

We stand at a ‘critical juncture’ when questions of inequality have come to foreground public life

lse blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2014/12/01/we-stand-at-a-critical-juncture-when-questions-of-inequality-have-come-to-foreground-public-life/

2014-12-1

*Recent events in Delhi have been at the forefront of reshaping the national imagination. There is now visible a new assertion of citizen power, where the margins have begun to question the power and authority of the centre. **Manisha Priyam** argues a less conventional “vari-focal” lens is needed to interpret this new urban moment.*



There is a need to focus on those occupying Delhi’s fringes and the processes, institutions and politics that keeps them so. For long Delhi has been the city at the centre of national imagination and aspiration, and, relatedly, the perception that it anchors national life as its political capital. From being labelled a ‘dull city’ of the bureaucratic elite and former emperors, recent events in the city have been at the forefront of reshaping the national imagination. Its public spaces have been the site of anti-corruption movements, protests and fasts, the collective evocation of grief and action following the Nirbhaya tragedy, and the formation and ascendance to power (albeit for a short tenure) of a fledgling political party – the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Tearing asunder the widely advertised and largely commercial images of the city as a site of grand wedding tamashas, and of its residents as engrossed in the hedonistic pursuit of a ‘happy’ life, there is now the visual of a city that protests in its public spaces, debates issues of use and misuse of power, be it around the masculinity of power and persistent gender inequality, or the disregard of citizen security in favour of providing protection to the chosen few.

Rejecting attempts to carry on politics as usual – the technique of garnering democratic power by extending patronage, exercising domination and control – there is now visible a new assertion of citizen power. This is perceptibly a ‘critical juncture’ when questions of inequality have come to foreground public life, and when the margins have begun to question the power and authority of the centre.



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At this moment, therefore, the gaze needs to turn inwards – towards understanding this departure, the ideas and processes that have been turning this city inside out. Many of the answers can be found in an unravelling of the

hierarchies that structure spaces in the city. And yet others in understanding the city in its everydayness – the chaos, struggle, and desperation that anchors ordinary lives. This is not the city dominating the imagination of the nation, but concerned with how it relates to its citizens, especially its labouring poor and the vulnerable.

To deepen these insights, we need a more open-ended approach, and to focus on the political economy of inequality. The politics of locality or region, adversarial forms of protest, the relationship of the marginal or disadvantaged citizens with the local state become central to a revised understanding. The attempt, therefore, is to take an inverse route – of bringing the margins together, and reconstituting the periphery as the centre of the urban discourse on Delhi. This framing is at some variance from what most established discourses on Delhi have so far presented.

In both urban planning and in policy analysis, the emphasis so far has been on understanding space as an ordered reality based on principles of formal urbanism. Preserving substantially the colonial distinction between (and the subordination of) the ‘old’ city from the ‘new’, such an approach assembles and then segregates spaces into separate zones for earmarked purpose, and thereby confers a legality to these differences. With this the sovereign assumes a territorial form, and law becomes an exclusive instrument of its actions. Civic citizenship is an anticipated practice only within these ordered confines. Outside it, however, lies the domain of illegality – fraught with force and fraud, and unanticipated to the vision of a central plan.

Unfortunately, the overwhelming reality of city life conforms to what was unanticipated in technical design – especially how those without the means to dwell in the ‘zones’ have been herded into a hierarchy of illegal spaces where services fail the poor, citizenship is at best a constricted practice, and state-citizen relationships are firmly under the control of intermediaries. Entitlement based welfare policies have achieved precious little to change this, premised as they are on serving an exclusive lot who can prove they are poor, and provide documentary evidence of legal residence. In other words, even where inaccessibility to the legal city is itself the cause of desperation and vulnerability, the poor must first prove ownership of a certain order of legality before they can claim what is theirs by public policy!

More recent critical interrogations of the city attempt to move beyond this narrow technocratic rationality inspired by centralised plans, and look at subaltern lives in their everyday character. Though a welcome advance, many of them still continue to treat power and resistance as distinct domains, with a clearly demarcated boundary. Beyond this neat divide there is little understanding of the role of state power, policies, or institutions. These are critical components of the unconventional and vari-focal lenses needed to perceive this new urban moment. Why must citizens most in need of care by the state remain invisible to ‘targeted’ lists of the poor? Why must the ageing poor bear the double burden of proving old age and poverty? In order to access the basic amenities of life such as water or toilets, why must they fear the law of the overlord? Why must the spaces of the poor be shorn off the aesthetics of the city, its history and heritage? Understanding of the political, social, economic and aesthetic in this manner is an assertion of the ‘rights to the city’.

This article is adapted from the introduction of a special issue of Seminar Magazine, which was put together for the LSE Urban Age Conference. The full issue includes further articles on life, living and struggle in Delhi’s urban periphery and an interview With Ricky Burdett, Professor of Urban Studies and Director of LSE Cities and the Urban Age Programme. It can be accessed [here](#).

About the Author

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