Political Leadership and the Urban Poor
Local Histories

by Veena Das and Michael Walton

Based on survey research and ethnographic interviews, we analyze struggles over housing and access to infrastructure in two low-income "unplanned settlements" in the National Capital Region of Delhi, India. We argue that political leadership in these two different areas cannot be regarded as a simple extension of traditional forms of authority from the village to the city. Rather, the local leaders emerge in the process of learning how to engage institutional processes of law and bureaucracy in an urban context to secure housing and infrastructure. The enfolding of structures of governance with democratic politics in these neighborhoods reveals the overlapping movements of law, bureaucracy, markets, and democratic mobilization through which social life is made durable for the urban poor. Instead of asking what democracy has done for the poor in India, we shift the focus to ask, How does the work that the poor perform through and with these institutions give form and substance to democracy in India?

The summary description of the course Foucault gave titled "The Birth of Biopolitics" at the Collège de France in 1979 stated, "What should be studied now is the way in which the specific problems of life have been posed within a technology of government which has always been haunted, since the end of the 18th century by the question of liberalism" (Foucault 2004:329; cited in Fassin 2009:37). One place to locate the technology of government is in the practices followed by bureaucrats, as in the excellent work of Gupta (2012) and Hull (2012). Such technologies, however, also have a life outside the offices of the bureaucrats because they are negotiated in other places, such as in the low-income neighborhoods we describe in this paper. This shift of perspective seems crucial if the poor are not to be seen as passive populations managed by different agents of the state, assigning them a place outside the realm of politics almost by definition. We do not imply that the neighborhood can be treated as a self-closed entity. Instead, our analytical task demands that we incorporate different scales of social life in our analysis—those of law, bureaucracy, electoral democracy, forms of patronage, and the minutiae of power relations at the level of neighborhoods we describe. We do not concep-

tualize the state or law as larger entities that contain the smaller scale; rather, we are interested in seeing how phenomena at different scales intersect in the life of the neighborhood (Han 2013). Instead of regarding law, bureaucracy, and the state as overarching institutions that regulate life from above, we ask how these institutions are folded into the life of the neighborhood (see Das 2011). While for Foucault, technologies of governance have been haunted by questions of liberalism, for us, the work that the poor perform in their everyday lives interrogates the basic assumptions on which liberal notions of the sovereign subject are based (see Englund 2012 for an elegant formulation of this issue).

We first give a brief account of the legal and bureaucratic structures within which various kinds of "unplanned settlements"—such as recognized slums, unrecognized slums, unauthorized colonies, and resettlement colonies—are placed. We then take up one particular case—that of housing—and offer a comparison between two different low-income settlements, each standing in a tense relation with law and bureaucracy (available in a PDF as CA+ online supplement B). We then argue that the nature of political leadership that has emerged in these two different areas does not result from the simple extension of traditional forms of authority to the city; rather, the local leaders emerge in the process of struggles for securing infrastructural necessities for sustaining everyday life. We do not wish to suggest that this makes the leaders altruistic people working for the public good. Instead, the rough and tumble of politics—its forms of patronage, corruption, violence, as well as the possibilities of democratic mobilization—become evident as we track the nature of political life through the efforts made for securing housing, electricity, or water.

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Slums and Other Unplanned Settlements

According to the 2021 Master Plan of Delhi, the unplanned settlements in Delhi can be divided into the following types: resettlement sites, designated slums, urban villages, regularized unauthorized settlements, unauthorized settlements, and squatter settlements, also known as JJ (*jhuggi jhopdi*) colonies. Different kinds of settlements enjoy different degrees of security of tenure, so, for instance, designated slums have rights against eviction under the Delhi Slum Act of 1956, and resettlement sites that came up under the government's own initiative, most notoriously during the beautification-cum-sterilization drive under the National Emergency in 1976 (Tarlo 2003), gave permanent lease to holders over the land allotted to them. Some squatter settlements might have obtained stay orders against eviction from courts, but the possibility always looms over their lives. According to different estimates, about 50%–70% of the population of Delhi lives in these "unplanned settlements"—thus, these people are not marginal to the life of the city but constitute its very fabric.

Punjabi Basti: What Does It Mean to Have an Address?

Punjabi Basti, located in West Delhi, is an area of 34 acres with a built-up section of 21.59 acres. It has 2,318 plots (combined houses and shops), though multiple households may live within the same house. Let us take a deceptively simple question: from where do these figures come? How did a house or a shop acquire something as simple and taken for granted as an address?[1] Punjabi Basti did not figure as a separate colony in official records till 1995 because it was assimilated in the larger area of Baljit Nagar. Even now, many documents, such as ration cards or voter ID cards, record the locality as "Punjabi Basti, Baljit Nagar."

Until a few years ago, streets in Punjabi Basti did not have numbers or names. Certain landmarks were used to orient oneself to the place—thus, crossroads were named after small temples that had come up through local effort (e.g., Gayatri Chowk is named after the goddess Gayatri). Certain sites were marked after important events, such as the hosting of the national flag on independence day (Jhanda Chowk, literally "Flagstaff Crossing"). Boundaries between neighborhoods were fluid. The geography of the area thus reflected an order that emerged from an evolving collective life rather than from official planning or control.

Families of the earliest settlers in Punjabi Basti had moved here from different parts of Delhi soon after 1976 because

these settlers saw the opportunity to claim empty land. The local term for this process is *jagah gherna*, which literally means "enclosure of a place," and it can be used in a neutral way when people are making a reference to the amount of labor that went to enclose a piece of unoccupied land and convert it into a house. Alternately, the term has the connotation of illegality when one voices the perspective of law, seeing the world through the eyes of government officials. Residents of Punjabi Basti could take both perspectives, claiming simultaneously that it was their labor that had made the area inhabitable and at the same time conceding that the land had been taken without going through the legal mechanisms that bestow ownership within the formal regime of property relations.

