# 'Participation' and Contestation in the Governance of Indian Cities

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# 'Participation' and Contestation in the Governance of Indian Cities

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Abstract:
This paper was prepared for a conference organized by the University of
Michigan and the Centre for Social Studies, Kolkata, and held at the Centre in
March 2010, around the theme of 'Contesting the Indian City: State, Space and
Citizenship in the Global Era'. The paper, concerned specifically with
contestation over the governance of Indian cities, shows that the stated intentions
of the Government of India with regard to the democratization of urban
governance through decentralization have not yet been realized. They are in any
case opposed, in effect, by the way in which the accountability of city
governments has been compromised by other innovations that are sanctioned by
the current 'governance' agenda.

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# 'Participation' and Contestation in the Governance of Indian Cities

Formally, in terms both of normative statements from government, and of legislation, it would seem that India has a strong commitment to democratizing urban governance, while there is also evidence of vibrant support from within civil society for these norms and measures. This paper reviews evidence about the implementation of the measures that are intended to bring about the democratization of urban governance, and about the implications of civil society activism for democracy. The evidence shows that the democratization of the governance of Indian cities is promised on the one hand but effectively taken away on the other by the policies that are being pursued in regard to urban planning. Meanwhile, much civil society activism is frankly exclusive of urban poor people, and may actually increase political inequality.

Most significantly for urban governance, the Constitution (74th) Amendment Act of 1992 extends the principles of decentralized democratic local government, those of *panchayati raj*, to the cities; and the more recent urban programme of the present Government of India, the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), which includes amongst its objectives that of 'strengthening municipal governments and their functioning in accordance with the provisions of [the 74th Amendment]', also argues the need for a community participation law. In response to this statement of principle the Delhi Government, in February 2008, moved a note for cabinet approval for enacting such a law, that would make it mandatory for government and its agencies to seek the views of citizens before embarking on any project. The 74th Amendment – even though it was, reportedly, enacted only as a result of an afterthought by the protagonists of *panchayati raj* for the villages – legislates for the constitution of three different types of municipalities, for the devolution of greater functional responsibilities and of financial powers to these urban local bodies, for 'adequate representation' of women and the so-called 'weaker sections' (an official euphemism for people from historically lower castes), and for the constitution of 'ward committees' as the instruments of increased local participation in decision-making. These measures are strongly supported by well-organised groups in civil society such as CIVIC (Citizens Voluntary Initiative for the City), and *Janaagraha* ('jana'+'agraha', meaning 'moral force of the people') in Bangalore, or CAG (the Consumers and Citizens Action Group)

and *Catalyst* in Chennai and comparable organizations in other major cities, many of them tied up with *Lok Satta*, a civic movement that is now a political party standing for the platform of establishing 'a new political culture that will place the citizen at the centre of governance'. All of these organisations are headed by dynamic, highly principled professional people, and their ethos and their quality are well reflected in their equally professional, informative websites.

It would seem, therefore, that there are in India political and institutional conditions favouring the establishment of more participatory and inclusive forms of urban governance. Yet I find a lot of evidence to support views that I have advanced in published work (e.g. Harriss 2006, 2007) about the extent to which institutions of democratic decentralization and various participatory initiatives in Indian cities are taken over by members of the middle classes, in a way that is exclusive in regard to poorer people from the informal working class (those very many people in India, forming the overwhelming majority of the labour force, who are employed in activities in which they do not enjoy the benefits of labour legislation). On the other hand, when I argue that poorer people are 'left with politics', I recognize that this very often entails their dependence upon local 'big men' (or women), who may be local party leaders or who are closely linked to party leaders, and who function as intermediaries between the denizens (hardly 'citizens') of the city and the state. I am less sanguine about the implications of this intermediation than are Jha, Rao and Woolcock who have argued on the basis of comparable observations of the role of the *pradhan*s of Delhi's slums that 'urbanisation … (is) .. providing the poor with greater voice in democratic discourse' (2007: 244). How so, when their 'participation' is mediated by dependence upon particular gatekeepers?

## Context: the Contrasting Economies of Indian Cities

There is a distinct dualism in Indian cities, well reflected in the idea of the separation between their 'local economies' and their 'corporate economies'. Solomon Benjamin (2000) has used these terms in an analysis that aims to show the connections between different economies, poverty and modes of governance. The 'local economies' are diverse and complex, and provide most of the population with their accommodation, work and livelihoods. Their links with government are through middle and junior bureaucrats and local political leaders, with local

government, and they are aimed at influencing councillors and the middle level bureaucracy of the city so as to provide improved infrastructure, basic amenities and greater security of land tenure.

