
Digital Transformations, Smart Cities, and Displacements: Tracing the Margins of Digital Development¹

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Abstract

In this essay, drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork in the subaltern peripheries of urban India, constituted in an academic-activist politics of developing advocacy interventions, I critically interrogate the discursive construction of Smart Cities. The rhetoric of Smart Cities in Asia reflects the neoliberal imaginary that seeks to organize urban spaces in the ideology of efficiency and speed, while simultaneously erasing the voices of the subaltern margins that are continually expelled to materialize the smart imaginary. Through the deployment of communicative inversions, the seductions of the smart city serve to prop up promises of freedom, development, and sustainability that are not borne out in the reality of the lived experiences of inhabitants. Attending to the tropes of technology, efficiency, inclusivity, and sustainability, this essay attends to the materiality of displacements that form the bedrock of urban projects across India being set up as the bases of a digital future. These digital imaginaries are accompanied by the proliferation of hate and calls to violence across digital platforms. In this backdrop, drawing on the culture-centered approach, the essay offers a framework for academic-activist interventions grounded in an ethic of listening to subaltern voices.

Bibek works as a daily labourer in the tea stall outside of the NewTech Office in New Town in Kolkata. His family lived in the slums that formed the landscape of the marshlands in the area. With the New Town project, as more land was acquired, the party musclemen came in to evict the colony of tin-roofed one-room houses that lined the highway. This he had known as home, growing up with his three brothers and two sisters. In the tea stall, there are many of the information technology workers that come in regularly. Dressed in their white shirts, and navy pants, they talk about the clients in the U.S. and U.K. Bibek learns from their conversations about the

¹ Some sections of this Chapter are drawn from my book, *Imagining India in Discourse*, published with Springer.

offices of clients in New York and San Francisco, how they have to practice how they speak English so they can communicate clearly with these clients. Sometimes, he sees these clients, mostly White, come visit the office in New Town, when they are brought to the tea stall to give a taste of the street-side tea culture in Kolkata. Bibek says that although mostly he gets paid Rupees 60 per day for working ten hours, this is not enough money to pay for the medical expenses of his ageing parents, or to cover for the food for his family of five. He mentions how there are no unions to represent workers like him, and how he lives in everyday fear of being displaced again from the tin-roofed one-room house he has now built from his daily savings. The visits of the dalals (referring to intermediaries) to the colony have grown over time, with increasing threats of eviction. He has heard that the lanes going into New Town are going to be further expanded to make it attractive for new IT companies. This threat of being displaced is an ongoing threat to his family, producing a sense of anxiety about being uprooted that is a part of his everyday life. He also notes how the Trinamool Congress (TMC) musclemen have sprouted in the past five years, with an ever-increasing presence of violence. He places this anxiety about violence amid the messages he has been receiving on his mobile phone about the *miyans*, Muslim infiltrators from Bangladesh, that are going to take over West Bengal. He takes out his hand phone, a 2010 Nokia model with a broken screen, and shows me images he has been receiving about the Muslim infiltrators and their attacks on temples. The anxiety about being displaced again is multiplied exponentially by the fear of the Muslim infiltrators from Bangladesh that are taking over West Bengal. The “New Town” “Smart City” project that was initially projected as one of the 100 “Smart Cities” (hereafter SC) projects after the first inauguration of the Narendra Modi government in 2014 later wrote itself out because of the disagreements between the ruling TMC in West Bengal and the BJP government in the Center.

Since 2005, India has signed on to the SC agenda for development, putting in place a vision for building smart cities across the nation as a marker of the preparedness of the nation for next-generation development (Datta, 2015). The SC imaginary crafts a template of development that extends and gives completeness to the digital development narrative at the heart of the contemporary neoliberal transformation. Through the narrative of the SC, the development narrative in the Indian mainstream catches up with the global narrative of digital transformation, anchored in the Asian context by the model of authoritarian neoliberalism, Singapore. The seduction of the “Singapore model” lies precisely in its propaganda of

delivering growth and lifting Singaporeans out of poverty, erasing systematically through its authoritarian control on the discursive sphere any articulation of poverty or organizing among the poor and the working classes. In the Indian template of SC therefore, the “Singapore model” recirculates, reproduces, and amplifies itself, projected as a model of development that leapfrogs the incremental stages of development, launching an urban digital infrastructure that is projected as being at the forefront of the global economy while at the same time achieving sustainability.