Three of the older residents who gave detailed accounts of their experiences—Dhanno Devi, B. D. Joshi, and Hargovind Ramgarhia—were among the first settlers who moved to this area in the seventies.[2] All three migrated from other areas of Delhi, where they were engaged as unskilled laborers hired in construction work. The initial settlement was of about 40 households who had enclosed (encroached on) and demarcated certain areas and then worked this land to make it inhabitable. These early settlers in time sold off parts of the land they had occupied to others—Joshi claims, and others agree, that at one time the whole street on which Joshi lives was an enclosure created by him through the act of *jagah gherna* and that he "settled" that part of Punjabi Basti.[3] Such transactions of land and shanties or houses have a very ambiguous place in law, although there are well-worked-out procedures by which selling, buying, and renting houses takes place within the local world in which such settlements are made. While documents of these transactions are not registered in the Municipal Corporation, they are nevertheless recognized through mutual witnessing (see Das 2011; Rao 2013).

According to Joshi, it was some time in the 1980s that a major setback occurred. Ramjas Foundation, a large charitable foundation, claimed that it was the legal owner of the land that these families had occupied and started to levy a "license fee" on them. Ramjas Foundation also began to assign addresses to houses, which they used in licensee agreements with the residents and in receipts issued to them. These addresses were assigned haphazardly—P124 could well be nestling against D28—and sometimes the same address was

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1. Veena Das presented a more detailed analysis of the address interviews in this locality in the second M. N. Srinivas Memorial Lecture at the King's India Institute, London, in March 2013. Veena would like to express her gratitude to Sunil Khilnani and Kapila Kriti for their kind invitation and to members of the audience for their perceptive comments.

2. In all, there were 40 interviews with residents from different parts of the neighborhood on the address history of the house and the history of street names.

3. The whole expression "jagah gherna"—enclosing a place from the local perspective and encroaching on the land from the strict legal perspective—refers to the act of taking a piece of land and making it one's own through one's labor. In other areas the term *kabza* is widely used by residents in both India and Pakistan to refer to land or houses or even mosques that are "occupied" and for which there are no legal entitlements (*patta*). The difference between *patta* and *kabza* occurs in various bureaucratic records and sale deeds.

found on several different houses in different parts of the colony. Because there were no street names, addresses were indicated by "landmarks," for example, "1–128 near the Gayatri temple" (see fig. A1; figs. A1–A4 available in CA+ online supplement A).

Ramjas Foundation enforced its license fee by threats of legal action and by the use of physical force. As an act of defiance, some residents started using different self-assigned addresses. They also formed a registered society titled Punjabi Basti Sudhar Samiti (literally, Society for the Improvement of Punjabi Basti) in the same period. Thus, the initial impetus to form themselves into a formal organization came from the friction created by the threat posed by the Ramjas Foundation—according to Joshi, the office holders as well as other members who were registered were local members of the Congress Party.

The Legal Battle over Land Rights

The following summary of the legal issues is from *Ramjas Foundation v. Union of India*, civil appeal no. 6662, filed in 2004 and settled in 2010. Earlier cases by the Ramjas Foundation pertaining to the same land go back to 1959, 1968, 1971, and 1992. We focus on the points at which the Punjabi Basti residents' claim over housing came to rub against the claims of Ramjas Foundation's fight with the Government of India over ownership of this land. The facts of the case as they emerged in the process of adjudication were as follows.

Rai Sahib Kedar Nath,[4] who retired as district judge from the Punjab Judicial Service, started three schools in parts of old Delhi between 1912 and 1916 to honor the memory of his father, Lala Ramjas Mal. Kedar Nath had bought 1,800 bighas of land from his own resources as well as through donations in what were then the villages of Chowkri Mubarikabad and Sadhra Khurd. In a public function held on December 25, 1916, Kedar Nath had announced that he had formed a *waqf* (an inalienable religious endowment under Islamic law) and donated all his movable and immovable properties for charitable purposes to provide aid for the education of the poor.[5] In 1917 he formed the Ramjas College Society and had it duly registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. Later, he transferred all his property to this society, which was renamed the Ramjas Foundation in 1967.

The legal conflict with the Government of India has its genesis in a notification issued in 1959, under the Land

Acquisition Act (sec. 4), by the Chief Commissioner of Delhi, which proposed the acquisition of 34,070 acres of land for planned development in Delhi of which a portion (870 bighas and 17 biswas)[6] was claimed by the appellant. However, exemption from acquisition was granted to several categories of property, including *waqf* property. Ramjas Foundation claimed that the land it held was *waqf* property and hence exempt from acquisition by the government. After hearing the arguments on whether a Hindu could create *waqf* property, the court held that though Hindus could create *waqf* property, it could only be used for furthering the cause of Muslims or Islamic institutions. It is clear that while in 1916 words such as *waqf* were used in the general sense of an institution for charitable purposes, in independent India *waqf* had become an exclusively "Islamic" category.

While this battle on the larger issues was being waged in the courts, Ramjas Foundation filed cases in lower courts against several residents of Punjabi Basti and of adjoining unauthorized colonies for nonrecovery of license fee. We have documents that detail one such case, but we understand that several residents faced police and legal action as well as harassment by what are described in local narratives as hired goons. The case we describe pertains to a lawsuit for recovery of possession and damages that was filed in the Tis Hazari Court in Delhi against one Daya Ram Yadav of Jhuggi number D-204, Punjabi Basti, Baljit Nagar. It was claimed by the plaintiff that the defendant was the licensee of the plaintiff in respect of land under Jhuggi number D-204 (though now the locality is Punjabi Basti, Anand Parbat), which in the revenue records appears as khasra number (i.e., plot number) 367 of the original village, Chowkri Mubarakabad, and the license deed executed in 1986 was attached. The plaintiff further demanded possession of this plot as well as damages of Indian Rs 5,472 (ca. US$300 in 1990) for nonpayment of the license fee.