The 'corporate economies', on the other hand, are the arena for industrial, bureaucratic and IT sector elites; they are plugged into higher level political circuits, and have quite direct links with state-level and national parastatal agencies (including finance corporations and development authorities). They operate through 'master planning' and mega-projects that have made it possible, as Janaki Nair argues – in regard to Bangalore – for the capitalist class to achieve 'hegemony in the shaping of the urban form' that is quite unprecedented (Nair 2005: 340). Control over real estate in Bangalore has over time passed to the state level[1], as suggested in the following policy document:

> Government land may be provided, subject to availability, at concessional rates, except in Corporation and City Municipal Council areas…Where it is not possible for private investors to obtain land required for the project on their own, the Karnataka Industrial Areas Development Board [KIADB] will acquire the land required for project charging concessional administrative charges and will hand over the same to the investors free of encumbrances (Government of Karnataka, Infrastructure Policy of Karnataka 1997)

Consequently IT companies – both real and well known ones like Infosys, and some which appear bogus – have become major players in the real estate market, free to choose land that they fancy. A recent report (cited by Narayanan 2005) states that "It is clear that the IT companies are dictating the process almost entirely. From the timing of the notification to the approach adopted by the KIADB there is evidence of dictates from the IT companies…". Because this land poaching [which is what it amounts to] happens with the blessings of the state, ' it is in effect the State Government that dictates and controls much of the city's development through the Bangalore Development Authority – with a concomitant erosion of the ability of elected representatives of the local municipal corporation to participate in urban planning processes. This is critical from the point of view of the poor and the slum-dwellers, who typically have little security in tenure. Therefore on the one hand, even as there is some effort being made to decentralize (in line with the 74th Amendment), there is an opposite and counterbalancing

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[1] The text that follows is taken from an unpublished report by Sudha Narayanan (2005), based on work undertaken as part of the Bangalore study within the project on political participation in major cities in which I am engaged with Peter Houtzager and Adrian Gurza Lavalle.

tendency to subvert local autonomy in favour of centralization of decision-making in the area of spatial planning of the city. It appears that in the context of decentralization the government has one foot on the accelerator and the other quite firmly on the brake' (Narayanan 2005; and see also Ghosh 2005).

Very much the same point is made in a study of 'Representation and Development in Urban Peripheries', referring to Ahmedabad (Roy 2006), where it is pointed out that the progressive takeover of decision-making in urban development by the Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority, dependent upon government grants, provides no mechanisms of accountability to citizens. The agencies that are involved in the 'corporate economies' of cities like Bangalore and Ahmedabad, therefore, and their instruments, offer little if any place for local representation[2]; while their definition of public priorities is discordant with those that may be expressed by participants in the 'local economies'.

Benjamin sums up: 'Rigid land controls in the expanding corporate enclave areas exclude most pro-poor economic activity and threaten poor groups' fragile claims to land. Poor groups suffer demolition, resettlement, increased land prices and a governance system in which their local representative structure has little power. Meanwhile, the publicly sponsored mega-projects do little to support the local economies that are so important for the city's prosperity and may disrupt them' (Benjamin 2000: 35). Class differences, rooted in the structure of economic differentiation that has been fostered by economic liberalism, are associated with practices that have strong spatial and social implications.

## The Implementation of the 74th Amendment

This brief account of the increasing power of the corporate sector, of the upper middle class and of real estate developers over the shaping of urban space provides an indication of the failure, so far, to make a reality of the intentions of the 74th Amendment with regard to the establishment of decentralised democratic governance of the cities. A study of its

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[2] Sudha Narayanan, in the course of her study of associational activity in Bangalore, conducted in 2004, reported that the informal but still influential Bangalore Agenda Task Force made some efforts to invite participation from slum dwellers' associations. That none did participate might be explained by the fact that meetings of the BATF took place in such venues as the Infosys Boardroom (Narayanan 2005).

