THEORISING FROM THE OVER-LOOKED CITY

Generating a research agenda
& network on small / secondary cities

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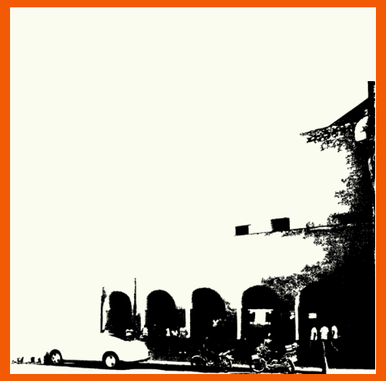

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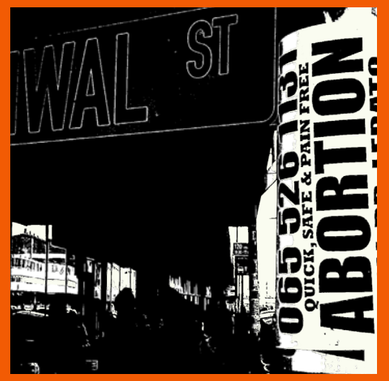

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RENE VERON

Small cities in India: Stories and reflections from a research journey

On my arrival in the small city of Medinipur, my colleague from the local university guides me directly to the thana, the local police station. He apologizes for not knowing the officer-in-charge personally. This would have been useful as it is Friday afternoon and time is running short for the required registration as a visiting foreigner.

The trip to Medinipur, a city of 170,000 inhabitants in West Bengal, was not part of my original plan for this short research visit to India, although the town is one of four field sites of our research project on small cities, urban environments and governance in India. After giving talks on the project in Delhi and Bangalore, I wanted to travel directly from the airport in Kolkata to Bardhaman, our other study site in West Bengal. However, an endorsement on my research visa issued in Geneva states “For research in collaboration with Vidyasagar University, Medinipur” causing the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO) in New Delhi a few days earlier to turn me away and direct me to this small city 1,500 km to the east. My attempt at registering at the FRRO in Kolkata in the morning of the same Friday proved equally futile despite a letter from my colleague at Vidyasagar University. I had no choice but hire a car and make the three-hour journey to Medinipur.

As a district headquarters, Medinipur is a secondary (or even lower tier) city in India’s government system. Not including it on my lecture tour, mostly due to logistical reasons, unwittingly confirmed its ‘secondariness’. Yet, our research project[1] did not use the concept of ‘secondary cities’ (Rondinelli, 1983) as we tried to avoid predetermined hierarchies and urban-systems thinking. While relating and being linked to a wider world (for example, more and more people commute between Medinipur and Kolkata), we did not see small cities as merely placed at the bottom of a hierarchical network of ‘global cities’ (Sassen, 1991). Rather, we took the ideas of ‘ordinary cities’ (Robinson, 2006) and ‘small cities’ (Bell and Jayne, 2006) as our conceptual starting points. ‘Small cities’ in these conceptualizations are not necessarily defined by their population size; they are diverse and unique, though neither particularly influential nor overly aspirational, and sometimes ‘overlooked’ (Ruszczyk et al., 2020).

[1]“Small cities, urban environments and governance in India”, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

At the thana in the center of town, the helpful young officer-in-charge – dressed in a well-ironed, starched khaki uniform – agonizes how he could possibly do the registration without having the required forms. He makes a few phone calls, presumably to his neighbors living in the quarters of government officers posted in Medinipur. Eventually, he tells me to go immediately to the Civil Lines[2] – he would have informed the officers over there already about my arrival. Fifteen minutes later, armed police officers at the entrance of the large government compound direct us to the farthest corner of the compound, to a dilapidated building overgrown on its sides by wild bushes. Inside, two government officers are waiting in a dark and dusty room. They inspect my passport, nod and ask me to both register and request an exit permit, as I am to leave India in a few days again. Although the office is about to close officially, they do not seem in a hurry and start chatting with me. When asked for coins, I wonder whether a baksheesh is expected – after all, it is late in the day and I am in a hurry. I hand over a clunky 5-franc coin. One of the officers beams and explains that this piece will fit very well in his son's collection of foreign coins. I start to relax, push more coins across the table, try my rusty Bengali and talk about life in Switzerland. Ten minutes later, the other officer pulls out a notebook from his briefcase and shows me a collection of beautiful children's poems – written by himself, in English. Eventually, the official paperwork gets done – serial no. 1, I am the first foreigner registered in Medinipur that year by the end of March.

