

Transition from Village Republics to Smart Cities in Gandhian Thought

Dr Seema Agrawal

Assistant professor, Political Science, Central Sanskrit University

Jaipur campus, Jaipur

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ABSTRACT

The history of the Indian nation is based essentially on a struggle between two opposite directions of what an ideal society should be. The village was a strategic one, long in years, not only because a great number of Indians lived there, but as a moral and political centre. Gandhi based his idea of Gram Swaraj upon the principle that genuine self-rule begins in our communities and that they make what they consume and that it is more democratic when its people know each other well. Decentralization was not a strategy, but an ideology. Smart cities imply quite a different notion. Their usage is efficient, linked, rich in information, and organised mostly at the top tier. The clever traffic management systems in Pune and the single command centers in Bhopal are quite amazing. Nevertheless, they operate in systems where decisions are made by authorities and computer algorithms, not village councils. The question that this paper is discussing is whether this transformation is a betrayal of Gandhian ideals or something a bit more subtle perhaps that it is an evolution and is uncomfortable and even flawed however not completely disconnected. The paper will be based on the findings of political theory, urban planning, and development studies, and how these two models actually conflict and in which cases, surprisingly, they might coincide. Both claim that they focus on citizen welfare and sustainable resources, for instance. The methods are very different. The concern is real, however. Unless these concepts, such as equity and ecological responsibility are explicitly included, smart city projects can contribute to intensifying the inequalities they are meant to alleviate. More promising is the new concept of smart villages - integrating, rather than substituting, digital tools within decentralized and community-based structures. Ultimately, the message is that India does not have to make a choice between Gandhi and gigabytes. Finding a way to work out how to deal with the two is more difficult and interesting.

Keywords: Indian culture, philosophy, democratic values, Gandhian ideals, city growth.

Introduction

The manner in which societies organize their economic and political being is never a neutral issue. It is very important in India as the decision processes of development have always been determined by a bigger discussion about the kind of society that India indeed wishes to be.[1]

India was mainly rural during the period of independence. Not only were villages their place of residence but also the primary sources of a lifetime economy, culture, and, as thought of by Gandhi, government itself. Gram Swaraj was no ordinary policy proposal. It was a moral standpoint on industrial

modernity, which was perceived to divide people from their labor, their society, and the world at large, according to Gandhi. He thought his answer was in small, self-governing, locally answerable republics.[2]

After gaining independence, India has been taking another completely different route. Nation-building, economic competition and Cold War geopolitical pressures led to a bias in favor of planners in the direction of centralization and industrialization. To a certain extent, urbanization was an inevitable process. The country is now changing the urban centers by analysing the data, sensors and integrated systems, as part of efforts like Smart Cities Mission. Pune, Surat, and Indore as cities these can become new standards to evaluate development in these cities.[3]

This tension is real and it must be given serious consideration. The presence of smart cities and Gandhian villages seems utterly opposed, philosophically speaking, at first sight. One of them is top-down technology-led and tightly connected with international flows of capital. The other was imagined as tremendously local, morally grounded and deliberately simple in material ambitions.

Yet, this is the interesting point. The issues smart cities are meant to solve-resource distributions, ecological pressure, civic disengagement are quite close to the problems identified by Gandhi a hundred years ago. The overlapping might be unintentional. Instead, it might signify something more fruitful.[4] This essay discusses the possibility: not whether or not Gandhi was right, but whether his model has helpful lessons to teach.

2. Conceptual Framework

The paradigm behind the paper is deliberately interdisciplinary, which is, of course, its strong point but, at the same time, has to give rise to the difficulties on its own. The combination of political philosophy, economic theory and technological analysis is what makes sure that no one opinion will prevail; however, this also means that none of the views will dominate the discussion.[5]

This is a vision of a normal Gram Swaraj as propagated by Gandhi. The most noticeable is that it highly criticizes measuring progress by using standard measures. Gandhi was not a fanatic about GDP growth, density of infrastructure, or urbanization rates. What had a bearing was whether people lived respectably, whether societies had considerable power in their own actions and whether the Natural environment was seen as more than a resource to be taken advantage of.

