

There is a complex relationship between technology, space, and the production of the ideological nation state. In the last two decades of the expansion of Information and Communication Technology in India, there have been significant moments where the proliferation of technology and spaces that have been inflected by digital technologies have led to a reconfiguration of the domains of life, labour and language. The emergence of the shopping malls and consumer culture, the construction of electronic cities and special economic zones, the imagination of mega-cities and information cities, have all led to new models of citizenship, nationalism and governance.

Especially within governance, there has been a continuing of the Development rhetoric with an increased focus on expansion of administrative and government services into the rural areas. Simultaneously, there has also been the construction of the new urban cities that are being developed in terms of architecture, lifestyles, economies and social structures that serve as significant nodes in global flows of capital, information and infrastructure. These two faces are often clubbed together as e-governance and are under great scrutiny and have been discussed through many different disciplinary perspectives, concentrating on the efficacy, validity, technological choices, the politics that inform the spread of e-governance, the local contexts within which these projects emerge and the way they are changing the texture of the relationship between the Nation State and the Citizen in many different ways. While these metric reports and evaluations, often funded and propelled by external agencies are of great importance, most of them end up in analysing what I call e-government. I take this opportunity to posit a stark and precise difference between e-government and e-governance, which I think is particularly necessary in order to provide a more

comprehensive understanding of the processes of technology inflected governmentality and the politics that they are informed by.

e-government, in my understanding, refers absolutely, to the administrative and infrastructural aspects of government. The creation of municipal and other regional bodies, the administrative policies and processes, the financial and technological actors involved, the touchstones upon which the efficacy, scope and scale of the different processes are measured, the digitization of resources and the making availability of basic IT infrastructure and correction of the information imbalance, are all a part of e-government. With e-government, we are particularly interested in looking at the stages of conceptualisation, development, deployment and support, thus producing tangible and calculable parameters which can be used to talk of and understand the projects or processes under scrutiny. It also ensures that we can break up the complex and often inaccessible information on government policies, acts, visions and functioning, into small practical units which can be measured by different standards, eventually leading to the understanding of the present scenario of the nation and the future visions that it hopes to achieve.

Hence, for example, we have a S.M.A.R.T. code - Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent code by which we judge the efficacy or the relevance of e-government projects. Similarly we have indices of e-readiness by which we identify various regions and their readiness and capacity to embrace e-governance as integral to the functioning. These definitions and understandings of e-government borrow their paradigms of success evaluation from the corporate that allies itself with the State in the Public Private Partnerships (PPP) that have been the basis of e-government in India.

e-governance can be identified as distinct from these aforementioned descriptions. Even before I try to posit an understanding of e-governance I want to emphasise that I am not trying to introduce a rift between the two and understand that there are several overlaps and that in an ideal world one would inform the other. I also want to clarify that this is not a conscious distinction and that the vocabulary does not exist very clearly; it is common to use e-governance and e-government as interchangeable terms which mean the same thing. Having said that, I want to start by suggesting that the notion of e-governance is more an ideological notion rather than a tangible process. However, as Althusser makes it so clear for us, the ideological nation or notion is not necessarily abstract and produces several practices and identities which are informed by them. Michele Foucault's idea of 'Governmentality' – a state of governance, regulation and containment that informs the very identity, existence and material practices of the people – who we also call citizens – subjected to this regime, is perhaps a better jumping point into understanding the notion of e-governance. If e-government deals with the questions of catering to citizens and producing citizen centric services which would give greater access and 'empowerment' to the different communities, e-governance is the process by which these citizens and communities are defined and created.

What I want to suggest is that the communities of citizens or collectives or the civil and political societies are not created ex-nihilo. The presence of the nation state does not automatically lead to the production of citizens or communities which are in place and need to be catered to. The notion of governance or e-governance which is actually governance inflected by technology to make technological units as integral structures of governance, needs to stem from here. E-governance, as I define it, for this presentation, is the way by

which the ideological nation state, the aspired for citizen subjectivity and the relationship between the two can be understood. It looks at the responsibilities of the state and the citizens subject to the state. What are the ways by which we define the State? Does the State exist in the service of the citizen or is it the other way round? What are the reciprocal rights and responsibility for the State and the Subject? How does the government get informed by the governance? What are the ideological apparatuses that the State establishes in order to materially invent itself? Are the ideological apparatuses changed because they get inflected with technology?

To make my argument more lucid, let me borrow from two different analyses of one of the most celebrated e-governance projects in Karnataka – The Bhoomi Project. Bhoomi doesn't really require introductions to the audience we have here but to briefly summarise it, Bhoomi was a rural e-governance initiative which aimed at digitizing land records for rural Karnataka and making the information available to the relevant owners of the land from the kiosks which have been strategically scattered all over the State. It has been a triumph that under the Bhoomi project, 20 million records were digitized and are now made available from citizen service centres across the state. It has won prestigious awards and has been recognised as a model for land revenue digitization processes. Such an account of Bhoomi, that evaluates on the SMART code that we talked about earlier, appreciates the government or the administrative part of Bhoomi. It indeed allows for information dissemination and cuts down severely on the time taken earlier to obtain information about land records. An analysis of e-government stops here and what is left is only a technological despair at some of the choices that Bhoomi has made and how it can be made more robust as a system.