implementation from the National Institute of Urban Affairs[3] found 'full compliance across states with many of its provisions', but not with regard to the constitution of the ward committees that are supposed to be the means of increased democratic participation and of deliberative decision-making. Though the report states that ward committees have been constituted in eight states and one Union Territory (Delhi) it proceeds to argue that across the four southern states, at least, 'they are practically not functional except in Hyderabad and Bangalore' – and then goes on even to qualify this statement with the remark that 'In the case of Bangalore, it is further learnt that they are neither meeting regularly nor functioning effectively'. This is confirmed by CIVIC, the movement that was in the forefront of the (eventually failed) campaign to ensure that in Bangalore ward committees be set up in such a way as to create at least the possibility that they become meaningful fora of deliberative participation[4]. Working for the formation of ward committees in the city continues to be a major component of CIVIC's programme; while Ramesh Ramanathan of *Janaagraha* argues that though the ward is the crucial unit for action, as the lowest level of political representation, 'institutionalizing citizen participation in urban areas' requires the formation of assemblies at a level closer to citizens. He advocates the creation of 'area sabhas', constituted by the voters registered for a particular polling booth, which will then send their representatives to the ward committee (Ramanathan 2007). Comparable arguments are advanced by civil organizations in Chennai – where the so-called 'ward committees' are actually 'zonal committees' constituted by the elected councillors from each of the wards in the ten 'zones' into which the city is divided for administrative purposes (each of them with, on average therefore, a population of upwards of 400 000). In Chennai, certainly, in spite of the intentions and the provisions of the 74th Amendment, city governance is still very largely in the hands of the Municipal Commissioner, an office from the Indian Administrative Service[5].

There is, unquestionably, a long way to go in the realization of the objectives of the 74th Amendment, which – in common with those of the 73rd Amendment that legislates for the creation of decentralized rural government through *panchayats* – are resisted in practice by

[3] Research Study Number 106 (2005) on *Impact of the Constitution (74th Amendment) Act on the Working of Urban Local Bodies*, last accessed on the web 24.02.2010.
[4] The campaign is described and analysed in detail by Heitzman 2004, in a chapter on 'The Third Force and Goverrnance'.
[5] When I spoke to senior officials in the Chennai Corporation about the experience of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre and elsewhere they were frankly dismissive of the possibility of implementing such a programme.

elected politicians in most states who evidently fear the possible loss of their powers of patronage.

## The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission

Are there, then, any indications that the Urban Renewal Mission announced in December 2005 will help to advance the democratic objectives of the 74th Amendment? The origins of the JNNURM are in the commitment made in 2004 in the Common Minimum Programme agreed by the Congress Party with the parties on which it depended for office, to 'a comprehensive programme of urban renewal and to a massive expansion of social housing in towns and cities, paying special attention to the needs of slum dwellers'. The Mission is also based on a recognition of the needs for development of urban India, in a context in which 'As a result of the liberalization policies adopted by the Government of India [it is] expected that the share of urban population may increase to about 40 per cent of the total by 2021' [6]. Its Mission Statement is given as being: '… to encourage reforms and fast track planned development of identified cities[7]. The focus is to be on efficiency in urban infrastructure and service delivery mechanisms, *community participation, and the accountability of urban local bodies and of parastatal agencies to citizens*' (emphasis added). Elsewhere it is said that the aims are to create 'economically productive, efficient, equitable and responsive cities' (quotations from the website). The language of these statements very clearly reproduces that of the World Bank with regard to the requirements of 'good governance', linking 'efficiency' with 'participation' and 'accountability' – in which it is unclear whether 'participation' does not really mean 'co-optation'.

It is still too early to form an assessment of the impact of the JNNURM, but the way in which it is organised around a clear division between 'urban infrastructure and governance' on the one hand, and 'basic services for the urban poor' on the other is discouraging. As Partha Mukhopadhyay has said this division seems to reflect the old mind-set that the rich need infrastructure and the poor need amelioration, while in spite of the intentions of the CMP the provision of low cost housing does not appear so far to be a priority for the Mission

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[6] See http://jnnurm.nic.in Last accessed 8 May 2010.
[7] The cities identified are the 7 cities with populations greater than 4M, 28 cities with populations of between 1 and 4M, and 28 smaller cities selected because of their political or cultural significance.

(Mukhopadhyay 2006). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the 'Vision Statement' in the *Development Plan for the Chennai Metropolitan Area* submitted to the Mission in April 2006 emphasises the needs of the IT sector and of the services, including housing development, required for it. 'Basic services for the poor' make up about 11 per cent of the expenditure projected in the Plan. This part of the Plan includes provision for 'Housing for LIG/EWS'[8]. In this connection it is stated that the estimated demand for new housing stock for these groups in 2011 is 278 000 units. The Plan provides for the Tamil Nadu Housing Board to spend Rs 2031 crores[9] in constructing 86 000 units, all located towards the further outskirts of the city. Mukhopadhyay's final point in his review is that the inadequate infrastructure of Indian cities is really only a symptom, and that the crucial problem is the lack of democratic urban governance. If he is right about this – and also right in arguing that the focus in the implementation of the JNNURM is really on infrastructure provision through a scheme administered by the central government – then we are back to square one.

