Special articles

Antinomies of Empowerment
Observations on Civil Society, Politics and Urban Governance in India

Since the 1990s, and coinciding with the onset of liberalisation, a "new politics" aimed at associating the hitherto disempowered with aspects of governance appears to have taken shape across India's urban, especially its metropolitan, centres. "Civil society" organisations that seek to make politics more accountable to the "consumer citizen", are invariably, as this study based in the city of Chennai argues, middle class dominated, and while working to bridge the democratic gap between the ruling class and the governed, do not really involve themselves in primary concerns of the "urban poor". That the urban poor then have no option but to seek the redressal of their concerns by associating themselves with political parties is just one of several contradictions that this new politics throws up.

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I
Empowerment and Governmentality

Economic liberalisation in India, as elsewhere, is intimately associated with transformations in the role of the state. The "strong" formulations of neoliberalism of the 1980s, arguing for the drastic diminution of the role of the state in both economy and society, have themselves by now been "rolled back" with the recognition that the state has an essential role to play in the establishment of the institutional conditions that are necessary for a successful market economy. The case was perhaps first set out in the World Bank paper on 'Governance and Development' of 1992, which highlighted transparency and accountability as defining features of the "good government" that was now seen as being essential if economic reforms were to be successful. Now "governance" – defined, for notable example, by the World Bank as "the traditions and institutions by which authority is exercised for the common good"[1] – is frequently regarded as the central problem of development. The concept of governance is clearly broader than that of "government" alone, and thinking about what is required for effective governance embraces arguments not only about the reform of institutions of government itself, but also about the possible role of market mechanisms in the efficient delivery of services, and about community deliberation and action as a means whereby people may develop the "voice" that they need in order to improve the accountability and the efficiency of government. One of the leit motifs, indeed, of governance in the context of liberalisation is the idea of the desirability of "partnership" both between government and the private sector, and government and citizens. In this paper I am concerned especially with the role of such community deliberation and action, in regard to local governance in India's great metropolitan cities, drawing on research in Chennai.

Arguments about community deliberation and action in the governance agenda are bound up with ideas about the importance of organisation in "civil society", and the potentials of participation by citizens in and through such organisations for improving the functioning of political institutions and of the state. "Participation" in this sense is seen as an important aspect of the "empowerment" of people which is sought both as a means to development, and as an objective in itself (it is the "end" – the objective – of development). Empowerment is defined in the World Bank's *Sourcebook* of 2002 (written by Deepa Narayan) as "the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives"; and it includes, as practical requirements, four key elements: access to information; inclusion and participation; accountability; and local organisational capacity, all of which have synergistic relations with each other. I consider that this particular idea of empowerment is a fundamental theme of the governmentality of the post-liberalisation state in India. It has been rendered by the World Bank more recently – and brought more transparently into line with the liberal viewpoint – in these terms: "Empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes".[2] Those who are thus empowered are surely the desirable subjects of a liberal market economy?

"Empowerment" is a complex notion, however, and one that appears in a range of literatures.[3] One influential source is in

the work of the radical educationist Paulo Freire, who argued that in order to build a liberated society, in which people are freed from all forms of oppression, it is necessary, through an appropriate dialogical form of education, to bring about "conscientisation", and through this the transformation of the self. "Conscientisation" is understood as 'breaking through prevailing mythologies (ways of thinking and being) to reach new levels of awareness – in particular, awareness of oppression, (of) being an "object" of others' will rather than a self-determining "subject". "The process of conscientisation involves identifying contradictions in experience through dialogue and becoming part of the process of changing the world" [Goldbard 2006: Glossary]. It is through such a process of the transformation of individual selves – their empowerment, or liberation from "disempowerment" – that society will be transformed. A comparable idea of empowerment is found amongst feminist theorists, for whom a society in which women are treated more fairly can only come about as a result of changed perceptions and ways of being – through the transformation of the self, in other words. In these conceptions social change comes about from within individuals rather than being imposed upon them through changes brought about from outside. In these conceptions of it, too, "empowerment" clearly presents a challenge to existing power-holders, the powerful, in society – a challenge which is lost in the language of "capacity to make choices" in which there is no reference to the others who constrain individuals' choices through class, gender and political hierarchies.

Yet there are resonances of these critical constructions of what empowerment means in the governance discourse. For all that there has been movement away from the more extreme liberal arguments about the desirability of "rolling back the state", it is still held to be desirable that government should be as small as possible – and this objective is achieved if people govern themselves to the greatest extent possible. The ideal subject of the post-liberal state is perhaps well described in the notion of the "consumer-citizen" that is favoured by one policy research and advocacy NGO in Chennai – on the grounds that the term "consumer" emphasises the principle of accountability (and of the "efficiency" to which it should give rise). Consumers are empowered through the operations of markets. "Consumer-citizens", however, also submit to the disciplines of the market, as well as accepting the duties of citizenship, so that they are in an important sense essentially self-regulating. Of them it might well be said that "Governance in this case is something we do to ourselves, not something done to us by those in power" [Cruikshank 1996: 235]. Those who regulate themselves surely are people who are "empowered". Yet the continuities with the discourse of economic liberalism are unmistakable. Subjects who are able to "participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives" are also the entrepreneurial consumer-citizens who function effectively in a free-market society. I make this point about the way in which the discourse of empowerment provides an ethical dimension to neoliberalism not to dismiss it as an ideological screen for the status quo in our societies, but rather to draw attention to the palimpsest of meanings – the antinomies –that the idea contains, and to anticipate my own antinomial conclusions.

