

Article

A Cause, but no Rebels?

Coping with Oppression in a New Delhi Slum

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Abstract

This article analyzes the political activities of residents in a 50-year-old slum in New Delhi. Based on long-term fieldwork undertaken periodically between 2004 and 2019, we describe the forms of oppression experienced by slum residents, how they cope in their everyday lives and how they have responded to their oppression. In order to understand the nature of slum residents' political activity, we also analyze forms of group consciousness and solidarity among residents. We identify three main channels through which slum residents act politically: by voting, by taking part in protests and demonstrations, and by using informal intermediaries. We show that they are fully aware of being oppressed and express dissatisfaction with the government and 'the rich'. However, their political activities are quite limited and constrained by the structural context within which they act. Their primary goal is to be *included* on equal terms in the existing system, not to change that system. Hence, their strategies can be described as *affirmative* rather than transformative. The analysis brings out three main points: First, that without external assistance slum residents lack the organizational capacity for sustained political mobilization; second, therefore their main way to seek political influence is through local intermediaries; and third, that while their reliance on intermediaries enables them to access certain goods and services it also paradoxically reinforces their marginalization.

Keywords

slum, India, politics, oppression, political mobilization, inclusion, group consciousness, New Delhi

Introduction

Across the world the rate and scale of urbanization are increasing, and particularly so in the Global South. The result is a growing number of mega-cities and an

escalating number of people living under precarious conditions in so-called unauthorized settlements (Braathen et. al. 2016); what Davis has termed *Planet of Slums* (Davis 2006).

Based on long-term fieldwork undertaken periodically between 2004 and 2019, this article puts the spotlight on one such old slum in New Delhi. It describes slum residents' responses to their marginalization and how these have varied over time. We assess whether their responses represent resistance, adaptation and/or demands for inclusion. What do they do to cope with the situation and improve their lives? To what extent do they have a sense of group-identity? What are the factors that enable or constrain them in acting politically to improve their situation?

India is a particularly interesting country in which to study slums and contentious politics among the urban poor. It is one of the most unequal countries in the world. In addition to a traditional caste system that ranks people as inherently different, economic inequality has increased significantly since the early 1990s, when economic policies were liberalized (Bharti et al. 2024; Chancel et al. 2022). At the same time, India is known as the world's largest democracy, with high voter-turnout and a higher turnout among poorer sections than among the middle classes (Banerjee 2014). It also has a long tradition for political mobilization – independent India is after all the result of the Independence Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru (Nielsen and Nilsen 2016). But while there has been an increase in political mobilization and resistance among the urban poor in many countries during the last decades (Holston 2019; Rabinowitz 2014), this has not been the case in India. Here, urban social movements have predominately been rooted in the middle classes (Harriss 2005). Among the urban poor, mobilization has mainly been limited to protests in connection with slum demolitions, such as those seen in Delhi in the early 2000s (Dupont 2008).

New Delhi is the capital of India, and one of the country's largest and fastest growing mega-cities, with more than 20 million inhabitants. Approximately half the city's population live in unauthorized settlements, which have come up without the authorization of city-planners. Of these, approximately 19% live in settlements categorized as slums (Dupont 2011, 76; Vidal, Tarlo and Dupont 2000, p.20).¹ Until 2010, the guiding government policy in Delhi was that slums should be demolished, and residents resettled (Banerjee 2002; Ghertner 2015). Since then, the official policy has shifted to what is called in-situ upgrading. For various reasons, however, there are many slums that have not been demolished and resettled, and in practice for government authorities the process of organizing in-situ upgrading has turned

¹ The term 'slum' is an official category used by the Government of India. The terms bastis (shanty), squatter settlement and Jhuggi-Jhopri (JJ) colonies are also widely used (e.g. Banerjee 2002; Grover 2018, p.19). See also fn.9. Estimates of the percentage of Delhi's population living in slums vary from 14.6% to 23%. The official population Census of 2011 estimates the lowest percentage of 14.66, but this includes only the city itself. See: [Delhi City Population 2025 | Literacy and Hindu Muslim Population](#). The Delhi Metropolitan Region is much bigger, and this is where many slums are located.

out to be long, contested, and cumbersome (Dupont and Gowda 2020). As a result, several slums have existed for decades.

Janata Camp² – the slum that is the setting for this paper – is located on the outskirts of New Delhi, and is an example of one such old, ‘illegal’ settlement that has existed for almost 50 years. In her study based on fieldwork in Dharavi³ in Mumbai, Weinstein emphasizes three features of such old slums: 1. Stability and durability; 2. Precarity and uncertainty; and 3. Endurance and resistance (Weinstein 2014, 21).

Just like in Dharavi, residents in Janata Camp live in precarious conditions with a high degree of social and economic insecurity, and conditions are characterized by both durability and precarity. However, Janata Camp differs from Dharavi when it comes to how residents cope with, react to, and endure the situation. Dharavi has an active resistance-movement, where slum-activists have formed alliances with NGOs and activists across the world to fight successfully against demolition, and ‘the right to stay put’ (Appadurai 2001; Weinstein 2014). Although considered illegal, Janata Camp has never been in any immediate danger of demolition, and one could say that the slum appears to be forgotten by authorities and caught in a situation of vulnerable standstill.

