Neighborhood Associations and the Urban Poor: India's Slum Development Committees

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Summary. — How do slum dwellers organize and demand development from the state? The politics of urban slums has primarily been examined through the lens of clientelism. In contrast, associational activity has gone relatively understudied in these spaces, reserved instead as a focus of inquiry for middle-class neighborhoods. Drawing on twenty months of fieldwork and an original survey of 1,925 residents across 80 settlements in the north Indian cities of Jaipur, Rajasthan and Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, I find that local associations are prevalent features of political life in India's slums. These associations—colloquially referred to as *katchi basti vikas samitiyaan*, or slum development committees—afford residents a degree of organizational formality in otherwise informal spaces. They provide a medium for making individual and collective claims on the state. While patron–client networks do pervade slums, this study demonstrates that vertical ties co-exist with horizontal associations, producing a multi-dimensional space in which residents mitigate risk and demand development.
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1. INTRODUCTION

The residents of Saraswati had little time to organize.[1] The police had already razed several shanties and a larger eviction was imminent. Less urgent problems also prevailed. Water was scarce, roads were mostly unpaved, and trash piles were strewn throughout the slum. In the face of these threats, residents gathered in the winter of 2007 to elect a leader and form a development committee. Makeshift ballots were crafted for the informal election and candidates gave speeches—all organized outside the purview of the state. Most adult residents voted, and with a margin of 141 votes, Jagdish defeated Prem and formed his committee. Interviews and committee documents reveal a range of performed activities. The committee has secured water tanks, drainage, and paved roads, facilitated the provision of ration cards and widow pensions, and halted eviction after meeting with officials. While the activity levels of the committee have ebbed and flowed depending on local needs, it has served an important role in advancing the collective interests of residents.

The organizational efforts of Saraswati are not isolated. Based on 20 months of fieldwork and a survey of 1,925 residents across 80 settlements in two north Indian cities, I find that development committees are prevalent features of political life in slums. Committees provide a vehicle for petitioning the state for public services. They also afford a degree of organizational formality in otherwise informal spaces. Scholars, however, have largely overlooked the efforts of slum dwellers to organize and make claims through associations.[2] While patron–client networks do pervade slums, vertical ties co-exist with associations, producing a multi-dimensional space in which residents mitigate risk and demand development. The presence of development committees in India's urban slums challenges notions that these communities are too mired in vote-bank politics to produce associational activity.[3]

The study of neighborhood associations in South Asia has predominantly focused on the middle class. Slums have been mostly relegated to an analytic space that Chatterjee refers to as political society—an arena in which the poor make demands on the state through parties and patronage networks, not through civil society and legal procedures.[4] The characterization of slum dwellers as inescapably bound to vertical, clientelistic relationships—or reliant on NGOs for representation—misses the bottom-up associational efforts of residents to improve local conditions. It obscures the multiplicity of ways that the urban poor govern themselves and engage the state. Development committees do seek to build political linkages to secure public services. The formation of vertical ties, though, does not preclude local agency and associational life. By explaining widespread yet understudied associational activity in slums, this article contributes to research on urban informality in India and other developing democracies.

International development programs are increasingly calling for local participation.[5] Researchers and practitioners argue that participation can strengthen accountability, improve project sustainability, and better address local needs. Several urban development programs have been implemented in India within the last decade. One recent program, Rajiv Awas Yojana, included guidelines for the creation of community-based organizations in slums, charged with inducing participation. Practitioners, however, should carefully identify existing associations before encouraging the formation of community-based organizations *de novo*.[6] It cannot be assumed that associational life is absent, nor can it be assumed that extant organizations can—or should—be circumvented. I encountered active associations in my fieldwork—a finding supported by a survey across 80 settlements in Jaipur and Bhopal. In

those neighborhoods with associations, the potential for state-society synergy presents itself.[7]

Jaipur, Rajasthan and Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh—the two research sites for this study—are instructive cities in which to examine associational life in India's slums.[8] Much of India's population of slum dwellers do not live in the megacities of Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata, and Mumbai, but rather in a constellation of relatively small- and medium-sized cities spread throughout the country; cities that are likely to have lower levels of state capacity than their larger counterparts.[9] As Davis notes, "If megacities are the brightest stars in the urban firmament, three quarters of the burden of future world population growth will be borne by faintly visible second-tier cities and smaller urban areas."[10] Jaipur and Bhopal represent these less visible second-tier cities that mark urbanization in India and other emerging economies.

