1-2017

# Contesting urban citizenship: The urban poor's strategies of state engagement in Chennai, India

Subadevan Mahadevan

Ijlal NAQVI
*Singapore Management University*, ijlalnaqvi@smu.edu.sg

Subadevan and Ijlal Naqvi

**Title**

Contesting Urban Citizenship: The Urban Poor's Strategies of State Engagement in Chennai, India

**Abstract**

Existing accounts of how the urban poor in the global south engage with the state fall short on two fronts. Firstly, the literature lacks an overarching framework articulating the urban poor's strategies for engaging the state. Secondly, these accounts typically capture singular instances of state engagement pursued by the urban poor and theorise on that basis. Using Partha Chatterjee's distinction between civil and political society as our theoretical point of departure, we draw on ethnographic evidence from Chennai's informal settlements to demonstrate how and when the urban poor deploy different strategies of state engagement to advance their claims to urban citizenship. We do this by proposing a typology that relates the seemingly distinct strategies of claims making for urban citizenship to each other, and identifying a trajectory of change for strategies deployed in the Indian metropolis of Chennai.

**Introduction**

Urban citizenship, or the lack thereof, has a material character manifested in access to land, infrastructure, and basic services (Anand 2012, Benjamin 2008, Kooy and Bakker 2008, McFarlane and Rutherford 2008, Das 2011, Harvey 2008). Objects such as electricity meters, water connections, toilets, and documents certifying property ownership 'become material embodiments of the right to dwelling' (Das 2011: 327). This competition over scarce resources divides rich and poor. While the urban poor claim urban citizenship through access to land tenure and basic services, the upper and middle-income residents of the city seek to prevent this to extend their claim to spaces of lesiure, cleanliness, and order (Ghertner 2012). These attempts often threaten the existence of the urban poor, with slum eviction drives often the result (Fernandez 2004, Fernandez and Heller 2006).

The urban poor wage their claims to space and resources from a disadvantaged position as 'citizens without a city' (Appadurai, 2001: 27), viewed by state authorities as illegal squatters. The disadvantaged position from which the urban poor seek to attain urban citizenship is captured succinctly in Partha Chatterjee's (2004) theoretical distinction between civil and political society. Criticizing the permissiveness with which scholars have expanded the idea of civil society, Chatterjee characterizes civil society as bourgeois, consisting of urban elites with settled claims on property, and by extension, urban citizenship. The urban poor instead occupy what Chatterjee terms 'political

society': 'a site of negotiation and contestation opened up by the activities of governmental agencies aimed at population groups', who are 'only tenuously rights bearing citizens' and therefore a 'population' for the state to govern (Chatterjee 2004: 74, 38). Without settled claims on property, the urban poor are forced to operate in the realm of paralegality, an ambiguous sphere outside the bounds of formal codified rules and procedures.

As with all powerful paradigms, Chatterjee's theoretical distinction between civil and political society has been critiqued for its bluntness. One major critique of Chatterjee is to highlight the pervasiveness of informality in the global South's cities (Baviskar and Sundar 2008, Roy 2009), with the urban middle classes also engaged in informal practices such as exploiting legal loopholes and subverting the law to access land and basic services (Ranganathan 2014b, Truelove and Mawdsley 2011, Naqvi forthcoming).

Indeed, informal practices are used as much by the rich as the poor. Yet, Chatterjee's theoretical formulation remains relevant for approximating the tenuous terrain upon and the purpose with which the urban poor operate to seek their ends. Urban elites, when using informal or paralegal means, do so from a stronger position of having attained urban citizenship through settled claims on property. The urban poor, however, negotiate with the state from a position of disadvantage, seeking to secure urban citizenship that they do not already have. This also affects the ease with which the urban poor can access the state and its functionaries. While urban elites are engaged by authorities as key stakeholders in the making of new 'world class' cities through public consultation exercises, such avenues are often unavailable to the urban poor (Ellis 2012, Raman 2013, Weinstein 2014). Lacking access to 'invited' spaces of participation made available by the state, the urban poor often have to resort to creating 'invented' spaces of participation (Miraftab 2006, Cornwall 2002) to engage the state to seek concessions and extend their claims to urban citizenship.

This paper examines how the urban poor operate in the realm of Chatterjee's political society by deploying strategies of state engagement to seek concessions and extend their claims to urban citizenship. It seeks to extend the understanding of Chatterjee's political society as a strategic space within which the urban poor deploy multiple strategies of state engagement in response to context, temporality, and access to material and symbolic resources. The existing literature on urban contestations presents multiple strategies of state engagement, but usually presents one such strategy at a time. We develop a typology to better analyse these strategies' key characteristics, their relationship to one another, and when they are deployed.

**Strategies of Engagement**

Chatterjee does not systematically lay out the methods used by the urban poor to claim urban citizenship in *The Politics of The Governed*. Yet, in his primary example, Chatterjee describes the residents of Gobindapur Railway Colony 1 (an informal settlement in Calcutta) as having transitioned from protesting against attempted evictions to collectively negotiating electricity connections through a local residential welfare association. Although Chatterjee does not elaborate the conditions that gave rise to these different forms of engagement and their underlying characteristics, his example indicates how the forms of state engagement used by the urban poor evolve over time.

