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John Harriss

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'Politics is a dirty river': but is there a 'new politics' of civil society? Perspectives from global cities of India and Latin America

John Harriss
London School of Economics

'Politics is a dirty river' is an expression frequently used by a leading civil society activist in the south Indian city of Chennai. The organisation that he founded, an NGO that has successfully mobilised significant numbers of people for civic activities across the city, often in partnership with government, is well known internationally and has strong international links. It is an organisation that can fairly be considered to be part of international, or 'global' civil society - which, according to Mary Kaldor in her book *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War* (2003) is 'about the empowerment of individuals and the extension of democracy …about "civilizing" or democratising globalisation, about the process through which groups, movements and individuals can demand a global rule of law, global justice and global empowerment' (2003, p.12). The actual civil organisations, social movements and transnational networks that constitute global civil society, Mary Kaldor argues, have roots and bases in local public spheres – just like the organisation in Chennai - as well as involving new actors who have 'found it possible and necessary to make alliances across borders and to address not just the state but international institutions as well' (2003, p.76).

When my friend in Chennai speaks of politics as a 'dirty river' he refers, of course, to the 'old politics' of political parties and their mass movements, especially trades unions – a politics forged primarily in workplaces and directed at struggles over state power. He explicitly opposes to such 'old politics' a 'new politics' involving organisations such as his own, a politics built up around voluntary associations in civil society (or what might perhaps better be described as 'civil organisations') rather than political parties, around new social movements rather than labour organisations, and forged in communities as much or more than in workplaces. For my friend (as also for thinkers like Mary Kaldor) such 'new politics' is more genuinely participatory than representative democracy and it answers people's needs and interests by addressing

their problems directly. 'New politics' of this kind is attractive to many because the 'old politics' has failed to deliver solutions to so many social problems (certainly in a country like India), and appears fatally corrupted by struggles for state power and personal advantage.

'New politics' attracts, indeed, a remarkable set of bed-fellows. Intellectuals and policy actors whose ideas are rooted in very different values and theoretical assumptions nonetheless converge around the views either that there is or that there can be such a 'new politics' grounded in local political spaces and practices. The dominantly liberal discourse emanating from the World Bank is one powerful voice expressing this idea, but there are remarkably comparable views being articulated by intellectuals (like Arturo Escobar) who can be described as 'post-structuralists'. Meanwhile there are significant thinkers and activists from the left who advocate what seem to be quite similar ideas (see, for example, Avritzer 2002 and Fung and Wright 2003). All these groups of actors share a conception of the vitalisation of democracy (or the establishment of more meaningful alternatives to it) through popular participation in local public spaces, and many – like Mary Kaldor - see this as the essential foundation of global civil society.

An idea of what constitutes the 'new politics' is expressed by writers from the World Bank, in the *World Development Report* for 1997 on 'The State in a Changing World', when they say: 'In most societies … citizens seek representation of their interests beyond the ballot as taxpayers, as users of public services, and increasingly as clients or members of NGOs and voluntary associations. Against a backdrop of competing social demands, rising expectations and variable government performance, these expressions of voice and participation are on the rise' (World Bank 1997, p.113). The former Prime Minister of India, V P Singh, said something rather similar to me in an interview in April 2003. The Bank is not alone in putting a positive gloss on the political changes of the present, when, it is widely believed, an historic shift is taking place in forms of political representation available to the poor, from the classic patterns of the earlier 20th Century, based – as I said - on social relations forged in workplaces, organised in trades unions and other mass organisations linked to programmatic political parties, and concerned with the achievement of social and economic rights, to new patterns based on other sorts of social networks and goals.

Political parties, though they were once linked to society through ideology and mass organisations, have increasingly become loosely organised followings of populist and charismatic leaders and/or (like the major parties in the United States and in Britain) they rely on marketing themselves to voters through mass media, tapping popular sentiments through public opinion polls and focus groups (see Roberts 2002: 20). The 'new politics', based in civil society, represents a positive response to this decline of party systems – the decline that is reflected in what has come to be described as 'the crisis of representation', as in many countries more and more voters abstain, electoral volatility increases, there is a decline in partisan identification and the numbers of independent candidates and of 'anti-politics' outsiders, like the Chennai activist, increase. It is a great irony that the crisis of representation should have become apparent in the period of what Huntington describes as the 'third wave of democratisation'.