The village, in this case, is a kind of ethical model. Small enough so it can be a matter of real responsibility. Well established in the community to be authentic. Scalability or scaling whether that prototype is scalable is a question that will be discussed in this paper.

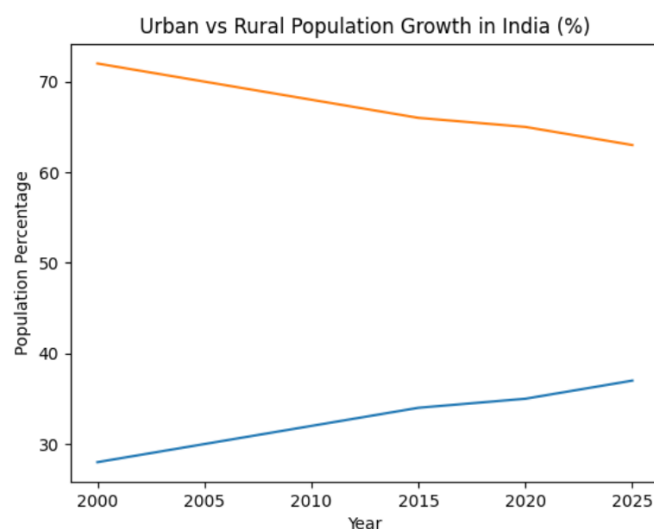


Fig. 1: Urban vs Rural Population Growth

The smart city model assumes the effort on the completely different set of assumptions. Though Gandhi began with the ethical problem, good city planners can begin with the systems problem: how can a city become more efficient? Productiveness, timeliness, efficient allocation of resources. The inherent philosophy is mostly technocratic in nature, whereby enhanced data and more intelligent infrastructure, will to a great extent, automatically result in better conditions of living. That argument is downright appealing, especially when a city such as Surat is seen successfully operating its flood responses by using real-time sensor networks. But it also does not touch on the problems, which have no easy technical solutions, who benefits, who decides, and who does not.[6]

Decentralization theory and the concept of sustainable development are the bridging concepts that are used in this paper to move between these two understandings. In this regard, the theory of decentralization is useful since it focuses more on the distribution of power and not on the distribution of services. It asks whether communities have some actual decision-making authority or merely an illusion of engagement. A distinct intersection between Gandhian ideology and contemporary urban policy, however, is sustainable development, which, in both cases, at least in theory, proclaims that economic progress should not be made at the expense of ecological and social health.[7]

A combination of these perspectives does not resolve conflicts between village republics and smart cities. And to tell the truth, nothing's absolutely. But it also allows a more subtle perspective, where it can appreciate the real reporting performance of smart city infrastructure, but also identify the real failures of the infrastructure, and understand how Gandhian principles might, in part, redress those failures, rather than simply criticizing the proposal as incorrect.

3. Historical Development Gram Swaraj to the Urban-Industrial Nation.

The concept of Gram Swaraj by Gandhi was never one of an idyllic dream of the simpler times. It was a strategic political decision, which was made due to the proper analysis of the effect of colonialism on India. Not only was British industrialism extracting resources, but it was also laying waste to local economies, disintegrating community structures, and concentrating wealth in ways that made villages dependent and poor. The village, restored to genuine self-government, could be the foundation of a less corrupt society, this Gandhi posited. Mostly against was independent India. The administration of Nehru was offered a huge country with enormous poverty and they thought that the best method to get out was through industrialization. An integrated plan, steel complexes, and gigantic dams became symbolic of a country in a state of modernization. The argument here was not totally wrong. Rapid infrastructure development paid off.[9]

The village-centered vision was however edged out in the process. Reform of the land was general and patchy. The community development projects hardly devolved actual power to local institutions. The economic centre shifted heavily to urban centres. What Gandhi hoped would become the cornerstone of Indian democracy, over the next few decades, turned into an afterthought than a guiding principle in India.

