No. 69 December 2018

Emerging Cities of Amaravati and Xiong'an: Redefining Urbanization?

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Introduction

n April 2017, the Chinese government announced the plan to build a new city 100km from Beijing. Christened Xiong'an New Area, the new city is to be developed as a subsidiary capital in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei economic triangle to transfer the "non-capital functions" from Beijing (Xinhuanet 2017). The Andhra Pradesh government led by Chandrababu Naidu undertook a similar project in 2015 with the announcement of a new capital city in Amaravati, following the creation of Telangana. China has gained prominence in recent decades for its top-down approach to urbanization where the government manipulates the development of certain regions by channelizing resources. Amaravati, on the other hand, will only be the fifth planned capital city in India (Ravishankar 2016).

With similar visions of people-centric urbanization and eco-friendly metropolises, both Xiong'an and Amaravati come in the backdrop of major national policies adopted by the central governments. The master plans of both cities project a redefinition of urbanization, in terms of its functions, organization of space, and central focus. They seem to pioneer a way of building cities, which are inclusive, accessible and integrated with the

surrounding environment. Yet, there is a visible gap in implementation. This paper discusses the emergence of Xiong'an and Amaravati in the backdrop of the national policies and political interests that motivate their planning. Further, it attempts to highlight the implications of building these new cities for a significant section of the population, which has so far been excluded from developmental projects.

There has been a visible shift in rhetoric in the national policies for urbanization in both countries, in that they make a conscious attempt to ensure that the marginalized are allowed to become active participants and stakeholders in the city. China's New Urbanization Plan (2014-2020) recognizes the insecurity among rural migrants in attaining an urban *hukou* and proposes reforms in the household registration system. India's Smart Cities Mission stresses on context-specific city development where people's aspirations are taken into account.

Xiong'an: First step to New-Type Urbanization?

China's National New-Type Urbanization Plan (2014-2020) recognizes urbanization as an important driver for the country's economic and social development and a symbol of national modernization. The Plan, published by the

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Communist Party of China on 16 March 2014 in Xinhua, stresses the need to build a "well-round society in an all-round way". It establishes urbanization as the only way to modernize and as the key for industrial transformation and development of the service sector. The Plan also projects urbanization as the means to solve the problems faced by farmers in the countryside, in that a shift to urban areas would increase the per capita share of the farmers, thereby increasing the availability of resources for modernization of agriculture. (National New Urbanization Plan 2014-2020).

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It is significant to note that the plan acknowledges the problems faced by migrants due to the *hukou* – the household registration system. The hukou system has long been identified as the main reason why rural migrants suffer in urban areas, since their rural status does not allow them to access various services like health benefits, public education for their children, and affordable housing. The hukou system has been the mainstay of the Chinese government in limiting the urban population, thereby channelizing growth towards other small and medium sized cities and towns (Ren 2013: 53). However, despite the relaxing of hukou norms in non-Tier 1 cities¹, the flow of migrants has been towards large, wellestablished regions such as Beijing and Shanghai due to the large number of opportunities for employment (Chan 2018). In this regard, the recognition that the household registration system needs serious reform to address the problems faced by migrants and their families is a crucial step towards enhancing the quality of life of China's labour force.

Further, the Plan clearly lays down the problems associated with extensive spatial construction without a simultaneous movement of the people towards these newly developed regions. It underlines how the population density of built environment remains low even as provincial governments continue to deploy ambitious for infrastructure development. Another highlight of the Plan is its emphasis on the need to tackle "urban diseases", including heavy urban construction, environmental pollution, excessive population agglomeration, and poor living conditions of migrants (National New Urbanization Plan 2014-2020). The Plan clearly acknowledges the struggles of the population due to inadequate migrant institutional mechanisms to protect their interests. This recognition is furthered by the guiding ideology of the Plan, which specifically talks about "taking people's urbanization as the core". First among the basic principles to be adhered to is making urbanization "peopleoriented" and "fair-sharing". It reinforces the government's commitment to 'rationally guide' the movement of population, encourage urban living among 'agricultural transfer population', expand the provision of 'urban basic public services', foster 'overall development and quality living of the population', and 'fair distribution of the benefits of modernization' (National New Urbanization Plan 2014-2020).

Following the adoption of this plan, the Chinese government initiated the process for a new kind of urbanization through a number of public announcements. Among these was the decision to build a new subsidiary capital in the Beijingeconomic triangle, Tianjin-Hebei named Xiong'an New Area (XNA). The new region is to be created by combining three counties in the Hebei province – Xiong, Rongcheng and Anxin – and is expected to play a vital role in the development of the Jingjinji capital region. Considered to be Xi Jinping's brainchild and pet project, the XNA's success will be crucial in establishing it as a city on par with Shenzhen, which was personally endorsed by Deng

cities are those which are directly under the control of the central government, have a GDP of more than \$US300 billion and a population of more than 15 million people. Currently, Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou come under this category (South China Morning Post 2016).

