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(Dis)connecting Colombo

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(Dis)connecting Colombo:

Situating the megapolis in post-war Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is in the midst of a post-war infrastructure boom, with new investment directed into roads, ports and airports as part of an uneven and contested development process. Taking the transformations unfolding in Colombo as our point of departure, we examine how the vision of Megapolis has animated debates on the geographies of connectivity. The post-war Sri Lankan political landscape initially envisioned political integration, which was to be delivered through the expansion of national road networks. The political priorities in the past decade reoriented away from integrating the nation to the strategic positioning of Colombo as a financial trading hub for South Asia. Focusing on Colombo's flagship Port City project, we problematise these models of development by foregrounding counter-narratives that speak to concerns around debt, enclosure, persistent ethnic tensions, and the degradation of coastal ecosystems.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, infrastructure, uneven development, connectivity, ecological stress

'The design suggested a kind of complacency that was itself a kind of madness... It was as if the bourgeois belief in the regularity of the world had been carried out to the point of derangement.'

- Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* (2017, 35-6)

'If man creates an illusory world, these illusions will come to haunt him.'

- Bishop Asiri Perera, Methodist Church of Sri Lanka (public speech, July 2018)

Introduction: Sri Lanka in motion

When Bishop Asiri Perera stood up to address members of the Peoples' Movement against Port City (PMAPC), a collection of fishing communities, religious leaders, environmentalists, trade unionists and urban activists, gathered along Colombo's Galle Face Green, he tapped into a widely-held sense of trepidation amid the rapid transformations unfolding in Sri Lanka. Against a backdrop of cranes and scaffolding towering over the seafront, his speech cautioned against the ultimate fallibility of human designs. Perera's intervention echoed concerns voiced by Amitav Ghosh (2017), who in *The Great Derangement* sought to identify exactly why the threat of climate change has elicited such a muted global response and lack of critical introspection. For Ghosh, this represents an imaginative failure, a consequence of submission to the nihilism of economic growth, and a retreat to the enduring civilizational myths of progress, which continues to animate the workings of contemporary capitalism. Indeed, both men were speaking to the construction boom gripping many parts of the world - including post-war Sri Lanka - and a development founded on an 'economy of appearances' (Tsing 2011). The symmetry in their words, so heretical to the minds of developers, investors, and the nation's political class, vividly illustrated the paradoxical impulses at the core of Sri Lanka's uneven and contested development process – as the unanticipated political volatility and Easter day bombings signal.

Since the end of Sri Lanka's civil war in 2009, successive governments' ambition to transfigure Colombo into a hyper-modern megapolis have grown exponentially. Under

the auspices of the newly formed, Ministry of Megapolis and Western Development, the country has witnessed an influx of investment, funnelling money into an array of real-estate and infrastructure projects. However, the absence of meaningful democratic deliberation or citizen input addressing how this much vaunted development might reshape Colombo's urban ecosystem and direction of development has been met with alarm. The crowd addressed by Bishop Perera had assembled to resist this new 'offshore' urban development under construction, and the latest example of a pivot towards a debt-fuelled and overtly financialised economic model (Gidwani and Baviskar 2011; Kadirgamar 2013; Nagaraj 2016). Despite protestations around debt, enclosure and the degradations of coastal ecosystems, Port City has become a flagship initiative, with multi-party backing from both the current UNP coalition government and their political predecessors, the latest stage of a post-war development vision geared towards reinventing Colombo as a 'world class' hub for trade, tourism and finance (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 here

Nationally, post-war infrastructure priorities have shifted from roads to ports; new infrastructure and real-estate projects and ports, including the controversial Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City, have dominated public debate. In the ambition to become a globally connected trading nation, the construction of Port City is viewed as an economic imperative.[1] The theme of connectivity has been a refrain increasingly mobilised in political discourse; former president Mahinda Rajapaksa made it a key

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[1] The recent Easter bombings (April 21st 2019) in various parts of Sri Lanka, including Colombo, may however bring other complexities to the time-line and the nature of the project, as China on the next day (April 22nd 2019) was the first country to have issued a travel advisory to its citizens to leave Sri Lanka because of security concerns. BRI (Belt & Road Initiative) geopolitics may have shifted on the day, with likely realignment and Sri Lanka's role within it needing further scrutiny.

theme of his flagship *Mahinda Chinthana* policy vision, a frame since invigorated by the present government's recommitment to the 'business for peace' agenda (Venugopal 2018; Brown, Chan and Ruwanpura 2018). Since the defeat of the LTTE militants in 2009, successive governments have sought to consolidate popular support and territorial control through roadbuilding and infrastructure programmes, incorporating the former warzones of the North and East back into national life (Sarvananthan 2011). Although, the stated focus of infrastructure was initially to integrate the nation and mend a fractured ethnic polity, over time there has been marked shift in emphasis, in keeping with efforts to strengthen regional economic and political ties across Asia in alignment with China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative (de Alwis 2010; Duar, 2010, 2015; Mawdsley 2012; Sidaway and Woon 2017).

