TERRAINS OF NEGOTIATION:

LOCAL POLITICS, BUREAUCRACY, AND URBAN RESIDENTS IN CONTEMPORARY CHENNAI

By

PRITI NARAYAN

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D. Asher Ghertner

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Terrains of Negotiation: Local politics, bureaucracy, and urban residents in

contemporary Chennai

By PRITI NARAYAN

Dissertation director:

D. Asher Ghertner

This dissertation examines how the informal poor make claims to city land and basic

services in a landscape marked by increasingly violent and frequent slum evictions. I posit

that outcomes for the urban poor emerge from their adept navigation of 'terrains of

negotiation' with politicians, local bureaucrats, and activists to preserve their citizenship in

the city. Terrains of negotiation emerge as part of the contested arena of patronage

relations widely discussed in the literatures on postcolonial state-society relations and

urban informality.

Based on over thirteen months of ethnographic field work conducted in an informal

settlement, archival research, and multiple years of housing rights activism, I forward that

residents deploy particular, temporally variable, strategic positions on shifting terrains of

negotiation. I examine moments at which

(i) as pliable clients of local political patrons, residents cede slum territory and spatial privileges to avoid threats to their occupancy;

(ii) as biopolitical subjects of the welfare state, they stake claim to land, legitimacy, and citizenship, both current and future, through a metis, or learned practice of capturing identity documents;

(iii) as active encroachers of city space who build their own community infrastructure, residents attempt to strengthen their moral claims to the land by demonstrating its current use value by creating and sustaining an urban commons; and

(iv) as consumers of municipal services who are willing to pay and bribe for access, they are able to secure access to certain state agencies and a form of substantive urban citizenship.

The terrains of negotiation I examine emerge at the intersection of both the splintering of housing patronage in the state bureaucracy and the absence of formal regulations for eviction and resettlement, and a more fluid landscape of political parties and community organizations in shaping patterns of collective action. Terrains of negotiation are uncertain, unpredictable webs of political alliance that form in particular spatial settings and that, I argue, allow the urban poor to exert considerable, although inconsistent, claims upon the state in the face of deep economic and political vulnerability.

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It is unfortunate that I cannot name the residents of "MGR Nagar" without endangering their precarious position in the city. But to those I call Malliga, Malathi, Charumathi, Pushpa, Dhanalakshmi, and Rajathi amma, I owe a great deal of gratitude, for their companionship, conversations, laughter, and the countless cups of tea, numerous meals, and dizzying numbers of Milk Bikis packets they fed me. I thank them especially for opening the doors of their home and community to me. We shared a rather dramatic journey for a while, and I hope I can continue to be a part of their struggles in any way possible. I am also, of course, immensely grateful to Thangam, Kamatchi, Palani, Muthu, and all the residents of MGR Nagar for their trust, openness and time.

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The Department of Geography at Rutgers has been generous and nurturing from even before I accepted the offer to do a PhD here. This research was conducted entirely with the financial support of the department and the university.

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List of abbreviations

AE - Assistant Engineer

AIADMK - All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party

CI - Commercial Inspector

CMWSSB – Chennai Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board

DMK - Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

ICDS - Integrated Child Development Services

MGR - M G Ramachandran, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu (1977-1987), founder and leader of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

MLA - Member of Legislative Assembly

NOC – No Objection Certificate

PDS - Public Distribution System

TANGEDCO – Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation

TNEB - Tamil Nadu Electricity Board

TNSCB - Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board

TNUDF – Tamil Nadu Urban Development Fund

UIDAI - Unique Identification Authority of India

WVS - Women's Voluntary Service

INTRODUCTION

The story of a wall

One morning in late December 2016, I received a call on my mobile phone from Malliga, a resident and local leader of MGR Nagar where I had been doing my field work. Malliga and I were both members of *Pennurimai Iyakkam*, a slumdweller rights organization that has been helping poor residents fight evictions for the last forty years. On the call, Malliga reported that the police, and the elected ward councilor[1]—the most local elected official in the city—had just come to the neighborhood and told the residents that a wall was going to be built between MGR Nagar and the road.

MGR Nagar is located on an arterial road, in what is normally a highly securitized area in central Chennai: policemen in groups of different sizes can usually be seen stationed near the entrances to MGR Nagar, or hanging out in the stores along the main road. A wall, so it was said, was now going to come up right along the line of stores run by MGR Nagar residents, walling off the settlement from the main road and its dense commercial activity.

After Malliga called, I informed the *Iyakkam*, and took my scooter up to MGR Nagar to join in the conversations residents were having. The neighborhood ration shop, where residents often got together to discuss local issues, was abuzz. The Member of the Legislative Assembly (the MLA) - an elected official who represented the part of the city that MGR Nagar is in[2] - visited only the previous day, promising to build a nearby park and install

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[1] The councilor is the elected representative of the smallest administrative unit in the Corporation of Chennai, the ward. Through local body elections held every five years, the residents of Chennai elect councilors for 155 wards, and a mayor for the city.

[2] "MLA" stands for Member of Legislative Assembly. The MLA is also an elected representative, but of the state government. State assembly elections are also held every five years, in which a Chief Minister for the state of Tamil Nadu, ministers, and MLAs for the various constituencies are elected.

more streetlights and water pumps in the slum. But he had not mentioned the wall at all, and residents wondered why.

Why was a wall necessary in the first place? Murugan, who worked in one of the stores, speculated that it was because MGR Nagar was an eyesore in need of hiding, considering how close it was to important state government offices.

The stakes of the wall coming up were high for the residents. The wall would threaten the entire line of shops facing the main road, a vital part of the neighborhood economy, providing not just business income, but connections to the wider city. The wall was also going to block three entry points from the main road, leaving just two ways to access the settlement or exit it, a danger given the risks – fire and flood, to name a couple - that they had faced in the past.

Residents gathered there that day considered taking action. Protesting the wall, though, would have considerable political implications. It would mean going against, or at least questioning, many powerful parties. Dhandapani, who owned and ran one of the larger, more profitable establishments along the road, declared that he was not about to protest the wall since residents already thought that he was bribing local police officials to keep the place running and did not want to be seen as acting out of pure business interest.

After the brief street meeting, conversations about the wall reverberated through various parts of the neighborhood until the day wound to a close, with residents remaining undecided on what to do. One of the male local leaders suggested that residents write a formal letter to the MLA, hand it to him in person, and investigate the specific reason for the

wall's construction. In making that phone call to me and involving the *Iyakkam*, I expected that Malliga would request the *Iyakkam* to intervene in the matter by formally petitioning the MLA or staging a formal protest along the lines discussed by residents on the streetside.

Instead, the matter of the wall was not brought up to the *Iyakkam* again. In February 2017, the Chennai Corporation posted notices in some high traffic areas of the slum, like the tea shops and the water tank. Two days later, the wall was built: a tall white concrete barrier, with an adjoining pavement built with stones and rocks embedded in the poured concrete surface, an example of deliberately hostile infrastructure meant to prevent the homeless and loiterers from getting too comfortable—a model of defensive architecture of increasing prominence globally (see Andreou 2015, Borromeo 2015). In the end, residents neither resisted the wall in an outright show of force, nor questioned the logic behind its construction to the powers that be.

I asked Palani, a resident and local leader, why this was the case, despite the considerable social costs the community would bear, and despite the fact that the wall was going to constrain their mobility greatly. The intervention was clearly hostile and oriented at cutting off MGR Nagar, as the initial unrest around its proposal indicated. He said with a shrug and a wry smile, "we decided not to oppose this. It's only a wall, let them build it. We have other battles to fight."

My friend Malathi went further, when she said "the wall is a good thing, in a way. It is protection for us. At least this way, they won't trouble us."

MGR Nagar is a settlement that emerged about fifty years ago on land belonging to two government departments. MGR Nagar is not an officially recognized slum under the Tamil Nadu Slum Areas Act 1971, meaning that its residents have not been legally authorized to occupy the land on which the slum lies and do not pay property taxes. It is what scholarly literature calls a "squatter settlement," and what administrative and policy documents in Tamil Nadu and India more broadly variously call a "slum" or an "informal settlement." This condition makes MGR Nagar residents vulnerable to eviction. In the absence of legal property rights, there is little to no room for them to legally make claims against removal on the state. Residents have always endured tenure insecurity as a result, as evidenced by the numerous rumblings of summary evictions of the entire settlement that have circulated in the past. One part of MGR Nagar was evicted to a peripheral area in the 1990s in the name of "flood relief." After clashes with the locals in the location to which they were resettled, residents came back and re-squatted where they had previously lived. Another part of the slum was actually evicted, violently, in 1999, for the expansion of a playground in a nearby planned area. Now, too, a new infrastructural project, an expressway that will connect the Chennai port to its industrial suburbs, represents the newest threat of displacement looming over residents' heads. If the project were to materialize in the form in which it is currently being proposed, no part of MGR Nagar will remain. MGR Nagar's endurance for almost fifty years in the face of persistent existential threats provides one way to understand residents' stance vis-à-vis the new wall.

Malathi's perspective on the wall as a form of protection, despite the obvious material and social damage it enacts, begins to make sense in this context. Full blown resistance would have involved potentially upsetting relationships both with powerful actors of the state, such as elected representatives and the police, as well as internally with residents. Allowing

the wall to come up, and in a sense, *ceding* slum space and spatial privileges, was a way of gaining invisibility, leaving residents alone to continue to get by. Inaction was not inaction after all, but, as residents understood it, a tacit exchange invested with hope. It was a negotiation, albeit one without the direct transactional conditions those with the privilege of title, deed, or income slip might be familiar with. Rather than a negotiated agreement on right-of-way or in the form of monetary compensation, the logic of this unstated transaction was one where residents' forfeiture of certain privileges granted by allowing the wall to come up would, they hoped, make their evicted from illegally occupied city land less likely.

This dissertation attempts to identify strategies used by the urban poor as a way to retain urban space, even citizenship, in the city. In this brief story of a harmful-but-not-contested wall, many actors can be identified: working residents of a low-income slum; local leaders formed from among that group, such as Malliga; the *Iyakkam,* an activist organization seeking to defend MGR Nagar's future; elected representatives; and the police. In the pages that follow, I argue that outcomes for the urban poor emerge from their adept navigation of what I characterize as "terrains of negotiation" with these politicians, local bureaucrats, and activists to preserve their citizenship in the city. Slum residents try to better their living conditions and sometimes those of their neighbors by negotiating, giving and taking, in multiple, not usually self-evident ways to defend the gains they have made in the city, and to make further advances by negotiating relationships and urban space itself.

This is a critical moment in which to examine how claims to urban land are being made. Hundreds of urban poor settlements had not just been noticed and ignored, but actively allowed by the government to capture public land in Indian cities for many decades: this was a manifestation of the welfare function of the Indian postcolonial state (Ghertner

2014). In addition, protection from evictions and *in situ* housing provision had been explicitly part of the patronage-based, "vote bank" logics of leading political parties at the time. However, with an increasing developmental pressure on land, these guarantees are no longer available. Strategies to make a world-class city— "beautification", "development" and "eco-restoration" (Coelho and Raman 2010)—increasingly envision no place for the poor. Working classes who have lived on public and common lands for generations are increasingly facing eviction threats on urban, peri-urban, and increasingly outright rural lands as part of a broader turn to speculative rent seeking via real estate and infrastructure development (Ghertner 2015, Levien 2013, Mahadevia 2011, Sharma 2010). Chennai, the fourth largest city in the country, has seen at least 150,000 people from sixty-three slums removed from their homes in the past ten years (Transparent Cities Network 2015) Between September and November 2017 alone, over 3,000 families were evicted (Aditi 2017). The scale of this violence, and the destruction it has wrought to previous, more predictable modes of claims making in the city, suggests the need to attend to the more provisional, and directly territorial negotiation strategies the poor carry out to claim and re-claim tenure security, basic services, and more broadly, urban citizenship itself.

Figure 1: Demolition of a settlement in Chennai, August 2015. Photo by author.

Setting up terrains of negotiation

Chennai's terrains of negotiation emerge as a part of the contested arena of patronage relations widely discussed in the literature on urban informality. In Chatterjee's (2008, p. 57) influential formulation of "political society," for example, the urban poor "make their claims on government, and in turn are governed, not within the framework of stable constitutionally defined rights and laws, but rather through temporary, contextual and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations."

I forward that residents deploy particular, temporally variable, strategic positions on shifting terrains of negotiation, with politicians, bureaucrats, and activists. I examine moments at which

(i) as pliable clients of local political patrons, residents cede slum territory and spatial privileges to avoid threats to their occupancy;

(ii) as biopolitical subjects and beneficiaries of the welfare state, they stake claim to land,

legitimacy, and citizenship, both current and future, through a *metis*, or learned practice of capturing identity documents and mobilizing markers of locational identity;

(iii) as active encroachers of city space who build their own community infrastructure, residents attempt to strengthen their moral claims to the land by demonstrating its current use value and performing a caretaker role in creating and sustaining an urban commons; and

(iv) as consumers of municipal services who are willing to pay and bribe for access, they they are able to secure access to certain state agencies and a form of substantive urban citizenship.

Making this argument demands that we pay close attention to the social, political and economic context in which these negotiations take place, and the scholarly literature on which this research relies, and builds on, which I will lay out in this section.

Patronage politics and housing policy

The Dravidian movement of the early twentieth century is of great significance in the state of Tamil Nadu. The movement, spearheaded by prominent rationalist and social activist Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, was centered around a politics of secession from India based on the distinctive language and religious practices of Tamil Nadu (Subramanian 1999, p. 30), and emerged as a force against Brahmin caste dominance in education, socio-economic spheres, and associational politics (p. 96). Since the secessionist demand did not garner significant popular support, the movement took a populist turn by transforming from an ethnic social movement into an electoral force that leveraged the demands of emergent non-Brahmin groups—mostly the so-called Other Backward Castes, or OBCs (ibid., p. 7). The electoral

party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), formed in 1949, has remained one of two dominant parties in the state, using populist strategies that have emphasized intermediate and lower-caste community empowerment efforts through affirmative action, expanded opportunities for mobility, as well as paternalistic measures, through which communities were made dependent on a benevolent leader for protection and material benefits. The topmost benevolent leader figure in the DMK was first the party founder, C.N. Annadurai (popularly referred to as *arignar*, the scholar) and, after Annadurai's death in 1969, poet M.K. Karunanidhi (*kalaignar*, the artist), five-time Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. More localized leaders paid fidelity to these senior figures and sometimes became charismatic neighborhood-based leaders with dedicated followings. The DMK thus developed local party cadres to allocate clientelistic benefits, and consolidate local electoral strength and political legitimacy, while also binding party members to the goals of the party in a direct manner (ibid.). Tamil Nadu is hence well known for a near-religious celebration of iconic political leaders and film stars, who often overlap.
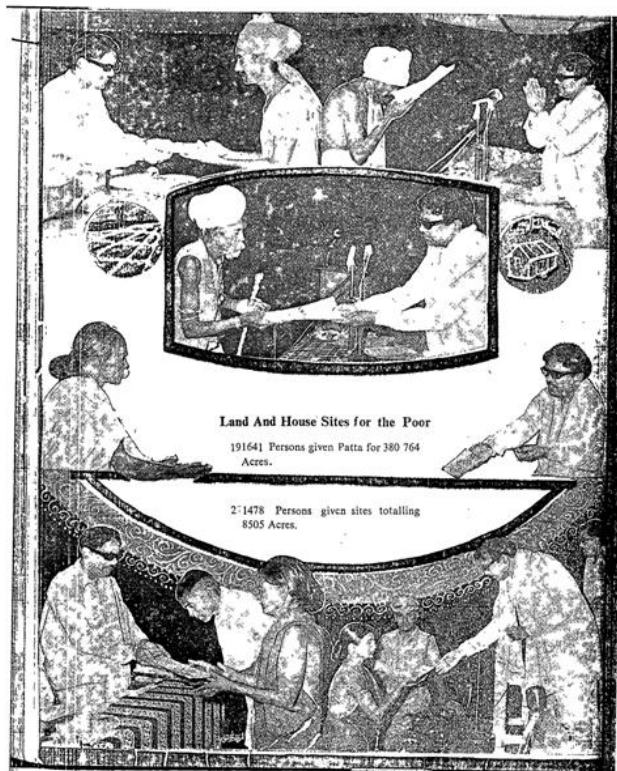
Tamil Arasu, March 1971 issue. Accessed at the Tamil Nadu Archives Library
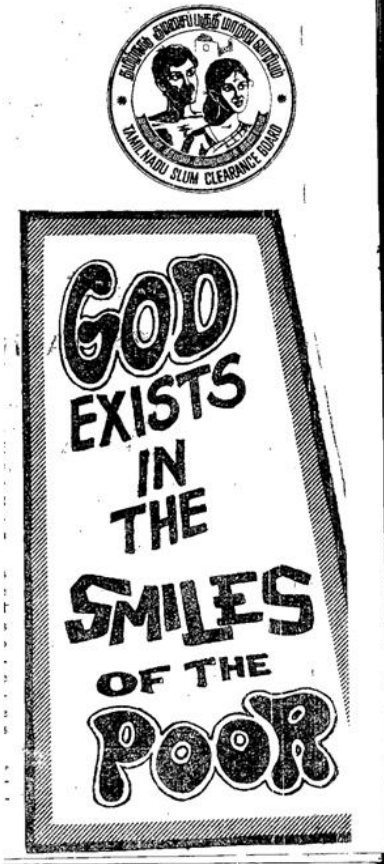
Figure 2: Then- DMK chief and Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M. Karunanidhi pictured; the early imagery associated with the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board.

Shelter policies in Tamil Nadu, too, were rooted in patronage for much of the 1960s–1980s. The state constructed and delivered concrete apartments to the poor where they already lived, couching housing policy in the distinctly Tamil rhetoric embodied in the slogan, "God we shall see in the smiles of the poor." While these tenements were touted as being Western in sensibility—much like high-rise "apartments in a foreign country"—they were essentially patronage-based in logic, with the expectation that the poor would return the favor by voting for the DMK, the dominant party throughout this period. The Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB) was created in the 1970s specifically to dole out housing to DMK supporters (Raman 2011). It is notable that thriving populist shelter policy meant that slum interventions were broadly considered humane and pro-people: all slum dwellers were

given concrete homes where they lived, and the state offered near blanket protection against evictions (ibid.).

Significant events in the political economy of Tamil Nadu caused a paradigm shift in the ways in which the state dealt with the urban poor in Chennai. The first of these was the arrival of the World Bank in 1972, which ushered in a depoliticized, "technocratic neoliberal" approach characterized by deregulation of markets and cost recovery (Raman 2011, p. 77). The Bank veered housing strategy away from *in situ* provision of public housing to the more cost- and time-efficient "Sites and Services" projects it promoted globally at the time, through which large tracts of mostly peripheral land were developed with basic amenities. The World Bank's funding conditionality that shelter practice remain free of political interference led to the delinking of shelter policy from electoral politics through the bureaucratization of TNSCB leadership and the introduction of expert committees to lead housing projects. The Bank also created a Community Development Wing in the TNSCB designed to liaise directly with communities and to improve collection rates and user fees for housing projects (ibid.).

The end of the 1970s also witnessed the DMK's loss of power to the splinter party All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), headed by movie-star-turned-politician MG Ramachandran, or MGR, due to internal leadership differences. The AIADMK did not offer the same protection against evictions as the DMK had previously done. It shifted away from the earlier model of housing clientelism, and set the tone for welfarist, programmatic schemes, such as the flagship Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme, which was made available to all

school children (Wyatt 2013a, p. 33)[3]. MGR became the charismatic leader extraordinaire, affectionately known as the king of the people (*makkal thilagam*); he was beloved as the good sovereign, the constant donor to the poor for these reasons (Cohen 2004). He did not lose a single election for as long as he was alive, and after his death, has remained a figure who is largely free of reproach. It is significant that this is the case despite the checkered record of his leadership with respect to the urban poor: it was at his behest that an attempt was made to seize fishermen's goods from the sea, escalating to the eventual gunning down of six fishermen in the 1980s in order to clear beachfront land for Pope John Paul XXIII's visit to the city (Arabindoo 2011). This move was then condemned by the Supreme Court, forcing the government to return the fishermen's wares. Visweswaran's (1988) account of the eviction of Wallace Garden slum in 1986 points to the convergence of calculated informality of state practices, state violence, legal apathy, and the assertion of the construction of an elite private hospital that MGR personally favored as a "public good" - all while he was in power.

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[3] Wyatt (2013a) uses Susan Stokes' (2007) and Kitschelt's (1995) definitions of clientelism as the use of material inducements to seek electoral support from individuals, and programmatic (welfarist) appeals for support as drawing the voters' attention to policy which provides benefits to all those in a defined category (say school children) irrespective of whether they vote for the authors of the program.

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)
Established 1949	Established 1972
M Karunanidhi, MK Stalin	MG Ramachandran, J Jayalalithaa

Figure 3: Schematic of the leading political parties, party symbols and flags, and key leaders.