In practice empowerment is thought to be realised through the development of local organisational capacity, which partly depends upon, partly gives rise to access to information; which may be a means of inclusion and participation; and which has the potential of greatly improving the accountability of both government and market. It ties up, therefore, very closely with arguments about what may be described as "new politics". This is a politics built up around voluntary organisations in civil society rather than political parties, around new social movements – like the women's and environmental movements – rather than labour organisations, and (most significantly) it is forged in communities rather than in workplaces. Such a politics both requires and may be the instrument of the diversion of "the dirty river of politics", as it is described by one civil society activist in Chennai – referring to the "old politics" of political parties and their mass movements, especially trades unions, which is – or was – a politics forged primarily in and over workplaces. For this civil society activist, organisations such as his own – a highly regarded environmental organisation – offer a "new politics" that is more genuinely participatory than representative democracy, answering people's needs and interests by addressing their problems directly. "New politics" of this kind is attractive to many because the "old politics" has failed to deliver solutions to so many social problems, and appears fatally corrupted by struggles either for personal advantage, or in India, for group advantage. The idea of a "new politics" attracts, indeed, a remarkable set of bed-fellows. Intellectuals and policy actors from right and left of the political spectrum converge around the view either that there is or that there can be such a "new politics" grounded in local political spaces and practices.[4]

In the remainder of this paper I aim to subject these ideas about empowerment through "new politics" – which define forms of governmentality of the post-liberalisation state – to empirical scrutiny, drawing especially on an ethnographic study of associational activity (including both civil and social organisations[5]) in the city of Chennai that I carried out in January to March 2005.[6] I used the method of snowball sampling from starting points identified by several key informants in different parts of the city to identify 62 associations of different types, and their networks, supplemented by additional interviewing of residents' welfare associations and of NGOs in north Chennai. My analysis of the networks of associations brings out the quite sharp differentiation that exists between the brahman dominated civil organisations of south Chennai (which is where the "global city" is located) and the civil and social organisations of north Chennai (occupied by large numbers of informal working class people with very large areas of slum housing, where the physical and social effects of globalisation are hardly in evidence at all). The sphere of associations is the terrain for middle class activism that often has an ambivalent relationship with the organising of poor people and of informal workers. In a sense, "civil society is the site of middle class activism, while the poor have politics", or in the pithy words of another activist in Chennai, "the poor agitate, the rich operate". Another way of putting it is to say that members of the middle class *are* "empowered" while the urban poor continue to struggle against their disempowerment. The question is that whether or in what ways or to what extent they are supported in these struggles by middle class activism.

I conclude that there is a "new politics" in the relations of urban society and the post-liberalisation state, but that it is a politics that is often exclusive in relation to the informal working class, or the "urban poor". Linked struggles over rights to housing, to livelihoods and for women's rights are at the centre of their politics, and they are not generally supported in them by middle class activists and their organisations. "New politics" is strongly

associated with technocratic, rationalising modernism, and it tends to be about "problem-solving" rather than about democracy – which is indeed messy and often involves "dirty politics".[7] Yet poor people in India show a strong preference for representative democracy, because in spite of the manifest imperfections of political parties and their leaders, democracy has still opened spaces for subaltern struggles, offering the possibility of their self-realisation, and helped to increase their self-confidence. The "new politics", on the other hand, rather excludes the poor as active agents, even when the organisations involved do aim to work for them. This conclusion should be qualified, however, with regard to those policy research and advocacy organisations, including some in the south Chennai cluster, that are concerned with such matters as the accuracy of electoral rolls and bringing about the realisation of the expressed aims of the 74th constitutional amendment regarding decentralisation of urban governance. These objectives are potentially supportive of the capacities of the poor to agitate against their disempowerment.

II
'New Politics' and Associational Activity

Contrary to what might be deduced from the title of a well known book on Indian politics – which is *Democracy without Associations* [Chhibber 1999] – there can be little doubt about the vibrancy of associational life in Chennai. The idea is anyway contested in historical research, especially that of Carey Anthony Watt in his book *Serving the Nation: Cultures of Association, Service and Citizenship in Colonial India* (2005). He shows that in the early 20th century "a vibrant "associational culture"" was being developed in India, meaning by this "a richly variegated, autonomous and self-governing multiplicity of associations and societies that were cradles of citizenship, mutual assistance and social reform" (2005:10). He remarks, however, significantly for the story of associational cultures in Chennai today, that "with notably few exceptions social service work was undertaken by urban elites of the upper castes, lower-middle and middle classes, and directed towards individuals of lower social status" (2005:3), and further that it is 'not surprising that educated, elite middle, class and upper caste social service activists imparted brahmanical values to citizenship' (2005:16). But, equally unsurprisingly, this became problematic when imposed on people from what were then called the "depressed classes" in the process of trying to "uplift" them. "Uplift" involves disciplining the rough margins of society, and there is a strong tension between this objective and that of the self-realisation of marginalised people through their empowerment politically. The point has remarkable resonance in present-day Chennai – as it did in the 1970s according to Caplan's study of women's welfare organisations (1985).

