

**PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE IN AN ERA OF ECONOMIC REFORMS:  
UNDERSTANDING THE RISE OF ‘NEW POLITICS’ AND  
INDIAN MIDDLE-CLASS ACTIVISM**

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**ABSTRACT**

*With the introduction of economic reforms in the early 1990s and a greater integration of the Indian economy into the global markets, there has been an increasing strategic importance of cities from an economic, political, and demographic perspective. This has led to the promotion of decentralization governance policies as part of the reform triptych ‘decentralization-privatization-participation’. In India, this is apparent in the landmark 74th Constitutional Amendment Act on urban local self-governance. In this paper, we shall attempt to examine how this evolving shift towards cities as economic and decision-making actors has led to the rearticulation of claims and a renewed form of mobilization of urban dwellers. However, many scholars have emphasized that instead of a more egalitarian imagination of citizenship this has created gentrified channels of participation by the introduction of elite discourses and strategies by the Indian middle class. This has been increasingly located within the realm of ‘new politics’, which has come to define forms of governmentality of the post-liberalization state. This paper aims to investigate the impact of middle-class activism on local governance by understanding the contextual factors leading to the emergence of Resident Welfare Associations (henceforth referred to as RWAs) and umbrella RWA organizations in Delhi, and how they have influenced various public policy outcomes at the local and state level. Although these mobilizations are rooted in the local, certain generalizations can be culled from it as neighborhood associations are on the rise in all large cities in India. By examining the spatial politics and contestations located in ‘new politics’, it is argued that an analysis of the political practices of the new Indian middle class deepens our understanding of the political dynamics of economic reform in contemporary India. This also provides us with an analytical frame to understand citizen negotiations with the state, market and the civil society in the backdrop of newer cultural and political economies of liberalization. By undertaking an analysis of participatory urban governance schemes such as Bhagidari and Mohalla Sabhas, this paper would also attempt to investigate the transformations that have taken place in local democratic politics of Indian cities and questions of inclusion/exclusion located within it.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Urban Development, Citizenship, Local Governance, Middle Class, Civil Society*

**INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1990s in the South Asian context, the ‘urban question’ has attracted increasing attention. In the subcontinent, the issues at stake take on a particular urgency for several reasons. The foremost reason is the increasing strategic importance of cities from an economic, political, and demographic perspective. Generally from the 1990s here has

been a global trend in the promotion of decentralization policies as part of the reform triptych ‘decentralization-privatization- participation’ (Tawa Lama-Rewal and Zerah 2011). These reforms have been crucial in promoting the functional efficiency of cities and in advancing the position of cities as ‘engines of economic growth’, an aspect that finds increasing use even in government policies in India like JNNURM. This emergence in the national and global economy of a new, international consensus on the central role of cities has manifested itself into policies and government interventions focused on increasing urban productivity and urban renewal.

In India, both these trends of rescaling and decentralization are apparent and critical in reshaping large metropolitan centers. The landmark 74th constitutional amendment on decentralization and local self-government give more powers to previously debilitated urban local bodies. The setting up of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission engraves this new strategic character of metropolitan cities in a national policy framework. With a mandatory reform including the enactment of a community participation law, it supports the stand that political decentralization should also be accompanied by citizens’ participation in local decision-making. In this paper, we shall attempt to examine whether this evolving shift towards cities as economic and decision-making actors leads to re-articulation of the claims and a renewed form of mobilization of the urban dwellers (Varma 1998; Fernandes 2007).

There has been an increasing visibility of neighborhood based civic activism across major Indian cities, especially in the form of Residents Welfare Associations (henceforth referred to as RWAs). This has provoked increasing academic inquiry about whether they constitute the new face of urban civil society in India and what are the consequences of such a phenomenon? Studies of neighborhood associations in India including RWAs and their role (Harriss 2005; Tawa Lama-Rewal 2007; Z erah 2007) draw attention to the class character of such associations and the dominant presence of middle-class associations in such exercises. Drawing implicitly on Partha Chatterjee’s (2001) distinction between “civil society” and “political society”; such dominance, they point out, tends to exclude the voices of the poorer sections, ie, members of the political society. In an urban context increasingly structured by the axis of class, John Harriss (2005) formulates that middle-class associations maintain a distance from the sphere of local politics. As in, “civil society is the arena for middle-class activism and assertion, while the poor engage in politics” (Harriss, 2005, p.32). These middle-class collective actors have been increasingly located within the realm of ‘new politics’, an emerging project of a partnership between the reforming state, private capital and sections of civil society, aimed at reclaiming urban governance from what they perceive as messy and dirty dealings of electoral democracy (Harriss 2007). First, rather than being located within the infrastructure of parties and electoral democracy, new politics is organized in small-scale voluntary associations. Secondly, they employ “civilized modes of engagement such as memos, media coverage, and courts rather than mass campaigns, rallies, or demonstrations” (Coelho and Venkat, 2009, p.359) and are rooted in residential and recreational domains rather than in workplaces.