Situating our research at a critical juncture in Sri Lanka's post-war history, in this paper we seek to disentangle the ways in which policy-makers and related institutions respond to realities that might hinder development ambitions. In a moment where a revived economic developmental logic is taking hold, following trends towards neoliberal urbanism and global connectivity (Doshi 2018; Nagaraj 2016), we draw attention to the simultaneous disconnect from local inhabitants and their articulation of livelihood claims to secure environmental justice, the politics of debt and ethnicity, and the disruption to marine ecology, which is rendered subordinate to the growth imperative (see also Sanyal 2007; Gidwani and Baviskar 2011). The next section of our paper unpacks how geographies of connectivity speak to Sri Lanka's post-war development ambitions, animated by its renewed geopolitical importance as a strategic node on China's proposed Maritime Silk Road under the OBOR initiative. We hope to shed light on discourses on connectivity in the context of post-war development, and how the generative effects of infrastructure, in particular, invite further scrutiny. The third section of the paper

overviews our fieldwork methods and the research conducted in Sri Lanka more broadly and Colombo in particular. Our fieldwork contributes to our three substantive sections, where we analyse our findings from the viewpoint of those connected and disconnected – and consequently bear the ecological stresses induced by "overdevelopment". We conclude our analysis by reflecting on how Sri Lanka's development trajectory can be situated within broader global transformations. Ultimately, we contend that the discursive construction of 'connectivity' as an animating frame in Sri Lanka's post-war development, for all its claims, simultaneously disavows the ways in which Sri Lankan citizens are disconnected from the very aspirations that its political class and economic elite champion for a post-war nation.

Connective infrastructures: A catalyst for development?

This article builds on existing scholarship concerning connectivity, infrastructure, and processes of uneven development at this current historical juncture. The desire of national governments to develop infrastructure and secure greater connectivity has been well established, often embraced as a signifier of modernity, development and progress (Appel et al 2015; Enns 2018; Wade 2018). This impulse has been bolstered by prominent writers espousing broadly neoliberal policy positions. Parag Khanna's (2016) work on 'connectography' has proven influential among a transnational class of business and political elites with its optimistic take on the rise of global transportations, communications, and energy infrastructures.[2] Nation-state are to be rendered obsolete, with cities celebrated as key nodes between 'connective corridors', coupled with an

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[2] We particularly draw attention to Khanna's (2016) work because both at public events and during our interviews many advocates and policy makers explicitly mentioned his work; or implicitly did so by invoking the trope of connectivity.

appeal for greater investment in roads, ports, and related infrastructures to deliver the purported benefits of a 'supply chain world', the new 'anchor of global civilisation' (Khanna 2016, 28).

Critical scholars have drawn attention to the discursive construction of problems to be 'solved' by technocratic interventions (Scott 1998; Smith 2010; Truelove 2011; Doshi 2018), where roads, ports, and infrastructure purport to facilitate rapid progress (Anand 2006; Rodgers and O'Neill 2012). In the quest to sustain a regime of accumulation, states and corporate entities harness the needs and desires of citizens towards the goal of opening new markets. Yet the group differentiated and targeted nature of such interventions, geared towards servicing the needs of global capital, forecloses a holistic understanding of entanglements within the nature-society-politics nexus.

The emphasis on connectivity to generate economic growth reflects an abiding preoccupation of Sri Lanka's political class, making post-war Sri Lanka 'fit' with the edicts of capitalism; its most recent iteration has prioritised delivering a low tax, deregulatory regime, with preferential policies to attract foreign investors and facilitate 'free markets' (Widger 2017; Venugopal 2018). The growing emphasis on world class cities is emblematic of this economic restructuring towards greater global integration, allowing countries in the global South to gain international recognition, not only as spaces of transit or zones of production, but as a *destination* and enclave spaces (Anand 2006; Sidaway 2007; Da Costa and McMichael 2007; Baviskar 2011). However, as Enns (2018) has demonstrated in East Africa, where development corridors are mobilised for the purposes of expanding trade in resources the operationalisation of this infrastructure bring new forms of immobility, violence, and spatial exclusion (see also Anand 2006; Truelove 2011; Rodgers and O'Neill 2012; Wade 2018). From nearly two decades ago,

Graham & Marvin (2001:11) observed that "the construction of spaces of mobility and flow for some, however, always involves the construction of barriers for others". This salutary observation, however, continues to be neglected and proceeds regardless of its meaning for marginal and disconnected communities (Anand 2006; Da Costa and McMichael 2004; Gidwani and Baviskar 2011; Truelove 2011; Wade 2018).

Infrastructure has received growing attention because of its function as a technology of government, and the ways in which this relates to citizenship rights as state subjects practice both compliance and resistance in order to secure or legitimate access (Anand 2006; Truelove 2011; Appel et al 2015; Wade 2018). In Colombo, the drive to reinvent its post-war identity began with urban beautification projects that did nothing to tackle urban segregation or other deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities (Amarasuriya and Spencer 2015; Caron 2016; Nagaraj 2016). They outline how in the desire for post-war Sri Lanka to become connected and networked to finance, trade and tourist flows, the colonial concern with 'improvement' was mobilised to legitimise the eviction and displacement of the working poor and ethnic minorities to the urban fringes. This altogether unravels a process of "splintering urbanism" (Graham & Marvin 2001), where the physical fabric of the city is fragmented into cellular enclaves of different social and economic natures, creating a city lacking internal coherence and where social divisions and spatial segregation are continually perpetuated.