However, if we start looking at Bhoomi from the viewpoint of e-governance, a whole set of unanswered questions emerges. The CASUM-M report on the Bhoomi project opens with specific questions that challenge the very need or political purport of Bhoomi. ‘What happens to cities and city regions in poorer countries when they begin to attract global corporate investments? More specifically, what are the political consequences of actions by their political and administrative elite claim justified as a way for cities to be global players? Does the digitization of land titles need to be framed within larger issues of Governance and move beyond narrow techno-administrative narratives?’ The report spearheaded by Solomon Benjamin, concludes very incisively that there is a ‘need to replace politically neutered concepts like ‘transparency’, ‘efficiency’, ‘governance’, and ‘best practice’ with conceptually more rigorous terms that reflect the uneven terrain of power and control that governance embodies...[and that]researching ‘E-governance’ needs to move beyond narrow technocratic concerns and be located in grounded ways set in larger political economies of corporate led globalization in cities of poor countries.’

It is from this analysis and my own understanding of e-governance that I give you a brief analysis of the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project which is figurehead of the Mega-city restructuring and the Vibrant Gujarat campaign that has been rapidly changing the tone and texture of the city of Ahmedabad.

### **The SRDP and aspiration**

This is a particular story of the Indian State’s Mega-City project that started in India in 2001 and focuses on a singular incident of the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project in the city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat. As a part of the Nation wide initiative to build IT-cities or

Mega-cities which can serve as the hubs of IT development to support the bludgeoning globalised economy, the city of Ahmedabad, once the textile and industrial capital of the country was put back upon the map as a site for constructing the mega-city. Generally acclaimed for its shrewd and enterprising business community and the home of the Hindu Right Wing Political Party (BJP), Ahmedabad is a city that is divided by the river Sabarmati. The Sabarmati runs through the city, dividing it into the old and the new, serving as the life-line for water and livelihood of most of the city.

Historically, the Sabarmati riverfront has housed the official slums that provide home to the manual labour and immigrant communities in the city. In the post-independent India, a large section of the riverfront was given to the migrants who came from Pakistan in the times of partition. Similarly, refugees that came to Gujarat from Bangladesh, during its partition from Pakistan also found home here. The migrating communities from around Ahmedabad but also from Rajasthan and Bihar, who came to Gujarat in search of employment opportunities, also found their home in these slums. The riverfront also provided a lifeline for many who found agriculture, cultivation and other home-based industries for running their houses. The central location of the slums, the cheap housing and the easy availability of water made it an ideal location for the people working in the informal sectors and day wagers. Most manual labour, domestic help, day wagers, hawkers, vendors, people selling wares on the streets, women in the informal sectors, etc. have found the riverfront one of the most convenient spaces of living, giving them easy access to the work spaces and essential resources for survival. The Sabarmati riverfront, over the last fifty years has also become a second hand market of used and recycled goods, clothes, furniture, household wares, fixtures, construction material, books etc. According to the last census in 2001, the Sabarmati

riverfront housed more than 20,000 families made of around a 1, 00,000 people on its 25 km long shoreline. The current informal estimate puts the figure to around 2,30,0000 people who live on the shoreline. The number of people and businesses supported indirectly by the riverfront sites is naturally much higher.

In 2004, as a part of the Vibrant Gujarat project initiated by the state of Gujarat, Ahmedabad became a part of the mega-city project. The imagination of Ahmedabad as a part of the larger network of international IT services and globalised capital entailed a significant restructuring of the city to meet the international standards conducive to Foreign Investments in the state. The building of roads, availability of cost efficient and comfortable public services, development of lifestyle consumerist spaces like malls and multiplexes, encouraging the service and hospitality industry, the reading down of the liquor prohibition law, beautification of the city with the construction of lakes and gardens, encouraging the growth of IT education and English medium education in the state, the e-governance projects and the cultural commoditisation of the city's heritage resources are all a part of the larger techno narratives of the Mega-City project.

The Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project (SRDP) is also a part of these changes in the city. The SRDP, now already under implementation since the last four years, is the face-lift being given to the global city. More than 20,000 families have been relocated to new and far-away spaces in order to make way for neon and glass, steel and chrome spaces of consumption, recreation and leisure for the people who are expected in the city as a part of the Mega-city project. The SRDP was initiated as an attempt to recreate a skyline for the city, modelling it on the surface imaginations of other global nodes – Shanghai, Taipei, Tokyo.