The DMK and AIADMK, which have alternated in controlling state power since MGR's death, have pursued a combination of clientelist and welfarist politics to woo voters and retain legitimacy. For instance, Wyatt (2013a, p.41) argues that the DMK gained political capital through measures such as cash-for-votes and the distribution of gas stoves, which was then leveraged to undertake widespread evictions after 2005 (Arabindoo 2011, as quoted in Wyatt 2013a, p. 41). The popular narrative among slum communities and in activist circles is that the poor's acquiescence to the breakdown in their tenure security in Tamil Nadu is bought through the distribution of consumer goods, while rendering them broadly vulnerable to exclusionary, more market-oriented citymaking (see Balakrishnan 2015, for instance)[4]. In place of the pre-neoliberal exchange of votes for housing and secure tenure, slum consent, in other words, is understood to be bought through the handout of television

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[4] Recently, during the 2015 Tamil Nadu floods largely acknowledged to be a disaster caused by governance failure and mismanagement, the ruling party AIADMK was accused of forcibly applying stickers of current Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa on relief mobilized by citizens, in a posturing move to save face (see PTI 2015, for instance).

sets and food grinders, items that households otherwise saved up to purchase during auspicious occasions like Deepavali or Pongal[5]. What one witnesses instead of protection of slum dwellers from evictions is state assistance for private development on lands where slums once stood. This is a process that has been deepened and extended during the period of economic liberalization, beginning in the early 1990s in India and directly informing urban policy and housing intensely from the late 1990s onwards.

Figure 4: Distribution of consumer goods by Chief Ministers in power.
Left, M. Karunanidhi as Chief Minister distributing free colour television sets, September 2006.
Picture courtesy V. Ramesh, Rediff India
Right, J Jayalalithaa giving out free bicycles, August 2015. Picture courtesy Deccan Chronicle

Urbanization through dispossession

The post-liberalization Indian city is a dynamic site where the empowerment of elite actors in governance and the commodification of urban land has occurred through flexible governance (Shatkin and Vidyarthi 2014, Roy 2005). As in the colonial state's use of infrastructure as an instrument for creating and maintaining spatial differences (Kooy and Bakker 2010, McFarlane 2008), expansive and visible infrastructure built in the city for

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[5] Wyatt (2013a, p. 371) describes another shift in the nature of populism: food subsidies in the Noon Meal Scheme for instance, aimed to protect the vulnerable, while consumer goods speak to the aspirations of ordinary voters as consumers.

consumption by the middle class today is achieving similar effects by causing the eviction of the urban poor and deepening forms of spatial segregation. With infrastructure being hailed as the material embodiment of modernity and the means for carrying the city and nation forward (Baviskar 2010, Graham and Marvin 2001), landscapes have been dramatically transformed, justified by public calls for beautification and environmental improvement to create world-class cities (Ghertner 2015, Baviskar 2003). The Cooum River Restoration project and the Singara Chennai ("Beautiful Chennai") campaigns are examples of such efforts in Chennai, which have led to large-scale evictions across the city in the name of urban clean up, environmental restoration, disaster relief, and tourism and amenity enhancement (Narayan 2018, Coelho and Raman 2010).
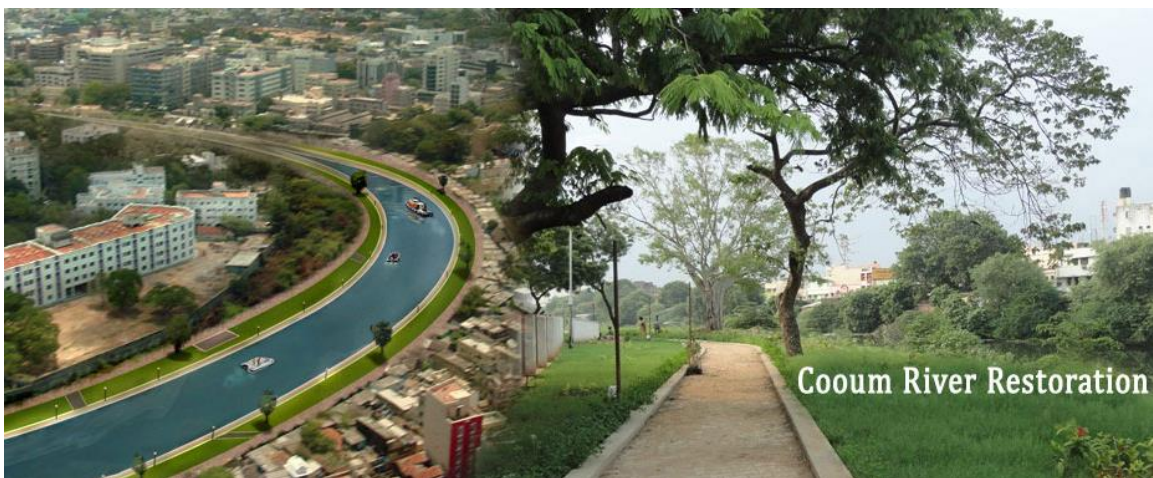
Figure 5: Graphic rendering of proposed river cleanup projects. Accessed on the Chennai Rivers Restoration Trust website (2018).

Given that most of the land occupied by slums is state-owned (TNSCB n.d.), the state is the central actor in the current drive to reorganize urban space. Land owned by the state has increasingly been released into the market as opportunities for major revenue gains from public asset sales have materialized. For instance, a separate financial intermediary called the Tamil Nadu Urban Development Fund (TNUDF) was set up in 1996, with the explicit aim of enhancing "the flow of private capital to the urban sector" and facilitating "private sector

participation in infrastructure" (TNUDF website, n.d.). The resulting development projects

have been dispossessing the poor of the land they had been living on for years, in a classic

case of what David Harvey (2004) calls "accumulation by dispossession." The availability of

increased funds from the central government since the late 1990s for flood alleviation,

housing development and urban renewal has enabled the construction of large resettlement

colonies on the outskirts of the city (Raman 2011)[6]. These colonies are somewhat distorted

adaptations of the World Bank's older Sites and Services projects, which also involved the

development of peripheral land for residential purposes. Sites and Services projects were

based on a model of incremental construction and voluntary application to the housing

program rather than forced resettlement.

This accumulation of land and capital and the subsequent evictions of the urban poor have

been enabled by informal yet purposive acts of the state, what Roy (2009) describes as

"calculated informality." The state regularly gives away urban land, suspends laws, and

creates exceptions for corporate investors and middle-class homeowners to aid land

development, real estate growth and the aesthetic appeal of a world-class city (see Ghertner

2015). Consistent with a formulation of the state as not just a regulator, but also an active

producer of informality (Roy 2005, p. 149), the state's formal interventions into Chennai's

informal settlements over the years have been characterized by neglect and bureaucratic

indifference. For example, slum declaration, which legally authorizes the residents of the

notified slum to continue living in their location, pay property taxes and access basic

services *in situ*, has been undertaken in Chennai only twice, in 1971 and 1985 (Transparent

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[6] In 2000, the first set of 3,000 houses were constructed at the first large scale resettlement colony Kannagi Nagar, using funds made available through the Flood Alleviation Programme. Since then, at least A host of slums living on river margins were evicted and rehoused here. Disaster relief has also been used as a reason to evict the poor from the city, notably after the 2004 tsunami and the 2015 Tamil Nadu floods.

Chennai 2012), leaving most settlements in a state of legal limbo: while they might formally

qualify for notification according to past criteria, the absence of official notification means

that their residents never quite know how secure they are; they remain in a tenuous

balance with political leaders, state bureaucrats and the law, relationships with whom

require constant maintenance and work. This is a state that Chatterjee (2004) terms

"paralegality," a condition of not being legal, but not necessarily being illegal either. Since

1985, city boundaries have expanded, recognized slums have grown in population and

density, and new settlements have come up, but there has been no further declaration. This

has meant that thousands of urban poor residents now live in a condition of state-

perpetuated informality, leaving them vulnerable to evictions on the basis of their

informality.

Most of the evictions in the city invoke the Tamil Nadu Land Encroachment Act of 1906[7].

This Act declares all public land—such as roads, bridges, ditches, rivers, streams, and

lakes—the property of the government and confers on the government the right to

summarily evict anyone "unauthorizedly" occupying taxable land. While this provides some

basis for the eviction outcomes that have taken place historically, the Act makes no mention

of the approved eviction processes, as far as issuing notice, compensating those to be

displaced, or filing appeals (Narayan 2015). An ex-employee of the TNSCB revealed to me in

an interview in January 2013 that no legal government order is passed in the initiation of an

eviction. Decisions to evict are taken at interdepartmental meetings, with official approvals

often issued on paper only after the evictions have already occurred[8]. Unlike in Delhi,

Gujarat and Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu does not have state legislation governing

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[7] Interview with advocate D. Nagasaila, February 14, 2013.
[8] Interview, January 24, 2013.

resettlement and compensation in case of eviction. There is often ambiguity of authority

and jurisdiction between state departments, especially in the case of projects involving

state- and city-level agencies, such as the Public Works Department or the Chennai

Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board. The Community Development Wing of the

TNSCB, which was set up specifically to liaise with communities during evictions, is often

not even involved in the process. My interactions with officials indicate that the Revenue

Department provides the bulldozers, the landowning state department supervises the

demolition, and the TNSCB provides resettlement housing—even though it typically has no

legal obligation to do so[9].

Most evictees are offered compensatory housing in peripheral resettlement colonies; at

least 50,000 homes have been constructed over the last two decades, making Chennai

comparable to South Africa for the sheer scale of state-driven resettlement programs

(Sutherland et al 2015). These tenements are not exactly free. Most evictees pay

downpayments and monthly dues to the TNSCB as part of the hire purchase agreements

they receive towards ownership of the house. Upon paying dues for a certain amount of

time, usually 15 or 20 years, they receive a sale deed for the house, with which they can, in

theory, buy, sell, or take a loan against the house. Alongside, residents also pay maintenance

charges. These costs are often described by resettlees as unaffordable, especially given the

loss of livelihoods resulting from the evictions. Residents report poor access to basic

amenities, limited social infrastructure, and few employment and educational opportunities

at these resettlement colonies (Lakshman 2009, Ramakrishnan 2009). These government-

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[9] The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, which guarantees just and fair compensation to families who have been affected by development projects was only passed in 2013; Narendra Modi's regime attempts to vastly undercut the protections offered by the legislation Sharma 2015, for instance). Chennai's attempts of providing alternate housing to evicted families began in the 1990s.

created ghettoes, cut off from major work centers and with minimal transportation links to the central city, are also characterized by high crime and suicide rates due to economic deprivation and social exclusion experienced there (Tejonmayam 2014, Special Correspondent 2011).

Figure 6: Resettlement tenements in Perumbakkam, 2013. Picture courtesy Transparent Chennai

With the major political parties no longer offering broad protection against evictions for slum dwellers, and multiple gaps in existing laws and policies concerning land acquisition and resettlement, evictions happen in a seemingly arbitrary manner, with no stipulated notice period and no standard compensation package for evictees. Different development projects planned on or near slum lands produce different eviction outcomes for slumdwellers (Narayan 2015). For instance, projects with central government involvement have been able to provide more inclusive and generous resettlement experiences than local projects carried out by the state or city government, even though these different forms of state involvement have no relationship with the historical conditions of settlement and the different forms of political connection or de facto levels of tenure security they provide to the residents. While the bureaucratic ambiguity of evictions makes it hard for communities

to seek accountability or legal redress, it leaves the terrain open for communities to negotiate differential outcomes for themselves.

State action around the now booming land market in India, in this sense, cannot be reduced to the singular will of the state or the expression of a coherent set of capitalist interests. It is, rather, a complex process of negotiation between state actors and multiple forces in political society (Chatterjee 2004, Kaviraj 2000). In Chennai, evictions are mediated by communities themselves and "civil society," a domain including, but not restricted to, elite activists, community-based organizations, rights groups, unions of low-income female workers, networks based on caste and kin, and religious organizations. Under conditions of anonymity, an ex-employee of the TNSCB admitted to me that the TNSCB used to attempt to follow a due process to execute evictions in the 1990s, but found that its efforts had been constantly corrupted by politicians looking to dole out favors[10]. Caste-based political parties were not prominent in Tamil Nadu from the 1960s to the 1980s because the DMK and the AIADMK absorbed most non-Brahmin caste groups in their social coalitions (Subramanian 2002); the Dravidian movement had earlier provided a platform for multiple non-Brahmin castes to express their discontent against upper-caste domination and North India's general subjugation of the South, forming a sort of "consensual bloc" (Pandian 1994, p. 221) with some common demands. However, the uneven social and economic advancement of non-Brahmin castes within the bloc over the recent decades led to the emergence of caste-based parties at the end of the 1980s (ibid.) with growing mobilizational strength and experience in influencing local conflicts. These parties are now a force to be reckoned with and upon which the large ruling parties, the DMK and AIADMK, now depend for electoral alliances (Subramanian 2002). The recent political and social empowerment witnessed by some

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[10] Interview, January 24, 2013.

sections of the Dalits - members of historically disadvantaged caste groups subject to discrimination and segregation - and the significant rise of Dalit electoral politics in India over the last twenty years more generally (Kumar 2006, Pai 2002), has led to the proliferation of small but cohesive Dalit groups in Chennai, which exercise fluid allegiances with parties and politicians, making them significant actors in the everyday lives and struggles of slum communities, but often without predicable effect. Communities, with the help or influence of civil society and political actors, thus often negotiate flexible urban processes in ways that are beneficial for them. Such dynamics are even pronounced not only among urban poor settlements in the central city, but also in resettlement colonies, where old political coalitions hold less organizational sway[11].

Thus, the organizational tentacles of political parties in Tamil Nadu in its urban slums and resettlement colonies, and the clientelist nature of Tamil Nadu politics, have coupled with the vernacular means of claims making available to the urban poor characteristic of Indian politics more generally, to generate multiple paths and systems by which the urban poor can appeal to lower-level state functionaries (Benjamin 2008, Chatterjee 2004, Kaviraj 2000), at the same time blurring the lines between state and society in terrains of negotiation in Chennai. The terrains of negotiation I examine thus emerge at the intersection of both the splintering of housing patronage in the state bureaucracy and in the TNSCB, the absence of formal regulations for eviction and resettlement, and a more fluid landscape of political parties and community organizations in shaping patterns of collective

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[11] In Kannagi Nagar, the oldest resettlement colony in Chennai, residents described political conditions there as being akin to a 'jungle' when they first arrived over fifteen years ago, with organizational coherence, and hence livability, having improved somewhat over the years. By means of mobilization through networks of civil society organizations within resettlement sites and in the central city, residents have been able to acquire better, more frequent services, such as improved bus service to the central city, and more educational and health facilities.

action. Terrains of negotiation are uncertain, unpredictable webs of political alliance that form in particular spatial settings and that, I argue, allow the urban poor to exert considerable, although inconsistent, claims upon the state in the face of deep economic and political vulnerability.

Collective action and citizenship in terrains of negotiation

India has always had a history of differential citizenship, taking the form of separate electorates for minority groups before Independence and later embedded in the Indian Constitution as exceptional provisions made for marginalized groups. Drawing from Marx's allusion to differential citizenship in "On the Jewish Question," Chatterjee (2013, p. 91-92) outlines how differential entitlements have proliferated and expanded from constitutional and legal provisions to administrative regulations even at the lowest level of administration in India.[12] The exception, then, itself becomes a terrain of negotiation, with multiple forces from political society trying to extend the field of exception as a way to secure greater equality for marginalized populations (ibid.), often through moral claims (Das 2011, Anjaria 2011).

In order to establish what this 'political society' is, Chatterjee (2013, p. 12-14) draws attention to the trajectory of modernity in postcolonial societies, in which rational bureaucracy and universal suffrage preceded the formation of civic associations, unlike the democratic state in the West. The domain of civil social institutions in colonial societies was restricted to a small section of the colonized population. Once the new republic after

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[12] It is notable that the state of Tamil Nadu in which the Dravidian movement has predominantly shaped politics, has been one of the most enthusiastic embracers of differential rights, affording reservation of about 69% of seats in educational institutions for backward classes, Scheduled Castes and Tribes - the highest rate in the country.

independence was formed on the basis of universal suffrage and a liberal democratic constitution, the space of politics was splintered into "a narrow domain of civil society where citizens related to the state through the mutual recognition of legally enforceable rights and a wider domain of political society where governmental agencies dealt not with citizens but with populations to deliver specific benefits or services through a process of political negotiation." 'Political society' for Chatterjee (2004, p. 74) is "a site of negotiation and contestation opened up by the activities of governmental agencies aimed at population groups," somewhat in opposition to the more formal, associational means of participation in state decisionmaking afforded by 'civil society', increasingly hegemonized by capitalist and urban middle classes. Those belonging to the realm of political society, "make their claims on government, and in turn are governed, not within the framework of stable constitutionally defined rights and laws, but rather through temporary, contextual and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations." (Chatterjee 2008, p. 57).

Tamil Nadu remains a unique and relevant location to study the mechanisms of political society, given how much democracy has been vernacularized in Tamil Nadu. The rise of the DMK as an electoral party from the Dravidian movement occurred just as democracy was taking hold in independent India (Wyatt 2013b). The party's recruitment from middle and low social and economic classes rendered it a plebeian party (Subramanian 1999), especially in comparison to the mostly elite-dominated Congress in Tamil Nadu until the 1960s, and the rest of the country until much later. Politics became a popular activity that common people participated in the discourse and practice of (Michelutti 2008, as quoted in Wyatt 2013b), some credit to which also goes to the AIADMK which engaged directly with voters from the poorest backgrounds. For many years, until the death of J Jayalalithaa in

December 2016, Tamil Nadu has seen movie actors and fierce Tamil poets as Chief Minister.

Movies, and the Tamil language itself ,have been used as vehicles to create affective ties

between the voting population and charismatic leaders often elevated to demigod status.

The loyalty demanded by these leaders is then channeled by more local elected

representatives at various levels. This is not a one-way street though. This relationship,

often disparagingly described as "vote bank politics" or patron clientelism, creates a terrain

in which symbolic devotion and loyal vote casting is to be met with material needs. This is

how the vast majority of those living in informal settlements get access to adequate water,

sanitation, and other facilities. This historically situated relationship still exists itself creates

a terrain to negotiate with politicians and state actors as I detail in Chapter 1 of this

dissertation.

For Partha Chatterjee (2004, p. 74), 'political society' is "a site of negotiation and

contestation opened up by the activities of governmental agencies aimed at population

groups". Postcolonial states, in particular, aided by aid agencies and non-governmental

organizations, have deployed modernization and development policy strategies for the well-

being of populations, especially marginalized groups acting against the law by squatting on

public land, say (Chatterjee 2013, p. 199-200). Such a population group, produced by

governmentality is then invested with the moral attributes of a "community" with which

claims are made on the state (2004, p. 75). The practice of democracy for him, is through

interactions with governmentality (p. 72). Indeed, biopolitical initiatives produce identities

on the basis of which urban struggles are fought and belonging claimed (Rutland 2013,

Yuval-Davis 2006, Lemke 2002). The poor mobilize as the governable categories they are

slotted into - "encroacher," or "below-poverty-line" — intended to direct them to eviction or

welfare, to appropriate these very governmentality initiatives — as in my second research

claim (Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation). However, following Veena Das (2011), I suggest that conceptualizing the poor as merely "populations" created by governmentality initiatives, is inadequate, while holding on to political society as a mode of claiming rights through the tenuous political engagement of the poor for its survival. Critiques of political society have also pointed out how middle-class associations whom Chatterjee would consider part of 'civil society' regularly engage in political "string-pulling," and the urban poor undertake civic associational forms in claimsmaking (Coelho and Venkat 2009, Bardhan 2009). Where parastatals accord the status of 'consumer' to the urban poor, residents do not have to engage in contextual, unstable, informal arrangements characteristic of political society, despite their own insecurities (Chapter 4).

What we witness here in MGR Nagar is, drawing from Anand (2017, kindle locations 1523-1554) residents as 'dividuals' or 'fractal persons', who are differentially and simultaneously constituted through discrete exchange of gifts, commodities, and rights. Himself drawing from anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1991) who challenges Western conceptions of a unitary self, Anand sees urban poor residents in Mumbai as simultaneously occupying different political positions as they are serviced by various urban institutions and infrastructure, maneuvering and managing these positions in effective claims making. In Chennai's *terrains*, residents negotiate with various actors not simply to access infrastructure, but also to secure tenure security, avoid violence, and stake a better claim to citizenship. In doing this, they are not *just* biopolitical subjects, but also variously pliant political clients, active encroachers, and consumer citizenships aspiring to more substantive citizenship in the city. Residents activate and toggle between these various temporally variable, strategic subject positions as and how advantageous for them. They might defiantly squat on public land to secure means of social reproduction and a moral claim to

tenure security, but also cede that very spatial privilege in exchange for increased legitimacy and political protection for the settlement (Chapter 3).

Several forms of transactions, including material patronage gifts, bribes, giving up of slum territory, the offer of votes and loyalty in exchange for favours constitute the ways in which negotiations occur. Clientelism itself - the use of material inducements to seek electoral support from individuals (Wyatt 2013a) - is a historical mechanism of government in the history of Tamil Nadu, a Gramscian hegemonic project to maintain legitimacy of leadership. Hegemony, the 'cultural, moral and ideological leadership' over subordinate groups, is a dynamic process that includes the active and practical involvement of the subordinate groups (Forgacs 2000, p. 423-424). This allows urban poor residents themselves the opportunities to participate in transactions and exchanges with those in power. Jessop's (2008, 1997) strategic-relational approach of the state builds on Gramsci's ideas to emphasize how securing hegemony is often temporally, spatially, and strategically specific. What clientelism has delivered has changed: earlier it guaranteed protection from evictions, today, it promises consumer goods, and perhaps resettlement houses in the event of evictions.

