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Do India's Urban Poor Have a Distinct Politics of Their Own?

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To counter the exclusionary nature of the state, the urban poor have to constantly develop new tactics to claim citizenship and welfare benefits.

It is a stark reality of modern democracies that states can recognise entire populations as citizens and yet deny them political agency. Over the last two decades, there has been a growing recognition that citizenship manifests differently across the territory of the nation state. Urban citizenship is distinct from the rural. One might then ask, do the urban poor in India have a distinct politics of their own: political action to be counted as citizens, to stake claim to land, to housing, education and health, decent wages, and welfare.

The relationship between citizenship and political agency has long been the subject matter of concern for scholars of the formerly colonised world. Normatively, many scholars take political agency to be a central requirement of citizenship. Citizenship status not only provides a sense of security and belongingness but also offers a host of benefits for the poor to claim stakes in the city and build their lives incrementally.

There is a general consensus on the complexities of social and political lives in cities in the Global South. The relationship between the citizens and state has been described by Tereasa Calderia (2017) as “a set of interrelated processes that entangle citizens and states in the production of cities of great heterogeneity and dynamism.” Ananya Roy uses the concept of “worlding” to explain the visions and practices of building alternate social worlds in cities; while Solomon Benjamin’s “occupancy urbanism” describes how the processes of occupying land and claiming public services opens up physical and political spaces for the urban poor (Benjamin 2008; Roy and Ong 2011). Indeed, examining housing rights struggles in Mumbai in the 80s and 90s led Arjun Appadurai (2000) to argue that the nation state was no longer the sole arbiter of citizenship.

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The latest in this bewildering growth of literature is Sanjay Routray’s *The Right to Be Counted: The Urban Poor and the Politics of Resettlement in Delhi*. Routray returns to the basic questions. Who is a citizen? What does it mean to be counted and recognised as a citizen? What is the political and social significance of being recognised as citizens?

Routray provides thought-provoking narratives of the lives of residents in three ‘state-recognised’ sites, locations where residents have proof of residence: Gautam Nagar, a jhuggi jhopri cluster; Sitapuri, a transit camp; and Azad Nagar, a resettlement colony. In Gautam Nagar, he illustrates the struggle to gain recognition from the state to access infrastructure, basic amenities, and services. Through the story of Sitapuri transit camp, he showcases the struggles of the poor against the middle class and to access basic amenities. Finally, through Azad Nagar colony, Routray illustrates the innovative coping mechanisms adopted by residents through their numerical strength to restart their lives in abandoned spaces in the city. These different kinds of struggles, and the different “rann-nitis” adopted by the residents to be recognised as citizens, and win benefits from welfare measures in these sites forms the crux of the book.

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Rann-niti literally translates to “strategy”; but in the book it is used to refer to tactics and the countertactics of the poor to be counted. Routray situates the rann-nitis of Delhi’s poor in the complexities of the national capital’s political landscape. They include engagements with intermediaries such as samaj sevaks and pradhans to gain access to infrastructure; documentary practices of auto-archiving documents and articles to gain citizenship entitlements; and leveraging judiciary mechanisms. Routray highlights the agency of the urban poor through how individuals and communities deploy a variety of practices to counter the exclusionary nature of the state’s enumeration process.

According to Routray, exclusionary enumeration processes arise out of general practices of under-enumeration, emotionally charged biases of enumerators, predefined conditions of eligibility for citizenship (due to which migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal living in Delhi for decades are instantly denied housing rights) and the state’s orthographic techniques (ensuring correct spellings of names and other such details on official documents) to name a few. These observations reflect and feed into what the author calls “calculative governmentality”: state practices which deliberately de-politicize deeply social and political issues and turn to provide simplistic technical solutions for the same. These practices are governed by the state’s calculative rationalities, which includes collecting statistics and categorising populations to extend welfare measures to those deemed “eligible.”