There have been several important contributions highlighting the ethnic and social impact of displacement resulting from the construction boom in post-war Colombo, addressing persistent marginality and resurgent Sinhala nationalism in the face of new luxury developments (Amarasuriya and Spencer 2015; Caron 2016; Nagaraj 2016; Jazeel 2017). The sense of marvel and wonder generated by the phenomenon of 'spectacular urbanism', plastered onto billboards that line the construction site, conjured by the

project's promotional materials seek to capitalise on the future hopes, desires and aspirations of citizens (Sanyal 2007; Smith 2010; Tsing 2011; Wade 2018). These analyses, however, overlook the ways in which capitalism manifests itself as an ecological regime, reorganising the environment and space according to the logics of capitalist accumulation (Smith 2010; Gidwani and Baviskar 2011). In other words, by centring infrastructure, we aim to investigate that even though "built network….facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and *allow for their exchange over space*" (Larkin 2013, 326, our emphasis), we also need to consider how the creation of material infrastructures is coupled with a denial, disavowal or downplaying of the ecological ruptures and social inequities frequently induced. For Sri Lanka our concern is with how the environmental impacts, including in the interior of the country, has also been ignored.

Infrastructure developments also feed into rising tensions between India and China over influence in the South Asian region, where Sri Lanka's strong relationship with China has attracted growing interest (de Alwis 2010; Sidaway and Woon 2017, Mawdsley 2012). Under China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, a broad strategy to develop trade routes throughout Asia and reorder the region's economic geography, Sri Lanka is considered as a strategically important location, and a key node on the maritime Silk Road envisaged through the Indian Ocean (Lin et al 2018). Prasenjit Duara (2010) has sought to explain how different actors negotiate this emerging regional order, proposing that nation-states seek to adapt to globalised financial capitalism through flexible citizenship and self-improvement projects. As China and India jostle for influence in the South Asian region, we reorient our focus to how and what this means for locals disconnected from narratives of ethnic and social cohesion through global connectivity and instead feel the burden of growing Sri Lanka's indebtedness – to Western creditors and China, alike (see also de Alwis 2010).

Approach and field methods

Our article draws on two phases of fieldwork in Colombo (2016-2018) and sits within a two-year extended research period in post-war Sri Lanka – which included stints in Colombo, Jaffna and Colombo again, mirroring the shifting focus of Sri Lankan policymakers. When the fieldwork initially began in 2016, the newly elected government of Maithripala Sirisena had suspended the Port City project, responding to concerns around its ecological impact; the political energy at the inception was about both the nation and the city. By early 2018 however, Port City had become the flag bearer of Sri Lanka's quest to be even more integrated into the global economy in an epoch increasingly defined as the age of Asia. During these two time periods, we undertook interviews with figures selected from academia, business and industry, civil society, and the state, and their contributions constituted a core part of our research agenda. Respondents were identified using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, with efforts made to include a diverse range of voices and viewpoints. This was supplemented with visits to conferences and events, alongside a survey of blogs, newspaper articles, reports, and key policy documents, generating a wide range of materials for discourse analysis (see Table 1).

Table 1

List of sources

Interviews	Policy Documents	Video and print media	Conferences & Events
Academics (6), business and industry (4), civil society (11), state officials (3)	*Mahinda Chinthana: Vision for the Future* (2010)	*Colomboscope 2015: Future Cities: The Balancing Act.*	*Towards the Main Financial Hub of Asia: Port City Colombo,*

	Public debate, video (2015)	conference (2018)
Sri Lanka 2011-2030 National Physical Plan (2010)	*Colombo Port City: A World Class City for South Asia,* promotional video (2017)	*Peoples Movement Against Port City* book launch, Galle Face Green, (2018)
Western Region Megapolis Masterplan: From Island to Continent (2015)	Articles from *Sri Lanka Daily, Daily Mirror, FT Daily, Ceylon Observer* (2009-18)	

Close scrutiny of policy documents was illuminating, revealing the discursive tensions and contradictory impulses manifested in large-scale development agendas. As a team of three researchers we came together in the November-December 2017 period to bring this research to conclusion because of failures akin to those identified by Harrowell, Davies and Disney (2018). The fieldwork for the entire project started in the summer of 2016 by the lead author and another junior researcher but by Autumn of 2017 the data gathering was incomplete and wanting. Hence, to bring this research to completion, the new research team worked as follows: two of us conducted an intense and short fieldwork phase doing interviews and revisits in Sri Lanka during July 2018 while the other analysed policy documents and newspaper archives over a six-month period.

Given the resurfacing of Colombo Port City into the post-war development landscape and the reorientation away from the nation to the city, we felt it was important to capture this moment of Sri Lanka's volatile post-war development vision. While the initial phase of fieldwork started with interviews of those involved in the reimagination

of Colombo as a megapolis, the Port City was suspended, given the dubious environmental impacts assessments (Environmental Foundation 2015). However, even at that stage, many policy makers interviewed mentioned to the lead author that the break clauses are punitive to Sri Lanka – and they feared the Port City initiative would still go ahead. One and half years later, their fears have since transpired – and we felt it was critical to record the conflicting stakes. As one of us is native to Colombo and Sri Lanka, reaching out to relevant informants was done through a web of connections. Our interviews were mostly conducted in English, while a few done in one of the vernacular languages – in which one of the authors, as a bilingual speaker, is fluent.

