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‘Deleting’ Dirty Politics: City Building as Self Making for Youth on the Urban Periphery

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This paper helps elucidate the contours of democratic youth politics in a newly-formed city on the periphery of the Indian metropolis, Mumbai. In this new city called Vasai Virar, male youth as a category is deliberately produced and mobilised to advance the local political party’s agenda of neoliberal city-building, convincingly packaged and sold as an opportunity for the young men to be a part of the emerging city’s development. In turn these young men use party politics and the city itself as a resource to carve out routes of social mobility. The symbiotic rise of the city and the produced category of youth has not only influenced the politics of the region but also the materiality of the shifting landscape where young men, encouraged by the political regime, act as builders, social workers, vote aggregators, brokers, fixers, strongmen and political leaders. We understand democratic politics as both a means of political authorization and a social relation through which governance is achieved (Piliavsky 2014). Therefore, this is also a story of how a patriarch ruler reinvented party politics in the person of his son to develop new “sambandh” with the youth based on promises of development (efficiency and transparency) and dignity (inclusion) for all. The trajectory overall reveals movement from a traditional-style politics that was based on patronage and coercion to a more ‘youthful’, hybrid politics that runs on discourse of corporate, neoliberal governance while maintaining its violent core. This metamorphosis, we argue, serves to recast/whitewash the rulers/party’s image from the violent past of gangster-style governance to one of selfless and efficient service to the public who had elected them and they were now accountable to. The promises made to youth about the real possibilities for them to access power by entering into politics, on the other hand, reveal themselves to be largely illusory.

Neoliberal technologies of rule are at the heart of this local state as evidenced in the calculated absence of the state in a social welfare role and the focus on politically managing youth’s conduct through two distinct types of practices. The first steers the conduct of the individual and focuses on the process of self-making, of re-invention using the resource of the city. The second is directed at city building and the (re-) branding of the city through vision and hype. Both self-making and city-building practices are inextricably connected. Processes of self-making focuses on exploring how youth are constantly engaged in improvising opportunities in the peripheries in a context where they have no access to secure, (white-collar) jobs or public services. Navigating their uncertain and shifting world occurs through accessing different routes to power at particular conjunctures – during elections, through “social work”, through building neighbourhoods and schools. Key to their convertability is building and sustaining networks with the aim of creating social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term (Bourdieu 1986). For young men without access to stable employment, a party position serves as virtually the only opportunity to build a network and through it a successful business, gain social status and political power.

Processes of city-building on the other hand, portray new imaginations for a “smart” city.

The patriarch ruler's son plays a key role in representing and forwarding these futuristic visions through his grand, utopian plans and charismatic personality that hinges on his international education and his rhetoric of "corporate" style governance. These ideals and plans seek to directly speak to the youth and are therefore associated with certain values (such as technology) and lifestyle attributes (corporate parks, international schools and colleges, olympic-style sports complexes, malls) desirable to the youth. They are designed to solicit the keen participation of the youth in these soon-to-be futures, each vision serving as a vehicle for the soaring aspirations of this aspirational class. Through these utopian blueprints and promises of an urban, socio-cultural life-style, consent for the local state and its rule is achieved. Through engagement in this project, the category of youth that is seen as a potential menace is managed and made governable.