The defendant (the jhuggi dweller) claimed that the plaintiff was neither owner nor in possession of said property and that the land in dispute was owned and possessed by the Government of India. He also claimed that the land in dispute did not even fall under the *khasra* (plot) number given by the plaintiff but was registered under another number and that the plaintiff had got some blank paper signed from the defendant by taking advantage of his being illiterate.

In her judgment the presiding judge noted that the Ramjas Foundation had known all along that its claims over the land were in dispute. Having gone into the subtleties of lease versus license, the judgment finally stated that "The notification (of land acquisition) was issued on 13.11.1959 and license was granted on 21.06.1986. Thus the plaintiff was 'very well assured' that the acquisition proceedings in respect of the land (i.e., by the Government of India) of which the suit property forms a part had been initiated. Thus the plain-

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4. Rai Sahib is a title bestowed by the British.

5. The term *waqf* refers to an inalienable religious endowment in Islamic law typically denoting a piece of land or a building to be used for charitable or Islamic religious purposes. However, because Persian words were used freely in the Punjab by both Hindus and Muslims in this period, it is possible that the word denoted dedication of property for charitable purposes independent of religious affiliation.

6. Bighas and biswas are local measures. A biswa is 125 m², and 20 biswas make a bigha.

tiff had no authority to create any licenses qua the land in question."

People living in the area were not entirely clear about legal and constitutional issues involved in the characterization of *waqf* property. There was, nevertheless, a clear understanding that the legal strategy of the foundation was a continuation of the intimidation and coercion it had pursued. It is worth emphasizing here that this particular conflict was not fought with the help of any activist organizations or legal help cells outside the locality; rather, it was the Punjabi Basti Sudhar Samiti led by Joshi that gathered the necessary expertise from various sources to fight for the residents because they understood that the rights over housing for all residents were under threat if the Ramjas Foundation won the case.

This conflict with Ramjas Foundation looms over the discussions with local leaders and other residents about the nature of politics in the locality. Joshi claimed that they had sought the help of various officials from the lower-level Patwari to the keeper of revenue records in the Delhi administration using various networks of lower-level workers in these offices to get access to higher-level officials. It is with the help of the sympathetic officials that his organization had extracted the khasra numbers that covered the area that the Ramjas foundation was claiming as its own.[7] In the process of these legal battles, the residents had come to acknowledge that although they had won the battle against the powerful foundation, ownership of their land vested not with them but with the Government of India. Here we want to point out that there is an implicit acknowledgment of the fact that rights over their dwellings are split between the government and themselves in the contractual languages that have evolved for transactions of buying and selling houses in the area.

A typical "agreement" of sale mentions the buyer and the seller as well as the location of the property. It concludes, however, with the statement that "the money that is being charged for the house is for *malba* and *mehnat*." *Malba* literally means "debris," and, in the normal course of a construction, it is the material that must be removed after the construction is complete. In the slums and JJ colonies, however, the word *malba* is used to refer to building materials—an acknowledgement of the provisional nature of the house that is built. The word *mehnat* refers to "labor" or "effort." It is then fascinating to see that what is being sold is the cost of materials and effort—it is implicitly assumed that the land is not theirs to sell. Yet there is a general sense of agreement in the locality that first, there are some rights over their dwellings that have already accrued to the residents, and second, that

even if the particular plots of land on which they built their houses are encroachments, the locality as a whole must engage with state agencies in order to improve their conditions of living.

The Struggle for Electricity

The 138th Report of the Law Commission of India that was given the mandate to report on how law could be marshaled in aid of the poor had commented on civic provisions in slum areas in the following terms:

> The slum dwellers in occupation of their units situated within the municipal limits are so often refused essential facilities such as civic amenities, sanitary services, water supply, street lighting, electricity supply, approach road etc. Two grounds are mentioned for supporting such upholding or denying, viz. (1) that they are unauthorized occupation of land and/or (2) that they do not make any contribution by way of municipal taxes etc. (GOI 1990)

Elsewhere, Das (2014) has analyzed in some detail how the locality managed to get electricity and the efforts made by one of the local leaders, Sanjeev Gupta, a Congress Party worker and office bearer of the Punjabi Basti Sudhar Samiti. Gupta had formed another registered society with different office bearers because he felt that different civic issues require different organizations to be at the forefront of "the struggle." Here we briefly recapitulate some of the important points through which the project for getting electricity legally was waged.[8]

The story of the electrification of this neighborhood begins with the privatization of electricity in Delhi in the years between 2000 and 2002. When power reforms began in 2002 in Delhi in light of the heavy losses incurred by the state-owned Delhi Vidyut Board, the latter was unbundled into three privately owned companies. Sanjeev Gupta and many others told us about the terrible harassments that residents faced when electricity officials of the private company lodged complaints with the police about theft of electricity. As in

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7. These are not vague references. Joshi named at least two officials of the Delhi Development Authority who had been singularly helpful in teaching their organization how to petition their department and the Department of Revenue to get access to records. He also showed me several letters that he had written to various officials on behalf of his organization in connection with the harassment faced from the Ramjas Foundation.