Local residents and community associations are prominent in Chennai – notably the ubiquitous Residents' Welfare Associations (RWAs) found very largely, however, in middle class areas;[8] there is a lot of local organising around the construction and the maintenance of temples [Waghorne 2004]; there are numbers of caste and cultural associations (the latter very prominent in Chennai); there are still lots of trade associations (in which we may perhaps include the well known Lions' and Rotary Clubs) and local unions; there are now very large numbers of NGOs, most of them providing services to poor people, but some of them engaged in research and advocacy work; there are human rights organisations and movements organised around rights to information, to food, to employment; and there are significant numbers of organisations that federate or coordinate the activities of, variously, local community associations, NGOs, or human rights groups. There is no way of measuring exactly what the universe of associations is, but the impression of abundant associational activity is inescapable and is confirmed from a variety of sources.[9]

The following table describes my snowball sample. I distinguish between various types (see footnote 5) of *civil organisations*, and of *social organisations*. Amongst the former the largest single category is that of the non-profit service providers – what are commonly described as "NGOs" – including both charitable trusts set up by individuals to provide services for particular groups, such as the elderly, or mentally challenged children, and organisations with wider programmes including mobilisational objectives. The other type of civil organisation is that of advocacy and policy research organisations (labelled here "advocacy NGOs"). The social organisations described in the table as "associations" include local territorial associations such as the residents' welfare associations and some identity-based groups, including here dalit welfare associations and associations of male sex-workers and gays. The second category of social organisations is that of social movements – membership organisations which are neither territorially based nor restricted by particular ascribed identities.

As the table shows, few of the associations were started before the 1980s, and more than half have been started since 1990. Though there is no means of knowing about the rate at which associations are closed down, it is probably reasonable to conclude that there has been an acceleration in the rate of establishment of organisations in the 1990s. This is certainly so with regard to non-profit service providers, driven in part at least by the availability of more funding from foreign donors in this time. "Now", one observer said, "Chennai has an NGO on every corner".

In sum, the era of the post-liberalisation state certainly appears to be a period of associational activism, and – especially with

Table 1: Types of Associations, Dates of Foundation and Social Identity
(Per cent)

Association Type	Numbers	Date of Foundation						Social Identity*		
		Before 1960	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000 and After	Brahmin	Christian	Other
Advocacy NGO	7	0	0	0	3	3	1	3	4	0
Advocacy and service	5	0	0	0	2	3	0	3	2	0
Service Providers	19	1	1	2	4	7	4	2	12	5
Movements	10	1	0	3	4	1	1	4	1	5
Associations	12	0	0	0	3	5	4	4	0	8
Networks/fora	9	0	0	1	0	6	2	2	5	2
All	62	2	1	6	16	24	12	18	24	20
Organisations listed in Sahaya**	202	27(13)	7(3)	37(18)	44(22)	68(34)	10(5)			

Note: * "social identity" refers to the identity of the founder or founders, or – in the case of the networks and fora – of the organisers.
** Sahaya is a directory of 202 associations involved in "welfare, health and social service in the city of Chennai". Data on date of foundation missing for 5 per cent of the associations listed.
Figures in brackets are per cent.

the development of networks, fora and of coordinating agencies amongst them – the institutional forms looked for as the basis of "new politics" clearly are present in Chennai. It is to be noted, however, rather contrary to what is suggested by the World Bank about the character of the associations that are part of "new politics",[10] that many of these associations in Chennai are not membership organisations, and their representational claims rest on weak grounds – such as the argument that we work for them or "we know their needs".

III
Class Character and Activities

It would be foolish, clearly, to suggest simple conclusions about the significance of all the diverse activities of the associations in the sample. An important share of them, however, like the RWAs, certainly are associations of and for middle class people as consumer-citizens; others, as I go on to explain, have been organised by middle class people, mostly (as the table shows) either brahmans or Christians. Survey research in Delhi shows that participation in associational activities is skewed quite heavily towards those with higher levels of education and income [Harriss 2005], and it is unlikely that comparable research in Chennai would yield different results [Caplan 1985: 33-34]. Whereas we found in Delhi that poorer and sometimes also less well educated people are more active in political life, and that poorer people (especially those who have some education) are more active in attempts at solving public problems, the same is not true of associational activity. If we take associational activism as an indicator of political participation then we find a stronger tendency for wealthier and particularly for more educated people to be involved, clearly calling into question the hopeful notion in the current development discourse that poor people are able to secure effective representation or "empowerment" through participation in associations in civil society. In general the evidence I have shown that though there are now more channels for influencing government, and thereby securing representation – through RWAs, advocacy NGOs and their fora and networks – those who can avail themselves of the opportunities offered are usually the better educated and wealthy. The paradox that increasing opportunities for participation may go to increase political inequality stands against the claims of protagonists of new politics.

