1

Smart Cities

The Urban Panacea

As developing countries continued to witness urbanisation at a rate never seen before in the history of humankind, the year 2008 delivered a key moment, when the global population in urban areas surpassed that of their rural counterparts for the first time in human history. Such a scale of urbanisation resulting in intensive use of resources is often linked with environmental challenges including climate change that can make human life unsustainable on planet Earth. This has put the need for long-term sustainable development at the heart of any such urbanisation. The case is acutely severe in the Global South as countries such as India, China and Nigeria will be responsible for 35 per cent of the increase in urban population worldwide from 2018 to 2050 (UNPD, 2018). Thus, with such a large majority of the population living in the cities, it is crucial to solve the contradictions of developing these areas in a sustainable manner. This has resulted in a range of initiatives and scholarly discussions around technology's possible role in resolving climate change and sustainability issues.

Proponents argue that urbanisation should be seen less as a challenge and more as an opportunity to deliver economic growth and infrastructural upgrades while also addressing associated environmental concerns. Here, technology, and more specifically information and communications technology (ICT), is often proffered as a panacea to deliver sustainable urban development, addressing the challenges while maximising the opportunities. When ICT is applied at the scale of cities and towns, what we have are smart cities:[1] 'places where information technology is combined with infrastructure, architecture, everyday objects and our own bodies to address social, economic and environmental problems' (Townsend, 2013: 15). ICT's growing dominance is evident in the global smart city industry's valuation at USD 549.1 billion in 2023, a total that is expected to reach more than a trillion dollars by 2028 (Statista, 2024).

India, the most populated country as of 2024, has arguably been the epicentre of such rapid urbanisation and infrastructural transformations, including smart cities. In 2015, for example, the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, launched the National Smart Cities Mission,[2] a multibillion-dollar project to upgrade 100 existing Indian cities to smart cities. To explore the intersection of urbanisation and technology, this book studies one such project called Dholera Smart City, a project that is also the microcosm of India's urbanisation and development journey. It is situated in the western Indian province of Gujarat (Figure 1.1) and is supposed to include 920 square kilometres, twice the size of present-day Mumbai (Sampat, 2016). Launched and continuously promoted by Modi since his days as Gujarat's chief minister for more than a decade (2001–2014), Dholera has been a platform to reimagine the state and ideas of development. The project has witnessed protests by local farmers who stand to lose their farmlands to it. This book provides a detailed picture of how smart cities of the future are likely to be planned, delivered or governed against the backdrop of the socio-environmental collapse that has become a real threat to the entire planet.

Importantly, countries adopting such a model of economic growth have often chosen to practice liberal economic policies, referred to as neoliberalism,[3] the set of laissez-faire socio-economic policies practised since the 1980s across the globe (Harvey, 1989). Here, the market is projected as crucial to the management and delivery of such urban transformations to deliver growth with a limited role for the state to play (Brenner et al., 2002). Cities are to act as growth engines of the economy by incentivising investment by private sectors in the urban sphere. On the other hand, as technology is proffered as the solution to economic growth and environmental concerns, many political leaders with authoritarian and/or populist tendencies have used such policies of urbanisation and infrastructure building through 'seductive language and technologically utopian imaginings of the future' (Bunnell, 2015: 1). In the process, these leaders often combine liberal economic policies with illiberal political and cultural or religious agendas. Over the last few decades, countries as diverse as the United States of America, India, Brazil, the Philippines and Turkey, along with parts of Europe, have witnessed this coming together of neoliberalism and right-wing nationalism (Bello, 2019).

Essentially, these projects have become vehicles for the leaders to reimagine the concept of state and delivery of development. As the book will show, state and development become key platforms for the propagation of the two ideologies of neoliberalism and right-wing cultural or religious nationalism.

Figure 1.1 Map of India with the location of Dholera and the Delhi–Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC)

Source: DIPP (2018).

Note: The corridor connecting Delhi to Mumbai is marked light grey. Gujarat is highlighted in dark grey within which Dholera is located. Other important nodes along the corridor are shown. IR stands for Industrial Region and IA for Industrial Area.

Thus, this book lies at the intersection of themes concerning development, neoliberalism, smart urbanism and right-wing nationalism, and is of topical significance to a host of countries across the globe. At a critical juncture when neoliberalism and right-wing nationalism are becoming further entrenched,

this book demonstrates the intricate connections between these two ideologies, showing how they mutate and adapt in particular geographies.

India embraced market-oriented neoliberal policies in the early 1990s, a departure from the erstwhile state-led planning and development models towards a new private and market-oriented development (Jenkins, 1999). Gujarat has been amongst the leading provinces in the race to implement such policies.[4] Within such neoliberal endeavours of the province, Modi as the chief minister played a critical role through his unapologetic backing of a series of economically liberal policies. In that context, Modi saw Dholera smart city to be built in the hinterlands as the vehicle to 'use urbanisation as a business model' actively creating markets while turning its back to the challenges of existing Indian cities struggling with pollution, traffic congestion and slums (Datta, 2015: 9).