In turn, in the face of a neoliberalizing urban, what residents truly *desire*, is also ambivalent (no matter what *Pennurimai Iyakkam* might desire and articulate as its single point agenda: acquiring tenure security where people already live). Continuing to live where they do offers easy access to the central city's benefits - livelihoods, amenities such as schools, hospitals, transport systems, and social networks built over many years. Residents of MGR Nagar, the subjects of this study, also echoed a sense of belonging and attachment (*enga ooru*) as reasons why they might not want to leave. However, resettlement is an opportunity

by which residents may find respite or escape from the less ideal aspects of poor residents' present living conditions. From talking to many urban poor residents over the years, I have recorded "*kal veedu*" (concrete house), "*sondha veedu*" (legally owned house), "*thanni ulla varaadha veedu*" (house that doesn't flood), "*angendhu thookka maatanga*" (we won't be evicted from there) as reasons why residents might want to get resettlement housing. The hope that living conditions and tenure security may improve and residents may finally become legal, property-owning citizens is a powerful reason why resettlement, even if as a result of dispossession, may be a somewhat attractive prospect for poor city dwellers. Ghertner (2015), and Anand and Rademacher (2011) illustrate how despite the inevitable losses associated with imminent dispossession, urban poor residents might be interested in being included in the new visions of development for the global city.

For these reasons, I am reluctant to resort to the binaries of "consent" and "resistance" to describe what residents truly *want* from these negotiations, especially as a privileged outsider. I am less interested in differentiating between confrontational and non-confrontational acts (Bayat 2000), or acts of quiet encroachment (1997) and Brechtian class struggle and resistance, although residents also actively participate in the *Iyakkam*'s demonstrations and protests demanding land title (these are not the subject of this research). Instead, consistent with subaltern urbanism's interest in heterogeneity and paradoxical forms of social agency (Roy 2011), I examine the *everyday* political practices of the urban poor as might yield certain outcomes: increased legitimacy where they live, improved access to state welfare, a better moral access to the state through community infrastructure, consumer citizenship, even resettlement houses in the event of evictions. Their aspirations for the future are in Das' conception (2012, p. 5-6), "also an anticipation of contingencies," based on practical calculations as well as faith in opportunities presented.

Residents keep possibilities open, seize opportunities where they are available, and move on, taking what they can when they fail: "living as logistics" itself (Simone 2017).

All urban poor residents are formal citizens in that they have the right to vote. Indeed, it is through the power to vote that they are in a terrain of negotiation with political actors, who offer benefits in the hope that they will be voted into power. However, cities are densely articulated nodes of people, resources, and capital, where global forces are localized, where "the business of modern society gets done", where crises of belonging and democratic participation are most acutely experienced (Holston and Appadurai 1996, p. 189). Having access to tenure security and basic services then, is a matter of substantive citizenship and inclusion (Anand 2017, kindle location 334-346). Having to operate by means of tenuous, unstable, informal, political arrangements to secure these entails a view of citizenship that is not a binary status — either one has it or doesn't. It is the idea of citizenship as precarious claim that is constantly negotiated (Das 2011). On a temporal axis, it appears stronger at some moments, and weaker at others, more effective in some instances than others, as I demonstrate in this dissertation. The choice of geopolitical metaphors — terrains, capture, ceding — is not coincidental. The citizenship of the informal urban poor is threatened by the spatial reorganization of the city by capital. To make claims to citizenship, then, is to entrench one's claims to urban land in distinctly territorial ways, to capture the political through the spatial (as in Holston's Sao Paulo (2008)).

In examining the everyday practices of the residents, I am also concerned with how the state is *seen* by the residents in this settlement (Corbridge et al 2005)[13]. The effect of the

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[13] Corbridge et al's 2005 compilation of scholarship flips James Scott's preoccupations with how the state sees its subjects, to examine how the state appears to the people.

state (Mitchell 1991), as a body that imposes certain conditions of living and surveillance through the building of a wall, imposition of an *Aadhaar* card, or a force that can strip one of the land one has lived on for decades, for instance, is acutely witnessed in MGR Nagar (*avanga*, referring to an abstract, unspecified "they", is used to describe another that has certain powers). However, scholarship by Sudipta Kaviraj (2000) and Partha Chatterjee emphasizes the disjunctures between planned practices of the government at the highest levels, and their interpretations (even appropriations) by those at the lower levels, where there is significant porosity with the very population groups these practices are concerned with. Residents demonstrate an ability to exploit the very features of a state-society continuum in the postcolony, the vernacular, political means of appeal possible with bureaucrats (ibid., Benjamin 2008), to adapt to changing urban circumstances. Residents interact with specific officials in every state agency they deal with, with the hope of being able to influence them through the interaction to get better outcomes: these interactions could take the form of just effective moral appeals to the conscience of the concerned bureaucrat, affective appeals to a politician, or monetary inducements such as bribes. This points to an understanding of a state agency as being internally heterogeneous (Gupta 1995), not necessarily coherent or united in ideology, with some parts more conducive to negotiation than others. Of course, the active participation of residents in everyday politics (and not just by voting), and the clientelist nature and shifting goals of Tamil Nadu politics itself blur the boundaries between state and society, and highlight the ongoing, partial construction of the state as experienced in its effects (Hansen and Stepputat 2001).

In addition, residents access different infrastructure in vastly different ways within the settlement (also in Anand 2017). They receive formal access to electricity, but water is available only through collective, informal arrangements. The possibility of making different

kinds of negotiations with various state agencies challenges a unitary conception of "the state". Residents are constantly looking for pathways to obtain opportunities, welfare, or just improvement in their conditions of everyday life, from a fragmented state apparatus, being more successful in some terrains than others.

The site of examination: MGR Nagar

The site I am studying is one I call MGR Nagar. In actuality, it is a large settlement with over a thousand families; in this project, I focus mostly on one part of the settlement, which has about 500 families. Some interviews were conducted with people in the larger whole, and I have clarified these where necessary. MGR Nagar is about fifty years old, among the oldest informal settlements in Chennai. It used to be a large, prominent settlement extending for about a kilometer on an arterial road in the city, until a significant part of the settlement, about 700 families, were evicted, its residents resettled in Kannagi Nagar, Asia's largest resettlement colony. Now, the settlement is more compact, running along a fourth of a kilometer stretch of the same road, and 0.15 km deep. The settlement has relatively clean, straight borders, thanks to fencing by the landowning state departments.

Initially, the settlement consisted of people from the *paraiyar* community, who identify as Dalit, and remain subject to exclusion and stigma in the social sphere[14]. Over time, as the settlement grew, the demographics diversified, but only a little[15]. Most of them work in the informal sector, running and/or working in small shops in MGR Nagar and elsewhere, construction and allied work, selling flowers and fruits. Others are employed in low level

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[14]*Paraiyar* is a caste group classified administratively as part of Scheduled Caste and Adi Dravidar groups. They are often engaged in occupations largely considered polluted. The English word 'pariah' meaning outcast, originates from the name of this group.

[15] Most residents of informal settlements in the city are Dalits. Activists regularly highlight how the state is engaging in neo-exclusionary practices by resettling them *en masse* in the peripheries.

government jobs or with contractors working with the state, as autorickshaw drivers, with a small fraction of them in salaried employment in the private sector. The women work as domestic labor or as vendors of flowers and small eats nearby; many of them are homemakers.

Both the leading political parties in the state have historically had a significant presence in the slums, most residents aligned with either one. Since the early 1980s, *Pennurimai Iyakkam* has been involved in the settlement as well. Literally translating to "women's rights movement", the *Iyakkam* was started by a group of educated middle class women to respond to what they perceived as women's issues in the 1970s: domestic violence, murders of women when they did not comply with demands of dowry ("dowry deaths"), obscenity, to name a few. In response to the early interventions of the TNSCB, the *Iyakkam* started to take an interest in residents of slums, especially women, and has since evolved into a working-class women's movement fighting slum evictions and demanding better services for the urban poor. It was in this context that the *Iyakkam* first entered MGR Nagar in the 1980s, rallying women around local childcare services, which I talk about in some length in Chapter 4. Apart from the two political parties and the *Iyakkam*, there were no other significant organizational presences in the settlement at the time of my primary field work in 2016-2017, unlike many slums in Chennai that have local Ambedkarite organizations and self-help groups among women[16] [17]. Many residents are members of the Unorganized Workers' Federation and the Tamil Nadu Manual Workers Union, both allies of the *Iyakkam*.

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[16] B R Ambedkar was a lawyer and social reformer who was the architect of the Indian Constitution which enshrines special protections to marginalized groups. He is the inspiration for Dalit-Bahujan led social movements in the Indian public sphere today.

[17] Self-help groups are run by governmental and non-governmental organizations, to encourage savings among groups of poor women through local mobilization. Many groups also receive micro-credit from banks to undertake entrepreneurial activities.

The Tamil word to describe settlements like MGR Nagar is *kudisai paguthi*, literally translating to "hut area," but colloquially called a "slum". This descriptively connotes the *kachcha* or semi-*pucca* nature of the housing structures in these settlements, made at least partly of flimsy, low quality building materials such as mud, thatch, tarpaulin, asbestos sheets, etc. The word 'slum' has been avoided in many scholarly accounts due to its pejorative connotation (Bhan 2017, Rao 2006, for instance); in addition, in official administrative terms in Chennai, slums are those that are formally identified and recognized under the Tamil Nadu Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act, 1971. MGR Nagar is not one of them; it is an informal settlement, and thus will be referred to in this dissertation as a "settlement". Residents themselves use the Tamil terms *ooru* (broadly meaning place, or neighborhood in the urban context) or *paguthi* (area) to describe their settlement.

Research methods, and researcher positionality

Since early 2012, I have been working on policy research and advocacy on housing policies concerning the urban poor in Chennai. *Pennurimai Iyakkam* has been a grassroots partner, and inspiration, through this time. The praxis of the *Iyakkam* has been foundational to my own understanding of the right to the city as imperative for those who lived in it and laboured to create it. Academia is a way to take this project forward, armed with new perspectives (Besteman 2013). When I went to Chennai to start field work in the summer of 2016, I offered my time and services to the *Iyakkam* while I undertook field work. I allowed my work with the *Iyakkam* to determine what I wrote about, and reaped very rich rewards for it.

Through the research I had been doing on slum evictions over the years, I was most

intrigued by how some urban poor settlements ended up being evicted, but (residents of)

others managed to survive in the city. (In my dissertation proposal, I had envisioned a

comparative project that studied processes of eviction and resettlement across settlements

in Chennai, to examine how consent to eviction was produced). From their vast experience

in mobilizing the urban poor, my colleagues at the *Iyakkam* often lamented the breakdown

of unity and capacity to resist among residents now, compared to a few decades ago. People

are too tempted by benefits offered by politicians, especially resettlement homes, they

would say. These perspectives illuminate the changing nature of both patronage and

urbanization in Chennai (and find brief mention in Chapter 1). But I also wonder whether

they hold enough space for and reflect the true aspirations and priorities of the urban poor.

As an activist committed to struggles for urban citizenship then, I ask 'knowledge for whom,

and for what?' (Burawoy 2005). I do not focus on binary conceptions of consent and

resistance to evictions, instead examining the agency of the urban poor in surviving in the

city every day, making claims to land and basic services, preparing both to save the land

they currently occupied while also preparing for a future in the resettlement colony. The

study of these lived experiences, oral histories, and alternative practices can document

various types of political agency that exist (Skidmore 2006) among the urban poor, in order

to reflect on how their priorities and aspirations might feature more honestly in struggles

for citizenship and dignity. The contingent successes and failures of these negotiations also

allow us to understand the contemporary Indian welfare state, and the pathways that

remain to access it to ensure one's survival in the city.

One of my starting points and main research questions was to understand how residents who have been threatened with eviction have managed to stay on in the face of persistent threats. I asked my colleagues at the *Iyakkam* where I might start to explore this set of concerns. They suggested that I study MGR Nagar, where the *Iyakkam* had been involved for many years. Leelavathy, the Chennai district president of the *Iyakkam*, made a call to Malliga, and arranged for me to visit the *ooru* first. The first time I went there in early August 2016, Malliga and Lalitha were standing on the main street, both in crisp blue sarees. Malliga and I looked familiar to each other from having seen each other in past public meetings of the *Iyakkam* before, but she wasn't among the members that I knew well. It was through my intention to do research on MGR Nagar as a member of the *Iyakkam* that we got to know each other.

I undertook ethnographic research in MGR Nagar for a period of 13 months, from August 2016 to September 2017. This entailed a kind of "deep hanging out" (Geertz 2001) for four to six hours each day for four-five days a week, with many afternoons filled with conversations on the street, going food shopping with residents, helping women cook, taking care of children occasionally, or going to birthday parties and religious events. I identified key respondents in the process who knew more about, or had the fluency and interest in explaining, the settlement's history, and conducted informal group discussions, sitting in corners to write notes when I could, before rushing home at day's end to write up all of the day's field notes. I conducted semi-structured interviews with about fifty respondents, but my primary insights really emerge from immersing myself in the texture of everyday life in a tenure insecure environment, and the daily modes by which especially women sought to preserve and enhance their families' conditions of living. I immersed to

the extent that I ended up never leaving MGR Nagar to do the comparative research I had

originally proposed.

Some people like Malliga, Malathi, and Kamatchi appear a lot in throughout the chapters.

There are two reasons for this. First, Malliga was my entry into MGR Nagar, by virtue of

being my colleague at the *Iyakkam*. When I first met her and told her what I intended to

research, she told me to take her daughter with me when I wanted to talk to other people,

especially in the beginning, so I may gain credibility and not arouse suspicion. Malliga and I

became fast friends, and out relationship intensified ever further as we collaborated to

undertake the construction of a childcare center in MGR Nagar that year, a process I detail

below. Although I actively sought out residents for conversations on my own in order to get

multiple perspectives and seek corroborating stories or different accounts of events, it was

through Malliga that I made many of my initial connections, and ultimately found my key

respondents, in MGR Nagar. For these very practical reasons, I sort of saw in MGR Nagar

what she showed me, which makes her a collaborator, instead of simply a key respondent.

My association and extended interactions with her have made this a detailed and rich, if also

perhaps, limited project. I have embraced this limitation in order to present in final written

form, a small cast of characters, so to speak, through whose practical and affective

endeavors to survive and improve, we may track a condition of urban life in Chennai today.

In doing this, I aspire for the dissertation to follow the model of other inspiring public and

activist ethnographies in the mold of Goldstein's (2016) *Owners of the Sidewalk*, a deeply

moving account of insecurity among Bolivia's street vendors. I hope also that my project is

as accessible—as all activist scholarship must be—and as theoretically rigorous, and be

read as an interpretation of what these residents told me, and what I observed as I worked

with them. I took down most direct quotes in my notes in Tamil but have translated all the

residents' quotes into English here, while retaining key Tamil words to articulate specifically how they talked about and understood certain things.

I considered doing a survey of residents, on their political inclinations, political participation, and relationships with elected representatives and local leaders, but ultimately decided against it. Like many informal settlements in Chennai, the residents of MGR Nagar have been subject to many enumerations and surveys, both by the government and other researchers, without their intent being fully or truthfully declared. Given the already precarious tenure status, residents were rightfully suspicious of such endeavours. Besides, I was in MGR Nagar as a member of the *Iyakkam*, and did not feel comfortable undertaking a survey on political ideas, especially because the *Iyakkam*, as a matter of principle, was not concerned with the political lives of its members. Instead, I introduced myself, and asked for consent orally before I initiated a discussion or interview. I took notes by hand into field notebooks, and did not make any audio recordings except at public meetings of the *Iyakkam* that MGR Nagar residents participated in. I did not hire a research assistant or undertake any financial transactions with any of the respondents.

In the time since primary fieldwork, I worked in MGR Nagar fitfully for two months in the summer of 2018 and remain in close contact with key respondents in the settlement over the phone and on social media. Given the informal status of MGR Nagar, and the precarious relationships that residents share with powerful bureaucrats and politicians (which is really what this project is about), the names of all people and settlements I mention have been changed. Only my colleagues at the *Iyakkam* who do not live in MGR Nagar have been identified by their real names. I also undertook archival research of policy documents from

the 1950s onwards, at the Government of Tamil Nadu's Madras Record Office and Archival

Library, for a period of three months in the summer of 2015.

Reciprocal relationships are imperative to activist scholarship (Hymes 1974, Steusse 2016).

The *Iyakkam* and the residents were interested in raising in MGR Nagar, a *balwadi,* a

community-run childcare center found in urban poor and rural areas to address the

nutritional and social needs of pre-school children. During my time in the settlement,

Malliga and I led the initiative. Given MGR Nagar's status occupying state land, building a

childcare center was an act of squatting: capturing land, raising a structure, getting an

electricity connection... Somewhat along the lines of Carolyn Nordstrom's (2004, p.13)

"following the networks" of war, and Jessica Barnes' (2014, kindle location 906) "following

the flow of water", I "followed the squat," learning first-hand and up close about squatting

practices in an informal settlement. This dissertation is in a way, a chronicle on what it

takes to squat in Chennai; I had the opportunity to learn a few of these terrains myself. For

these reasons, my methods are perhaps better described as *observant participation*, rather

than participant observation (Vargas 2008). Of course, given my position as a non-resident

of MGR Nagar, and as an upper class and dominant caste researcher, I make myself visible in

this account of squatting wherever interesting and necessary (but especially in Chapters 4

and 5). In parts, this dissertation is a relational ethnography (Simon 2013), one that

emphasizes "reflexivity, responsivity, transparency of the researcher(s), relational

awareness and dialogic coherence" as it attempts to speak "about and from within

relationships" and reflecting on the influence of the researcher on the research endeavour. I

made monetary contributions for the construction of the childcare center. I also did little

favors for residents, such as finding out about particular schemes or government projects,

and visiting government offices with residents to get Aadhaar cards or pensions.

Despite a fairly easy entry into the settlement as a member of the *Iyakkam*, the first few weeks were hard. Although I had the backing of a credible and respected organization which had had a long-term presence in the settlement, the prospect of working there was still a little daunting, especially because I was working on my own. I would hang out at Malliga's house most of the time in the beginning. I got teased by young boys for a few weeks, before we became friendly. Apart from Malliga and Malathi, Muthu was the first one that broke the ice by asking me to help coordinate weekend spoken English classes in the settlement (I discuss this briefly in the next chapter). Muthu ended up introducing me to the boys I was afraid of, and from that point on, I would stop by for a chat every afternoon, to talk about hair color, or the latest Tamil movie before I started the day's interviews. I also engaged with some of them on their political opinions, interests, and educational prospects. Months later, several of these young men were ultimately involved in painting the walls of our childcare facility. One of the first instances when I felt welcome, was not where many of my key informants lived, in the central parts of the settlement, but in the *pallam,* the most interior, most impoverished part of the settlement. After a long afternoon discussion in the local church, a precarious, rundown structure with a tarpaulin sheet roof, residents gathered there prayed for me. They got down on their knees, and acknowledged how I came to *inquire about* them (*visarippu*), the poorest of them all, and asked the Lord to give me a long life, success, and happiness. (I remember stumbling out in tears.)

In August 2016, I was also elected as an executive committee member of the *Iyakkam* at its annual Chennai district general body meeting. I was involved in making decisions with respect to legal and mobilization strategies against evictions, and participating in several initiatives of the *Iyakkam*, until September 2017. I followed legal proceedings against at

least two evictions during this time, did considerable documenting and petition writing in the office, and helped run a few medical camps across the city. I wrote three reports, two on recent evictions and resettlement, and a third on released bonded labourers for submission to the National Human Rights Commission. Along with some colleagues at the *Iyakkam*, I was arrested for gathering on the beach to observe Women's Day in March 2017. (We were detained without being formally charged, because the police had disallowed any public gathering of people on the Marina after the spectacle of the *jallikattu* protests[18].) I was also periodically involved in the activities of the *Iyakkam*'s allied labor organizations, including the Unorganised Workers' Federation, and the Tamil Nadu Manual Workers Union. This work with the *Iyakkam* ensured that I was clued in to goings on outside of my specific research site which, while making significant demands on my time and energy, greatly benefited my research. It was an exciting, eventful year in Chennai.

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The separation between the "here", the university space, and the "there", the field site (Geertz 1988), has always been of great discomfort to me. I wonder if I am indeed an outsider travelling far to study "the other", as in the tradition of classical anthropologists. My site of study is Chennai, my home town, and I work with colleagues. Yet, I am also always an outsider: among the youngest members of the *Iyakkam*, one of two bilingual people in the entire movement, self-evidently upper middle class, and most importantly, clearly upper caste. In a conversation about housing in MGR Nagar, Malathi suddenly asked me if I had a room of my own, in my parents' home in Chennai. It was one of many moments during which I was painfully aware of the deeply unequal relationship between me, the researcher,

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[18] About 200,000 people gathered on Chennai's Marina Beach over two weeks in January 2017, to protest a Supreme Court ban on *jallikattu*, a traditional bull-taming sport in Tamil Nadu.

and the residents of MGR Nagar, the research subjects, and the stark differences in our everyday realities.

