This is a repository copy of *A 100 smart cities, a 100 utopias*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/83075/

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

A 100 smart cities, a 100 utopias

Abstract: In my response to the commentaries on my anchor paper, I have taken on board the key question of how and why India has become the site of production of 100 smart cities. I have proposed a notion of 'technocratic nationalism' to suggest that it is the young urban population in India that has largely bought into the smart city dream. While drawing encouragement from the largely positive commentaries on my paper, I then take on three main critiques of the paper – first that it has inadvertently promoted a hegemony of 'city-ness' by focusing on the imagined smart city to be; second that the smart city has strong connections with colonial urban planning; and third, whether Dholera should be considered the first smart city at all. I suggest that the paper's 'city-ness' and postcolonial links to India's urban planning is both political and heuristic, since it is the postcolonial 'urban' moment where India has situated its moment of modernity globalisation and economic power. I suggest that the final critique is based on a misinterpretation of the use of the word 'first' which was always intended to reflect a politics of innovation among cities. Finally I suggest that the other 'gaps' in my paper highlighted by one of the commentators is not a gap, rather beyond the scope and objectives of an exploratory paper such as this.

Chasing the moolah

Recently I was contacted to do some research by an organisation that works in an advisory capacity to the Indian software industry. I proposed a research that would lead to recommendations for overcoming the challenges facing by urban poor in becoming 'smart citizens' in India. The answer from their R&D head, '*our clients are not interested in these social projects. That is for the government to implement. They are only interested in the moolah'.*

This statement sums up quite neatly the motivation behind smart cities in India – the 'moolah'. As a sociological moment presented in a conversation between an academic and a corporate entity, this cuts through the entire rhetorical apparatus to a primal moment of capital accumulation. It summarises as Sassen (2014) would argue, the most elementary forms of extraction by the market as a driving force for smart cities. Perversely it answers Marcuse's (2009, 189) question of 'whose right, what right and to what city' with the answer – 'the right of the corporate sector to accumulate capital from the smart city'.

While this should be no surprise to critics of neoliberal urbanism, the puzzle then as Watson raises in her commentary is '*who they aim to convince with their unlikely claims'*. Greenfield further muses, '*why this particular confluence of ideas, why India, why now?'* In providing a very short response to the commentaries on my paper, I will begin with this key question. This question directs us to find answers in a target audience that now stokes the dream of 100 smart cities in India. I reinforce here that a forensic analysis of the 'rhetorics of urgency' is immensely important

since they do much of the work in sustaining the aspirations of a rising urban middle class youth who in turn reinforce the power of the smart city trope. In starting my analysis from this imagined city then, I am not implicitly or explicitly reinforcing an ideological moment vested in the urban age. This ideology is already propagated by McKinseys, KPMG, Accenture, PriceWaterHouse Coopers and other global consultancies with their striking graphs and pie charts depicting India's urbanization. I am interested in exploring the city as a heuristic, as India's experiment with modernity and globalisation. This does not discount the challenges faced by those who must be forcibly brought to line up with India's urban dreams often through a rule of law. The 'urban' has powerful myth-making capabilities in Indian nationalistic space and challenging this myth is an important objective of my work on smart cities.

The aspirations of the 'technocratic nationalists'

