**Utopian urbanism and representational city-ness:**

**on the Dholera before Dholera smart city**

Tariq Jazeel
Department of Geography
University College London
26 Bedford Way, UK
WC1H 0AP
t.jazeel@ucl.ac.uk

**Abstract** This commentary responds to Ayona Datta's critique of India's smart city agenda by emphasizing the representational work that urban futures require. In the context of Dholera smart city, I draw attention to the discursive terrains – around city-ness and utopianism in particular – mobilized by the state in order to normalize the inevitability of exclusionary urban planning and imaginations. I suggest these representational fields are key battlegrounds for critical urban geography.

More than half way through Ayona Datta's important article that critically interrogates the inception and emergence of Dholera smart city, we learn that Dholera – that is, the actually existing Dholera – is a small village in the Gulf of Khambat in Gujarat, one of 22 other villages that "will be pooled together to constitute Dholera smart city" (Datta 2014a, p.20). We learn that this low-lying, predominantly rural region has a scattered population comprising around 38,000 inhabitants, the majority of whom are of the Koli Patel caste, an indigenous fishing community who, with little or no help from the state, battle against high, year-round levels of soil salination that make subsistence agriculture a challenge. Towards the end of the article, in the last two sub-sections, Datta goes on to describe briefly the work of the *Jameen Adhikar*

*Andolan Gujarat* (JAAG) coalition of farmer's cooperatives that, from the early 2000s, have organized and protested with moderate success against state development and seizure of their land under the 2009 Special Investment Region (SIR) act. All of this is preceded, however, by her incisive and astute critique of Dholera smart city itself. In other words, in Datta's article Dholera smart city has an overwhelming primacy as *object* of analysis in relation to the eponymous village that it promises to eventually devour.

In making this observation I do not mean to critique Datta's important intervention into India's smart city craze. Rather, I do so to draw attention to the key point I want to draw out in this short commentary: that is, the representational work upon which urban futures depend, and more unequivocally upon which 'city-ness' depends as an imaginative geography. For Dholera smart city does not yet exist. It is a plan, an imaginary, an ideology even, and one that as Datta stresses has an uncertain future. As she has put it elsewhere, any casual visitor to the region would soon "understand that Dholera is not yet a place" (Datta 2014b, n/p). But it is. Dholera smart city is not planned on terra nullis. Its future materialization will violently overwrite already written space. And so it is precisely this tension between the discursive primacy of an imagined city-to-come, smart or otherwise, and the relative secondariness of the actually existing village of Dholera that I pick up on here.

To stress that Dholera smart city does not exist materially is by no means to suggest it is not real. In the context of utopian urbanism, the imagined future is very much part of the real; cities are never complete. As Henri Lefebvre (2003 [1970], p.45) has put it, for urbanism "the possible is… part of the real and gives it a sense of direction, an orientation, a clear path to the horizon…" The imagined "possible" for Lefebvre (ibid., p.17), moves teleologically toward the urban, and in doing so it seeks

to overcome and break through the obstacles that make it *im*possible in the present. In the context of Dholera smart city as an idea, an imaginary, this movement toward a smart urban future for the region, one that will obliterate all pre-modern impediments standing in its way, seems an almost archetypal negotiation of the 'agrarian question': the capitalist's challenge to eliminate precapitalist social relations in rural space, bringing them into line with the normative agenda of capital accumulation and economic growth that is now the hallmark of neo-liberal states (see Gidwani 2008). And it is the discursive power of the city-to-come that achieves this kind of normalization and universalization of the urban imagination (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]).

This is all too visible in Dholera smart city's textual field. That Dholera smart city does not yet exist makes it no less palpable nor inevitable, and Datta's article makes clear, if not wholly explicit, the representational terrain through which Dholera smart city is being actualized, visualized, and can be touched and felt *in the absence* of any substantive material city: the future oriented technical reports, the statistical projections, the international engineering expertise and consultancy, the glossy CGIs and promotional videos, the national economic projections. These seem to be the weapons of the predatory 'utopian urbanism' that Datta's article implicates. What I want to emphasize here is simply the discursive performativity of smart city-ness; the ways that a litany of speech acts make Dholera smart city seem more real than the village of Dholera, even though the latter exists materially whereas the former as yet does not. I will return below to the Dholera before Dholera smart city.

As Datta's paper allows us to grasp, but does not fully develop, city-ness is in this sense as representational as it is material. It works as a 'thought object', a 'category of practice' (see Wachsmith 2014, p.78), or as Lefebvre (2003 [1970], p.17) might have it, an "illuminating virtuality" for a Dholera smart-city-to-come. Lefebvre,

however, was clear that the transcendence that illuminating virtuality offers, that is its ability to take us elsewhere imaginatively, is utopian, or "u-topic" (ibid., p.22). This is key, because in Datta's intervention into Dholera's discursive field utopianism emerges as itself a discourse that seems to be doing an inordinate amount of diffuse, yet we must assume persuasive, work. Utopianism variously represents a genealogy of post-independent urban planning, it is also synonymous with new 21$^{st}$ century 'greenfield' cities (p.3), at turns it comes to stand for corporately financed technology led urbanization (p.5), it also offers the blueprint for a new era of social and economic prosperity (p.12), and stands as a promise for new ecological forms of urbanization. As Datta (2014a, p.25) puts it, "Dholera presents such an all-encompassing utopia of a future city that its scaling up to a national level seemed inevitable when it was mentioned in the state of the Union budget in February 2013."