8. It is of course true that the material character of different resources (houses, land, electricity, water, garbage, sewage) leads to organizational differences in how services might be prioritized, but it would be hasty to assume that, say, electricity is less important than water because one can always do without electricity but one cannot do without water. First, many households run small *karkhanas* (workshops) in the house or engage in other forms of domestic production that require electricity, so that frequent cuts in the supply of electricity or increasing the rates can jeopardize the economic resources available to a household (see Das 2014). It is also the case that once people begin to make a distinction between water that is fit for drinking and cooking vs. water for other kinds of domestic or industrial use, there are concomitant changes in how a household organizes itself for getting water. In Punjabi Basti, all households surveyed used more than one source for accessing water. We have not analyzed the survey data from other localities.

most such neighborhoods, people had earlier drawn electricity illegally from street poles to draw lines to their homes, shops, or *karkhanas* (workshops) to power domestic or commercial appliances (see fig. A2). The networks of private contractors and low-level officials of the Municipal Corporation who were routinely bribed had assured that the residents did not face criminal charges for theft of electricity. Now with privatization they were finding that the game plans had completely changed. Sanjeev Gupta used his position as the president of the zonal congress committee to arrange a meeting (sometime in 2005) between the representatives of the locality and the officer in charge from the zonal division of the company Bombay Suburban Electric Supply (BSES) to discuss the issue of electricity theft and harassment. Here is the description of what transpired (we juxtapose fragments of the account given by Sanjeev Gupta [in Hindi] to Veena over several informal discussions with an account of the issues involved in electrification as given by one of the officers [Vidyut Sir][9] of the private company who granted an interview to Veena [mostly in English]) by Sanjeev Gupta.

> After electricity was privatized, there was this big move to install meters—now, as you know, in colonies like ours there were no regular meters—there were local contractors who used to supply electricity for payment by drawing lines from the high tension wires—or else, many people drew the lines themselves, and there were regular payments extracted by the local linesmen and the policemen. We said to Vidyut Sir, "Sir, we have been demanding regular supply of electricity, but you do not sanction meters for us. On top of it you file complaints, and the police treat us like criminals. They come and catch hold of the person by the neck as if he has committed a major crime, as if he is a murderer. What kind of justice is this?" Vidyut Sir replied that their records showed how much electricity had been consumed in this locality and what was the recovery of money against it. He said vehemently, "I say on that basis, I say that I have proof, I say, that people are stealing—they are thieves." We said, "Sir ji, how can you call us thieves? If you don't give us electricity on the grounds that we are not an authorized colony—and people naturally need electricity—a man wants to run a fan, his little children are burning in the heat—he will get electricity with whatever means—then why call him a thief?"[10]

In his interview with Das, Vidyut Sir related how his boss and he were both struck by the force of Sanjeev Gupta's argument—was it ethical of them to deny electricity to people when the government was itself tolerating these unauthorized colonies? But they were also concerned as to how

they would be able to recover costs, because the addresses were all haphazard, and there were no numbers or names of streets. As he said, "It was a maze."

Sanjeev Gupta for his part was truly stung by the accusation of theft and vowed that they would remove this stigma of theft from their locality. As he related, "Vidyut Sir guided us—so did another officer. The big issue was that houses did not have addresses in sequential order, streets did not have names or numbers—sometimes if a linesman was expected to deliver a bill, the client would simply rip apart his meter and say, "my house is not C4—that house is in another street." Through interactions with the officers in BSES, Gupta came to understand the importance of getting an authorized map of the area with house numbers, for without a list of houses and their correct addresses, the electricity company could not install meters.

Sanjeev Gupta and some other leaders then organized meetings in the area and persuaded most households to contribute Rs 200 per household for a map of the area. After many difficulties due to the topography of the area, a private firm of architects finally made a map. After an exchange of many letters, petitions, and pressure from the chief minister's office, the town planner of the municipal corporation finally approved the map (see fig. A3). This enabled the BSES to prepare a list of consumers and to install meters in the houses after augmenting electricity supply by installing seven transformers in the area. In the process, each house was assigned a new number, but Sanjeev Gupta managed to get the electricity company to agree to write both the old numbers and the new number on the bills so that now, in all official correspondence, the address appears to be a composite of the two numbers. In that way, electricity bills can be used for purposes of establishing residence for any new scheme, but residents do not have to apply again for change of address for such purposes as bank accounts.

We do not want to give the impression that all this—the map making, the assigning of new numbers, the installation of the transformers—was achieved by agreements arrived through rational deliberative discourse. Accusations have been made in the locality that all the money that was collected was not properly accounted for. There were fights over the exact location of the transformers—for instance, the leader of the local dalits complained about a transformer being placed in the Ambedkar Park that adjoins the streets where most dalits live, saying it amounted to an insult to Ambedkar's memory.

The gravest threats to Sanjeev Gupta came not openly but in many covert ways from the network of "entrepreneurs" who were earlier supplying electricity illegally and whose business was adversely affected.[11] One day when Sanjeev

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9. All personal names in the paper except that of Sanjeev Gupta (on his own request) are pseudonyms. The suffix *Sir* simply follows local practice to denote respect.

10. Politicians are sometimes honored by the addition of the Hindi particle *ji*, which is also used in contexts of kinship.

11. It was not possible to locate the persons who constituted this network, but some employees of the earlier Delhi Vidyut Board were implicated.

Gupta was relating the efforts they had to make to complete the project, he suddenly choked, and his eyes were tearing. He said, "I was even attacked one night when I was coming home." "What happened? Did you get hurt?" "No but they showed me a revolver and told me to stop these activities." "Who were they?" "Oh, the ones who do this *dukandari* [literally, "market transactions," but carrying a tone of illicit transactions here]—whose *dhandha* [illicit work] would have stopped." "Did you report to the police?" "No, the local police are always on their side." "So what did you do? How do you know you are safe?" "I told you I was not a die-hard Congress man. I am in the party because I cannot do without it. So those above were informed, and they must have talked to them—after all, the ones who were intimidating me are also part of the same set up."