To map middle-class activism in Delhi qualitative research has been conducted in select municipal wards of South Delhi representative of the city’s different types of settlements: elite neighborhoods of plotted lands, DDA flats, urban villages, and informal settlements. Using both structured and unstructured questionnaires, interviews have been conducted with government officials, Members of Legislative Assembly, office bearers and members of Resident Welfare Associations and umbrella RWA organizations to understand the modalities of neighborhood based civic activism as well as the Delhi government schemes for promoting civic participation in local governance such as *Bhagidari* and *Mohalla Sabha*. The ethnographic material has also been collected by observing RWA meetings and elections, and public meetings

conducted by political representatives. Information received was also supplemented with newspaper articles, government reports and Public Interest Litigations (PILs) filed.

## **THE RISE AND IMPACT OF RESIDENT WELFARE ASSOCIATIONS**

The policies of economic liberalization were first initiated in the country in the 1990s, which was followed by decentralization reforms as part of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) in all tiers of the government has resulted in the gradual withdrawal of the State and concomitant increase in private sector participation in terms of capital investment, operation and maintenance of urban services. Furthermore, the ineffectiveness of ward committees which were institutionalized through 74th CAA to bring in decentralized governance led to the growth of middle-class activism through Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs). Some scholars have argued that large cities in India are currently witnessing a rise in neighborhood associations, as an outcome of rapid growth generated after economic reforms in the early 1990s (Chatterjee 2004; Fernandes 2006). Examples of such neighborhood association movements include the Porto Alegre inspired experiment called Janagraha in Bangalore, the Advanced Locality Management programme in Mumbai, and RWAs in Chennai and Delhi, among other cities.

While traveling across the city one aspect that caught my attention irrespective of where I was RWA boards especially on the entry and exit points of middle-class neighborhoods. They boldly proclaimed the name of the RWA and are usually manned by a security guard who checks those who are crossing over the threshold. This perhaps provides a general indication of the exclusionary nature of middle-class neighborhoods in the city. Neighborhood associations are primarily middle-class in nature but prevalent in both planned neighborhoods and unauthorized colonies of the city. Harriss (2005b) describes RWAs as essentially neighborhood management committees in apartment blocks or colonies to which the residents are required to pay regular charges, and which organize and pay for security and look after the maintenance of common resources. They also engage with city governments over issues such as access to public services like water, electricity and street lighting, roads maintenance and drainage, waste management, and parking. Legally RWAs are registered under the Societies Registration Act of 1860.

Political scientists and sociologists explain the behavior of neighborhood associations in the context of 'globalizing cities'. Leela Fernandes (2006) argues that the 'new' middle class in India is a product of economic reforms of the early nineties which led to exponential growths in income of the managerial class employed in multinational firms. The formation of neighborhood associations by this class, she argues, is a means of 'reclaiming public space and consolidating a style of living that can adequately embody its self-image as the primary agents of the globalizing city. She further emphasizes that these associations seek to reproduce a clear socio-spatial separation from groups such as street vendors and squatters. This is reflected by slum evictions from public spaces that are often carried out on grounds of 'public interest and the environment'. Thus, the middle-class begins to mimic the lifestyle of the 'global city' which results in the displacement of subaltern groups. In my own interviews with members of RWAs, they often equated slum settlements within and around their neighborhood to criminals because they occupy land illegally and stated that removal of 'encroachments' was one of the objectives of the association. When talking to residents of an elite neighborhood in South Delhi they told me how the slum nearby their houses was a health hazard to them. They complained of open sewage near the slum and equated the slum cluster to an open dumping ground because of the garbage piling up and the open defecation