The existing literature on state engagement practiced by the urban poor reveals a variety of methods exploiting the pluralistic, multi-faceted, and fissured state apparatus (Ranganathan 2014a). Protests and other forms of mass-agitations often associated with the urban poor (Harriss 2006) feature as the most prominent form of state engagement, usually as options of last resort. Benjamin's (2008) 'occupancy urbanism', Bayat's (1997b) 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary', and Rao's (2013) 'tolerated encroachment' all show how the urban poor exploit bureaucratic slippages and connections in a more subtle form of state engagement. Similarly, Das (2011) and Jha et al. (2007) elaborate how local politicians serve as alternative democratic conduits for the urban poor to seek concessions from the state. On occasion, the urban poor eschew the politics of cooperation for more direct means of confrontation challenging the existing regime of citizenship. For instance, Appadurai (2001) and Kumar et al. (2014) demonstrate how the urban poor challenge governmentality from below through legitimation practices such as self-enumeration surveys, and the drafting of alternative maps articulating customary rights to the commons. Further, the use of middle class forms of associationalism and symbolism are sometimes appropriated by the urban poor when engaging the state to realise ends that are 'framed less as political demands than as rights activated by authorized and documented allotments of urban "property"' (Coelho and Venkat, 2009: 359).

The examples above, mainly drawn from India, articulate the various approaches the urban poor use in trying to attain urban citizenship but leave unanswered questions of why and when the urban poor use particular strategies of state engagement. Answering these questions requires a framework that identifies similarities and differences between the various strategies by analysing their key characteristics. Further, understanding how the use of these strategies form part of a strategic calculus responsive to temporality and context requires moving beyond one-

off representations of such strategies. We present a typology capturing the various strategies of state engagement used by the urban poor in which strategies take one of four forms: informal-antagonistic; informal-transactional; formal-antagonistic; or formal-transactional.

[Insert figure 1 about here]

The first dimension of the typology distinguishes strategies of engagement as being formal or informal. Here, formality and informality are analysed as practices rather than territorial or organizational categorizations. This does not render the latter two categories irrelevant, for they affect the extent to which particular types of strategies can be deployed, especially for the urban poor. Thus, for instance, the urban poor, based on their categorization as unlawful squatters, still can access formal strategies of engagement, albeit with some difficulty. The analysis of informality and formality as forms of practice also acknowledges that formality and informality are not benign categorizations but instead reflections of dominant interests, with flagrant violations of law by urban elites downplayed and the transgressions of the urban poor amplified (Roy 2009, Truelove and Mawdsley 2011, Ranganathan 2014b).

In our formulation, formal practices refer to one of two things. The first definition refers to practices conforming to existing bureaucratic logics. This refers to bureaucratic practices defined by the state through law or policy as appropriate means by which to engage state institutions and actors. These include the filing of a Right to Information request (RTI), the filing of a court case, the writing of official letters and petitions, the paying of utility charges and the use of methods that are deemed by the state to be legitimate means of knowledge production and categorization (e.g. the conduct of surveys or drafting of maps using methods that would be accepted by the state).

The second refers to the use of practices that are deemed visually, socially, and spatially legitimate in the eyes of the state. Such practices include attempts to engage the state through organizational forms such as Residential Welfare Associations (RWAs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the use of symbolic practices within such organizations (e.g. the affixing of organizational seals on letters sent to state agencies). While RWAs and NGOs are forms of civil society organizations, the use of these platforms and their symbols by urban poor groups constitutes a form of practice that seeks to elicit notions of stateliness and formality (Lund 2006) Conversely, informal practices are a residual category of practices that do not conform to existing

bureaucratic logics or that attempt to engage the state via organizational forms and platforms viewed as illegitimate by the state.

Our definition of formality and informality places significant authority in the hands of the state to define what is formal and informal. This is intentional, for existing examples in India reveal the state's manipulation of the categories of formal and informal as tools of governmentality to advance its developmental agendas (Björkman 2014, Ghertner 2008, Roy 2009). Formality and informality remain negotiable practices that can occasionally be challenged from below (Appadurai 2001). Yet, the balance of power tilts largely towards the state, whose institutions and concomitant practices are aimed at maintaining an existing social and political order (Mitchell 1991).

The second dimension of our framework views practices as being either antagonistic or transactional. Antagonistic practices are those that overtly challenge the state's authority and the existing status quo. Such measures include, for instance, the holding of protests, filing of court cases, and the usage of surveys and maps that challenge the state's existing classifications and enumerations. Transactional practices on the other hand, do not overtly challenge the state's authority and the existing status quo. The status quo is instead amended through collaborative relationships and incremental, calculated steps negotiated with the state and its representatives. Such measures include for instance, seeking concessions from politicians or state bureaucrats and engaging in collaborative discussions through organizations such as NGOs and RWAs. The following section will further elaborate on the four types of strategies contained in the framework using ethnographic evidence.

**An ethnography of forms of state engagement**

We draw primarily on ethnographic evidence from two informal settlements in the South Indian city of Chennai to outline and elaborate upon the dimensions of the proposed framework. The evidence presented in this section draws on direct observations and semi-structured interviews conducted in these two informal settlements, as well as interviews with elected municipal government representatives[2], local political actors and community leaders/representatives, representatives of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), and current and retired government officials. In total, 70 individuals were interviewed. The ethnographic methodology used in this

---

[2] We actually interviewed the husbands of elected municipal representatives who performed the responsibilities of the elected municipal councilor. Their wives had stood on their behalf due to electoral quotas that designated certain seats for women.

study is the extended case method (Burawoy 1998). Our inquiry into the strategies of state engagement in Chennai is based on and seeks to reconstruct existing theories – especially those developed with an empirical foundation in urban India.

Drawing on five months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2015, we identify the use of strategies of engagement belonging to each of the categories presented in our framework. The informal settlements that formed our field sites, Anjaneyar Nagar and Service Colony, [3] are located in central Chennai, on one bank of the Buckingham canal, an inland waterway cutting through much of the city. The opposite bank of the canal, previously housing other informal settlements, holds the tracks of the Chennai Metropolitan Railway system. Having existed for over 70 years and evaded multiple state attempts at eviction, these two neighbouring communities have achieved relative success in preserving their livelihoods amidst state attempts to rid the city of informal settlements, having incrementally upgraded their houses from straw huts to concrete buildings and gained access to basic urban services such as water, sanitation, and electricity. Their relative longevity and success also marks them as prime sites for understanding the multiple strategies of state engagement used by the urban poor to resist eviction and access urban citizenship.

