International Journal of Advanced Research and Development
www.multistudiesjournal.com
ISSN: 2455-4030
Received: 28-11-2023, Accepted: 14-12-2023, Published: 29-12-2023
Volume 8, Issue 6, 2023, Page No. 32-34

Urban anthropology: Smart cities, Inequality, and changing community Life

Sadhna Verma
Department of Anthropology, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract
Urban anthropology, a subfield of social anthropology, critically examines the cultural, social, political, and economic dimensions of urban life. In the 21st century, the rise of "smart cities" has redefined the contours of urban development worldwide, including in India, where the Smart Cities Mission (2015) has become a flagship initiative. While promising sustainability, efficiency, and digital inclusion, smart cities simultaneously reproduce or intensify inequalities and alter traditional community life. This paper explores the anthropology of smart cities through the lenses of inequality, governance, and changing community relations. Drawing on case studies from India (Delhi, Bengaluru, Pune, Varanasi, Lucknow) and global contexts (Barcelona, Singapore), the paper highlights the duality of smart city transformations: innovation and progress alongside marginalization and exclusion. It emphasizes anthropological insights into everyday lived experiences, identity negotiations, and social stratification in smart urban environments.

Keywords: Urban anthropology, smart cities, inequality, community life, India, globalization

Introduction

The concept of the city has been central to anthropology since the mid-20th century. With increasing global urbanization—over 56% of the world's population now lives in cities (United Nations, 2022) [8] urban anthropology has become a vital lens for analyzing how people live, adapt, and struggle within rapidly changing cityscapes. India is projected to have 600 million urban residents by 2036 (Government of India, 2021) [3]. The Indian government's Smart Cities Mission, launched in 2015, aims to integrate digital technology, sustainability, and governance efficiency into urban life.

Yet anthropologists caution that the notion of "smartness" often masks deep inequalities. Urban poor, migrant workers, and marginalized groups frequently face displacement, loss of livelihood, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Simultaneously, community life, social networks, and traditional spaces of interaction are being reshaped in profound ways. This paper situates smart cities as anthropological sites where technology, inequality, and community dynamics intersect.

Theoretical Framework

Urban anthropology draws from multiple frameworks:

- Political economy of the city (Harvey, 1989) [5] emphasizes how neoliberal policies influence urban development.
- Anthropology of infrastructure (Larkin, 2013) [6] examines how roads, networks, and data systems shape daily life.
- Space and place theory (Lefebvre, 1991) [7] critiques how urban planning reorganizes social relations.
- Digital anthropology contributes to understanding how technology mediates social behavior in cities.

These frameworks enable an analysis of smart cities as more than technological projects: they are arenas of power, governance, and identity negotiation.

Smart Cities and Governance

The Smart Cities Mission in India encompasses 100 cities, aiming to modernize infrastructure, digitize governance, and promote sustainable living. Cities like Pune and Bhopal have adopted smart surveillance systems, digital kiosks, and e-governance platforms. However, critics argue that these projects often serve the interests of middle-class elites and private corporations while sidelining marginalized populations.

Globally, Barcelona's "smart city" model promotes citizen participation and open data, while Singapore's approach focuses on surveillance and state control. The Indian model sits between these extremes, with heavy reliance on public-private partnerships (PPPs). Anthropologists note that governance in smart cities tends to be technocratic, reducing citizen participation to data points rather than meaningful engagement (Datta, 2018) [2].

Inequality and Exclusion

Smart city development often exacerbates inequality

- **Spatial segregation:** Slum demolitions in Delhi (e.g., Kathputli Colony) were justified in the name of "urban beautification." Displaced families were relocated to peripheral areas with limited infrastructure (Bhan, 2016) [1].
- **Digital divide:** While urban elites enjoy high-speed connectivity, low-income groups often lack access to digital services required to participate in smart governance.
- **Gentrification:** Rising property values in "smart zones" displace long-term residents.
- **Surveillance inequality:** CCTV networks and biometric systems disproportionately target the poor under the guise of "safety."

Case studies in Pune reveal how smart mobility projects prioritized middle-class commuters over informal workers.

In Varanasi, the "smart heritage corridor" displaced small vendors in favor of tourism-focused redevelopment. Such dynamics illustrate that the rhetoric of inclusivity often masks exclusionary practices.