Despite my attempts not to flaunt my caste status, the fact that I was different from the residents — fairer in complexion, wore different clothes, lived in the US, spoke English fluently and wrote most of my notes in English — was regularly pointed out. Residents curiously enquired about whether I had a scholarship, got a salary, of how much, how much tickets to the US cost, where my parents lived in Chennai, and what they did, as a way to place me. Apart from Malliga's family in the very beginning, no one really asked about my caste openly. Some words that I used eventually gave me away; in some context, I said the word *viboothi*, the upper caste word for sacred ash applied on the forehead, instead of *thunooru*, the more commonly used word, and the residents I was conversing with realized I was Brahmin, with a hoot of goodnatured laughter. One of them, Dhanalakshmi's husband Gopi, started calling me *maami*, a word used to refer to Brahmin women, from then on. Rajathi *ayah*, a wise old lady, declared perceptively,

iyerunga nalla pesuvaanga, pazhaguvanga. aana namma veetla oru vaay saapda maatanga. (The Brahmins mingle with us socially well enough. But they would never eat a mouthful in our house.)

In pointing this out, Rajathi was referring to the ways in which untouchability continues to be practised in everyday subtle ways, despite being illegal. Most days, I brought a lunch box from my home, packed with *thair saadham*, curd rice, easy on the stomach, but really a dead giveaway of Brahminness. (I found myself often defensively explaining that I used to eat meat as a child, and quit for reasons that did not have to do with religion or caste.) On some

days, I ate lunch at Malliga's, the *Iyakkam* office, or the food cooked for the children at the childcare center. Once or twice, I ate at Rajathi's. I drank tea and ate snacks multiple times every day at MGR Nagar, usually bought from Dhandapani's tea stall. But on most days, despite my protests, my mother usually insisted that I pack lunch from home, to ensure that I ate "safe food". On days that field work was particularly exhausting emotionally, I ordered pizza for dinner, from the comfort of my air-conditioned living room.

In July 2017, I met with a somewhat serious road accident and was confined to my house in a leg brace for a few weeks. During this time, many residents of MGR Nagar and colleagues in the *Iyakkam* called to ask after me. Geetha and Kamala insisted on coming home to see me with an ayurvedic oil they insisted would help my knee heal. I tried desperately to dissuade them and spent a good few days feeling very worried about their upcoming visit. It would be the first time that anyone I worked with met me in my own home; I usually met them in the *Iyakkam* office or in the field. For many years, I had managed to keep my personal space, my parents' home, completely hidden from the people I worked with, and now, the prospect that my colleagues would know that my home was a clearly affluent and upper-caste one filled me with anxiety. As someone who invited herself to others' homes to see and talk about how they lived, the irony was not lost on me.

Many young Dalit public intellectuals like Christina Thomas Dhanaraj, the co-founder of Dalit History Month, speak about the epistemological violence faced by Dalit women in their inability to penetrate scholarly circles that treat them as merely research subjects, silencing their perspective[19]. My interpretation of what residents told me and what I observed, is inevitably situated knowledge (Haraway 1988), but from a position of privilege, as someone

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[19] https://twitter.com/caselchris1/status/1068156538680836097

who has the privilege to conduct and direct research (Lorde 2003); it remains *my*

interpretation. I remain conflicted about this research that will give me a PhD and a few

publications, whether I should be doing this work at all. I had originally envisaged this

research as a book project, which may explain why some parts read the way they do. I have

since decided to undertake a collaborative book project separate from my main research

publications to better incorporate the input of, and credit my colleagues, while sparing them

the references to abstractions distant from their terminological reality. The Sangtin Writers'

and Richa Nagar's *Playing with Fire* (2006) is an inspiration.

Subaltern studies scholarship on democracy has pointed to the need for the language and

cultural politics of caste to feature in academia, public debate and practice (see Pandian

2002). In thinking about future research, I am looking for ways to turn the lens on myself,

and to do work that is more equitable, less exploitative. I am working towards being able to

talk and write about caste, and *my* caste position in a way that contributes to discussions on

lived realities sensitively, critically, and productively.

Dissertation outline

Chapter 1 is a biography of MGR Nagar as seen through the political life of the community.

Using Veena Das' framing of life as mutually absorbing the biological and the social, I

attempt to illustrate the role of politics in sustaining the lives of the residents. Surviving has

entailed showing loyalty and devotion to the party, in exchange for political legitimacy,

livelihood opportunities, and patronage benefits. Grassroots organization of the political

parties reveals the performative aspects of politics not just at the top levels, but also at the

level of the local. Official members of multiple parties, who also take on the responsibilities

of being local leaders, are engaged in competitive and cooperative patronage to do *nalladhu*,

good for the settlement. Alongside, MGR Nagar also displays tendencies to organize in ways more typical to civic associationism, challenging the overschematized ideas of civil and political society. These hybrid forms, instead, are the marker of a wide arsenal of tactics employed by residents to appeal to different parts of the state in different ways. In a short section, I explicate how Malliga as a woman navigates the various spheres of political activity, with priorities conflicting occasionally in ways that undercut potential resistance to evictions. Patronage is also inequitably distributed within the settlement, rendering the stakes of evictions different for different residents. While party members recognize the complicity of their respective parties in parts of MGR Nagar being evicted in the past, they remain loyal, some of them even believing that their political connections will save them. Other residents at the margins of both material and political life in MGR Nagar do not depend on political community for their survival and believe evictions might free them from local neglect.

In Chapter 2, I use the residents' deployment of the word *pidikka* (meaning capture) to interrogate how urban land and associated documentary legitimacy are appropriated by them. The capture of land requires the capture of political legitimacy through party activities and appeals, in turn enabling the parties also to capture political clients. In order to access the welfare state, residents have developed a *metis*, a cunning learned practice consisting of formal and informal processes, to obtain ration cards, which allow them to be seen as biopolitical subjects, and offers them *de facto* tenure security. These practiced procedures of the residents also allow them to adapt to new, more technologically advanced documentary requirements like the Aadhaar card, whose potential in according tenure security is still unclear. Capture hence emerges as an exploratory technique by which the urban poor seek to retain access to the welfare state, one possible outcome of which is

potential gain of propertied citizenship in the resettlement housing colonies. The shifting

conditions of urban rights, and changing documentary requirements for accessing those

rights reveal the urban poor's savvy in navigating bureaucratic processes and capturing

documents to maximize their own benefits.

Following the capture of land and legitimacy by each family, I examine the collective ways in

which capture is practised, specifically through the creation of common infrastructure in

Chapter 3. I suggest that squatting practices in MGR Nagar can be characterized as collective

in its attempts to create community infrastructure for social reproduction. Residents have

mobilized, with the aid of the DMK, to build their own ration shop as a way to bring the

welfare state to their own doorstep. In this chapter I detail how they worked with

Pennurimai Iyakkam to raise their own childcare center, which I characterize as a feminist

mechanism of squatting, a practice of caring and income generating that reproduce

capitalist social relations, while also altering these relations, in what what Katharyne

Mitchell, Sallie Marston and Cindi Katz call 'life's work' (2003). The facility is an example of

an urban commons in its resistance to commodification, and demonstration of the use value

of the land, that can also be channeled into making moral claims on the state in the case of

evictions. Ultimately, however, the childcare facility was demolished by the local elected

representative, so he could raise a government-funded facility in the same location.

Although the demolition implied the loss of autonomy over slum space, it was not the end of

politics. The ceding of slum territory and spatial privileges is a way to gain material

improvements and more legitimacy, highlighting that citizenship is a precarious claim that

is constantly negotiated, which is sometimes built through unbuilding and ceding of

autonomy, rather than building upon and seizing urban territory. The commoning practices

of the *Iyakkam* however, prove portable and durable, enacting a countertopography (Katz 2001) that challenges capitalist spatialities across multiple locations.

The final ethnographic chapter, Chapter 4, asks why residents of MGR Nagar apply for formal electricity connections when they can easily pirate electricity. Contrary to common narratives of the poor being compelled to pay for commodified urban services, I suggest that applying and obtaining formal electricity connections is an opportunity to be legible which allows the residents to demonstrate a capacity for propertied citizenship. The parastatal service provider, the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board, in turn can be seen as offering forms of citizenship that other state agencies don't, thus complicating scholarly accounts of parastatals as means and manifestations of a neoliberalizing state. An ethnographic account of how an electricity connection was obtained for the childcare facility reveals corrupt practices in the bureaucracy that were possibly enabled by the documentation issued, while according the status of 'consumer' to the residents. Bribing itself is a routine practice, used to keep livelihoods and services intact in MGR Nagar, part of a large repertoire of inducements, transactions, and negotiations that characterize political life in Chennai.

In the conclusion of the dissertation, I reflect on the fragmented nature of the state and urban citizenship as reflected in these practices of MGR Nagar residents, and the negotiable, transactional nature of urban life for the informal urban poor. I also attempt to (briefly) place MGR Nagar in the larger context of the state of Tamil Nadu, and provisionally set up an examination of women, labor and the Right to the City.

CHAPTER 1

STORIES OF LOCAL POLITICS, A BIOGRAPHY OF MGR NAGAR

manushan illaama arasiyal illa, arasiyal illama manushan illa - Malliga, April 2017.

(There is no politics without Man, and there is no man without politics.)

In his genealogy of the philosophies of life, Didier Fassin (2010) makes a case for Derrida's (2004) conception of life as survival, survival as "life beyond life, life more than life." He eschews binary conceptual separations of life as biological and social — "mere life" and "just life" a la Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt's Aristotlean distinction between bios and zoe, "bare life" and qualified life in Giorgio Agamben's formulation — arguing that this opposition erases the complexity of life in society. Paying attention to everyday lived realities of people, he suggests, reveals the ways in which they may variously use life as a political instrument, moral resource, or affective expression, without separating the body from society. Veena Das (2011) follows a similar argument, rejecting a notion of life as that which is *simply* governed in Foucauldian biopolitics, life as object, in which the idea of life that is considered is simply biological life.

Instead, her notion of life, based on work with the informal poor in Delhi, is one where the life of the individual and the life of the community are intertwined and there is mutual absorption of the biological and the political, as seen in the demand of rights, or *haq,* by the urban poor for water, shelter, and the basic conditions of living. The biological and the political are inseparable for the residents of MGR Nagar as well, as Malliga articulated. Their survival has depended on blurring the lines between the biological and the political, even to the point, as the epigraph points out, where politics itself takes on biological and existential

meaning through democratic action[20]. This chapter is a biography of the community pieced together from resident narratives and participant observation, an attempt to articulate the ordinary, everyday lives of the people as they survive.

Politics as everyday life

One of the key things that stood out to me as residents narrated stories from their past is the remembering of key events in terms of who was in power at the state-level at the time. Even if the exact year was fuzzy, or time was marked by who was pregnant at the time or how old a child was, residents seemed to recall with authority, who the leader was at the time when something happened (and this was not true just in MGR Nagar, but among many residents in Chennai in general). "In 1977 MGR was the one that first gave us rice for Re. 1 a kilo, was it in 1977, yeah possibly," Thangam said. It was during the DMK's reign in 1996, with funds from a then-DMK MLA that the public toilet facility for the settlement was built. When MGR Nagar built its ration shop, support came from the DMK to obtain permission from the Civil Supplies Corporation. This was the first instance where residents were building their own facility and inviting the government to provide services. The party, and the then-Councillor also pitched in funds.

Negotiating with the political parties was a key mechanism through which life was sustained. In fact, in the early 1970s, when the settlement was relatively new, it was called Malaiappan Nagar, after an old local leader. After enduring intimidation and demolition threats a few times, the settlement was renamed MGR Nagar, after the eponymous leader, creating an affective tie between the slum and the charismatic leader[21]. The hope was that if

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[20] Chatterjee's political society illustrates a mode of claiming rights that entails the political engagement of the poor for their survival, but Das' analysis points out that conceptualizing the poor as merely "populations" created by governmentality initiatives, is inadequate.

[21] The real name of the settlement being studied is not MGR Nagar, but the naming logic is similar.

one appealed to the state on an affective, sentimental basis, the settlement might be spared

punitive action, and allowed to survive in that location, despite being squatters[22]. Residents

of MGR Nagar, irrespective of current political affiliation and party rivalry, remain fiercely

faithful to his memory, with most having his picture on prominent display in their homes,

quite like pictures of God one finds in the average Tamil Hindu or Christian household. Over

the years, MGR Nagar has received direct patronage in times of need from both the DMK

and the AIADMK. Residents still rely on the discretionary powers of their locally elected

representatives, such as MLAs and ward councillors (Figure 7) from these parties to provide

them with additional hand pumps to access ground water, and street lights[23].

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[22] The names of all the settlements and residents mentioned in this dissertation have been changed, in order to protect the identities of those who are engaged in both complex negotiations with powerful political leaders, and informal practices of occupying urban land. In this instance, the real name of the settlement follows the same logic as the one mentioned but is not called "MGR Nagar" in specific.

[23]The implications of being an undeclared slum or an informal settlement is that it cannot formally access basic services such as piped water, drainage facilities, or household toilets, since the state departments owning the land (in MGR Nagar's case, the Public Works Department and the Chennai Collectorate) have neither given over the land to the TNSCB nor granted permission for these services to be provided.
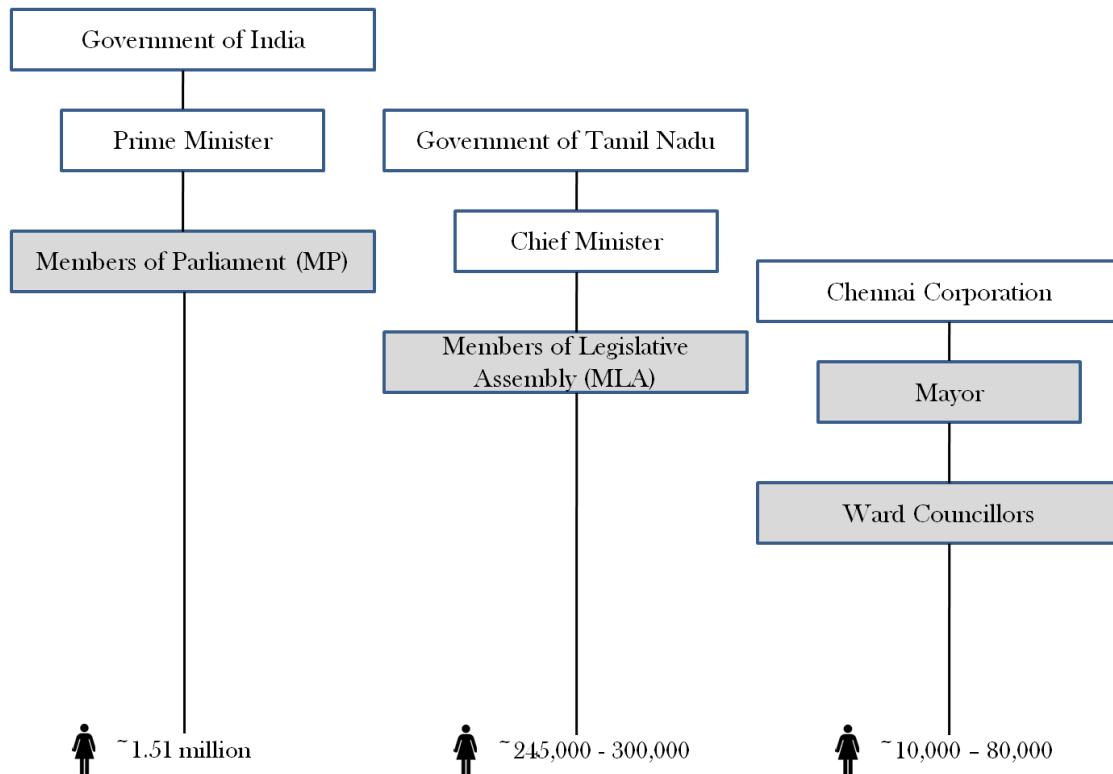
Figure 7: Simplified representation of elected government in India.
Shaded boxes indicate positions directly elected. At the bottom I indicate the number of people the elected representative works for.

The patronage model of the Dravidian parties has been built around the figure of a benevolent leader, who by providing protection and material benefits, made communities dependent on him (Subramanian 1999). From the central charismatic leader at the apex, the organizational strength of the two main Dravidian parties is in its highly hierarchical but decentralized structure, with devolution of powers right down into the neighborhood. Palani, resident of MGR Nagar of the DMK, explained the organization thus (Figure 8): he was one of two division deputy secretaries (*vatta thunai seyalaalar*) for the party in that particular administrative ward (lowest level in the figure), above him was a division secretary (*vatta seyalaalar*) (or two per ward), above them was unit secretary (*paguthi seyalaalar*), one or two per assembly constituency, and above them, the district secretary. The division level secretaries have been described as the "bridge between the party and the public" (Sivakumar 2018), crucial actors in the grassroots strength of the party. The district

secretary is an influential office holder within the party, who enjoys a great deal of autonomy and opportunities to seek kickbacks from developmental activities, and the power to accumulate and distribute patronage resources in their jurisdiction (Manikandan and Wyatt 2014). In the constituency that MGR Nagar is in, the district secretary is the representative in the state-level elected government, "the MLA" (refer also to Figure 7). In addition to this, there is a youth wing of the party, that Palani was once an office bearer of. Now, Palani's duties were to coordinate the party's activities within his territorial jurisdiction: distributing patronage goods made available through the ward councilor or MLA's discretionary funds, relief distribution in the event of disaster, organization of medical camps, etc. He was accountable to and a functionary of party members above him. Below him were party workers (*thondargal*) who were card-carrying, registered members of the party.
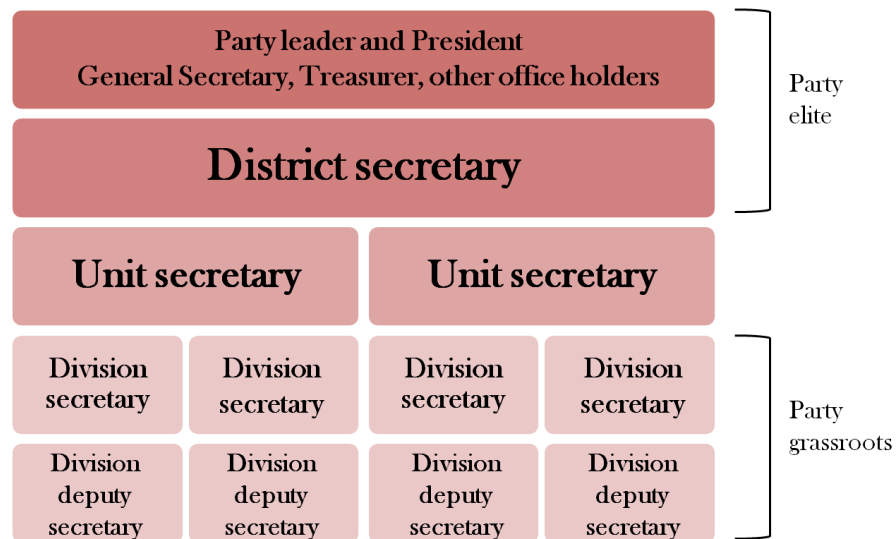

Figure 8: Simplified party structure of the DMK.
Based on conversations with Palani, and Manikandan and Wyatt (2014).

Thomas Blom Hansen (2004) deliberates on the "permanent performance" of politics, in the context of the Shiv Sena in Mumbai, and its reliance on constructing spectacles. This is

obviously evident in how Dravidian electoral politics operated in the state through the mode of spectacle, using cinema very effectively as anti-theist, anti-Brahmin, anti-Hindi, and anti-North India through the 1950s and 70s (Pandian 2015). Key examples of such films include *Nadodi Mannan* and *Parasakti* in the 1950s, the successes of which were then further publicly, conspicuously celebrated by the DMK through processions. The symbols and colors associated with the party appeared explicitly on screen. Many of these films were written by CN Annadurai and M Karunanidhi, key figures of the DMK, with MGR playing the various subaltern protagonists who belonged with the common people: variously a cowherd, a manual worker, a fisherman, a rickshaw-puller, a peasant, and so forth (ibid.).

Drawing from Erving Goffman's (1959) notion of everyday life as a series of not always conscious performances of speech and bodily action, Hansen further argues that political performances are also "a certain styling of the self, the movement or the cause - by the use of a linguistic style or conceptual vocabulary, a certain way of dressing and acting in public, etc." (p. 23). All high-level political leaders channeled the performance of a paternalistic leader, taking on appropriate bodily actions and bearing. MGR was often found physically among the people, holding them, touching them, and breaking bodily barriers. Kamala of the *Iyakkam* recalled how MGR publicly accepted both adulation, as well as condemnation, once in the form of *seruppu maalai* (garland of slippers, literally used to denounce particular figures). This is why he is deified, there is no one like him, she declared.