¹ Chinese cities are popularly classified into four tiers, based on GDP, population and political administration. Although this ranking is not officially endorsed by the government, it enables analysts and businesses to understand the differences in income levels, consumer behaviour and market trends and opportunities. Tier I

Xiaoping. The announcement of Xiong'an cannot be seen in isolation from the measures undertaken by the government in Beijing to cure its "big city diseases" (China Daily 2018). Among these is the cap on the population, which aims to limit the number of residents in Beijing to 23 million by 2020. This is not the first time that a population cap has been placed in Beijing, and the city has consistently surpassed these limits in the past. However, this time the announcement came in the backdrop of the hukou reforms to make it easier for migrants to access services in urban areas (Reuters 2015; *Xinhuanet* 2016). Paradoxically, there is evidence to show that attaining an urban hukou has become more difficult than ever in big cities like Beijing (Chan 2018). The plan to build a subsidiary capital for "non-capital" functions offers some clarity on the government's strategy - to transfer people to newly established cities by forcing them to leave overpopulated ones.

Beijing has committed itself to the development of Xiong'an, with a three-year action plan issued by the Beijing Development and Reform Commission in July 2018. Apart from building an expressway, intercity rail network and highspeed railway to connect Beijing and Xiong'an, the capital city will also oversee the construction of school buildings, hospital and Zhongguancun Sciences and Technology Park (ECNS 2018). Xiong'an's location -100km from Beijing – ensures that the people working in the relocated educational, administrative, technological and corporate institutions will be compelled to move to the city. At the same time, the authorities in Beijing have initiated a systematic clearing out of spaces occupied by migrants. In early 2017, authorities began shutting down local restaurants and small shopfronts run by migrants, as part of a project to "beautify" the streets and to enhance the urban landscape (Yichi 2017).

After the death of 19 people in a fire in Daixing District in November 2017, a mass clean-up operation was spearheaded by the municipal government to clear out supposedly unsafe settlements. Those affected by the drive were migrants from the countryside engaged in blue-collar work; most of them received notices of eviction and were expected to pack up and leave within a day (*China Change* 2017). Another class of workers affected by the drive is the

educated migrants from smaller cities, who come to Beijing to work in the fields of technology, finance, commerce, or hospitality. Many of them live in affordable houses available on the peripheries of the capital, which the municipal targeted by government (New York Times 2017). While the government continues to cite migrants' safety as the primary reason for eviction operations, it would not be out of place to see this as a tactic to force migrants out of the city in order to meet the population goal (New York Times 2017). The sheer volume of migrants involved in fields which have now been designated as non-capital functions makes them the direct target and supposed beneficiaries of reform measures. However, it is clear that the development of adequate facilities infrastructure and Xiong'an to accommodate them will be a longdrawn process.

The Plan clearly acknowledges the struggles of the migrant population due to inadequate institutional mechanisms to protect their interests.

Amaravati: 'Smart City' in the making?

The Government of India launched the Smart Cities Mission in 2015 with the aim of developing 100 smart cities in India through retrofitting, redevelopment and greenfield development. The project recognizes that the definition of a smart city differs according to spatial configurations, peoples' aspirations, level of development, and availability of resources. It clarifies that a smart city in India cannot be 'entirely modelled on one in Europe', and that there may be diverse manifestations of smart cities within India. The project, therefore, emphasizes the incremental and context-specific nature of city development (Smart City: Mission Statement and Guidelines).

The Mission establishes three models for developing cities: 'retrofitting or city improvement in existent built areas to convert them into smart cities'; 'redevelopment or city renewal to replace outdated features of existent cities with smart characteristics'; and

'greenfield development or city extension where vacant plots of land will be converted through innovative and inclusive mechanisms' (Smart City: Mission Statement and Guidelines). There is a constant emphasis on context-specific development based on suitability of surrounding environment and availability of resources, led by state governments. The shift in focus from economic development to inclusive and more accessible systems is also visible in the policy guidelines. However, infrastructure and highend technologies continue to be portrayed as defining features of smart city development. The need for developing social and institutional infrastructure is mentioned but not elaborated upon, thereby limiting its potential to encourage people-centric growth.

The AP government continues to project Amaravati as a capital city for the people, which is modelled on Singapore; many international consultants like Surbana Jurong and McKinsey and Company have been engaged in its planning and designing.

The decision to build Amaravati, the greenfield capital city of the state of Andhra Pradesh (AP), announced was by the Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu in 2015. The announcement came in the wake of the separation between Telangana and AP, where the former laid claim to the common capital Hyderabad. Being developed on the banks of Krishna river, the new capital's site was chosen due to its central location between the cities of Vijayawada and Guntur, easy connectivity with other important cities, and the scenic beauty of the river plains (The Indian Express 2015). AP government's proposal of building Amaravati into a smart city was selected in Round 3 of the Smart City Mission, which instituted challenge over multiple rounds, to select cities based on the guidelines. The SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis in Amaravati's Smart City proposal recognizes the threat of destabilizing the ecological balance and the possible loss of livelihood in the region. It proposes a strategy with least disturbance to nature, secure investment to development, and employment linked economic activity

prominent themes (Amaravati Smart City Proposal).