Studies of slum politics in India mainly focus on either reactions to threats of demolition (e.g. Ghertner 2015; Routray 2022), or on patron-client networks and the important role of the so-called slum *pradhans*; that is, local leaders who mediate between slum residents and government institutions (e.g. Auerbach 2019; Routray 2022; Jha, Rao and Woolcock 2007). In an influential study, Partha Chatterjee has argued that the poor in India and other countries in the Global South respond to their marginalization and exclusion by resorting to informal forms of politics, based on community relationships, mediators and patron-client networks (Chatterjee 2004). Chatterjee calls this form of politics ‘political society’,⁴ and argues that political society, understood as a style, or form, of politics, has enabled poor people to ‘expand their freedoms by using means not available to them in civil society’ (Chatterjee 2004, 67). Hence, according to Chatterjee, political society has become a ‘site of democratization’. Others disagree (Carswell and de Neve 2020; Harriss 2005; Corbridge et al. 2003). While not disputing the importance of informal politics and patron-client relations, these authors express doubt about the democratic potential of such politics and argue that this form of politics reproduces

² To protect the identity of people that have taken part in this research, all names are anonymized. Janata Camp is not the real name of the slum.

³ Dharavi is known as the biggest slum in Asia and has received a lot of attention from politicians, media and researchers. See i.e. Appadurai (2001) and Sharma (2000). Dharavi also became famous outside India in the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*.

⁴ It has not been entirely clear in Chatterjee’s writings whether the term refers to a space, separate from civil society, or a distinct style of politics. Below, we use it in the latter sense.

hierarchies and inequality. Below, we discuss these arguments in the light of our findings from Janata Camp.

The article is divided into five parts. This introduction is followed by an outline of our approach to analyzing forms of oppression and different types of responses. Second follows a part on methodology. Third, we turn to a presentation of the setting. Next, we assess the forms and extent of oppression experienced by slum residents. Using Nancy Fraser's distinction between redistribution, recognition, and representation, we show that slum residents in fact see themselves as oppressed and unfairly treated. Next, we look at residents' everyday coping strategies, with a focus on neighbourly relations, sense of community and group consciousness. Finally, based on the description of forms of oppression and residents' everyday coping strategies, we analyse how they act politically.

We argue that their political activity is shaped by the nature of the oppression they face, the way they cope with this oppression in their daily life and the context within which they act. We find that although residents are acutely aware of being oppressed and marginalized, this has not led to any rebellious movement or political resistance against the government or 'the system'. We show that slum residents act politically through several channels: by voting, by engaging in NGOs, by organizing and taking part in protests and demonstrations and by using informal intermediaries. However, their political activity is quite limited and constrained, and that their responses do not challenge the system that oppresses them. Their primary goal is to be *included* on equal terms in the existing system as equal citizens, not to change that system. Hence, their strategies can be described as *affirmative* rather than *transformative* (Fraser 1995). We also argue that while they want to be treated as equal citizens, the means available to them to pursue their interests reflect and contribute to reproducing the structures that oppress them. We conclude that slum residents, despite expressing somewhat rebellious views and having a fairly strong sense of group identity, have very limited room for political agency.

Theoretical Perspectives on Oppression, Resistance, and Ways of Coping

To understand the political activity of slum residents, we distinguish between 1) The different *forms* of oppression they are subjected to, and 2) The nature of their *responses* to oppression.

Forms of Oppression

Oppression can exist in different forms and the oppressed can deal with their situation in a variety of ways. Following Nancy Fraser, we distinguish between three main forms of oppression, which we call injustices of distribution, recognition, and representation (Fraser 2005; 2009). We also develop a typology of possible responses, ranging from violent protest to explicit acceptance of the system in which the oppressed people find themselves, and identify the key factors which shape how people respond. Finally, we reflect upon the preconditions for political mobilization

and resistance. Based on these distinctions, the next section assesses how slum residents have responded.

According to Nancy Fraser, people may experience three distinct types of injustice. *Economic* injustice is associated with unequal distribution of material resources, which she calls maldistribution. It includes income and wealth inequality, exploitation and unequal living conditions caused by a lack of material resources.

Cultural injustice is defined by lack of recognition, in the sense that certain groups or individuals, such as women, ethnic or religious minorities, are discriminated against and treated with a lack of respect. Hence, they are not recognized as having equal worth compared to other members of society. Fraser calls this form of injustice *misrecognition*.

The third form of injustice is what she calls *representational* injustice. It refers to inequality in political influence, or political voicelessness. This form of injustice prevents people from having influence on collective decision making and from being full participants in political life. Injustice of this type contradicts what Fraser calls the principle of participatory parity, according to which all members of society should have equal influence on decisions that affect them (Fraser 2005; 2009).

For Fraser, these three forms of injustice represent a standard, or a lens, through which injustice can be assessed. Below, we apply this typology to describe the forms of oppressions experienced by Janata Camp residents.

Responding to Oppression

How do people cope with oppression? When do people rebel against oppressive social orders? These are core questions of social science and various theorists have answered them in different ways.

We may assess responses to oppression along four dimensions: a) whether the oppressed see themselves as oppressed or not; b) whether and how they act politically to address the situation⁵; c) whether they seek to be included in the existing system or seek to change the structural relations that generate injustices in the first place (what Fraser (1995), calls *affirmative* remedies and transformative remedies, respectively); d) under what conditions they act politically to promote their interests.

A number of theorists have discussed how oppressed groups deal with their situation and preconditions of effective resistance to domination. Antonio Gramsci and Pierre Bourdieu argue that the dominated accept their situation, either because they

⁵ The distinction between the political and the non-political is purely analytical. In practice, activity not aiming at changing government policies can have indirect political effects. We use the term "political" in a narrow sense here, as referring to actions directly addressing government authorities.

consider the existing order as legitimate (Gramsci 1971) or because they naturalize it and take it for granted (Bourdieu 2000). However, as we show below, people in Janata Camp do not consider their position as natural or legitimate. The perspectives of Gramsci and Bourdieu are therefore not directly relevant for understanding how they cope with their situation.

