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'Homegrown' Smart Cities: empowering or deregulating Indian municipal government?

In 2015, the newly elected federal government of India launched the Smart Cities Mission ostensibly to improve failing urban infrastructure(s) and governance in 100 Indian cities. The Mission has been criticised as the governance structure of the smart city necessitates the creation of a corporate entity – a Special Purpose Vehicle. It has been argued that this marks a strong shift towards privatised or entrepreneurial forms of governance and there is a need for more grounded empirical data. As the Indian Smart Cities Mission is a relatively recent programme, much of the critical research focuses on greenfield cities, issues of citizenship and policy analysis. There is a need to understand 'actually existing' smart cities in the India and my work fills this lacuna.

Through a case study of one city – Pune — I focus on the relationship between the municipality and Special Purpose Vehicle. My research examines how the implementation of this programme affects the municipal corporation and its authority. My data illustrates how the municipality and SPV function, the processes and flows of power, and their standing within the larger Indian legal system. I employ a mixed-methods approach to data collection including: 1) semi-structured interviews with stakeholders within these institutions; and 2) a study of institutional 'paper' to capture different articulations of smart cities and urban governance. My thesis will provide a more nuanced and historicised framing of Smart City SPVs within India's complex colonial administrative history demonstrating how these interventions affect urban governance, institutions, and democratic accountability.