A majority of the civil organisations in Chennai are service-providing NGOs aimed at meeting the needs of different groups of people who are in some way deprived. There are specialised organisations working in the health sector and some specifically with HIV affected people. Others aim to organise their beneficiaries in what are described as "community development" programmes, usually through setting up women's self-help groups (SHGs). Other common activities undertaken by the service providers as part of their community development efforts are: provision of crèches, night schools to enable working children and school dropouts to take their education further, transit schools intended to get working children, or in one case children with disabilities, back into mainstream education, tailoring classes and computer classes – supplemented with some health services (health check-ups and health training). Such organisations serve slumdwellers and it is not to scorn the motivation or the sincerity of those who have set them up, to suggest that their effects, as well as delivering real benefits to some individuals, are to bring

order to the "wild" that is constituted by the slums in a way that is absolutely comparable with what Watt describes for the late-colonial period. I observed the activities of one such organisation quite closely, including participation in its Womens' Day events. These included an exhibition of the produce of the self-help groups that it organises in partnership with the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Women's Development – not much of which can have been more than marginally profitable – a programme of speeches by distinguished guests, and a drama about the lot of women. The large numbers of women who took part were said to have come from some of the poorest slum areas. All were smartly turned out. And on another occasion I was impressed by the way in which some spoke in a regular meeting of an SHG. But it was hard to avoid the impression of "disciplining" that was given by the attitudes and the mannerisms of the distinctly middle class women who organised the Womens' Day programme, towards those amongst whom their organisation is working (much as Caplan also described: 1985).

IV
Stratification of Associational Activity

The most telling feature of the associational space in Chennai is indeed the sharp differentiation and stratification of organisations. On the one hand there are organisations, concerned mainly with issues of urban governance and the interests of consumer-citizens, that are quite elitist, run by upper middle class people, mostly brahmins. These are organisations that adopt the formal language of "citizenship" and speak of participation in budgeting, and of transparency and accountability in local government. Many of these organisations are run with substantial budgets with a high degree of genuine professionalism, but they do not have – nor even seek – a broad popular base. On the other hand there are some organisations that are focused on the urban poor – also set up in the first place by middle class people, though usually from a different, less affluent stratum, commonly Christians – that do mobilise and organise people to make demands upon the state. The focus of their work is typically the slums and much of their effort is directed at securing basic rights for the people.

These two types of organisations engage with government in very different ways. The former may well adopt the paradigm of "public-private partnership" and champion the notion of "collaborative change" between state and civil society (such as the Delhi government claims to be doing through its Bhagidari Scheme, of partnerships with RWAs). The idea is that "synergy" between citizens and government is essential to bring about change. This is "the rich operating". The latter have adopted "protest" – this is "the poor agitating". "Partnership" with the state is inconceivable to most organisations in this group – rather the state does have to pressured for the realisation of people's rights. It appears then that the stratification in civil society organisations reflects also a dualism that distinguishes "citizens" from "denizens" (inhabitants, who may be "done unto"),[11] and that a particular technocratic associational elite defines citizenship in particular ways (such, notably, as in terms of the idea of the "consumer-citizen"). Networks among civil society organisations tend to form within the realm of either "citizens" or "denizens", rarely straddling both. In Chennai there is a sharp distinction between the brahmin dominated networks of RWAs, advocacy and some service organisations of south Chennai, and

the networks of mainly Christian-led service and advocacy organisations in north Chennai. The dominantly Christian cluster includes organisations that actually work *with* people in poor parts of the city, and the relatively few social organisations or movements in which poorer people are active participants – those organisations that may be described as being *of* the poor. The former, brahmin cluster, does not include such organisations. Some of the associations within the brahmin cluster are concerned with problems relating to citizenship and to problems of governance that surely affect and are of relevance to poorer people – an important point to which I shall return – but they principally address middle class interests. There are few links between these distinct networks. Those in the north Chennai networks talk explicitly of the "caste base" of civil society activism in the city, and there remains a good deal of resentment towards what is seen as brahmanical paternalism – very much as Watt describes for the later colonial period – even though there may also be respect for the work done by some of the brahmin organisations.

Janaki Nair (2005) and Sudha Narayanan (2005) have described a very similar stratification of associational activity in Bangalore, too. In Bangalore, the upper stratum, of highly professional associations, has been very much concerned with the problems of the urban environment, but – as Nair has put it – with "Roads, rather than public transport; garbage and pollution, rather than public housing; mosquitoes and public toilets rather than public health" [Nair 2005: 336]. In other words the concerns have been with issues that are framed by middle class interests. She continues: "Other studies that have been undertaken of how different sections of the city prioritise their municipal problems reveal altogether different concerns: they include, importantly, concerns about the availability of water, the existence of job opportunities in poor neighbourhoods, and an overwhelming anxiety to claim citizenship and voting rights by getting onto the voters' lists. The last was seen in many cases as critical to the survival of the poorest groups in the city, as politics is often the only resource in a system which may deny the benefits of policy decisions or legal remedies to the poor" [2005: 336-7].

