

Third World City in the Information Age

Dipankar Sinha

Calcutta University, India

INTRODUCTION

It could be one of the great paradoxes of history that the third world continues to urbanize itself at a faster pace than the developed world. At the same time, third-world cities, inevitably at the cost of the rural areas, continue to play the game of one-upmanship in proclaiming themselves the best possible hub of the information and communication technology (ICT). Such a phenomenon is natural not only because in the third world the cities are the privileged sites or spaces in which any new and progressive process or event is supposed to take root but also because the cities, the firm favorites of the policymaking elite of the third world, are supposed to be the privileged channels in the trickle-down process of development. In this process, the hinterland (the suburbs and the rural areas, mostly in that order) fall behind. Thus, a veteran scholar of third-world urbanization, T. G. McGee (1971), described third world cities either as “enclaves” (spaces meant for the elite’s games surrounded by “hostile peasantry”) or as “beachheads” (centers of modernization and catalysts for economic growth) (p. 13). However, cities in the third world are not monolithic entities enjoying exclusive occupation by elites and other privileged sections of society. Our real-life experience shows that third-world cities that are inhabited by nearly one-third of the world’s urban population provide classic and shocking contrasts in terms of playing host to affluent, powerful citizenry on the one hand and to their underprivileged, powerless counterparts—ordinary people (the middle-middle/lower-middle classes downward) on the other hand. The latter, at best, possess only the legal attributes of citizenship, and, at worst, they are devoid of even that to remain utterly marginalized if not pulverized. It is in this setting that the third-world city opens itself up to the information age and its concomitant: digital governance.

This article limits itself to drawing attention to the fate of the third-world city caught in the vortex of the information age and the associated rhetoric of salvation. In the process, it reveals certain general indicative trends. It does not provide any fixed blueprint for immediate crisis solving, keeping in mind the variety that exists in third-world cities despite a substantial degree of commonality among them. However, it does endorse the view

(Visvanathan, 2001) that to “understand ... spaces being continually defined by development we need sharper tools for the analysis of symbolic space and the interrelationship between historical events and social phenomena, which bring space, time and culture together” (p. 182).

BACKGROUND: INFORMATION REVOLUTION AS SOCIAL REVOLUTION

The information age might have been initiated and propelled through spectacular technological breakthroughs, but it goes beyond the technological confines to have immense impact on the lives and lifestyles of people across social echelons (Robins & Webster, 1999). With the onset of globalization, which compresses space and time like never before, the policymaking elite of third-world countries dreams of harnessing its power to create an information society. As it is, in the information society, the socialization of technology is a must in order to put its power and to reach to the service of the people. This is what makes the information revolution a social revolution in the fundamental sense. What is seen, however, as Scott Lash (2002) so directly puts it, the information society turns into the “Disinformed Information Society” (pp. 141-155). Obviously, the state has a key role in such a design in terms of its stress on thrusting an information society on the people without adequately promoting the communicative dimensions (Sinha, 2005).

Referring back to ordinary people in the third world, they continue to be marginalized and even pulverized. It is despite this fact that in almost all third-world cities (e.g., Kolkata [previously Calcutta], Mumbai [previously Bombay], Delhi, Dhaka, Karachi, Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, etc.), a substantial percentage of prime urban land/space is occupied by the less privileged segments. Such occupation can be found in various forms, such as pavements, public parks (originally planned for the privileged), bus terminals, railway stations, government precincts, or, for the relatively fortunate ones, *bustees*, *jhupries*, *favelas*—slums and shanties. Thus, one finds a widespread urban schizophrenia in the cities. However, what is more alarming, as I have demonstrated (Sinha, 1989) in the case of Kolkata, policymakers remain

largely ignorant and indifferent about it. The following statement on the city-regions in the developing countries confirms this point:

[T]he population of global city-regions are almost highly segmented in terms of social class (and) income. ... These city-regions then assume spatial forms that express ... segmentation of the rich and poor. At one extreme, one finds massive poor communities living in shantytowns, favelas, and bidonvilles, and at the other the more spacious and well-equipped communities of the middle class and the rich. ... This architecture of fear only exacerbates the fragmented character of the urban space, and generates additional problems. (Scott et al., 2001, p. 25)

Being partially if not completely devoid and deprived of many basic amenities in life, cities in the third world with loads of ordinary people now are waiting to be catapulted to the status of what Manuel Castells terms an *informational city*. It happens amidst the hype generated by third-world rulers as well as the media that the information age is a sort of magic wand (Sinha, 2004). The magic wand is supposed to end the hitherto existing discriminations, deprivations, and exclusions. In short, the urban third world is expected to benefit immensely from the much-publicized marriage of good governance and digital governance. It particularly happens when the information revolution is conceptualized and sought to be implemented technocratically and technologically, keeping the vital issue of social negotiations out of sight. The wrong can be corrected to a considerable extent if the information revolution is treated fundamentally as a social revolution and as one stage of social development. This would demand extensive organizational innovation and restructuring. But it calls for the change in the mindset of the ICT-happy third-world policymakers, as well. For a good beginning, they might try to be conversant with the concept of informational city.