Changing Community Life

Community life is being reshaped in smart cities through both empowerment and alienation:

- **Erosion of traditional networks:** Marketplaces and neighborhood courtyards are replaced by malls and digital platforms.
- **New forms of digital community:** WhatsApp neighborhood groups and online civic forums provide spaces for interaction but often exclude those without smartphones.
- **Changing kinship dynamics:** Migration to "smart zones" disrupts traditional joint family systems while promoting nuclear and mobile family structures.
- **Cultural homogenization:** Heritage-based smart projects risk commodifying traditions for tourism, reducing their role in everyday life.

Anthropologists observe that while digital governance platforms increase efficiency, they also weaken the informal social fabric that sustained urban resilience in the past.

Case Studies

1. **India**
2. **Delhi:** Demolition of Kathputli Colony for redevelopment illustrates cultural erasure of performing artists' communities (Bhan, 2016) [1].
3. **Pune:** Smart transportation prioritized BRT corridors but marginalized rickshaw drivers and hawkers.
4. **Varanasi:** Smart heritage projects prioritized global tourists over local livelihoods.
5. **Bengaluru:** IT-driven smart city initiatives created stark contrasts between affluent tech enclaves and informal settlements.
6. **Lucknow:** Selected under the Smart Cities Mission in 2016, Lucknow emphasizes heritage conservation and digital governance. The Hazratganj Smart Street Project modernized infrastructure, widened pedestrian zones, and beautified heritage corridors, but also displaced small vendors and raised rents beyond the capacity of traditional shopkeepers. The Gomti Riverfront Development Project, although not strictly under the Smart Cities Mission, is often associated with Lucknow's "smart" initiatives but has been criticized for ecological disruption and exclusion of river-dependent communities. Anthropologically, Lucknow demonstrates the paradox of smart urbanism: balancing cultural preservation, modernization, and socio-economic inequality.

2. **Global Comparisons**

1. **Barcelona:** A model of participatory smart governance, emphasizing open data and citizen-led planning.
2. **Singapore:** Highly efficient but surveillance-heavy model, prioritizing state security over participatory democracy.
3. **Songdo, South Korea:** A "built-from-scratch" smart city that struggles with community life due to its top-down design.

Ethical and Anthropological Challenges

Urban anthropologists confront methodological challenges in studying smart cities

- **Access and representation:** Marginalized communities are often silenced in official narratives.
- **Ethics of surveillance:** Anthropologists must critically interrogate how biometric systems and data collection affect privacy.
- **Positionality:** Researchers must balance critique with recognition of the aspirations of urban middle classes who see smart cities as pathways to progress.

Future Directions

a. **Inclusive governance:** Participatory planning that goes beyond tokenism.

b. **Digital literacy:** Bridging digital divides to democratize smart services.

c. **Cultural sustainability:** Preserving community spaces and intangible heritage alongside technological upgrades.

d. **Comparative anthropology:** Studying smart cities across the Global South to highlight alternative models of urban development.

Conclusion

Smart cities represent both promise and peril. From an anthropological perspective, they are not merely technological innovations but social experiments that reshape community life, redistribute resources, and redefine citizenship. In India, the Smart Cities Mission has generated new opportunities for modernization but also exacerbated inequalities. A nuanced anthropological lens reveals the lived experiences of those at the margins, reminding policymakers that "smartness" must be measured not only in data and infrastructure but also in justice, inclusivity, and human well-being.

References

1. Bhan G. In the public's interest: Evictions, citizenship, and inequality in contemporary Delhi. University of Georgia Press, 2016.
2. Datta A. The digital turn in postcolonial urbanism: Smart citizenship in the making of India's 100 smart cities. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,2018:43(3):405–419.
3. Government of India. Population projections for India and states 2011–2036. National Commission on

Population, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021.
4. Government of Uttar Pradesh. Lucknow Smart City: Progress report. Lucknow Smart City Limited, 2020.
5. Harvey D. The condition of postmodernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change. Blackwell, 1989.
6. Larkin B. The politics and poetics of infrastructure. Annual Review of Anthropology,2013:42:327–343.
7. Lefebvre H. The production of space. Nicholson-Smith D, translator. Blackwell, 1991.
8. United Nations. World urbanization prospects: The 2022 revision. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022.