## 1) Informal-Antagonistic strategies

Informal-antagonistic strategies of engagement represent the most overt of strategies used by the urban poor to engage the state, often in the face of sudden state eviction attempts. These strategies are used when other material and/or symbolic resources are unavailable, thus often being the primary strategy used by newly formed settlements. Having newly occupied land with nothing but their huts, and bereft of cement houses or electrical and water connections that act to signify rightful occupancy, new inhabitants of informal settlements are especially vulnerable to threats of eviction. A lack of alternatives means that protests and mass agitations often serve as the only available resistance strategy.

Older residents recounted the early days in both communities as characterized by constant efforts to resist multiple eviction attempts. The use of protests and mass agitations featured heavily - the early residents of Anjenayar Nagar in particular, remembered with considerable detail and excitement how their then leader and

---

[3] The names of the settlements Anjenayar Nagar and Service Colony, as well as the names of their residents are alibis. The real names of the settlements and residents have not been used to protect informants' identities.

organizer Eesan had mobilized them for multiple protests and hunger strikes. Over time, however, protests were replaced by other less overt and antagonistic methods of state engagement.

This did not mean that use of protests and other antagonistic forms of state engagement had completely evaporated. The residents of Service Colony had resorted to protests on several occasions in order to force the state to restore one of the non-functioning public toilets in the community and to advance their case for the granting of *pattas* (land titles indicating legal ownership of land) aided by a local political activist from the Communist Party of India (Marxist). An interview with Ramu, a local political activist who had aided Eesan in early attempts to secure *pattas* for Anjenayar Nagar's residents helped clarify the logic behind the use of protests as a state engagement strategy. Noting his affiliation to the Dravidian Munnezha Kazhagam (DMK), one of the two main political parties in Tamil Nadu, Subadevan had asked him what he would do if the state threatened imminent eviction to the community's residents as it had done in the past. Ramu reminisced back to when a similar threat had materialized a few years back while the DMK was in power, with the exchange below resulting:

> Ramu (R) if they do, but they won't do. That time they said they would evict, we brought the RA 2... Subadevan: area surveyor? R ah yes, and had a meeting here only, at the temple at Anjaneyar Nagar, then we went to Sindarapet (?) to go and see the party leaders ... But if they do threaten to take away, whoever is in the government, we will put aside our party affiliations and fight it. We will put a big protest at the beach. We have already talked about it. Some people have even told me that they are ready to give up their lives. I told them no need to think about it now. We will discuss if they do something like that.
>
> (Field Note, 04 January 2015)

In addition to clarifying his primary loyalty to the community, Ramu's response clarified the use of protests as trumps to be used when other strategies of state engagement were not tenable and the threat of eviction imminent.

Ramu's account also corresponds with recent accounts of state eviction attempts in Chennai. A few months after we completed our fieldwork, there were renewed state attempts at evicting informal settlements along the Marina Beach loop (Yamunan 2015). Residents of the fishing communities occupying this stretch of the beach responded with intensive protests that eventually thwarted the threat of eviction. The use of protests as a strategy however, was a marked move away from the usual methods of mapping and legal challenges that fishing communities across Chennai had deployed to engage the state in recent memory (Kumar et al. 2014).

These accounts serve to demonstrate the essential characteristics of informal-antagonistic state engagement strategies. Firstly, these are informal strategies of state engagement as they take place outside the parameters of legitimate practices as defined by the state. Secondly, they are antagonistic as they openly contest the state's authority and the existing status quo. By choosing to protest, sit in, or go on a hunger strike, the urban poor are contesting the state's view that they are illegally occupying land, and asserting their right to stay put. Finally, these are last resort options, used in the absence of other material or symbolic resources to mobilise. This makes the use of protests most viable when the urban poor initially occupy land, and when the threat of eviction is imminent.

### 2) Informal-Transactional Strategies

Our interview with Ramu in addition to elucidating the nature of the use of protests as a strategy of state engagement, also threw light on less overt strategies of informal state engagement. In particular, Ramu highlighted interactions with government bureaucrats and politicians as essential to seeking concessions for the community. These state actors operate within a formal governance framework that is fissured and multi-faceted, often providing the opportunity for the employment of informal-transactional strategies such as party affiliation, bureaucratic infiltration, and negotiation with various state actors over the use of space.

Forming alliances with political parties in power in order to gain concessions with the state has been identified in various other contexts as significant in determining whom the urban poor select as their community leaders cum organizers (Jha et al. 2007, Das 2011). As the exchange with Ramu indicates, the formation of party affiliations serves an instrumental purpose. While their personal interests might well be served by belonging to a political party, party affiliates in informal settlements devote considerable time and energy to using their political connections to serve the interests of the members of the community that they belong to. Ramu elaborated:

> Why I joined means I wanted to do good for the people, water problem, getting *patta*, so if I go as one person, I would not be able to get anything done, but if I am in the party, I can call the *vattach seyallalar* [Tehsildar/Revenue Collector] and tell and they will do, they will tell the Maavata Seyallalar [District Collector] to do something, so that is why I joined.

> (Field Note, 04 January 2015)

Ramu's explanation for his decision to join a political party was also corroborated by several community leaders and organizers in Service Colony who had come together to attempt to hold local elections for the next batch of local community leaders and organisers despite hailing from different political parties. 'Politics second, friendships first' (Field Note, 14 July 2014), said Sundaram, one of the organisers of the local elections, emphasising the primacy of personal relationships.

