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Producing Informality, Imagining “Smart” Cities: Interrogating Hybrid States and Neoliberal Governmentality at the Urban Periphery in India

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The urbanizing peripheries of large cities in India constitute marginal spaces and dream-making spaces simultaneously, often in contiguity. Both these kinds of spaces are exceptional, operating outside normal laws, where the terms ‘marginal’ and ‘dream-making’ transcend a purely geographical meaning to include re-signifying and recasting social relations between people, place and the city. These exceptional spaces reveal a highly unequal and differentiated politics of space and subject formation. We read this unevenness as connected to the emergence of hybrid state formations that practice a form of governmentality designed to produce governable subjects and governable spaces. Such governmentality is informed by market principles as well as personalized modes of legitimacy (affect and charisma), and aims to discipline through calculated informality in (land use) planning, futurist visions and violence. Crucial to understanding exceptional spaces, therefore, is the way state power and democratic transformations are organized and used in the urbanizing periphery to secure economic and political control. Paradoxically, spaces of exception are also those in which “the creativity of the margins” is apparent (Das and Poole 2004) in new modes of politics, subjectivity and rebirth.

The paper focuses on the informalised city of Vasai-Virar, located on the edge of the metropolitan region of Mumbai to examine the evolution in its gangster-style governance: whereas formerly networks of ‘big men’ had not depended on the law but on force and violence, after the entry of formal government (the Vasai- Virar Municipal Corporation - VVMC), it was these same leaders who innovatively used land use planning law and the state apparatus to create/reinforce exceptional spaces and discipline certain groups. Studying the kinds of planning and governing rationalities that this state assemblage has engaged in reveals how it has spawned, governed and benefited from high levels of informality because of its janus-like nature: improvising and structured, centred in a patriarch ruler yet built on networks, founded on patronage and violence yet propagating grandiose dreamscapes of the future. The two-way nature of this governmentality - the strategic element to the ways in which territorial flexibility is deployed and visions are imagined by the local state as well as the tactical way in which the network functions to ensure (self) regulation happens even in domains where formal regulations don’t reach - is a particularly potent one. We squarely implicate the (local) state for generating and sustaining informality and inequality through means that it has legitimate control over – development control, planning for the future and violence. The paper also throws up larger questions of the future and role of the democratic state in cities in general, and in the peripheries

in particular.

As part of a rapidly urbanizing periphery of a megacity, Vasai-Virar serves as a vantage point for comparative (theoretical and empirical) research for several reasons. The peripheries of large cities or city regions are locales where we most explicitly see governance beyond the state (Swyngedouw 2005), partly because this is after all a terrain where formal local government has come much later. Networks of 'big men' (Hansen and Stepputat 2001), whose individual acts of patronage or terror dwarf the institution of the state, proliferate. Operating with some characteristics of 'mafia' they function via organized formal structures as well as informalized modes, with deep roots in governance and business simultaneously. This form of networked governance marks a departure from those commonly described (Swyngedouw 2005; Kooiman 1995) since it is located outside the grid of western liberal rationality and comprises a hybrid mix of earlier forms of rule and the more recently introduced bureaucratic apparatus of the state. It thus provides an effective perch from which to understand the hybrid nature of the state that has used democratic transformation to innovate new, more legitimate, forms of policing and informality, and advance neoliberal rule. It also enables a focus on rural-urban flows and connections, particularly useful in the context of an urbanizing India where the distinction between rural and urban is increasingly rendered liminal.

This paper is based on ethnographic explorations over the course of a year in Vasai- Virar.

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