It was characteristic of Sanjeev Gupta's mode of relating a story that he refused to name those who had intimidated or threatened him. Clearly, he lived and worked in a context in which people were involved in what he thought of as corruption. For instance, when describing an ongoing case of demolition of shanties in an adjoining neighborhood in which many poor people lost their abodes, he predicted that they would be back and would reoccupy the land but that they would have to pay again to the very people who had first encouraged them to occupy the vacant land. "It is the same people who had first allowed them to occupy this land by giving an extortion fee to them and then had the demolition squads out and will now again extract money from them." He would only name the "people" as the local *bhu mafia* (land mafia)—"you think that land mafias all come from outside with the big building lobbies, but there is a local bhu mafia, too, that operates right from within." Gupta said, people are 60% good and 40% bad. The general sense was that relations of proximity required that one saw in everyone some good and some bad.

We reserve the commentary on these struggles for housing and electricity for the conclusion, but we do wish to underscore that an authorized map became a major resource for an application that was moved on behalf of the locality to Delhi Development Authority to convert the neighborhood into an authorized colony, which was given provisional approval. We now move on to the second neighborhood, the shanty settlements in Sector 5 and Sector 8 of Naveen Okhla Industrial Development Authority (NOIDA).

NOIDA: The Politics of Surveys

NOIDA was set up as part of the National Capital Region during the National Emergency (1975–1976) to absorb increasing migration to the city. The administration was later taken over by the Uttar Pradesh government as migration increased. According to the 2011 census, the current population of NOIDA is 642,381, and it is primarily composed of migrants from other cities as well as rural migrants. The official descriptions of the township boast of a high literacy

rate (89%) as well as major educational institutions and a hospital in every residential sector. Yet nestling in between these affluent zones are the clusters of shanty settlements, some of whose residents have been living there for more than 40 years. What started as settlements of mud and straw shanties have now become crowded settlements with most houses made of bricks and cement, though they are still tiny, often windowless, and with no proper drainage. The narrow spidery mud lanes are dotted with garbage dumps, open drains, and stagnant water pools, and very few houses have proper toilet facilities.

An interesting feature of the political landscape among the poor of both Punjabi Basti and NOIDA is the proliferation of local leaders, but whereas in Punjabi Basti, a leader will speak of himself in terms of specific achievements—this one for getting electricity meters, that one for arranging water tankers or for getting a tube well—in NOIDA the picture has become much more confusing, with considerable rancor over who has achieved what.[12] It was rare to find any local leaders who did not trade accusations of siphoning off benefits for their own relatives or party members. In much of the literature on urban slums in Delhi, it is assumed that the term *Pradhan* refers to those who wield traditional authority on the basis of caste.[13] However, we found that the authority claimed by Pradhans (a term used much more frequently in NOIDA than in Punjabi Basti) is based on their associations with particular political parties or with politicians at the district or state level rather than on the basis of caste.

The Struggle over Housing

People attribute some of the changes in the structure of leadership, which they say has descended to a state of anarchy, to the fact that NOIDA has a dual administrative structure because it is part of the National Capital Region and also a part of the District of Buddhanagar in Uttar Pradesh. They also see the shift in the nature of leadership as part of a generational shift that has taken place in the structure of sensibilities as new migrants have come into the neighborhood—"ab har ghar mein Pradhan hain—har koi apne

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12. This is not to say that there are no counter claims or accusations of corruption but that we usually found that a leader could back his claim by showing documents that he had amassed on his role in securing a particular resource for the neighborhood.

13. Thus, e.g., Jha, Rao, and Woolcock (2007) state at one point in their paper on the theme of governance in slums in Delhi that the governance structure depends much on traditional gram and caste *panchayat*, but they also acknowledge that in their interviews they found that the authority of the Pradhan has waned in matters of property transactions (see also Harris 2005). The only locality in which we found a semblance of caste Pradhans was in Kathputli Colony in which street artists had been settled through the intervention of a famous advocate for street arts but the governance structure had been put in place more through the authority of the bureaucrats than being organic to the communities.

ko Pradhan manta hai" (now every house has a Pradhan—everyone thinks of himself as Pradhan). However, in 1998, when Das initiated an exploratory project on the urban poor in Sector 5, there was only one recognized Pradhan, Nathu Ram, whom she interviewed a number of times in 1998.

Nathu Ram rose to a position of power in the locality some time in the midseventies because of his ability, he said, to deal with outsiders, especially the agents of the state, such as policemen. In this aspect he was somewhat like the big men first made famous by Godelier and Strathern (1991), because he did not represent traditional authority. Although not the traditional caste Pradhan, Nathu Ram used his dense kinship connections in the area to build support. He counted eight families of close relatives who lived within the same cluster of jhuggis, while other, more distant relatives had been encouraged by him to come and settle in an adjacent park on *kabza* land. We should note that there were no formal mechanisms for the selection of Pradhans (as is the case in rural areas), but people sought Nathu Ram's mediation in personal disputes or to deal with the police (Harris 2005). His authority was evident in different projects he initiated for the settlement (see Das 2011).

Let us fast forward to the nineteen eighties, when the residents of the area were embroiled in a conflict with the neighboring Gujjar community, the original residents of the area before it was claimed for industrial development.[14] For the Gujjars, whose fortunes over the years had changed radically as they too had taken advantage of the growth of industry in this area, the presence of a lower-caste cluster of jhuggis in the neighborhood was seen as threatening to their economic dominance and would, they feared, "corrupt" their young people. Nathu Ram explained to me that most men in the jhuggis were performing the tasks of sweepers or working as load carriers for the local factories that were coming up since the late seventies. These were not jobs that the Gujjars were willing to take on because of their higher status, but as longtime settlers in the villages in this area they did not want new settlements to come up. The Gujjars had clout with the police, so the police were all set to demolish their jhuggis. In Nathu Ram's words, "the bulldozers were literally on our threshold."