In this essay, I will critically interrogate the digital transformations that underlie the “smart city” movement, the political economy of this transformation, and the displacements that are written into these transformations. The making of the “smart city” is predicated on the ongoing reproduction of the margins, that must be continually expelled from its everyday livelihood and displaced from its already peripheral location at the margins in order to produce a coherent rhetorical image of the SC. In this sense, the very concept of the “margins” is rendered mobile at an accelerated pace, as it must continue to peripheralize itself to enable the hegemony of the rhetoric of smartness. The ever-expanding digital seduction of the smart city, folded into glossy images of apartments, high rises, amusement parks, hospital services, and greenery, is marked by the continual displacement of the spaces on which and from where the margins can articulate their rights. Workers such as Bibek that perform the manual labour of the smart city are continually expelled from their livelihoods, accompanied by the erasure of frameworks of labour organizing. This magnifying interplay of violence and erasure is discipline through the incorporation of the digital infrastructure in a politics of hate, manufacturing anxieties that undermine collective organizing for rights. The material expansion of the smart city is built on the constant pressure exerted on the underclasses, continually erasing spaces and possibilities of organizing by on one hand, incorporating them into cultural anchors of Hindutva revival and, on the other hand, by erasing them through ongoing threats of violence. In this essay, I will first attend to the framework of digital development, locating the smart cities project within this framework. I will then attend to the ongoing practices of erasure of development’s margins through the interplays of the symbolic and the material, often written as scripts of violence that displace and expel. In this backdrop, I will examine the possibilities of resistance as the basis of imagining other developments, anchored in democracy and labour rights.

Digital development and the neoliberal Indian imaginary

In a quick meeting with a Singapore sociologist, I am regaled with the story of Chandrababu Naidu's SC project in Andhra Pradesh, the Amaravati project. This colleague shares excitedly about the role Singapore is playing for the project, offering its expert knowledge on smart planning to the construction and planning of the city. When I saw this colleague many months later, he shared his disappointment that the project seems to have been stalled because of the complexities of Indian bureaucracy and Indian land laws. He tells me that there have been many protests against the land acquisition for the Amaravati project that have become the hindrance to the project. I read in this colleague's dejected voice the very promise the Singapore model offers to such resistance, of consolidating land under the state's bureaucratic control so it can be deployed toward the goals of capital generation, development, and planning. Land, consolidated under the instruments of the state and land records, delivered through digital platforms, is placed under the logic of smart planning, being traded as a commodity through digital platforms. The digital technology, both as a form and tool of smart planning, is integral to the neoliberal transformation of land, turning it into a commodity in the global market. Note in this neoliberal imaginary the inevitability of urbanization as the monolithic future of development, working through a wide array of authoritarian techniques to silence other imaginations.

The neoliberal project

The articulation of the digital is imbricated within the overarching neoliberal logic. Since the 1990s, successive Indian governments have implemented economic liberalization as the monolithic solution to development (Ahmed, Kundu, & Peet, 2011a, 2011b), demonstrating what Kaviraj (2010) terms as an "elite consensus about the direction of macroeconomic policies" (p. 43). The large-scale privatization agenda has been carried out in the language of development, with the digital emerging as the new frontier for enclosing public spaces. The religious faith in the market as the solution to India's development forms the architecture of this neoliberal imaginary (Kohli, 2006a, 2006b, 2013; Pedersen, 2000). Noting the elite consensus on neoliberalism, Chopra (2003) observes:

This newly formed elite group, which no doubt is substantially comprised of the older elite groups in addition to new entrants, and the Indian state thus appear to have embarked afresh on a shared history, one founded on a

neoliberal view of the nation and the world. In sharing the categories of neoliberal thought, the elites of Indian society, at once, affirm and reinforce the neoliberal vision and policies of the Indian state. The Indian state, in turn, continues to sanction and promote the privilege of the newest incarnation of an Indian elite. (p. 440)

Neoliberalism in India, similar to neoliberal projects implemented elsewhere, emerges out of a close alliance of state and traditional business interests, manipulating new spaces of privatization to generate profit. These traditional elite alliances work alongside a newly emerging class of Indian industrial elites that profited from the technology sector and therefore, depended on the opening up of India to international trade. These reforms created new market opportunities for an aspiring professional class, conversant in English, trained for the emerging technological market, and therefore, positioned well to benefit from the mobility offered by the new global economic opportunities. The proliferating media industries post-liberalization, with ever expanding markets for television networks, unveiled new market opportunities for media professionals. These internal forces of change constitute the zeitgeist of neoliberalism, rendering as common-sense the ideology of the free market, driving forward with zeal the neoliberal economic reforms across India, as the foot soldiers of the international financial institutions (IFIs) (Dutta, 2017; Kohli, 2006a, 2006b; Pedersen, 2000).

