

Saumya Vaishnava, 2021  
Pennsylvania State University, Geography

***An island entire of itself: infrastructure, imaginaries and the making of Mumbai's electricity grid***

On October 12, 2020, transmission lines bringing electricity to the city of Mumbai snapped, causing a power outage which left the city and its millions without power. While power outages are a regular feature in India, this outage made national headlines since Mumbai has always had exceptionally reliable power supply. This outage was all the more troubling because the city's electricity infrastructure had been designed to prevent such a situation: an "islanding scheme", set up in the 1980s, had protected the city from such power failures in the past.

In this research project, I use the case study of Mumbai's electricity infrastructure to animate the entanglements of technology, institutions, social and political life within which electricity infrastructure decisions and operations take place in the city. This research project asks the following questions: What makes electricity flow (un)reliably in Mumbai? Through what processes do private capital, state agencies, and civil society negotiate their interests to make electricity flow? How do these processes shape the material infrastructure and how does the infrastructure in turn shape these processes and the workings of the city? To answer these questions, I will study the evolution of the material grid with the socio-political and economic changes in the city. Second, I will examine the functioning of the city's multiple utilities as embedded city-based actors, especially its private utilities that built the city's earliest grid and continue to maintain it today. Finally, I will analyse the hearings of the electricity regulatory commission as a site where different imaginaries of the city are negotiated.