## Residents' Welfare Associations

In practice, the principal means whereby urban authorities have sought to encourage 'participation' has been through local residents' welfare associations (RWAs), with which the Delhi government, in particular, has sought to establish partnerships – 'collaborative change', in the words of the Delhi government website – 'for the development of the city' through its Bhagidari Scheme; or in Bombay through 'Advanced Locality Management Units' that were instituted first in 1997 and also intended to improve the quality of provision of urban services through establishing partnerships between residents/citizens and the municipal administration (Zerah 2007).

The organizations that are labeled 'RWAs' in Indian cities are in fact quite diverse (a point that is picked up and explored in depth by Kamath and Vijayabaskar in their work on Bangalore, 2009). RWAs are found, however, very largely in middle class areas and not in slums

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[8] LIG= Lower Income Groups ; EWS= Economically Weaker Sections.
[9] 1 crore = 10 000 000.

– though this is not to say that there are not neighbourhood associations in some slum areas[10]. The RWAs are organisations of those who are described by the Chennai civil organization, CAG, as 'consumer-citizens' (terminology also discussed and used in her book on the 'new middle class' by Leela Fernandes 2006). Those in older middle class areas have quite often been active historically in addressing matters of public interest, such as the provision of water supply and sanitation, garbage disposal, or the construction and upkeep of roads. In Delhi, in particular, where only 24 per cent of the population now lives in so-called 'planned colonies' – meaning that they were legal at their inception – RWAs have been concerned with the authorization of their housing colonies (accounting for another 25 per cent of the current city population)[11]. But the 'RWAs' of new housing estates, apartments and condominiums, are often nothing more than statutory management committees, responsible for the upkeep of elevators and security services, and concerned with people's interests as consumers rather than as citizens.

The urban middle classes have long sought to displace the 'visual signs of poverty from public space' (Fernandes 2006: xxii). Urban slums and squatter settlements, pavement dwellers, hawkers, rag-pickers and the like are at least a nuisance and sometimes found quite threatening by middle class people. Nandini Gooptu has described the urban planning carried on already in large towns in Uttar Pradesh in the interwar period, intended to reduce overcrowding and to improve sanitation and public health. As she says 'The urban local authorities, representing the attitudes of their constituency of properted classes, identified the poor as the main perpetrators of growing urban overcrowding and insanitary conditions'. The policies they pursued then 'contributed significantly to the creation of the "problem" of the urban poor, both materially by intensifying their scarcity of housing or impairing their sources of livelihood, and discursively by

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[10] Coelho and Venkat have taken me to task for a 'schematic' portrayal of RWAs 'as constituting an exclusively middle class "civil society"' (2009: 358); and they suggest that in my own work in Chennai I failed to recognize the extent of local organization in poor neighbourhoods. Yet in their own sample they found that 'Middle class neighbourhoods accounted for 82 per cent of RWAs' (2009: 359); and as they go on to explain the most significant proportion of the remainder is made up by bodies originally set up by the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board. The great majority of the associations that they identified in poorer neighbourhoods were in fact self-help groups, many of which would have been set up at the instigation of government, albeit working often through NGOs. They are not, I think, to be equated with RWAs in the way that Coelho and Venkat seem to imply.

[11] These data taken from a presentation made by Gautam Bhan of UC-Berkeley, at the Annual Conference on South Asia, Madison, October 2008 (Bhan 2008).

categorising them as a distinct social group defined by their undesirable habits and practices' (Gooptu 1996: 3245)[12].

Such exclusionary policies are still being pursued, now more than ever. It is interesting, for example, that amongst the issues that were discussed in the bhagidari workshops in Delhi observed by Srivastava, was the problem of 'the "security threats" from JJ dwellers [i.e. from slum dwellers]' (Srivastava 2009: 344) – and the whole list of issues reflects the eminently middle class character of Delhi RWAs (matters such as 'servant verification' and 'surprise check by the police on the private security personnel employed by the RWAs'). As Srivastava concludes: 'the bhagidari scheme foregrounds the notion of the caring state through defining citizenship as acts of partnership between its various organs and the occupants of legally defined neighbourhoods, [and in so doing] it also endorses and creates realms of illegality and exclusions' (2009: 345). Such moves serve the interests of the 'beautification' of the great cities of India, as part of their more or less well formulated plans and programmes aimed at their becoming 'global cities' that will be attractive to international capital. These intentions are well summed-up in the campaign recently mounted by the *Times of India* in Delhi under the slogan 'Walled City to World City'.