The overarching ideology of neoliberalism is upheld through the collaborative relationship among state elites, industry elites, and professional class elites (including media elites), circulating the narratives offered by the IFIs. Worth noting here is the deep-seated realignment of state elites with business interests since the 1980s to actively promote a growth-driven statist agenda, which then translated into an overt liberalization agenda in the backdrop of the economic crisis of 1991 (Kohli, 1997; Shastri, 1997). The cultivation of the neoliberal ideology among the political and bureaucratic elites started in the mid-1980s, led by a change team of pro-reform elites who strategically positioned the reforms as solutions to development to key stakeholders.

Essential to India's foray into economic liberalization was the narrative of development, and development continues to be the trope through which policies of liberalization are justified (Peet, 2011). The anchor of liberalization is economic growth, and economic growth is seen as the driver of development through trickle-down. The trickle-down rhetoric frames economic liberalization as the solution to development and poverty

alleviation, offering the dogma of the free market as the panacea for India's problems (Chopra, 2003). The dogma of neoliberalism sets up the free market rationality as an objective truth, obfuscating the possibilities of interrogating evidence or for evaluating the claims made by the proponents of neoliberalism. The privatization of public resources is anchored in an underlying discourse of national development, punctuated in a linear trajectory of economic growth. The nation state occupies center stage in this reworking of the economy, with the agenda of liberalization being carried out by the state, defining a pace for the reforms that fit the agendas of the state. The economic liberalization processes saw the widespread emergence of the civil society sector as less and less dependent on the state and increasingly operating in a space that has been left open with the retreat of the state. The emergence of the elite in the civil sector space is tied to an articulation of development that is privatized, and narrated in the languages of empowerment and participation.

The discourse of liberalizing India is presented in claims of certainty, offering neoliberal reforms as the only solutions for addressing the problems of India (Chopra, 2003). The depiction of the nation state and its problems thus is closely intertwined with the rationality of the market, with the positioning of the free market as the solution to the problems thus presented. The privatization of problems creates new markets and therefore new opportunities for capitalist extraction. The framing of problems and the solutions that are attached to these problems are both embedded within the overarching logic of neoliberalism, reflected in calls for privatization, opening up of trade boundaries, and minimization of tariffs and subsidies (Kohli, 2007). The solutions to India's problems thus reflect the neoliberal ideology, and are located in the realm of the free market, with an emphasis placed on minimizing trade barriers, weakening organized labour, and removing tariffs and subsidies. The rhetoric of neoliberalism as development obfuscates the dramatic inequalities that are produced by neoliberal policy reforms, on one hand, and simultaneously positions the logic of trickle-down as an agreed upon reality on the other hand (Patnaik, 1997). The portrayal of the trickle-down logic supports the privatizing agendas of the state built on the argument that privatization creates greater opportunities for economic growth, which then should translate into greater benefits for the poor and underserved classes. The poor thus are configured into the neoliberal project as sites of intervention, with the goals of neoliberalism being presented as solving the needs of the poor. This rhetoric of neoliberalism stands in sharp contrast to the materiality of evidence in India, registering large scale inequalities, increase in rural poverty, and increasing disenfranchisement of the poor (Patnaik, 1997).

According to the proponents of the neoliberal narrative, the liberalization of India has catalyzed growth, although the data on India's growth and its relationship to liberalization remains contested (Topalova, 2007). Moreover, the economic liberalization of India has generated uneven distributions and further exacerbated these inequalities. The economic conditions of the margins of Indian society have further declined with the reforms, with greater disenfranchisement of the poor from their sources of livelihood. This is especially the case in the context of agriculture, access to food, access to basic resources such as education and healthcare, and access to sources of livelihood. Moreover, reforms carried out in the name of poverty alleviation have been specifically directed at the privatization of public resources, thus weakening the public infrastructure that was otherwise available to the poor and disenfranchised communities in India. The inaccess to healthcare is evident in the form of a weakening public health system and the simultaneous growth of a public health care structure that often remains out of reach for poor communities. Situated in the backdrop of the discourses of neoliberalism are the everyday realities of lived experiences of large proportions of Indians that are left out of the growth story.