by the slum dwellers, which they said made it unbearable for the residents to venture out because of the smell. The RWA President even stated that even though the residents of the neighborhood had to pay one of the highest property taxes in Delhi, they were made to live next to 'anti-social elements'. They complained that although arrangements had been made to build a wall separating themselves from the nearby slum, it was of no avail. The slum dwellers had broken the barrier wall in a matter of few days stated the RWA members. They further went onto explain that they were planning to make a separate entrance for the slum dwellers, as their thoroughfare was causing inconvenience to the residents. The urban poor is also blamed for the inefficiency of elected representatives. An RWA federation member stated on one such occasion that RWAs in the city were encouraging their members to contest in elections especially in the 2017 MCD elections because they were fed up of vote bank politics which was meant to appease the urban poor while marginalizing the voice of the middle-class. He stated the reason for middle class associations entering politics is the desire to 'clean up the system' and change 'dirty politics'. This is quite a fascinating shift in behavior of the middle class which has traditionally been viewed as apolitical and which keeps its distance from electoral democracy. Additionally, while interviewing political representatives at the local level and office bearers of RWAs it could be seen that these neighborhood associations are in fact able to exert significant influence on decisions regarding development activities undertaken and expenditure proposals at the local level. RWA office bearers, in fact, interact quite frequently with councilors for everyday grievance resolution. Although RWAs are emerging in major Indian cities under different guises, there have been concerns of how they might exacerbate inequalities. Debolina Kundu (2011) states that this participatory model helps people to get involved to voice their concerns by building local pressure groups. RWAs found in middle class areas serve their interests as consumer-citizens (Kundu, 2011, p.23). Further, the very mechanism of the functioning of RWAs is likely to accentuate and institutionalize disparity within cities. For instance, RWAs of elite and upper middle-class neighborhoods have been found to undertake development and service delivery related activities through the funds they are able to self-generate through various subscriptions paid by the members, in addition to the funds allocated by the state government. It is thus the better educated and wealthy who can avail themselves of the opportunities by adopting the notion of 'collaborative change' between the state and civil society.

The participatory efforts of RWAs have also resulted in 'sanitation of cities' and policing of public spaces within their jurisdiction. The kind of empowerment that is taking place through civil societies is exclusionary in nature and often favors the consumer-citizen. Much of the activity that it sustains is directed at disciplining the urban poor rather than supporting their struggles over rights to housing, livelihood, and protection. Therefore, some scholars have stated that the new politics of empowerment doesn't incorporate the urban poor (Harriss 2007; Kundu 2011). The functioning of RWAs has serious consequences in terms of access of the poor to basic amenities and infrastructural facilities and accentuations of intra-city inequalities. Middle-class activism through RWAs has opened up new opportunities for local representation, as they are able to exercise significant influence on the city and the state government.

## **URBAN PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE**

Virtually every development agency advocates the importance of community participation. Closely knitted with the ideas of community deliberation, activity and action in the scheme of governance are the importance of civil society organizations. However in Delhi instead of being an organic process, through Bhagidari programme and Mohalla Sabha, it is the State which has tried to engineer this process of community participation. These schemes of participatory governance which are entrenched in the discourse of empowerment are thought to be realized through the development of local

organizational capacity through inclusion and participation; which could bear “the potential of greatly improving the accountability of both government and market” (Harriss, 2007, p.3). This manifestation of governance and empowerment, therefore, is closely related to the scholarship about what may be described as ‘new politics’ and is built up around civil society based voluntary organizations rather than political parties. Harriss further points out that civil society offers a ‘new politics’ that is seen to be more participatory than its counterpart i.e., representative democracy, by addressing directly the needs and interests of participating citizenry. This is one of the reasons for the increasing popularity of ‘new politics’ of this kind as ‘old politics’ or representative democracy is considered to have failed in addressing many social problems and providing solutions for it. In 2000, the Delhi government through the Bhagidari programme initiative sought to institutionalize citizen participation in local governance. Unlike previous popular forms of participatory governance that targeted the working class and urban poor, the Bhagidari scheme was based on the aspects of legality and property ownership and thus restricted to the middle-class parts of the city. The Bhagidari programme sought to institutionalize citizen participation in governance by involving neighborhood associations in local level decision-making. The aim of Bhagidari (meaning ‘collaborative partnership’ in Hindi) was to provide a collective forum for government agencies and citizen groups to solve problems and manage public assets. It was expected that this exercise would empower citizens and develop their sense of ownership over government programmes. Importantly, Bhagidari brought RWA members from middle-class neighborhoods and local political representatives to the same forum. Bhagidari workshops and meetings organized by the government of Delhi, particularly in the initial years of the programme, facilitated this process. The purpose of these workshops was to initiate dialogue and joint problem solving among key stakeholders: RWAs, officials from government agencies and political representatives. The institution of administrative mechanisms for better communication between RWAs and government agencies resulted from the workshops.