Clearly, the state is present in India's small cities, as government buildings, officers, register books and stamped paper witness. At the same time, it is embedded in social relationships of caste, kinship and friendship; social connections are sought through phone calls, chatting and the exchange of small gifts. The interactions of the 'intermediate classes' (merchants, retailers, large farmers, local government officers, etc.) are key for the social regulation of the economy and the state in small cities (Harriss-White, 2003). They form the local elite, as in Navsari, an urban agglomeration of 250,000 inhabitants and one of our two project field sites in Gujarat. There, a municipal engineer draws upon his family and friends involved in the city's hotel and diamond business to carry out his 'official' work efficiently. This level of social embeddedness and the role of the local elite may well be a characteristic of small cities.

On the way from the Civil Lines to the university, we pass many open plots, tree patches and ponds. People of all walks of life use these green spaces: they worship trees or collect their leaves; they angle for fish, bathe themselves or wash their utensils in the waterbodies. My colleague brings me to a natural spring in a temple compound and invites me to drink the supposedly purifying water.

This is in stark contrast to a tour through Navsari a year earlier, as we recall in a published article: "Helpful municipal officers led us … to a few extraordinary and recently created parts of the local urban environment …: a meticulously manicured park that had been built on a former dump site, an impeccable Olympic-size public swimming pool, and a tranquil tree-lined pond with ducks… the pond had actually been altered to serve as a drinking water reservoir." (Zimmer et al., 2020, p. 225). Referring to the above-mentioned waterbody, an older respondent recalls that the pond was in the past used "like a village pond" for bathing, washing animals, etc. In more ordinary parts of contemporary Navsari, we still came across 'unkempt' environments used for multiple purposes – similar to the urban environment seen in Medinipur.

Elsewhere, we have distinguished between 'wild and 'artificialized' urban nature (Véron et al., 2018) and it seems that non-engineered urban environments are more prevalent in small towns than in large cities. In the course of urbanization, 'natural' environmental amenities (e.g., the clean spring water in Medinipur) are replaced by environmental infrastructure, from communal water hand pumps to complex municipal networks. To highlight the 'in-betweenness' of small cities, it may seem preferable to conceptualize them as 'semi-urban' (Trivedi, 1969) or as 'desakota' (McGee, 1991) regions. On the other hand, small cities have ontological status – as municipal bodies and as imaginations.

For instance, the locals in Medinipur are proud of their city and its history (which includes local revolts in the 18th century against the British Raj) even though they admit the town's provinciality[3]. Navsari challenges our original understanding of small cities more. Local elites are not only dissatisfied with state visions to define the city as a residential satellite town, but they also display high aspirations to develop modern infrastructure and to 'beautify' urban space, including through slum removals and relocations – as seen in India's metropolitan cities. Yet, these municipal actions are not worlding practices, or attempts of becoming global (Roy and Ong, 2011). Although thousands of NRIs (non-resident Indians, mostly from the US) sojourn in Navsari every winter, the benchmark is neither New York nor Singapore, but rather Surat, the 4.5-million city 35 km to the north that has been revamped after the 1994 plague outbreak and is now considered India's second-cleanest city by the Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs.

Our project not only aimed to analyze urban imaginaries and planning processes but also to appraise the capacity of small cities to implement their visions in

[2]The British established these colonial administrative enclaves in small cities too.

[3] In fact, locals insisted that Medinipur is a town and not a city.

the overall context of India's decentralization and continuously strong state and central governments. For this purpose, we visited numerous government offices at the municipal and state level for interviews and data collection.