These community leaders and organisers also took to infiltrating the many levels of state bureaucracy in addition to seeking affiliation with political parties, using tactics that resemble what Benjamin and Bhuvaneswari (2006: 222) term the 'politics of stealth' used to infiltrate the 'porous bureaucracy'. Lower and middle level bureaucracies provide opportunities for community leaders and organizers in these informal settlements to gain concessions from the state by interacting and negotiating with state bureaucrats. Community leaders and organizers often approach various governmental departments and parastatal bodies in an attempt to seek concessions from various alternative sources of state authority by exploiting fissures in the state apparatus. The use of this strategy of bureaucratic infiltration also serves to exploit the arbitrariness of bureaucratic action, a by-product of the institutional weaknesses and overtly complex procedures that characterize bureaucracy in India and much of the rest of the global south (Gupta 2012).

The apparent arbitrariness of bureaucratic action, however, hides a transactional logic that is hidden from those who do not frequent bureaucracies. Residents of informal settlements, while cognizant of the need to engage with bureaucrats in order to gain concessions or attempt to claim the status of rightful citizen, spoke of bureaucratic procedures in abstract terms, such as the filing of a petition or the writing of a letter. Locally appointed community representatives/leaders were the ones tasked with the responsibility of deriving the appropriate methods by which concessions could be gained from bureaucrats in lower and middle level bureaucracies. This required these community representatives to actively attempt to understand the nature of informal bureaucratic practices and form close relationships with government bureaucrats so that they might possibly grant them concessions from undertaking onerous bureaucratic procedures in the future. The forming of these relationships is difficult, requiring sustained effort on account of the negative perceptions generally held by bureaucrats towards the urban poor (Coelho 2005, Anand 2012).

The importance of these relationships was evidenced in Vikram's visit to the *Tehsildar*'s (Revenue Inspector) office. Vikram, a 22-year old resident of Anjenayar

Nagar, sought to go to the office in order to secure an income certificate that would aid his brother's scholarship application by showing proof of familial financial difficulty and allowed Subadevan to accompany him on his visit. While local bureaucratic procedures can be bewildering. Vikram seemed well equipped to navigate bureaucratic channels on account of his relatively high level of education, at that time pursuing a master's degree in Criminology.

Yet, Vikram's sense of frustration and confusion soon became apparent. First, Vikram was almost immediately derailed from his mission, being told that he needed to book another appointment and bring along a missing required document. Luckily, Vikram was able to secure a concession to proceed with the application. What followed, however, was an incredibly frustrating process of trying to locate the Revenue Inspector (the RI2), involving visits to multiple offices based on contradictory information provided by various bureaucrats. Eventually he found out that she would not be present during visitation hours from a non-descript note stuck outside the office. Frustrated, Vikram muttered 'you go here, they will say go there, you go there, they say you come here'. Subadevan enquired 'no system?', to which Vikram gave an ironic laugh and replied 'no, that is bureaucracy here' (Field Note, 26 December 2014).

Vikram's visit to the *Tehsildar* office highlights the important role played by local community leaders and representatives in addressing the various issues faced by the residents of informal settlements by understanding bureaucratic procedures and forming relationships with lower and middle level government bureaucrats. Vikram's relatively high level of education was not helpful in enabling him to decode informal bureaucratic procedures and secure accurate information from his interactions with bureaucrats. What was required was a different type of knowledge – an intimate understanding of bureaucratic procedures, something Vikram did not possess.

'No, not educated, but he had this' (Field Note, 19 December 2014), said Rajendran, pointing to his head, when asked whether Anjenyar Nagar's former leader Eesan benefitted from being well educated in advancing Anjenayar Nagar's residents attempts to secure basic services and land ownership. The 'this' Rajendran referred to can be understood as being streetwise in the sense of having an intimate knowledge of various bureaucracies, their procedures, and the relevant actors to approach within these organisations. The importance of having streetwise community leaders and organisers is reflected in Service Colony's attempts to rejuvenate local community leadership with younger men who would have the time and energy to traverse various government bureaucracies, form relationships with bureaucrats, and decode various bureaucratic practices.

Informal-transactional strategies thus have three main characteristics. Firstly, they require the use of informal procedures to circumvent or access formal requirements by affiliating and negotiating with state actors such as politicians and government bureaucrats. These are informal actions as the channels through which such affiliations and negotiations take place occur outside of bureaucratic logics defined by law and policy as the proper means by which to engage state institutions and representatives. Secondly, they are transactional rather than antagonistic. Community representatives do not attempt to challenge their community's status as non-citizens under the rubric of urban citizenship. Instead, they attempt to gain concessions for their communities from lower and middle level bureaucrats and politicians. Transactional strategies of engagement also result in gains for these bureaucrats and politicians. These strategies are transactional as the extension of concessions allows bureaucrats and politicians to maintain the existing status quo without dealing with protests and other antagonistic confrontations that may be initiated by the urban poor. Politicians further gain by securing electoral support for elections. Lastly, these forms of state engagement are pursued when the threat of eviction is not imminent; often some time after the occupancy of an informal settlement is established as this long-drawn strategy to gain concessions through building alliances requires community leaders/representatives to invest significant amounts of time and energy.

### 3) Formal-Antagonistic Strategies

Formal-antagonistic forms of state engagement are defined by two main characteristics. Firstly, they are formal as they utilize practices of state engagement recognized by the state as being legitimate. Secondly, they are antagonistic as they seek to challenge the existing status quo. By using these strategies of state engagement, the urban poor seek to contest their status as non-citizens under the existing rubric of urban citizenship. We term such strategies as attempts at formalising the informal.