As India adopted neoliberal policies, the country also witnessed the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism or Hindutva[5] in the everyday lives of the state and citizens, especially since the 1990s. Here too, Modi's tenure as the chief minister of Gujarat and now as the prime minister of India is crucial, as they are marked by the continued rise of Hindutva. Scholars have rightly argued that his liberal economic policies have gone hand in hand with political illiberalism (Sud, 2012). As the book will document, in Dholera smart city, a quintessentially neoliberal project, Hindutva networks have taken newer forms to drive forward its exclusionary cultural and religious ideologies while accruing material benefits from the project. In the process, what is witnessed is a coming together of actors and practices of neoliberalism and Hindutva. The book tells the story of how Indian urban development policies have become ideological, technocratic and avowedly Hindu nationalist in their scope under the Modi administration.

Most importantly, the book will illustrate how both neoliberalism and Hindutva exhibit a number of contradictory traits between their ideologies and their practices. This theorisation of contradictory traits, what is termed as 'disjuncture', is a key contribution of the book. While neoliberalism is taken to imply an ideological emphasis on market ethics, competition and commodification, the practices in Dholera manifest the lack of competition or an ideal type of neoliberalism as it mutates depending on the context. Thus, the book challenges the textbook understanding of neoliberal development by demonstrating how the state and its actors with myriad interests work in practice. Similarly, Hindutva in practice in Dholera exhibits a departure from its foundational ideologies to be successful. In all, the target remains

the capture of the state and society for both neoliberalism and Hindutva. At the intersection of development, smart urbanism and right-wing nationalism, the book is of topical significance to understand how the very idea of the state is being transformed in Gujarat and India—beyond recognition—with implications that are global.

The book uses the state as an analytical lens to understand micro-practices of development in Dholera. Based on nine months of ethnography observing numerous actors across villages, corporations and the state, the dissertation explores how the everyday state functions in Dholera. The study finds that at various levels of government, the state constitutes and is simultaneously constituted by multiple intricate linkages between the actors and practices of neoliberalism and Hindutva. It shows how these linkages help to promote the cause of both ideologies, further entrenching them into institutions across state and society. In doing so, both neoliberalism and Hindutva use strategies that display disjuncture between their foundational ideologies and practices, which help them further their cause.

Dholera and Development: The Perpetual Association

> Development neither reaches us nor leaves us. It's an illusion….
>
> —A Dholera farmer

Within such stories of global change, a small place in the hinterlands, Dholera represents a peculiar history of development. The above quote by a local farmer epitomises the protracted history of development in Dholera. Dholera is one of the twenty-two villages located in a low-lying area off the Gulf of Khambhat (on the Arabian Sea) in Gujarat. These villages are being pooled together to build the first greenfield smart city of India called the Dholera smart city, also referred to as the Dholera Special Investment Region.[6] Although famous for producing the Bhalia wheat,[7] in recent years the provincial government of Gujarat has often termed the quality of land in the Dholera region as saline or infertile.[8] Through such narratives and the siting of an infrastructure project, Dholera's land has been rendered investible by enabling flows of commodities and capital to circulate between sites of investment and (global) markets (Li, 2014). The project has captured global attention due to its sheer size and continued promotion by Prime Minister Modi (Sampat, 2016). The delivery of the project, however, has witnessed the coming together of such market forces

along with right-wing nationalist actors in this small place. Analysing Dholera's history, present and future, this book tells the story behind the planning and implementation of the project, demonstrating the hegemonic roles played by the philosophies of Hindutva and neoliberalism.

As the book will elaborate, equally interesting is Dholera's protracted development history which mirrors the journey of development of the Indian state.[9] Since India's independence from the British, this small place called Dholera has been promised a number of major 'development' projects in accordance with, or against, the wishes of its people. They include proposals to build dams, canals, a sea port, an industrial estate, the smart city—as discussed in the following chapters. None of these projects has materialised. James Ferguson (1994) mentions the story of a villager from Lesotho saying: 'It seems that politics nowadays is nicknamed development.' This was due to the failure to deliver development despite multiple projects, while social problems such as inequalities remained. Not very different was the view of the Dholera farmer. Despite newer versions of development, be it state-led or market-led, none of those has ever been implemented. Although Dholera's land continues to lie idle, the visions around it mutate and multiply, becoming bigger, global and smarter.

