

Indian Cities: Of Utopias, Dystopias and Something in Between

The imaginations of Indian cities have oscillated between series of utopias, threats of dystopias and an actually produced reality of states in between. Utopias thus offer an interesting lens to understand the processes of urban transformation – what visions guide these and how these have changed over the years. The paper traces some of these shifts in utopias in relation to Indian urbanization and their meanings and embedded possibilities.

The concept of Utopia

The term 'Utopia' was coined by Thomas More in 1516 that means a nowhere place ie one that doesn't exist but has a place in imagination. It is thus a site of possibilities, inherently linked to the future. Edmund Burke dismisses the idea of utopia as 'utopias are really fantasies because they lack the continuity between those who are already dead, those who are living and those who are yet to be born'. On the other hand, Gordin et al(2000 p2) conceive of 'utopia, dystopia, chaos as not just ways of imagining the future (or the past) but also as concrete practices through which historically situated actors seek to reimagine their present and transform it into a plausible future'.

point out that utopias involve an analysis or diagnosis of the present, a review of the past and outline possibilities for the future. Yet even futures are constrained by the present. Thus, Mannheim points out that one of the limits of utopias is that they are conditioned by views of what is negative in the present and thus are not 'free' of time or history. To engage with utopias is thus to engage with ideas of change and to understand the radical (or otherwise) possibilities contained in them.

Utopias are interesting as imaginations but they become potent when they are backed by power. Ashish Nandy(1987) thus discusses the tranny of utopias wherein ideas of modernity, beauty, order were transposed onto the third world by the global north.

Changing Trajectories of Urban Utopias

Utopias have special significance for cities. They have been the instruments by which projects of city transformations have been envisioned, and executed. Cities represent an organisation of space under specific constellations of power, and thus vulnerable to several generations of 'transformative' projects. The Haussmanian transformation of Paris or the influence of the Big three ie Corbusier, Ebenezer Howard and Frank Lloyd Wright on several cities across the world are illustrations of the same. While all utopias may not be powered by any effort to translate them to reality; those ideas that are backed by power; bring in deliberate actions and application of resources to projects and influence a larger ecosystem that shapes the making, and governance of cities. In this context, several questions emerge. How are utopias produced and by whom? Who proposes, when and how do they acquire traction and who backs them and how? What do they diagnose, and what is being proposed?

Colonial cities were shorn of utopia; they were expressions of colonial interest and power inscribed in space. Independence however, brought in several ideas of change. Imaginations of the city ranged from the promise of inclusion away from the shackles of tradition aka Ambedkar to producing oases of planned cities as symbols of modern development to an overall non-worthiness of urbanization as a project. One utopia that can be traced in several initiatives till the 1960s is that of the city itself as a public project; cities that would be free of the divides of the colonial city and included all under the rubric of the plan. Shaw (2000) comments 'many of the new towns came to symbolize much more than their functional role because the Indian state ... (they)attempted to fashion a new society and economy to reflect its new-found freedom from colonial rule'. These imaginations intertwined with several sub projects such as that of the enhanced power of the state in relation to land and housing markets, the strengthening of expert bureaucratic bodies and state governments in governing cities and a disregard for local politics and government.

What was experienced was the tyranny of these utopias. Cities as created through deliberate actions and application of resources rather than through organic processes turned to be a strategy to escape chaos, disorder, dirt and commoning of Indian towns. The dirt, chaos thus continued to live in the divides already created by colonialism and in the peripheries of towns.

This was a time when India was still largely a land of villages, where urban had a low imprint. Currently, urbanization per se is thought of as a growth engine; and thus, calls for a high utopia. What is new is also the sense of urgency being brought to the project of urbanization: rural-urban migration, challenge of fast urbanisation, climate change and sustainability etc. Instead the ambition of planned cities creating opportunities for all is being forsaken to advance a project of smart cities which is in fact a project of fragmented and partial development of few cities. Smart cities are a global utopia. But does the idea even have the magnificence of scale to even be a utopia? Can it transform the entire urban scenario? Instead the idea seems to be focusing on that which is executable, ring-fenced, clearly circumscribed? It is being thrust upon places, economies, societies that are not ready for it and hence, possibly excluded from the 'places on their way to becoming smart'. Instead of moving towards smarter urbanization, we are moving to a highly un-utopian imagination of cities that look smart but lack the substance of smartness (a shift towards circular economies, inclusion) and the political agency to drive projects emerging from the top.

Heterotopian Possibilities?

The opposite of utopia is dystopia; the existence of urbanization beyond the metro cities (located in small towns, peripheries, areas that have not been planned or serviced legally) has always been seen as dystopian and city histories are witness to ongoing plans or moments to remove it or obliterate its existence. Thus Delhi had its Turkman Gate, Kolkata had Operation Sunshine; Mumbai had an overnight drive for removal of pavement dwellers under Antulay and so on. The current smart city prefers to see the entire city as dystopic and hence focuses on only a part of it for development while keeping the rest out of sight.

However, these unplanned, informal, dystopic are the actual sites of transformation, where the real dynamic in urbanisation is emerging. Here is where millions of ordinary people seek their livelihoods, struggle to stake claims and engage in a variety of strategies to not just make do but also improve their lives and spaces in which they live and work. These are spaces which symbolise the hope as articulated by Nandy, this is where... 'our native vernacular genius will corrupt the imported model of the post-industrial city and turn it into an impure, inefficient, but ultimately less malevolent hybrid'. The 'hope' is of a silent resistance to the violent project of 'urbanization' as it is unfolding in the country. It is a hope in the 'weapons of the weak' Scott (). However, this is also a passive project, where alternate ideas for the future city are not being birthed.

Simultaneously however, there is a rise in utopias that are more bottom up making claims on cities and the larger urbanization process. There are campaigns such as right to city which are taking shape and claim to represent these excluded sites and groups. Such campaigns are now reaching a new scalar height in reaching out to other groups of marginalised, asking questions on governance, development directions of the city and thereby seeking to democratise the hitherto exclusive nature of the city. Examples here include the Hamara Shahar Vikas Abhiyan(My city development Campaign) in Mumbai which intervened in the land use plan of Mumbai; These efforts are budding but could have the potential to form into heterotopias to borrow Nigam's (2010) terminology.

References

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