Nair in fact concludes her study of Bangalore with the argument that 'the city has become the ground on which broadly two contending forces stake their claim: on the one hand are the newly renovated citizens, who are amply aided by a technocratic vision of change offered by the leaders of the new economy. On the other hand are those, including citizens-in-the-making such as women, for whom democracy has come to have a different meaning "in the urban setting" [Nair 2005: 347]. This account of Bangalore corresponds quite closely with the distinctions that I have observed in Chennai. It is important to nuance the analysis, however. There are associations in my south Chennai brahmin cluster that are concerned with citizenship, voters' rights and the maintenance of the electoral rolls – which, as Nair says of Bangalore, are matters of great concern to poor informal working class people; and even the SHG movement has ambivalent implications. In part it seems, in a sense, to buy women off with very modest resources; but insofar as it does bring them into public spaces and help them to acquire a greater sense of their own agency, then it contributes to their becoming citizens, rather than just denizens of the city.

The crucial distinction between the south Chennai network of organisations for and of "citizens" – even if the concept of citizenship, for them, tends to be regarded in terms of the rights of consumers – and the north Chennai Christian network, is that in the latter there are not only organisations that work with the urban poor, like the service providing NGOs, but also mobilisational movements – the most notable of them actually being women's organisations. The Penn Urimai Iyakkam (Women's Rights Movement), in particular, though started initially by four middle class women – a teacher of physics, two other academics, and a lawyer – is an organisation of poor women. The group whom I met included two women with no education at all, one with education to ninth standard and one with higher secondary school qualification. The husband of one is a day labourer, and that of another a watchman. The other two were victims of domestic violence and had been deserted by their husbands. They are all members of the committee of an organisation with about 7,000 members in Chennai and 10,000 in the state, that aims to fight for women's rights, campaigns on violence against women, provides legal aid and counselling services, and – most importantly, for those women with whom I spoke – fights to secure housing rights and basic services for women living in slums. It is a constituent member of the Tamil Nadu Slum Dwellers' Rights Movement, and both through this formal connection, and through the central involvement in both associations of the same leading women's rights campaigners, the Penn Urimai Iyakkam is also closely connected with the mobilisation of informal sector workers by the Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangh (the construction workers' union, founded in 1979) and now with the more recently formed Unorganised Workers' Federation (on which see also Agarwala 2006). The federation links unions of domestic workers, construction workers, scavengers, tailors, gem cutters, vendors, agricultural labourers, handloom weavers and, latterly, fish workers, and (reportedly) it joins together about one lakh (1,00,000) people across Tamil Nadu. Its objectives are to campaign for the rights of unorganised sector workers – including those that have been formally legislated for already by the government of Tamil Nadu, but not fully implemented – and against globalisation (on the grounds that liberalisation and globalisation harm the livelihoods of poor workers).[12] The close links of these organisations – the women's rights movement, those for unorganised workers, and the Slum Dwellers' Rights Movement – depending partly on their overlapping leadership, reflect their common position that housing rights and rights to livelihood are intimately connected. The priorities of these movements of the urban poor are distinctly different from those of the citizen-consumer advocacy associations of south Chennai, and their modes of action are also very clearly contrasted.

The women's movements in many ways supply the backbone of the mobilisations of the urban poor in Chennai. The numbers of women who are organised by Penn Urimai, and also by CPM-affiliated All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), and by Mahila Milan (never mind the large numbers of women's SHGs) far outweigh the numbers of men from amongst the urban poor, living in slum areas, who are involved in such mobilisational movements. All those involved in the Slum Dwellers' Rights Movement spoke of the difficulty of holding together local organisations of poor people, including men, in slum areas. The Tamil Nadu Slum Dwellers' Federation proved to be unable (I believe, rather than unwilling) to provide any introduction to local slum dwellers' organisations. The professor of social work who provided my third entry point was able to identify five or six slums in which there are, to his knowledge, more or less active

local organisations. According to him, and to other activists, there are particular mobilisations against evictions but they rarely, if ever, hold together for very long either because of their politicisation by competing political parties, or because of the buying off of leaders by landlords. Exactly as Janaki Nair has said of Bangalore, therefore, politics "is often the only resource in a system which may deny the benefits of policy decisions or legal remedies to the poor" (cited above). Survey research in Delhi [Harriss 2005] shows that the urban poor are often more active in trying to find solutions to public problems than are members of the middle classes, but that their way of tackling such problems is most commonly mediated by political parties. It seems likely that the same is true of Chennai, in spite of women's activism through their own movements and organisations.

V
'New Politics' of Empowerment and Governmentality of the Post-Liberalisation State

Contrary to some claims in literature, the metropolitan cities of India have a vibrant associational life, and the institutional forms that are thought to be the potential basis for the "new politics" of empowerment – civil and social organisations established to achieve a variety of ends – clearly are there. But contrary to the expectations, for example of the World Bank, when it speaks of NGOs and of voluntary associations as "expressions of voice and participation" that are "on the rise" (see footnote 10), many of them are not membership organisations and their representational claims are weak. Participation in associational activities is quite heavily skewed towards more highly educated and wealthier people, and they provide little space for active participation on the part of poor people from the (massive) informal working class. Civil society activism has opened up new opportunities for representation, no doubt – for the upper stratum of professional advocacy organisations and policy research outfits in Chennai is able to exercise significant influence on the actions of governments – but such opportunities hardly extend to the informal working class or the "urban poor". As I have put it earlier, the paradox that increasing opportunities for participation may actually go to increase political inequality stands against claims of protagonists of new politics.

