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DE-densifying knowledge of cityness

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Introduction

Cities are often considered in relation to density. What can density reveal? The online dictionary (Lexico, 2019) definition of density has three meanings. The first is the degree of compactness of a substance, another is the quantity of people or things in a given area or space and the third definition is the one that resonates with what I am exploring in Nepal. This definition comes from computing and is "**a measure of the amount of information on a storage medium**" (similar to a low-density floppy disk from the late 1980s - early 1990s). I consider knowledge of cityness and the storage medium are newly elected government officials and the rural areas and their residents of administratively and geographically expanding cities. The *Atlas of Urban Expansion* (Angel et al, 2016) presents the scale at which transformations are occurring throughout the world in cities with less than 500,000 residents. Urban expansion and peripheral growth is dramatically increasing yet it is almost becoming commonplace. A particular challenge in understanding the evolving urban form is

not only related to scale but also considering historical trajectories, governance and politics in the spaces where people live (Keil, 2018).

The call for this special issue was to reflect on the problematic surrounding density we are encountering in our work. I do not see the city through increasing population density. I do not see compact, tight spaces ruled by horizontal nor vertically densification. I see regional cities, increasing common spaces throughout the world. Cities whose geographic boundaries are expanding, where cities are becoming visibly ruralised. Where population density is decreasing and the rural population does not understand what it means to be a resident of the city and furthermore, does not possess knowledge of cityness. In this paper, "cityness" refers to Simone's (2010, 3) term to describe the state of cities which are things that are 'in the making', evolving. I am writing to make space for cities that are unremarkable, ordinary (Robinson, 2006), full of unpaved roads, full of agricultural fields that are rapidly disappearing to accommodate residents' desires for housing and cities full of unmet aspirations. Rather than writing about urbanization, I reflect on density through a ruralization[1] of the world where Krausse argues that "people carry their past into their habitus" (2013, 238). People use their history and their knowledge to make sense of their new-found engagement and residency in cities. This paper describes how in a country such as Nepal, which until very recently was considered rural (Ruszczyk, 2020), cities are being formed where density of knowledge is vital to understand evolving practices. The implications of this approach, of considering density as a form of knowledge is a socio-

[1] Based on Monika Krause's paper, '*The Ruralization of the World*' (2013)

historical formation that can be a window into considering many spaces throughout the world.

Ruralised urban cities

Nepal, sandwiched between the political and economic behemoths of India and China, is a country of almost 30 million residents. Nepal has survived a ten-year internal conflict (1996-2006) that killed 13,000 people, an earthquake in the spring of 2015 that killed almost 9,000 people and an everyday economic and social landscape where international remittances from young men are the backbone of the economy (Ruszczyk, 2017; World Bank, 2018). Since 2014, due to political and administrative battles taking place between ministries on a national level, the central government administratively transformed Nepal. In 2014, 86 percent of the population lived in rural areas (IFAD, 2014) but within 36 months, Nepal nominally became an urban country where up to 60 percent of the population live in urban municipalities[2]. While the country was being consolidated administratively, the earthquake occurred in April 2015, the new constitution was promulgated in September 2015 and the economic blockade was imposed by India in late 2015-2016. All of which impacted either how the country would be organised administratively or how the local authorities and residents interacted with each other.

The local authorities had new roles and relations with residents needed to adjust accordingly. These administrative changes of 2014-2018 have been radical and led to profound changes including a federal system of government with seven provinces and significant

[2] *Nagarpalika* in Nepali

decentralisation of power to the 753 local governments. Nepal's ambitious transition from a unitary to a federal government system is a daunting task in the short term for a low-income country such as Nepal with "fragmented politics and weak institutions" (World Bank 2018, 10) and many challenges exist which will strain the government whose implementation capacity is already stretched. Elections for all three tiers of government took place relatively smoothly in 2017 (Ibid). The new elected government was established in February 2018.