The installation of utilities such as water connections in particular, serves the purpose of formalising the informal by generating utility charges. The generation of these utility charges forces the state to recognize residents of informal settlements as formal paying customers of the state and long-term occupiers of the land. These charges can be used in the long run to establish de-facto tenure and a claim to ownership based on extended occupation of land. Employing informal-transactional strategies to engage with the state and its actors, local community leaders of these slum communities are able to influence the state to extend the delivery of basic services such as water connections that slum residents have no legal right to. The extension of these utilities

then generates utility charges which serve to document a formal relationship with the state. A letter dated to 1987 collectively addressed to the Prime Minister by local community leaders from Service Colony, Anjenayar Nagar, and other informal settlements nearby characterises the importance of the establishing of these utility connections:

> We, the undersigned 20 subjects of our esteemed country have been living since 1932 in the piece of land having survey No. R.S. 971/1 we have been paying house tax, land tax etc. till 1970. Our petition to District Collector was considered and boundary was laid. Besides basic facilities were also provided.
>
> (Letter, January 03, 1987)

The extract above shows how the establishment of basic utilities (facilities) is used as an indicator of long-term and rightful occupancy of land.

More significantly, the establishment of these basic utilities provides leverage for the urban poor to contest the state for formal recognition of land occupancy. This same formal relationship through the generation of utility charges had been used to engage the state differently in both Anjenayar Nagar and Service Colony. Eesan, the deceased former leader of Anjenayar Nagar had taken to encouraging residents to settle utility charges promptly, even going to the extent of drafting a makeshift water consumption sheet for Anjenayar Nagar's residents to track how much water they had consumed monthly. In Service Colony, however, local community representatives encouraged their residents to leave water utility charges unpaid. Cognisant of the potential negative publicity for municipal officials from cutting off the supply of utilities to disenfranchised groups on grounds of their inability to pay, local leaders were adamant that residents of the community would only pay outstanding utility charges if they were granted land tenure.

Local community leaders of these two communities also took to using the formal bureaucratic channels to coerce the state into recognizing their long-term and rightful ownership of land. For instance, twenty years ago Eesan had filed a stay order against continued attempts by the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB) to evict Anjenayar Nagar's residents. While this did not in itself grant them land tenure, current residents of Anjenayar Nagar could not be summarily evicted as the TNSCB had to wait for a resolution to the case.

Thus, formal-antagonistic forms of state engagement are defined by their use of formal procedures to challenge existing classifications of urban citizenship. By

generating utility charges, communities force the state to engage with them on the basis of their status as consumers of services provided by the state. In providing utilities, the state has entered into a formal relationship with the residents of informal settlements – that of service provider and consumer – as a result of past bargaining and pressure. This status is then used by residents to negotiate with the state through this formalised procedure. Similarly, the filing of a stay order in the courses also forces the state to enter a formal relationship with such settlements through the form of a legal challenge. Both examples are also antagonistic, for they are designed to challenge the state's existing classification of slum residents as illegal occupiers of land. A degree of judicial independence from social and political structures is an important enabler of these strategies.

### 4) Formal-Transactional Strategies

Formal-transactional strategies refer to the last category of strategic methods used by the urban poor to engage with the state and its actors. These forms of engagement are formal as they use methods of engagement viewed by the state as being legitimate. Secondly, they are transactional as the actions within are collaborative and do not aggressively disrupt the existing status quo. These forms of state engagement are characterised by actions that use accepted forms of organizations, such as RWAs and NGOs as platforms to engage with the state through recognized procedures. When used by the urban poor, these forms of engagement mimic civil society. This strategy of mimicking civil society entails the use of symbolic markers by local community organizations in informal settlements to denote legitimacy and public authority on par with civil society organizations and the state (Lund 2006). This strategy had been used to considerable success in Anjenayar Nagar over the last two decades and was being tried out in Service Colony.

Eesan had undertaken efforts in the 1960s itself to form a local community organization. Named the Tamil Nadu Scheduled Caste Sangam, it was a registered society, thus giving this informal mode of local organization an air of formality. More significantly, however, it had its own seal that was affixed to correspondences sent to state departments and their officials. The formulation and employment of this seal is symbolically significant, enabling the local community organization to claim legitimacy and authority equal to civil society organizations and state entities.

From Eesan's personal archive we learnt that local community organizations in other adjacent slum communities had resorted to employing such symbolic practices, each possessing their own seal and adopting other symbolic markers of legitimacy and

authority. For instance, the signatory to the letter to the Prime Minister described above – a local community leader – marked under his name that he was the president of the local community organization. Rather than indicating any recognized authority, this title was a symbolic indicator of the formal status to which the organization aspired.

This strategy of mimicking civil society echoes the findings of Coelho and Venkat (2009) in their study of Chennai's RWAs, a typically middle class form of association belonging to civil society. Finding that the urban poor had taken to appropriating typically middle class forms of association and organization and that the urban middle class were tied much more closely to formal politics than contemporary accounts would suggest, Coelho and Venkat conclude that there are significant overlaps between Chatterjee's civil and political society, with the analytical distinctions between both largely overplayed.

Chatterjee, however, is careful to clarify that organizations operating in political society are not akin to civil society organizations although they might seem outwardly similar. Chatterjee documents how Anadi Bera, the chief organizer of the slum community he uses as case study to illustrate the concept of political society, successfully formed a People's Welfare Organization (PWO) similar in character to an RWA. For Chatterjee, institutions such as Bera's PWO differ from civil society organizations due to the different contexts they operate from. Organizations such as Bera's PWO operate from a more precarious site of negotiation and contestation on account of having originated from 'a collective violation of property laws and civic regulations' (p. 59). These organizations thus seek to mimic civil societal forms of organization and activism in order to evoke a sense of legitimacy and authority on par with that granted to civil society organizations by the state.