The Bhagidari scheme is important to analyze and becomes pertinent for our understanding because it has been celebrated as a benchmark in the urban governance of Indian cities. The media, government and high-level administrative officials have lauded this citizen-government participation programme, justifying it for reducing corruption and inefficiency while increasing citizen initiative and transparency. It was also deemed to be one of the key achievements of the Congress-led Delhi government. The scheme was awarded the UN Public Service Award in the year 2005. It was based on the notion of a caring state which actively links its citizens, who occupy legally designated neighborhoods, to various government agencies. The scheme has become a blueprint to be implemented in various other cities for rooting out corruption and vote bank politics. Which, however, is just a platform for expressing the “contemporary consciousness of the official city, which demonstrates the relationship between the state, market and ‘authorised’ and ‘unauthorised’ spaces, linking it to the visions of a metropolis based on global aspirations and urban planning” (Srivastava, 2015, p.110). This implies, rather, that the citizenship initiative also brings to fore mechanisms of exclusions based on legality.

Apart from being a state-backed scheme to institutionalize citizen participation in governance matters, Bhagidari is an interesting case study for the unintended consequences it had vis-a-vis consolidation of RWAs into umbrella bodies. The sphere of influence of RWAs until a few years back was restricted to the boundaries of their neighborhoods. But what followed was an extension of these boundaries to the realm of the city through the development of horizontal networks with other RWAs. RWAs from all over Delhi organized, and became one of the principal ‘voice’ of the citizens in the media and public policy discourse. The Delhi Residents Welfare Association Joint Front was formed in 2003 in response to

changes in government regulation relating to cable television technology in the city (Chakrabarti 2007). The public discontentment against this was high and this matter was discussed in a Bhagidari meeting held then. This led to some RWAs of South Delhi coming together to form a coalition of sorts since they considered that it would be easier to bargain with government agencies as one group rather than as disjointed voices. Today it is one of the major RWA umbrella organizations in the city along with URJA (United RWAs Joint Action).

### **UMBRELLA RWA ORGANISATIONS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS: A CASE STUDY**

The sphere of influence of RWAs until a few years back was restricted to the boundaries of their neighborhoods. But as a result of participating in the Bhagidari scheme what followed was a development of horizontal networks with other RWAs. RWAs from all over Delhi organized themselves into umbrella bodies mobilizing diverse neighborhood associations into one body. The formation of RWA umbrella organizations resulted in the extension of the influence of RWAs from just their neighborhoods to encompass the realm of the city. These umbrella bodies like Joint Front, URJA and Citizens Alliance (discussed subsequently) have become one of the principal 'voice' of the citizens in the media and public policy discourse. One of the most important reasons behind the success of protests organized by these umbrella organizations has been the use of media, both electronic and print, which has been used to draw the attention of the people and the government.

One such case is that of Citizens Alliance, an organization of the resident welfare associations (RWAs) of Alaknanda, Greater Kailash II, and Chittaranjan Park to protest against the proposed construction of a mall in the middle of a residential neighborhood of Alaknanda in Delhi. This plot of land earlier housed a JJ cluster which was demolished by government agencies. The residents alleged that the DDA had proposed to build a sports complex and develop other community facilities on this 3.7-acre plot of land. However, in 2007 the DDA auctioned off this land to Reliance Industries for Rs 304 crore to build a massive 7,30,000 square foot mall, touted to be one of the biggest malls in South Delhi. Over 40 RWAs joined in to protest against the proposed mall. The first protest rally organized by the collective was attended by over a 1000 residents, which they considered a feat considering that the middle class is usually deemed as traditionally apolitical. Several large hoardings were also put up at strategic points of the participating neighborhoods denouncing the mall with the slogan "Say No to Alaknanda Mall". Elaborate pamphlets explaining the problem at hand were distributed to residents of the participating RWAs to create awareness. This issue was also tackled legally as the matter was also taken to the High Court in 2012 and several Public Interest Litigations were also filed by the organization. One way in which it was also able to mobilize mass support for the protest was through the media. It was widely covered in the print media which called it the first such "organized urban upper-middle-class protest" (Polanki 2014). The residents represented their concerns under the categories of security, ecological, health, and lifestyle threats. The President of the alliance even stated that the mall represented "a callous disregard for the public interest". Residents complained that the mall would destroy the peace and tranquility of the neighborhood and add to the traffic woes of the area leading to huge traffic jams. Furthermore, the mall would overburden the existing civic infrastructure and cause problems for the residents. Following massive protests by the residents Reliance Industries has decided to follow a 'wait and watch' policy and stall the construction of the mall.