We also recognised the politically charged and evolving nature of our subject matter; hence we adopted an open-ended and flexible approach by also attending choreographed corporate events. These 'theatres of virtue' are indicative of a closed culture, reluctant to respond to criticism outside of an audience and select to validate its own message (Rajak 2011); hence, they can be instructive in presenting hegemonic positions. In order to anchor our theoretical analysis, it is to these narratives we now turn.

(Dis)connected Colombo: A Cautionary Tale

The post-war infrastructure boom was visible across Sri Lanka, which began with a network of roads and highways criss-crossing different parts of the island. The connectivity initially aspired to rebuild an ethnically polarized nation has within a decade shifted to geopolitical connectivity and alignments, with Sri Lanka's infrastructure impetus shifting from roads to ports (Duara 2015; Lin et al 2018; Brown et al 2018). Port City has been at the epicentre of the controversial drive for new development, with the aim of cementing Colombo's place on the map as a 'city of capital' (Nagaraj, 2016); a

hyper-modern, globally connected tourism and trading hub for the South Asian region. It is in this context that the expansive vision of the Megapolis comes to life, animated by a mission to smooth the flow and circulation of people, goods and trade. Connectivity has constituted a core tenet of Sri Lanka's post-war political agenda, affirmed by both the Rajapaksa regime and its UNP successors' commitments to invest heavily in infrastructure. Following activities by the Ministry of Defence and the Urban Development Authority (UDA) in the immediate post-war years, in 2015 the Ministry of Megapolis and Western Development was created and tasked with designing as blueprint for transforming the region, addressing critical urban challenges relating to sanitation, transportation, and waste (see Figure 2).

Figures 2 and 3 here

The centrepiece of the Megapolis masterplan is the flagship Port City development, whose scale – encompassing a 269 hectare expanse of land reclaimed from the Indian Ocean - is set to double Colombo's current population of 750,000 inhabitants, inscribing a new benchmark for mega-development projects in the country (see Figure 3 above). Emulating affluent cities, such as Dubai, Hong Kong, and Singapore, architects of Port City seek to develop a new zone adjacent to the Port for commercial and touristic activities, building on Sri Lanka's strategic location close to shipping lanes across the Indian Ocean (Lin et al. 2018). The glossy, beguiling renderings of Port City, on display in advertising billboards, press releases, and promotional videos, foster an air of anticipation by tapping into aspirations and hope (Anand 2006; Da Costa and McMichael 2007; Tsing 2011). As Harvey and Knox (2012, 534) observe, 'Infrastructures can dazzle with the possibilities they hold – the glitter of progress, the lure of profit, the promise of

circulation, movement and a better life as rational and scientific plans…generate illusory effects supported by numbers, figures and pictures.' Following in the footsteps of other Asian cities, the Megapolis project presents a seductive promise to deliver economic renewal and reimagine a hyper-modern Colombo in keeping with the convictions and assurances of global consultancies, investors, and transnational corporations (Anand 2006; Da Costa and McMichael 2007).

Delivered at an estimated cost of $15 billion over a 25-year period and bankrolled by China, Port City is also designed to host high-end flats, a luxury marina, parks and casinos. The prevailing emphasis on 'high net worth individuals', creating a low tax zone with its own separate legal system, and a thriving centre for 'offshore products and services,' implies the project is designed to cater to elite and upper-middle class groups. Such attitudes were on display at a recent conference entitled '*Towards the Main Financial Hub of Asia: Port City Colombo 2018*', hailing Port City as the spur to transform Sri Lanka into an economic power. Later, a banker we interviewed alluded to this 'untapped' potential:

> *Look at Dubai, CFC, Central Finance, then Singapore. Marina Bay Sands. So many others. Look at them. Nothing, like it has never been closed down, or anything like it has not taken off. In our sort of geography, there is nothing to cater to India, the Southeast, I mean the South Asian market.*

There is a performative aspect to the 'hyper-planning' of megaprojects like Port City, mobilising iconic imagery to animate a 'city that works', juxtaposed against the everyday frustrations of urban life (Wade 2018, 11; see also Gidwani and Baviskar 2011). In the dramatic words of Champika Ranawaka, Sri Lanka's Minister of Megapolis and Western

Development, at a conference address shortly after assuming his new post (2016): 'we have to compete with other nations to attract investment and we have to boost our economy…either we peddle and be competitive, or we meddle – collapse and perish.'

Designs for Port City follow a recurrent emphasis in the Megapolis masterplan on improving Colombo's urban environment, where beautification schemes have already transformed some neighbourhoods through the incorporation of trees and foliage, the removal of urban detritus and the addition of public amenities. However, their reach has been confined to the centre, catering primarily to the city's middle and upper classes, and precipitated the expulsion of street vendors and residents of informal settlements (see also Amarasuriya and Spencer 2015; Nagaraj 2016; Jazeel 2017). As Sri Lankan architect Madhura Premathilake comments in *Colomboscope* (2015), 'a lot of this was done for the glorification of the [Rajapaksa] regime; urban design was used as spectacle and intoxicant.' Such admissions speak to the multiple agendas which coexist simultaneously, and the contradictory outcomes that this necessarily entails. In cities aspiring to 'world class' status, settlements and livelihood activities are sanctioned as a legitimate only if they align with the aesthetic sensibilities of financial capitalist modernity (Graham & Marvin 2001; Anand 2006).