With its massive publicity as the "people's capital", the AP government adopted a Land Pooling Scheme. Farmers with agricultural land in the rich, fertile plains were encouraged to hand them over in lieu of receiving proportional land after the development of infrastructure and public facilities (Andhra Pradesh Economic Development Board). However, there evidence to suggest that many families were into partaking in the coerced scheme (Ramachandraiah 2016; Tarafdar 2017). Farming will not be the only source of livelihood under threat, as the building of the new capital city will require clearing away close to 124 square kilometres of forestland (Minhaz 2017). The AP government continues to project Amaravati as a capital city for the people, which is modelled on Singapore; many international consultants like Surbana Jurong and McKinsey and Company have been engaged in its planning and designing. Though their designs claim that the capital city will promote a healthy lifestyle closely integrated with the natural environment, the plan remains heavy on construction and infrastructure development. An alternate plan proposed by Indian architects Romi Khosla and Vikram Soni envisions Amaravati as a "Natural City" which can rejuvenate itself and potentially change the way India builds its cities (Tarafdar 2017; Soni & Virmani 2014).

This alternate plan warns of the threat posed to the natural ecosystem by the building of a seed capital heavy on infrastructure, as designed by Surbana Jurong. It stresses on the need to preserve the natural floodplain to ensure prosperous agriculture and to allow the city's water supply to constantly rejuvenate itself. By moving urban construction to higher ground and leaving natural floodplains on both sides of the river untouched, Khosla and Soni suggest that Amaravati can thrive with a convergence of urban and rural development (Soni & Virmani 2014). While the state government shares this vision of redefining Indian metropolises, there has been no response to the Natural City plan. The current process of development in Amaravati contradicts the idea of contextspecific development stressed upon by the Smart Cities Mission.

The development of Amaravati had strong initial support from the central government, depicted through symbols such as the laying of the foundation stone by Prime Minister Narendra Modi (The Hindu 2015) and monetary allocation of close to INR 2,500 crores - INR 25,000 million (The Hindu 2017). This was despite the report and subsequent criticism by the expert committee appointed by the Home Ministry under the Andhra Pradesh Reorganization Act, 2014. The report expressed that the new capital must not emerge in fertile agricultural land and that it should aim at overall regional development through multiple urban centres (The Hindu 2015). The steps undertaken by the AP government have, however, been in the opposite direction.

The relations between the central and state governments have since then become strained over multiple political issues (The Economic Times 2018). In the absence of strong political backing and financial support, the ambition of having a world-class city ends up getting constrained. This is despite attempts to bring on board investors and government partnerships from other countries, including from Guizhou province in China and some other Chinese firms (The Indian Express 2016), and introducing a crowdfunding campaign for infrastructural development in the city, building Amaravati's projection as a people's capital.

Conclusion

Both Amaravati and Xiong'an are highly ambitious projects that have been able to capture international as well as domestic attention. While both of these new cities emerge at an important juncture with strong political motives, on the flipside, there are sections of the population that stand excluded. Despite the strong pro-migrant rhetoric of China's National New-Type Urbanization Plan (2014-2020), the consequences of the steps undertaken by the government to reduce the burden on Beijing have not been beneficial for non-Beijing hukou holders. The rampant clearing out of shops and residential colonies occupied by migrants, citing "safety concerns", hints at the diversion of the population towards new centres that are still under construction. This stands in contrast to the very inclusive, people-oriented urbanization that China seeks to promote. In Amaravati, the AP government continues to portray the greenfield project as a "people's capital", even as many residents of the villages and hamlets in the area are forced to give up their agricultural land for infrastructure development. promise of proportional compensation does not carry weight since the pace of development in region been has extremely slow. Furthermore, some structures, like the Secretariat building, have already begun to show signs of bad construction. Amaravati could become a project embroiled in conflict between the state and central governments, led solely by the vision of AP's Chief Minister, but lacking public or political support.

It is not sufficient to follow designs, which worked in other places, as that would only end up creating imitation cities without proper context and local specificities, and even become 'white elephants'.

The endorsement of Xiong'an as Xi Jinping's pet project ensures that the city will not lack resources and investments, but these could be inadequate if people are unwilling to leave Beijing and move to the new region. Amaravati managed to attract international collaboration, but the state government's obsession with megacity model of city building adversely affect the resource-rich surroundings as well as those who inhabit it. Putting both the proposed cities in context, it is pertinent to note that a city avowedly for the "people" needs to go beyond just financial resources and political motives. It is not sufficient to follow designs, which worked in other places, as that would only end up creating imitation cities without proper context and local specificities, and even become 'white elephants'. A respect for the local environment, in terms of resource availability, ecological stability as well as livelihood and social dynamics of the inhabitants, is essential to strengthen the commitment towards people-centric cities.

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