

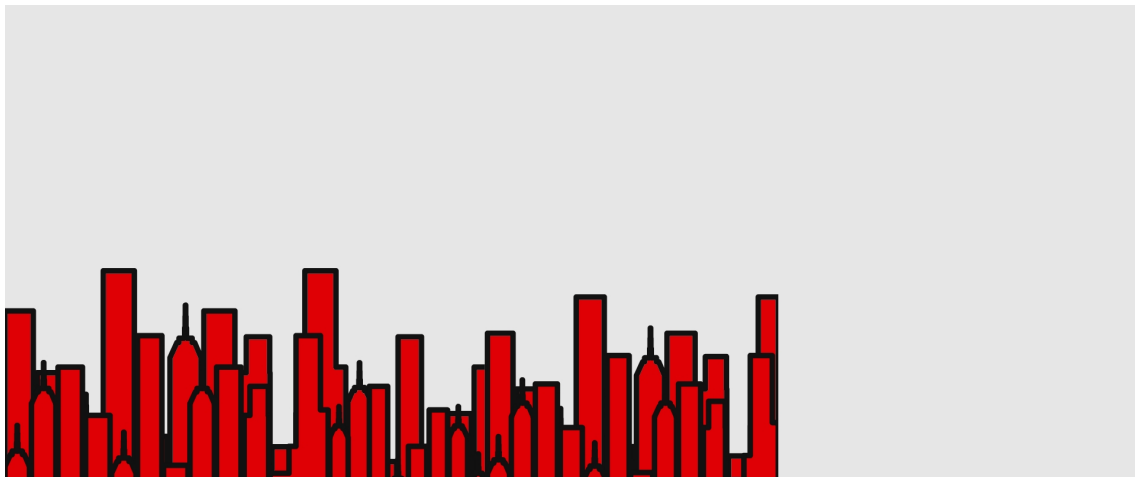
In Bengaluru's Gated Communities, New Forms of Civil Engagement Are Emerging

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Vol. 53, Issue No. 39, 29 Sep, 2018

This research was funded by National Science Foundation grant No 1636437 for Speculative Urbanism: Land, Livelihoods, and Finance Capital and carried out at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru.



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“In India we are a democracy, how do we encourage grassroots participation? When we exercise our responsibility at *grassroots* we can show our electoral representatives that things can be done better. Whatever microcosm that we live in, we can show that we can do this better. That gives them [politicians] the beacon of light that they can go after. This has not happened for a long time in India and I hope that it can happen more and more,” said a former vice president at JP Morgan India, Srinivas^[1] who is currently the President of the Residents’ Association of a gated community, “Golden Springs”^[2] with over 1,200 apartments in Bengaluru.

How did the president of a Residents’ Association come to see their complex as one invested in “grassroots participation?” Our ongoing research on land, livelihoods, and finance in the

global South suggests new ways to think about the relationships between the residents of such communities, space, and politics.

I elaborate on three of these: (i) Imaginations of the nation; (ii) Flows as epistemic frameworks; (iii) Knowledge (technical) as power.

During my interview with we sat in a small office in the basement of Golden Springs. Around us, drivers and domestic workers circulated across desks, receiving ID cards, requesting police verification forms, and attending to building maintenance. Service workers differentially shuffled between people and processes, chaperoning friends who were eager for jobs, and renewing relationships with testy managers. The relationship between this circulating labour force and the residents of elite gated colonies has been the subject of much news recently. A domestic worker at a gated community in Noida alleged that her employers prevented her from returning to her home in an informal settlement adjoining the enclave. Her employer, in turn, accused the worker of stealing from her. In the fracas that ensued, members of the informal settlement forcibly entered the gated community and demanded justice. The media reported on the case through the familiar lens with which gated communities are represented not only in India but around the world. Headlines captured the focus on class and inequality: “Class conflict: Migrant workers attacking gated community in Noida reflects deep inequalities,” “Noida: Mob violence at Mahagun Moderne exposes deep class fault lines,” “At a Luxury Complex in India, the Maids and the Madams Go to War” (Vasudevan 2017) (Jeelani 2017) (Raj and Barry 2017).