The digital as neoliberal infrastructure

The free market aspirations of India are enabled through the power of technology. Technology expands the reach of the market. Neoliberal technology, itself a form of technocratic experiment driven by experts, is anchored in technologies of communication and mobility. Technology on one hand differentiates the urban from the rural; on the other hand, it marks the primitive, the rural, the backward as the site for transformation to generate new markets for expansion of capital. The depiction of rural India as a vast-untapped market offers the enticement for the development of technology-based solutions that enable access to these distant markets. Technology thus expands the reach of the market and connects rural Indians to global brands. Consider for instance the Chapter titled "*Thinking outside the bottle*" by Muhtar Kent, Chairman and CEO of The Coca-Cola Company published in McKinsey's "*Reimagining India*" (pp. 133-134):

One of my favorite examples of how we're trying to come up with solutions tailored for the Indian market is eKOCool, a solar-powered mobile cooler we developed for use in the tens of thousands of rural Indian villages that lack electricity. The eKOCool looks a little like an ordinary

pushcart, but it's actually a sophisticated marriage of technology and local market savvy. Stores using our eKOCool solar coolers can stay open later and generate extra power to do double duty recharging mobile phones or electric lanterns. We hope to distribute more than one thousand eKOCool carts to rural store owners in India by the end of 2013—and we have begun testing them in dozens of other countries...For the Coca-Cola Company in India, the rewards from being in the market will materialize only if we see our investment in broad terms: not just capital investment in bottling plants and trucks but also human investment in schools and training, social investment in women entrepreneurs, and technological investment in innovations like solar carts that can power a cooler, a mobile phone, or a lantern by which a young boy or girl can study. That's an expression of our commitment to India—and our commitment to succeed on India's terms.

The technology of the eKOCool creates and enhances the market reach of Coca Cola into the hard-to-reach and distant areas of rural India. Technological innovation is measured in terms of the reach created by the innovation to new markets. The power of the technology of eKOCool is embodied in its ability to deliver chilled Coca Cola products operating on solar power and without depending on electricity. Rural Indian villages lacking electricity can now be connected to the market for Coca Cola products through the technology. In this sense, technology bypasses the limitations of poor infrastructure and lack of development resources in rural India. The intertwined relation between technology and market reach points to the ways in which technology offers the pathway for the penetration of market knowledge, incorporating rural Indians into the folds of Coca Cola.

Note also the link that technology creates between markets and development, with technology as the vehicle for the dissemination of the market. The benefits of the market are intertwined with the development of India, in investments in schools and training, in empowering women entrepreneurs, and in building opportunities to study through the power of technology. Access to the market becomes synonymous with access to development; social investment works alongside capital investment. The technology of the solar carts that can power the cooler as well as a mobile phone or a lantern drives India's development even as it creates greater access among rural communities to Coke. The technology of eKOCool not only delivers a bottle of Coca Cola but also the light of a lantern by which a young boy or girl can study. The rural citizen is empowered through the technology to participate in the neoliberal economy even as he/she is transformed into a consumer of Coca Cola.

Technology transforms the citizen to the consumer in the global market. In another Chapter in “Reimagining India” titled “Bricks and clicks” authored by Philip Clarke, CEO of Tesco PLC., the technology corporation in the front lines of the SC projects in India and globally, digital technology will transform the ways in which Indian consumers participate in and relate to the market (p. 141):

India bears all the hallmarks of a country where digital technology will bring enormous benefits...But in many ways, India’s digital commerce revolution will be unique. In India, people who access the Internet only through a mobile or a tablet device are expected to account for 75 percent of new users and 55 percent of all users by 2015. Inevitably that will mean greater demand for content designed for the small screen. As Internet penetration increases and this new multichannel world expands, Indian consumers will enjoy unparalleled choice; not just more information and a greater variety of goods and services to buy but also a choice of ways to shop at whatever time they like.

The framing of the benefits of digital technology in the language of the market depicts the role in development technology is envisioned to take. Technology enables development through its penetration, which in turn enables access to the market. Digital technology produces the Indian consumer that is presented with a plethora of market choices delivered through multiple channels. Technology brings to the consumer new array of choices in the form of greater access to goods and services, access to new information, and new choices in ways of becoming a consumer by shopping. The ubiquity of technology constitutes the ubiquity of the market, ever-present in the life of the consumer by bringing about new ways of shopping around the clock, at the convenience of the consumer. In other words, technology does not only increase the reach of the market across space but also constitutes the extension of the market across time.

New technologies bring new partnerships and relationships constituted in the realm of the market. These relationships with the market are situated in the backdrop of growth and efficiency, technology thus serving development through the instrument of the market. Consider further the description of the technology-enabled market offered by Clarke (pp. 142-143):

To capitalize more fully on these new opportunities, Indian retailers must work with suppliers to drive growth and efficiencies in the supply chain and distribution networks. Developing partnerships with suppliers will help improve products’ quality, freshness, and flavor. At Tesco, we’re

using blogs, discussion forums, and customer data to make our operations more transparent and accessible to our suppliers. With social media causing customers' tastes to change ever more quickly, the challenge now is to keep up with the change by analyzing data rapidly and sharing it throughout the supply chain, so manufacturers, farmers—and anyone involved in shaping the product—can help maximize the appeal.