What this raises is the simple question of how the state deploys a diffuse discourse of utopianism as a promise. In other words, how can we understand the ways the state mobilizes a rather vague and "all-encompassing" notion of utopian urbanism – an empty signifier? – to legitimize not just Dholera's promise, but moreover the multiple dispossessions and evictions its realization will inevitably promulgate? Dholera in this sense is also something of a Trojan horse if we are to take seriously its metonymic relationship to the Narendra Modi government's promise of 100 new Indian smart cities to be built over the next few decades. For if the people can be convinced of Dholera's rather vague utopian promise, then we must assume that 99 more such state sponsored land grabs will follow. And in this process, as I have stressed above, the spatial signifier 'utopian urbanism' is doing much of the violent, dirty and persuasive work of the neoliberal state.

In all this, I want to stress the critical intellectual importance of representational work, particularly that which is poised to be able to reclaim some of the spatial categories coopted by the state and by corporate power to legitimize the forms of dispossession that smart city building will necessarily entail. It is churlish to chide Datta's article, which is rigorous, responsible, interventionary and exciting precisely for the ways that it speaks truth to power. Yet my sense is that a slightly more fine-grained analysis of the ways that 'utopian urbanism' has been wittingly or unwittingly deployed by constellations of power to achieve certain neoliberal ends, would enable a more forceful politico-intellectual counterpunch to India's smart city craze. Perhaps this more generally is a call for more thorough workings between postcolonial theory and urban studies, that is to say those postcolonial approaches engaging fulsomely with the (dis)continuous textual fabrics of our worlds. For as soon as we see that utopianism is a powerful spatial categorization, we can also how it may usefully be claimed back from the state, snatched from the jaws of power, and this is a point of which I know Datta is aware. As she has written elsewhere, the work of the JAAG activists – in their fight against land grabs, loss of livelihoods and evictions, and in their pursuit of social and environmental justice – is itself a "utopian social dream" (Datta 2014b n/p). In other words, the state has no preordained right to define the content of utopia. Utopianism, as Ernst Bloch would have it, is a people's concept.

How then to go about redefining, reorienting, the utopian dream of Dholera? Here I want to return to my opening observations, but not before reiterating that my desire in this commentary remains to write in solidarity with Datta. It is somewhat inevitable that Dholera smart city emerges in her article as the primary object of analysis. Indeed, for a putative urban geography it stands to reason that 'the city' should constitute the primary focus of inquiry. But we should also remember that the

breakneck speed with which Dholera's 'instant urbanism' is being assembled, being expertly conjured, discursively so, easily subsumes resistant voices or those that would want to stubbornly refuse the hegemonic urban imaginary. There is a curious sense then that despite Datta's critique of the precise contours and faultlines of Dholera's urbanization, hers is an argument unwittingly made to participate in the state's discursive enactment of Dholera smart city's inevitability precisely because it enters into a discourse about its city-ness to-come. I do not want to push this point to a dismal post-political cul-de-sac, nor do I want to suggest that the contours of smart city utopian urbanism should not be tackled head on, as Datta commendably does. However, I do want to stress again, as Datta herself does but only toward the end of her paper, that subaltern actors are key to the political work to be done if the Dholera smart city juggernaut is to be slowed. And I also want to stress that our work as critical geographers, urban or otherwise, may well offer a valuable tool for subaltern representations in the face of hegemonic smart city narratives.

If, as I have suggested in this commentary, city-ness is as representational as it is material, then quite simply alternative representations are required to arrest the force of smart city urban utopianism. Here is where it is paramount that the subaltern geographies of those that JAAG represent are brought into representation, given space, visibility and legitimacy across the textual terrain that currently makes Dholera's smart city urban future seem inevitable and hence real. As I have argued elsewhere (Jazeel 2014, p.100), the radical potential of 'subaltern geographies' (as opposed to histories) is in their ability to fracture the dialectical certainty of hegemonic spatial theorizations, or in this case of hegemonic urban futures. If Datta's article chips away at the self-assured discourse of utopian urbanism that, with dizzying speed, is consolidating Dholera's actuality as a smart city-to-come, then her

effort requires the supplementary ethnographic and testimonial work that disseminates JAAG activists' alternative spatial narratives loudly and widely, providing them with as much legitimacy and visibility as the claims of smart city inevitability.

The city is a politic economic material entity for sure, yet as Datta's article enables us to grasp, it is also a representational field, a spatial signifier that performatively precipitates its own material manifestation. What this means is that the material effects of rampant neoliberal urbanization require forceful material and legal resistance yes, but they also require discursive strategies to change the ideological carapace; a carapace that routinely legitimizes the ways that power disguises dispossession and disenfranchisement as the inevitable march of progress. The Dholera before Dholera smart city *is* a place, and as Datta (2014b, n/p) herself has put it, for many "the only way that Dholera can be a smart city is if it never gets built at all."

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