However, after his death — his house became the site of a school for the speech and hearing impaired, as per his will — that sort of performative empathy and oneness with the people largely diminished; the distance between the party heads and the people has increased. Lalitha recalls a time when the location of the settlement and its visibility did not

particularly matter to the government. "There was no pomp and grandeur (*aadambaram*) associated with the Chief Minister who drove past us everyday. Things were very low-key." From that time, things have clearly changed: a tall white wall (the one in the Introduction chapter) now completely blocks the settlement from view, on the arterial road it is located on. Since the 1990s, the top rung of both the DMK and the AIADMK have come under fire and scrutiny for amassing vulgar amounts of wealth. In 1997, the Income Tax Department reportedly found in Jayalalithaa's house, gold worth Rs. 6 crores (~$857,000 today), 750 pairs of shoes, 10,000 sarees, 800 kilograms of silver, 44 air conditioners and 91 wristwatches, which implicated her in the infamous Disproportionate Assets Case (The Economic Times 2017). Karunanidhi has been accused of building a dynasty to consolidate power in politics, and the telecom, television, and movie industries; most spectacularly, his daughter Kanimozhi was accused of getting kickbacks to the order of $29 million in a telecom license allocation scam (the "2G spectrum case") (Arunima 2017). The performance is intact in the political sphere: large cutouts of leaders and party flags lining the roads are a regular sight, elaborate light displays and large crowds of people are only to be expected at the sites of public meetings during the time of elections. The people show fealty to their leaders in the most spectacular ways. Song and dance, even bodily harm was quite common, especially at public meetings of the AIADMK; party seniors liberally threw themselves at Jayalalithaa's feet. All the charismatic leaders of the Dravidian parties have elicited very dramatic popular expression of anxiety and grief when they were sick, and ultimately when they died. Crowds outside their homes and hospitals, hundreds and thousands of mourners at funeral processions, dramatic, performative displays of sorrow such as self-immolation and damage to public property have been common features.

Figure 9: A snapshot of Tamil Nadu politics
Clockwise from bottom right: A poster of Nadodi Mannan (1958) starring MGR, picture source Wikipedia; MGR with the people, picture source Penguin Random House; Cutouts of MGR and Jayalalithaa, picture credited to Preminda Jacob; M Karunanidhi's funeral procession, August 2018, picture source Hindustan Times.

My time in MGR Nagar highlighted that similar relationships existed at the local level. I was witness to this a few times, memorably once when I heard from residents that the MLA was going to be visiting that evening at 6 pm. The excitement in Malliga's household was palpable. Malliga enthusiastically recalled how the MLA during his visits, often stood near the public toilet complex for many minutes, despite the stench, to discuss his plans for the area. "I couldn't tolerate the smell, but he did," she said, beaming. "The MLA says he will come at 6, but his men will come earlier, at 4 or so, and the women can come later, because he respects them," she explained to me. "He is so fit, and walks around so fast, it's going to be hard to keep up!" she added. Charumathi mentioned how she missed him when he was distributing Christmas gifts in the neighbourhood. "I will ask him for the gifts today, he

won't say no," she declared. The conversation wouldn't have been out of place in an introduction scene for a hero in the average *masala* (commercial) Tamil movie.

At about 5 pm that day, Malliga and I were occupied with work around the childcare center when we ran into Malathi making a tea run. "Palani just called and asked you to come to the ration shop immediately, the MLA is on his way," she said. Malliga darted into Thangam's house nearby, mumbling about how shabby she looked, and quickly washed her face. A little girl brought her a pack of *bindis* from next door, and we rushed to the ration shop. We were met by a group of about ten DMK men, both from MGR Nagar and the MLA's office, all smartly dressed in crisp white shirts and white dhotis or dark trousers, the quintessential politician-at-work uniform. We were all introduced to each other, and briefly discussed the possibility of the construction of the childcare center even being funded by the MLA's allocated discretionary funds.

Finally, a white SUV slowly rolled up in front of the ration shop. It's not hard to tell if a vehicle belongs to a politician: a little red and black flag, that of the DMK stood at the end of the bonnet. On the dashboard, there was another flag, and small framed pictures of M. Karunanidhi, party president of the DMK and party heir apparent M.K. Stalin facing outward, that anyone facing the car could see clearly. The MLA himself stepped out from the passenger seat, smiling radiantly. He was also in a white shirt and white dhoti, with an outward facing picture of Karunanidhi and Stalin visible through the transparent chest pocket of his shirt. The entire group gathered near the ration shop immediately swamped him. He quickly enquired about them all, Malliga first, then all the men, before also peeping into the ration shop to ask Kumar if supplies were adequate. He then entered the part of MGR Nagar closest to the ration shop with his entourage of party members and a couple of

municipal corporation ward officials, now about twenty-five people or so, including Malliga and I, closely following him. He quickly walked through the first two streets and asked people what they needed most urgently: residents responded with shy smiles, telling him they needed extra water pumps and streetlight bulbs replaced. Malliga asked me to take pictures of him as we chased after him for the next five minutes into the nearby defunct park that he wanted to revive, after which he was ready to leave. Malliga introduced me to him and brought up the childcare center. He immediately said that building the childcare center would be possible with MLA funds. He asked Malliga to remind him to follow up and inspect a potential site for the childcare center, asked her to take care of her health, waved "bye, sister" to me, and left, in less than thirty minutes after he first arrived. (Chapter 3 will illuminate his ultimate role in the childcare center). As we walked back to her house, Malliga pointed out how he speaks to her specifically, calling her out by name every time, and even offered to pay for her medical expenses to treat her asthma. Months later, when she arranged for, and accompanied me to an interview with the MLA, she regretted not having brought a *ponnaadai*, a shawl with which dignitaries and important people are honoured at meetings and public occasions.

Figure 10: Politics in MGR Nagar

Clockwise from top right: Local Jayalalithaa memorial after her death, December 2016; poster of M Karunanidhi and MK Stalin on the wall of a house, March 2017; pictures of MGR and Jayalalithaa on the walls of a home, March 2017; invitation of a local plant-a-sapling initiative by the DMK division, featuring pictures of DMK leaders, March 2017.

There were many individual benefits to being part of the political party apparatus. Being engaged in politics was a livelihood, a source of income for the local leaders of MGR Nagar, in addition to serving as a way to receive patronage gifts. When strapped for cash, Malliga often called the division secretary of the party, and asked for work. On one such occasion, she was told by the MLA to come to a certain location for campaigning. Malliga explained that the MLA was likely to give about Rs. 1,00,000 (~$1428) per day for all the ten zonal secretaries to share, who in turn would distribute to lower-level leaders like Malliga and cadre members. All cadres are paid for party work, she emphasized. For Malliga though, the

reasons for doing political work are more complex. It gives her a certain degree of financial independence, but she also does the work because of her deep affective connections to the party. She uses the words *parambarai* (lineage, descent) and *sevai* (service) to describe why she does what she does. Of course, it is also a source of local power, and pride for her.

Although Thangam did not have an official party posting like Malliga or Palani, she was an integral part of efforts to mobilize local strength and coordinate local welfare measures on behalf of the AIADMK. She was a small, fit, enterprising woman always ready for a chat. We sat together on many occasions at her doorstep, sunlight dappling through the neem tree planted nearby, to chat about life in MGR Nagar. One of the main things I was curious about is how someone like Thangam, who was not a local leader , benefitted from being part of a party. In a regular sense, party workers (*thondargal*) are paid Rs. 200-300 (~$2.8 - $4.2) to attend big party meetings, and sometimes, for leading people to polling booths to vote during elections. Thangam's loyalty has served her well when she needed specific favours from the party biggies. When her nephew wanted to take civil service exams but didn't have the money to enroll in coaching classes, she approached the AIADMK Chennai district secretary with pictures she had had taken with him at a rally and asked him for help. He took her to the Mayor of Chennai Saidai Duraisamy, who runs a free coaching academy for aspirants of the civil services exams, who in turn, agreed to enroll her nephew for classes. "If I weren't in the party, would this have been possible, would I have ever been able to meet Saidai?" she asked, beaming. And when Thangam's husband died a few years ago, an erstwhile MLA of the party came to MGR Nagar to pay his respects. "Isn't that a matter of pride?"

Party members not only treasured and recalled encounters with important party members, they also recorded them as pictures. It was a matter of pride, but the pictures were also of instrumental value, in a way to use them in their favor with politicians, but also to win local support and channel local leadership. Their proximity to senior political leaders inevitably also lent them local authority and legitimacy. Political cadre members were important in the neighborhood; in turn, none of the local leaders were without strong political loyalties to particular political parties.

Local leadership and competitive patronage

Among the earliest settlers in MGR Nagar was Mahendran, who was then *oor thalaivar*, and a DMK loyalist. In all the accounts of the settlement that I heard in MGR Nagar, he led the process of settling, and helped protect the settlement for the first few decades. Mahendran himself seemed to have been a charismatic figure at the local level, one that all the old timers seemed to talk about regularly on many registers: how he looked like a hero, how many women were attracted to him, how he set up the neighborhood, fought the party when the neighbourhood was threatened, regularly helped people build their homes and distributed patronage gifts. Pushpa once remarked that Malliga, Mahendran's daughter, really took it upon herself to carry on his mantle, felt it was her responsibility to look out for MGR Nagar. Malliga herself repeatedly expressed her deep admiration for her father, while comparing herself unfavorably to him in terms of what she was able to do for her neighborhood, given her own financial situation and family troubles. Following her father's footsteps in the DMK and MGR Nagar, Malliga was, in fact, a natural leader, with great people skills and confidence, who had also greatly benefited from training and experience in the *Iyakkam*, and some social work she had participated in as a youngster. (At the time of my field work, she was also enrolled in a free social work training program that she

diligently worked at.) She was so devoted to the DMK and so committed to her political leanings that she named all her children after some variation of what was the symbol of the DMK, "*udhaya suriyan"*, the rising sun.

As joint deputy division secretary and *oor thalaivi*, Malliga was required to undertake many activities. The most important of these was to keep and regularly update a list of all families that had ration cards in MGR Nagar, a mimesis of government enumeration of slum households (cf. Das 2004), in a sense. The purpose of the list was mainly to distribute any patronage benefits the respective party wanted to distribute, such as rice, lentils, or even saris as flood relief during the monsoons, or as gifts during festivals. In addition, the list was also used so Malliga or the party could make recommendations on behalf of the residents to the *tahsildar* for governmental benefits such as monetary and material compensation as part of flood relief, old age pensions, and the like. Sometimes, Malliga would be asked to provide special lists, such as a list of Muslim families for party gifts to be distributed for Ramzan, or one of schoolgoing children who were to be given notebooks or school bags for the new school year. Other activities included having to attend meetings, and bring other residents to them, even coordinating logistics to ensure they reached polling booths during the elections. For instance, on the morning of the opening of the childcare center, Malliga was called by party seniors to be part of, and bring others to join, a group who were to receive and garland then-party heir apparent MK Stalin as he disembarked from a train from Coimbatore.

Tamil Nadu politics is fiercely competitive, a competition most evident in the kind and quantity of patronage distributed by each party when it is in power. Competitive patronage exists not only at the level of the state, with parties announcing this or that scheme. It

percolates down to the level of the slum, with various local leaders attempting to outdo each other in the competition for local support from residents. All local leaders were constantly engaged in attempts to do *nalladhu*, good, for their *ooru*, making visible notions of community and society through their performative speech and action (Hansen 2004) which emphasizes their centrality in the *ooru*'s wellbeing. Without reading into the intentionality of these acts, these attempts in turn, helped build and increase legitimacy of these leaders and the parties they belonged to. This sense of competition also penetrated my navigation of relationships within the slum. Although I came in as a member of the *Iyakkam* and thus a colleague of Malliga's, and although I frequently clarified what I was doing there—enabling *Iyakkam* activities as a way to help MGR Nagar, but also doing research on how residents have managed to hold on to urban land for so many decades, which meant I had to talk to everyone—I was sometimes uncomfortable talking to people across party boundaries, mostly because they saw me as Malliga's friend. Malliga certainly saw me as her friend and ally. This was not surprising, or unjustified: I did spend much of my time in MGR Nagar with Malliga and her family. Once when I told Malliga that I wanted to spend some time with Muthu, the young local leader who was a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), she was very disapproving (*un ishtam*, your wish, she said, before also adding that he works for political gain, not for the *ooru*). Similarly, Muthu and informants who belonged to other political parties often put some distance between me and them because of how justifiably close I seemed to Malliga.

Kamatchi's parents were also among the first dozen families to settle in what is now MGR Nagar. Her parents were in the DMK too, but Kamatchi loved MGR too much; her loyalties followed him when he defected from the DMK and started the AIADMK. MGR lives on in the hearts of even those in the DMK today, she emphasized. As an office holder, Kamatchi does

for the AIADMK, tasks very similar to what Malliga does for the DMK: record and update list of families in MGR Nagar, take care of logistics when goods have to be distributed, coordinate relief efforts during floods, etc.

Malliga and Kamatchi had been rivals for a while, considering that they are both respectable middle-aged women associated with the two leading political parties in the state. Both members of the *Iyakkam* and some residents claim that Kamatchi willfully sabotaged the childcare facility that was functional in MGR Nagar in the 1990s. "We have even literally pulled each other's hair out during an argument, and then I apologized and withdrew because we are related to each other by marriage," Malliga recalled with laughter to me one day. In the intervening years, their relationship seemed to have significantly improved. Although it was widely known that I was Malliga's colleague at the *Iyakkam* and was seen mostly with her, Kamatchi never treated me with anything other than warmth and respect. During the time of field work, she once came to talk to Malliga and I about her missing minor granddaughter, asking if we would help her file a complaint with the police station, and have the *Iyakkam* intervene to help. (Malliga offered some solid advice to arbitrate without the police, and they subsequently found the girl.) Malliga made sure Kamatchi's family members got adequate relief material, such as tarpaulin sheets and bed linen distributed by her party after Cyclone Vardah. Kamatchi had recently helped Malathi obtain an income certificate, accompanying her to the *taluk* (revenue administration at the level of the sub-district) office multiple times because she shared a good relationship with the concerned official. One afternoon, a group of social work students had come to MGR Nagar in order to talk to the local leaders about life in the settlement: Kamatchi pulled out a bunch of plastic chairs and laid them out in front of her house, and invited Malliga to talk to the

students with her, since she was "also a local leader, who does a lot of work for the community".

"If it is party work, we do our own thing, but if it is for the *ooru*, we work together," Malliga says, as she describes her relationship with Kamatchi. "We work to have area drained in the event of floods, file police complaints together where necessary, mediate in family disputes, and help destitute people in the settlement together," Kamatchi chimed in. There is also mutual division of power: through her experience with 'Amma scheme[24]', Kamatchi is good at, and takes on helping residents get old age pensions, widow pensions, and health insurance given by the government. "Working with the Corporation of Chennai (for civic issues) is not my jam," Kamatchi admitted, so that, along with coordination with Chennai MetroWater, is Malliga's turf. "The electricity board guys have to be bribed to get work done, there is no other go, and so we have relationships with people there," Kamatchi added. (Chapter 4 details encounters with the Electricity Board).

However, the terrains of cooperation and competition were uneven in the slum. Around the time of my fieldwork, Muthu, a 20-something year old was emerging as a local leader, whose loyalties, for a change, lay with the BJP, which was in power in the central government, but had a negligible presence in Tamil Nadu. Muthu's reasons for joining the BJP were fascinating. His father was a DMK party worker, and Muthu considered joining the party for a while. He asked the party for money to do some welfare activities for the slum but was denied. "The BJP was a change," Muthu recalls. "They listened to my plans for the

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[24]'Assured Maximum Service to Marginal People in All Villages', or AMMA, for short, was an initiative in which bureaucrats went out to the people to process various applications and address grievances (Special Correspondent 2013). "Amma" meaning mother, is also the moniker with which then- Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa was known.

ooru, not for who I was, and they recruited me because they liked my plans. In the DMK, you

must be subservient, and in the BJP, you can advance by hard work," he says. Muthu started

his political career first by starting a team to do "social service", one he named "Tamil Nadu

Vigilance Team". The goal of the team was to learn about various government schemes and

help residents access them. It had members across different political parties, who could

each coordinate with their respective party offices to obtain information on eligibility and

procedures for various welfare schemes. Muthu had some initial success with helping

residents obtain the health insurance scheme for low income groups, and the *Selvamagal*

Semippu Thittam, a savings scheme for girl children, and later with awareness programs as

part of the *Swachch Bharat* (Clean India) sanitation campaign of the BJP. It was through the

latter that he was first noticed and acknowledged by the party. Muthu's efforts paid off: he

was given the party ticket to contest in the local body elections that were originally

scheduled for October 2016[25].

Muthu's dynamism and tech savviness, as well as his young age, set him apart from the

other leaders in MGR Nagar. He actively uses WhatsApp and Twitter to record his

accomplishments (that others had taken credit for in the past), gather support for his

service activities, and gain the attention of more senior BJP leaders. He is more cautious

with Facebook, though, for fear that his ideas may be copied by others belonging to other

political parties. He has given himself a populist moniker on social media, *makkal selvan*,

son of the people, in an attempt to build a cult of personality, much like other Tamil Nadu

politicians. He continues to undertake his social service activities, describing the BJP as his

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[25] The local body elections were cancelled first in 2016 due to legal tussles between both the leading
political parties, specifically with the DMK accusing the AIADMK of irregularities in election
arrangements (Mariappan 2018). After almost three years of not having an elected local government,
local body elections are expected to be held in 2019 (TNM Staff 2019).

"brand" for legitimacy with the public, and as a way for him to receive institutional support for his work. His vision for MGR Nagar borrows a lot from the BJP's elite, technocratic vision for urban development as seen in the Smart Cities program: among his goals are to make the settlement a "Smart Area" with new houses and free wifi for all, a Smart playschool ("to give people rich education in our area"), mobile toilets, and dustbins. His priority, he says, is education, because it is the only route to "development" of the area.

The BJP in Chennai, as examined through Muthu's activities in MGR Nagar, did not seem to be adopting a particularly radical approach. Although Muthu says that he does not want to encourage cash-for-votes in the slum and wants to "educate" people instead, he listed activities that may not seem out-of-place on the current MLA's plans, illuminating the hegemony of patronage logics in the state: distributing cooked food as relief during the 2015 floods, school bags for children, a kilogram of rice for the Pongal festival, water pots for 500 families, helping residents get school and college seats... When I probed Muthu further on what he thought was the difference between the BJP and the Dravidian parties, he forwarded that while DMK and AIADMK functionaries distributed gifts to those who only supported their parties, "I distribute to all, I started the trend of distributing benefits to all residents of the slum, irrespective of existing party loyalty," he explained. Besides, while other party functionaries put up banners establishing their place in the party, Muthu pointed out that he doesn't. (From speaking with Malliga, I know that the ability to put up banners is very much a function and product of one's seniority in the party, and one's own ability to afford one. Malliga was neither senior enough, nor could she afford to make a banner for herself, announcing her achievements or clout.)

At the time of the start of my field work in the summer of 2016, MGR Nagar residents and the *Iyakkam* had already started discussions on opening a childcare centre in the neighbourhood. Muthu was invited to lead this meeting, both by Malliga and the *Iyakkam*, who had worked with his father while he was alive. "He intends to do good for the people, we can involve him in this," Malliga had said. This was right around the time that Muthu was trying to organize spoken English classes in the neighbourhood with Malliga's support and my assistance. It seemed like Malliga and Muthu were developing a cooperative relationship that would lead initiatives in MGR Nagar.

However, this phase did not last very long. We were part of a couple of meetings also attended by Muthu's resource person, and a possible teacher of classes. However, in talking to Muthu about the initiative, Malliga began to suspect that he was undertaking this for *arasiyal*, political reasons, given that it was likely he would be given a ticket by the BJP to contest in the upcoming local elections. After a brief period of no progress on this matter, Muthu posted pictures of the English classes on the "Make in India social work" group that he had invited me to join on WhatsApp. When I enquired about it, Muthu revealed that he had used a different team to conduct the classes. Malliga had discovered that he was using the previously engaged resource person to distribute clothes to fire-affected residents in a nearby settlement and accused him of using them and me as a way to advance his political career. Muthu, in turn, shrugged, and observed that to Malliga everything looks like *arasiyal*, politics, and that was the end of the collaboration. Malliga herself was also hoping to secure a ticket to contest the post of councillor, in the same constituency in which Muthu was likely to contest, and so, now, they were officially political rivals. On his part, Muthu had initially wanted to be involved and help raise the childcare facility, but then suspected DMK's involvement and backed off. (He thought that more people would've contributed to the *oor*

vasool had he participated.) He did express interest in distributing school bags to children at the opening of the facility, and I encouraged him to do whatever he wanted to for his *ooru*. But Malliga believed that he would appropriate undeserved credit by hijacking the opening, and insisted on focusing on the participating institutions, the *Iyakkam* and the Women's Voluntary Service, and the free medical camp that was to mark the opening. He can distribute whatever he wants to the children later, she said.

Despite differences among the local leaders, the settlement is a peaceful one, without any significant infighting. Even during the worst of their rivalries, people spoke to each other, possibly because they were all related to each other, through kinship or marriage. Thangam observed that in the run-up to the elections, people belonging to different parties don't get along, they fight and compete, *morachukuvom adichukuvom*, but after elections, things are peaceful per usual.