The purpose of the research on which this paper is based[1], was to subject arguments about the 'new politics' and the belief that democracy is being invigorated through popular participation, in the ways that the Bank describes, in local public spaces, to empirical scrutiny. My colleagues and I have studied political participation and representation, especially of the urban poor, in several global cities in Latin America and in India: Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Delhi and Bangalore. We have surveyed representative samples of (around 1400) individual citizens in each of these cities, asking questions about perceptions of public problems, about approaches to solving such problems, about political participation in the formal sense, and about participation in associational activities; and we have sought to map associational life through surveys also of civil society organisations and their networks. I have, in addition, latterly undertaken ethnographic studies of associational cultures and practices in Chennai. Here I shall draw on the findings of all this very detailed research to present some general arguments about the 'new politics'. The paper is

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[1] This paper reports and reflects upon some of the results of a research project that I have been engaged in intermittently over the last two years on 'Rights, Representation and the Poor'. The project is a comparative one, with research having been carried on in Latin America – in Sao Paulo and Mexico City – as well as in India (Delhi and Bangalore). My co-researchers in Latin America are Peter Houtzager from IDS, Sussex and Adrian Gurza Lavalle, from Sao Paulo; and in India Neera Chandhoke at Delhi University, and K Nagaraj from the Madras Institute of Development Studies. Neera and Nagaraj have been the ones primarily responsible for the field research conducted in Delhi and Bangalore (respectively).

mainly about the Indian cities, but one part of the argument is drawn from our work in Sao Paulo.

The over-arching argument that I make is that 'new politics', in practice, is strongly associated with technocratic, rationalising modernism. It is about 'problem-solving' rather than about democracy – which is indeed messy and often involves 'dirty politics'. Yet poor people, certainly in India, show a strong preference for democracy, because in spite of the manifest imperfections of political parties and their leaders, democracy has still opened spaces for their struggles, offering the possibility of their self-realisation, and helped to increase their self-confidence. The 'new politics', on the other hand, rather excludes the poor as active agents. The organisations involved may work *for* them, but they are not *of* them.

There is a second general argument that I don't develop here. It is that 'new politics' emphasises on the one hand local and on the other global levels of action. It often marginalizes the state level and neglects the necessary role of the state in delivering on human rights.

The three specific arguments for which I supply evidence in the paper are (i) that the forms of organisation of the 'new politics' are found – in abundance - but in India's metropolitan cities they frequently exclude the poor; (ii) that where they do not, as apparently they do not in Sao Paulo, then 'old politics' is rather centrally involved; and (iii) that a particularly high value is placed upon the politics of representative democracy by poor people in India's cities.

1.The forms of organisation of the new politics *are* found in global cities but they frequently exclude the poor.

A few years ago a political scientist published a book about Indian politics entitled *Democracy Without Associations* (Chhibber 1999). The empirical base for his claim that India has only very limited associational life was in fact very weak, and it sits oddly with the abundant evidence that we have of the vibrancy of associational life in India's metropolitan cities. Local residents' and community associations are prominent in Delhi, Bangalore and Chennai; there is a lot of local organising around

the construction and the maintenance of temples (see Waghorne 2004); there are numbers of caste and cultural associations (the latter very prominent in Chennai); there are still lots of trade associations and local unions; there are now very large numbers of NGOs, most of them providing services to poor people, but some of them engaged in research and advocacy work; there are human rights organisations and movements organised around rights to information, to food, to employment; and there are significant numbers of organisations that federate or coordinate the activities of, variously, local community associations, NGOs, or human rights groups. There is no way of measuring exactly what the universe of associations is in any of the cities, and so rigorous comparison is impossible, but the impression of abundant associational activity is inescapable and is confirmed from a variety of sources. The same is true of major Latin American cities. Our survey research shows that similar proportions of citizens in Sao Paulo, Mexico City and Delhi participate in associational activities of some kind (Sao Paulo 26%, Mexico 28%, Delhi 30% - these are figures in each case for engagement in *secular* associational practices). The Latin American cities seem to differ from the Indian ones principally in that Sao Paulo has relatively larger numbers of coordinators – of federating or coordinating bodies – and service NGOs are less prominent than they are in India.