A different approach is taken by Vivek Chibber; in a broad critique of theories that argue that the oppressed consent to domination, he argues that when people do not rebel or protest, it is not because they accept it as legitimate (as Gramsci argues) or because they naturalize it (as Bourdieu claims) (Chibber 2022). According to Chibber, people are well aware of being oppressed, and the relative absence of protest is a result of resignation. People realize that the costs of protest are high and the possibility of succeeding limited (Chibber 2022).

However, oppressed people sometimes do mobilize. At one extreme, they can become violent revolutionaries. Such armed rebellions have succeeded in numerous countries and failed in many others. It has also been attempted in India, where the Maoist movement has been active for several decades. However, it nevertheless remains relatively rare, and there have been no signs of violent rebellions in Janata Camp.

Another type of response was first famously analyzed by James Scott in his *Weapons of the Weak* (Scott 1985).⁶ Scott argues that people are fully aware of their oppression and do not consider it as legitimate. However, instead of open rebellion, they resist by trying to escape from domination and by subverting the rules and practices that oppress them (Scott 1986; 2009). Such acts of defiance reveal that they do not consent to being dominated, but do not necessarily lead to open resistance or rebellion.

Alternatively, dominated groups who are aware of being dominated may try to improve their situation by attempting to influence government policies and practices. They may join social or political movements or political parties, stage demonstrations, write letters to decision makers or use personal contacts or mediators to get access to and support from people with political influence. Such forms of mobilization may either be aimed at overthrowing the social order that dominates them, or at improving their own position within the existing social order. Following Nancy Fraser's distinction between affirmative and transformative remedies, this can be called struggles for affirmative remedies (Fraser 1995).

A number of factors have been emphasized in analyses of how people respond to domination and oppression. We follow McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, who argue that the manner of response will depend on both the properties and resources, of the

⁶ A large body of literature has emerged which critique and nuance Scott and use the concept in empirical analyses. See for instance Prasse-Freeman (2022) for an overview.

oppressed themselves, and on the opportunities and constraints defined by the structures within which they act (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Hence, in addition to awareness of being oppressed, the dynamics of mobilization and contention are shaped on the one hand, by factors such as material resources, knowledge, and cohesiveness of the oppressed group and, on the other hand, by the policies and practices of other actors, which shape their opportunities and scope of action. Here, the policies and practices of governments are especially important.

Below, we discuss whether Janata Camp residents are aware of being oppressed and whether they consider the existing situation as legitimate or natural. We also discuss whether they show a consciousness of belonging to a group with common interests and describe the nature, scope and limitations of their political responses.

Method

This article is based on longitudinal, ethnographic research—or ‘ethnographic returning’ (O’Reilly 2012) — in Janata Camp and its surrounding unauthorized colonies and has mainly been undertaken by Anne Waldrop. The study takes place over a total period of 15 years and was originally part of a project that aimed to study relationships between residents in unauthorized, semi-legal slum settlements and the state in view of gender, caste, and class.

In view of the widespread protests seen in India in recent years (on issues such as corruption, citizenship laws, agricultural policies), we became interested in the nature and extent of political mobilization and resistance among Janata Camp residents. Much of the material collected for the earlier project contained relevant information about this and makes it possible to assess the evolution of political activity in the area over a long period of time.

The bulk of the fieldwork was conducted as a series of visits to New Delhi, each lasting one to three months, between 2004 and 2007, and then again with a new round of interviews between 2011-2012. In between and after the two research periods, Waldrop has also made several visits to the area and had regular informal conversations with key contacts, with the last visit in 2019. In addition to these in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with women and men from 60 different households, Waldrop has interviewed activists, politicians and representatives of various NGOs and municipal officers, and collected written reports, maps, and newspaper clippings.

Because of limited knowledge of Hindi, we have depended on research assistants that have acted as interpreters.⁷ During interviews we have asked questions in English that the research assistant has posed in Hindi to the person(s) being

⁷ See Borchgrevink (2003) on the advantages of using an interpreter during fieldwork.

interviewed, and then the research assistant has translated the answer back to us in English. Thus, the quotes from interviews used in this article have gone through several phases of translation; from oral Hindi to oral English, which then has been written down by hand by us. The exact meaning of what has been said might therefore in some instances have been lost in translation. Still, the longitudinal approach with so many interviews – some of them several times over the years – have enabled us to know the area and some key contacts quite well. We have acquired a unique in-depth knowledge and are confident of our findings.

The Setting: History and Key Features

Janata Camp, the slum that is the setting for this paper, is on the outskirts of New Delhi, almost entirely encircled by two large unauthorized colonies and next to a small resettlement colony.⁸ Long-time residents have told us that the first *jhuggies* came up in the area around 1975, and occupied plots illegally on waste land. By the early 1980s, the area had grown into a permanent settlement and was classified as a slum (Banerjee 2002). In 2005, it was estimated that approximately 55,000 people lived in Janata Camp. The number has risen steadily, largely because the families of long-time residents have expanded. Both the number and size of houses have increased during the time we have followed the slum. When we started research in the area in 2004, some houses still had mud-walls, but most were made of brick; most houses had a simple tin roof, while a few had started adding a second floor with a roof terrace. Now, almost all houses are made of brick, and most residents have added a second floor and some even a third floor.

