

# Third World City in the Information Age

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## 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 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

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