INFORMATIONAL CITY

The information age acquires importance because the steady and rapid expansion of ICT has been a constitutive element of the globalization of capitalism, often specified as information capitalism. This leads to the point that information today has shifted to a higher status—from being a facilitator to commodity production to being a key commodity. How, then, do ordinary people in a third-world city confront this problem? A lead can be found in the way Castells (1989) conceptualizes and theorizes the informational city.

Castells (1989) defines the informational city as an urban system with sociospatial structure and dynamics determined by a reliance of wealth, power, and culture on knowledge and information processing in global networks, managed and organized through intensive use of ICT. But it is only one side of the coin. He simultaneously points out that the informational city is a dual city. Dual city, in Castells' perception is an urban system socially and spatially polarized between high value-making groups and functions on the one hand and devalued social groups and downgraded spaces on the other. The politics of a third-world city vis-à-vis the information age can be explored more specifically from these twin referents.

Ari-Veikko Anttiroiko (1999) incidentally refers to a number of items of the informational city Management, of which a select few can be mentioned for providing a more concrete scenario:

- **Main Premises:** Globalization and the information mode of development; informationalism and new welfarism; managing aspects of risk society.
- **Overall Objectives:** Welfare and quality of life; equality and equity; sustainability and diversity.
- **Operational Objective Area:** Thriving local and regional economy; strengthening human and social capital; attracting external resources; efficient and cost-effective administration.
- **Strategic Tools:** Better innovativeness; efficient utilization of institutional resources; creativity and utilization of human and social capital; informational urban policy lines.
- **Informational City Management Techniques:** New concept of informational city management; networking and creative alliances and partnerships; enhancing local investment and empowerment; city marketing and place promotion; management support systems.

Before we go more deeply into Castells' (1989) depiction of the informational city to extract its political implications, it is important that we refer to his earlier and classic work, *The Urban Question* (1977). In it, Castells produced two senses of urbanization: first, as a spatial concentration of a population on the basis of certain limits of dimension and density; and second, as a diffusion of a system of values, attitudes, and behaviors—by the name *urban culture*. While to Castells, the notion of *urban* relates to the ideological dichotomy between traditional and modern society, in his scheme, the process of urbanization, linked with the development problematic, relates to technological and economic level, to process as qualitative transformation of social structures, and to ideological function in the form of structural change

Third World City in the Information Age

presented as accumulative movement of technological and material resources of society.

No less significant is the fact that, with this backdrop, in *The Urban Question*, Castells also introduced and elucidated the concept of *collective consumption* (a concept of fundamental importance along with the concept of *reproduction of labor power*), which refers to forms of services (e.g., mass transport, housing, health facilities) collectively provided generally by the state. Castells, in fact, established a link between collective consumption and political mobilization, which lies at the basis of urban social movements (e.g., squatters' movements, tenants' movements, etc.), aiming to challenge the existing nature of collective consumption, if the need arises, for purpose of improvement. Castells floated the concept in the particular context of labor force on which the capitalists depend for production of commodities.

However, there is reason to develop a critique of Castells' propensity to focus on the concept of collective consumption, somewhat at the cost of the process of production. The latter carries much relevance in the third-world context, which has been well explicated by scholars like Lojkine (1976) and Harvey (1973). But, with some degree of liberty, one can stretch the concept of collective consumption to include the ordinary people referred to here. One can do this on two grounds: (1) the concept refers to the collective use of certain services that also have something to do with the quality of life of individuals and with the role of the state in organizing and running the various forms of collective consumption; and (2) for a long time, this resembled the scenario in the third-world cities. A major criticism against Castells could be that the concept of collective consumption is less relevant in the case of the Western-developed states that also have large private provisions of consumption. By the same logic, the concept retains its validity in the third world. However, with the coming of the information age, the concept, which is rooted in the ideas of state welfare, was in need of revision. Castells seemed to have realized this as much as his critics, particularly Saunders (1986), who is best known for his dual state thesis. Saunders (1986) made incisive analysis of the advent and centrality of consumption practices as a reference point of urban inequality by explicating the growing split between those who can afford to purchase their services from the market and those who continue to depend on state welfare.

