



## Volume 5, Issue 1/2

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**Keywords:** rhythm, urban, India, city, sound

**Recommended Citation:** Cook, I. M. (2022). 'Conducting the City: A Multimodal Essay about Housing and Land Brokers in India', *entanglements*, 5(1/2): 227-232



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# Conducting the City: A Multimodal Essay about Housing and Land Brokers in India

Ian M. Cook

## Abstract

Mangaluru, a smaller city in coastal south India, is undergoing wide reaching and transformative urbanisation. This short essay film explores the working lives of housing and land brokers amidst urban change. Starting from a point of hearing, the contribution is an invitation to listen to the city's multiple concurrent rhythmic patterns: patterns of buildings being built; of faith, selling and sport; of consumption, production, and desire. These rhythmic patterns form the everyday urban aesthetics of Mangaluru; regularities that produce sensory familiarity and create an overarching rhythmic formation against which individual rhythmic patterns are measured and understood. In urban India, where the wider aesthetic rhythmic formation is one shaped by a vague and powerful desire to construct a 'modern' city, groups and individuals can fall in and out of time with imagined futures. Within this, housing and land brokers seek to establish and maintain regular schedules and routines, whilst also linking, mediating, and synchronising buyers and sellers through their work and thus conducting the city around them as they go about their everyday lives.

**Please see HTML version for accompanying video**

<https://vimeo.com/746976744>

Figure 1: Conducting the City, Film [14m]

This is an audio-visual essay. The script below is only meant as an accompaniment and for references. Watch and listen without the script.

## Introduction: Aesthetic Rhythmic Formation

You are listening to the rhythms of Mangaluru, a 'smaller city' (Cook, 2018) in coastal south India. Unlike a point of view, in which you can see in one direction, a point of hearing allows the sounds of a city to bleed through walls and into ears from multiple directions.

Listening reveals multiple rhythmic patterns. Patterns of buildings being built; of faith, selling and sport; of consumption, production, and desire. These rhythmic patterns form the everyday urban aesthetics of Mangaluru (cf. Meyer, 2009). They help produce sensory familiarity (cf. Maffesoli, 2000).

Together they create an overarching rhythmic formation against which individual rhythmic patterns are measured and understood.

But this is a formation in motion; one of intense urbanisation; of condensing, expanding, and differentiating patterns (see Brenner and Schmid, 2015).

## Routine

And as these rhythmic patterns become more complex, divergent, and unpredictable there is fierce competition amongst those who seek to profit from fast-moving transformation; a requisitioning of belonging; a recalibrating of reputation and prestige; a reassessing of desire; and, for some, a search to establish routines amidst all this rapid change. For instance, Mr. Pai,

*I will start my life 4 o'clock. Then I bring two papers, one English and one Kannada, that is the local language. I will clean my teeth and one cup of water I will take and pray the god. 4:30 that work is finished then I will fill my water and the other clothe I will put in the bucket, only then after 5-5:30 I will go to the nearest canteen, one half kilometre, take one cup of tea and two biscuits and one cigar.*

*The worker will come, a lady, 7:15-7:30, she will wash my clothes, 7:15 I am going to temple. Then the bus will reach there 7:45 I am taking some flower and entering in the temple and one pooja [worship] is there, then 8:05-8:10 the bus will be ready, the return bus is 16 number, Ambedkar motors, it will start at 8:30 sharp, it reaches PVS circle 8:55. Then I am directly going to Taj Mahal or Ayodhya [canteens], taking my food, 9:10 there is a bus, 31 straight away it is coming to Mannagudda. I bring some flowers I put them for the god. Then 9:30 I will start my work. That is my routine life.*

An individual's routine is one thing but working with and through the wider rhythmic patterns of the city is another. And that's why Mr. Pai offers us a unique insight into change and rhythm. As a housing and land broker his job is intimately tied to ongoing urbanisation.

Brokers conduct the rhythmic patterns of the city by linking, mediating, and synchronising buyers and sellers, and tenants and landlords (Cook, 2015). But he's not just any old broker; he's the longest serving broker in town.

*Everyday I am doing this land job. I have lots of experience, oldest man in Mangalore, in land dealings. My birthday is 44, 1944. 16 age I started my work. I'm the oldest why means every day I can know, most top persons I will know, everybody will come, top persons, I'm not an ordinary person, I'm an extraordinary person in Mangalore.*

*From doctors, engineers and officers, DC [district commission] I know, they will come, commissioners will come, they will call me. That is the link connection.*

*So many years I'm doing this business no? The link connection. One officer will come. Last, some 6-7 months before some commercial tax officer will come. He was directly called me, 'I want one house, rested house' I will arrange him immediately, within 24 hours, he was very happy! That is the connection.*

### **Property Relations (competition and synchronisation)**

The link connection he refers to are the links between brokers and clients—either tenants and landlords or buyers and sellers. But there are also links between brokers and brokers when they collaborate and split the commission. In this way, the links themselves become a type of property: property as an 'assemblage of social relations' (Hann, 1998) rather than only a material thing.

Their work is one of rhythmic synchronization. On the one hand the broker must move fast to close the deal for the tenant or buyer, yet on the other he or she must keep good relations with the landlord or seller and not bring unsuitable tenants or buyers.

The work is also fiercely competitive. Land and housing prices have been growing steeply, this not only tempts people into brokerage, but also tempts existing brokers to double cross each other. Cutting a fellow broker out of a deal is more money in your pocket.