Bharatpur, a metropolitan city, is located on the fertile plains of Nepal near the border with India. Bharatpur is the fourth most populated city of Nepal and second largest in geographic area. Until November 2014, Bharatpur Municipality had 14 wards and a population of 144,000. In December 2014, it was designated a sub metropolitan city (SMC) with 29 wards; its physical area increased by 50 percent and its population increased over 50 percent (to 210,000) due to five amalgamated villages. Five months later, the earthquake struck and the local government struggled to inspect the damaged 8 percent of 40,000 buildings. In 2017, Bharatpur became a metropolitan city, its geographic area was increased again and the population increased to 280,000 residents due to the incorporation of adjacent villages. Due to the composition of the city's inhabitants (high caste Brahmins and Chetris as well as a range of ethnic and indigenous populations who live without conflict) and the new leadership of Bharatpur, the city is very visible politically on a national level.

Of particular importance to this discussion of density, these administratively designated changes have profoundly changed Bharatpur. It is now very "rural" in terms of demographics, geographic area and physical attributes such as poor quality of roads, poor access to

electricity, lack of piped water and lack of sanitation facilities. While the national political project to create an urban country is underway in Nepal, the radical and rapidly imposed administrative changes are straining the capacity of newly elected local authorities (the first since 2002 when they were banned by the King) to cope with the new and increased responsibilities (Asia Foundation, 2018). The municipal officials are paralysed; they do not fully understand the range of their new-found responsibilities and they do know how to effectively engage with the rural areas of the metropolitan city.

Incremental urban planning

How does the local authority talk, discuss, and negotiate with those who are unfamiliar with the city's administration? I agree with Pieterse (2013, 14) who suggests there is a nuanced and complex story occurring on a local level "if nothing else, the (local) state is a site of constant contestation, stabilisation, adaptation and re-legitimation through actors of learning and institutional recalibration". I am exploring the organising logics related to urban planning and notions of the 'core', 'semi core' and 'rural'[3] parts of the city and who possesses what type of information and knowledge. Again, my understanding of the concept of density is through knowledge of cityness from the perspective of the newly elected government officials and residents of rural areas in administratively and geographically expanding cities.

[3] 'Core', 'semi core' and 'rural' are the terms utilised by government officials and residents in Bharatpur to describe different parts of the city

Baitsch argues “much of city-making processes happen in a … discrete manner” (2018, 22). He considers incremental development to be the step-by-step, transformation of houses and neighbourhoods over an extended period of time. This acknowledgement of urban processes to be step-by-step and occurring over extended, stretched periods of time where people are living their lives, learning how to function, to create and what can be taken and achieved is important. It subtly nods to the active contribution of a wide range of invisible people in creating cities. Five months after the earthquake, in September 2015, the most senior central government’s representative based in the local authority brought together the construction sector for a meeting. He proceeded to tell them that the local authority will begin to enforce the building code bylaws without exception. The engineers and construction companies were stunned and scared. There was a palatable silence in the outdoor venue. Prospective home-owners were uncertain if the local authority would actually implement the law uniformly throughout the city.

During this same fieldwork trip, a SMC official leading urban planning for the sub metropolitan city explained to me in exasperation:

> “Now that we have 29 wards, it is more complicated, the area of the SMC is too big. In the near future, there will be a [new] SMC master plan with a land use plan. At the present time there is no demarcation of land use. People will be angry that agricultural land cannot be[come] residential. It is all easy on paper but in the “field” [in reality] it is difficult to implement [for the local government]”.

Upon my return in 2017 and more recently in 2019, the expected master plan and land use plan was (still) being developed by the new administration led by the newly elected mayor. How realistic is it to expect that someday the master plan and land use plan will be implemented is unclear. The necessity of *implementing* urban planning in cities is not imbedded in the public sector nor in the minds of residents. Tensions between historical notions of centralised urban planning conducted by central government staff residing in cities throughout the country for two to five years and the new public sector urban planning regime implemented by elected officials and their subordinates who originate from the cities they govern will exposure a host of new issues on a local level.