"Someone" advised Nathu Ram that he should try to get a court order to stall the demolitions. The lack of specificity in Nathu Ram's account of who that someone was or how he came to know him was a common feature of narratives among the urban poor that Das encountered in the early years of her research here. This particular feature indexed the diffused forms of knowledge over which no one ever had full control but that one could follow, and, like a gambler's move, it could pay dividends. (A new generation of leaders,

though still unclear about how to make the legal or bureaucratic system work, are much more savvy about the nature of party politics at the state level.) Having gathered this bit of advice, Nathu Ram decided to go to the High Court in the city of Allahabad, though he did not seem to know anyone there. From his own account, it appeared that he would go to the High Court with a bag of chickpeas and sit on the stairs hoping that someone would take notice of him. We should note that such a strategy for getting attention of state officials, of doctors, of teachers, though not routine, is not uncommon. As luck would have it, an activist lawyer saw him sitting there everyday and asked him what he wanted. Nathu Ram explained his predicament, and the lawyer agreed to file a petition for a stay order on the ground that the residents belonged to the scheduled caste category, were economically downtrodden, and hence should not be deprived of their homes and their means of livelihood. The lawyer, however, insisted that the jhuggi dwellers legally register themselves as a society under the Uttar Pradesh Registration of Societies Act, 1860. The jhuggi residents thus acquired the legal status of a Registered Society under the title of Harijan Mazdur Sangharsh Sabha.[15] They were successful in obtaining a stay order from the court and used it in bargaining with the police. Simultaneously, they tried to pursue the demand for alternative accommodations with various political parties, especially during elections, organizing public meetings, holding demonstrations, and submitting petitions to various political leaders. Despite promises made every 5 years during elections that alternative housing would be provided to them, nothing concrete has resulted from these endeavors.

The registered society formed by Nathu Ram had become defunct in 2001, having failed to meet certain procedural requirements. Nathu Ram's nephew had helped in registering it under another name—Jhuggi Jhopdi Welfare Association—but this nephew absconded soon after to escape arrest because of a criminal case in which he was involved. The society was again registered in 2006, this time with the nephew's son (Vinod) who had now risen to a position of some power as the executive head. Under the auspices of this society, there was a writ petition filed in court submitting the names of 1,140 jhuggis as eligible for allotment of alternate housing. The High Court found merit in the petition and ordered the NOIDA administration to provide alternate accommodations to these households on the payment of 62,000, to be paid in monthly installments of Rs 120 per household. The lawyers of the society contested this decision on the grounds that as a welfare state, India could not charge such exorbitant sums from the poor. The listing of these

14. Though classified as a "backward" community now belonging to the administrative category of "Other Backward Castes," historians identify several past kingdoms as Gujjar or Gurjara in origin.

15. The name of the society bears trace of the intervention of the upper caste lawyer who might have suggested the name. *Harijan* was the term Gandhi used for untouchables, but later dalit leaders rejected this appellation. Of the 23 or so registered societies that are now active in the local politics of the area, none uses caste terms, preferring such titles as Jhuggi-Jhopdi Welfare Association, Society for Worker's Struggle, etc.

1,140 jhuggis, however, led to other petitions filed on behalf of other registered societies claiming that their members had been left out of the list of those entitled to receive alternate housing. Thus far, any agreement on who are the legitimate beneficiaries of the original petition has eluded the locality as bitter fights have broken out over who is to be included or excluded from the list of recipients entitled to alternate accommodations.

Thus, for example, two new registered societies filed writ petitions in the Allahabad High Court against the attempts to evict them from their hutments even as late as 2010. The Allahabad High Court in 2010, in a case filed by a coalition of local NGOs (Jhuggi Jhopri Nagrik Kalyan Mahasabha)[16] versus the NOIDA Authority, gave specific instructions regarding rehabilitation of the jhuggi dwellers and passed a new interim order based on the existing order of 1998. There were other writ petitions filed accusing the NOIDA authority of contempt of court for not acting expeditiously on the orders of the court. In response, NOIDA Authority officials assured the court that a new scheme for rehabilitation of jhuggi dwellers had now been finalized and that a fresh survey would be conducted in 2010 to identify all legitimate jhuggi dwellers. The results of this survey were posted on the NOIDA Authority website, but the number of jhuggis identified were far fewer than the actual existing jhuggis at that time. For instance, the website mentioned 525 jhuggis in Sector 5 whereas our census showed 830 jhuggis in one cluster alone in this sector. Thus, individual petitions as well as collective appeals to political parties continued against the NOIDA authority.

It would be evident from the above description that the matter of securing rights over their residence did not end for the jhuggi dwellers with obtaining the various interim orders against eviction. It is true that this protected them from demolition of their homes, but it did not ensure that they were provided alternative plots of land or apartments with permanent rights, which is their goal.[17] Rather, the jhuggi dwellers continued to find a variety of ways in which they could deepen their claims over housing.

At the individual level, the strategy for deepening the claims over the jhuggis built on occupied land is to gather as many documents as possible to establish long-term residency. The most important of these documents are ration cards and voter identity cards. The new impetus by the government to cover the entire population of India through unique identity cards had not yet had an effect on household strategies of building incremental rights over their dwellings, although this was already emerging as a major issue in 2013. The strategies used by leaders for security of tenure has since come to focus on two alternative goals—either to secure alternate accommodations or to get permanent rights over the land that they have occupied. At the collective level, different political leaders at the local level who are affiliated with different political parties continue to petition powerful politicians, form new registered societies, and use the media, especially during elections. Yet the bureaucratic plans for rehabilitation are following their own logic. We visited Sector 125, where in 2012 an area was earmarked for multistory buildings for rehabilitation of all jhuggi dwellers. There were tenders floated by NOIDA authority to invite builders to submit building plans, but it was equally clear to the inhabitants that the issue was not going to be resolved in any hurry. An articles in the Hindi newspaper *Amar Ujjala*, for instance, had reported on March 13, 2011, that the 2010 survey yielded a total of 11,500 jhuggi dwellers in five sectors of NOIDA and that a tender for 3,472 flats was floated. Although application forms for allotment of flats were made available and advertised, there were few takers, as considerable controversy broke out over the authenticity of names included in the survey in the localities as well as the conditions of allotment. The very discrepancy between the number of jhuggi dwellers identified in the survey and the number for which a tender was floated was evidence for people that the bureaucracy was making empty gestures to satisfy the courts.