The sociological literature on gated enclaves, or “communities,” too has largely focused on the internal dynamics of labour, privatised infrastructure, and sanitised space. In Asian contexts, the anthropologist Li Zhang suggested in her early work on space and citizenship in post-socialist China that “with the distribution of wealth becoming more and more uneven, further social polarization seems bound to ensue among the urban population, leading to new forms of social conflict” (Zhang 2002). The spread of the gated community is accompanied by an anxiety that it leads to a breakdown with civic engagement; possibly a demise of the public sphere itself (Pow 2009: 26). The gated community, with its high walls and securitised gates cultivates “a relationship of rupture and denial with the rest of the city” (Caldeira 2001).

Fear of the ‘Other’

The literature on such enclaves points to a general fear of the “other.” In the West, the middle classes are stuck in place by ravaged property markets to bear their race/class/gender terror in the “revanchist city” (Smith 1996). In India, the middle classes in gated communities sequester themselves spatially from class and caste others whom they mark as “migrant outsiders” [3]. For middle class “returnee migrants” in particular, the gated community reproduces the feel of Western suburbia, replicating the material and affective textures of life in the West (Upadhy 2013). In their ethnographic work on civic

activism, urban researchers note that the transient “new rich” live in gated communities and tend to rely on the market for their services rather than make direct claims on the state (Kamath and Vijayabaskar 2015).

In general, residents of gated communities are believed to spatially isolate themselves from the teeming streets of cities in the global South, relying on the market for their infrastructural and labour needs, and replicating the lifestyles of former lives in the West. Yet, Srinivas is not the only resident of a gated community who explicitly outlined to me their desire to work with local government and reformulate current practices around waste disposal, water treatment, or electricity generation. At another gated community on the peripheries of the Bengaluru city limits, Sunitha Seetharam explained that she first moved back to India to work for an IT company on a “smart city” project. She laughs ironically when she recounts her earlier work “... forget ‘smart,’ forget trying to sell technology to somewhere that doesn’t have sewage.” Today, Sunitha has quit paid employment to engage in civic activism around urban environmental problems.

Our initial interviews with diasporic returnees to Bengaluru who live in gated communities suggests a recurrent theme in how such returnees conceptualise their role akin to “developmental heroes” (Bhatt et al 2010) at the intersection of urban infrastructure, questions of sustainability, and civic politics. Of course, diasporic returnees do not consolidate their efforts into a uniform model of development. Instead, local governance forms a contested terrain on which diasporic returnees “renew” their citizenship via investments in environmental politics. Civic activism is a claim to citizenship by a middle class formerly alienated from formal politics; through their engagement with civic issues of water, electricity, and waste, they craft a politics outside the party system. My fieldwork with residents at gated communities suggests new ways to think about this urban environmentalism that seeks new subjects and collaborators amongst subaltern urban dwellers, middle-class residents, local civic officials, non-governmental Organisations, and state-level politicians.

Diasporic Returnees as Civic Actors

First, I note a particular relationship to the idea of the ‘nation’ amongst diasporic returnees. As transnational subjects, such residents repeatedly invoke their experiences in different countries around the world, and their strategies toward water and waste are cross-pollinated by examples and ideas from these contexts.

For instance, describing Golden Springs’ approach to treating sewage water, Srinivas employed an example of Singapore: “You know in Singapore, the mayor took the water treated by an STP (Sewage Treatment Plant) and drank it and then made a big announcement of it. Here they won’t even pick up the water because we have two problems: not just the government, but residents won’t drink it... because the government has created a negative view of such water.” The developer installed an STP (as is mandatory by law),

and residents take on the responsibility of running it. Golden Springs' STP is so efficient, Srinivas told me, that they now produce an excess of treated water that they cannot legally dispose of. He says that unclear government regulations fetter his ability to maintain a flourishing private infrastructure that could be a model for others to follow.