The latter part of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century were marked by additional changes brought about by the process of globalization, liberalization and the technological revolution. The process of urbanization increased with the economical opportunities that took place in the cities bringing massive rural migration. Simultaneously, the development of information and communication technologies opened new horizons in the governance, service provision, and economic activity. Against this backdrop[10], the idea of smart cities was developed because of the issues of high urbanization such as congestion, pollution, and inadequacy of resources.

In India, the Smart Cities Mission, which was initiated in 2015, is one of the important steps in this development. It aims at using technology to develop urban spaces that are efficient, sustainable, inclusive and friendly to the citizens. Nonetheless, this trend of intelligent urbanism has also brought in a question of social inequalities, the digital divide and the decline of locality living. To this end, the historical shift towards Gram Swaraj and smart cities is not just a narrative of advancement but also a

narrative of unresolved contradictions of competing ideas of development.

4. Comparative Analysis Village Republics vs Smart Cities.

The modern smart cities and the Gandhian village republics have a comparative analysis of two paradigms of development that are fundamentally different, but potentially complementary. At the governance level, Gandhian village republics are based on radical decentralization with decision making power being held by the local community. Governance is participatory, direct and consensus based and is founded on the ideology of Gandhi about the moral ability of people to govern themselves. Smart cities, on the contrary, although involving the elements of e-governance and citizen involvement, are mostly centralized in the administrative systems[11]. Technological systems and institutional hierarchies often mediate decision-making, and can at times alienate citizens to direct control.

Gandhian villages focus on the localized production and self-sufficiency economically. This is guided by the fulfilment of the basic needs using the locally available resources with minimal reliance on the external markets[12]. This model develops resilience and diminishes the vulnerability to the global economic changes. Conversely, smart cities are strongly rooted within the world economic systems and they serve as financial, service and innovation centers. Their economies have been specialization, interdependence and integration in the global supply chains, which, on the one hand, encourage the development, but on the other hand, they are exposed to external shocks.

The technological gap between these two points of view is probably the most difficult one to conquer. Gandhi was not against technology per se as he was very skeptical about any technology that displaced people at work or concentrated power in the hands of a few. The reason why the charkha was useful was that anybody could use it. Smart cities operate on a brand new scale, including AI-driven traffic control, IoT, and vast amounts of data on displays. Truly remarkable. But they also raise disturbing concerns about spying, personal data and what happened to the citizenry that simply does not have an online presence.

Both models take the issue of sustainability seriously however in completely different ways. In Gandhian villages, interconnectedness with the environment came almost naturally, with the consumption being minimal consumption, local resource utilization, and a connection to nature that needed no policy to enforce. Smarter cities are even more consciously sustainability-oriented with solar grids, waste systems and energy-saving infrastructures. Praiseworthy in purpose. There is, however, the obvious opposition of this: the construction and maintenance of large urban technological infrastructure has a high ecological cost, and it is unlikely to be brought up in advertising documents.[13]

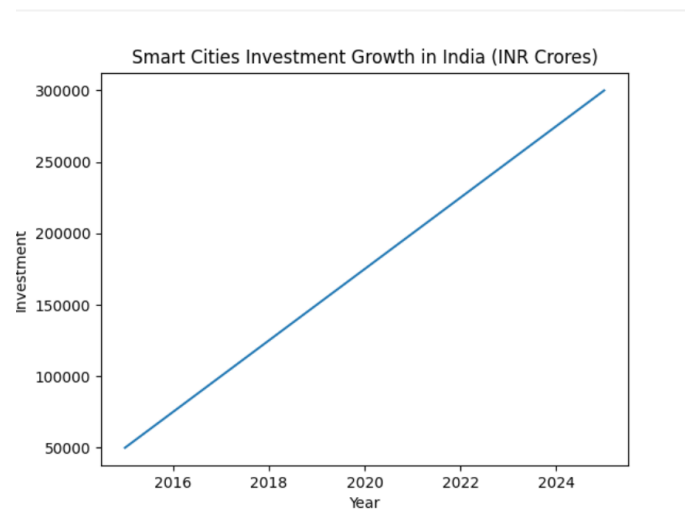


Fig. 2: Smart City Investment Growth.