In the 1980s, the *Iyakkam* conducted elections in one part of MGR Nagar for the post of *oor thalaivar*. It was much like formal elections in that the two contesting parties adopted signs, and voters above eighteen years of age cast secret ballots. Palani was elected through this process. In early 2017, that particular part of the settlement came together in a meeting and decided that he would continue being the *thalaivar*, with additional formal posts, such as secretary, additional and joint secretaries. This was perhaps deemed necessary because that part of the settlement contains about a thousand families, in comparison to the part of MGR Nagar where Malliga, Kamatchi and Muthu operate, the part which was predominantly studied as part of this research project, which is a little less than half its size. This part of MGR Nagar is also the oldest part of the settlement, where the first set of families first captured land, and where Mahendran was a well-loved leader until 1995, and hence, retains

some amount of traditional authority, taken over by descendants of the original settlers, like Malliga and Kamatchi. However, it is in the interest of younger, emerging leaders like Muthu that local elections are held: Muthu did once express interest in elections being held for a formal *oor thalaivar* in MGR Nagar, instead of relying on political parties for authority.

Palani is also the elected leader of a formally registered organization that works to secure housing rights of the urban poor in the state. In a one-room shack that functions as a sort of office and household storage space, there are multiple pictures of M. Karunanidhi, MK Stalin, and of course, MGR on the walls. Here, Palani has preserved a veritable document collection of MGR Nagar, with records of every letter, petition, flyer, ever printed for claims making, in the history of the settlement. Like most local leaders, Palani is well-versed with bureaucratic procedure, and bureaucratic-speak in terms of the survey numbers of the land occupied by MGR Nagar, the various enumerations the settlement has been included in, and so forth. To apply for and request government schemes, such as income certificates, old age pensions, and the like, Palani drafts letters and petitions under the letterhead of the slum dwellers organization. The production of petitions enacts a particular form of subjectivity (Hull 2012, kindle location 1818). It implicates the writer of the petition as a member of a formal organization who is channeling a civic authority through the use of a letterhead. When Palani himself cannot accompany someone to apply for an income certificate, say, his petition channels his organization's credibility as a formally registered civic association. (The *Iyakkam* undertakes very similar tasks for its members.) It then invokes the resident as a citizen appealing for her rights in the liberal tradition, stating her eligibility for the pension. If the DMK is in power, and if the appeal is to be made to elected politicians from the party, the DMK letterhead is used.

This is an example of civil associationism found among the urban poor that does not fit into overschematized accounts of civil and political society in which people make claims through one mode or another (as Chatterjee could be interpreted), or a class-based division of how the state is engaged with (Harriss 2006), as observed by Coelho and Venkat (2009). Instead, in MGR Nagar, we see multiple overlapping kinds of organizations co-existing to secure the conditions of life as a community (Das 2011). There is a persistence of traditional and kinship-based authority, alongside more formal democratic practices of mobilization and claimsmaking that are each wielded where convenient and advantageous.

A matter of gender

After a prolonged illness, Chief Minister (and head of the AIADMK) J. Jayalalithaa was declared dead on December 5, 2016. During her funeral procession and after her subsequent burial next to MGR at a memorial on Marina Beach, hundreds of thousands of visitors from all over Tamil Nadu thronged Beach Road to pay their last respects. A week after her death, I noticed a little local memorial for her, right by Kamatchi's house (Figure 10). Kamatchi and her family were in great sorrow, and I decided not to talk to them right away. Malliga and Malathi themselves were considerably upset. How bold she was, how much she has done for the people. As a woman, to have accomplished so much, is a great thing, Malliga reflected, with sadness.

Malliga went on to wonder aloud whether as a woman, she would have done better in AIADMK, risen the ranks sooner, and been recognized for her efforts much more. She went

on to clarify that the heads of the DMK, Karunanidhi and Stalin, and her MLA was not like others in the party, they treated women with respect[26].

Malliga had invited me along on visits to the party office on a couple of occasions. Once, she wanted to put in a word with the MLA about an electricity connection for the childcare facility (I describe this in more detail in Chapter 4). The office was intensely air conditioned in response to the blazing heat outside. There was a faux leather couch, and a few white plastic chairs, all of which were occupied by the men in the room. The most prominent feature was, of course, a larger-than-life size portrait of MK Stalin. The MLA was not in, but one of his deputies, Prabakar[27], and three other party men, were available, all of them dressed nearly identically in white shirts and dark trousers. Upon entering, Malliga quickly discussed the electricity connections, and put in a request for two additional borewell pumps for the settlement. Prabakar commented on the number of pumps already installed by residents themselves, commenting sarcastically that they must be rich to be able to afford them, before agreeing to put down a request for one additional pump. Malliga readily expressed gratitude, as he noted down the details of the request in a tabulated sheet of paper with all the wards listed on them, under the corresponding ward number that MGR Nagar was located in. After this little discussion, Prabakar asked us to "first pull up two chairs and sit down", but Malliga says *paravala na*, it's OK, doesn't matter. There were no more chairs in the room. None of the men budged, so we continued to stand, right in the line of blasting coldness from the AC.

Prabakar: Who is this? (gesturing to me)

Malliga: Her name is Priti. She is in *Pennurimai Iyakkam* with me.

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[26] Despite the progressive gender politics of the Dravidian Movement, the DMK has had the reputation of being male-dominated, even misogynistic (Suresh 1992, Manikandan and Wyatt 2014, for instance).
[27] Name changed.

PN: *vanakkam*. (Greetings)

Prabakar (nodding to me): *vanakkam.* What, did you say "Periamma"? (laughing; the other men and Malliga join him in the laughter)

The men continued to mumble and laugh, but I was unable to comprehend their conversation, so I stood by quietly. Malliga continued to talk to Prabakar about other party efforts in a familiar shorthand that was hard to keep up with without context, on ration cards, pots distribution, etc. In the day's field notes, I wrote about how squirmish I was during the twenty minutes I was in the room, recalling both what Malliga had said about gender dynamics in the party, as well as the disproportionate vitriol that my Brahmin middle-class family routinely expressed for the DMK and their treatment of women.

Malliga had been seriously considering running in the local body elections that was originally scheduled to happen in 2016, until she decided not to. One of the reasons was financial: she didn't have the money she needed to spend on the campaign to make an impression on voters (her estimate of how much she would've needed was Rs. 2-3 lakhs (~$2,857 - $4,286). Malliga's father Mahendran had attempted to help Malliga run in local body elections many years ago as an independent candidate, but it did not work out for financial reasons. Besides, the AIADMK was in power at the state level at the time and would've been able to consolidate local power. The second reason was gender:

> they won't let women rise up the ranks. I know this from my experience. If I do decide to contest, the MLA will help me financially, but others in the party won't. The zonal secretary said that I would get votes in one or two areas, but wondered aloud if I would be able to get constituency-wide support. The party should support me and help me erect a campaign. I am not confident of that support here: people will only look to replace me.

In another instance in July 2017, Malliga had been summoned for a meeting at the MLA's office, and I accompanied her. It turned out that Malliga was required to bring a list and photos of pregnant women, who would be aided in applying for and receiving benefits such as free medical check ups, labor assistance, and nutritional food, in collaboration with a local hospital. Although Malliga did not receive the right instructions from the partyman who had called her only to say it was "important for ladies to go", she stayed on for the meeting anyway, after talking to the young office secretary about everything she could bring later. Malliga and I then went outside to the office courtyard to sit down with Solai from Annai Nagar and two other women leaders from the constituency. The women were all similarly dressed in neatly pinned synthetic sarees and slippers, hair oiled back with fresh flowers in them, and faces freshly dusted with talcum powder. We waited there for the MLA for well over an hour as the women gossiped gently about people they all knew from the area. Finally, just when the women were contemplating giving up on the meeting and leaving to prepare for Vinayaga Chaturti the next day, the secretary came out to tell us that the meeting was cancelled because the MLA was caught in traffic. The women goodnaturedly complained for a few minutes about how often the MLA made them come, and then cancelled on them. On our auto ride back, Malliga grumbled about how often women were made to abandon household duties, spend money, and come all the way for nothing. A few weeks later, there was a huge DMK-led protest meeting announced in the papers, but I found Malliga hanging out in MGR Nagar. When I asked her why she didn't go, she said "my phone isn't working, so I escaped it." She hastily retracted her words, but Malathi and I teased her about it for the rest of the day.

It seemed like Malliga's authority in the settlement as Mahendran's daughter and decades of experience working with the *Iyakkam* had given her a sense of empowerment that she

sometimes did not get from her party. When Malliga and I went to meet Solai about organizing an eye camp in her settlement on behalf of the *Iyakkam*, Solai observed with admiration, how Malliga was able to do party work as well as "social work" outside of the party. She was interested in brainstorming about what she herself could do in her neighborhood. Malliga benefited from her own innate abilities, and capital (social, ideological, cultural) capital from the *Iyakkam* in these abilities. Solai, on her part, was coordinating self-help groups which helped women access formal finance for livelihood activities. Malliga was interested in taking that up and suggested that she and Solai help each other do better for their respective neighborhoods, by exchanging information and ideas, and sharing experiences. The women held each other up in being entrepreneurial and creative in their jobs as local leaders.

Politics of distribution and inequality in MGR Nagar

All local leaders maintained a list of all families in the settlement, mainly for the purposes of distributing gifts from the party. While conducting *oor vasool* (contributions from every household) for the childcare facility, Malliga frequently alluded to this list of all family ration cards that she already possessed, threatening (sometimes jokingly, sometimes impatiently) to identify those who had not contributed, to have their cards cancelled, or deny them the next set of benefits her party planned to provide in the slum, even resettlement housing in the event of eviction. Although to the best of my knowledge, she didn't carry out her threat, the presence of this list (a biopolitical exercise, if you will) in the hands of slum leaders indicates the potential power of surveillance and control they possess, of being able to selectively distribute patronage benefits, or even hand out or deny resettlement housing in the event of eviction. As we solicited contributions, I noticed several ongoing tensions between residents and Malliga, especially concerning patronage gifts, reflecting the

transactional nature of contemporary politics in the settlement. The following is one such exchange:

Resident: What did *Kalaignar* (the moniker of M. Karunanidhi) give me?

Malliga: Am I his wife? Why do you ask me?

Resident: Jayalalithaa was the one who gave me money... when the storm hit, why didn't you give me a tarpaulin sheet?

Malliga: The party people only gave me 40 sheets to distribute, what can I do? When you come to party meetings, do you leave empty-handed? Don't I always make sure you get paid?

Conversations with the residents who were only part of the voting public, but not members of any particular party, all pointed out how the distribution of welfare goods is uneven, often reaching only the family and friends of the leaders, and not all deserving, or listed residents of the settlement. ("I didn't get a TV, only the grinder. They take everything.") Following one such conversation in the *pallam,* the most interior, impoverished part of the settlement where she lived, a bright-eyed 13-year-old, Jenny, caught me walking around, and quietly told me that she didn't get one of the school bags distributed by this party or that. Residents alleged that there was discrimination, even corruption within the settlement, with *katchi kaaranga*, the party people, taking money and benefits, but not helping people. "They call us to political meetings, but don't pay us." Bama, a resident reported, that her daughter applied for a marriage assistance scheme and approached a *thalaivar* for help, who demanded Rs. 10,000 (~$143) to help her out. "Ultimately I approached a different MLA and got it done," she said. When I asked whether she was referring to a leader within the settlement or higher up in the political hierarchy, she

remained non-committal, and did not mention names. "But everyone everywhere takes

bribes, from political leaders to bureaucrats in government offices," she said with a shrug.

When flood relief was to be distributed after the major disaster in 2015, with concrete

homes being eligible for Rs. 5,000 (~$71.5) and semi-*pucca* and *kachcha* homes for Rs.

10,000 (~$143), government officials came to the settlement to estimate the number of

residents eligible for either. Selvi of the *pallam*, alleged that due to the intervention of the

*thalaivar*s who knew the government officials, there was discrimination in how this relief

was distributed, with some residents being left out, and others benefiting undeservedly.

("This is why I don't believe the leaders, I only believe God," she declared. We had been

chatting in the local church.) There is even collusion between the different political party

leaders, they just do not help the common people, was another key allegation. Bama chimed

in to say that when she needed something, she didn't go to the leaders in the settlement, but

sought help outside, with others in her social networks of kinship and work, who have

connections in government offices. Local leaders often mediate in processes between the

state and the residents. They tend to be familiar with the *metis* of obtaining particular

benefits (which I discuss more in Chapter 2), have experience and familiarity with

important bureaucrats, a certain felicity in communication, and the power to expedite or

slow down processes in their position of authority. One may suffer for not sharing a good

relationship with them.

Conflicting priorities

Malliga often found herself having to negotiate between the *Iyakkam* and the party in being

able to carry out tasks for either. In some instances, the separation between the two types of

tasks was clear: the childcare facility was as a local leader and *Iyakkam* member, the

distribution of *kodams* (water pots) to residents was as a DMK functionary. In other cases,

negotiating between the priorities of these two became a challenge. One such instance occurred when the *Iyakkam* was framing a response to the slew of slum evictions that were to be carried out along the city's rivers[28]. It was decided at a meeting that street-corner meetings would be held by the *Iyakkam* at various locations, at which the impending threat would be discussed, and city residents would be invited to participate in a large demonstration that would protest the upcoming evictions. Malliga was among those that was asked to lead meetings in MGR Nagar, and a couple of nearby neighborhoods located along one of the city's arterial water bodies, including one that I will call Annai Nagar. Leading a meeting first entailed submitting letters to the concerned local police station to obtain permission to run the meeting at a specific date and time. In order to do this, Malliga reached out to Solai, the leader in Annai Nagar, as a way of informing her about the *Iyakkam*'s plans, checking about her convenience in terms of scheduling the meeting in Annai Nagar, and asking her to accompany her to the police station.

On hearing about the upcoming elections from Malliga, Solai panicked, and called the MLA to ask if it were true. She then called Malliga to say that the MLA wanted to speak to her. This, in turn, made Malliga nervous, and she called to ask me to send the MLA via Whatsapp, the link to the news article that reported the impending evictions, before she talked to him. (I did: the MLA's display picture was one in which he was embracing MK Stalin). After a few minutes, Malliga called me again to discuss how her conversation with the MLA went. He apparently told her not to get involved in these matters, because if she did, *adhu vera maadhiri aidum*, things may become complicated. Malliga assured him that the *Iyakkam*'s meetings were only for raising awareness among slum communities, but the MLA in turn,

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[28] Since the major flood event in the city in December 2015, thousands of slum families living along the city's waterbodies have been evicted. The *Iyakkam* was responding to news reports that confirmed evictions in the summer of 2017: see John (2017)

encouraged her to come talk to him when crucial issues came up so they could decide what

action to take[29]. Although the MLA did not explicitly ask Malliga *not* to conduct the street

corner meetings, Solai refused to move forward on arranging the meeting without a clear

go-ahead from him. Resistance against evictions had been thwarted by political

interference. Geetha of the *Iyakkam*, in her analysis of the situation, declared that politicians

were all complicit, all pro-evictions, so they could enable their party members to get homes

in the resettlement colonies. This meant that street corner meetings or neighbourhood

meetings won't work. Another Iyakkam colleague had a less sympathetic view. She said

> This is why party members should not be part of the *Iyakkam*. They themselves will sign
> up for getting multiple resettlement homes each, and make our efforts go to waste. The
> childcare facility? If the area were to be evicted, it would easily fetch four or five
> resettlement homes. Who do you think will get it?

Ultimately, it was decided that the *Iyakkam* would write a letter to the Collector of Chennai

district, urging him to stop evictions and prevent resettlement, and demanding that all slum

families be issued a *patta*, land title, and based on his response, plan a city-wide

demonstration in the next week or so.

In the *Iyakkam*'s view, ironically, it was due to the introduction of local body elections in

1996 that people's resistance to evictions, and the relevance of an organization like the

Iyakkam has weakened. As the colleague explained to me,

> The people are not like before. Nowadays, if they need something, they go straight to the
> councillor. The parties also lure the people in by giving them official party posts, like
> "division secretary" or "district secretary." If the settlement is evicted, each of the people
> associated with parties get two or three houses. People then do not know what to do;
> they choose to endure the everyday difficulties of their lives in the resettlement colony
> instead of in the city, and leave.

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[29]The MLA proceeded to ask her to come to his office, so he can make some contribution to the
childcare facility. When Malliga informed him that we had already raised the structure, he wanted to
know if an opening ceremony had been held. Malliga had to hastily assure him that it was a small,
low-key affair to which no one important was invited.

My colleague's analysis implies that local democracy has strengthened the hold that political parties have on people. They are embroiled deep in mutually beneficial relationships with local elected councillors, who function as a direct point of contact in government, a one-stop shop for all grievances. In turn, the cadre-based strength of the political parties, their ability to penetrate into the settlement, and their legitimization and honoring of party membership through handing out official party posts to residents has entrenched their relevance in the lives of the urban poor. The temptation of multiple legitimate homes in the resettlement colonies is also offered in exchange for party membership and loyalty. Upon making calculations on the relative benefits of resettlement, people choose to take up the offer, and continue their struggles for survival in the resettlement colony, instead of within the city.

Malliga personally benefitted from her dual position as party member and *Iyakkam* member in some ways. Among all the lower-level office bearers within the constituency, she was picked as coordinator of working groups set up in all neighborhoods to address various issues. Apparently, the MLA said that in addition to her leadership, her familiarity with the problems of the people, *makkal oda kashtangal*, from being in the *Iyakkam*, were reasons why she was given this responsibility. Some of my Iyakkam colleagues would perhaps interpret this as one of the ways in which the party co-opts, and effectively binds people to the party, undercutting possibilities of any radical resistance.

Negotiating tenure security

In the Introduction chapter, I had laid out the paradigm shift in interventions into slums in Chennai, from a patronage-based protection from evictions and in situ housing provision, to

a state-led drive to justify and enable evictions. Nowhere has this shift been starker than in the local history of MGR Nagar.

One of the main ways in which MGR Nagar residents could settle in their current location is through the capture of political support (a little more on this in Chapter 2). In its early days, the settlement was known as Malaiappan Nagar, after a local figure. Naming themselves after a beloved political leader known for his empathy for the poor was a way to protect themselves from arbitrary state action and violence. Party activities, first of the DMK, later of the AIADMK were held here in order to deliver legitimacy to the settlement; both parties have symbolically marked the settlement as their territory by erecting flags here. However, from the early 1990s, these political moves did not have the same currency as before in according residents tenure security. The settlement's occupation of public land and unrecognized status has rendered it vulnerable to evictions. Its central location in the city and proximity to the government offices does not help matters.

In 1991, one part of MGR Nagar was evicted (during AIADMK's reign, Thangam, a staunch party loyalist, admits). Petitions had been submitted for the settlement's removal, allegedly for the construction of a helipad for then- Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa, and people responded by staging a road blockade with the opposing DMK's support, even managing to surround Jayalalithaa's car on her commute. They had also filed a writ petition in the Madras High Court. An eviction order was issued right away, according to Thangam, and police violence was involved in making people move to Kodungaiyur, in the then- peripheries of the city. On the very first day there, residents had to face hostilities from the host population. A resident's arm was cut off in clashes, and MGR Nagar residents moved back overnight, in the midst of a cyclone. The land they had occupied earlier had been razed

down and fenced. But they waited in the pouring rain in the nearby monument, while the

Iyakkam took down the fence, and measured out 10 x 10 plots for each family, to help

residents resquat in what is now their current location. Meanwhile, the Madras High Court

issued a stay order against evictions, deeming the eviction itself as illegal when the writ

petition was yet to be heard in court.

In 1999, another part of MGR Nagar were enumerated by state officials, immediately

followed by arson, where both houses, as well as goatsheds in the settlement were

destroyed. Malliga describes this as a state conspiracy or plot (*arasaanga sadhi*) to build

recreational facilities in that location, this time during the regime of her party, the DMK.

Residents protested, blocking the main road; in response, a Rapid Action Force team of the

police unleashed violence on them. About 500 people, including women from the *Iyakkam*

were arrested on the first day, and about twenty male residents were taken away to an

undisclosed location for an extended period of time. Gomathi was among the women that

threatened suicide if the police did not reveal the whereabouts of the men, until they were

informed that the men were being detained in Vellore jail, and the women would have to go

there in order to bail them out. As Gomathi and others headed to Vellore, several families

left to be resettled, with women and children being beaten up and manhandled to urge the

move. They were afraid of further violence, and the possibility of getting no alternate

housing if they resisted any longer. Ultimately all families in that part of MGR Nagar moved

to Kannagi Nagar, Asia's largest resettlement colony; they were among the first groups of

Chennai residents to be resettled there. Upon arrival, they did not have electricity, adequate

drinking water, jobs, buses, even food, Gomathi recalls. Evictees of MGR Nagar that I had

interviewed in 2013 recalled how they ate earthworms for the few days because they

couldn't find anything else to eat, with no ration shops or grocery stores to buy from for

kilometers. Kannagi Nagar at the time was also particularly infested with crime and violence, with a huge moonshine problem, which subsided only after the first police station was set up a few months later. Gomathi continues to travel into the city to visit her relatives in MGR Nagar, and even worked in the local childcare facility for a while.