From the outset, the Port City concept has been carefully choreographed, proceeding as planned despite a brief period of suspension in response to public anger over corruption and objections from environmentalists. The sentiment reflects a prevailing mood among politicians and policymakers enthralled at the perceived successes of Dubai, Hong Kong, and Singapore – while neglecting the failures of similar initiatives.[3] The message of optimism is communicated through the media, albeit re-

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[3] Our thank to colleagues at Koç and Bogaziçi Universities (Istanbul, Turkey), who offered us many counter illustrations from the MENA region, which because of word space limitations we do not go into (see also Scott, 1998 for evidence from other parts of the world).

articulated through the prism of national self-determination. As one urban activist sardonically put it: 'The Prime Minister says, by 2050, we will be like America and Singapore. No one will be indebted. By that time…all that the foreigners have taken from us, we will have taken back.' In gesturing towards the rhetoric of strident nationalism that has manifested in Sri Lanka, at times laced with xenophobia, there was tacit recognition of the overlap between different political agendas at play. Whilst applauding Singapore as a model, respondents nevertheless stressed the distinctiveness of Sri Lanka with its own particularities.

Among the various planners, investors and bureaucrats involved with Port City, some expressed doubts, narrating a cautionary tale regarding its development prospects. According to one respondent, a property developer who had been approached by Port City officials looking to solicit investment, the decision to render a new city from reclamation was taken despite ample land available for redevelopment across Colombo. Echoing the comments of NGOs, he mentioned how brownfield sites were overlooked and disregarded in favour of the portside location. Similarly, a senior administrator from the Megapolis planning department privately conceded:

> I am not an expert in that environmental sense. But I think it is a political decision to reclaim the sea. Especially…places next to the Colombo Port, because you can find many other places. I'm not talking as an officer, but as a layperson; around Sri Lanka you can find many other suitable places to reclaim….

A more candid explanation was provided by a senior waste contractor who, while broadly supportive of the project, expressed doubts about the decision-making logic of the

process and once again, alluded to the power of the Chinese state in shaping development outcomes:

> *Port City's justification is that because it has [already] been signed with the Chinese…it has to go ahead. Other than that, there is no other justification. It's not like we need that additional land, there is plenty of land to build on in Colombo. You might not be able to build the kind of city that they are envisioning building over there. But there is certainly plenty of land to develop. And even if you go around the Central Business District, there are so many old buildings, and pretty stately buildings, that are not utilised, under-utilised, owned by the state, completely neglected buildings that can be completely revived, you know?*

As such comments illustrate, the enthused, polished and celebratory tone of official proclamations belie the uncertainties, political calculations, and antagonistic relations that have blighted the project. Sri Lanka remains riven with social and ethnic fractures, and many areas of contention have not yet been resolved (de Alwis 2010; Brown, Kajotha, Chan and Ruwanpura 2019; Venugopal 2018). While PM Ranil Wickramasinghe announced a suspension of the project in 2015, on the grounds that it would "end up destroying the coastal belt from Negombo to Beruwala," (quoted in the *Daily Mirror*, December 2014), after objections from the Chinese Harbour Engineering Corporation (CHEC), construction resumed in 2018.

The People's Movement against Port City

The Megapolis masterplan includes many provisions welcomed by advocates for a more socially just, liveable city, including improved access to green spaces and plans for

a new light rail system in Colombo to ease chronic congestion. Yet since it was first publicly mooted in 2011, the plan for Port City has proven exceedingly contentious, with a vocal and active social movement rising to resist and warn against its detrimental effects. PMAPC have engaged in street protests, litigation, and hunger strikes to express the strength of their opposition; mobilising the rhetoric of 'endangerment', to draw attention to the prospect of irreversible loss to ecosystems, harm to livelihoods and ecological ruination arising from the construction of the Port City (Huggan and Klasen 2005; Paprocki 2018; see also Gidwani and Baviskar 2011).

Although Sri Lanka's 2010 National Physical Plan boasts a series of seemingly robust sustainability guidelines, including precautionary principles, intergenerational equity and conservation of biodiversity, these do not appear to have been adopted wholesale by planners and developers in practice. Bolstered by warnings from geologists and marine ecologists, activists have concentrated on resisting dredging and sand mining, which bear a direct impact on the livelihoods and declining catch of upstream fishing communities due to damaging areas of coral reef and excavating from the seabed. Although an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) gave the greenlight to construction, this was widely criticised as flawed by opposition politicians at the time and remains at the core of grievances. Our research highlights the need for greater engagement with dynamic coastal ecology because in spite of reassurances and compensation arrangements, livelihoods have nevertheless been adversely impacted by dredging in the coastal ecology. Similar concerns have been voiced about the effects of rock mining in the interior of the country with effects on the water table.

Another concern is around procedural justice, particularly regarding the EIA released in 2011, which was widely condemned as flawed and inadequate. One Colombo-based NGO researcher summarised the predicament:

> 'There was really very inadequate communication about the decision to go forward with Port City, and communication across the board has been a huge issue with this government. Tremendous failure on all accounts...people are still wondering, why...It's not so hard to communicate if this contract was so tight - in terms of transparency it's not so difficult - but they didn't..."