Dholera is also part of the largest infrastructure project of India to date, the Delhi–Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC) along which industrial areas and investment regions are to be developed as smart cities along with a host of other infrastructure. As discussed earlier, such infrastructure and urbanisation projects have increasingly become key vehicles for economic growth in the last few decades. In addition to the global acceptance of neoliberalism as the main economic ideology that led to the adoption of such policies, a key factor has been the increasing urban population. At the current rate, 68 per cent of the global population will be urbanised by 2050 (UNPD, 2018). The major proportion of this is to come from the developing countries in Asia and Africa. For example, India, China and Nigeria will be responsible for 35 per cent of the increase in urban population worldwide from 2018 to 2050 (UNPD, 2018). This impetus behind urbanisation in the Global South led many proponents to argue that urbanisation should be seen as an opportunity and not as a challenge. Here, urbanisation itself becomes the growth engine of the economy as outlined previously. Hence, the solution is technology-led urbanisation, that is, smart cities to be delivered through neoliberal policies. Dholera is part of these imaginaries that technology can continue to deliver unlimited economic growth while tackling the side effects.

Urbanisation: A Confluence of Neoliberalism and Right-Wing Nationalism

While urbanisation is used as the engine for economic growth in the neoliberal era in distinct ways, its symbolic use is not new. Whereas the British built New Delhi as a symbol of the Raj to mark a break from India's previous rulers (the Mughals), the first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, often called the architect of modern India through his developmental state model with a socialist ethos, similarly opted to build new planned cities. While laying down the foundations of Chandigarh, India's first planned city in the modern era, Nehru argued: 'Let this be a new town symbolic of the freedom of India, unfettered by the traditions of the past … an expression of the nation's faith in the future' (Kalia, 2004, 2006). Nehru hired Le Corbusier, the Swiss-French architect while local Indian planners were behind the newly planned city of Gandhinagar, the provincial capital of Gujarat built on a similar ethos (Kalia, 2004). In recent years, governments have hired planners, and consultants seeking to use the 'blank slate' that potential sites such as Dholera provide to make a radical break from previous ideas of the state. As Modi launched the flagship 100 smart cities project, he said (Tolan, 2014):

> Cities in the past were built on riverbanks. They are now built along highways. But in the future, they will be built based on the availability of optical fiber networks and next-generation infrastructure.

Modi's comment that cities in the future will depend on 'next generation infrastructure' is an attempt to mark a departure from the previous ways of city planning where modern technology and market forces are key. Hence, the case of Dholera is significant as Modi continues to champion the project, possibly to mark a break from previous Nehruvian ideas of state socialism and bring in a sense of newness. The idea of delivering development through an infrastructure project such as Dholera comes at the back of significant changes witnessed over the last few decades following the hegemony of market forces. The task of analysing the practices of neoliberalism is significant in the current period. It is doubtful if there is any place in the world that remains untouched by market forces. The question of whether neoliberal policies are good or bad goes unchallenged by political parties from both the right and left. Ultimately, the triumph of the market seems imminent, being at the centre of various processes discussed under the rubric of economic liberalisation, globalisation, development and even democracy.

However, as the market has become the norm, issues of inequality between rich and poor, rural and urban, labour and capital have resulted in myriad reactions across societies. One of the common reactions to this has been the rise of authoritarian populist leaders often in the form of the 'strong man'.[10] Among such leaders, be it Modi, Donald Trump, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan or Rodrigo Duterte, often there is a push to increase natural resource extraction and similarly environmentally destructive practices. These leaders have often moved towards authoritarian tendencies, utilising state powers to increase surplus for a few, while moving away from any idea of welfare for the majority of the citizens (Scoones et al., 2018). We are witness to a distinct moment in history of the rise of right-wing nationalism hand in glove with neoliberal capitalism even if with variations. Of course, the intensity and scale vary across countries or even within a country. However, their global relevance is beyond doubt and that is where the study of Dholera in this book becomes important.

Scholars have elucidated how leaders with similar authoritarian or right-wing nationalist tendencies use seductive language and technologically utopian imaginings of the future (Bunnell, 2015) in these projects that are essentially embedded in neoliberal policies to bring in a semblance of progress even if at the cost of dispossession of large populations. The construction span of these infrastructure projects is usually rather long, during which such leaders may have sold their imageries at various platforms or won many elections using the project's grandeur as a measure of the leader's own success or ability to do something 'big'. Thus, what matters most for Dholera is how it is the biggest or the first smart city or how it is double the size of Delhi or six times the size of Shanghai.[11] Whether its promise has been delivered or not remains less important. At the same time, when such projects have faced protests by farmers, the 'charismatic' leaders have turned to authoritarianism or have gone back to other populist welfare measures to mitigate some of the losses of farmers or protestors, as this book will document. Overall, what we get is a combination of neoliberalism and right-wing nationalism, trends that are widespread across countries in Asia, Europe, North and South America (Scoones et al., 2018).