Latterly the urban middle classes have found a powerful new instrument for pursuing their endeavours for cleaning up and beautifying their cities, in public interest litigation (PIL). This judicial innovation, involving non-adversarial litigation in protection of the public interest, that may be introduced in a court of law not by an aggrieved party but by the court itself or by any other private party, was instituted in the later 1980s as a means whereby poorer people could defend their rights. As it has been described by Gautam Bhan (2008) PIL has been used for fifteen years in India in what has often been a socially progressive manner – as in the judgements that have defended rights to food and to information. But latterly, certainly in Delhi, many PILs have been brought by middle class groups, especially RWAs, to pursue the 'displacement of visual signs of poverty'. While judgements have not always gone in their favour and the courts continue to enjoy the respect of people from different social classes, there has been an

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[12] Nehru, surely, did not intend this outcome, but still he was reported as having said at one point in Bangalore, that: 'It is scandalous that a city like Bangalore should have slums. Don't allow them to grow here. Root them out. Once they grow they have a tendency to stay' (quoted by Nair 2004: 220).

increasingly remarkable change in the character of judicial judgements, as Bhan (2008) has explained. Whereas, for example, those described as 'encroachers' on public or private land for purposes of setting up their dwellings or their businesses used to be treated as citizens whose rights to dwelling space and to livelihoods should be respected, so that recommendations were often made about the need for their resettlement, recent judgements have been to criminalize encroachment (Bhan 2008). One was to the effect that the encroacher is no more deserving of public care than the pickpocket. Both are criminals, their crimes being against private property.

This criminalization of the poor through PIL, often in the interests of the beautification of the city – and not necessarily in the immediate material interests of real estate developers – shows a use of the law that clearly counters other formal moves designed to build 'participation' and to extend substantive democracy. It has also been associated, in Bhan's view, with the increasing political clout of the RWAs in Delhi. This is reflected both in the numbers of 'non-party' candidates from RWAs now standing for election, and in the marginalization of municipal officials, whose entry, even, into some housing colonies is now only possible with the permission of the officers of the RWA. In response politicians now seek – contrary to what was the earlier practice – to extend the Bhagidari Scheme into unplanned colonies and even slums, so as to set up a kind of a political counterweight to the established RWAs.

Zerah's account of 'Middle Class Neighbourhood Associations as Political Players in Bombay' (2007) brings out very similar points. The 'Advanced Locality Management Units' set up there in middle class neighbourhoods of the city have had some success in the co-production of urban services, but they have also encouraged the discursive articulation of people's rights as taxpayers against illegal settlements or the activities of hawkers. Now, like the RWAs of Delhi, they are increasingly becoming political players in their own right. In 2007 one upper middle class Bombay neighbourhood elected an ALM candidate as its 'non-political' councillor – though this person subsequently supported Shiv Sena, the intensely chauvinist, right wing Maratha party. Zerah refers to the support of the ALMs for the 'elitist vision' of local democracy envisaged by *Lok Satta*, which would, for example, have candidates for election judged in regard to their education and their wealth.

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As instruments of participation, therefore, there are strong grounds for believing that the RWAs and comparable local associations of middle class urban neighbourhoods, are frankly exclusionary, and in their practices are exclusive in regard to the mass of informal working class people. Theirs is indeed an elitist vision of democracy.

## Civil Organizations

What of civil organizations, especially those of the kind to which I have referred, from Bangalore and from Chennai, that are directly concerned with questions of urban governance? It would certainly be unwise to pass any sweeping judgements. They include organisations such as CIVIC in Bangalore that has amongst its current projects one on 'Information Rights and Awareness at Ward Level for the Urban Poor', which does work with slum dwellers' organizations (see Narayanan 2005), and that has a 'Citizens' Charter on JNNURM' in which the first article is that 'All proposed policy changes should be preceded by a policy for the urban poor …. No plans to privatize basic services should be initiated' and which goes on to proclaim 'The Right to Shelter of all … ensured by earmarking adequate land for housing of the urban poor'. Yet my own analysis of civil and social organizations in Chennai showed that there are almost entirely discrete networks of organizations in South Chennai, which is where the 'global city' of the IT industry and modern shopping malls and condominiums is to be found, and in North Chennai, once the industrial heart of the city, and now almost an economic wasteland with vast areas of slum dwellings.

