

Two-day Workshop

on

Infrastructure and the Right to the City: Perspectives from India

15-16th February 2018

Institute of Development Studies Kolkata

Infrastructural development of a city shapes and defines the urban space and imbues it with a particular character that informs people's lived experience as well as their imagination. In this workshop, we would like to critically engage with various forms of urban infrastructure in Indian cities, and see how they fashioned colonial and post-colonial urbanism and urban life in the subcontinent. For us, infrastructure does not only mean the built environment or the physical artifacts; it also includes the way these material entities shape or sought to shape people's conduct in the city. Building of roads, sewerage, bridges, monuments have been a staple of urban history for a long time now. Numerous studies have discussed the ideas and thinking of the planners and the government in creating the city. They have laid bare the political exigencies, financial constraints and various ideological imperatives that governed the state and its planners in shaping the city. Likewise, scholars have focused on the ways in which people negotiate, challenge or subvert the expected uses of these artifacts. Conflicts and negotiations between the planners' vision and people's reality are part of any urban system. We seek to bring these two strands in conversation by focusing on the politics of infrastructural programme of a city which helps certain groups, while at the same time makes life difficult for some other groups. What are the considerations of the planners when they conceive a particular project? Which groups of population benefit? How do people bend norms and structures to shape their own city? In short, how do they articulate their right to the city?

We invited papers on the following sub-themes:

Planning and the Built-environment: What role does the planning of a city play in creating the infrastructural facilities? Sanitation, public health, free circulation of air and water, and broad thoroughfares were crucial for any planning vision of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Studying these initiatives—by looking at various levels of the official voice and negotiations among them—we can see the changes brought about in the cities from the above. How can we think about the different urban conglomerations of India—the colonial metropolis, the post-independent Nehruvian cities, the steel towns, neo-liberal new towns, 'smart' cities and towns beyond metropolis? How can we locate the shifts, if any, between the colonial and post-colonial thinking on cities?

Infrastructure and Urban Governance: Managing traffic flows, sanitary regulations, clearing waste, circulating provisions are some of the essential everyday features of a city. The high density of population makes it necessary to deploy various mechanisms to ensure a smooth functioning of urban life. Along with that, there are times of ‘crisis’—be it political protests, riot, religious processions, petty disputes or large-scale violence. In these hours, policing the city and managing the mob becomes important. How does the urban infrastructure figures in everyday governance of the city and also during ‘crisis’ situations? How do the protesters manoeuvre in the city? How does the morphology aid or abet them? What are the ways in which the state tries to regulate the ‘unruly’, ‘uncommon’ situations? Another important aspect of governing the city relates to the land use pattern and the issue of development and displacement associated with land ownership. Any infrastructural development needs land. So, looking at the land relations in an urban set-up is extremely crucial. Development of the city often brings in its wake displacement for a large number of people. What happens to these people? How do they manage to survive in the city even after eviction? What does the government do to carry on with their vision of development?

Access to Infrastructure: One of the crucial elements in any city is the access to various urban facilities. The question of access brings forth important aspects of the city life where often class, caste, gender, religion, physical abilities play significant role to shape the urban lives of the people. In Indian cities, social registers determine the nature of participation of a person in urban activities. We want to look at various levels of access, or its denial—from neighbourhood clubs to gated communities, from air-conditioned public transport to public toilets, ghettoization—to understand the nature of urban existence in India. Linked to the question of access are the issues of social justice and inclusion/exclusion in the city. Who gets the opportunity to avail various public services in the city? What happens when the numerous sections of marginal population who are essential to the everyday running of the city are regularly relegated to the fringes of urban society? How does the resident population treat daily commuters? How do the commuters create their own networks and spaces in the city? These are some of the many ways through which we can think and complicate our understanding of urban infrastructure and its relationship to the people.

Experiences: What is the sensory experience of the city for those who live in it? How does it differ from place to place, inside the city, along, class, gender, age, religion and caste lines? What is the everyday of the city, how is it constituted by everyday practices of its inhabitants, commuters and caretakers? How do they define the city for their own purposes and how do these definitions circulate in contemporary cultures? Experiences of cleanliness and filth, of height and depth, of access and inaccessibility, or of control and deregulation, are subjective and communitarian and we are particularly interested in critically understanding such urban experiences across caste, class, gender, age, religion and other possible registers.