The extension of neoliberalism and right-wing nationalism to newer geographies across the world has driven countries and societies at an alarming pace towards heightened levels of inequality across income, race or religion. Whereas the confluence of the two ideologies continues to expand across India, Gujarat witnessed it at least a decade earlier, culminating in the rise of Modi. With respect to India, there have been theoretical (Chacko, 2018a, 2018b; Gopalakrishnan, 2006) or macro-level accounts of the commonalities between

neoliberalism and right-wing Hindu nationalism by various scholars (Breman, 2020; Corbridge and Harriss, 2000; Desai, 2006; Sud, 2012). Kohli (1990) argued that Hindutva has been used as an electoral strategy by the pro-business elite to connect with the large Hindu majority of the country. Varshney (1999) analysed it through identity politics that helped implement the economic reforms in the 1990s. Corbridge and Harriss (2000) argued it to be the outcome of an 'elite revolt', coming especially from the middle classes and upper castes[12] against an earlier model of state-directed economic development and social justice. While many of these explanations can be witnessed simultaneously in Gujarat, what is usually missing are micro-level studies that can give a richer account of the coming together of these ideologies in a particular place that this book provides.

The combination of economic liberalisation and right-wing nationalism may at first glance appear somewhat unexpected because the former is based on a liberal view of the economy while the latter is based on an illiberal, exclusionary view of state and society. Neoliberalism is a 'free trade faith' being essentially a transnational project reflecting the interests of finance capital (Bourdieu, 1998). On the other hand, Hindutva's foundational ideology vociferously opposes such global integration, instead invoking vague arrangements of economic nationalism. However, in practice, both have seen very little such contradiction as noticed by scholars across the world (Brenner et al., 2002). Despite apparent tension between the two ideologies, the disjuncture[13] between what they profess and what they practice enables the two ideologies to come together and align their interests. This is addressed through an analysis of the empirical observations and related literature in the book, leading to the arguments discussed across the remaining chapters.

Studying the State

Within this framework of neoliberalism and right-wing nationalism, the state remains at the centre of all developmental endeavours. Hence, the book examines these ideologies by using the state as an analytical lens while neoliberalism and Hindutva provide the context. It disentangles how the state has come to be constituted due to profound changes brought about by policies of neoliberalism and an extension of Hindu nationalism into these geographies. State refers to the set of institutions of political and executive control, 'a palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centred on government' (Abrams, 1988: 58; Harriss-White, 2003: 72; Mitchell, 1998). In other words, the state

'refers to the state apparatus—a set of political, administrative and coercive institutions and organisations, more or less well coordinated by an executive authority: the government' (Mooij, 1996, cited in Sud, 2007: 604). However, studying the everyday functioning of the state at the ground level in Dholera or in Gandhinagar, the book explores other dimensions that complicate such an understanding of the state as a concept. The state in practice here is referred to as the 'actually existing state' (AES), a multi-faceted, internally differentiated, pluralised entity rather than a homogenous one (Sinha, 2011). This proposed concept of the AES is explored further in the next chapters using four proposals. Through this, a more nuanced, situated understanding of how state policies emerge, how they take root in a particular place and their impact on the entity of the state is outlined.

To study the state in such a project, this book follows anthropologists of the state. Scholars have stressed the importance of 'studying the interactions between local functionaries and ordinary people' as the starting point for an ethnography of the state (Gupta and Sharma, 2006: 17). As Gupta and Ferguson (2002: 981) have pointed out regarding such interactions, '… it is here that it becomes possible to speak of states … as "Imagined"—that is, as constructed entities that are conceptualised and made socially effective through particular imaginative and symbolic devices that require study….' In trying to understand this, the book is interested in the everyday state and society's role in Dholera smart city, the practices and representations of the state, and people's experiences in the dynamics that are the outcomes of the project. How do everyday state practices in a project of urbanisation in a rural area affect state–society relations? What constitutes the AES in Dholera? Studying the everyday state highlights how it is a divergence from the idea that the state is a fixed or coherent unit while guiding us towards its multifacetedness (Gupta and Sharma, 2006: 10). Everyday practices of the state and the resulting representations bare the process, illuminating how the state or the idea of the state is 'created, negotiated, and contested' (Gupta and Sharma, 2006: 10).

But how does one connect a small place such as Dholera with the transformations taking place across the globe? Burawoy (1998, 2000) argued that the local cannot be studied as mere local places but only as places of interconnectedness. In this, the researcher moves 'from specific small observations in their ethnographic field towards outside to wider problems and larger structures within which the subject is contained or constrained in their practices' (Burawoy, 2000: 5; Appadurai, 1997; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). This also addresses the debate around the generalisability from a single