Thus, a stalemate continued on the plans for alternative accommodations (Chatterji 2005 and Chatterji and Mehta 2007 for similar conflicts in Mumbai at the time of their fieldwork in 2001 and 2002 in Dharavi). Meanwhile, with parliamentary elections scheduled in 2014, many local inhabitants who were politically connected started converting their jhuggis into two-storied *pucca* houses in both Sector 5 and sector 8 because they were convinced that no demolitions would be risked in an election year. In this case, at least, their gambles paid off.

Unlike the case of Punjabi Basti in which, despite the presence of different political parties and the electoral contests, the local leaders had been able to unite over the issue of getting an authorized map or electricity meters, in the case of NOIDA, the surveys to determine who were the original inhabitants and who were the newcomers generated intense open conflict so that no final survey could be taken as the authorized document for recognizing rights for claiming compensation in the event of resettlement. Thus, the form that local politics took in these two areas shows the importance of local ecologies: rather than a generic category of the poor, what we find is that local histories of settlements are vital for understanding how governmentality and dem-

16. Despite many efforts, we were not able to trace on whose initiative this coalition formed, but it is clear that despite its name, it does not represent the different NGOs in the area.

17. In this regard the trajectory of the politics of compensation in Mumbai has taken a very different turn, showing the importance of the specificity of local histories rather than appealing to some generic notions such as neoliberal reform (see Anand 2011 and Roy 2009 for an incisive analysis of the issues raised by the coexistence of repressive land policies in Mumbai represented by the bulldozer and the spaces for negotiation with builders that opened up as the milieu changed; see also n. 21).

ocratic politics inflect each other to produce different outcomes.[18]

As the paper by Amarasuriya and Spencer (2015) shows, the ethnographic present poses especially important challenges for analysis as changes at the level of state politics can translate rapidly into the rise and fall of particular local leaders and particular projects. In the years since the bulk of data collection was done in the two areas described here, Delhi saw the changing fortunes of political parties that included the near decimation of the Congress Party in 2015 after it had ruled Delhi from 1998 to 2013, the national rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and its subsequent defeat at the hands of Aam Admi Party (AAP) in the assembly elections in 2015. But part of the burden of our argument is precisely to show the fragility and volatility of the housing and infrastructure projects in these areas and the waxing and waning of aspirational politics that emerges within this milieu of uncertainty. What can the struggle for housing and for better infrastructure then tell us about the politics of the urban poor even as we argue in this volume that any generic category of the urban poor is not helpful except as a placeholder (see Das and Randeria 2015)?

Do the Poor Have Politics?

Some political philosophers have argued that because the poor are driven by the immediacy of need, they are not capable of the kind of collective action that constitutes the realm of politics. In Hannah Arendt's (1963) view, for instance, the raison d'être of politics is freedom, and its field of expression is action. Action, however, is distinguished from both labor and work—the first related to necessity, wants, and urges and the second to self-expression, as evidenced in the work produced by the artisan. Neither of the two constitutes the realm of freedom and collective action that Arendt considers as attributes of politics. A full development of the critique of Arendt is not possible here, but even if we were to grant that the kind of struggles over needs (for housing, electricity) we describe here fall more on the side of work than labor because there is an aspiration for infrastructural projects that would be lasting, these forms of collective action would still constitute only the conditions of possibility for politics to arise in Arendt's framework, not evidence of politics itself.[19]

From our perspective, such theories as advanced by Arendt often bypass the question of what it is that the poor actually do. While subaltern studies in India did much to analyze the subaltern groups as political actors, their exclusive emphasis on resistance does not help in analyzing the way in which the poor participate in political activities as part of their everyday lives. Chatterjee's (2004) concept of political society, though more sensitive to everyday life, creates a teleological story in which the efforts of the poor are seen as converting a "population" into a "moral community" by engaging politicians over such issues as housing and electricity, but the notion of moral community manages to erase any signs of the power struggles within the community.

In the case of both neighborhoods discussed here, the trigger to organize themselves for collective action came in the form of a crisis over housing. The turn to the courts of law in both cases was initiated to avert a crisis, though the nature of this crisis was somewhat different. In the case of Punjabi Basti, it was the fight with a powerful private foundation, which led to the formation of the Punjabi Basti Sudhar Samiti. Although the cases the foundation had filed were against *individuals*, it is very important to underscore that residents were able to see this as a collective threat that required action on behalf of the whole community. In the case of NOIDA, it was the fight between migrants and the local settled population that led to recourse to law, which was intended in the first place to ward off police action against them. The trajectories that these fights took became quite different. In the case of Punjabi Basti, the local leaders were able to forge sufficient unity among themselves to establish an authorized map of the colony. They took the initiative to organize their own surveys and, despite conflicts of various kinds in the locality, they were able to get a final agreement on the list of homeowners as well as establish a boundary of the locality.[20] In the case of NOIDA, the conduct of surveys was left to the administrative authority. While surveys to fix titles were periodically conducted and a number was produced each time, an agreement on a final list of homeowners eluded the residents. Instead, the number itself led to further escalation of conflicts within the neighborhood along lines of party politics or along different spheres of influence.