This was not the first time that the riverfront project has been proposed in the history of the state. The first riverfront beautification proposal came in 1999 when the State, on the premise that the slums in the riverfront are unhygienic and breeding grounds for epidemics, tried to reclaim the land for other purposes. However, a strong campaign of protest from the inhabitants of the area, aided by many non-governmental organisations and activists, thwarted the effort. After the two month long communal riots in 2001, the riverfront project was again proposed, claiming that the riverfront houses some of the dangerous elements that disrupt the safety and security of the city. However, this claim was also found to be dubious and the State's attempt at reclaiming the land was frustrated. Further suggestions were made that it is the State's responsibility to provide health, hygiene and security to the many minority communities which populate the riverfront and that removing them or relocating them is not only an act of violence but also a shirking of the responsibilities of the State towards the citizens.

However, in 2004, when the Mega City Project started taking shape under the aegis of the Vibrant Gujarat Programme, the SRDP was initiated with a different logic. This was the logic of e-governance. The idea was to connect Ahmedabad city with the other larger nodes in the networks of globalisation by building infrastructure that would attract future employment opportunities, huge foreign investments and the emergence of new economic sectors in the BPO and the Call-Centre industries. So powerful was this imagination of that the SRDP was welcomed and met with very little protest either from the people who were being relocated or the non-governmental and Human Rights organisations that have, in the past, resisted such moves. The families were being relocated to the far fringes of the city, sometimes as far away as 25 kms from the original locations. It would be very difficult for

the earning members of the family to travel to their places of employment, sometimes causing them to spend more money on the transport than they might be able to earn in a day. Similar problems would arise for children. Due to the huge settlement of many years, many municipal and free schools have been established in the area for the children from the slums, which now become redundant. Moreover, the new locations where they are being relocated do not have adequate infrastructure for the children to be admitted. Many informal businesses and trades used to flourish because of the location as well as the proximity to the river. The relocation and rehabilitation plans do intend to look at the questions but earlier attempts at rehabilitation by the State have been often failed and flawed. What is interesting is that apart from a very few handful individual activists, nobody has registered protest against the reclaiming of the land for the new global face of the city.

The little protest that arose, deployed the parameters of efficient e-government and were quickly thwarted because the planners already had ensured effective relocation packages that included employment, remuneration and rehabilitation. The people who were being affected the most by the relocation were also accepting it without any apparent protest and thus protests were dropped. As an e-government project the SRDP seems to be an ideal project that successfully achieves its aims without any apparent violence on the communities that are being relocated.

However, an approach from the notion of the e-governance, produces interesting insights. In my ethnographic interviews with the people who were being affected by the relocation, talked about their aspiration as the motivation for the relocation. This is not a mere aspiration of upward mobility or class fluidity but the aspiration of appropriating a model

citizenship for themselves. Most of them looked upon the relocation as a 'sacrifice' akin to the sacrifices their ancestors made during the partition, for the better of the future generations. They accepted this trope of invisibility – of being flung to the fringes, with radical restructuring of their life and habits – as their contribution to the techno narratives of the India Shining campaign. The relocation in the larger technonarrative of land politics, became a trope by which they feel implicated in the imagination, sustenance and development of the ICT dreams that are being integrated in the imagination of the model citizen of the globalised country. This aspiration would never be documented as a part of the political relocation. Even though the aspiration motivates the relocation, it will never feature as a parameter by which the project and its subsequent relocation and rehabilitation will be measured. The aspiration which is the chief trope by which the e-governance initiative is carried on, shall not feature as a way of mapping the future of the relocated communities. The exhaustive focus on questions of e-government obliterates the phenomenological or experiential expectations or imaginations of the people under question. At the end of the day, the political gets reduced to quantitative data that can be sifted through the neutral SMART categories where as the politics of desire or aspiration will be lost. What happens in this obliteration of the aspired or the imagined is an epistemic violence that reduces the citizens to quantitative datasets that are identified by biometric data and documents. The e-governance, as has been defined in this particular presentation comes and shows not only the absence of contexts from our administrative processes – e-government – but also how the lack of ideological implications of government – e-governance – make these projects perpetuate violences and injustices which otherwise cannot be documented or accounted for.

## **Conclusion**

It was the intention of this presentation to revisit the site of e-governance and look at the rift between government and governance. I have hoped to present governance as an epistemological category, not only in the conceptualisation of the different initiatives but also in the assessment and further suturing of such initiatives into the larger narratives of political choice, experience and aspiration. Several themes are implicated in the questions that I have tried to raise in this discussion. It means that we need to further evaluate the construction and definition of the civil society and their politics. Models of good governance and new practices of citizenship need to be revisited in the light of these approaches. Several authors have mentioned the fragility of being connected to international capital where fluctuations in the global economy with today's electronic connectivity, can be instantaneous. The notion of e-governance forces us to look at the restructuring of land and technologised cities beyond the narrow techno-narratives and driving the argument into much larger territories of contradictions in the political and economic terrain.