And Mr. Pai has his own tales of woe. He's wily dealer, but also an elderly man falling a little out of step with the speed of the fast-changing city. He took a young man under his wing, taught him ropes of being a broker, even set up an office with him, only to be cut out of a big money deal at the last moment.

*So many officers are here, all are cheating, their ambition is only money, nothing else, only money. Now in Mangalore in one road 200 brokers are there, single road. So many brokers are there, unauthorised. They've got no respect, they can't speak English nothing, all cheats.*

*My ambition is nothing, I believe the god, I want little amount, I will doing one business, hardworking, hardworking that purpose I want some lump sum. 1000 I will put in the bank, 1000 I can spend. I'm alone.*

### **Mediation (of caste, gender and more)**

Brokers mediate the city's rhythmic patterns along caste, religious community, gender and other contours. Landlords often do not wish to sell or rent to certain communities, for instance between castes or religion, or to young groups of women. Brokers have a feeling for this, performing a quick sociological analysis of the seller or landlord and subtly or less subtly probing their views before bringing them potential tenants.

A brokers' own caste is also important. Mr. Pai is from the Gouda Saraswat Brahmin caste, usually shortened to GSB. They are a so-called upper caste, but differ from most Brahmins as they eat fish. They also differ from most others in the city as they speak Konkani as their mother tongue,

something they brought with them from Goa to the north when displaced by Portuguese colonialists

As a caste, or rather *jati*,<sup>[1]</sup> they gained prominence as traders who went on to set up banks, hotels, and educational institutions across the region (Tambs-Lyche, 2011).

But a brokers' community are also a source of links, especially when it comes to the owners of property.

*We were also landlords once upon a time. Our lands are all gone, otherwise we were kings of Mangalore.*

### **Reputation (out of step)**

Mr. Pai is proud of his caste status. His pride doesn't stop him taking me to cock fights, late night drinking sessions in darky sticky places, and mixing with people of all religions. But his pride does extend to displays of wealth. He is always a big tipper, but his donations also have a slower if still regular rhythm.

*So I'm giving donations. They will give the respect, er the receipt! I have given to some Hindu, some Christian institution, some Muslim institution, I will give. And some Ramakrishna Mission and poor service home. I've got receipt. I've got so many receipts.*

The regular donations to charity help him establish a certain reputation with those he meets, but so does the daily rhythmic patterns he upkeeps. Being seen in the same place at the same time each day is a public display of productivity and importance. Even when there is not much work about, he doesn't let up his routine.

Well almost never. Because someone's everyday rhythmic patterns can also get recalibrated by life events. Like moving to a new city.

*For one year my father's shop is there wholesale sugar business, then straight after SLC (school leaving certificate) then straight away going to Mumbai 1963. Bombay I'm working in a British company, 3 years. After that nobody is here [Mangalore] my younger brother is in Bombay, my elder brother is going to school, my father had already expired I was the age of 12 nobody is tint he house, my mother can't manage the house, so she has written a letter to me 'immediately come, nobody is here. Any item you can bring from the shop, I can't go. I'm old age'. That type, 'Please come. Resign and come'. 'Okay I told her, within a few days, within one month I'll be there in Mangalore'. Then again I started my business, real estate.*

*She was staying in the same building. She was a surgery gurl. Her father was working in the Indian army at that time. The second daughter. I came to Mangalore no, otherwise I would've married her.*

### **Desire (creating tension)**

In urban Indian the aesthetic rhythmic formation is one shaped by desire: an enveloping desire to construct a city which is modern and world class (Ghertner, 2015).

The unconsummated desire for modern world class cities is vague and powerful, creating tensions that pull groups and individuals in and out of sync with this imagined future (Cook, 2020).

A few years before we filmed this, Mr. Pai stopped going to the Mangladevi Temple each morning. Within a few weeks he was so sick he was hospitalised. So, he started to pray to Mangladevi again and hasn't stopped since.

Which is why you can't let anything get in the way of rhythmic patterns. Especially, anthropologists with cameras.

*Why are the prices so high in Mangalore? What's the reason?*

*The international situation is like that. Why means this is the educational centre. So foreigners will come. One minute, one minute, one minute.*

*Hello? Hello? Ah. Tell me [in Kannada]*

## **Outro**

Listen again to Mangaluru.

Construction, construction and more construction of course. But also the structured rhythmic patterns of cock fights, worship, bars with sticky floors, ice-cream parlours, orphanages and much more besides.

Brokers like Mr. Pai forge routines in the rhythmic city, but also forge links between people and property as they mediate and synchronise different groups.

Their work takes place within a rhythmic aesthetic formation built upon the patterned repetitions of everyday life that is pulled forward by a vague desire for a modern city.

Amidst these regular irregularities of urban change, brokers link, mediate and synchronise, conducting the city as they go.

*Filmed, directed, edited, and narrated by Ian M. Cook. Additional camera work by Alexandra Szőke. Many thanks to 'Mr. Pai'*

## **Notes**

<sup>[1]</sup> The word 'caste' is now used in India, both in English and the vernacular languages, but I think it confuses analyses as it can be used to refer to both varna (the ancient ideal textual distinction between Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras—priests, warriors, merchants, and labourers) and jati (the thousands of distinct groups, often based on profession, found across the subcontinent).

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Ian M. Cook is Director of Studies at the Open Learning Initiative (OLive), Budapest located at Central European University (CEU). An anthropologist by training, his work focuses on urban India, environmental justice, access to higher education, and podcasting. He strives to make scholarly practice more collaborative and multimodal. He is part of the Allegra Lab editorial collective.

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