The population in Janata Camp mainly consists of Dalits (approximately 65%) and Muslims (approximately 30%). Both are among the most underprivileged social groups in India. There are a few high-caste families, but in terms of class-factors such as economic capital and education, there are no obvious distinctions. Most people, regardless of caste and religion, are quite poor and have little education. The men typically work as rickshaw-drivers, construction workers and fruit/vegetable sellers, while women mainly work part-time as maids or do cottage-work of different kinds. Overall, these are informal and uncertain jobs, with low pay and no job security.

Government policies towards slums have shifted over time in India, and different cities have also operated with different plans and strategies. In New Delhi, where large parts of the land have been under government control, it is the Delhi Master

⁸ According to Risbud (2002, 61-64), slums (also termed squatter settlements) 'are basically encroachments on public land by the poor', and in such cases it is the landownership and tenure that is illegal. An Unauthorized Colony, on the other hand, is considered illegal because the area has been subdivided into plots and sold off to individuals without the permission of the Delhi Development Authority. A Resettlement Colony, however, is considered legal. These are settlements built by the municipal government for resettlement of residents in slums that have been demolished.

Plans under the purview of Delhi Development Authority (DDA) that since 1962 have prescribed what land should be used for what purpose. Constructions that come up without permission from the authorities, such as slums like Janata Camp, are regarded as unauthorized and thereby illegal.

Delhi authorities have practiced a double-edged policy towards such unauthorized slums and their residents. On the one hand, because slums were defined as illegal, they should in principle be demolished, and residents should be resettled. On the other hand, authorities acknowledged that slum residents are poor and ‘needy’ and that demolishing and resettling every slum in the city in practice would be impossible. Since 1986 therefore, there have been different policy initiatives and programmes aiming to provide minimum municipal amenities, such as water and open brick-drains (Risbud 2002).

When we started research in Janata Camp, the Slum-Wing of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) had administrative responsibility for the area.⁹ In an interview with Slum-Wing officers in 2005, they told us that they had started providing minimum upgrades in Janata Camp in 1985-86, at the time when the Urban Basic Services programme (UBS) was introduced (Risbud 2002). According to slum residents, however, these upgrades were minimal and far from sufficient. In interviews, many residents have reiterated that it was only in the early 1990s, when an NGO entered the area and helped them mobilize, and after residents held several sit-down demonstrations, that the slum was provided with bricks in the alleys, garbage collection, water taps and communal pay-toilets. We will get back to these demonstrations below, when we analyse slum residents’ political responses to their marginalization.

In 2010, a new national programme for housing the urban poor was announced. Subsequently, with the change of government in 2014 and the launch of another housing programme entitled ‘Urban Housing for All by 2022’, there has been a major shift in slum-policy, from what could be termed a policy of demolition and resettlement to a policy of in-situ redevelopment through public-private partnerships (Dupont and Gowda 2020, 36-37; Ghertner 2015; Gooptu 2016). But although the overall government policy has been in-situ upgrading since 2010, several factors show that the future of the slum remains uncertain: 1) The in-situ policy would also imply demolition of the existing houses and residents being moved to apartment-buildings in the same area; 2) In practice there has hardly been any in-situ initiatives in the city (Dupont and Gowda 2020); and 3) There have been several instances of slums being demolished in Delhi since 2010 as well, either with

⁹ Administratively, the Slum-Wing that has been the government body responsible for slums in Delhi has alternately been under the authority of DDA and MCD. Since 2010 it has been called Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB).

the justification that these slums are placed on archaeological sites, or without any clear justification.

To summarize so far; despite being unauthorized, Janata Camp has over time grown into a densely populated and in many ways well-established settlement where people have lived for a long time. At the same time, residents point out several social problems, like crime and lack of water. The latter has gradually worsened.¹⁰ For Janata Camp residents, the situation of precarious stability remains (Dupont and Gowda 2020; Weinstein 2014). The shifting policies of authorities have not had any obvious impacts on the living conditions in the slum or on the predicament slum residents find themselves in.

Maldistributed, Misrecognized and Misrepresented

In this part we show that people in Janata Camp have very few resources and are exposed to all the three types of injustice analyzed by Fraser (economic maldistribution, cultural misrecognition, and political misrepresentation). This serves as the background for the following analysis of how slum residents respond to and deal with oppression.

Slum residents have come to Delhi as poor migrants from nearby states, looking for work. We were told many stories of extremely harsh living conditions where they came from. One man from a Scheduled Tribe background¹¹ told us for instance how he had struggled to make a living in his hometown as a small-scale farmer. In the mid-eighties, after both their children had died of malnutrition and illness, the couple had moved to Delhi. After a few months with various construction-work, they got a plot in Janata Camp. When we met them in March 2005, they had a two-floor house and were able to make ends meet.

Slum residents may not be poor in the sense that they fall below the official poverty-line. Nevertheless, they are without doubt poor in the sense that they have very few economic resources. As one man said in an interview (October 2011): *'We are happy because in Rajasthan it was worse. It was mud house and not pacca¹² roof. The biggest problem (in Janata Camp) is the water.'* Another man expressed their predicament plainly when he said: *'We are compelled to live here, we have no other option...'* while a woman, when asked about what she liked about living in the slum, replied: *'There is nothing to like, - ask me what I don't like about living here.'* They cannot go back to their hometown because

¹⁰ Groundwater levels are sinking all over New Delhi, so both the wells from the early 1990's and wells provided later have dried up. To provide water, the Delhi government nowadays send in water-trucks.

¹¹ The term 'Scheduled Tribe' is a term used by the government for purposes of reservation. It refers to ethnic groups belonging to what was previously called tribal groups, and which now refer to themselves as Adivasi.