INFORMATIONAL CITY AS DUAL CITY

The information age, which is based on a distinctly new mode of production and a new form of organizing power,

is not without its share of risk, uncertainty, and unpredictability. Saskia Sassen (2000) refers to the "new geography of centrality and marginality" (pp. 267-280) in this context. In Sassen's scheme, the new global economy in effecting centrality binds the cities, especially the downtowns and metropolitan business centers, of the developed and the developing world, particularly through financial markets and transactions in services and investments. On the other hand, low-income city areas continue to sink. The disparity, according to Sassen (2000), is even more evident in the contrasting pictures of workers, with highly educated workers witnessing a steady rise in their incomes and low- and medium-level workers facing steady declines and disasters.

As Castells views it, the lifelines of the information age—the space of flows and networking—produce revolutionary changes, but the changes, by their very characteristics, give rise to tension created by the conflict of personal well-being and social alienation, individual fulfillment, and social disintegration. Space of flows refers to different centers linked in information space through electronic networks. Networking relates to governance based on the use of flexible linkages organized by information technology. The two give rise to a flexible form born out of placeless logic and functional footlooseness of the network state within the framework of which the government works in more and more collaboration with other governments and supranational institutions. The institutions of society and governance, particularly in third-world countries, face the unpredictability factor head on. They fail to keep pace with the changes that find their highest expression in the global financial market—a virtual automate, in Castells' description—that affects everybody by doing things by itself without knowing why it does it. A direct and evident outcome of it can be found in the dismantling of traditional organization and patterns of work marked by stability, and the rise of various networks resting on temporary, contractual work in which individuals are constantly on the move by shifting jobs, tasks, and assignments.

With such sweeping change being inevitable, it is expected that the information age only would cause the decline of collective consumption through advocating decline in planning, thus facilitating the dominance of the market mode and privatized modes. All these are part of the process in which there is a perceptible shift from social redistribution to promotion of capital accumulation, from politics of legitimation to domination, and greater expansion of the capitalist system by accelerated internationalization of economic processes. This, in turn, creates a great cleavage between those who can afford to go by the market mode and those who are left behind to stick to the collective consumption, however emaciated it might be. When Castells theorizes on the informa-

T

tional city as a dual city, he has this cleavage in mind. His treatment is not superficial. As Castells explains in his reference to New York City as the dual city, it does not simply mean opposition between executive limousines and homeless people. More fundamentally, it represents an urban social structure that exists on the basis of interaction between opposite and equally dynamic poles of the new informational economy, whose developmental logic leads to polarization of society and its social groups, creates segmentation in labor forces and occupation, isolates cultures, and segregates the uses of a shared space.

One does not have to stretch one's imagination too far to realize the graver consequences of this cleavage in the third world (cities) in which it acquires an extreme form. To quote Castells: "There will remain switch-off, wireless communities, still real people in real place, yet transformed into urban shadows doomed to haunt the ultimate urban dream of new technology" (p. 19). Castells' observation finds echo in Mike Davis (quoted by M. Irvine):

The contemporary city stimulates or hallucinates itself in at least two decisive senses. First, in the age of electronic culture and economy, the city redoubles itself through the complex architecture of its information ... networks. ... If so, urban cyberspace—as the simulation of the city's information order—will be experienced as even more segregated, and devoid of true public space than the traditional built city. (Irvine, n.d.)

Let us take the instances of attempted replication of the Silicon Valley in third-world cities. In terms of high-tech-sponsored spatial manifestation, such replication runs the risk of being a truncated and incomplete version of the original. Castells refers to the following five factors that led to the establishment of the semiconductor industry in Silicon Valley: (1) the presence of high-ranking universities with intense research orientation in general and in thrust areas like electrical engineering and computer sciences; (2) organized and proactive network of financial firms specializing in venture capital; (3) positional advantage as regional nodes center and nodal points in national and international network of telecommunications and air transportation; (4) pleasant environment and hosting of an industrial milieu beyond the confines of its own organization; and (5) the military market. The factors indicate that they are the products of a long tradition and exceptionally wide-ranging milieu of innovation that cannot be developed overnight in the city regions of the third world. On the other hand, it is a total package without any opportunity of being selective about its ingredients. In other words, either the third-world cities should have all such facilities in a very satisfactory, if not full-fledged, form, or they simply do not. The

question is how many cities in the third world—already reeling under the strain of large-scale migration and associated problems like scarcity of livelihood, predominance of low-end, low-skill jobs and housing—are ready for a high-tech hub? The question calls for greater introspection because, as the preceding discussion shows, the difference between the thinking of being ready and being actually ready is the difference between the proverbial cup and the lip.