Growth and efficiency are brought about through the power of new technologies that connect retailers and suppliers in productive partnerships directed toward developing products in continual product improvement cycles. Technology-enabled partnerships improve the quality of products and services both by increasing access to consumer data as well as by fostering platforms that enable the simultaneous participation of various stakeholders. Data gathered through digital technologies and information collected over digital platforms such as blogs and discussion forums enable the effective acceleration of product development and modifications through partnerships between retailers and suppliers. Note here the causal role attributed to social media in shaping customer demands, and in the role of technology in monitoring these demands as ways of continually improving product quality. The power of technology enables the speed of product development and modifications. This catalytic power of technology forms the basis of the SC imaginary.

Smart Cities

The imaginary of the SC, articulated at the millennial turn, extends the neoliberal model of global governance amid the rising global challenges to it, namely climate change, growing income inequality, and growing alienation of large sections of the global population. I argue that the turn to the SC as a discursive anchor enables the grotesque expansion of neoliberal policies, while simultaneously framing these policies in the language of responsiveness to the global challenges to the expansion of capital. In other words, the SC imaginary is a discursive trope that offers specific material arrangements of digital and new communication technologies to enable the accelerated consolidation of capital. Juxtaposed amid interchangeable terms such as inclusive city, green city, sustainable city, SC serves as an umbrella terms for holding in a wide array of layered appeals that can be juxtaposed on it and superimposed on it, based on the market, audience, and problem being positioned.

Empty rhetoric.

The imagination itself in this sense is empty, made to be whatever the technocratic elite, political classes, and technology marketers would want it to be, depending on the market and the context. Note the following depiction of the SC mission of the Government of India available on its dedicated website.

The purpose of the Smart Cities Mission is to drive economic growth and improve the quality of life of people by enabling local area development and harnessing technology, especially technology that leads to Smart outcomes. Area-based development will transform existing areas (retrofit and redevelop), including slums, into better planned ones, thereby improving liveability of the whole City. New areas (greenfield) will be developed around cities in order to accommodate the expanding population in urban areas. Application of Smart Solutions will enable cities to use technology, information and data to improve infrastructure and services. Comprehensive development in this way will improve quality of life, create employment and enhance incomes for all, especially the poor and the disadvantaged, leading to inclusive Cities.

The SC therefore are the sites of neoliberal reproduction, marking off urban spaces as laboratories of experiments with neoliberal policies, arranged in the specificities of smartness. Note however the very ambiguity in the rhetorical posturing of smart outcomes, devoid of empirical articulations of what constitutes smart. This form of ambiguous communication, communication that reiterates the tautology, a smart city is one that produces smart outcomes, is reiterated in various forms in the promotional materials of the SC project. The definitional ambiguity that constitutes the SC vision of the Government of India also forms the basis of the appeals generated, with imaginations of data, information and infrastructure coming together to deliver the other imaginary concoction, inclusive development. This basic premise of neoliberal organizing as driving growth is juxtaposed in the backdrop of empty signifiers such as “quality of life,” “liveability,” and “inclusivity.” Also note the ways in which the poor and the disadvantaged are thrown in alongside promises of employment generation and income enhancement. Such is the techno-seduction of the SC rhetoric that evidence, warrants, backing do not need to be provided. Devoid of reason, the SC rhetoric operates as an affective trope that seduces its audiences into a vision that legitimizes new and more extreme forms of neoliberal transformation.

The rhetoric of SC is in content often empty, a collection of futuristic images, narrative accounts, advertising promised, packed into simulations that are targeted as recruited new sources of capital. The precise opportunities of capital themselves are often unrealized, projected as promised into a future. The futuristic premise of smart cities reproduces promises of innovations, themselves often based on the premise of iterative and cyclical learning. Underneath the advertising though, which is often uncritically reproduced in the literature, there is often little substance and content to what actually is being delivered as smart (see for instance Kong & Woods, 2018). Paradoxically, in a piece that projects itself as offering a critical reflection, and therefore a template for what is termed critical application, Kong and Woods (2019) offer a “fourth space” that they claim is emancipatory, enabling equitable access, and rebalancing power, a template of what they call “smart urbanism” based on the pillars of “digital space, data are/and power, and participatory governance” (p. 681). Situating their proposal of a fourth space in the context of the authoritarian regime of Singapore, they note:

When implemented for the benefit of all, digital technologies and the data they produce can lead to co-constructed urban spaces and, ultimately, more participatory – or decolonised – forms of urban governance. Thus, whilst smart urbanism has been criticised for providing a ‘powerful tool for the production of docile subjects and mechanisms of political manipulation’ (Vanolo, 2014: 883), fourthspace recognises the emancipatory potential of digital technologies, and correlates political power and governance with the degree of voluntary engagement with the project of urban inclusiveness. This is recognised in Singapore, where Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted in 2014 that, whilst the government was responsible for creating a ‘smart’ framework and infrastructure for citizens to contribute to, ‘the participation of the whole nation is vital to make Singapore an outstanding city in the world to live, work and play’ (cited in Housing and Development Board, 2016). (p. 697)

Note in the positioning of the participatory and decolonized nature of the “fourth space” they propose in the context of Singapore the strategic erasure of the various techniques of repression used by the Singapore government to control and silence digital dissent.