But what are the relationships between these organisations and individuals? And what are their representational functions? Contrary to the assumptions or propositions of the protagonists of new politics grounded in civil society (the World Bank, remember, spoke of people being 'clients or *members* of NGOs and voluntary associations) relatively few of them, in fact, are membership organisations – 17% in Sao Paulo and Delhi, according to our survey data, and only 11% in Mexico City. Most NGOs are not membership organisations at all, but are bureaucracies depending on donations or grants, quite often from international donor agencies, employing paid workers, working for particular populations or target groups – commonly described, in the Indian cities, as 'the poor' or 'the deprived' or 'slum dwellers' (if they are not more specific target populations such as 'mentally retarded children' or 'people living with HIV'). This is exactly the same kind of labelling of populations that characterises much state activity in India, too, as Partha Chatterjee has pointed out (2002). In answer to a direct question the NGOs generally claim to be representative of the people for whom they are working, on the grounds that 'we work for them', or that

‘we understand their problems’. These claims are understandable and usually sincerely made but refer to a very limited conception of representation (a point to which I shall return). And as a matter of fact our findings with regard to (public) problem-solving activity in the Indian cities show that while there is a high level of collective action – people usually try to solve problems in association with their neighbours, in particular – civil society organisations are only rarely involved in these efforts. Where they are it is usually local residents’ welfare associations that are involved. These are better described as ‘CBOs’ than ‘NGOS’, and they are membership organisations.

The evidence we have, too, on participation in associational practices in Indian cities shows that it is rather heavily skewed towards those people with higher incomes and higher levels of education. Whereas we found in both Delhi and in Bangalore that poorer and sometimes also less well educated people are more active in political life, and that poorer people (especially those who have some education) are more active problem solvers, the same is not true of associational activity. If we take associational activism as an indicator of political participation then we find a stronger tendency for wealthier and particularly for more educated people to be involved, clearly calling into question the popular notion that poor people are able to secure effective representation or ‘empowerment’ through participation in associations in civil society. There are at least indications that poorer and less well educated people are fairly active in neighbourhood associations (as well as in religious groups) - but in all categories of associations, save only for ethnic associations, we find the highest incidence of associational practices in the wealthiest and in the most educated groups. In regard to the hypothesis that ‘life space’ social networks based in neighbourhoods or on religious affiliation are now producing the most politically efficacious collective actors, it is true in the Indian cities, as in Sao Paulo too, that these kinds of associations are more prominent than work space related organisations. But the urban poor are much less prominent in these social networks than are wealthier and more educated people. In the Indian cities residents’ welfare associations are usually found in higher income neighbourhoods, not in slums and other poor parts of the city. I recently looked hard and long for associations *of* (rather than ‘for’) the urban poor in Chennai. There is little there. The Tamil Nadu Slum Dwellers’ Federation, for example – a branch of the National Slum Dwellers’ Federation, recently celebrated in

an important paper by Arjun Appadurai (2004) – has virtually no local presence. What presence it has is in the savings groups amongst women established by Mahila Milan. It is not, in fact, a 'federation' at all. Significantly, the most active organisations of poor people in Chennai are women's organisations – the *Penn Urimai Yekkam* (Women's Rights Movement) and local branches of the All Indian Women's Democratic Association that is affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

The most telling feature of the associational space in Bangalore, and in Chennai – the two cities which I know best - is the sharp stratification of organisations. On the one hand there are organisations, like (in Bangalore) the Public Affairs Centre (PAC), CIVIC (Citizens Voluntary Initiative for the City), and *Janaagraha,* that are distinctly elitist, run by upper middle class people (often those with strong corporate ties and sometimes NRIs) that even geographically are clearly confined to upper and middle class neighbourhoods. These are organisations that adopt the formal language of 'citizenship' and speak of participation in budgeting, and of transparency and accountability in local government. Many of these organisations are run with large budgets with a high degree of genuine professionalism. Their attempts, however, at establishing a broad popular base for themselves have not really materialised. On the other hand there are some organisations that typically originate with or are focused on the urban poor, that mobilise and organise people to make demands upon the state (such as KKNSS - *Karnataka Kolageri Nivasigala Samyuktha Sanghatana* – a federation of slum dwellers' associations, and *Womens Voice*). The focus of their work is typically the slums and much of their effort is directed at securing basic rights for the people.