Local community leaders and organizers also took to a separate practice that denotes the second form of formal-transactional strategies – that of using formal bureaucratic channels to engage with the state and its actors. Thus, for instance, local community leaders and organizers would send registered mails to all possible relevant departments when attempting to pursue a course of action in the interests of the community. The use of registered mail ensured that these local community leaders would get acknowledgement of the receipt of these letters by the relevant bureaucrats, creating a repository of previous actions undertaken to engage various state actors and ensure that courses of action sought by the community were being furthered through the proper bureaucratic channels. The use of this strategy in particular, often served as a complement to informal means of engaging state bureaucrats.

Our analyses of formal-transactional strategies thus reveal two main characteristics. Firstly, they seek to either evoke a sense of legitimacy on par with the state and civil society organizations and/or use formal bureaucratic channels to engage with the state and its actors. Secondly, these forms of state engagement are transactional, seeking to evoke the notion of co-operation and collaboration instead of openly challenging the state.

**Integrating the literature**

Having used ethnographic evidence to outline the framework by which we use to analyse the various forms of state engagement used by the urban poor, we now attempt to integrate existing accounts of state engagement from prior scholarship into our framework. In doing so, we also decode an approximate temporal logic to the strategies deployed in our field sites, evolving as they transitioned from the precariousness of early existence in political society to a relatively more stable existence where they attempt to cross over to the realm of civil society.

Protests are the most overt and visible strategy of state engagement practiced by the urban poor (Harriss 2006) The use of protests, hunger strikes and other forms of mass agitations falls into the first category of informal-antagonistic methods of state engagement. Often being options of the last resort, this method of engagement is deployed when a community first tries to establish itself, lacking other symbolic or material resources to deploy. This method of state engagement also manifests when sudden threats of eviction arise and urgent action is necessary to stymie these eviction threats. The use of protests and other antagonistic methods of state engagement, however, is less favoured when a community becomes more established – meaning it has secured a foothold in the area that it occupied, built up a more permanent presence, and is less vulnerable to the risk of eviction. Protests and other antagonistic actions can again be activated when a sudden threat of eviction manifests, albeit at the cost of destroying relationships with government bureaucrats that had been built up incrementally over time.

Instead, **i**nformal-transactional strategies of state engagement are preferred to gain concessions from political actors and lower and middle level bureaucrats within state institutions. Benjamin's (2008) concept of 'occupancy urbanism', Bayat's (1997b) concept of 'the quiet encroachment of the ordinary', Rao's (2013) account of 'tolerated encroachment', and Das's (2011) and Jha, Rao, and Woolcock's (2007) accounts of the forming of political affiliations by residents of informal settlements demonstrate the importance of negotiating the fissures in the state through local political and lower and

middle level bureaucratic channels. Here, the urban poor are not challenging their status as non-citizens but attempting to get concessions from the state and its actors.

While such informal alliances and negotiations are useful for gaining concessions, the urban poor do not rely on them throughout. Depending on informal alliances and negotiations is precarious. While useful for getting periodic concessions from the state, threats of eviction might suddenly arise. The urban poor seek to challenge for urban citizenship by using formal-antagonistic forms of state engagement. Such challenges can take various forms. For instance, Appadurai (2001) shows how the urban poor can conduct of their own enumeration surveys that challenge the state's classifications. Similarly, Kumar et al. (2014) document how urban fisherman groups have been able to conduct their own mapping exercises to challenge their illegal status by constructing their own land use maps. In this example, the urban poor go a step further, using these maps as the basis for mounting legal challenges in the courts. Ranganthan's (2014b) account of paying for pipes on Bangalore's urban peripheries, while focused on the urban lower middle class, shows how securing service delivery allows urban residents to engage the state through a service provider-consumer relationship. As our ethnography demonstrates, the urban poor can utilize these methods to attempt to gain legal recognition from the state. The use of procedures deemed legitimate by the state to challenge existing classifications is the defining character of forms of engagement in this category.

These strategies of state engagement are formal as they use practices that confirm to existing bureaucratic logics and/or are visually/spatially legitimate in the eyes of the state. The filing of court cases is an engagement process deemed formal according to law and policy. The use of other forms of knowledge production such as mapping or the conduct of surveys conforms to existing logics of knowledge production used by the state. These are also antagonistic strategies of engagement as they seek to challenge the state's conceptualization of those living in informal settlements as illegal occupiers of land. As McFarlane (2004) highlights, the deployment of such strategies 'can be analysed as forms of insurgent citizenship that seek to extend substantive citizenship to the urban poor' (p. 896). The deployment of such strategies might not result in an actual change in the status of the urban poor as non-citizens. Importantly however, they challenge existing 'imaginative geographies of the poor, and seek to create alternative imaginative geographies' (McFarlane, 2004: 911). When the urban poor deploy such strategies, their status shifts in the eyes of the state. While their claims to urban citizenship are still contested, the formality of the response required is itself a form of recognition that the state is forced to extend.

This shift in status allows the urban poor to deploy the last of a set of strategies – formal-transactional strategies. While formal-antagonistic strategies can be effective, they do not make for a good working relationship with the state and its representatives. Through formal transactional strategies, the urban poor mimic civil society by engaging the state through NGOs or by forming RWAs of their own. RWAs, while not equating to property ownership, carry the normative character of civil society organizations. Members use RWAs as platforms to frame their demands less as political demands than as rights based on the allotment of property (Coelho and Venkat). The nature of claims made by RWAs and urban groups affiliated to the urban poor evolve significantly over time. Initially seeking concessions from the state, they start using the language of rights to assert their claims to property and use symbolic procedures and markers, such as the filing of a petition or writing of letters – practices that conform to existing bureaucratic logics.

These strategies of state engagement are formal as their organizational structures and practices conform to existing bureaucratic logics and exhibit markers of visual and spatial legitimacy in the eyes of the state. They are transactional as such engagements with the state are couched in a collaborative rather than antagonistic tone, and geared towards forming establishing lasting relationships with the state and its representatives. The urban poor, through their mimicry of elites, deploy their accumulated resources and networks to further the claims on urban citizenship that they have previously pursued by challenging existing imaginative geographies of citizenship using formal-antagonistic methods.