Number of activists, including the noted human rights activist Jolovan Wham and the activist Sangeetha Thanapal have been targeted by the state for their digital posts. Journalists and civil society actors have been subjected to legal proceedings by various actors of the state for their social media posts. In March 2018, the Singapore state, introduced the draconian

prevention of online falsehoods bill (POFMA), that generated concerted protests across academia, activist spaces, journalistic spaces, and internationally because of the power it gives to Singapore ministers to determine falsehoods and therefore, control speech. The benevolent participatory planning depicted by Kong and Woods is a whitewash of state-controlled techniques of managing democratic participation, often through the use of defamation, laws of assembly, sedition law, and now, an online falsehoods law. The uncritical reproduction of the claim made by the Prime Minister of Singapore about citizen participation is situated amid the everyday reality of state repression on forms of expression. Marx, Adorno, or Horkheimer would be rolling in their graves at such functionalist co-optation of critical theory to uphold an authoritarian regime's techno-experiments with urbanism, going on to depict the methods of data-based planning, monitoring, and authoritarian governmentality as emancipatory. Participation is incorporated into the smart infrastructure of the city through the actual erasure of participation in Singapore through its draconian policies. Such "communicative inversions" are fairly common in the SC discourse. What is critical in the SC discourse is the promise of the digital technology to bring about citizen participation and engagement, constituted within the overarching logics of a state invested in building infrastructures for capitalist expansion.

Communicative displacements.

The "communicative inversions" constituted in SC discourse occur on layers of displacements, with each layer juxtaposed on the other based on the persuasive goals of the discourse. Ecology, sustainability, newness, technology, industrialization, creativity are all deployed in different turns, superimpose on the SC, with smart as the trope that holds them together. Inherent in the seduction is the articulation of digital technology as the elixir, capturing the interplays of big data, strategic planning, and innovation. Consider for instance the "Digital Dholera" SC, one of the first smart city projects proposed by Narendra Modi after his rise to power on the basis of the promise of bringing in clean government and development in the 2014 elections.

The 100 SC initiative, pitched as both a model for scaling up Modi's Gujarat model, and for reproducing other Asian models such as "Shanghai" "Hong Kong" and "Singapore" across India, is the image building exercise that whitewashes Modi's links with the right-wing Rashtriya Syamsevak Sangh (RSS) and more importantly, his alleged role in the Gujarat pogrom for which he had been banned from traveling to the US and UK. The initiative itself, projected across digital platforms as a new

birth of India into a new era, is a makeover of Narendra Modi from a communal politician to an architect of development. Note for instance the celebratory tone at the Launch of Smart Cities Projects, with the Prime Minister stating, ““There cannot be a transformation as long as we take things in bits and pieces. We need to adopt a comprehensive, interconnected and vision-oriented approach,” We are told SC embody a transformation, offering solutions to poverty, ““It is now our responsibility to provide strength to cities so that it can mitigate the maximum poverty, in the shortest time, and adds new avenues for development. It is possible as it is not a difficult task.” How this is going to translate through SC is however not at all evident. One of the key communicative inversions in the SC imagery of rational city planning based on data and technology projected on the discursive space is the absence of reasoned argumentation based on evidence.

Capital investments.

The premise of the SC lies in the creation of spaces for capital investments. Digital technology and its capacity to gather, organize, and deploy big data is positioned as driving innovations that create new market opportunities. The global hegemony of SC is therefore embedded in public-private partnerships for building digital infrastructures that bring in hitherto unimaginable opportunities for capital. This ability to anticipate futures and opportunities for investments forms the crux of the digital turn in the neoliberal governmentality captured in the SC initiatives. The large scale displacements of people and livelihoods is organized under this premise of bringing in future capital investments. Therefore, the SC framework is fundamentally the legitimation of large-scale allocation of public resources to build infrastructures that attract private capital, with the premise of the privatized infrastructure enabling additional investments and development. The cascading effect of digital capital is in its premise of generating new resources for new forms of capital and new markets. The citizen, incorporated into the smart city, is reworked under the agenda of the ever-expanding market, always being re-invented as consumer for new technological products, services, and plans.