In the time since, the Port-Maduravoyal Expressway, a national highway project estimated to cost Rs. 2,400 crores (~$348 million), has been proposed (NT Bureau 2018). Intended to relieve the city of traffic congestion and enable quicker connections between the Port and the city's industrial suburbs, the expressway in its currently proposed form, will require the demolition of many city slums, and MGR Nagar is among them. Preparation for the project started in 2010 but was stalled due to concerns related to environmental impact. After Jayalalithaa's death in 2016, among the first policy decisions that was made was to approve the Port-Maduravoyal expressway. Many of the *oor thalaivars* of the neighborhood got together at the ration shop to talk about the implications. When Malliga asked if this means that MGR would get affected, Thiyagarajan shook his head emphatically and said, "if the area is to be evicted, then why would the MLA and this troop of engineers visit us last week? We are not getting affected." Karunakaran of the AIADMK didn't believe that the political parties wanted them to move. "We are vote banks, they cultivate slum areas (*kudisai paguthi*) as vote banks, so why would they move us?". One thing that members of all parties had in common, was that no one wanted to move, he emphasized.

Thangam disagreed, though. "If senior officials decide to evict MGR Nagar, who can stop them? These local leaders? Do you think we can, considering what has happened before?"
***

Manuel Castells (1983) points out that 'urban populism' is one of the predominant ways to undercut resistance to dispossession; the reliance on "powerful protectors" and "invisible networks" rendering residents precarious. However, Benjamin (2008) forces us to reconsider the negative connotations associated with "vote-bank" politics, highlighting how this mode of politics enables the informal urban poor to make claims on urban land, infrastructure, and even protection from top-down urban renewal initiatives. In the experience of MGR Nagar, both views of populism hold. Politics has been a way to preserve life in the settlement, offering legitimacy to the settlement, and livelihoods, basic services, leadership opportunities, disaster relief, and of course, televisions, sarees, grinders, Christmas, Pongal, and Ramzan gifts. However, as the MLA revealed when Malliga was trying to organize against evictions, political party heads are more and more non-committal where tenure security of residents is concerned. The MLA explicitly asked Malliga, an office holder in the DMK, not to be involved in these activities without asking him. The reason for that is anybody's guess. Party elites have proven adept at extracting kickbacks from infrastructure projects. In fact, DMK chiefs have been investigated for corrupt practices in the approval and construction of various flyovers in the city (Frontline 2001). These flyovers are at one level, part of the developmental vision of creating a global city, which political parties have a direct stake in. Tracing this to the next step, these infrastructure projects are directly causing the dispossession of the urban poor. The past efforts of movements like the *Iyakkam* to make evictions an election issue, have been in vain.

The people's loyalty has never been in question, even if they might sometimes express cynicism or exhaustion with the parties they are loyal to. That is possibly because as members of the *Iyakkam* point out, even if evictions were to occur, party loyalties will ensure that life is sustained at the resettlement site, in the form of multiple resettlement

homes. I have observed that the organization strength of political parties at the resettlement colonies is rather weak; the colonies are much more the domain of NGOs, activist groups and the Slum Clearance Board. Indeed, small local groups and civil society organizations work tirelessly to improve the conditions of life in the resettlement colony, bringing in more bus services, ration shops, childcare facilities, health centers, and other amenities. Further research needs to be done to make stronger claims, but it is safe to say that being resettled, however, does throw residents out of the orbit of regular patronage benefits and political (party-based) community of the sort that one might find in the central city.

There is also the threat of violence, which MGR Nagar residents have been intimately witness to. Two evictions have occurred with the complicity (perhaps even active participation) of their beloved parties. In the face of the eviction project, the people's loyalties have not mattered; their protests and appeals have been met with severe damage to life and property.

And so, the wheels of political life continue to turn, and residents dutifully carry out all party activities, even if that might mean not resisting evictions. They invest hope in their current negotiations, while also preparing for a future in the resettlement colony, as I show in the next chapter.

Only the residents of the *pallam*, who seem to lie at the margins of both material and political life in MGR Nagar, had different things to say. They couldn't say whether they would be evicted or not; they could only declare that if they were given alternate homes, they would leave. Selvi said, "there are no services here. If demolition is about to happen, I

would tell them to go ahead to demolish. I would think of it as Jesus liberating me. I have my

sewing machine, I will survive." Selvi's survival has not depended on local political

community. The terrains of negotiating life in MGR Nagar have been uneven.

CHAPTER 2

CAPTURING CITIZENSHIP: LAND AND IDENTITY DOCUMENTS FOR CLAIMS MAKING

MGR Nagar was getting its own *balwadi*. To fund the construction of the necessary infrastructure, the plan was to collect Rs. 100 (~$1.4) per household in the slum (*oor vasool,* collection from the neighborhood), in addition to seeking external donations. The first day of *oor vasool*, I created a paper table following Malliga's instructions, with columns for the name of the contributor, the contributor's house number and family ration card number, and the amount donated (Figure 11). As I chased Malliga from door to door as she solicited contributions from families, she would demand to see household ration cards. If a household didn't have one, she would ask, "ration card *ivlo naala pidikkaliya*?" roughly translated as "do you not have a ration card after all this time?" I was struck by the use of the word *pidikkaliya* in her question. The Tamil verb *pidikka* means to grab or capture. The figure of speech, then, literally translated to whether one had *captured* a ration card or not, implying an act of encroachment, stealth, or sly appropriation.

Figure 11: *oor vasool* list, February 2017

Pidippu (the noun form, capture) applied to other materials as well, most notably land[30].

Noticing a shanty structure where there previously hadn't been one, Malliga asked a

resident nearby, *indha edaththa pidichutiya*, have you captured this piece of land? In

another instance, as we were telling a resident we were building a *balwadi,*

Resident: *Enga?* (Where?)

Malliga (pointing): *Adho, andha madha koil, water tank aanda* (There, near the Virgin Mary

shrine and the water tank)

Resident: *Andha edaththa pidichutiya?* (Have you captured that land?)

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[30] The word *kabza* in Hindi meaning capture, is used to describe land occupied without legal backing (Das and Walton 2015, for instance). The Hindi term for the labor in enclosing land is *jagah gherna*, with a connotation of illegality (ibid.).

That the absence of adequate housing leads to the urban poor's occupation of public land is an idea that has been established and acknowledged by academics and practitioners alike (Amnesty International 2009, Payne 2001). Multiple studies on informal housing emphasize "occupancy urbanism" (Benjamin 2008), "quiet encroachment" (Bayat 2000), or "pirate urbanization" (Davis 2006) as the condition of land use for the urban majority in the global South. But what does this ongoing capture of land in the slum entail, and how does it connect to the *capture* of the identity document and a more general form of urban citizenship in the neoliberalizing city? What are the implications of these captures for the future, and how might understanding document possession as an active form of labor, instead of and more than passive possession—to grab, as a form of active retaining, not just to possess, as in something that sits in a purse or wallet—bring attention to citizenship as a form of bureaucratic maintenance in which state and non-state actors alike are mutually engaged?

I posit that the practice of *pidippu* or capture is a durable mode of living in the contemporary Indian city. As employed by the urban poor, 'capture' refers both to the physical occupation of public land, as well as the deliberated labor of obtaining identity documents and other material and symbolic indicators of belonging that grant them legitimacy and *de facto* rights to occupy this land. In the increasingly precarious landscapes of speculative urbanization and public land privatization, resettlement housing forms the new terrain of capture for the urban poor. Securing future urban shelter via accessing a resettlement flat is also now dependent on the possession of particular identity documents. Future land access depends on documentary capture today. Capture hence emerges as an exploratory technique by which the urban poor seek to retain access to the welfare state, one possible outcome of which is potential gain of propertied citizenship in the resettlement

housing colonies. The shifting conditions of urban rights and changing documentary

requirements for accessing those rights reveal the urban poor's savvy in navigating

bureaucratic processes and capturing documents to maximize their own benefits.

In this chapter, I first lay out how land is captured through the cultivation of political

connections. The next section focuses on the particular significance of the ration card in

capturing subsidized rations and other benefits from the welfare state, and the *metis* -

cunning, learned practice (Scott 1998) - used to get one. In the next section, I detail the use

of the ration card to distribute resettlement housing, due to the perdurance (Hull 2012) or

versatility of the ration card as a government issued ID. The third section will focus on the

most recently introduced unique identification document in India, the Aadhaar—explicitly

designed to bypass the duplication and fraud possible with existing paper-based identity

documents such as the ration card— and the residents' successful appropriation of the

Aadhaar in the same circuits of knowledge and practices of capture already prevalent

within the slum. Finally, I deliberate on how all documents are viewed as opportunities by

the residents to secure citizenship through a future, as yet unclear mediation of these

documents.

Capturing land

A set of about thirty-two families from various villages in southern Tamil Nadu as well as

other parts of the capital Chennai (then Madras) first settled near a set of military housing

quarters in the central city in order to access employment nearby. Since the military wanted

the land within a few months of their living there, they were asked to move. Location was

key for the livelihoods of these residents, who lifted cargo, provided laundry services for the

military housing quarters, and desilted a waterbody, all in nearby locations. So, they moved a short distance, and settled in their current location in the early 1970s. Residents remember it as a *kaadu*, forest, of thorny bushes, waste and weeds, which they cleared with their bare hands. The most interior parts of the settlement were then a huge garbage dump, which was also cleaned and drained by residents: this part, called the *pallam*, or the pit, is the most low-lying area of the settlement. They first built provisional shanties of found materials and lightweight roofs, which could be dismantled in the mornings to avoid detection. Later, as they felt more assured of stability, the houses were supplied with more permanent materials.

Negotiating with political parties was a key mechanism through which life was captured and sustained in the settlement. When the settlement was relatively new, it was called Malaiappan Nagar, after an old local leader. Upon facing insecurity and having to dismantle their homes for a few months, the settlement was renamed MGR Nagar, after the eponymous leader. The hope was that if one appealed to the state on an affective, sentimental basis, the settlement might be spared punitive action, and allowed to survive in that location, despite being squatters. The earliest settlers were members of the DMK. Early on, the DMK flag was hoisted in the settlement. Meetings were held here, attended even by the past and present heads of the DMK, M. Karunanidhi and his son, MK Stalin. Later, the flag of the other party, the AIADMK, was also hoisted, as support for it grew, with party activities commencing in the settlement. Now, both flags remain aloft. As material objects, these flags symbolically mark the terrains of two major political parties, and in turn, accord legitimacy to the settlement[31]. Following Bhan's (2013, p. 60) definition, legitimacy of a

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[31]Hoisting party flags and installing plaques or boards of organizations is a common practice across many urban settlements. The *Iyakkam* installs boards in some neighbourhoods as a way to signal its presence there to the government, and strong local mobilization.

settlement implies a certain anticipated protection, either *de facto* or *de jure*, from arbitrary eviction. Settlements need not draw legitimacy only from law, but also through other means.

Until the mid-1980s, water for the entire settlement came from two wells the residents had dug, until a child fell into the well and died. Those who could afford to install their own hand pumps for drawing ground water did so, and those who couldn't retrieved household water in pots from a nearby government complex. Finally, in 1991, the settlement had a water tank installed in the slum, achieved by writing petitions to the presiding AIADMK politicians: the municipal water supplier, Chennai Metro Water, delivers water to this tank every day for a fee. For much of the settlement's history, all residents defecated in the nearby field, with women only going out in the dark. It was during the DMK's reign in 1996, with funds from the then-DMK MLA that the public toilet facility for the settlement was built. When MGR Nagar built its ration shop in 2007, aid came from the DMK to obtain permission from the Civil Supplies Corporation. The party, and the then-Councillor, also pitched in funds. The capture of clients by political parties through the legitimacy they provided to the settlement, and in turn, the residents' capture of the political machinery in order to retain the land and improve their lives upon it is significant. Capture is a political practice which thrives even today.

The settlement was impacted by many disasters over the past five decades, during which residents suffered temporary displacement, usually fleeing to a nearby monument or school. They returned when conditions were better, sometimes to a fully damaged house which they would have to rebuild. Residents recall vividly a flood event in 1989, after which the then-*oor thalaivar*, Mahendran, organized a road blockade (*saalai mariyal*) to draw

attention to the plight of the residents. (This was a significant event because Mahendran belonged to the DMK and led a protest against his own party for the welfare of his people.) In 1994, a container in the nearby harbour exploded, exposing residents to chemical fumes and oil that caused severe hair loss and skin conditions among some. In the early 1990s, the settlement suffered one of many fires. Fires are caused due to the flammable nature of many *kachcha* (or unfinished) building materials such as thatch, but arson has been widely acknowledged to be a common government tactic across the city to destroy poor settlements and relocate residents. Following the fire, residents rebuilt their homes in place, with those who could afford it installing fireproof tiled roofs. When the tsunami hit in 2004, a nearby waterbody overflowed and caused great damage in the settlement. The *Iyakkam* stepped in to transport people to safe locations in rented trucks, and by taking care many of their basic needs for about ten days while the residents waited for the water to drain. During the time of my fieldwork in December 2016 Cyclone Vardah hit Chennai, flooding homes in MGR Nagar briefly and causing some damage to property. The DMK provided relief in the form of tarpaulin sheets and fresh bed linen for the residents and fed the residents for a few days. The asbestos roof fell in and broke a resident's hand in one of the houses. The party provided monetary aid to fix the roof and his hand.

MGR Nagar has developed its own informal housing economy much like other settlements in the city: houses are bought, rented, leased out, mortgaged, and sold. Early settlers like Malliga and Thangam, for instance, have captured multiple pieces of land within the settlement, upon which they build houses that they rent out. These transactions are carried out through agreements drawn on stamped paper, bearing a revenue stamp of the

government, even though they have no legal validity[32]. Mahendran had planted a coconut tree for every house built, only some of which survive today. Houses all differ in size and layout, depending on the amount of land occupied, but most houses are two-room units, consisting of a living space and a cooking space, sometimes with a small bathing and washing space alongside. Residents have built multiple small shrines for Virgin Mary and various Hindu gods over the years, and continue to clean and service them regularly. The original barbed wire fence separating adjoining land used by the government and MGR Nagar was replaced by a tall concrete wall built by the city government as the settlement grew. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, MGR swelled to multiple times its original size, extending for a few kilometres in length, and is now densely packed with a thousand families or so occupying it.

That MGR Nagar and the hundreds of other slums like it across the city had not just been noticed and ignored, but actively allowed by the government to capture public land for many decades is indicative of the welfare function of the Indian postcolonial state (Ghertner 2014). This was not a simple ethical commitment of early socialist experimentation with public land access: welfarist state disposition toward informal public land occupation was a product of class struggle, an appropriation of public land by a working-class public[33]. Slum expansion is essential for sustained social reproduction, producing an inter-generational subaltern spatial practice that actively produces space as it "masters and *appropriates* it"

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[32] MGR Nagar is an informal settlement in which residents have no formal property rights. Yet, these agreements add a certain legitimacy and formality to the transactions within this community, because it mimics the procedural and representational formality of the state, and acquires a life of its own within the community. This is an illustration of what Veena Das (2004) calls mimetic practices in the margins of the state, which invoke the state while defying it.

[33] Some of these slums were officially recognized under the Tamil Nadu Slum Areas Act 1971. This meant that residents were legally authorized to occupy the land on which the slum lies, and paid property taxes. MGR Nagar is not among them.

(Lefebvre 1991, p. 38, emphasis mine).Thus the process of capture is not simply an initial 'enclosure' of a large piece of land, but an ongoing takeover of land within and at the edges, the continual production of the slum both by the residents and the state, the latter through both active intervention and passive complicity.

Most residents have voter IDs and ration cards with which they access subsidized the Public Distribution System. The Indian public distribution system is a large-scale food rationing program meant to secure food security at the national and household levels (Mooij 1998, p. 78). The family ration card, by recording a date of issuance, and the rations claimed by the household every month from the system, is documentary evidence of having lived in one's own dwelling in the slum for a certain amount of time. It also provides legitimacy to slum residents by acting as proof of identity and address (more on this later) with which they receive other governmental benefits such as old age pensions, widow pensions, and educational scholarships.

Capture by the urban poor, then, can be summarized as entailing first, the physical occupation of unused public land that is rendered livable by the residents' labor in clearing the land and constructing their own dwellings, and the channeling of legitimacy through political engagement. Social reproduction is sustained over the years with residents finding employment in the central city, constantly negotiating with elected representatives and bureaucrats in order to access municipal services and building documentary legitimacy to their occupation of public land through state-issued identity documents. In the next section, I will attempt to detail and theorize the process of capturing these state-issued identity documents.

The ration card, and the *metis* of capture

The ration card is one of the most significant means by which the Indian welfare state provides direct benefits to the population. It is a strategy to preserve the life and health of the population by creating knowledge about its consumption needs, and intervening to help the population meet these needs. It is an exercise in Foucauldian biopolitics in its concern for managing the biological, social and economic life of state subjects through the administration of goods and resources necessary for people to live (Collier 2011, as quoted by Anand 2017, kindle location 396). Rationing started as a wartime measure in the 1940s, as a way to mitigate public suffering (Sriraman 2011). Post-independence, the public distribution system has been employed for multiple political and economic ends (Mooij 1998). In the 1950s and 60s, food distribution was seen as a means to support a low-wage policy to spur industrial growth, maintain political stability and control possibilities of unrest meanwhile. Since the country became largely self-sufficient thanks to the Green Revolution in the 1960s, food has also been affectively channeled into popular politics, notably in Tamil Nadu. MGR's Noon Meal Scheme, and Jayalalithaa's Amma canteens (where fresh, cooked food has been made available for the general public but particularly for working classes at very nominal rates) are key examples of the ways in which food distribution has been explicitly connected to the image of particular leaders as a sovereign par excellence (*makkal thilagam*, king of the people) or a mother (*Amma*) respectively, and ensured their political legitimacy in paternalistic politics. Mooij (1998) notes that after the country adopted a structural adjustment programme in the 1990s, there has been considerable anxiety in the inefficiency of the public sector. This, combined with a recognition that the most marginalized would be adversely hit by the new economic policies, led to a new logic of 'targeting' the most needy in the provisioning of food, and also reduce government expenditure alongside. From its earliest iteration, the ration card has

been available to those living on the fringes, including the homeless, beggars, and those living in refugee camps, indicating that the card was intended as an instrument to preserve life without insisting on legality of residence (Sriraman 2011); if at all, it was mechanism to include into the welfare system, those who were particularly marginalized[34].

Calculations of how much rationed food a family is eligible for, are usually made depending on it falls vis-a-vis the "poverty line". The poverty line is calculated as the minimum expenditure required to be undertaken to meet nutritional requirements of 2100 calories per capita per day (Dev 2005)[35]. Those families considered to be above the poverty line may be eligible for fewer commodities or smaller amounts of rations, compared to those below the poverty line in most parts of the country, for which they receive ration cards of different types. Tamil Nadu has a "Universal Public Distribution System" in which income criteria do not apply; all families have the option of choosing the commodities they need every month from the system. They are given corresponding types of ration cards: the green ration cards are for those opting for all commodities, the "sugar cards" for those who opt for sugar in lieu of rice, and the white "no commodity" cards. There are only price differences for those above and below poverty line (see Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation n.d.).

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[34] Sriraman (p. 54) however, also points out that the enumeration of the homeless was not fully benign; the homeless only received temporary cards.

[35] Nutritional requirements, and the minimum expenditure to meet them differs in accordance to location (urban and rural areas). Nutritional requirements in rural areas stands at 2400 calories a day, and in urban areas, at 2100 calories per day. Estimates of extent of poverty on the basis of the poverty line are drawn based on periodic surveys by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO).

Figure 12: Ration card of a Chennai resident
Logo and hologram of the Tamil Nadu government on the right, name, address, list of family members with their age on the left.

Routine calculations like the census, and the extent of poverty as in the number of people below and above the poverty line constitute a technology of rule that is driven by numbers (Rose 1991), to govern and provide for its population, what Foucault identifies as governmentality. These routine calculations and the dispensing of particular kinds of ration cards is a way for the state to *see* its population (Scott 1998). In turn, it is also strategically advantageous for the population to be *seen by the state* through the ration card, in order to access these direct benefits that are provided by the state through its governmentality initiatives. Belonging to a particular income bracket and possessing a particular type of card then renders the resident eligible for direct benefits from the welfare state, in the form of subsidized food and fuel.