These two types of organisations engage with government in very different ways. The former have adopted the paradigm of 'public-private partnership' and champion the notion of 'collaborative change'. The idea is that 'synergy' between citizens and government is essential to bring about change. The Bangalore Agenda Task Force is a case in point (and there are similarities with the Bhagidari Scheme of the Delhi Government, which sets up 'partnerships' between residents' welfare associations and the government). Constituted by the Government of Karnataka in 2000, its 'single-minded mission is to modernise Bangalore by the end of 2004' through 'public-private partnership with Corporates, Stakeholders and the Citizens'. Members of this

Task Force are clearly drawn from the upper strata of civil society organisations and movements as well as the corporate giants of Bangalore (like Infosys, a company which is the icon of the Indian software industry). Its links with 'Citizens' seem similarly skewed in favour of the elite. Its articulation of a citizen-centred approach does not appear to have any place for the poor, and efforts supposedly aimed at poor people may be criticised for their tokenism. A common complaint, for instance is that the Pay and Use Toilets that have been built, through the BATF, though of better quality, have in many instances replaced free toilets, and it is strongly felt by poor people that the former should have been set up in addition to the latter.

Mass movements such as the KKNSS, on the other hand, have consciously adopted 'protest' – and see their methods as being successful in protecting the rights of the poor and the marginalized. 'Partnership' with the state is inconceivable to most organisations in this group, and the way they seek to obtain political representation is usually through entering into mainstream politics. Several do see the capture of political power as the logical conclusion of their struggle, enabling them to bring about genuinely pro-poor and pro-labour policies. The 'partnership' mode, however, seems to have undermined the ability of a whole stratum of civil society organisations, some of them claiming to represent the interests of the poor, to engage in the political process.

The question then arises as to who the 'citizen' is in supposedly 'citizen participatory' efforts, and who constitutes the 'private' in Bangalore's PPPs. It appears that in Bangalore alongside stratification in civil society organisations there is also a dualism that distinguishes 'citizens' from 'denizens' (inhabitants, who may be 'done unto')[2], and that a particular technocratic associational elite defines citizenship in particular ways. Networks among civil society organisations tend to form within the realm of either 'citizens' or 'denizens', rarely straddling both. Decentralisation of urban governance in Karnataka, meanwhile, has been undermined by the State government through the control that it has arrogated to itself over urban planning and real estate; and this has left little possibility for the poor to exercise any influence at all over decisions that have a great influence on their lives. It is only the elite fraction of the

[2] The 'citizen'/'denizen' distinction was suggested by Sudha Narayanan.

voluntary sector with its corporate links that finds any representation in the political arena. Our evidence suggests that 'citizen participation' actually has very little space for the urban poor, who are rather 'denizens'. This is partly the outcome of the path and policies adopted by the State government with its stated goal of making Bangalore among the world's best cities.

2. <u>Where effective associational networks and strong collective actors are found – as they are in Sao Paulo – they turn out to have been driven by a programmatic political party.</u>

I pointed out that, somewhat oddly, pessimism about the prospects for progressive programmatic politics in the party and union arenas stands alongside optimism amongst some researchers and development policy actors for the success of direct 'popular participation.'[3]. I have called into question the arguments of analysts, like those in the World Bank whom I quoted, who point to a flowering of new forms of community-based associations and see these not only as replacing parties and unions in representing popular interests, but also as being more responsive to their constituencies and autonomous from external influence and control. In so far as there is a flowering of such associations – and I have argued that the evidence shows that a great deal of associational activity is not actually community-based – it has often excluded and it does not represent the urban poor.