Smart citizens

The technologically seductive formula sold by the SC imaginary is pitched in the digital media lexicon, speaking to a young audience fed on digital

technology and seduced by the enchantments of the technology as a deliverer of jobs. The digital simulations of the smart city speak to the interpretive grammar of this audience, depicting roads, hospitals, playgrounds, living areas, transport systems, seamlessly communicating with each other, connecting the private to the public. The citizen thus disciplined, works with the technology from the everyday negotiations of home to the negotiations of work, surrounded by and immersed in the technology. The success of the smart city is thus dependent on the smart citizen, trained in the digital technologies of the city, and disciplined to participate in the participatory and engagement frameworks that are hosted on digital spaces. Even as everyday forms of participation and protest are controlled, specific forms of disciplined participation are cultivated to enable the everyday functioning of the smart city.

Smart Hindutva.

The infrastructure of the “Smart City” is also the infrastructure of hate, where space is re-organized to mark zones of purity, to outline the boundaries of belonging and expulsion (Chopra, 2006). Under the premise of smart transformation is the marking of the primitive cultural other, the body of the republic that is primitive, diseases, and a threat to the transformation into the digital utopia. In spaces such as Dholera, the basic infrastructure of the smart city then is built on the displacement and zoning of the city, expelling the minorities, lower castes, untouchables, and lower classes to the margins of the city (more on this in the next section). The neoliberal transformation of the Indian economy that forms the bedrock of the “smart city” imaginary is also the basic infrastructure that upholds the turn to culture. Citizens such as Bibek are continually displaced by the multi-layered materialities of urban innovations, and are strategically incorporated into the digital networks of hate that keep the power structures intact.

Expulsions and displacements

Folded into the SC imaginary is the subaltern, expelled from her livelihood, and existing in continuous layers of ongoing displacements to make room for neoliberal expansion. At the heart of the discursive construction of the SC, accomplished through the strategic arrangements of words and images, is the expulsion of the subaltern margins. Worth noting in the discursive and material constructions of the SC are what I depict as communicative

inversions, “the reversal of communication to communicate the opposite of material occurrences.” The symbolic construction of the SC, materialized through graphic designs, animated pixellations, and rendered videos, communicatively invert the actually existing materiality of space. Communication, and more specifically communicative inversion, circulated through digital technologies preconfigures, anticipates, and materializes displacement, unseeing strategically the lands that are grabbed to make room for the SC projects.

To control resistance to these expulsions and displacements that fundamentally violate human rights (more on this in the next section), communicative inversions are systematically deployed. Resistance, projected as barrier to development and progress, is then formulated as a site of state and police violence. Moreover, the everyday constructions of communicative inversions are directed at undermining the resistance. The power and control of meetings held in the ambits of the state structures is accompanied by misrepresentation of the meetings, strategic erasure of publicity of the meetings, and various techniques to limit and intimidate attendance at the meetings. Police violence is often a normal feature in silencing protest.

Subaltern resistance as other imaginations

In this backdrop of the consolidation of the neoliberal project through the re-working of cultural tools into the language of digital technologies, subaltern resistance marks the unruly spaces of transformative politics. Hope, articulated in these spaces, offers an entirely different logic that bypasses the communicative inversions reproduced exponentially through digital platforms. Worth noting in the account of the neoliberal transformation of India is the large-scale protests against neoliberalism that offered the basis of alternative political economic imaginaries in the 1990s. The accounts of the economic reforms in India depict the pivotal role of elite politics, working across the political, bureaucratic, and private industries that conceptualized, designed, and carried out the reforms. These accounts systematically erase the subaltern voices organized against the penetration of the neoliberal project in the various parts of everyday life.

The narrative accounts of the people, of India’s subaltern groups that resisted and continue to resist the monolithic and seamless perpetuation of the neoliberal project offer the basis of a politics of hope. Specifically in the context of the actual smart city projects, subaltern resistance forms the basis of reclaiming space, for challenging the SC rhetoric, and for

challenging the very basis of SC implementation. The Dholera SC project for instance is a site of contestation, with ongoing and sustained resistance put up by farming communities residing in the region against the grabbing of their land. Under the umbrella of the Jameen Adhikar Andolan Gujarat (JAAG) or Land Rights Movement Gujarat, farming communities have organized to protest the land grab, foregrounding their imaginaries of sustainable livelihoods. Their notion of sustainable livelihood, tied to subsistence farming that sustains them, is paradoxically under threat by the SC project that offers the seductions of sustainability and ecological balance. Through protests, placards, posters, marches, the farmers resist the land acquisition. They attend in large numbers the environmental impact assessments that are nationally mandated, ensuring their voices are heard. The new and accelerated legal structures that were introduced in Gujarat to first track land acquisition, bypassing the national policy framework on land acquisition, are now being scaled up for implementation nationally. In this backdrop, the model of farmer and community protests against the SC project in Dholera in Gujarat is also a model for resistance to be scaled up, as a model of solidarity and resistance.