There is a particular form of neo-liberal governmentality at work here, one that exceeds the realm of individual subjectivity to offer itself as a blueprint for local, and eventually perhaps, national governance as well. In their argument for an analysis of neo-liberalism-as-“event” that exceeds the economic, Bhatt et al (2010) argue that we should attend to new affects and new spaces (such as the household) where neoliberalism is articulated and contested. Here, collective efforts and contestations between and amongst residents of gated communities show how environmental concerns become the ground for framing a new form of classed citizenship amongst urban elites.

Sunitha Seetharam described to us how she began the citizen movement on Bengaluru's periphery. She describes its development as “organic:” She had no plans or vision for a large movement, but it just grew as so many people got involved, she said. “Fifty people got together and began to list their top problems. We said we would reconvene in a month. When we reconvened, there were still 50 people: no one had dropped out. The strength remained, everyone did their homework, felt passionate, and worked harder than they might have done in a paid job. We were all very naïve in thinking we could take on the problems of the world.”

Unlike the “bourgeois environmentalism” of New Delhi's middle classes (Baviskar 2002) or the desire to remove the low income residents of India's cities that Leela Fernandes describes (Fernandes 2006), diasporic returnees in Bengaluru's gated communities imagine themselves as responsible for the framing of a progressive civic politics that harnesses their individual technical knowledge and their exposure to varied systems of governance. Thus, we may find significant regional differences in these forms of elite civic activism. Ethnographic research plays an important role in foregrounding these divergences and detailing how and why citizens intervene as they do. Forms of “civic citizenship” enable middle-class actors to affirm a commitment to their imagination of a sustainable environment in their cities. It also effects a distancing from the popular imagination of a middle class disengaged from the public sphere.

Human Flows of Water and Waste

A second insight is how interdependencies between neighbouring communities might be uncovered by foregrounding and following non-human flows such as of water and waste. This vantage point helps exceed both popular and academic narratives of human class conflict through which the relationships between gated communities and their subaltern neighbours are typically framed. Golden Springs shares a boundary wall with an older neighbourhood established in the 1960s. The smells of waste, the buzzing persistence of

travelling flies, the blocking of sewage, the leakage of drains occur on both sides of the boundary wall, quite different from human movement between spaces. By following and tracing visceral responses to material infrastructures—their blocks and failures—we find conflicts, but also interdependencies, that emerge from the flows between neighbouring communities.

The “issue of the flies” emerged inevitably whenever our team discussed relationships with neighbours on either side of the boundary wall. Golden Springs had located their waste treatment plant just next to the boundary wall; smells and flies both wafted easily across to the other side. Residents here, in the older community, approached their local corporator to complain about the nuisance. The corporator called the head of Golden Springs’ Resident’s Association. Susan Thampi, a Golden Springs resident, was a member of what she called the waste and water “vertical” of the association at that time.

One rainy evening soon after Golden Springs’ brand new waste facility was rolled out, she got a call from a neighbour. There had been complaints, he told her, and the matter had gone to the local member of the legislative assembly and corporator. They had to stop that particular waste facility immediately. “At that point it just had to go out,” she said. Brokering a truce required Golden Springs to “clean up” its waste system—as Srinivas explained, it was the outcry from their neighbours that galvanised a change in the wet waste system. “That sort of gave us the impetus to work on it and our wet waste facility doesn’t produce any smell and there are no flies now, but that innovation was produced by the residents. Not by the government, not by the technology provider, not by the vendor. ...We came up with very new ideas. Completely new ideas. Now that is being taken up by the government vendor. So, we are making a change. To have a facility that is smell-free and fly-free.”

If infrastructural pressures and disconnections make abject citizens (Anand 2012), they also make entrepreneurial ones, and necessitate functional, long-term relationships between neighbouring communities that exceed the relationship of violent class conflict. Sushil Bhandari, one of the first residents of Golden Springs, explained how infrastructure breakdown created forms of civic action and citizenship: “A lot of residents lived overseas and experienced a different quality of life, and [the real estate developer] painted a picture that you’ll probably end up with the same quality of life [as there]. When it was not, we were ready to voice our opinion. I took a sabbatical year (to work on improving governance).” Others too narrated how they created systems for water and waste but had to take time off from paid employment to do this.