In social aspects, village republics are community based whereby collective interests, social cohesion, and mutual support are given priority. Although the quality of life and opportunities provided by smart cities can be more excellent, they tend to create more individualistic ways of life and contribute to the worsening of social disparities, unless properly addressed[14]. Therefore, the comparative analysis highlights the fact that the two models are different in terms of scale, orientation and mechanisms, but also can be used to provide a complementary knowledge to create a more balanced and sustainable development framework.

5. Points of Convergence

Although the overlaps between the Gandhian village republics and smart cities seem to be on the surface, with a closer look, one can find a number of areas of interconnection that can be used to provide a ground to integrate these paradigms[16]. The common focus on enhancing the quality of life among individuals and communities is one of the most important areas of intersection. Gandhi viewed development in a very humanistic way, whereby he was interested in dignity, well being and self realisation. Equally, the concept of smart city, at least in a perfect formulation, is designed to make the urban space livable by making services, infrastructure and opportunities more accessible.

The other intersection of these two realms, but the similarity requires some precautionary explanation is decentralization. Gandhi was practical in his decentralization: the power of decision-making remained in the hands of people being most close to the effects of any decision. The concept of decentralization within smart cities incorporates additional procedures, online complaint systems, civic-integrated mobile applications, and e-governance websites. The MyPune app of Pune and the ward-level feedback systems provided by the BBMP are really useful tools. Whether their real power-sharing is or merely an illusion is, frankly, an issue still unresolved.[17]

Giving possibly the most intuitive overlap is sustainability. The focus on limited consumption and domestic production by Gandhi appears very prophetic today, given the direction in which climate discourse is moving. Smart cities pursue the same comprehensive aim by applying several different methods: sustainable construction laws, requirements to install solar panels on the roof, and smart water regulation over sensors. The approaches are quite different, but the issue of shared concern is the ecological constraints. That similarity can not be overrated, yet it cannot be overstressed.

The third area of partial convergence is community, which is probably the most complicated. Gandhian villages were in a sense based on community-oriented villages. Social cohesion was more than a program; it was the initial principle. On the contrary, smart cities can be quite personalityless, being based on the movements of information, not human relations. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly accepted by urban planning circles that technology alone cannot make livable cities. Such approaches as participatory design approaches, citizen innovation workshops, local planning discussions are signs that there is awareness, although only in part, that the community has to be involved. One guesses that Gandhi would have considered volunteerism as beneficial and insufficient.[18]

Therefore, these models do not intersect around structural features but by the common goals and values. Through identifying these similarities, politicians and researchers can discover how to apply the Gandhian ideology to the smart city models to develop development models that are not only technologically oriented but also morally-oriented.

6. Points of Divergence

Although the convergence areas give one reasons to be optimistic, the differences between the Gandhian village republics and smart cities are still significant and cannot be disregarded. The difference in their philosophical orientation to technology is one of the most basic ones. Gandhi greatly distrusted big-scale industrialization and mechanization, which he saw as creating social inequalities and as a degradation of morals. He contended that over dependency on machines would result in the erosion of

human values and pushing out of human work. Conversely, smart cities are based on the high usage of sophisticated technologies as means of boosting efficiency, productivity, and governance. This dependence on technology poses significant concerns on the Gandhian thinking compatibility with modern urban development[21].