It would be misleading however to suggest that the smart city machinery is kept well-oiled only by the neoliberal state and its moolah-seeking business partners. India is set to become the youngest country by 2020 with 64% of its population in the working age group (IRIS-UN 2013). Smart cities are part of the dreams and aspirations of 'success' of a young urban population who are in the words of Leela Fernandes (2006) 'Products and promoters of globalization'. This young population grew up in a post-liberalised India relatively protected from 'shortages and rationing' (Fernandes 2006), and for whom the Muslim pogrom of 2002 in Gujarat is not a living memory. In India, this rather young but heterogeneous group consists of software engineers, middling entrepreneurs, management professionals, PR consultants, advertising professionals and so on. In the recent elections, this group rejected the earlier ruling party considered as elitist, 'dynastic' and corrupt, for a masculinist state headed by a 'subaltern hero' (Roy 2011) who believes in the power of technology to transform social life. It is this group which has passed globalization through a sieve of 'Indian culture' to produce (what I propose) a 'technocratic nationalism', in which to be patriotic is to believe in the power of technology. Harriss asks in his commentary '*How can we assume Dholera promotional videos instil 'an active desire for its materialization among the Indian young upwardly mobile urban population'*. My answer to that would be to observe the social media revolution in India and read the comments under every article on smart cities to get a sense of the flood of support that smart cities has received from young urban Indians. It supports the point that Greenfield makes in his commentary – '*to be a software engineer in this new economy is a noble thing, for in the end what else does so much of the new prosperity consist of but software?*' For this group, to ask questions of social, spatial and environmental justice associated with the smart city is to become 'anti-developmental' and by extension, anti-Indian – allegedly an agent of the West.

For sure, a dogmatic faith in technology has been a sustained feature of Indian nationalism and modernity. The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru believed that through the technological advances vested in new industries, roads, bridges, dams and cities, India would achieve development and progress after centuries of impoverishment under colonial rule. However it is only now that the language of 'moolah' is translated by the state and its business partners into a make-believe modernity that is seen to announce India's global position as an economic superpower. As Jazeel notes, '*the representational work upon which urban futures depend, and more unequivocally upon which 'city-ness' depends as an imaginative geography*' is wholly connected to these young aspirations. And it is precisely the terrain of rhetoric around smart cities that captures the imagination of India's urban youth.

Is Dholera the 'first' smart city?

My paper has been accused of coming '*close to inadvertently reinforcing the hyperbolic and unsubstantiated rhetoric accompanying its promotion*' (Harriss). Hariss suggests that the title of 'first smart city' is actually contentious and that 'it is likely that Dholera will have rivals as the exemplar for Indian smart city development'. Citing several new smart cities currently under construction or consideration in India, Harriss notes that a more multi-sited research would have provided better insights to the making of smart cities in India.

This is a critique which is asking the paper to achieve what it does not claim to do at any point. Certainly a more multi-sited comparative urbanism of different smart cities currently emerging in India would be a commendable project. And certainly it would be worthwhile to write a paper on grassroots utopias of JAAG and other movements to counter the smart city. However, does this imply that examination of the smart city trope should not be considered of academic worth? The 'story-telling' power of the smart city trope is transformational of state-citizen relations and therefore has also been the subject of study by other academics (Soderstorm et. al 2014, Vanolo 2014). Harriss is also quick to allege that I reinforce the power relations by using the adjective 'first'. This is based on his web search of 'first smart cities' where he comes upon several other cities claiming to be the first smart city. I am not contesting this finding. Indeed if Harriss does another search now, he will find that Surat also claims to be India's first smart city. Following closely on the heels of the announcement by the Indian government of creating 100 smart cities, other cities which earlier marketed themselves as eco-cities (Lavasa), new towns (Rajarhat) or finance tech-cities (GIFT) have now also begun to market themselves as 'first' smart cities.

My point in the paper is that Dholera was one of the first to market itself as the 'first smart city' (although smart city Kochi was approved before Dholera, but work had stalled here for a few years) and also one of the first to be recognised as such in the Indian state of the Union budget in 2013. It predates the Indian proposal to build 100 new smart cities, shortly after which GIFT began to claim the 'first smart city' status. 'First' has been the most vied for adjective in urban planning of late, since it represents a particular 'coming of age' for regional states which produce them. As an adjective it is subjective and political, ie not based on any rigorous terms of reference; rather it represents success in a race where the finishing line is drawn to suit those who are in the race. Being 'first' is associated with innovation, originality, authenticity and inevitably capital accumulation. Being first is important before the smart city novelty slowly fades away for the Indian upwardly mobile youth to reveal the elaborate 'myth-making' that has gone on so far. In the race for a 100 smart cities, the winner will be the first smart city. The losers will enter the market relatively late when the cache of smart rhetoric have dried up, when the smart technologies begin to reveal their failures, and when the smart city becomes yet another cliché in the history of global urbanism. Thus in using the terms 'first smart city' and 'twice the size of Mumbai' in Dholera , I was at no point suggesting that these are neutral territories, rather as made clear from the paper's subsequent discussion of speed and slowness that these terms in themselves have specific credence and evoke political action when backed by the state.

