

Pipe dreams: barriers to civic and social rights in an unauthorised colony

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Manisha Priyam draws on ethnographic research over eight months to highlight experiences of citizens on the urban periphery. She argues that it is not lack of money but rather desperation for water and the lack of ability to make the state hear their grievances that constitutes 'poverty' in Delhi's unauthorised colonies.



This is a narrative of the political from the spatial sites of the ordinary city of Delhi – places that are on the urban 'periphery'. To the south of South Delhi's richest residential areas, there is one such periphery – the 'unauthorised/illegal' colony of Sangam Vihar. While maps of the Forest Department show this area as open degraded forest, in real life it is inhabited by more than 2.5 lakh (250,000) people, mostly the labouring poor, providing services to the richer and urbanised parts of the city.

As an 'unauthorised colony' Sangam Vihar falls into a category of space where the authority of the state steadfastly refuses to recognise land-citizen relationships in a manner so complete as to not just refrain from grant of tenure and titles, but forbid even the basic right to water and waste disposal, including of daily human excreta. The landscape is understood as being divided into alphabetically numbered blocks – nearly thirty of them, giving it the feel of being a planned, organised colony – but this division was done by private 'colonisers' who carved out small plots for illegal sale, and the water mafia, who divided the territory amongst themselves for sale of water through the tankers they bring in.

Yet voters in Sangam Vihar are legitimate political actors. Through 24 polling booths established under the seal and authority of the state, they regularly cast their vote to constitute a government for the nation and the city. The dilemma of the legal sovereign constituted by illegal citizens! And just before the elections, especially those for electing a house of legislature for the city state (i.e. the 'Assembly'), political leaders dangle the carrot of 'regularisation' from its current unauthorised status – the promise to remove in one stroke the stigma of illegality and incorporate the area in the city's master plan.

For all its shortcomings, this type of political assurance builds a ladder of aspiration amidst the citizenry – the hope of a move from scarred urban illegal to naturalised city resident. In this urban periphery, citizens are voters with political rights, but with little or no capacity to claim the civic and the social. Pressure and social connections are not enough to make the pipelines flow – this must wait till the 'final' changes in territory authority relationships are enacted – indicating how specifically politics is conditioned in the urban space.

This article essays a direct plunge into the ordinary lives of the illegal, as lived in Sangam Vihar, and explores their world of political deliberation through ethnographic work over eight months. The focus here is on understanding these deliberations during the elections to the state legislature (October-November 2013). The arguments here are a somewhat stylised presentation of people's voices – placing an accent on inequality and marginality. These are 'visible' and have been 'sighted' through thick ethnographic interactions. Specially included are voices of social castes at the margins of the Hindu caste hierarchy, Muslims who perceive themselves as a minority, but more importantly of women, who never really came out into the public spaces of the *gali* (street), but were strong agents with articulated grievances.

Arena 1

Near the Shani Bazaar area, we interviewed families of *Poorvanchalis*, underclass migrants from Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, mostly belonging to the backward caste. It is interesting to note that the poorvanchali has

meaning and identity only as a resident of Delhi's various categories of authorised and illegal human settlements. As Kamlesh Pal describes it:

"We become collective actors in the city this way, we have identified leaders who we can approach in times of difficulty or more serious lafra (disputes and illegal entanglements). He will take our voice forward if needed. Also, we can have a strong leader of our own. Without this, how can we take on the police?"

Mahabal Mishra is named by the Poorvanchalis as their strong *neta* in the city – a person with recognition and influence. In the liminal space between the citizen and the government lies the need for such intermediaries simply to access public services that by law or intention of public policy rightfully belong to the poor.

Veerender Pal tells me:

'Water is a big problem. Supplied once every 10-15 days, for 20-30 minutes at one go, and by a private water mafia that has spread its own pipelines, it is very expensive.' The strife over water increases in the summer. At this time of year, the women migrate back to their villages – only the men stay behind on 'duty'.

Neither the Congress nor the Bharatiya Janata Party has done enough to resolve these issues.

Kamlesh Pal's aunt – referred to as *chachi* in this neighbourhood – is a hub of sorts, managing the household for an extended chain of migrants, belonging to a stretched-out group of relatives.