The other significant point of divergence is on how big and organized the society is. Gandhian village republics are deliberately small, allowing the direct involvement, high levels of social unity, and local decision-making. By definition, smart cities are large-scale, i.e. complex systems and multicultural populations[22]. This scale requires top-down governance and complex systems of management which can restrict the possibilities of direct participation of the citizens and give them a feeling of alienation.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Gandhian Village Republics and Smart Cities

Aspect	Gandhian Village Republics	Smart Cities
Governance	Decentralized and participatory, with decision-making rooted in local Panchayats and community consensus	Centrally coordinated but supported by digital governance systems and e-governance platforms
Economic Structure	Self-sufficient and localized economy based on agriculture, cottage industries, and Swadeshi principles	Market-driven and globally integrated economy focused on services, industry, and innovation
Technology	Emphasis on appropriate and labor-intensive technology that supports human effort	Extensive use of advanced ICT, artificial intelligence, big data, and automation
Sustainability	Environmentally harmonious, relying on minimal consumption and local resource utilization	Focus on resource efficiency through smart grids, renewable energy, and sustainable infrastructure
Social Structure	Community-centric, promoting collective welfare, cooperation, and social cohesion	More individual-centric, with diverse populations and potential social fragmentation
Scale of Development	Small-scale, localized, and human-centered development	Large-scale, complex urban systems with high population density
Philosophical Base	Rooted in ethics, self-reliance (<i>Swaraaj</i>), and non-violence (<i>Ahimsa</i>)	Rooted in technological advancement, efficiency, and economic growth

The two models are on the verge of moving in opposite directions as per finances. The principles of Gandhian philosophy are necessity-based consumption and self-reliance, deliberately avoiding the stimulation of accumulation as a goal of society. Smart cities flourish in the capitalist framework in which growth, competitiveness and innovation are accepted as naturally good. It is not a mere belief: the rise in consumption, the unequal distribution of resources, and the aggravation of inequality.

Gandhian villages were socially focused on collective identity and mutual responsibility. The mobility and the preference of individuals that smart cities tend to enable tend to have their strong points, though in a subtle manner, such behaviors undermine the social bonds within the community making it stronger. The two models possess blind spots. Both deserve serious consideration.

7. Bridging the Gap: Towards “Smart Gram Swaraj”

What this paper is concerned with is a simple idea: what happens if Gandhian villages and smart city technology can co-exist peacefully? What should happen when taken in hand, they may well help each other?

Call it Intelligent Village Self-Governance. A chapter of no brilliant theory. Can digital tools become a strength of village communities instead of a tool that disbands them?[19]

Friends, the idea that rural places are backward and urban places are progressive is rebuttable. Villages are not merely waiting to be converted into cities. They also have genuine knowledge, working ecological links and community relations which are easily ignored or misread by urban planners.[20]

Technology can only serve to boost those natural strengths at their best. UPI has already made real financial accessibility to the villages that did not have a bank branch before, and e-NAM has allowed farmers in Madhya Pradesh to sell to faraway purchasers without the need to utilize exploitative intermediaries. These do not amount to major cultural shifts. They are useful tools that one can embrace and apply without giving up the power to control their lives.[21]

Sustainability operates comparably. The centuries of water management experience are reflected in the johads of Rajasthan and the eris within Tamil Nadu. Putting that knowledge together with modern monitoring technology might allow us to establish solutions that neither tradition nor technology can provide single-handedly. It appears self-evident when put in such a light. Actually, it hardly happens.[22]

The technology is not the most difficult part, frankly speaking. It's administration. Smart Gram Swaraj can only be done when the villages have a real authority in decision-making and not just an illusion that they are consulted. Technology offered by centralised players, whether well-wish, still ends up benefiting these players.[23]

The vision should be given real thought. Yet it demands something which institutions would hardly give of their own accord: true power, shared outward.

8. Case Studies

Discussions about the theoretical aspects of Gandhi and intelligent cities are limited. At some point you have to analyse the consequences of policies in place and the findings mirror as you would have guessed, mixed.