¹² Pacca/pucca means hard, strong, certain and/or proper in Hindi. The term is often used referring to streets and buildings, meaning paved or laid with bricks. The opposite of Pacca is Kacha (kutcha). A Kacha street is unpaved while a Kacha house is a house built without bricks.

living conditions there are even worse, and they cannot afford to move to a better, authorized neighbourhood in the city. They are stuck in the slum because they have very limited economic resources.

Slum residents are also subject to the second type of injustice that Fraser discusses, cultural misrecognition. Several authors have described the stigma attached to being poor and living in a slum, and how slums and its residents are considered dirty by ‘the established middle-class’ (Baviskar 2003; Ghertner 2015). Many expressed that they experienced this kind of cultural misrecognition in various types of situations, and in particular from two sets of people: 1) Relatives and relatives-to-be; and 2) Authorities and people in power.

With regards to the first, slum residents told us for instance that when looking for a marriage-partner for their children, and for sons in particular, they worried that parents of prospective girls would hesitate to marry their daughter into a ‘slum-family’: *‘Our biggest concern is marriage. Our oldest son is soon a grown man, and to find him a marriage-partner we need a certain status.’*

Another example of this feeling of inferiority to relatives was expressed by a Muslim woman in her thirties who had lived in the slum since she was a child. She said:

I used to feel ashamed over living here when relatives from our hometown came to visit. I felt that our house was not a real house, that it was very small, and that the area was not nice. Our relatives would compare our house with the big house with open space around that they had at their place.

Several slum residents also expressed such a feeling of misrecognition from authorities and ‘people in power’. A couple in their 30’s with Scheduled Caste (SC)¹³ background, said:

The police only take our money but do nothing. They only help the rich. It is the same with a school run by an NGO in this area, they only take children of government servants. They (the children of the rich) should not be given priority over our children.

This experience of being misrecognized and not being heard by authorities, is also about feeling that nobody listens to them. This is linked to Fraser’s third dimension of injustice; lack of political representation. Residents complain that they do not receive the goods and services they are entitled to, such as water supply, schools etc.

¹³ The term ‘Scheduled Caste’ is a term used by the government for purposes of reservation, and refers to the caste group known as Dalit. See also footnote 11 about Scheduled Tribe.

and clearly express that they think government institutions do not represent them and their interests. A woman in her 50s said:

Government and political leaders are doing nothing for us. Unemployment and everything. All jobs taken by rich people. We have nothing. The MLA (from BJP¹⁴) says that you did not vote for me so why should I help you?... Elections are approaching so they are making a fool of us poor people. We want our problems to be solved. The rich people seldom get out of their houses.

A man, here called Omar, was probably the most vocal in this regard. He believes that slum residents are discriminated against by government officials and other people in power. Interestingly, he also links the discrimination they face by government officials with the caste-discrimination he is subject to because of his Dalit identity:

Whenever we approach the local politician, he simply refuses to help us. Politicians and schoolteachers do not consider us human beings, they just call us *jhuggi wallahs* (slum people). This is the same kind of discrimination we feel in the caste system. We are *chamar*.¹⁵

It is clear, therefore, that slum residents experience all three forms of injustice described by Fraser. Moreover, slum residents are fully aware of the injustice they are subjected to. Hence, they do not regard the situation they are in as legitimate, in the sense discussed by Gramsci (1971); nor do they accept it as natural, as analyzed by Bourdieu (2000). They are among the poor in a society with extreme levels of inequality; they are looked down upon by other people and they are poorly represented by government institutions. The different forms of injustice, which tend to reinforce each other, are the result of structural constraints, which severely limits residents' scope of action.

In the next sections, we describe and analyse slum residents' responses to their marginalization and show how they have changed over time. We distinguish between two main types of responses: 1) Day-to-day cooperation not directly addressing political authorities, and 2) Responses which in different ways address political authorities.¹⁶ We also discuss whether they show a consciousness of belonging to a group with common interests.

¹⁴ Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, the Indian People's Party) is a Hindu nationalist party, and has been the ruling party in India since 2014.

¹⁵ *Chamar* is the name of a caste group (*jati*) that is regarded as one of the lowest among the so-called untouchable castes (Dalits).

¹⁶ In practice, adaptation strategies not aiming at changing government policies can have indirect political effects. We use the term "political" in a narrow sense here, as referring to actions directly addressing government authorities.

Coping Strategies: Everyday Cooperation and Sense of Community

Facing multiple forms of oppression, slum residents' daily life can be a struggle. In this section, we look at how they deal with the situation in their every-day life, with a particular emphasis on neighbourly relations and sense of community. Taken together with the above description of forms of oppression, these everyday ways of coping help illuminate the forms of political activity analyzed in the next section.

Because they have lived in close proximity for many years, they know each other well. Studies from other slums in Delhi (Dubochet 2019; Grover 2018) have highlighted how such proximity of people from different castes and religions, combined with the precarious living-conditions, can create a good community feeling, but also reveal underlying tensions which might easily fissure into conflicts. In our interviews, no one reported such conflicts, but rather emphasized a good community feeling and a sense of solidarity between residents. This was expressed in many ways. While walking through the alleys, we have frequently observed groups of women sitting outside their houses, chatting, and when we for instance asked Kamla, a poor high-caste widow with three children, how she liked living in Janata Camp and if her neighbours were nice, she said:

My parents are very poor, and they cannot help me, but my neighbours are good. I feel safe and happy. I do not have to lock the door. It is very co-operative. (November 2005)

This can be regarded as a way of coping with the oppression they face. For instance, several women mentioned that they helped each other with looking after children: *'When one woman is absent, other women look after children.'* Some women also told us how neighbours would help in cases of abusive husbands, and how this gave them a sense of safety.