FUTURE TRENDS

Urbanization policies, as one observer mentions, "have traditionally been negative in tone and intent" (Mohan, 1996, p. 130). Add to it the inherent hierarchy that remains integrated to the third-world urbanization process in general and the third-world city in particular. Would not, then, the technocratic interpretation of the information age intensify the problem? One might argue that because such interpretation is couched with determination and optimism, the problem will go away. But let us assert that such technocratic optimism is part of the problem and not the solution itself. Only if its policymakers are ready to view the information revolution as a social revolution can they find possible and effective clues to establish a humane city with more equitable vision. The path is not very smooth. Then again, smoothness has never been a great attribute of urban management, as it always confronts urban politics not only in terms of physical control over physical urban space but also physical control over symbolic urban space, the latter being the instances of occupation or demonstration in prime locations in cities for a temporary period for a show of strength. The way forward, though strewn with challenges of complex nature, is to reinstate and reiterate the political, as expressed through reciprocity, conviviality, solidarity, cooperation, and not the least, simultaneously pursued competition and contest, which is a process through which challenges and negotiations emerge and sustain themselves amidst contradictions and dislocations that mark the urban scenario in the third world, in particular. Services like housing facility, sanitation, sewage, drainage and garbage removal, and public transport concern the efficient or inefficient nature of urban management. But the question is how can citizens demand a better deal in these services, if they are found in pathetic state?

The demand for the aforementioned services in the improved and better form—in the form of socially and environmentally sustainable sanitation, sewage, drainage and garbage removal and public transport—would need social struggles and protests and movements of segmented collectives of ordinary people. It could be

evident in putting up roadblocks, organizing meetings and processions, or even making collective representation to the friendly or not-so-friendly city councilor by people of different neighborhoods and/or social strata. It also requires greater attention of the powers-that-be to the citizen-centric political process and greater receptiveness to criticisms and protests. All of these provide the clue that rather than being over-enthusiastic about the inherent powers of the information revolution, the need of the hour is to adopt a stance by which the technological marvels of the revolution could be integrated and reconciled with more material aspects to improve the quality of life of ordinary citizens.

In addition, the local institutions, both public and private, have a key role here, but then again, they are facing tremendous challenges. There is little doubt that ICT has an intimate tie with the hyper-mobile global capital, the modus operandi of which calls for withdrawal of subsidy and weakening of public service provisions and the social sector (e.g., housing). This, as observed by scholars (Logan & Molotch, 1987), is leading to severe erosion of the autonomy of cities all over the world (including developed countries). Thus, when one thinks in terms of (urban) development in the third world, one has to rethink the locality (Peterson, 1981) in light of these new developments. It is known widely that local governments in the third world generally are weak, if at all in existence. This, from the very foundation, subverts any possible initiatives to reconcile the technological with the existing political, economic, social, and cultural milieu. However, the following excerpt, taken from a booklet titled *Are you a Councillor? This Booklet is for You* (2001), reveals that there are some attempts at the local governmental level in the urban third world to reconcile with the new reality. The excerpt shows how the elected councilors of the municipalities, the urban local body meant to administer towns, are provoked to be acquainted with ICT (more specifically, computers) in order to serve their constituencies better. The excerpt reads:

It goes without saying, if you need to make use of a technology to the fullest, you need to be familiar with it. ... You might ask, "I don't know how a computer works." ... In reality, it is not a very difficult proposition. Leave out the examples in developed countries; some of your colleagues have learnt this technology quite well within a few days. They too did not know the basics of computers. ... Even then if you fear you are not confident ... ask for training. (p.8)

In indicating the councilors' political positions, power, and responsibilities, the brochure concludes in this dramatic vein:

Whether you want to continue as subservient to the traditional system in the future or assert your own rights to fulfill the genuine expectations of your electorate, the final decision is yours. (p.8)

Such efforts need to be imparted a more broad-based character beyond the confines of the councilors. To initiate such process in more concrete terms, the imperative is to integrate a movement for technology literacy (developing the power to understand and analyze technology in terms of its positive and negative impacts) with social movements. It is unfortunate that in third-world countries, where one would find the existence of many kinds of social movements, none really goes for such integration.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion, among other things, reveals the problems with the technocratic orientation of policymaking in a specific context—the deployment of ICT in the (third-world) city. Keeping in mind that technocratic rationality tends to undermine political rationality, demythifying and demystifying the information revolution through the socialization process mentioned earlier become urgent tasks. It is needed particularly in order to prevent the third-world city, which is still a space for the struggle for existence and emancipation, from being thoroughly depoliticized and from becoming a bottomless pit. It definitely involves a long and arduous struggle, but only such integration can, in turn, make both the policymakers and the people aware that the question of ICT is not simply a technological issue insofar as providing dignified and humane living to the ordinary people of the third world. It is, first and foremost, a social, cultural, economic, and political question.