Similarly, and with a tinge of irony, a property developer noted that the consultation started after the project had begun and not before-hand; if due process had been followed, he said that the outcome may have been different given the extent of brownfield sites in Colombo. A respondent from the Colombo Municipal Council stressed that there were well established procedures in place for such a project, with social and environmental auditing in place to handle any grievances:

> 'And under this Megapolis project, I am aware that they have employed a lot of social officers. And they are supposed to go and talk to the people who are going to be affected. If their land is going to be acquired, or they are going to be shifted, or they are going to be put into a flat or something, they are supposed to go before decisions are taken to talk to them and ask them and get their views. And then they have a discussion.'

Neoliberal modes of governance conscript citizens into a practice of consultation, whilst circumscribing the terms of debate in ways which elide deeper modes of deliberative democratic participation (da Costa and McMichael 2007; Baviskar 2011; Truelove 2018;

Doshi 2018). Yet, some environmental activists cast doubt on this process of rubber stamping, as the director of a leading environmental NGO in Sri Lanka highlighted:

We filed … legal action, because all this started in 2011/12. At that time, we opposed; so at that time the Chinese premier came round maybe 2013, while were are in dialogue with the Central Environment Authority, and then someone from the central government said, please issue no objection letter because we want to pump sea sand in front of the Chinese premier. So that's how they got the no objection letter.'

In a country still living in the shadow of violent ethnic past, underscored by the spate of bombings on Easter Sunday 2019, public life remains marred by residual ethnic tensions, the demonization of minorities, and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. The persistence of majoritarian, communalist politics ensures that minority groups still struggle to get their voices heard, and voting constituencies tend to fragment in favour of communalist impulses (Caron 2016; Venugopal 2018; Brown et al. 2019). Equally, China's pivotal role at the end phase of Sri Lanka's bloodied ethnic war also meant that the initial conception of Port City escaped attention and scrutiny needed.

The organisational base of PMAPC are predominantly Catholic fishing communities, residing in the Negombo area, north of Colombo (see Figure 4). The Catholic Church has therefore played a prominent and sometimes controversial role, both supporting resistance and acting as a mediator. However, according to one priest who has taken an active organisational role in the movement, this involvement had initially come in response to pressure from communities themselves: '*it is they who introduced the subject to me. They said that because of this Port City, their livelihoods are affected.'*

The role of the Catholic Church has split opinion and divided more radical and moderate opponents – between those concerned with the encroachment of mining and dredging onto their own livelihood territories, and those objecting at a more fundamental level to the underlying logics and political interests driving the project forward without democratic legitimacy.[4] One fisherman active in the All Ceylon Fisherfolk Trade Union decried double standards, pointing out that while the CHEC was permitted to engage in sand mining, individual citizens could be fined or face a prison sentence for removing corals or taking sand from the beach.

Figure 4 here

The incipient demands for a rethinking of Colombo's regional development strategy subordinate citizens' movements to broader corporate agendas and political dynamics set in motion. Despite the PMAPC's limited successes in garnering a revised EIA process and promises to remove dredging from fishing Zones in Negombo, it has not evolved into a mass movement. There have been various explanations, such as media bias limiting the platforms available for critical views, and a stretched capacity amongst organisers. The CHEC emerged as a principle target of animosity, with accusations that it had corrupted the planning process. Other pointed to the 'betrayal' of the Catholic Church following a series of donations to divide opposition:

> "The parent company of the Chinese Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) has
>
> given a lot of money to the church...and a lot of money to the fisheries

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[4] The Catholic Church has also played an instrumental and radical role at various moments in time in Sri Lanka's troubled political history, including on protesting around environmental destructive projects (see also Caron and Da Costa, 2007).

organisations in the area, so that completely disrupted the campaign at the moment. So now they are trying to rebuild the campaign, but we don't have that particular strength at the moment."

Social activists expressed disillusionment with the press to safeguard the public interest and hold power to account. In the face of glaring economic inequalities, differing access to resources and concentrated forms of political power, the disbursal of payments effectively divided and neutralised opposition, as a trade unionist from the National Fishers Solidarity Organization (NAFSO) mentioned:

The media was bribed, totally bribed. Because when we put in the first campaign we had good media coverage, but later on CHEC… they offered to all the media institutions, advertisement…If the Chinese money is floating around, you will get it!"

The malleable and situated nature of corruption and how it finds itself attached a variety of political projects was underlined by our respondents in either subtle or stark ways (see also Rajasingham-Senanayake 2018). Like them, we too found how it offered a normative framework through which to attribute moral judgements upon deviations from socially accepted norms, drawing on symbolic, material and territorial power where production of marginality and class segregation gets re-inscribed (see Smith 2010; Baviskar 2011; Nagaraj 2016).

