plagued by what Lauren Berlant has evocatively described as “cruel optimism,” an unwarranted feeling of collective well-being, an excitement about “change that’s gonna come” that has no bearing on actual circumstances.¹ The young men of Katchipattu typically start their day drinking, doing a few drugs, and sharing videos of their friends’ music, while eternally holding out the hope for bit roles in Kollywood (referring to the multi-billion-dollar Kodambakkam movie industry in Chennai).

What’s so different from hundreds of millions of young people elsewhere in the world in bleak inner cities or culturally barren suburbs? Not much, except that this is a local instantiation of a pattern whose social and economic causes have been well-studied. To deny the value of the conceptual insights drawn from anthropologists in Chicago, London, and Jakarta to interpret what is happening in Katchipattu would be strange. But Katchipattu’s geographically and culturally distinctive location must also not be railroaded over.

Similarly, in order to achieve any type of meaningful change in Katchipattu, one must investigate expanding networks of power from the local to the global to understand what forces led to these circumstances and what points of intervention exist at all levels. Elite networks and their interlocking connections in Chennai, Dubai, Singapore, and Stuttgart (for a start) are implicated in determining the conditions in Katchipattu, but an excessive focus on the local might not reveal that unless one engages in a forensic exercise of placing people-environment interactions in progressively wider contexts.²

Intervention too seems to need the conjoined actions at local and larger scales, in order to engage (fractally) with local instantiations of transnational network flows and material forces. For the youth of Katchipattu themselves, would getting them to watch the HBO series *The Wire* give them some new insights into the commonness of their experience in other global localities? What type of planetary consciousness might that engender? Are there transformational

possibilities away from cruel optimism and, if so, what would these entail in culturally specific ways? And might these, in turn, generate lessons elsewhere, if “successful”?

Endnotes

1. Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
2. Andrew P. Vayda, “Progressive Contextualization: Methods for Research in Human Ecology,” *Human Ecology* 11, no. 3 (1983): 265–281.

About the Author



Chella Rajan is Professor and Head of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IIT-M). He is also Coordinator of the Indo-German Centre for Sustainability and an Associate Fellow at Tellus Institute. He has an extensive twenty-year research background in transportation, energy systems, and the institutional and political context of environmental policymaking. He is broadly concerned with the interactions among social, political, technological and environmental factors relating to sustainable development. His research has included energy and environmental scenario analyses, studies on the politics of power sector reform in developing countries, and analysis of institutional reform measures to reduce corruption.

About the Publication

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