Take the example of the Sansad Adarsh Gram Yojana which was launched in 2014. It was Gandhian in its nature: Parliamentarians would visit villages, would serve in joint work with communities and assist them in turning them into model villages by means of participatory planning as opposed to command-and-control implementation. Self-reliance, engagement, and incorporation of existing initiatives. In line with this, virtually speaking, bursting into writing, it is nearly like a re-enactment of Gram Swaraj today. In fact, it has been implemented in an ad hoc manner. The adoption was taken with some seriousness by some of the MPs; most of the MPs regarded adopting it as a form of obligation. Resources could be quite scarce, administration could be very hard to coordinate and political commitment was tremendous in diversity between constituencies. The idea was solid. This implementation demonstrated that real decentralization was a challenge given institutional incentives that cut across other ways.[24]

The Smart Cities Mission has a unique account to tell. This is evidenced by the remarkable command centers that were set up by cities like Bhopal, Coimbatore, and Visakhapatnam, sensor networks that were implemented, and the digitalization of public services that have resulted in more pronounced improvements in traffic control and waste collection. The technology works, as a rule. The tough questions relate to who it is benefiting. Digital infrastructure frequently serves the advantage of already connected communities, and many cities have been justly criticized for pushing out informal settlements to fit in smart zone development.[25]

Taken together, these instances point to the relatively stable concept: neither of the methods can deliver

on its claims without paying special care to equity. Good intentions be it based on Gandhian ideals or technocratic ideologies do not necessarily translate into inclusive outcomes.

9. Critical Evaluation

Any honest assessment of this change should not be preoccupied with the temptation to make a decisive answer. Smart cities also offer tangible advantages: mobility, means of solving real problems of a complex urban environment, and economic opportunities that cannot be inherent to a rural setting. Better infrastructure and good governance are a necessity to the millions of people moving into Indian cities every year. They play a vital role in our lives.[26]

Nonetheless, the costs are also authentic. Social inequality tends to escalate rather than being dealt with using purely technocratic development strategies. Stress accumulation on the environment. A feeling of community responsibility and collective ownership, which is less easily quantifiable is indirectly eroded as individual convenience is made the primary consideration in design.

Gandhian village republics, however, offer a very different idea of what the point of development is. Higher, greener, more concerned with human decency, not with productivity indicators. It is however limited by scalability. The Gandhi model was specific to a given social and economic society. It is merely not easy to adopt it wholesale in an India that is rapidly urbanizing and globally integrated, and pretending that it gets everybody to do so is non-beneficial.[27]

A more productive question is whether technology can be regarded as a means as opposed to an end. Not how do we make intelligent cities but what purpose, and who are our intelligent cities. It is simple to recast the reframing but difficult indeed to realize it in practice. But concentrated efforts are probably aimed.

10. Policy Implication and Recommendations.

The discussion in this paper has significant implications to policy and practice. It hints that a more comprehensive development should be taken into consideration overcoming the gap between rural and urban regions and integrating technological innovation with the value of people[28]. The policymakers are encouraged to work on empowering local authorities, especially Panchayati Raj institutions, by integrating digital tools into the system to promote transparency, accountability, and citizens.

Sustainable development practices that will be based on modern technology and traditional knowledge should also be encouraged[29]. These involve the investment in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture and infrastructure that are resource efficient. Concurrently, social disparities should be dealt with and all sectors of the society should be able to enjoy the fruits of development.

11. Conclusion

The shift to smart cities is one of the most dramatic ones in the development process of India as village republics are being replaced. Although these two paradigms have some differences in terms of their philosophical premises, structural features, and working mechanisms, they also provide complementary information on the issues and opportunities of development. Gandhian philosophy, focused on decentralization, sustainability and human welfare, is much needed in the context of dealing with the challenges of the contemporary world.

This paper has not seen smart cities as a breakage of the Gandhian ideology, but has instead presented the argument that it can be re-packaged as a continuation of the same ideology in a new form. With the combination of technological innovation, ethical governance and community inclusion, efficient and inclusive development models can be developed. Smart Gram Swaraj is an interesting idea that can offer

a way to realize this synthesis.

The future of development in India lies ultimately in how it can strike a balance between its tradition and modernity, local and global, technology and humanity. Combining the merits of both village republics and smart cities, India has an opportunity to follow a new way to a more sustainable, fair and human society.

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