In the Latin American literature, however, there is also an important argument that the continent is witnessing the emergence of a new model of representation, which is coming to stand in the place of earlier modes – whether clientelist, populist, corporatist or mass-mobilizational. This model is characterised as the 'associative network', which includes collective actors. It is said that: 'Such a network links state and societal actors – sometimes including popular ones – through interpersonal, media and/or inter-organizational ties. Multiple networks process and re-shape contending political claims through relatively open-ended and problem-focussed interactions. They are distinctive not only in the way they link people with decision-making

[3] See, for example, World Bank 1997, Chapter 7; or for a scholarly argument, Avritzer 2002.

centers, but also by their multiplicity and relatively rapid reconfiguration' (Chalmers et al 1997: 544).

There are quite large numbers of networks of associations, some of them with large numbers of members, also in the Indian cities. There are at least twenty such networks in each of Bangalore and Chennai, some – like TNForces, the Tamil Nadu Forum for Creches and Child Services – having upwards of one hundred members. But these are not networks of organisations representing the large numbers of people who work in informal activities. In Sao Paulo, however, there are extensive networks of civil society associations representing people who work in the informal sector, in new deliberative policy institutions (established by the Brazilian central government). Substantial aggregation is occurring within civil society through the establishment of forums, notably of neighbourhood and of housing associations, and through organisations which take on coordinating functions. What is very striking, however, is that civil society organisations with ties to political parties and to the state are far more likely to participate (in the legally mandated participatory institutions) than are those lacking such ties (and coordinators and local community associations participate at far higher rates than do advocacy NGOs). This suggests – and it seems a most important point – that the new politics of civil society and citizen participation is not separate from the old politics of traditional political actors and representative institutions, but rather may be closely linked with it.

The same point emerges from studies of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre and now elsewhere in Brazil, which is the most celebrated instance of empowered deliberative democracy – or, in other words, of radical new politics. This is one case – and it is argued that there are others from Latin America (Avritzer 2002) - of the formation of 'a *public space in which citizens can participate as equals*, and by arguing ['deliberating'] about collective projects for society, guide formal decision-making' (Avritzer 2002, p.5). In Porto Alegre, building on initiatives made in the first place by The Union of Neighbourhood Associations, the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabhalhadores*, or PT), once it had secured office in the municipal government, established a set of arrangements whereby it was made possible for large numbers of people to join in deliberation and decision-making on public projects and investments, and to monitor their outcomes. The People's Planning Campaign in Kerala attempted

very much the same thing. It is a matter of fact, however, that in both these cases the role of political vehicles that have successfully mobilised people from the lower classes – and hence shifted the balance of social power - has been one of the crucial factors. In Porto Alegre, which, like Brazil in general is marked by considerable inequality, it is hard to imagine that the creation of 'a public space in which citizens can participate as equals' (Avritzer) – would have been achieved without the securing of political power in the city by the PT. Similarly radical civil society activists in Kerala would never have been able to launch the massive People's Planning Campaign had it not been for successful simultaneous engagement and partial support from the Left Front government -particularly sections of the CPI-M - and access to the powerful state planning board. There seems to be no question but that the role of the PT in Porto Alegre, or of politically organised activists in Kerala contradicts the idea (Avritzer 2002) that democratic forces arise from within society and have to be transmitted into the political system, when it seems quite clear that without the commitment of the political parties and activists in these cases public space would not have been opened up at all.[4] It surely remains a moot point as to whether it is ever possible to establish deliberative structures in a social context where a small number of relatively powerful people can exercise dominance and so 'secure their first best preferences' (Fung & Wright); and a moot point, too, as to whether the kind of civility, or civic values that are an essential aspect of public deliberation are produced by the deliberative process or are instead a precondition for it.

3. The urban poor depend on the old politics of political parties, in spite of their limitations.

I have argued, in regard to Brazil in particular, that progressive achievements in civil society that appear to exemplify the real possibilities of new politics, turn out to involve the old politics of traditional political actors and representative institutions. Gains that have been made by poor people in Sao Paulo, and elsewhere in Brazil,

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[4] See Schonleitner's (2003) extensive discussion. As Schonleitner says, 'in Avritzer's own case studies of Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre and Belo Horizonte institutionalisation required the prior election of the PT into power.- in other words, the establishment of PB required the transformation of political society (via elections) as a precondition for, not a consequence, of public deliberation'.

would not have been realised without the interventions of the PT (even if the party, in national office, has subsequently disappointed many aspirations).

