

A SPLINTERED 'NERVE CENTRE'

Relevant for: null | Topic: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies incl. Migration & Smart Cities

Networked infrastructure in cities of the global South seems to be a chimera that everyone wants to ride. It is mostly the people, however, who occupy networks that make infrastructure work for our cities. Take, for example, the water supply distribution lines in most Indian cities. In its current form, no sensor may ever replace the “linemen” who work the valves spread across the city, often with a simple rod, to regulate the supply of water. And yet, a different logic of governing infrastructure is in the making.

The Union Minister for Housing and Urban Affairs Hardeep Singh Puri recently announced that Integrated Command and Control Centres (ICCCs) have been established in 80 cities selected as part of the Smart Cities Mission, a Centrally Sponsored Scheme. The ICCC projects being executed may be seen as part of the “pan city” component of the mission which envisages “application of selected Smart Solutions to the existing [emphasis added] city-wide infrastructure”.

The overbearing images of a hall with giant video walls notwithstanding, an ICCC has five basic pillars: first is bandwidth; second, the sensors and edge devices which record and generate real-time data; third, various analytics which are software that draw on data captured by end devices to generate “intelligence”; fourth is data storage; fifth, the ICCC software which may be described as, in MoHUA’s words, “a system of systems” — the anchor for all other application specific components and has been described as the “brain and nervous system” of the city.

Central to the promise of ICCC is the idea of “predictive modelling” which uses data to generate inputs on not just how the city is but also how it can be. It could tell which direction the city is growing in; it could predict future real estate hot spots; it could identify and predict all accident-prone spots in the city, and it could predict the bus routes prone to crowding. This is in sharp contrast to how things actually work on the ground: our frames of response are retrospective and we are constantly retrofitting our cities as the primary mode of transformation.

The ICCC may be seen in sync with the functions of an urban local body (ULB) under the 74th Constitutional Amendment, towards improving services for people. Several contradictions may arise in this context.

First, the project is being executed under the aegis of the Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) constituted under the Companies Act, 2013, in the selected cities. Projects of the SPV that overlap with core ULB areas have been a source of tension between the two, one that the cities are still learning to resolve. Unless the core staff of ULB working across departments such as health, town planning, water supply, etc., adopt the ICCC systems, it risks being a splintered “nerve centre”.

One solution is to build a team in the SPV that can act as a bridge, inspire more users, and develop capacities; however, as “contract employees” they may be subject to the mercurial aspects of administration. Second, there is the risk of permanent underutilisation of the system. With poor integration with ULB services, and not just software integration but also in terms of workflows and SOPs, the functional capability may continue to be tilted towards video surveillance. Even with the latter, configuration of video surveillance analytics and its application has been less than perfect and the police department operators often use the systems manually to screen the footage in the wake of an incident which defeats the purpose of ICCC.

Third, the sizeable investments required create contradictions in some cities which are otherwise struggling for funds to upgrade their basic infrastructure and services. One of the key questions to gauge the success of ICCC in future, maybe to ask, if cities are choosing to build and sustain these systems out of their own revenue or untied devolution funds. If not, ICCCs may struggle to outlive the exhaustion of mission grants. And finally, despite the efforts to keep procurement vendor-agnostic, some segments of ICCC are still dominated by select industry players who may dictate terms to the city or engage in arm-twisting for payments.

The ICCCs in some cities served as a “war room” during the COVID-19 pandemic, and its application is cited as a success. Despite its usefulness, the success of such “war rooms” lay in the fact that the municipal, district and the police administration were bound together by the compulsions of the pandemic, which may not be normally forthcoming. Unless the services of the ULB and the people taking them to the residents of a city are “integrated” into ICCCs, they may turn out to be as the images show: a hall with giant video walls, a rather expensive one.

(Pushkal Shivam is the former deputy CEO of a Smart City SPV in Maharashtra)

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