Mainly Brahman/upper middle class led organizations are predominant in the network of South Chennai. It includes the advocacy organization called *Catalyst* which works passionately for the extension of *panchayat* democracy to the cities, and which is also hostile to the ways in which the political parties seem to abuse democratic principles by blocking the effective implementation of the 73rd and 74th Amendments, as well as a number of effective NGOs working in different fields. But it includes no organizations that are actually *of* the working poor of the city, and the South Chennai-based NGOs that do 'community development' work in slum areas tend to be distinctly paternalistic and seem to be concerned with bringing hygiene and order to the 'wild' of the slums. They do not encourage participation in public decision-making,

and none of the South Chennai organizations is concerned with rights to living space, rights to livelihood, and their connections with women's rights, which are major concerns for members of the (numerous) informal labouring classes. These issues are taken up, however, by some of the associations in the North Chennai network, which includes some organizations, like the *Pennurimai Iyakkam* (Women's Rights Movement) and the Unorganised Workers' Federation that, though set up originally with the encouragement of professional people from middle class backgrounds, now are organizations *of* poor working people. I concluded that with these and a few other exceptions, participation in associational activities is quite heavily skewed towards more highly educated and wealthier people, and that they provide very little space for active participation by members of the informal working class[13]. 'Civil society [associational] activism has opened up new opportunities for representation, no doubt … but such opportunities hardly extend to the informal working class … the paradox that increasing opportunities for participation may actually go to increase political inequality stands against the claims of protagonists of "new politics" [supposedly grounded in associational activism]' (Harriss 2007: 2721).

A study of the Bangalore Agenda Task Force [BATF] (Ghosh 2005) confirms the misgivings that are expressed in Benjamin's analysis of the relations of the 'local' and the 'corporate economies' of Indian cities, in studies of the role that is being played by RWAs, and through my own research on associational activism, about the extent to which the rhetoric of democratic participation obscures the realization, in practice, of the interests of the corporate sector and of the new middle classes. The BATF 'model', espoused by the World Bank as a successful instance of civil society involvement in city planning that could be emulated widely, was constituted by the Government of Karnataka in 1999, to 'take advantage of the expertise of "knowledge institutions" based in Bangalore to reverse the trends of deterioration caused by rapid growth in the city. The government order constituting the BATF stated that "The Vision of the government is to make Bangalore the best city in India within five years"' (Ghosh 2005: 4916). The BATF included mainly successful corporate leaders, prominent amongst them – iconically – being the then-CEO of Infosys, the most celebrated of India's IT companies. It

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[13] These points, with specific reference to Chennai, are very largely confirmed by Coelho and Venkat 2009.

defined itself as an extra-constitutional body, working with government, engaged in improving supply-side service provision (a public-private partnership), while civil society groups – notably *Janaagrah*a – generated demand-side pressure. The 'stakeholders' that it defined for itself (and 'stakeholders' usually are defined by those exercising power) included all the agencies providing the core infrastructure of the city, but excluded social welfare departments and institutions concerned with the needs of the poor, such as the Karnataka Slum Clearance Board {KCSB}. 'The KCSB was left out because it is considered a "political cesspool" and [the BATF] did not want to "open that can of worms"' (Ghosh 2005: 4916). The BATF had no active engagement at all with poor people or with pro-poor activities and seems to have been at least partially responsible for diverting funds away from social programmes.

Ghosh's analysis shows that the BATF consistently sought technocratic solutions, by-passing councillors, but creating opportunities for lobbying by special interests; that it promoted master-planning which provided a tool for increasing centralised control over land in the interests of corporations and elites; and that it provided absolutely no structure of accountability, whilst serving middle and upper class interests, partly articulated by *Janaagraha*. Yet its approach, according to one of its core members, was enthusiastically taken up by the government in the formulation of the JNNURM.

The conclusion that Zerah expresses, pithily, in her Bombay study, seems apposite: 'The vested interests of residents' associations [and – we may add – of the private sector and the upper echelons of the bureaucracy in the 'corporate economies' of Indian cities] and their vision of a legal, clean, efficient and modern city are obscured by (a) universalist discourse on general interest and the public good' (2007: 67) – amidst the claims that are made about the enhancement of democratic participation in urban governance.