Re-working academia

Amid this neoliberal onslaught, including the concerted attacks on academia through privatization and metricization (Dutta, 2018b), sold through culturalist language, re-working academia in solidarity with subaltern struggles is essential to the politics of hope. This is especially critical at a juncture where communicative inversions are continually deployed in the form of academic projects of digital culture, cultural development, cultural participation, and cultural industries precisely to legitimize violent displacements and erasures of subaltern communities, often funded through networks of private foundations, global development agencies, and IFIs. Projects of urban rebuilding, redevelopment, and redesign, with designated spaces for culture, on one hand, appeal to new market segments of aspiring and diaspora urban audiences and new investments, and on the other hand, displace subaltern communities from their livelihoods.

Projects of digital cultural industries, cultivated as seductions for the neoliberal classes, are layered over the expulsions and displacements of subalterns they constitute (see for instance). Projects of smart ageing for instance create opportunities for academics to map the resistance to technologies among the elderly, with the goal then of proposing smart

solutions that address these barriers to technology adoption (see for instance Kong & Woods, 2018b). Similarly, academic projects of technology uses among the poor use the language of culture to map the poor for digital technology corporations, often funded by these technology corporations (Sambasivan, Rangaswamy, Cutrell, & Nardi, 2009). Communicative inversions often deploy terms such as voice, emancipation, and empowerment, while working precisely to hold up the hegemony of neoliberal technology. Academia, narrowly constructed in the terrains of fundable research, is positioned within the pragmatic logics of global capital, incorporating large parts of cultural studies into serving the agendas of capital, albeit through the communicative inversion of cultural studies. Terms such as activism, advocacy, and justice are grossly inverted to serve the logics of capital expansion and state discipline to attract capitalist investment.

Much of digital culture work for instance is incorporated into state initiatives for attracting capitalist investments. The rendition of the next digital smart city prototype, reproduced and displayed through digital and offline platforms and distribution channels, created by digital cultural workers, circulates a cultural vision of a new India by erasing the voices of the subaltern communities underneath it, expelled by it, and displaced by it through ongoing expansions of capital. The looking to the future, generated through digital cultural work, is also the erasure of subaltern struggles in the present. The artful cultural rendition of the Digital Dholera SC project works through the erasure of the real Dholera, the many villages of over 100 families that subsists on the basis of farming. Such materialist readings of cultural artefacts is critical to the decoupling of the link between cultural studies and neoliberal market promotion, actively creating spaces for solidarities with the subaltern margins in the struggles against SC. The work of cultural centering is the centering of narratives of the subaltern margins by co-constructing communicative infrastructures for subaltern voice. Such communicative infrastructures for voice, working in solidarity with subaltern communities disrupt, decolonize, and dismantle the very hegemony of the city and its inevitability (Dutta, 2011, 2014a). Subaltern voices articulating rural livelihoods as the futures of sustainability for instance invert the communicative inversions, pointing toward altogether different visions for development. For instance in the case of the EIA meeting for the Dholera project, conducted by a state-appointed consulted, farmers made sure they showed up in large numbers to be heard. The report however that was released erased many of these voices of resistance and was filled with disinformation. In this context, the work of academic-activist-community collaboration becomes one of holding the reports

accountable to community voice and disrupting the communicative inversions that are circulated. The work of communication is particularly critical in disrupting the layers of disinformation that constitute SC propaganda.

Conclusion

The SC imaginary offers a new template for development, folding into it a framework for development futures. In this essay, I situate the SC project within a neoliberal framework, noting the ways in which SC captures the new frontiers of neoliberalism amid the global challenges climate change, inequality, and alienation. Through a series of communicative inversions, the SC imaginary sells itself, drawing in the digitally familiar youth to its empty promises of technological futures that would solve key problems. The suspension of critical and reasoned participation forms the basis of the discursive formulation of the SC that is circulated globally. As a neoliberal future, the SC trope legitimizes new techniques of state power and control as it silences dissent in order to create new possibilities for attracting capital. In this backdrop, subaltern resistance, embedded in collective resistance to SC projects, disrupts the propaganda, calling instead for dialogue and understanding. Moreover, subaltern resistance offers a trajectory of hope, crafting a transformative anchor for constituting academia.

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