Such help also in some instances included men and could take the form of direct economic support. When we asked a man (low-caste background) if he did anything to improve the area, he replied:

It is a mutual understanding between us; if one needs help, we help out and vice versa. A person in this community was dying, and we collected money for him. We did not eat that night but saved some money and took him to the doctor.

We asked whether they provide such economic help because they have the same caste background or because they were related, which he denied. Instead, he emphasized the strong sense of community that had grown out of living in close proximity for so many years:

No, we are mixed group, different castes. This street was not based on caste, it is based on opportunity; who found house here. It is easier

with people on the same street. It is easier to make the universe smaller. It is easier to get to know the neighbours. Those who see you every day understand you better, than those who are invisible.

It is worth noting that this man uses the expression ‘*people on the same street, those you see every day*’. In line with Snell-Rood’s findings, he and the others quoted above are referring to their immediate neighbours when they talk about such close relations, community feeling and practical assistance (Snell-Rood 2015, 67).

To what extent does such community-feelings extend to the whole slum? We saw above that slum residents regard themselves as oppressed, and when talking about feeling overlooked and subject to discrimination, they used expressions like ‘us poor people’. As Routray also finds, this indicates that they possess a group consciousness that extends beyond the people on the same street (Routray 2022, 35). One woman in her mid-50’s said for instance: ‘*It is a good sense of unity.*’

Such references to a sense of group-solidarity extending to the whole slum came out most clearly when residents talked about threats from an outside enemy. A Muslim woman said for instance: ‘*Yes, it is good. We have lived here for so long. If rowdies from outside come and fight, we all get together and give him a good one.*’

The same attitude was expressed in relation to the fear of demolition. When we asked a respondent if she was afraid of demolition, she said: ‘*I am not worried about demolition. We are many thousand people. We will face it together.*’ This indicates that if their slum was up for demolition, it is very likely that residents would act collectively and mobilize against it, just like slum residents have mobilized against demolitions on so many occasions in the past.

In their everyday lives, however, residents do not actively resist, even though they expand and upgrade their houses. While this could be interpreted as a sign of defiance and subversion of government policies, when asked about this in interviews, we did not find any explicit signs of people considering house-building a form of resistance or evasion of authorities (Scott 1985; Prasse-Freeman 2020). Rather, in interviews in 2005 and 2006, residents did not seem to fear demolition, or they expressed a ‘come-what-may’ attitude. One widow (45 years) said, for instance: ‘*I feel confident that if government should demolish this place, they will give warning and give me an alternative house.*’ Thus, the way they talk about expanding their houses versus fear of demolition shows that rather than considering housebuilding as a form of protest, they do it because they expect to be able to stay in the area.

To sum up so far; residents on the same street help each other by lending money or with practical help on an everyday basis and have overall amicable relations. People also express a common identity as slum residents, which is defined in explicit opposition to the authorities and people in power, such as the police, teachers, and ‘the rich’. It is not linked to caste in a strict sense, but rather to a common caste/class-identity as ‘people of very modest means’; what in India is often referred to as ‘*chote log*’ (small people). In a couple of instances, when talking about

circumstances when the slum or its residents were faced with an outside threat, people would explicitly refer to the whole slum – and not only the people on the same street – coming together.

These responses can be interpreted as reactions to the first two types of injustice discussed by Fraser. Seeing themselves as poor reflects the economic maldistribution they experience. To cope with this, residents help one another with practical tasks, and occasionally with money. Not wanting high-caste people to live in the neighbourhood and expressing trust in people from similar ‘low-caste’ and humble backgrounds, are reactions to the cultural misrecognition and stigma they experience, and to cope with it, residents have developed good neighbourly relations and day-to-day solidarity. Such group-consciousness, solidarity and awareness of being marginalized can be seen as preconditions for effective political mobilization and resistance. Its existence means that there is a potential for effective mobilization. But for this potential to be realized, marginalized groups must have sufficient scope of action and opportunities for effective organization. Next, we analyse slum residents’ attempts at influencing government policies and the constraints they face.

Political Responses to Marginalization

In addition to such non-political forms of adaptation, over the years slum residents have also utilized different types of means to try to promote their interests by seeking to influence political authorities. As seen in other studies from slums in India, this can be done in several ways (Auerbach 2019; Routray 2022, Weinstein 2014). We found that Janata Camp residents have done it through three main channels: a) by participating in elections; b) by engaging in NGOs and in protests and demonstrations; and c) by using informal intermediaries. Next, we discuss how each of these have been utilized.

Voting

Voting is a way to perform citizenship and an explicit way of trying to be included in society at large (Banerjee 2014, Routray 2022). Election turn-out is very high in India, and the poorest and most disadvantaged in society are among the most enthusiastic voters (Banerjee 2014, 4). Voting is regarded as meaningful and a way for citizens that otherwise feels excluded by society to assert their rights as citizens (Banerjee 2014, 167; Carswell and De Neve 2014). However, in order to vote, you need a voting card. For poor migrants to a city-slum, attaining a voting-card for their new place of residence is a difficult and arduous task (Routray 2022).

As mentioned above, many slum residents expressed distrust in politicians, and said that politicians only wanted their votes and only came around with an election round the corner. They felt overlooked and left out. Yet, we did not come across anyone in the slum who said that they did not vote. Moreover, everyone we talked to had managed to obtain a voting-card.