Women also spoke of how fishermen had taken money and so been politically manipulated. One Catholic nun commented, "Families broke, women were for the cause, but men they start threatening – you choose the family or the boats…more than men, it is

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the fisher women who are doing the campaign." As Truelove (2011, 2018) notes, the intelligibility of infrastructural effects are produced through inequalities associated with processes of gender, class and social demarcations, with fissures for familial and community life becoming apparent even in protest movements (see also Scott 1998). The top-down, debt-fuelled and unattainable character of Port City then was not only robbing the country of its sovereignty and breeding corruption but was also accentuating socio-economic divides and causing community and familial tensions. The derangement had multiple strands needing further scrutiny.

Derangement via 'overdevelopment'

The geostrategic significance of Port City was highlighted at the official launch of the construction phase in 2015, attended by then president Mahinda Rajapaksa and Chinese Premier Xi Jinping. The close bilateral ties reflect historically amicable relations between Sri Lanka and China, cultivated from the 1950s through participation in the Bandung conference and Non-Aligned Movement (de Alwis 2010; see also Lin et al. 2018). This relationship can also be understood as a strategic geopolitical alliance to guard against India's power as the regional hegemon in South Asia, aligning with the OBOR initiative as part of a new axis of power in the South Asia region (de Alwis 2010; Duara 2015; Lin et al. 2018).

While China has emerged as an important foreign creditor in the post-war landscape, as de Alwis (2010) and Rajasingham-Senanayake (2018) note Sri Lanka's indebtedness, bail-outs and corruption extends to both Western and Chinese lenders alike. From multiple vantage points – as environmental activist, investors, bureaucrats,

or citizens – numerous segments of society figures articulated their fears about a prospective debt trap in the making, relaying their concern at the burden of debt-fuelled development. A senior executive of one property firm described the situation as follows:

> *"Out of our GDP, we are spending 80 or so percent of it on debt repayments. So, there is no chance...we are in a debt-trap, and we are specifically in a debt-trap because of ....a couple of big projects like that..."*

Environmental campaigners often responded in a similar fashion, whilst seeking to foreground the implications that this might have on democracy and global governance:

> *"We are in a serious debt trap. Politically we are in a very handicapped situation, because we are under Chinese debt, and we have to follow what they say, and that will be a real problem for us, politically, in the future...."*

This was not always painted in such a negative light. Another business figure, from a major Sri Lankan conglomerate, presented the case that this was part-and-parcel of lifting the country out of poverty: *"We are very poor, as you know. We are paying our debts, by getting this Port City done. It's a huge thing."* Nevertheless, the debt package offered by China and international creditors, and the terms of repayment stipulated, have generated significant anger over 'handicapped sovereignty', allude to the soft power exercised by China, and the ramifications of the debtor-creditor relationship to the West and China (de Alwis 2010; Kadirgamar 2013; Duara 2010; Lin et al 2017).

   The rapid acceleration of capital-intensive mega-infrastructure projects, derided by some activists as 'overdevelopment' has triggered a national debt crisis, with foreign

creditors wielding significant power over the direction of policymaking. The political vision bestowed by architects of Port City assures "better" lives for Colombo's residents in a generalised and abstract sense, with the project replicating a model of commerce and leisure catering only to elite and upper-middle class members of the population. There is, however, no acknowledgement of the mounting debt and its bearing on the people or those not endowed with sufficient cultural and economic capital to enjoy these new worlds (see also Sanyal 2007; de Alwis 2010; Gidwani and Baviskar 2011; Kadirgamar 2013).

The derangement of a debt burden is not the only gamble of Sri Lanka embracing the Port City. According to many of our interviewees, with this overdevelopment come incalculable environmental risks. The ecological impacts of sand mining – an undertaking necessary for the purposes of land reclamation - have been examined in scientific literature, revealing a plethora of risks. To take one example, the cascading effects of mining on shoreline erosion increase vulnerability to storm surges due to a reduced absorptive capacity (Helmreich 2011, Torres et al 2015). A senior figure from the Environment Authority acknowledged environmental violations, but remained optimistic these could be overcome:

The Chinese broke 47 [environmental] laws of our country. I took some legal guys from Sri Lanka to visit a few port cities last year – Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Guangdong. They have actually addressed environmental concerns in those port cities [as it's their own land]… "

Yet questions whether such laws are 'fit for purpose' miss a broader point; the limited focus on 'legality', which while significant, risked overlooking the broader picture. A

beleaguered statement from Catholic religious leaders active in the movement recalled how this had played out:

According to the EIA report, they should do mining 10km away from the coast. But the fishermen were estimating that they were doing it much closer, 5 km or 4km from the coast. And for that, everybody rose up against sand mining.

A fisherman showed us how the sandy beaches of Negombo are turning brown and black due to the dredging on the sea coast in closer proximity than that stipulated by the revised EIA study. Similar stories were recounted to us by environmentalists on the beach area south of Colombo, Mount Lavinia, where erosion and discolouring of the beach are visible. The fact that the environment has already taken a setback speaks to how technocratic instruments provide a legibility and rationale that displaces and neglects both immediate and potential environmental risks.

However, it is not just the coastline that is under duress. Environmental activists and scientists also brought to our attention the quarrying of rock and stone in the interior of the country, which is also needed to build the Port City and reclaim the sea. An activist scientist mentioned how consequently the water table in the interior of the country is depleting, with water shortages and unpublicized landslips taking place in the interior of Sri Lanka. A NGO activist leading a women centred unit corroborated the increasing difficulties faced by women because of the impact on their livelihoods due to these environmental changes. Because the difficulties faced by these women take place in the interior of country, they are very easily overlooked as disconnected from the ecological harm caused by the Port City (see also Chakrabarty 2014).