Over 800 million people live in slums worldwide.[11] Sixty-five million of them live in India's.[12] While these aggregate figures demonstrate the expansiveness of urban poverty and informality, the term "slum" is notoriously amorphous, including within it a diversity of housing conditions that vary in their legality, historical origins, and social integration in the city. This study focuses on *squatter settlements*, which are spontaneous, low-income areas that are constructed by residents in an unsanctioned and haphazard manner.[13] Squatter settlements lack property rights at the period of their establishment and are often located on environmentally sensitive lands such as riverbeds, mountainsides, and along highways and railroad tracks.

This article is organized as follows. I first situate the study within the literatures on social capital, local associations, and urban informality. I then introduce India's slum development committees and describe their formation, structure, and activities. Next, I draw on original survey data to investigate the prevalence of development committees across Jaipur and Bhopal's slums and then present two case studies that illustrate their emergence and claim-making efforts. I conclude with a comparative discussion of informal slum governance, highlighting remarkable similarities between India's slum development committees and associations in poor urban neighborhoods in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.

2. ASSOCIATIONAL ACTIVITY AND URBAN INDIA

A large, interdisciplinary literature argues that social capital is positively associated with a range of outcomes in development and good governance.[14] Studies have demonstrated that high levels of social capital promote political accountability and state responsiveness.[15] Other studies have established how trust and cooperative social ties enable collective action, facilitate the provision of public goods, and mitigate inter-ethnic conflict.[16] For individuals, social networks can be drawn upon to facilitate migration, secure employment, and overcome economic shocks.[17]

A related vein of research examines community associations, locally bound in their membership and activities.[18] Such associations can reduce the transaction costs of collective action[19] and afford members a platform for addressing common problems.[20,21] The social ties that animate associations can stem from shared identities, or they can represent linkages among individuals from diverse social and economic backgrounds.[22] The associations examined in this study seek to parlay these horizontal forms of social capital into "linking" social capital—vertical ties that connect communities to state institutions and other extra-local organizations.[23]

Alongside decentralization,[24] community-driven development projects have proliferated over the past two decades, seeking to harness—or induce—citizen participation, often through the use or establishment of community-based associations.[25] Recent development programs in India's cities have similarly emphasized local participation.[26] Such programs, though, say little about extant forms of neighborhood-level associational life, leaving little room for practitioners to adapt projects to the organizational contours of specific communities. To what extent do India's cities already have associations working to improve local conditions?

(a) *Associational activity in urban India*

In contrast to descriptions of India as a country with sparse associational activity,[27] scholars have documented robust forms of associational life across India's cities.[28] The primary empirical focus of this research has been middle-class neighborhoods. In her seminal study on Mumbai, Fernandes notes, "middle class neighborhood associations increasingly have begun to mobilize in an effort to regain their control over public space."[29] Other studies have documented neighborhood associations in India's cities.[30] These associations often focus on issues like sanitation, public safety, the environment, and the maintenance of places of worship and recreation.

Research on India's urban poor has largely focused on popular politics.[31] Encapsulating the analytical thrust of this literature, Harriss notes, "'civil society is the site of middle class activism, while the poor have politics'".[32] Chatterjee firmly positions the urban poor in the arena of political society.[33] He argues:

> Those in political society make their claims on government, and in turn are governed, not within the framework of stable constitutionally defined rights and laws, but rather through temporary, contextual and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations.[34]

Several studies have investigated divergences in the use of civil and political society across the urban class divide. In Chennai, Harriss finds differential forms of organization between the city's slums and middle-class neighborhoods. Middle-class residents in Chennai, he asserts, have formed neighborhood associations and draw on civil society while the poor use parties and protests to advance their interests.[35] In a related survey in Delhi, Harriss finds that the poor are more likely than wealthy residents to rely on intermediaries and political parties.[36] Baud and Nainan find in Mumbai that politicians are focal points of problem solving for the poor, whereas middle-class citizens often turn to the bureaucracy.[37] And along similar lines, Kundu writes, "Middle class activism through RWAs has opened up new opportunities for local representation, as they are able to exercise significant influence on the city and state government. Similar tools of intervention are, however, absent in the slums and low-income neighbourhoods ... [The] slums and squatter settlements located on public land, with the residents having no legal ownership or tenancy rights, have shown little initiative in forming the associations or registering them with the registrar of societies."[38]

The hard distinction between civil and political society in India is not without its critics. Coelho and Venkat argue against the use of a conceptual binary between political and civil society in approaching class politics in India's cities.[39] They find, similar to this study, evidence of civic associations in slums, as well as political activities in the middle-class neighborhoods of Chennai. Kamath and Vijayabaskar uncover similar patterns in Bangalore,[40] and Ranganathan finds hybrid