Since they have lived in the city for over 30 years, this is not surprising. However, we heard many stories of how difficult it had been to get when they first came to the city; how they had had to pay bribes, go to the *pradhan* and fill out forms. Nevertheless, they prioritize this, because voting is regarded as meaningful, and as a way to get recognition from authorities (Carswell and De Neve 2014, 1035).

What political party one votes for – and why – says something about identity, not only in terms of politics, but also in terms of class and culture. When we in the period 2005-7 asked about what political party they voted for, most people said they voted for Congress because of Indira Gandhi and her famous slogan ‘Garibi Hatao’ or ‘Remove Poverty’. For instance, in one of our early interviews one man said: ‘*I vote for Congress because of Indira Gandhi. She was the only politician that cared about poor people like us.*’

With Congress losing votes all over India, and new parties like Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) emerging and gaining popularity, in later interviews and conversations from 2012 onwards, several people, like this Dalit man, have said that they no longer vote for Congress:

I used to vote for Congress, but I am not happy with them. This time I will vote for a person with SC background (Dalit). I will vote for a politician that understands the situation of poor people like us, and that also comes from a humble background.

Residents’ attitudes to voting and elections reveal three things about how they deal with oppression. First and foremost, the fact that they vote and are willing to make such efforts to obtain voting cards shows that they see voting as a meaningful way to express their needs and interests, and that, at a general level, they wish to be a part of the community of citizens. Second, their justifications for how they vote confirms their strong sense of being neglected by authorities and experience of not being treated as equal citizens, and third, their reasoning regarding who and what party to vote for reveal their identity as *chote log* with humble background.

Participating in Demonstrations and Rallies

While voting is one means of expressing discontent, citizens in a democracy can also use other means to express their views and promote their interests. The main other way to participate politically in liberal democracies is to join social movements and civil society organizations, or to take part in public demonstrations and rallies. In India, there is a strong tradition for using the latter to get attention from government to various problems. As Routray finds in his research in three slums in New Delhi, this would typically be by staging so-called *dharnas*, stopping traffic and holding rallies (Routray 2022).

We have asked residents in Janata Camp if they ever have taken part in any form of collective public protests. We were told that in the early 1990’s, they had demonstrated to get the minimum municipal provisions. Several of the older residents reported that around 1990, an external NGO with a charismatic leader,

here called The Professor, had entered the slum with the aim of improving living conditions and making slum residents self-reliant. The NGO aimed to empower women and helped women form their own local NGO. This local NGO still existed when we started our research, and the woman elected as leader in the early 1990's was still the leader. We have met with her many times, and already in our first conversation in 2005 she told us about how The Professor had come to the slum and had started having meetings with them.

According to slum residents, it was the Professor and his NGO that made them aware that slums like Janata Camp in fact were entitled to basic municipal facilities such as water-pumps, *pacca* alleys with drains, sweeping and garbage collection. This NGO also taught residents how to mobilize, and many slum residents recalled this. The woman elected leader of the local NGO said: *'We rented trucks and arranged sit-down demonstrations in front of the bungalows of the big politicians.'*

A Dalit man in his mid-40s said: *'It was a long struggle to get water. Sometimes we sat down and stopped traffic in protest.'* When asked if there were many participants, he replied:

Since we all face common problem, we have to get together. Men and women, all communities. But only jhuggi people. People in the unauthorized colony are not cooperating.

A widow told us about another such demonstration to get water-pumps:

We went in autorickshaws and tempos to the house of a political leader, up in Lutyens' Delhi.¹⁷ It was around four vehicles. We went up to his house. Staged a big dharna... After that they installed the water pipeline. The pipeline is the proof (of success).

Since these big demonstrations in the early 1990s, however, there have been few such collective mobilizations. The Professor and his NGO have left, and without external assistance, residents have been unable to sustain the level of activity. When we asked residents in 2011 if they had taken part in any demonstrations recently, the answer was negative, albeit with a few exceptions. While the local NGO still existed when we started our research, its activities had decreased over the years, and it was mainly the leader, and a couple of other women that were active. As we have discussed elsewhere (Waldrop 2024), for reasons linked to gender and lack of external assistance, this local NGO ceased to exist after the leader in 2014 encountered several personal problems and did not have the capacity to continue.

Although there are many other NGOs active in the slum, these are not based on local initiatives and mobilization. Instead, they work in cooperation with municipal

¹⁷ Lutyens' Delhi refers to an area of the city marked by greenery, spacious avenues and white bungalows, where ministers and high-ranking government-officials live.

authorities and function as an extension of the government rather than as grassroots activists. While such NGO activities are not unimportant – they certainly matter in the daily lives of many individual slum residents – they are not based on local participation, and do not represent popular political mobilization or resistance.

Participation in elections and demonstrations and cooperating with NGOs show that slum residents are discontent with how they are treated and that they feel excluded. However, it also shows that they wish to be included and recognized as citizens.

This can be compared with Holston's, analysis from Brazil, where poor people protest against how they are treated by demanding to be included as citizens. Holston calls this 'insurgent citizenship' (Holston 2008). However, unlike the Brazilian case, Janata Camp residents cannot make claims on the state by appealing to their status as taxpayers and property owners. As informal sector workers, they do not pay tax, and as residents in an unauthorized settlement, they do not have legal ownership of their houses (see also Routray 2022). Instead, they try to access services with the assistance of the local *pradhan*. This points to the importance of informal patrimonial ties in local politics, to which we turn next.