The use of such strategies does not mean that the urban poor now possess substantive urban citizenship and belong to civil society, something that only the allocation of property ownership can accomplish. However, the urban poor are able to deploy such strategies of state engagement on account of having progressed along the spectrum of political society towards the category of civil society. Each move on the trajectory from informal-antagonistic strategies to formal-transactional strategies means that the urban poor reduce their precarity. Few informal settlements reach this stage. As Coelho and Venkat highlight, RWAs resembling civil society organizations constitute a minority of representational groups in informal settlements across Chennai. For those at this stage, however, the hope is that the politics of persuasion through the mimicry of civil society will eventually bestow upon them property ownership and mark their transition from civil to political society.

**Conclusion**

This article has articulated a typology by which to understand the nature of the strategies of engagement utilized by the urban poor in the global south to engage with the state. Each of the four categories in this typology distinguish the key characteristics of multiple forms of state engagement undertaken by the urban poor. We integrate existing accounts of state engagement and show how they are not mutually exclusive, but instead, complementary, forming part of a strategic calculus of actions undertaken by the urban poor to engage the state at multiple levels and varying contexts in incremental advances towards urban citizenship.

We demonstrate, using our case, the deployment of strategies according to temporality and resource availability. In our field sites, informal-antagonistic forms of state engagement proved unpopular as the settlements slowly established themselves, threatening the ties built with bureaucrats and local politicians by community leaders. These strategies only manifest again in desperate scenarios indicating sudden imminent eviction. Beyond this, we also demonstrate how strategies of state engagement had evolved over time in our field-sites. This does not mean that this temporal logic is universal. This approximate temporal logic is based on the exploration of an Indian case that might be applicable to other contexts with some level of democratic responsiveness and accountability - even if democracy in such contexts might be imperfect (Heller and Evans 2010) or disjunctive (Caldeira and Holston 1999). Attempting to claim urban citizenship in the context of a repressive regime is unlikely to work. As Bayat (1997a) argues, actions taken by squatters in non-democratic regimes are likely to be limited to silent encroachment. In such contexts, an open challenge for urban citizenship cannot manifest. The logic of strategy deployment will also vary based on other contextual factors – see the alarming frequency of service delivery protests in South Africa (Allan and Heese 2011), or the *de jure* rights to the city in Brazil (Fernandes 2007) – which cannot be covered fully here. However, this framework provides a basis for analysis that is applicable to most contexts possessing some democratic character.

We intend for this typology to allow for more meaningful analyses of strategies of state engagement used by urban poor groups in the global south. We do not intend to brand informality as the domain of the urban poor alone. Urban elites and the state often circumvent existing regulations to pursue their own ends, and the urban poor sometimes use formal procedures and applications to engage the state. Yet, we argue that in the Indian case, the tools and resources available to the urban poor lie largely in the informal sphere, with the urban poor having to draw initially on informal strategies of state engagement before accessing formal strategies of state engagement.

**References**

ALLAN, K. & HEESE, K. 2011. *Understanding why service delivery protests take place and who is to blame* [Online]. Available: http://www.municipaliq.co.za/publications/articles/sunday_indep.pdf.

ANAND, N. 2012. 'Municipal disconnect: On abject water and its urban infrastructures.' Ethnography, 13, 487-509.

APPADURAI, A. 2001. 'Deep democracy: Urban governmentality and the horizon of politics ' Environment & Urbanization, 13, 23-43.

BAVISKAR, A. & SUNDAR, N. 2008. 'Democracy versus economic transformation?' Economic & Political Weekly, 43, 87-89.

BAYAT, A. 1997a. Street Politics - Poor people's movements in Iran, New York, Columbia University Press.

BAYAT, A. 1997b. 'Un-civil society: the politics of the 'informal people'.' Third World Quarterly, 18, 53-72.

BENJAMIN, S. 2008. 'Occupany urbanism: Radicalizing politics and economy beyond policy and programs.' Internatioanl Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 32, 719-729.

BENJAMIN, S. & BHUVANESWARI, R. 2006. Urban futures of poor groups in Chennai and Bangalore: How these are shaped by relationships between parastatals and local bodies *In:* JAYAL, N. G., PRAKASH, A. & SHARMA, P. K. (eds.) Local governance in India: Decentralization and beyond. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

BJÖRKMAN, L. 2014. Becoming a slum: From municipal colony to illegal settlement in liberalization era Mumbai. *In:* SHATKIN, G. (ed.) Contesting the Indian City - Global visions and the politics of the local. United Kingdom: Wiley Blackwell.

BURAWOY, M. 1998. 'The extended case method.' Sociological Theory, 16, 4-33.

CALDEIRA, T. P. R. & HOLSTON, J. 1999. 'Democracy and violence in Brazil.' Comparative studies in society and history, 41, 691-729.

CHATTERJEE, P. 2004. The politics of the governed Delhi, Permanent Black.

COELHO, K. 2005. Unstating 'The Public': An ethnography of reform in an urban water utility in South India. *In:* MOSSE, D. & LEWIS, D. (eds.) The Aid Effect: Giving and governning in international development London: Pluto Press

COELHO, K. & VENKAT, T. 2009. 'The politics of civil society: Neighbourhood associationism in Chennai ' Economic & Political Weekly, 44, 358-367.

CORNWALL, A. 2002. Making spaces, changing places: situating participation in development. *IDS Working Paper* Brighton, Sussex: Institute of Development Studies.

DAS, V. 2011. 'State, citizenship, and the urban poor.' Citizenship Studies 15, 319-333.

ELLIS, R. 2012. '"A world class city of your own!": Civic governmentality in Chennai, India ' Antipode 44, 1143-1160.