As environmental regulations and EIA's are ignored, there is also wilful ignorance to the future prospects of rising seas, exposure to storms, tsunamis and extreme weather events. Even the stark warnings from the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change seems to have little bearing on policymakers (IPCC 2018; see also Chakrabarty 2014). The IPCC report points to the urgent need for a radical restructuring of the world economy to avert the existential risk to 'several hundred million' lives. Yet, Sri Lanka's Port City project signifies the inability to significantly rethink around global development agendas, as road, port, and airport expansion continues apace across the world. It is, as Ghosh (2017) reminds us, "a colonial vision of the world, in which proximity to the water represents power and security, mastery and conquest, has now been incorporated into the very foundations of middle-class patterns of living across the globe" (2017, 22; see also Chakrabarty 2014). This refusal to discard outmoded tools and categories in the wake of impending ecological crisis, is akin to the abdication of responsibility which Ghosh decries as nothing less than derangement.

Whilst the effect of infrastructures is concealed and remain above/below the surface, and even seemingly disconnected from other geographical spaces, they become visible in moments of crisis, surfacing when their operation stops or is interrupted – and this is a categorical failure, an indictment of the material symbolic modes of organisation (Chakrabarty 2014). Hence, although state bureaucracies, actors and engineers produce calculation design to cultivate the appearance of legibility in infrastructure projects, a sense of arbitrariness often prevails where both knowledge and ignorance are simultaneously produced (Truelove 2018; see also Scott 1998).

The promise of the Port City as an environmentally friendly eco-city rings hollow. Designed from scratch, its construction invariably requires huge amount of energy and material resources and come at the expense of retrofitting and 'greening' existing urban

infrastructure. Yet, as experience from South Asia alone shows, invariably, paradoxically incurs a violation of existing environmental laws and regulations (Baviskar 2011; Dutta 2012). By decentring Colombo-centric narratives of the urban commons, we have attempted to appreciate the extent of derangement by bringing into the radar the ecological stress created through the Port City to communities in far-away places.

Conclusion

Nearly a decade on from the bloody conclusion to Sri Lanka's civil war, efforts to transcend the country's violent past and reinvent a process of economic renewal have gained pace, with an attendant political ambition to rebuild and unify post-war Sri Lanka have remained captive to a narrowly conceived articulation of development. The pivot from the nation to the city has led to distinct efforts to cultivate an increasingly financialised model of 'Asian capitalism', in which connectivity and economic growth are celebrated as the salve that will temper ethnic tensions and ameliorate turbulent social and class inequalities. However, the push for expressways, ports and airports, and the economic model now embodied in the skeleton of Port City, are susceptible to a form of cognitive dissonance, in which the ecological damages incurred are viewed as temporary aberrations or inconveniences that can be overcome, rather than exposing flaws at the heart of this vision. Ambiguity over the meaning of sustainability has deterred substantive engagement in this arena, with the closely textured, entanglements of fisher and local peoples' livelihoods, coastal and interior ecosystems erased and replaced by simplistic binaries.

Together then, these moments can be read as an indictment of environmental governance in the Colombo metropolitan area. The very illegibility of infrastructures, and the manifest difficulties of surveying their complex effects in producing exclusion,

environmental degradation and iniquity, allows the state to disavow its own obligations. At such a conjecture, it becomes necessary to return to spatial dimensions of uneven development. In the quest to connect post-war Sri Lanka with regional trading infrastructures and cultivate ties with global capital, there is a simultaneous disconnect from the immediate needs of local populations, ethnic politics and urban and coastal ecosystems. Such pauses, interruptions and disjunctures speak to incoherence, uncertainty, and unsettled forms of power that have constituted the infrastructural focus in post-war Sri Lanka. More than this, infrastructure projects, have been a way of neglecting Sri Lanka's fractured ethnic tensions, complex political past and uneven development – as the tragic events of April 2019 in Sri Lanka reveal. Moreover, at this juncture with environmental risks deliberately ignored, neglected or displaced by proponents, which may likely tragically haunt Sri Lanka again in the future, as Bishop Asiri and the PMAPC warns.

In finalizing and tightening our paper, we were aided by fantastic editorial support by Barney Warf: thank you for this! The first author is appreciative of two great junior researchers (and co-authors) that worked enthusiastically through a difficult period and helped redress sparse initial data to ensure the completion of this research. Last, but not least, we remain grateful for all of the respondents that made the time for us; without them, this intervention would not have been possible.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS: NONE

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Figure 1

Screen shot from the Port City Colombo promotional video.

Source: You Tube

Figure 2:

Map of national infrastructure plan detailing new infrastructure projects

Source: National Physical Plan

Figure 3:

Detailed location of Port City Colombo

Source: http://www.worldportsource.com/ports/maps/LKA_Port_of_Colombo_44.php

Figure 4:

The image was taken in July 2018 when the PMAPC protest was taking place. The kite says "NO (to) Port City" in Sinhala; one of the three languages of Sri Lanka (other kites carried this message in Tamil and English as well).

Photo Source: Benjamin Brown