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One such example of calculative governmentality is that if a person does not have a residence proof/ or identity proof (usually an Aadhar card) they would not be eligible for a voter ID. Not having the right to vote excludes them from the benefits enjoyed by voters, including social welfare schemes and support from political leaders and cadre.) In this manner, possession of certain identity documents, such as the Aadhar card, make it possible to have access to welfare measures and be part of population databases, which effectively determine the status of residents as citizens.

Given this exclusionary nature of the calculative rationalities of the state, it would become impossible for the urban poor to make long term strategies for claiming citizenship and associated benefits. They must constantly re-situate themselves in webs of relationships and processes in response to the actions and logics of the state. This would require them to activate different social locations, relationships, and state apparatuses. The dynamic relationships between pradhans and legislators in Gautam Nagar; litigation for reclassification as “legal” and “authorised” in Azad Nagar and struggles to gain basic provisions such as water, all are forms of “rann-nitis” by the poor.

Routray offers another provocation: the “rann- nitis of demographic calculus”. He argues that numerical strength is not the collection of individuals demanding for infrastructure, services, and welfare measures; but an act of community and solidarity building. Hence, the framing of the political agency is a constant negotiation and renegotiation, constructing and deconstructing, of various aspects of the responses to the state. These throw light on the tumultuous nature of political agency of the poor and the process of claiming citizenship.

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In making these claims of the nature of rann-nitis and calculative governmentality, Routray draws deep from ethnographic insights from his fieldwork and engages in dialogues and discussions around citizenship and political agency. His idea of “numerical citizenship” as the struggle of claim-making to be counted falls in line with Veena Das’s idea of citizenship being a claim that one asserts, and not a status that someone has at any given point of time (2011). Numerical citizenship is also in the mode of “insurgent citizenship,” propagated by James Holston (2008). Routray agrees with Holston that citizenship claims are built on “struggles to advance occupation of land, demand multitude of rights, and extend solidarity”. But unlike what Holston shows for Brazil, the poor in Delhi do not claim rights as taxpayers but by foregrounding their numerical strength, community solidarity and a range of institutional and non-institutional rann-nitis.

Routray appreciates the innovative conceptual methods used by Partha Chatterjee (2004). Yet, critically engaging with the differences presented by Chatterjee between state and society, legality and illegality, “civil society” and “political society,” Routray argues that these binaries largely remain schematic. In dealing with the question of agency of the poor in securing citizenship rights and the effects of calculative state practices, Routray also places his argument in contrast to Stephen Legg’s ideas of “practices, modalities, and projects” (2007) of the calculative colonial state on the colonised populations in Delhi. While Legg’s analysis showcases that colonial subjects are not merely passive, he does not explore the ways in which these subjects counteract the colonial’s state’s exclusionary practices.

The exploration of such counteractive practices of the urban poor is the main theme of the book. It forms the base to frame Routray’s arguments on the nature of counteractive tactics of the urban poor to claim citizenship rights. He builds on Solomon Benjamin’s ideas of “porous bureaucracy” (2000) to showcase the poor negotiating their way through a complex and non-transparent bureaucratic system

to access entitlements. The engagement with various theoretical framings helps readers get a precise understanding of the author's location and explanation of the political agency of the urban poor.

It would be useful to take note of the realities of place, which shape the ways in which people act, react, and respond to the state's exclusionary practices.

The Right to Be Counted prompts us to think of two questions. First, can the framing of rann-nitis be applied across India? What makes these rann-nitis similar to or different from those deployed in Delhi to those in Hyderabad or Kolkata? While the author does not discuss the ways in which these rann-nitis are very specific to and entrenched in the politics of Delhi, it would be useful to take note of the realities of place, which shape the ways in which people act, react, and respond to the state's exclusionary practices.

The question of place is also useful to think of the distinctions between the three sites presented in the book. Given the different contexts, and political locations of the sites Routray studies, there does not seem to be a major distinction in the rann-nitis of their respective residents. How is it that even with these distinct locations, these places have similar rann-nitis? What are the differences in their rann-nitis if at all any?

In short, the book prods us to consider what we need to ask to be able to decipher the rann-nitis in various places and the role of place in shaping the agency of the urban poor.

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