Hariss is also correct in saying that the smart city model in India will include both cities built from scratch as well as modernising existing cities. But he writes that now from the privilege of knowing about the 100 smart cities programme, unlike when I was writing the paper in early 2014, when Dholera was indeed presented as the first prototype in the media and in political campaign speeches. The spatio-temporality of smart cities is a significant issue here which Harriss does not consider or acknowledge – that smart city parameters change every day in India with new cities added or taken away, new committees and policy notes drafted, and new investments made in its different sectors. Hariss also requests that the paper articulate several 'gaps' around the role of urban administrators, discuss why some cities miss out being smart, how urban projects come to be 'smart', the technologies and infrastructures used and so on. These are all valid questions which I can certainly answer in future papers, but again he misses the point in that they are questions that are beyond the scope or objectives of the current paper. At the risk of sounding clichéd, I assert that this is the 'first' paper on Dholera and therefore in many ways also an exploratory paper mapping out the politics in its making.

Post/Colonial links

A critique by Moser has been that utopian city-making projects are not just limited to the postcolonial state; rather they have their roots in colonial practises of city-making. Indeed masterplanned cities of Calcutta and Delhi were part of the colonial practices of mapping power and sovereignty over territories and populations. I would in fact go further in arguing that India has a strong continuity of urban planning from pre-colonial to postcolonial sovereign power. This was seen in new cities such as Jaipur (built by the Rajput King Sawai Jai Singh II in 1727) and Fatehpur Sikri (built by the Mughal emperor Akbar in 1569). Indeed modern day Delhi can trace its history of changing sovereign power through seven subsequent cities built along its river Yamuna– with the colonial city designed by Edwin Lutyens being the last one in its history.

Dholera however shows stronger connections with postcolonial utopian urbanism than colonial or pre-colonial cities. In Dholera, the connections between elementary forms of capital accumulation, neoliberal urbanism and dispossession are sharpened in the postcolonial moment. Dholera has continuities with several periods of India's utopian urbanisms, but these continuities reach a pinnacle when we consider the rising aspirations of a 'young independent nation' seeking to achieve modernity and breaking from tradition by building smart cities in the image of Songdo, Masdar and Singapore. Dholera is an assemblage of global smart city discourses and practices, but this assemblage has only been able to take root in India in its particular form because of its strong postcolonial model of modernity, rationality and development – a combination of discourses particularly attractive to India's urban youth.

My focus on India's postcolonial moment is also an ethno-methodological strategy that makes writing about India and its new phase of urbanization a political act. In recent years a rising tide of technocratic nationalism has sought to represent much of India's 'underdevelopment' as a product of colonial rule. Similarly Hindutva activists have sought to label any Marxist-feminist critiques of smart cities as 'pseudo-secular' and 'anti-Indian' – the work of 'foreign agents' seeking to keep India in the mire of colonial rule. This paper then begins from a political position – by making links between smart cities and postcolonial rather than colonial power. This is not to suggest that colonial urban planning was inconsequential to contemporary planning practices in India, certainly it laid the foundation of postcolonial planning practices. In this paper however, I have deliberately countered the dominant rhetoric of victimhood and underdevelopment linked to colonial rule that plagues Indian public discourse and social media currently.