## The Politics of the Urban Poor/Labouring Classes

The institutional innovations of the era of liberalization and of globalization in India that promise the 'empowerment' of poor people through their 'participation' in associational activity in civil society, and through democratic decentralization are turning out, generally, to be vehicles of the interests of the new middle class. In at least one case, that of the 74th Amendment, there

has been a major failure of implementation, so that democratic decentralization in India's big cities is, quite simply, a sham – and meanwhile the centralization of control over urban land use has taken decision-making over this crucial realm very largely out of the sphere of democracy. The question then arises as to the political practice of poor people from the urban informal labouring classes. How, if at all, are the practices of the middle classes – those that create 'realms of illegality and exclusion', as Srivastava puts it – contested?

Coelho and Venkat report from Chennai on a 'profound shift' in the character of collective action among the urban poor in Chennai 'since what is widely regarded as its hey-day in the 1970s and 1980s, when the city witnessed intense struggles by the urban poor around the three axes of land rights, housing and basic amenities' (2009: 362). It appears that three factors have been involved in the collapse of such struggles and their replacement by a mode of 'co-production': the acceptance by slum-dwellers, as a result of intense activity (ironically) by social workers from the Community Development wing of the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board, of the relocation option, after 1980; the growth of the Self-Help Group [SHG] movement, that fragments and divides rather unifying the poor; and thirdly 'the hardening stance taken by state agencies toward squatting in the inner city' (2009: 363). As I found, too, Coelho and Venkat report that 'Organised and large-scale opposition to evictions is now rarely evidenced, and movements like the Unorganised Workers Federation and *Pennurimai Iyakkam*, which continue to fight evictions, remain in the minority' (2009: 363) . Attempts to organize slum-dwellers outside of party politics are mostly unsuccessful – and party competition frequently divides rather than uniting people. In this context there has been a move toward what the authors describe as 'co-production', involving a switch from agitational modes of demand-making to negotiation. This story is, of course, specific to Chennai, but the accounts from Bangalore of both Janaki Nair (2005) and Sudha Narayanan (2005) suggest a comparable pattern there. Nair reports, for instance, 'an overwhelming anxiety to claim citizenship and voting rights by getting onto the voters' lists. The last was seen in many cases as critical to the survival of the poorest groups in the city, as politics is often the only resource in a system which may deny the benefits of policy decisions or legal remedies to the poor' (2005: 336-7).

SCHOOL FOR
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

So the urban poor labouring classes are, as I have put it, 'left with politics'. In Indian cities poor people still depend heavily upon political parties – as is clearly seen in survey data from Delhi that show the importance of the mediation of political parties in the ways in which poorer people try to tackle public problems (Harriss 2006) – in spite of the fact that the parties are frequently corrupt, non-democratic in their internal workings, and have commonly failed to deliver. They may also disrupt the sustained organisation of poor people by themselves, as I noted above, rather than supporting and being supported by it (in the way that has perhaps happened in Brazil: see Gurza Lavalle et al 2005). In Indian cities local organisations of Dalits and slum dwellers (who constitute the 'garrisons' of support for political parties) are easily divided on party political lines (if their leaders are not corrupted by those with interests in land). Yet there is strong evidence showing that while middle class people in India have withdrawn increasingly from electoral politics (from the 'politics of din' as Javeed Alam so aptly describes it), poorer people are remarkably active participants, and that representative democracy has empowered some historically subordinated social groups at least (in what Yogendra Yadav has referred to as 'the second democratic upsurge' in India: 1996). It appears very strongly that the principal possibility for the urban poor to exercise some voice is still through political parties, and also that there is a very strong commitment to the value of democracy amongst poorer and historically socially subordinated people in Indian society in general. Javeed Alam, for instance, argues that 'Democracy in India is an assertion of the urge for more self-respect and the ability to better oneself' (2004: 22). The evidence both of the surveys of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, on which Javeed Alam draws, and mine from Chennai, shows that civil associations in which people are represented as customers or clients rather than as citizens do not stand in the place of formal representative democracy. Further, the argument of these notes is that the stated intentions of the Government of India with regard to the democratization of urban governance through decentralization have not yet been realized and are in any case opposed, in effect, by the way in which the accountability of city governments has been compromised by other innovations that are sanctioned by the current 'governance' agenda[14]. What may be referred to as the 'new politics' of empowerment – which is the mode of governmentality of the

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[14] See David Craig and Doug Porter *Development Beyond Neoliberalism?* (Routledge, 2006) for a sustained argument about the 'governance' agenda and the way in which, in their view, it has led to the fragmentation of the state.

post-liberalization state in India – does not incorporate the urban poor, nor articulate their political practice.