It is of course important to emphasise the nuances in the story that I have told for Chennai, in several ways. Though civil society activism is – unsurprisingly – essentially middle class, and tends to be exclusive in regard to the urban poor except as the objects of middle class and often upper caste paternalism (now, as in the past), there are some mobilisational movements that really are of the urban poor. These are movements around women's rights, rights to housing and rights to livelihood, and efforts are being made to make connections between these struggles. Living spaces – the slums and squatter settlements – are the critical sites of poor, informal working class people's political struggles, rather than workplaces (which are, anyway, often found within the same marginal spaces), and these struggles are directed against the state not against employers (unlike many organised working class struggles). These movements have problematic relations both with middle class activism – the upper strata of professional advocacy NGOs are not involved in action over slumdwellers' rights, while the RWAs of middle-class neighbourhoods may well be supportive of urban planning that leads to their

displacement – and with political parties. The significance of party political activism in the slums is ambivalent. On the one hand, as Janaki Nair has argued, "politics is often the only resource", yet on the other because the slums are the garrisons of their support for political leaders, it is important for them that they should maintain clientelistic relations with their supporters, and they seek to control popular mobilisations like those that the Slum Dwellers' Rights Movement wants to encourage.[13]

The governance agenda set out in what has been called the 'Post-Washington Consensus' involves a package that includes privatisation, decentralisation, civil society participation and community involvement. In this paper I have been concerned in particular with the last two elements in the package which bear most directly on the aim of "empowerment". The governance agenda addresses a central problem of liberalisation, which is that it requires the shrinking of the space of state action and the devolving of functions to the private sector or to civil society, whilst still needing instruments of rule. Civil society participation and community involvement are instrumental in reconciling the tension between these different objectives – because, as I argued at the outset, they presuppose or are expected to encourage the development of "self-rule" and of people's capacities to look after themselves and their communities – and they thus constitute the governmentality of the post-liberalisation state. They presuppose the consumer-citizen subject who looks for accountability and efficiency, but who also submits to the disciplines that they require. Civil society participation and community involvement also present a way of reconciling democracy with antipathy to the irrationalities of party political competition.

But the slumdwellers and members of the informal working class of a city like Chennai pose a problem for the governance agenda. In the ways they live and behave they are as threatening to bourgeois order as they were in the colonial period when – as Nandini Gooptu has shown so well of the urban planning carried on already in large towns in Uttar Pradesh in the interwar period, intended to reduce overcrowding and to improve sanitation and public health – "The urban local authorities, representing the attitudes of their constituency of propertied classes, identified the poor as the main perpetrators of growing urban overcrowding and insanitary conditions" [Gooptu 1996: 3245].[14] The contemporary governance agenda proposes to tackle the continuing problem of the urban poor not through any very significant redistribution of resources – which is what is required if people are to have decent places in which to live, and reasonable means with which to support themselves – but by "empowering" them through decentralisation and community participation. In practice what is happening is that some advocacy NGOs in Chennai aim to make citizens of the slumdwellers (for example by working to enable them to participate more fully in decentralised urban government) – but without, as I have explained, supporting them in struggles over rights to housing and to livelihoods. There are no powerful voices from within civil society supporting the Tamil Nadu Slum Dwellers' Rights Movement, the Unorganised Workers Federation or the Penn Urimai Iyakkam. Meanwhile, many other service-providing NGOs are concerned with bringing order through their "community development" programmes. They are still "uplifting" poor people, partly by disciplining them into habits of hygiene and personal health, and responsible saving through

the burgeoning medium of "self-help groups". New politics is largely exclusive in regard to the urban poor, and the "problem" that they pose remains.

Yet this does not quite allow for the antinomies of the present. The great difficulty that the planners of the cities face today, unlike their predecessors in the colonial period, is that they operate in the context of an electoral democracy under universal franchise. Majoritarian popular politics may actually be threatening to their project of bringing rational order: the slums and squatter settlements in which at least a quarter of the population of Chennai lives (according to the 2001 census, and surely an underestimate) are a major part of the problem of order in the city, but they are also garrisons of votes for contending politicians. It is perhaps not surprising that there has in practice been very little effective decentralisation of government in the city. The 74th amendment, or Nagarapalika Act, provides a legal framework for urban self-governance, and the ministry of urban development of the government of India claims on its web site that the Act has "made the urban local bodies into vibrant self-governing institutions". It is hard to agree with this judgment on the basis of what has happened so far, in Chennai, or elsewhere – as Ramanathan has recently explained. As he says "Participatory involvement of citizens in and accountability of local governance structures are almost totally absent in urban areas" (2007:674). He estimates that in urban Karnataka the ratio of elected representatives to citizens is 1:3400. In Chennai, I calculate, it is something like 1:20,000, or more. The corporation of Chennai is divided into 155 wards, organised in turn into "units" and then zones. There are 10 zones in Chennai, so that on average each zone has a population of more than 4,00,000 people. Yet in Chennai it is the zonal committees, constituted by the councillors for each of the wards in the zone that are deemed (according to the municipal commissioner) to be the "ward committees" mandated by the 74th amendment. Each of the zonal committees has a chair elected from amongst the councillors. There is actually no committee or meeting of citizens, either as individuals or – as in Brazil – through their associations; and senior officials in the corporation are very sceptical about the practicality of setting up any kind of deliberative bodies or anything like the system of participatory budgeting, pioneered in Porto Allegre in south Brazil, and now instituted very widely throughout that country.