Patronage, Pradhans, and Political Society

As shown above, there has been little organized political mobilization among Janata Camp residents in recent years. However, this does not mean that they passively accept whatever government authorities do. According to Chatterjee, 'in India and most of the world', marginalized poor people are excluded from civil society (Chatterjee 2004, 2011). They therefore use informal means, outside the formal space of civil society, to promote their interests. He calls this informal political space 'political society'. In political society, one turns to means that are not always democratic in a strict, liberal sense, to get one's voices heard.

A typical example, widespread in politics all over India, is the use of patronage (Piliavsky 2014). In Indian slums, the slum-*pradhan* is a well-known figure. A successful slum-*pradhan* is a leader who uses patrimonial ties to mediate between slum residents on the one hand and government officials and party-bosses on the other hand (Auerbach 2019; Routray 2022; Jha, Rao and Woolcock 2007; Harriss 2006; Smets and Hanssen 1996).

We found that slum residents' first option when they seek to influence authorities would be to go to a slum-*pradhan*. In cases of municipal problems, such as no water or lack of garbage collection, all residents replied by naming a slum-leader. This is how we got to know about Mr. Aggarwal, whose name was mentioned most frequently. We have interviewed him about his activism several times over the years since 2005, and he has also taken us around and introduced us to municipal officers and other political leaders. During an interview in 2014, we asked him about his main tasks, and he replied: '*I make a path for people*'. In a slum like Janata Camp, this would imply helping with everyday problems, such as lack of water, garbage disposal, and clogged gutters.

One example of how Mr. Aggarwal in practice ‘help make a path for people’ was demonstrated to us on one occasion in 2005. Mr. Aggarwal had offered to introduce us to some municipal officers that he knew, and we had been with him first to the roads department and then to the Jal Board (water department). When we returned to Janata Camp, our car was stopped by a group of people that had gathered in the street. We got out of the car and were told that there was no water coming from the taps. While Mr. Aggarwal talked to the crowd and calmed them and said he would fix it, a couple of women turned to us and said: *‘He (Mr. Aggarwal) is the leader of us all’*. Later that day, the water came back, most likely because Aggarwal used his connections in the Jal Board. By using his patronage network, he can operate as an intermediary between slum residents and the Delhi state, and ‘make a path for people’ (Auerbach 2019, Bussell 2019, Piliavsky 2014).

This example shows that by using intermediaries and patrimonial ties, slum residents are in fact able to have some influence on local-level government practices. In a sense, this goes beyond both Chibber’s argument that dominated groups are passively resigned to their fate (Chibber 2022), and Scott’s claim that they seek to stay outside the reach of the state and avoid being governed (Scott 2009). But while Janata Camp residents seek to engage with the state, their engagement is quite limited and does not aim at a broader transformation of the conditions that sustain their marginalization.

Chatterjee’s distinction between civil and political society as two different forms of politics helps illuminate the contradictory character of slum politics (Chatterjee 2004). Janata Camp residents engage in both the politics of civil society and political society. When they engage in the forms of politics characterizing civil society, such as voting, working in NGOs or taking part in demonstrations, they assert their rights as citizens to provision of services.

However, the politics of Janata Camp shows that the democratic potential of political society is more ambiguous than Chatterjee’s formulations suggest. In conditions where the distribution of power and resources is highly unequal, the politics of political society are likely to reflect and reproduce that inequality, as the example of Mr. Aggarwal shows. Paradoxically, their marginalized status is what entitles them to the limited services that the *pradhan* helps them obtain. While it enables them to access certain goods and services, this type of politics does not help them overcome their oppression and marginalization.

Conclusion

We have shown that Janata Camp residents are marginalized and oppressed, both economically, culturally and politically. Moreover, they are well aware of this and do not regard the system that oppresses them as legitimate. Yet, in spite of political awareness of their marginalized situation, there is only a limited degree of political mobilization.

This does not, however, mean that slum residents passively accept their situation. On the one hand, they try to make the best out of a difficult situation through what we have called adaptation strategies. Drawing upon a common identity and sense of community and group-solidarity, they help each other in various ways to get by. And whenever they can, they use their meagre economic resources to improve and expand their houses.

On the other hand, they also try to influence government policies in different ways. Their political responses can be divided into three types: voting; occasional demonstrations and using local ‘big-men’ as intermediaries to help them. These practices and the justifications they give for engaging in these activities show that their main wish is to be included and recognized as full, equal members of society. However, the activities of the local NGO and residents’ participation in demonstrations ended when they no longer had external assistance. This shows that on their own, slum residents lack the organizational capacity and resources required for sustained political mobilization (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Moreover, the absence of a fear of demolition makes mobilization more difficult. Hence, when government policies are characterized more by neglect than by (threats of) coercion, it is more difficult to overcome the obstacles to mobilization.

Without external assistance, the main way they seek political influence is through local intermediaries. However, we argue that their dependence on intermediaries does not help them in this respect. When they employ means such as the use of patronage and assistance from *pradhans* to access services, they rely on hierarchies which reinforce their subordinate and dependent position.

Overall Janata Camp residents’ response to marginalization fits with Chibber’s account: they are aware of being dominated and they express resistance towards the government (Chibber 2022). They feel that authorities do not listen and that they are neglected. Yet, they do not rebel, and the limited forms of political mobilization that have taken place both reflect and contribute to reproducing their marginalized position. When they act politically, they do not aim at major reforms, or structural transformation of the conditions that oppress them, but to be included and improve their own conditions within the existing system. In other words, they seek what Fraser calls affirmative rather than transformative remedies.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank residents in Janata Camp who so generously have taken time to participate in this research. Also, many thanks to Jyoti Mishra for research assistance and great help during our many visits to Janata Camp.

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