In a regional city such as Bharatpur, large scale, private developers building gated communities are not evident. Instead, urban planning is being considered in a localised manner radiating from the centre, the urban core with paved roads, hospitals, administrative buildings, businesses and banks, through the semi core areas with their one or two paved roads, houses being constructed, market stalls and bus stops. Only then, is urban planning radiated out to the city's periphery, the low-density rural areas with dusty dirt tracks, fragmented access to electricity, no piped water, where farm-land is cultivated for rice and some vegetables and lastly where residents worry about wild animal (tiger and rhinoceros) attacks (Ruszczyk, 2019).

De-densifying knowledge of cityness

The local authority's *informal* yet tactical decision to incrementally implement components of the metropolitan city's urban planning regime is premised on the history of the

relationship between the local government and residents. For example, officials in 2019 were considering whether a particular ward (lowest level of local government) was part of the 2014 boundaries of the municipality or became part of the sub-metropolitan city in 2015 or more recently became a part of the metropolitan city in 2017. This informal assessment of the history of the relationship existing between the local government and residents is cognisant of the fact that people carry their history and knowledge into the present habitus.

For example, those wards and residents that have been part of the municipality as of 2014 were educated between 2014-2017 on how to implement urban planning requirements relevant to residents such as earthquake resistant construction of homes. Residents are also familiar with the staff of the local authority and have developed informal relationships that allow for knowledge transfer outside of formal channels (Ruszczyk 2017, 2018). In the peri urban areas, the residents appear to desire to be part of the city and to have the infrastructure that will give them recognition as residents of the city. Paved roads and street lightening are typical projects being implemented with municipal funds and co-financed by residents (Ruszczyk and Price, 2019). These geographic areas are excited to be recognised as part of the city and express a willingness to follow the emerging rules and regulations of the local authority.

After the boundaries of Bharatpur were enlarged to amalgamate villages, relationships between these residents and the local authority became tenuous and fraught with uncertainty. The relationships may not have even been established or have changed due to

the nature of the evolving roles of rural municipalities [4] and urban municipalities. In historically rural municipalities of Nepal, government officials served a key role in the provision of services and were generally responsive to the needs of the rural areas. Now, these rural spaces have become wards of the metropolitan city and staff have been replaced. The relationships between local government and residents are very different. Residents must travel long distances via infrequent public transport to the main office of the metropolitan city for key services and there are new officials to be reckoned with. The new staff in the ward offices as well as residents are simultaneously learning what their roles are and what can be expected from the other party. The metropolitan city is also promising new taxes and new forms of governance that may not be particularly welcome by these former villages. It is in these spaces where the metropolitan city of Bharatpur is incrementally deciding not to intervene, *yet*, and not to demand cityness as a form of relationality and knowledge with urban authorities from residents.

The newly elected local government officials understand that "people carry their past into their habitus" (Krause 2013, 238). The officials are scared of upsetting the rural residents who have coped on their own without much engagement with this new government. In these rural spaces, residents do not possess knowledge of how cities work. They pointedly ask the metropolitan city of Bharatpur why they should pay the local government a fee to get formal approval to build a house on land they own. They question why they need to pay for services and approvals they do not deem necessary. The residents question the applicability of city laws to rural, agricultural spaces. In 2019, the human resources assigned to the ward offices

[4] *Gaunpalika* in Nepali

are insufficient and importantly, they lack institutional knowledge, social networks and capacity to implement the law. In reality, the rural areas of the expanded cities throughout Nepal are tacitly being left to their own devices for the time being. Both the local officials and residents are averse to following the formal laws and thus behaving in a city like manner in regard to rules, rights and responsibilities.

This creates opportunities for elites located in these areas or those from outside Bharatpur who understand the current limitations of the local authorities to build in the way they chose in areas removed from the city centre. For the time being, the local government is not powerful enough to stand firm in rural areas and implement the law and possibly it should not. There is an unevenness to knowledge density of cityness. Today, in rural areas of geographically low density cities, we can also find low levels of knowledge density of cityness. The concept of density is always about something else. In this understanding of density, it is about power, politics and relationships. Density is about the evolution of new roles and relations in cities that are being expanded or being formed. At the present time, I see an on-going DE-densification of knowledge of cityness. Thinking about densification as knowledge and from the perspective of the rural has the potential to profoundly destabilise what we consider the urban throughout the world.

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