FERNANDES, E. 2007. 'Constructing the 'Right to the City'in Brazil.' Social & Legal
　　　　Studies 16**,** 201-219.
FERNANDEZ, L. 2004. 'The politics of forgetting: Class politics, state power, and the
　　　　restructuring of urban space in India.' Urban Studies*,* 41**,** 2415-2430.
FERNANDEZ, L. & HELLER, P. 2006. 'Hegemonic aspirations - New middle class politics
　　　　and India's democracy in comparative perspective.' Critical Asian Studies*,* 38**,**
　　　　495-522.
GHERTNER, A. 2008. 'Analysis of new legal discourse behind Delhi's slum demolitions.'
　　　　Economic & Political Weekly*,* 43**,** 59-66.
GHERTNER, A. 2012. 'Nuisance talk and the propriety of property: Middle class
　　　　discourses of a slum-free Delhi.' Antipode*,* 44**,** 1161-1187.
GUPTA, A. 2012. Red tape: Bureaucracy, structural violence, and poverty in India*,*
　　　　Durham, United Kingdom, Duke University Press
HARRISS, J. 2006. 'Middle-class activism and the politics of the informal working class '
　　　　Critical Asian Studies*,* 38**,** 445-465.
HARVEY, D. 2008. 'The right to the city.' New Left Review 53**,** 23-40.
HELLER, P. & EVANS, P. 2010. 'Taking Tilly south: Durable inequalities, democratic
　　　　contestation, and citizenship in the southern metropolis.' Theory and Society*,*
　　　　39**,** 433-450.
JHA, S., RAO, V. & WOOLCOCK, M. 2007. 'Governance in the gullies: Democratic
　　　　responsiveness and leadership in Delhi's slums.' World Development*,* 35.
KOOY, M. & BAKKER, K. 2008. 'Technologies of government: Constituting subjectivities,
　　　　spaces, and infrastructures in colonial and contemporary Jakarta.' Internatioanl
　　　　Journal of Urban and Regional Research*,* 32**,** 375-391.
KUMAR, M., SARAVANAN, K. & JAYARAMAN, N. 2014. 'Mapping the coastal commons:
　　　　Fisherfolk and the politics of coastal urbanisation in Chennai.' Economic &
　　　　Political Weekly: Review of Urban Affairs XLIX**,** 46-53.
LUND, C. 2006. 'Twilight Institutions: Public Authority and Local Politics in Africa.'
　　　　Development and Change*,* 37**,** 685-705.
MCFARLANE, C. 2004. 'Geographical imaginations and spaces of political engagement:
　　　　Examples from the Indian alliance.' Antipode*,* 36**,** 890-916.
MCFARLANE, C. & RUTHERFORD, J. 2008. 'Political infrastructures: Governing and
　　　　experiencing the fabric of the city.' International Journal of Urban and Regional
　　　　Research*,* 32**,** 363-374.
MIRAFTAB, F. 2006. 'Feminist praxis, citizenship, and informal politics: Reflections on
　　　　South Africa's anti-eviction campaign.' International Feminist Journal of Politics*,*
　　　　8**,** 194-218.
MITCHELL, T. 1991. 'the limits of the state: Beyond statist approaches and their critics.'
　　　　The American Political Science Review*,* 85**,** 77-96.
NAQVI, I. forthcoming. 'Governance as an emergent compromise: Modernization and
　　　　flexibility in the Pakistani electrical power sector.' Current Sociology.
RAMAN, N. 2013. The messy practice of participation: Lessons from the City
　　　　Development Plan Review in Chennai *In:* COELHO, K., KAMATH, L. &
　　　　VIJAYBASKAR, M. (eds.) Participolis: Consent and contention in neoliberal urban
　　　　India New Delhi: Routledge.
RANGANATHAN, M. 2014a. ''Mafias' in the waterscape: Urban informality and everyday
　　　　public authority in Bangalore.' Water Alternatives 7 89-105.
RANGANATHAN, M. 2014b. 'Paying for pipes, claiming citizenship: Political agency and
　　　　water reforms at the urban periphery.' International Journal of Urban and
　　　　Regional Research*,* 38.
RAO, U. 2013. 'Tolerated encroachment: Resettlement policies and the negotiation of the
　　　　licit/illicit  divide in an Indian metropolis.' Cultural Anthropology*,* 28**,** 760-779.
ROY, A. 2009. 'Why India cannot plan its cities: Informality, insurgence and the idiom of
　　　　urbanization.' Planning Theory 8 76-87.

TRUELOVE, Y. & MAWDSLEY, E. 2011. Discourses of citizenship and criminality in clean, green Delhi. *In:* CLARK-DECÈS, I. (ed.) A companion to the Anthropology of India*.* Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.

WEINSTEIN, L. 2014. The durable slum : Dharavi and the right to stay put in globalizing Mumbai.

YAMUNAN, S. 2015. *Marina Loop Road wideningstayed* [Online]. The Hindu. Available: http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/marina-loop-road-widening-stayed/article7017442.ece.

**Figure 1. A Schematic Representation of Patterns of State Engagement**

| | Agitational | Operational |
|---|---|---|
| **Informal** | **1) Informal-Agitational Protests and mass Agitations** <br> Harriss – Agitation and Operation | **2) Informal-Operational Affiliation, Infiltration and Negotiation** <br> Benjamin – Occupancy Urbanism <br> Bayat – Quiet Encroachment of the Ordinary <br> Rao – Tolerated Encroachment |
| **Formal** | **3) Formal-Agitational Formalizing the Informal** <br> Appadurai – Counter governmentality <br> Kumar et. al – Mapping the Commons <br> Ranganathan – Paying for Pipes | **4) Formal-Operational Mimicking Civil Society** <br> Coelho and Venkat |