> Writers' Building in Kolkata[4]. I am waiting on a foldable metal chair in a small office. The place is buzzing with activity. The phone rings, a lower-ranked officer takes the call and then quickly changes some figures by hand on an official form. The Deputy Secretary arrives. He sits down and ignores me. Files land up on his desk unceasingly; some are immediately signed, others are thrown on different piles on his desk, and a few are stacked on the floor – to be studied later at his home. It is our fourth attempt to get information from him. We have persisted because he is said to be knowledgeable and his office collects and aggregates data from all municipalities in West Bengal. I ask some questions, but receive monosyllabic answers. To expedite the end of the interview, he gives me a printout of a PowerPoint presentation with general information on state government schemes. I insist on receiving data that are more detailed. Exasperated, he asks a peon to make a photocopy of last year's budget allocations and expenditures for all government programs going to municipalities. Bingo! Before I leave, he apologizes for not having offered me tea and invites me to call him after 9pm at his home.

The information arduously collected from Writers' Building and many other offices allowed quantitative interstate comparisons (Véron et al., 2019, forthcoming) and it guided our painstaking analysis of municipal accounts, which provide interesting indicators of municipal agency. For example, limited funds set limits to the environmental services that a municipality can provide to its population. Furthermore, whether funds are tied to the implementation of particular projects, or untied transfers from the state and own revenue, influences the relative autonomy of small cities. Finally, the ratio between capital expenditure (asset-creating investments) and revenue expenditure (recurring expenses, such as salaries or utility bills) indicates whether a municipality builds new infrastructure or just struggles with the upkeep of existing services.

Figure 1: Types of municipal incomes with links to environmental governance in selected cities, 2011-12 (in Rs.) and municipal expenditures (2011-12)

	Medinipur (West Bengal)	Amreli (Gujarat)
Tied funds (for particular projects under government schemes)	196,000,000	24,800,000
per capita	*(1,160)*	*(214)*
Untied funds (from government transfers and own revenue)	77,400,000	155,500,000
per capita	*(458)*	*(1,318)*
Ratio capital expenditure to revenue expenditure	34:66	54:46

Sources: Municipal annual accounts, 2011-12; Municipal budget estimates 2013-14.

[4] Main site of West Bengal's state administration at the time of our research.

Given divergent and complex accounting systems, Figure 1 needs to be read with much caution. It nevertheless points to important qualitative differences between municipalities in West Bengal and Gujarat that are confirmed by quantitative and qualitative data from other municipalities in these states. Medinipur has slightly more money available per capita for its urban environment (water supply, sanitation, solid waste management, forests and parks, etc.), but most funds are linked to particular (often livelihood-oriented and labor-intensive) government schemes in which the municipality is merely the implementing agency. Amreli – our second study site in Gujarat – has more untied funds at their disposal but our qualitative research shows that the municipality has not initiated any bigger projects linked to urban environmental governance either. Generally, both human and financial resource constraints impede small cities to play a proactive role in environmental governance. The creation of large environmental infrastructure mainly remains in the realm of the state and central government; municipalities were often relegated to implementing small projects and to upkeeping urban environmental services. However, there were also notable instances of municipal initiative and innovation, particularly in Navsari (e.g., the above-mentioned citywide water-supply project) but also in Medinipur and Bardhaman (e.g., waste segregation-at-source and slum improvement projects).

In sum, our research confirms the diversity and uniqueness of small cities. Given the importance of local elites and social structures, this is hardly surprising. At the same time, small towns are shaped by the (sub-) national political economy. Urban (environmental) processes in the studied small cities follow a similar pattern as in the large cities of the same state: for example, modernization of environmental infrastructure, slum removals and beautification driven by an efficient, business-friendly bureaucracy in Gujarat; new urban developments largely limited to periurban areas, labor-intensive environmental upkeep and slum upgrading driven by redistributive politics in West Bengal. Yet, it appears that these processes are less contested – politically and in the realm of imaginaries – in small cities than in metropolitan areas. Finally, small-town urbanization is influenced by (global) capitalist forces – the most obvious example from our case studies is the impact of the seasonal influx of NRIs on the housing market in Navsari. However, the diverse urban-environmental processes in small cities should not be interpreted as mere local manifestations of variegated planetary urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2012). They seem to be outcomes of complex interplays between local social structures, regional political economy and global markets, as well as hydrologies, ecologies and materials, whereby no factor has predetermined primacy over another (McFarlane, 2011). As small cities have some relative social and environmental particularities, they deserve further attention in urban studies.

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