Typically, the residents whom we interviewed do not describe communicating with local environmental activists or unions. They rely on other apartment associations, non-governmental Organisations, and middle-class environmental advocacy groups. By foregrounding the flows of water and waste through the analytics of seepage, smell, and sightings (of flies and buzzards), an ethnography of the gated community suggests an

entangled and evolving relationship with its poorer neighbours. As a form of civic citizenship, it makes a moral claim through which residents of gated enclaves enter debates around public spaces and urban infrastructures as civic actors concerned about both human and non-human environments.

Technical Knowledge as Power

Finally, attending to technical details allows us to understand how measurements, compliance norms, and the calibration of waste and water flows create forms of citizenship unique to the gated community. Sociological studies detail the symbolic power of gated communities to create spaces of middle-class life and leisure. As enclaves sanitised from the busy streets of cities such as Bengaluru, they represent the ability of middle-class actors to retreat from public spaces into a realm where labour, infrastructure, and markets are all privatised. However, the symbolic façade of middle-class life that is disinterested in local politics might be challenged by shifting focus to the technical aspects of urban governance.

Sunitha Seetharam, had returned to India “as another IT expat... living a bubble life.” She worked in a corporate job, and lived in a well-known gated community. One evening she noticed the large and ancient tree outside her gym being felled. The tree was over a 100 years old, she told us, and something about its cutting—not just a few branches but the entire tree—seemed meaningless to her. She began to research about how permissions are acquired and discovered that all it took was a licence for a few hundred rupees to fell a tree. She notes this as a sort of rupture event that initiated her entry into civic activism.

In her interview with us, Sunitha often described government procedures in detail, showing her fluency with vocabularies of local governance and explaining her familiarity with municipal officials and local politicians. Middle-class Indians are not expected to be familiar with state functionaries or to know the legalities of urban governance. Yet for Sunitha, researching garbage or working with the Special Commissioner on Waste enabled her to demonstrate her mastery over technical jargon and legalese. She has learnt about the techniques for dredging lakes and describes the kind of options available to the government. This research is the backdrop necessary to her group’s interventions into a nearby lake that is continually in the news for its large-scale froth-pollution. Like Sunitha, others in our interviews—Susan Thampi, Sushil Bhandari, and Srinivas—all shared Power Points, research material, and legal details of governance with us. Their interest in mastering technicalities and speaking the language of local governance offers a useful entry point into understanding how corporate managerial expertise translates into, and influences, the participation of elite citizens in urban governance.

Renewing Citizenship

For residents of gated communities, their ability to influence aspects of their physical and material environment is shaped by a self-representation as agnostic to party politics. They claim only a recent competence in the jargon and technicalities of compliance norms and

local laws. Yet, affective and civic engagements with (dys)functioning urban infrastructures create new forms of citizenship and shape urban environments as contested domains on which diasporic returnees stake claims to local and national leadership by harnessing their managerial skills and technical knowledge. The “environment” is a staging ground for struggles over how to build a sustainable city; for residents of gated communities their diasporic capital offers them the resources to see themselves as influencers of urban governance. This is a form of civic citizenship that enables middle-class actors to shape a politics focused on urban environmentalism outside the realm of formal and messy local party politics. Such a citizenship attempts to attune itself simultaneously to the urban poor and other middle-class residents. It harnesses newly-acquired technical expertise and diasporic capital to address systems of water and waste. Through these newly cultivated spheres of influence, residents of gated communities in Bengaluru begin to renew their citizenship and meaningfulness in the contemporary city.

End Notes:

[1] All names have been changed for confidentiality.

[2] Name of the community has been changed and will be referred to as Golden Springs.

[3] For a larger discussion, see Srivastava (2014).

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