## Conclusion: 'Civil Society'/'Political Society'

There is much in this account of recent literature and of my own research that may seem to recall the particular distinction made by Partha Chatterjee between 'civil society' and 'political society'. And indeed I do believe that this is a useful distinction 'to think with'. Chatterjee's starting point, with the view that a majority of Indians are only very tenuously rights-bearing citizens in the manner envisaged in the Constitution of India, is well taken. I recognise, too, what Chatterjee talks about when he speaks of measures and actions that mean 'walling in the protected zones of bourgeois civil society and dispensing the governmental functions of law and order and welfare through the 'natural leaders' of the governed populations [what so much of the activity of NGOs and other civil society organizations is about] …(in a) strategy (that) seeks to preserve the civic virtues of bourgeois life from the potential excesses of electoral democracy' (2004: 50). The masses who are 'only tenuously rights-bearing citizens', are in a sense 'left with politics' – as I put it earlier – and in order to claim their rights as citizens they very frequently have to do so through the mediation or brokerage of local big men and political parties. Then, as Chatterjee argues elsewhere, these agents 'mediate between domains that are differentiated by deep and historically entrenched inequalities of power … between those who govern and those who are governed' (2004: 66). It is a mode of politics that is a denial of citizenship among equal members of a civic community[15].

Chatterjee also writes, however, of another response to the awkward dilemmas of the politics of most of the world, one that 'does not abandon the project of enlightenment, but attempts to steer it through the thicket of contestations in …political society (and) … the zone in which the project of democratic modernity has to operate, slowly, painfully, unsurely' (2004: 50). This is a point that has not, I think, been very much picked up, perhaps because Chatterjee

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[15] This is why I find it extraordinary that Jha, Rao and Woolcock, reporting observations from Delhi that are very like my own in that city, or in Bangalore and Chennai, can argue that 'Urbanization in Delhi does appear to be providing the poor with greater voice in democratic discourse. Slum dwellers benefit from a remarkable access to politicians and other government officials …' (2007: 244). But not as citizens with equal rights and duties.

has not elaborated upon it very much himself. I think again of organisations like the *Penn Urimai Iyyakam*, the Unorganised Workers' Federation and the Nirman Mazdur Panchayat Sangh in Chennai, and of the Tamil Nadu Slum Dwellers' Rights Movement (described in Harriss 2006 and 2007). They are all organisations (like the KKNSS in Bangalore, too) founded by middle class people (the same, remarkable, TamBram woman, a former teacher of physics was involved in the establishment of all the Chennai organisations), but they are movements in which poor people from the informal labouring classes are active participants. And through these movements they develop political agency of their own[16] – as I witnessed among the remarkable, poorly educated, poor women who are active in *Penn Urimai* – that is not mediated by local big-men and political parties. These are instances, I believe, of organisations and of activities that are directed at achieving democratic modernity. Their existence fundamentally qualifies the distinction that Chatterjee himself makes between 'civil society' and 'political society' – for it shows that the struggles for rights and justice extend the principles of civil society also in the sphere of 'political society'[17].

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[16] They acquire political agency themselves in a way that is quite comparable with what Arjun Appadurai describes in his study of the SPARC-NSDF-Mahila Milan alliance, which he constructs in terms of the development of a 'culture of aspiration' (2004). At this point there seems to be some convergence between Appadurai and Chatterjee.

[17] One should not end even a set of notes for a conference with a footnote, but having just read, rather quickly, Sanjeeb Mukherjee's mainly sympathetic critique of Chatterjee ('Civil Society in the East, and the Prospects of Political Society', *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 30 2010), I feel bound to comment that Mukherjee seems to me in some ways to have misjudged Chatterjee. Mukherjee argues that we should look for ways of 'turning populations from being objects of government intervention and control into subjects and agents demanding new rights and justice' (p 61), and he says that Chatterjee 'looks upon democracy [only] in instrumental and populist terms' (p 62). I suggest that he, like other commentators, has missed Chatterjee's point about a response that 'does not abandon the project of enlightenment ..(etc)' [cited in the text above], and the possibilities of struggle for democratic modernity – such as I see reflected in the political practice of the organisations of the labouring poor that I have observed in Chennai.

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