Beyond the smart city

This paper starts from the smart city – a place that is imagined rather than the already existing material space of the villages that will make way for the smart city to come. Jazeel articulates an important critique that 'city-ness' reinforces a hegemonic

knowledge production by making cities as the entry point of all critiques of urbanization. This is a broader critique that can be levelled at the discipline of urban studies which reinforces the very primacy of the city it often seeks to challenge. This is also an issue which I have been acutely conscious about in my paper, particularly as Jazeel points out, the battlegrounds of the city are located far from it on the rural and pastoral landscapes of Gujarat – places incorrectly represented as 'terra nullis' by smart city builders. As Watson has identified correctly – '*The inevitable result of new political interest in these fantasy cities is that both attention and national budgets will be skewed away from the urgent needs of urban dwellers for basic sanitation, water and shelter and towards support for corporate demands, resulting in an urban landscape with far higher levels of inequality and more urban dwellers living without basic urban services*'.

While peasants may have become the final frontiers of city-making' (Goldman 2011) in India, the focus on city-ness in this paper is intentional to chart out how the grounds for capital accumulation is laid through representation, rhetorics and story-telling around new urban utopias. This does not reduce the importance of the very real struggles that are being enacted by JAAG and other farmer's movements across India and the global south for their identities, rights and livelihoods. This paper has made a start in this discussion, constructing a political economy of smart cities and a cultural critique of its tropes to examine the 'signs and machines' of raw capital accumulation, when the 'production of subjectivity represents the primary and perhaps most important work of capitalism'(Lazzarato 2014). In India too 'smart citizens' define the new subjects of capital consumption in the smart city.

But Greenfield asks, '*after all the farmers and fishermen have been chased from the land, the digital infrastructure laid down, and the golf club opened for business, what of day-to-day life in this environment*?' The answer can be found by looking at other examples of smart cities globally – at Singapore, Songdo, Masdar and Dongtan, in whose image Dholera and other smart cities in India are being recast. In particular as Bunnell mentions in his commentary, Dholera is a crucial reminder of the 'intelligent cities' trope, which produced the Malaysian Super Information Corridor. Indeed one of the first endeavours of the Indian Smart City Taskforce was to visit Singapore to learn from its smart city initiatives. However, this learning has not included understanding the reasons behind the effective failure of Songdo, Dongtan and Masdar to attract their target population, to provide a seamless smart urbanity or to become zero energy. Thus while the Indian Prime Minister has recently visited several countries including USA (which had earlier banned Modi from entry) and garnered huge interest from investors to 'help' India build its 100 smart cities, this has not considered how everyday life in the smart city might hold the potential for new forms of democratic and emancipatory citizenships beyond the representational spaces of the sanitised, orderly and programmable smart polis.

Bunnell asks, '*what technologies are being (or could be) mobilized against those seeking to acquire land for smart cities in India based on 100 year old maps.*' Some of this is already shaping up with the use of online blogs and magazines written in local Gujarati language and by connecting with international networks of farmers' movements such as Via Campesina. The JAAG campaign is grassroots and utopian – albeit a more difficult utopia to materialise because of the state's use of 'lawfare' against it. And in this context JAAG is shaping new political imaginings of citizenship outside of city-ness. In answer to Bunnell's question – '*in what ways can investment in smart technology-enabled futures yield returns to more than just the corporate interests and political elites behind the smart cities business model in India*?' – This is where ethnographic and participatory research is essential and imminent. Watch this space.

Bibliography

Fernandes, L (2006) *India's New Middle Class*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MT.

Goldman, M (2011), "Speculative urbanism and the making of the next world city", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol 35(3), 555−581.

IRIS-UN (2013) *State of the Urban Youth, India 2012,* Iris Knowledge Foundation, Mumbai.

Roy, A (2011) The Blockade of the World-Class City: Dialectical Images of Indian Urbanism, in Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong eds. *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the art of being global*, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Sassen, S. (2014) *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Soderstorm, O., Pasche, T. and Klauser, F. (2014) Smart cities as corporate storytelling, *City,* vol. 18(3).

Vanolo, A. (2014) Smartmentality: The Smart City as Disciplinary Strategy, *Urban Studies*, 51: 883