This is a problem that some of the highly professional advocacy and policy research NGOs in south Chennai seek to change through their strong support for effective decentralisation of city government. One of them has used the 74th amendment to take the government of Tamil Nadu to court for its failure to practise 'subsidiarity'. Another of the advocacy, NGOs is specifically concerned with what its director refers to as "civic engagement". In his view – like Ramanathan's (2007) –there is an inverse relationship between urbanisation and civic engagement in Tamil Nadu, there being more active involvement of people as citizens in rural areas than in towns and cities, because of the increasing significance of panchayati raj institutions in the villages. For all their imperfections and malfunctioning, gram sabhas do create spaces for the active engagement of people, spaces that are lacking in the city. Ramanathan's organisation aims to encourage participation in panchayats through programmes to increase information and awareness. It is also active in trying to increase participation in local elections in Chennai, pointing out that given the low turnouts in elections to the Chennai council, it is possible for a candidate to be returned with only a tiny number of votes. In his view, organisational space for civil society activism is closed off by the alternating ruling parties, the DMK and the AIADMK, neither of which wishes to see influential alternative local leaders coming up. Part of the programme of his organisation is to encourage independent candidates to stand in city elections. For him too, then, "politics (referring to regular party politics) is a dirty river". Yet his organisation is also active in improving the electoral rolls and enhancing the possibilities of formal political participation in exactly the way that is sought by many of the urban poor (as Janaki Nair argues with reference to Bangalore). There are possibilities for the empowerment of poor people through representative democratic politics inhering in the activities of these NGOs; and it is possible, at least, that the establishment in India's cities of the democratic spaces envisaged in the 74th amendment would create fora in which (middle class) "citizens" and "denizens" or "slum dwellers" (see footnote 11) are brought together in deliberation. The creation of such democratic spaces is greatly to be desired (see footnote 13).

Finally, to sum up. The kind of local organisation in civil society that is looked for in the agenda of "empowerment" does exist in a metropolitan city of India like Chennai, but it is very largely exclusive in regard to the urban poor of the informal working class – certainly as active agents. It is organisation of and for the "consumer-citizen" subjects of the neoliberal state, and much of the activity that it sustains is directed at disciplining the urban poor rather than supporting their struggles over rights to housing, livelihood and protection, or their self-realisation. It is important, however, to nuance these conclusions, for there are organisations and activities that do address the needs and interests of poor people, support their claims to political citizenship and aim to extend the possibilities for them to participate in local governance. But there are then the antinomies of representative democratic politics. In the global cities of India the urban poor depend heavily upon political parties – as we observe in the survey data that shows the importance of the mediation of political parties in the ways in which they try to tackle public problems –in spite of the fact that they are frequently corrupt, non-democratic in their internal workings, and have usually failed to deliver. They may also disrupt the sustained organisation of poor people by themselves, rather than supporting and being supported by it (in the way that has happened in Brazil: see Gurza Lavalle et al 2005) – for in Chennai (as also in Delhi) local organisations of dalits and slum dwellers – who are the garrisons for political parties –are easily divided on party political lines (if their leaders are not corrupted by those with interests in land). Yet there is strong evidence showing that while middle class people in India have withdrawn increasingly from electoral politics, poorer people are remarkably active participants, and that representative democracy has empowered some historically subordinated social groups at least (in what has been called "the second democratic upsurge" by Yogendra Yadav, 1996). It appears very strongly that the principal possibility for the urban poor to obtain representation for themselves is still through political parties, and that there is a very strong commitment to the value of democracy amongst poorer and historically socially subordinated people in Indian society in general. Javeed Alam, for instance, argues that "Democracy in India is an assertion of the urge for more self-respect and the ability to better oneself" (2004: 22).[15] The evidence both

of the surveys of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, on which Javeed Alam draws, and that from Chennai discussed here, show that civil associations in which people are represented as customers or clients rather than as citizens do not stand in the place of formal representative democracy. The "new politics" of empowerment – the mode of governmentality of the post-liberalisation state in India – does not incorporate the urban poor, nor articulate their political practice. This is why there is so often resort to coercive action by the state in the metropolitan cities – ultimately contradicting the blandishments of the discourse of "empowerment". **EPW**

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Notes

1   This statement is taken from the World Bank's Governance and Anticorruption website, accessed at www.worldbank.org/wbi/governance on May 7, 2007.

2   From the World Bank's 'Poverty Net' website, accessed May 7, 2007.

3   An illuminating discussion, from which I have drawn here, appears in Aradhana Sharma's forthcoming book *Empowering Moves: the Cultural Logics of State Formation, Gender and Development in Post-Liberal India,* see also her paper in *Current Anthropology* 2006, Vol 21, No 1, pp 60-96.

4   For a discussion see the introductory essay by the editors in *Politicising Democracy: the New Local Politics of Democratisation* [Harriss, Stokke and Tornquist 2004].

5   By "civil organisation" I mean to refer to those organisations that have professional staff, work to benefit others and specialise on a particular set of issues, while by "social organisation" I refer to those organisations or associations that represent their members or communities and mobilise them around their own demands.