"We live here with dignity, with our sisters and daughters-in-law, while the men go for their jobs. Our houses are clean from inside, just like yours in a kothi (house of the wealthy in recognised legal areas). We are women of dignity – we conserve water and sparingly use the toilet. It is the men who must have priority of use as they have to go to work on time."

It's not just water that is a problem, there is also a lack of drains, which results in a stench outside. No political party resolves this.

As we begin to leave, Chachi signals: '*Didi, is baar jhaadu ko bhi dekhiyega,*' pointing to the election symbol of the Aam Aadami Party (AAP). With this firm indication, people open up about their choice – representatives of the AAP party, especially women, had visited them in their homes. They were being seen as a set of trustworthy people – the only ones to promise secure pipelines for bringing water to households and take away sewage. For women, the promise of security in the party manifesto has special significance:

"Nirbhaya [victim of the 2012 Delhi Gang rape] was like our daughter, a Poorvanchali. Anything can happen if women's dignity is not ensured."

Arena 2

Entering Sangam Vihar from near the Jamia Hamdard University, we reach K Block referred to as the 'Bakri Gali' –

indicating it to be a Muslim settlement. There is a clear difference here in what the men and women say. For men, voting is their right, a duty they must perform. In contrast, there is anger and protest in the voices of women. 'I will not vote this time, I never vote, what is the point? Nothing is ever going to change for us,' says an elderly Fatima Begum. Tabassum, a young student, also declares that though she has a voter identity card, she is not convinced as to why she should vote.

"Look at the state of our gali. Our houses are full of the backflow from drain water. It floods the house, we have to keep our fridge and television sets on a chowki, and our houses stink for months. How can I ever invite friends from school to my home?"

Nuzrabad affirms and says:

"Frankly we feel embarrassed living here, no one can come and visit us.' The women confirm there is no water supply. They pay a deposit of Rs1000 and then Rs100 every fortnight to those who control the bore well. Water comes for 15-20 minutes, and just enough to fill a 50-litre storage drum. If we refuse to pay, 'he' cuts our pipeline. And then we have to pay from our pockets to fix it. What is the point of voting?"

Contrast this with what the men tell us – they do not admit to any 'rentseeking' for water. The bore well is under the control of the local masjid, and these fortnightly payments are used to run a *madrassa* for young children. They will vote for the Congress, but there is also the Peace Party, an independent party of the Muslims which they will consider if the Congress does not listen. An elderly Mohammed Sajid walks along as we leave, and says: '*Jo neta ke chahete hote hain, unne paani ka connection diya jaata hai. Aur unne, jinse yehaan sab darte hain*' – this is a quiet signal that it is fear of the locally powerful that guides their political choices, fear of those who are 'connected' with politicians.

Reflecting on these voices, and the differences within Sangam Vihar, I gather that it is desperation for water and the lack of ability to make the state hear their grievances that constitutes 'poverty' here, not lack of (any) income or money. The state turns a blind eye to providing social welfare and civic amenities to its citizens, and it is this lack of responsibility which leaves the citizens here at the mercy of the police.

In Sangam Vihar, though the police is *gormint* (government) who extracts money when they cast their linter (a roof for their house), it is all fixed, *bandha hua*. When they fight over who gets how much water, the police stands by: '*...yeh aapka aapas ka maamla hai, aap hi suljhaaiye*' – it is a civil dispute, please resolve it by yourselves. But when they claim water from bore well and tanker owners, it is a route to the life of the illegal. The AAP helped them challenge this twin domination – the social power of the Jats and the extractive power of the police. The AAP government, however, was short-lived.

Rational action (of voting) within this bounded domain was understood as a weapon of substantive change – to change the terms governing exercise of power as domination and subordination, understood in community debates as power 'over', and a use of their collective resources to exercise the capacity to act and accomplish goals. In less than six months, voters here elected a national government to be located in the heart of their Dilli, the Centre that does not smell or stink, which has aesthetic flower gardens and water fountains, and traffic police to ensure there is no congestion. The utopia here is that Sangam Vihar will someday insert itself into the city, and the city into the nation.

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