## **NEW FORM OF ACCESSING THE STATE: MOHALLA SABHA**

With the coming of the AAP government in Delhi, it attempted to change the perceived elitist hegemony and pro middle-class dimension of Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) by the introducing the participatory governance scheme of Mohalla Sabha (referred henceforth as MS) in the city. The rise of AAP in Delhi in itself constitutes an interesting phenomenon since it started off as a neo-civil society entity that rallied against widespread corruption and demanded governance reforms in the form of Jan Lokpal and later metamorphosed into a political party. In fact, the implementation of the MS scheme was one of the headline reforms during their election campaign. Hailed as a neo-Gandhian project it seeks to improve upon the Bhagidari scheme and the format of RWAs by including a wider base for participation. Since the former included only those who were homeowners and not tenants, MS seeks to include eligible electoral voters in its framework. The scheme envisages Mohalla Sabhas to be constituted on a territorial basis. Using GIS each municipal ward will be divided into 10 parts each being called a Mohalla. Therefore, each assembly constituency of Delhi has been divided into 40-50 Mohallas. The members of these mohallas would be registered and eligible voters and would approximately be constituted of 4000 voters each. Before every scheduled meeting members would be intimated with a written notice and through text messages (SMS). The MLA or the councilor would preside over the meeting and would ensure the participation of officials from government agencies so that MS members can directly voice their grievances and receive remedies for it. Through Mohalla meetings, citizens can propose, discuss and decide to carry out basic or urgent works for the development of their own mohalla. Each Mohalla will get funds under the Citizen Local Area Development (Citizen-LAD) scheme to carry out these works. It was also proposed that MS would also have the authority of checking the progress of development work undertaken and if unsatisfied would withhold money from the contractor. However, during my fieldwork, many RWA office bearers complained that the scheme of MS hadn't really been implemented properly and no sabhas had been organized. During the initial months of coming into power the AAP government had organized a few sabhas, however, MLAs complained that people often didn't turn up for these events. One such resident that I interviewed stated that initially there were many hoardings and banners put up everywhere in Delhi advertising the concept of MS. He would even get regular updates and invitations on Facebook and phone messages to attend these sabhas. However, after the initial enthusiasm surrounding this scheme the interest in it has petered down, he complained. There have been reports of how funds allocated for MS have not been utilized and have lapsed as a result.

## **RIGHT TO THE CITY**

The economic reforms of the early 1990s and the transformations it established in the political economy and society of the country set the contextual framework for this paper. This paper has attempted to provide a framework for understanding the relationship between middle-class activism illustrated by the rise in neighborhood associations, and its relationship with local governance and politics using the case of Delhi. Delhi makes for an interesting study not only because it embodies the larger socio-economic changes that are transforming urban India but also because of radical changes that have been instituted in the governance of the city in an effort to make it more responsive to citizens through participatory schemes such as Bhagidari and Mohalla Sabhas. This paper also illustrates how middle-class activism also redefines the idea of citizenship in the contemporary city through the invocation of legal citizenship and mobilization of aesthetics and ecological concerns.

As David Harvey (2008) points out the contemporary far-reaching “expansion of the urban process has brought with it incredible transformations of lifestyle. Quality of urban life has become a commodity, as has the city itself, in a world where consumerism, tourism, cultural and knowledge-based industries have become major aspects of the urban political economy” (Harvey, 2008, p.8). However, neoliberal principles have gone beyond guiding corporate tendencies, they have become emblematic of humans based on profound individualism, identity stemming from consumption of commodities, political aloofness, and apathy. The propertied class has become so anxious about defending the value of its possession that resident associations have proliferated the city. These associations in the city become sites of political activity and collective action based on the identity of being home-owners. These trends of neoliberal principles entering the narrative of urban development have led to many scholars questioning if the very idea of democracy in the city is under threat or not? Questions of how urban residents have been disenfranchised of the political status as a result the economic and political consequences of urbanization are increasingly being asked. Mark Purcell (2002) argues that the idea of the right to the city establishes a possibility of creating a space for political participation and negotiation to counter the threats of disenfranchisement of the urban dwellers offering a distinct potential to a new urban politics which can empower those who live in the city.

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