REFERENCES

- Anttiroiko, A-V. (1999). *Informational city management*. Retrieved January 3, 2004, from <http://www.uta.fi/valogos/cities.html.htm>
- Are you a councillor? This booklet is for you.* (2001). Kolkata: CMDA-UNICEF-SUDA.
- Castells, M. (1977). *The urban question*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Castells, M. (1989). *The informational city: Information technology, economic restructuring and the urban-regional process*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.

Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of the network society* (Vol. 1). Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.

Harvey, D. (1973). *Social justice and the city*. London: Edward Arnold.

Irvine, M. (n.d.). *Global cyberspace reconsidered: Cyberspace, identity, and the global informational city*. Retrieved April 15, 2004, from <http://www.comms.val.es/inet98//5e-2htm.htm>

Lash, S. (2002). *Critique of information*. London: Sage Publications.

Logan, J., & Molotch, H. (1987). *Urban fortunes: The political economy of place*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.

Lojkine, J. (1976). Contributions to a Marxist theory of urbanization. In C. Pickvance (Ed.), *Urban sociology: Critical essays* (pp. 119-146). London: Tavistock.

McGee, T. G. (1971). *The urbanization process in the third world: Explorations in search of a theory*. London: Bell and Hyman.

Mohan, R. (1996). Urbanization in India: Patterns and emerging policy issues. In J. Gugler (Ed.), *The urban transformation of the developing world* (pp. 93-131). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Peterson, P. (1981). *City limits*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Robins, K., & Webster, F. (1999). *Times of the technoculture*. London: Routledge.

Sassen, S. (2000). Cities in the global economy. In G. Browning et al. (Eds.), *Understanding contemporary society: Theories of the present*. London: Sage.

Saunders, P. (1986). *Social theory and the urban question* (2nd ed.). London: Hutchinson.

Scott, A.J., et al. (Eds.). (2001). Global city-regions. In A. J. Scott (Ed.), *Global city-regions: Trends, theory, policy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Sinha, D. (1989). Development and decay in a third world city: A humanizing approach for Calcutta. *Journal of Third World Studies*, 6(2), 97-114.

Sinha D. (2004). Depoliticising politics: Information technology as the magic wand. *The Statesman Festival Number*, 161-164.

Sinha, D. (2005). Information society as if communication mattered: The Indian state revisited. In B. Bel et al. (Eds). *Media and mediation* (pp. 135-161). New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Visvanathan, S. (2001). Interpretations of the city. In S. Visvanathan (Ed.), *Structure and transformation: Theory and society in India* (pp. 152-182). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

KEY TERMS

Disinformed Information Society: Mainly developed by social theorist Scott Lash, it refers to a cultural development made up of unintended consequences of the informationalization, which makes information ubiquitous and spins it out of control. It also leads to overload of communications, thereby subverting many of the promises and prospects of the information society.

Dual State Thesis: Attributes two functions of the State—(1) social investment, which aims at maintenance of goods and services in the economy with support to the profitability of the private sector firms and (2) social consumption, which supports the consumption needs of diverse groups that cannot fulfill their requirements through the market.

Information Age: An era marked by the advent of information as a primary resource/commodity, guided by information flow, with the consequences of spatial and temporal compression, disembeddedness, and real-time relations.

Informational City: An urban system with sociospatial structure and dynamics determined by a reliance of wealth, power, and culture, and on knowledge and information processing in global networks managed and organized through intensive use of ICT.

Information Mode of Development: The resultant change guided by development ICT-mediated communication, which contributes to radical reconfiguration of institutions and processes.

Information Revolution: The transformation in the nature of information, propelled by that of technology (beyond the earlier focus on the silicon chips and based on the later focus on the economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions of information and communication technology) with extensive and intensive impact on society.

Information Society: Primarily theorized as a post-industrial society marked by the centrality of knowledge-based services, as distinct from the industrial society in which production of goods held center stage.

Third World: The underdeveloped and developing countries/societies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The term is shorn of its pejorative connotations here.

Third World City in the Information Age

Trickle-Down Process: A process characterized by the gradual diffusion, penetration, and percolation of the changes occurring at the top of the layer (in this case, the upper crust of society/economy/polity) to the lower level.

T