In the global cities of India the urban poor also depend heavily upon political parties, in spite of the fact that they are frequently corrupt, non-democratic in their internal workings, and have signally failed to deliver. They may also disrupt the sustained organisation of poor people by themselves, for we have found in all the cities that local organisations of Dalits and slum dwellers are easily divided on party political lines (if their leaders are not corrupted by those with interests in land). The overwhelming conclusion from our research in both Delhi and Bangalore is that it does not appear *yet* to be the case, at least, that (in the words of those World Bank writers cited at the start of this paper) 'expressions of voice and participation beyond the ballot' are on the rise in metropolitan cities in India. We find little, if any, evidence that political action amongst the urban poor is now based on collective actors such as 'associative networks', facilitated by NGOs that aggregate local groups. We have found very little evidence that NGOs – in spite of their burgeoning numbers - have a significant presence at all in the lives of poor people; and poor people generally are not very much involved at all in associations. The broad picture that emerges is one showing a considerable difference in political participation between wealthier people who are also usually better educated, and the urban poor. Wealthier people are more likely to try to solve problems for themselves through self-help, or they go to government or have recourse to legal action. They are (relatively speaking) active in associations rather than in politics. Poor people are generally more active problem solvers, particularly through the medium of political parties, and they are more active politically than are the wealthier people. It appears very strongly that the principal possibility for the urban poor to obtain representation for themselves is through political parties.

This does not mean, as Javeed Alam has recently pointed out (2004), that poor people in India, who – contrary to what has been observed in many other countries – participate more keenly in electoral politics than the middle classes, are not (justifiably) mistrustful of political leaders, whom they generally hold in low esteem, or of political parties. But there is a very strong commitment to the value of democracy amongst poorer and historically socially subordinated people in Indian

society. 'Democracy in India (Alam argues) is an assertion of the urge for more self-respect and the ability to better oneself' (2004, p.22). The evidence of neither the surveys of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, on which Javeed Alam draws, or of our own surveys, suggests that civil society associations are coming to stand in the place of formal representative democracy.

Conclusions

There is evidence in the Indian cities of the existence of associative networks that have some of the features, at least, of the ideal type defined in the Latin Americanist literature – though in neither city are there networks comparable in their organisation, their scope and their complexity with those found in Sao Paulo, the formation of which has been so much influenced by the activities of the PT (see Houtzager et al 2003). There are voluntary associations – perhaps most significantly, active neighbourhood associations; there are NGOs; there are social movements – so that the elements of the 'new politics' clearly are there in the Indian metropolitan cities. But the evidence that we have of the stratification of associations and networks, especially when they are taken together with the findings of our Citizen Surveys regarding both patterns of problem-solving and associational activities, show that there is a fairly sharp distinction between 'citizens' and 'denizens'. The urban poor, who are 'denizens', clearly find little possibility for securing representation through the institutions of the 'new politics' – though there certainly are a good many organisations (a majority of the NGOs we have found in all three cities) that claim to represent the poor, usually because they aim to work *for* them. The 'new politics', then, excludes rather than includes the urban poor, who find support mainly amongst friends and neighbours as they try to solve public problems for themselves, and who turn still to political parties for assistance - in the domain that Partha Chatterjee has called 'political society'.