6   In addition, however, I refer at some points to the results of survey research conducted in Delhi by Neera Chandhoke and her research group, as part of a Research Programme on "Rights, Representation and the Poor". The programme also included rigorously comparable survey research in Sao Paulo and Mexico City, undertaken by Peter Houtzager and Adrian Gurza Lavalle, to which I refer as well.

7   The point is made very clearly by Pratap Bhanu Mehta. Arguments about policy, he says, are entirely subordinated to the calculus of securing electoral majority. In this context the frustrations of the middle class are understandable, since "in the name of democratic empowerment, we have focused on the *side issues of representation* rather than effective public policy" (emphasis added). The middle class is not, he says, "an unalloyed carrier of virtue … but we are underestimating the degree to which this class is the wave of the future and is now struggling to articulate new conceptions of social justice" (quotations from the *Indian Express* June 7, 2006).

8   The RWAS are mixed. Those in older middle class areas have quite often been active in addressing matters of public interest; those in new condominiums are concerned much more with the interests of individuals as "consumers" rather than as "citizens". Many of the latter are not well described as "membership" organisations, functioning more as statutory management organisations.

9   The same is true of major Latin American cities. Our survey research (see footnote 6) shows that similar proportions of citizens in Sao Paulo, Mexico city and Delhi participate in associational activities of some kind (Sao Paulo 26 per cent, Mexico 28 per cent, Delhi 30 per cent – these are figures in each case for engagement in *secular* associational practices). The Latin American cities seem to differ from the Indian ones principally in that Sao Paulo has relatively larger numbers of coordinators – of federating or coordinating bodies – and service NGOs are less prominent than they are in India.

10 An idea of what constitutes "new politics" was given by writers from the World Bank in the *WDR 1997* on "The State in a Changing World", when say: "In most societies … citizens seek representation of their interests beyond the ballot as tax payers, as users of public services, and increasingly as clients or members of NGOs and voluntary associations" [World Bank 1997: 113].

11 The "citizen"/"denizen" distinction was suggested by Sudha Narayanan, reflecting a usage that, she tells me, is found amongst some activists in Bangalore. Kalpana Sharma has pointed out to me that it is quite commonly the case that in reports in the English language press the distinction is made between "citizens" and "slum dwellers". How telling this is.

12 See reports in *The Hindu* of March 15, 2005 and May 5, 2005, on demonstrations on job security, wage and pension guarantees for unorganised workers. A model bill has been drawn up, and a rally of about 20,000 people from all over the country took place in New Delhi in May 2005, when a petition was presented to the speaker of the Lok Sabha, "seeking inclusion of the right to employment, education and health security as fundamental rights".

13 It is surely very important to recognise the contradictions in the role of local leaders and political parties in slums. Jha, Rao and Woolcock have recently analysed the role of local 'pradhans' in Delhi slums, showing that, just as happens in Chennai, these local "big men" (sometimes women) are "fixers" who function as vital intermediaries between people and the state. Jha, Rao and Woolcock's final conclusion that "urbanisation in Delhi does appear to be providing the poor with greater voice in democratic discourse. Slum dwellers benefit from a remarkable access to politicians and other government officials …" (2007, p 244) then appears to be remarkably one-sided. Their analysis shows how extensively slum dwellers depend upon the patronage of the pradhans, and it is surprising that they do not recognise how such dependence qualifies citizenship and democratic participation. These authors have perhaps been carried away by the problematic notion of "linking social capital" (on which see comments in Harriss 2001, p 87). The survey research in Delhi referred to in note 6 produced comparable observations to those reported by Jha et al , but my interpretations of them are different. They seem to suggest the existence of what Partha Chatterjee has labelled "political society" , in which people "are only tenuously … rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the Constitution" [Chatterjee 2004, p 38].

14 The point, about the relations between the urban middle class and the rest of society has been well put by Sankaran Krishna, in his commentary on the nuclear scientist Raja Ramanna's biography, when he comments that: "one of the existential realities of being a middle class Indian is an inescapable desire to escape the rest of India" (2006, p 2327). In regard to urban planning, not much has changed since the time, in the 1930s, of which Gooptu wrote, when the aim was to exclude the poor. Now each of the metropolitan cities has a plan for becoming a global city, involving measures of "beautification" that frequently require massive slum clearance campaigns. Rational order is to be brought to the cities, along with improvement of their economic and recreational infrastructure. In Chennai this involves, for instance, the policy of relocating people from inner-city slums or pavements, and from squatter settlements alongside the city waterways, to resettlement colonies 20 km away

from the city centre, initially at least virtually without water and with limited transport facilities. Relocation for many has meant loss of livelihood and deprivation, while children have sometimes been forced to dropout of their local schools. Separation and exclusion of the poor remains an important part of the strategies of the middle class, and it should be a major concern for the influential citizens' organisations, like Janaagraha in Bangalore, to create fora in which middle class people and members of the informal working class in the slums come together (as Ramesh Ramanathan of Janaagraha argued at the Berkeley conference).

15 See also Pratap Bhanu Mehta 2003, pp 35-57 on 'Democracy and the Politics of Self-Respect'. Mehta argues that "The desire for democracy is in part a desire to have one's moral worth acknowledged" (2003, p 41).

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