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18. We invite the reader to pursue the tables provided in CA+ supplement B to see the differences in the access to housing and infrastructure in Punjabi Basti and NOIDA. We also want to stress that interpersonal enmities, land grabbing, and forceful occupation of empty plots were not entirely absent in Punjabi Basti and point to our sense that new configurations of power relations might arise. What effect these configurations will have on the ongoing projects for access to water and sewage disposal must be left as an open question for now.

19. We thank Michael Degani for pushing us to think further on these issues, though we must leave a fuller examination of the impli-

cations of our findings for the tripartite arrangement of labor, work, and action in Arendt for another occasion. However, see Pitkin (1998) for a sympathetic but rigorous critique of Arendt's insistence that labor and work do not belong to the domain of politics.

20. We do not wish to suggest that people regularly participate in the activities of the NGOs and of registered societies or even regard themselves as members of these organizations in any formal sense. In the case of Punjabi Basti, the agreement to be represented by the relevant NGO for taking the claims of the locality to the officials for getting it regularized was an important step. In the case of NOIDA, the proliferation of registered societies, each with its own claim of representing the residents, reflected an escalation of conflict.

We also saw that in both cases local leaders were connected with political leaders from outside the locality. They were also able to petition bureaucrats or officials who helped them to negotiate the complex terrain of rules and regulations. Local leaders in Punjabi Basti stressed the importance of learning about the "system," inserting the English word, though they are not English speakers. In the case of NOIDA, the connections with politicians were used most often to increase one's own sphere of influence—the leaders in this locality saw these as personal ties. For instance, they emphasized the importance of having such connections for negotiating with the police in cases where someone was accused of petty crimes or got caught in local disputes. Thus, elements of patronage were present in both cases, but in one case the local leaders were able to establish a measure of autonomy while in the second case the local leaders saw themselves primarily as mediators who delivered "goods" such as votes or "people" for political rallies in exchange for the influence yielded by the politician-patrons in negotiations with police or with local government officials.

We also want to underscore that the poor participate actively in electoral politics, but they do not see elections as the only political activity they engage in. In a random sample of 1,200 households drawn from four localities (including these two clusters in NOIDA), it was found that 86% respondents had voting cards and 75% reported voting in elections.[21] However, when in detailed ethnographic interviews with 40 households chosen from the sample we asked the reasons why people voted, it turned out that one prominent reason was that they thought that their names would be struck off the voter's list if they did not vote and that in the absence of a voter card they would not be able to have proof of residence. They feared that this would lead to their being excluded from different government schemes, including rights to alternate accommodations. Thus, far from wishing to evade the eyes of the state, in these matters, at least, they were demanding to be counted as citizens with entitlements that they could claim without being seen as recipients of charity.

It is not that other considerations for voting for one or other candidate were not offered. In Punjabi Basti, people spoke of MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly), MPs (Members of Parliament), or ward councilors in terms of who had done what for the constituency. In NOIDA, too, the Uttar Pradesh state-level politics were watched closely for any shift in policy regarding the right to alternate accommodations (see fig. A4). What was striking, though, was the sense that they were entitled to live in the city and that it was their votes that had brought the politicians into positions of power. These kinds of considerations and calculations might

not constitute politics in the purest form as Arendt envisaged it, but we claim that it is in the process of engaging the legal, administrative, and democratic resources that are available to them—in courts, in offices of the bureaucrats, and in the party offices—that the poor learn to become political actors and not simply recipients of the state's benefits.[22]

Perhaps the most important point we want to underscore is that we should be considering not simply how well democracy has served the poor but how democratic politics have been deepened by the participation of the poor. After all, it is because they have put political labor into going to courts, insisting that the law take into account what the constitutional provision of the right to life actually means, or their active participation in asking how city life is to be made viable that democracy has taken shape, for all its benefits and its shortcomings. We can do no better than cite Sanjeev Gupta, who, with some assistance from Veena Das, was able to write an op-ed piece in the national newspaper, the *Indian Express*, articulating his criticisms against the policies of AAP, who won the Delhi elections in 2014 (Gupta 2014) and who has now emerged again as the ruling party with a thumping majority. Gupta then wrote, "For us, democracy is measured by the spaces for action that are opened up for us and not by the free gifts we might be given as charity. We have worked to shift the perspective of our fellow residents from that of expecting charity to that of demanding rights." This aspiration might not be an accomplished fact, nor might the position of Gupta be assured within the neighborhood as old enmities reemerge with the change of fortunes at the level of state politics, but the articulation of such an aspiration is not to be dismissed either. Neither the talk of the lure of elections as expressions of the sacred (Banerjee 2007) nor the assumption that it is the ubiquity of relations of patronage that provide durability to politics in India (Piliavasky 2014) provides us with the framework of understanding how to conceptualize the kind of aspirations we described here or the work done by those who inhabit the poorly served areas in Delhi as a sign of the thickening and deepening democracy in India.

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22. Nikhil Anand (2011) makes the important point that large-scale mobilization for housing rights, political representation, and what he calls the "moral economy" of petitions and favors may have been able to secure infrastructural services in the slum areas in Mumbai, but they also serve to create further claims to resettlement. Thus, the "politics of compensation" that has led to negotiated settlements between developers and settlers in many areas in Mumbai cannot be simply treated as a compromised form of insurgent citizenship (see also Roy 2009 for a nuanced argument on how rights to resettlement and accumulation by dispossession coexist in Mumbai). None of this is to deny that bulldozers are still used to dismantle whole settlements, but it complicates the issue of why a differential geography emerges in the city with regard to the possible forms of political action against eviction.

Acknowledgments

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