Chatterjee argues that 'Most of the inhabitants of India are only tenuously …rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution. They are not, therefore, proper members of civil society and are not regarded as such by the institutions of the state' (2004: 38). People like the urban poor of Delhi, Bangalore and Chennai relate to

the state (as they do to many NGOs, too) as defined ‘populations’ – such as that of ‘slum-dwellers’ – which are the targets of policy and to be controlled by the state. The people who are thus defined take action that is quite often technically illegal – such as squatting on public land - to make claims upon the state for the realisation of what they believe to be their rights to welfare. This is what Chatterjee refers to as ‘political society’. There is a good deal in the evidence that I have referred to in this paper that lends support to this controversial idea: the conviction, amongst the people of Delhi in particular, according to our surveys, that it is the government that is responsible for taking action to solve public (and even private) problems - which implies a strong sense of popular rights; the fact that there is more, and more diverse problem solving activity amongst the poorer people; and that poorer people often turn to political parties, particularly the Congress which is identified still with the providing state. Then there is our evidence especially from Bangalore that in the way in which urban governance is now carried on, involving public-private partnership, in effect those whom I have described as ‘denizens’ are indeed *not* regarded as ‘proper members of civil society by the institutions of the state’. ‘Denizens’ are the objects, the targets of policy, largely excluded from the modes of participation that are at the centre of the ‘new politics’.

Chatterjee distinguishes this ‘political society’, which is a site for democratic struggles, from ‘civil society’, which he defines in terms of ‘civility’ and as a sphere of voluntary associations, operating according to principles of deliberation, in which people come together as equal rights-bearing individuals. Civil society, for him, is a site of rationalising modernity. It is not inherently undemocratic but rationalising impulses may have precedence over the messiness of democracy. This is rather a stark opposition. Nonetheless the practices, say, of the Bangalore Agenda Task Force, do appear to emphasise technical rationality over democracy.

This is not to say that civil society actors have not sometimes been very successful in bringing the problems of poor people to attention – and even in bringing about action to address these problems. This is true of some of the organisations that I have described in Bangalore and Chennai, or of a number of the well organised rights-based movements in India, like those that are mobilised around the Right to Food and the Right to Employment, the Peoples Health Movement, the Campaign for the Right

to Education, and the Campaign for the Right to Information – which are also not engaged in mass mobilisation, and are not 'social movements' in the accepted sense of this term, but are more or less effective campaigns, led by NGOs. But, as Neera Chandhoke asks, '…can all this substitute for the activity we call politics? …do civil society actors actually *represent* people? [my emphasis: JH]'. She worries that what all this activity connotes is 'the collapse of the idea that ordinary men and women are capable of appropriating the political initiative' (2002: 47). The evidence that I have presented from the Indian cities suggests, I think, that she is right to be worried, not only in regard to 'global civil society' (the subject of her essay) but also in regard to civil society in general. Poorer people, our evidence shows, may be excluded through the 'new politics', and progressively denied the possibility of engaging in politics as self-realisation. The potential and the possibility of politics, Chandhoke argues, involves 'activity that is empowering inasmuch as, when ordinary people engage in political activity they acquire agency, they recover selfhood, and they earn self-confidence' (2002: 46). The passionate commitment of many poorer people in India to the democratic idea, through all the manifest imperfections of the political parties and their leaders, and in spite of the failures of democracy in regard to the solution of their problems of livelihood and well-being, demonstrates their recognition of these potentials. The vision of participation that is suggested in the statement that I quoted from *WDR 1997* , by contrast, reflects a very stunted view of the meaning of 'representation' because it reduces politics to a market place of buyers (people are presented as customers or clients rather than as citizens) and sellers. It is in this sense that the World Bank discourse, and that of some of the other protagonists of new politics, is anti-political. But it is a vision that is consistent, of course, with the classical liberalism that remains in ascendance in the Bank and elsewhere.

Where does this leave me with regard to 'new politics'? I certainly do not wish to negate the value of the work that is done by the friend in Chennai with whom I began this paper (though I do have severe doubts as to the value of much that is done by well-meaning NGOs that, in the honest words of one of them, 'dispense drops of charity'). But clearly I do call into question whether the kind of politics of civil society in which he is engaged substitutes for old politics. There do appear to be lessons to be drawn from Sao Paulo and from Brazil more generally – though I do not wish to elevate the Brazilian experience into a model for emulation. The first of the

lessons is that there is an important complementarity between civil organisation and a programmatic political party that aims to represent the poor. The actually existing political parties of India and of many other countries, too, may be a long way from being this sort of a party. But the necessity of the struggle to restructure them, to encourage their openness, internal democracy and deliberative mode of operation, seems to me to inescapable. There is no way out through civil society organisations on their own.