Ration cards also serve as a proof of identity and address, often produced to receive services and benefits such as pensions and telephone connections. In a historical account of

the ration card, Sriraman (2011) details how the card was retained even after wartime, as a way for the state to continue the provision of welfare in an economy marked by food scarcity in the 1950s. In proceedings in the Delhi High Court on allocation of housing after the partition of the country in 1947, the ration card, as a unitary evidentiary document, has served as a way to verify the identity and address of claimants, going *beyond* its initial purpose of being a ticket to receiving rations. Ghertner (2015, p. 52-53) highlights that the initial distribution of the ration cards in Delhi also coincided with the first instance where addresses within informal settlements were registered by the state. For these reasons, these documents became associated with residential permanence, confirming continued occupation of land in various lists and state-run surveys (Ghertner 2015, p. 52-53). Ration cards were the only requirement to vote in Delhi before voter IDs were issued and thus, politicians ensured that all residents received it, in exchange for political support. (Voter IDs were issued only in the early 1990s, after the Election Commission launched an ID drive across the country (Sundaram 2017)). Urban poor residents are routinely enumerated as part of some urban scheme or developmental project, and often receive paper "slips" that confirm their inclusion on particular lists. However, the public distribution system undertakes a regular updation of its lists, and the ration card itself is inscribed with validity periods and date stamps for every time monthly rations are obtained. The card, thus, is a living record of *ongoing* residence at a particular location. Although issued by a single state department, through its use in various situations apart from receiving rations, the card has taken on significance as a *de facto* government ID, according bureaucratic recognition and legitimacy to its possessor.

In Chennai too, ration cards can be obtained by all families irrespective of whether their actual residence is deemed legal. Veena Das (2011, p. 328) forwards that the ration card

recognizes slum dwellers as *legal subjects* while having ambiguous legal validity,

demonstrating the state's commitment to preserving life and ensuring its legitimacy. It is

perhaps for this reason that the ration card along with the voter ID card has been referred

to as a patronage document: it is in the interest of the state and political parties to ensure

that residents possess them. The card itself is an asset or resource, submitted in advance at

the ration shop to get timely rations, mortgaged, even stolen, as has been known to happen

in MGR Nagar. It is valuable enough to be bought and sold at unofficial prices from corrupt

agencies (Goetz and Jenkins 2001), as a way to access rations, possibly other welfare

benefits from the state such as subsidies, maternity benefits, and pensions, even

resettlement housing (as I will explain later in the next section) from other state

departments, due to its function as a government- issued family identification document[36].

Through its status as a widely recognized government ID then, the ration card has long

since outgrown its originally intended purposes.

The material form of the ration card (as a 'graphic artifact' (Hull 2012)) has a semiotic

function in how and why it is obtained, held, and circulated among residents (ibid., p.14),

and in ways that go beyond its officially intended function. The ration card held by a

Chennai resident (Figure 12) bears multiple markings of the Tamil Nadu government (one

printed, and another a hologram, possibly to prevent duplication), and is explicitly a

document issued by the Civil Supplies and Consumer Protection Department. Depending on

the location, it identifies the administrative ward that the family resides in, and the

particular shop from which they can access rations. It also bears a photograph of the male

head of the family. The card also performs a two-step referential function. First, the card

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[36] Many government departments even mandatorily require the ration card for registration of the family or individual under various welfare schemes.

legitimizes a family unit through documentation. By listing the head of the household and

the members of his or her family, the card establishes a discrete unit of which specific

individuals are a part. All the listed individuals can use the card as identification proof.

Second, the address printed on the card explicitly links the family to an address, a door

number, a particular, material asset, the dwelling located in a particular neighborhood, and

is authorized by a state department[37]. This is the means by which the ration card acts as a *de*

facto tenure security document, as has been observed by multiple scholars before. Within

the informal housing economy of the slum, the ration card is often surrendered to the new

owners when the house is sold, it inscribes state recognition and associated forms of

legitimacy. For these reasons, it becomes important for every family in MGR Nagar to obtain

a card.

In order for the first referential function to be realized, what constitutes a 'family' becomes

significant. Settlements tend to expand over time, with both families expanding with grown

children getting married and starting families of their own, and with new families settling

down here. If the names of the adult children of a couple remain on their parents' ration

card, they would be considered part of one family unit[38]. This would mean that they would

be eligible for only one family's quota of rations and benefits. Thus, residents had to be

strategic. A resident Malliga and I encountered during *oor vasool*, Latha, had four grown

children with their own families, who all shared the same two-room house. She had only

one ration card attached to her family, bearing the address of this house, which meant they

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[37] Where a door number is not available, the card identifies a general location. Many pavement dwellers in Chennai have ration cards, with their location identified by the road they live on, without a door number.
[38] When asked about the number of families residing in MGR Nagar, residents would say "450 odd ration cards, 1000 families", implying that not all "families" have been legitimized by their own ration cards.

received the subsidized rations this one card gave them.

Malliga: Why don't you apply for a new ration card with a new door number?

Latha: Where do I go for a new door number?

Malliga: Build a bathroom, and give it a new door number!

MGR Nagar does not have access to underground drainage, so a bathroom is literally just a space to bathe with a distinct door or entrance, with the waste water draining into a pit underground. A 2' x 2' extension of the existing structure, or simply a "wall" or a divider in an existing structure, made of PVC or tarpaulin sheets, is often adequate qualification to deserve its own door number. Malliga explained the earlier process of obtaining a door number. The local leader Mahendran had earlier instated the practice of having the *tahsildar,* the revenue official of that administrative division, issue door numbers for new household units for a sum of about Rs. 500 (~$7.7USD) each (it was also a way for the local leader himself to get hold of five or ten house numbers himself, she added). The *tahsildar* maintained a serialized list of door numbers and corresponding families in the settlement. But soon, there was a proliferation of houses, with people making sub-units of their houses, and numbering them "45A", "45B" and so forth, which led to the practice of going to the *tahsildar* being discontinued. The current local leaders also possess a list of homes and ration cards and make suggestions to settlement dwellers on the basis of this list. Malliga said to a resident*, "*I think 520 is the last door number in the *ooru* so far, call yours 521." To another, Malliga offered the door number of one of her own couple of houses in the settlement which did not have a ration card attached to it, or suggested that she take on the number of an abandoned structure elsewhere in the settlement. Therefore, in order to get a ration card for your family, you first needed to have captured land in the slum, or at least build a bathroom with a distinct door number attached to it. This constitutes *Step 1* of obtaining a ration card (Figure 13).
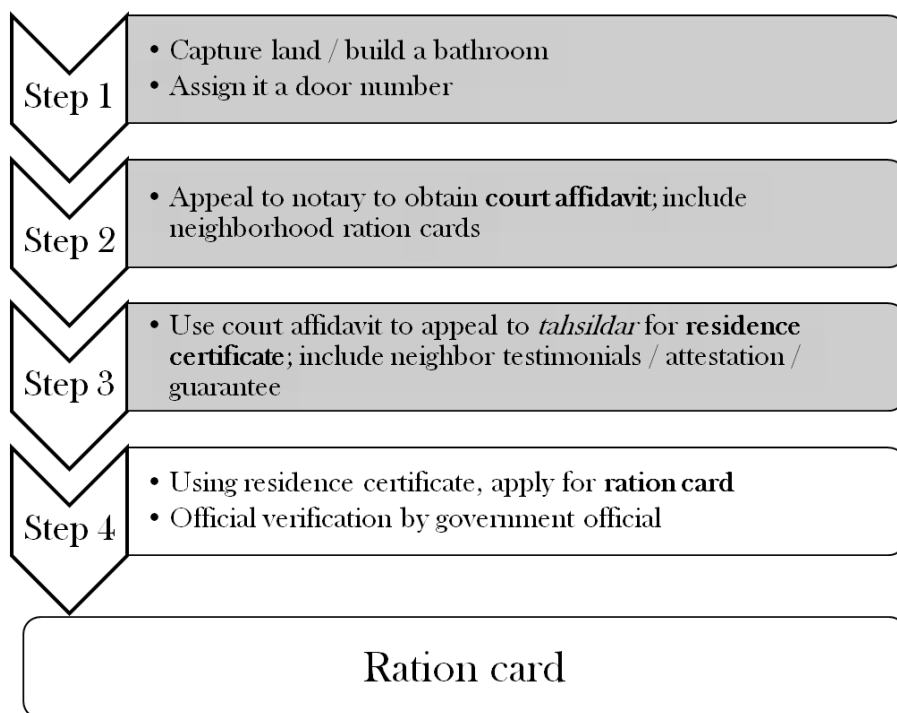
Figure 13: Representation of *metis* of capturing the ration card, in steps
Clear boxes indicate official bureaucratic procedure; shaded boxes indicate locally created / transformed practices

Now, the door number needs to be reflected on a ration card. But ironically, for the ration card itself to be issued, a proof of address is required (How Do I, n.d.). So how do you get a ration card? Here's how Malliga and Kamatchi, the two leaders of MGR Nagar, described the rest of the process, in discrete steps:

Step 2: One needs to obtain a **court affidavit***, that is, a declaration on stamped paper that confirms your address, signed by a notary.* As Malliga explained to someone, "state in your court affidavit that you were raised in this settlement by someone who later left the settlement, and so you want a card in your own name." If one has bought a house within the settlement, the promissory note on stamped paper with which the transaction was formalized can be used to obtain a court affidavit.

In order to have their affidavits drawn and attested, residents of MGR Nagar usually approach notaries in the Madras High Court, a Rs. 40 ($0.5). About half a dozen notaries can be found seated cross-legged in the shade of a large banyan tree in the bustling premises of the city's main court complex, surrounded by piles of paper, multiple pens, stamp pads, and seals of various sizes. Often accompanied by Malliga or Kamatchi, residents make their case as they hand over their promissory notes, along with photocopies of the ration cards of five other residents of the settlement. Once (if) convinced, the notary draws up an affidavit and attests it with his official seal at a charge of Rs. 200 (~$3 USD).

Step 3: One takes the notarized court affidavit obtained and the ration card photocopies to obtain a **residence certificate** *from the tahsildar, the revenue official for the concerned administrative division.* The *tahsildar* can be met at his office, an old building with a shaded courtyard —when he is available, that is. It is often hard to say if one can meet the *tahsildar* on a given day. He gets called away to meetings and undertakes inspections at short notice, making his schedule unpredictable. It often takes multiple trips to the office before he can be met with. (On a day you can spot his grey jeep in the porch, you know he is in). A case must be made to convince the *tahsildar* as well, who may even insist on paying a visit to the neighborhood or ask residents to come by later. The residents who submitted their ration cards to vouch for the resident applying for the card also must attest their photocopies in the presence of the *tahsildar*.

Step 4: One can now apply for a **ration card**, by submitting the residence certificate, a completed application form, and a photograph of the head of the family. The Civil Supplies Department then issues a slip, confirming the receipt of the application and promising a

card pending verification. Officials then undertake a verification of the residence, by coming in person to check whether there is indeed a family living in the dwelling corresponding to the door number. Sometimes, the verifying official may reject the application, if the "bathroom" does not pass off as a dwelling in his estimation, if he doesn't believe that a family actually resides in the sort of space that Malliga advised Latha to build. He may need to be actively convinced and negotiated with. But if verification is successful, fifteen days later, one gets the ration card. The residence certificate can be used to obtain a voter ID, an ID issued by the post office, cooking gas, and electricity connections, all of which also serve as proof of addresses and incremental documentary legitimacy in themselves.

While it may seem like the blueprint for getting a ration card involves a set of fairly straightforward, even seemingly formal procedures, the kinds of negotiations involved in achieving each step are illustrative of the informal nature of claims making in political society itself. The initial steps in getting a ration card is through the oral testimonies of one's neighbours and their ration cards, which were probably obtained through the same processes. Obtaining the ration card, a formal state document, involves orally convincing actors in or close to state space, and relying on their discretion. Step 3, for instance, relies on a relationship with the *tahsildar*. These are built with time and effort: local leaders in MGR Nagar have traditionally, actively cultivated these relationships over a long period of time. Mahendran for instance, worked with the *tahsildar* to assign door numbers (and increased legitimacy) to MGR Nagar residents, and Malliga in a sense, has taken over this vernacular, local level relationship with the bureaucrat. When new government officials are to be dealt with, the party, or others like Palani who can channel some credibility with his notepad, can weigh in. For these reasons, undertaking these endeavors with the local leaders, who can mediate interactions with both parties, will likely prove advantageous for

residents. For ease in the process and to strengthen their collective bids for legitimacy,

residents often apply for ration cards in groups, as Malliga intended to facilitate after *oor*

vasool. Residents of MGR Nagar, in separate group discussions, also alleged that local

leaders held and exercised the power of determining who succeeded in getting cards and its

associated benefits, due to their connections with state officials and bureaucrats.

When I asked the leaders how they learnt how to do this, Malliga said

> If one wants to live here, one must get a residence certificate, otherwise one cannot
> survive. I learnt how to get one, and then step by step, I learnt how to get a ration card,
> electricity connections, etc. Then I had to do it for my kids, because do they not need
> their own cards? Now that I have learnt, I tell others what to do.

I suggest that the capture of land and legitimacy in the informal settlement is done through

what Scott (1998), drawing on de Certeau (1984) and Ranciere (1994), calls *metis*: practical

skills and acquired intelligence with elements of deception, with which people respond and

adapt to situations (p. 313). Scott identifies characteristics associated with *metis*: it is a form

of knowledge embedded in local experience and has a vernacular character. "The skills of

metis may well involve rules of thumb, but such rules are largely acquired through practice...

and a developed feel or knack for strategy" (ibid., p. 316). It is with years of practice and

experience that local leaders like Malliga have arrived at these thumb rules with which to

improve their living conditions in the city.

In order to explain how *metis* applies as a useful framing to understand capture, I work

backward through the rules listed by Malliga, the goal being to obtain a ration card (Figure

13). The Civil Supplies Department office or website could tell one how to apply for a ration

card. But in order to follow that formal bureaucratic procedure (and Step 4 is a bureaucratic

procedure), one requires a proof of address. The residence certificate could serve as proof of address. However, the *official* procedure for getting a residence certificate, ironically, circuitously, demands a ration card, as seen on the Tamil Nadu Government website[39]. What Malliga describes as *Step 3* to get a residence certificate then, is a *subversion* of the official process; it is an informal, local iteration, whereby residents can get a residence certificate with a court affidavit and testimonies of neighbors. This is an arrangement evidently made with the cooperation of the bureaucrat that the residents have to work with to get the residence certificate, the *tahsildar*. This is an instance of what Benjamin and Bhuvaneswari (2001) call a porous bureaucracy, whereby social ties between low level bureaucrats and urban poor residents could create local level administrative procedures that run parallel to higher level objectives and procedures, according benefits to residents even when there seems to be no official room to. The *tahsildar* seems to demand some authorization with which this subversion can be enabled, and the court affidavit plays that role.

Malliga's description of an appropriate court affidavit that would serve the purpose (Step 2) - "state in your court affidavit that you were raised in this settlement by someone who later left the settlement, and so you want a card in your own name" - is clearly one that has been arrived at with some practice, a knack (Scott 1998, p. 311) for knowing what might fly with the *tahsildar* when you get to Step 3. Of course, having a door number appear on the court affidavit that is notarized means having to capture a piece of land in the settlement, or at least build a "bathroom" with a door, and assigning it a door number (Step 1) are part of a locally evolved repertoire of capture practices that are dynamic and adaptive in nature.

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[39] http://cms.tn.gov.in/sites/default/files/forms/cert-residential_0_0.pdf , accessed on Government of Tamil Nadu (2019).

When the older practice of being given door numbers by the *tahsildar* died out, residents

adapted with their own numbering logics ("45A", "45B"). Thus, in order to be able to

formally obtain a ration card (Step 4), residents have perfected a *metis*, a set of informal

local practices that have in turn cultivated their own bureaucratic procedures and

relationships, as in a porous bureaucracy. The *metis* of capturing ration cards is what Das

(2011) calls a 'labor of learning' how to navigate the system, and secure objects with which

incremental claims to citizenship can be made, and social reproduction sustained in the

settlement. Scott (1998) also acknowledges that *metis* may not be democratically

distributed (p. 334), because the knack required, access to information, experience and

practice are themselves not equally distributed among all residents. Their leadership skills

and ability to communicate effectively with bureaucrats especially about procedures that

may not be immediately comprehensible, renders Malliga and Kamatchi quite important to

the process of documentary capture. (Malliga and Kamatchi, on their part, regularly help

residents get new cards. During *oor vasool*, Malliga and I also compiled a list of families who

needed cards, that Malliga was going to help later). Given the testimonials and attestations

required from one's neighbours, the *metis* of capture also relies greatly on the larger

community that each family is part of, the settlement itself, as a way to ensure its survival, a

conception of life as in a community demanding its subsistence (Das 2011).

To summarize: after the initial enclosure of land, residents work towards building

documentary legitimacy such as ration cards for their occupation. Residents, with the help

of local leaders, have worked out a metis — a learned, cunning practice — to capture the

ration card. The ration card, originally used for the distribution of wartime rations and

subsidized food from the public distribution system, is a key, versatile government-issued

proof of identity and address that is used for purposes beyond its original intent, such as *de*

facto tenure security for the informal urban poor. In the next section, I will outline another unexpected mediation of the ration card, in the struggle for urban citizenship.

Negotiating resettlement

MGR Nagar residents live in circumstances where their tenure security is under threat. Capturing the political machinery no longer accords the protection from eviction that it once did (and this is evident in how a part of the settlement was violently evicted in the 1990s). That manifestation of the welfare state, in which the urban poor is allowed to capture land, is on the decline, due to the intense developmental pressure on urban land. As the urban poor are evicted from the central city, welfare now takes the form of resettlement housing in the peripheries.

However, a resident's access to resettlement housing in the event of evictions is not guaranteed. About fifteen percent of the families evicted between 2005 and 2015—more than 4,500 families in total—were not provided resettlement housing, meaning they were left homeless after the eviction (Transparent Cities Network 2015). In multiple conversations I have had with them over the years, TNSCB employees have complained about the "corruption" and "politicization" of the resettlement process (Narayan 2015, for instance). Political leaders, local leaders and activists with political connections are prominent lobbyists for additional housing allocation, typically for their family and friends. The discretionary power of the bureaucrats in the eviction process is also significant: some evictees reported being denied housing altogether because they were at work or out of town at the exact time of allotment. In one instance, families that had lined up to be given allotment orders were denied housing altogether, because TNSCB officers in charge of housing allocation became "irritated" with the residents negotiating terms of resettlement.

During an eviction elsewhere in the city in early 2017, I observed many families with tenuous connections to the settlement, often tenants living elsewhere in the city, or in inconvenient situations sharing accommodation with other families, hastily erecting structures in the neighborhood and moving into them in the hope of securing resettlement housing upon eviction. The eviction and resettlement process in Chennai is an illustration both of state informality (Roy 2009, 2005), and the unstable arrangements characteristic of political society. The range of outcomes is wide: one might manage to get multiple resettlement homes or be denied resettlement housing altogether. In these circumstances, residents need to secure legitimate claims to resettlement through more concrete, material ways so that their eligibility cannot be threatened by the vagaries of the process.

Eligibility cannot be ensured by putting up shanties just before the enumeration. Even if the processes of eviction and resettlement are largely arbitrary, accounts of residents across evictions reveal that state officials are likely to deem ineligible, residents who don't have evidence of their residence in the settlement at least for a few years[40]. The ration card of every enumerated family, by virtue of serving as a family identification document and bearing validity periods and date stamps for every time the family accesses rations at a particular location, is central to the process of enumeration and resettlement. From a study across multiple evictions in Chennai (Narayan 2015), it is clear that ration cards have served as a way to render families eligible for resettlement housing since at least 1999; much like in other Indian cities (Rao 2013, for instance). Although ration cards were not demanded at *every* eviction, given the informality of the process, tenants and those without

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[40] Some other Indian cities like Mumbai and Delhi deem eligibility for resettlement on the basis of cut-off dates: if you have demonstrably lived in a slum beyond a certain date, you qualify for benefits and resettlement (de Wit 2016). Chennai, however, does not have a similar process.

family ration cards are the two constituencies most often left homeless after evictions (e.g., Narayan 2015)[41]. Where the informal process cannot be predictably relied upon to deliver benefits, having a ration card strengthens one's claim to compensation in the event of eviction.

The new terrain of capture of resettlement housing, for the urban poor then, involves relying on existing forms of capture that sustain life in the settlement. The ration card becomes that link between the past and the future, the ticket with which direct benefits can be received from the government while residing in the settlement, and also to receiving resettlement housing in the event of evictions. Residents also recognized this link between the present and the future: during *oor vasool*, Malliga urged families who didn't have ration cards to allow her to help them get one. "Today, you may feel like you can get by, buying groceries at market price. But tomorrow, if we get evicted, you need another place to live, right? For that you need a ration card!" Thus, when the informal urban poor's continued access to the central city is threatened by state capture of land, the ration card is the informal urban poor family's ticket to future propertied citizenship. The capture or appropriation of a state biopolitical practice then, is to put it to strategic use in the future, if the opportunity were to arise.

While local leaders have outlined a certain rule of thumb for getting a ration card, the process of actually getting one can be fraught. The complexity of each case of a family applying for a card, and the dependence on the discretion and benevolence of local leaders

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[41]Even this is because tenants do not always obtain ration cards associated with their own family and the house they rent, although they can. Owners may also discourage this practice because ration cards act as *de facto* tenure documents and can be used to claim resettlement benefits; there is the risk of only one family associated with a single dwelling getting a resettlement house.

and bureaucrats all pose challenges and reveal the fragility of the process at all stages. For instance, if your name appears on your parents' ration card or if you had a ration card in your native village and now want one in the city, a certification of deletion or transfer must be obtained (How Do I, n.d.). A resident of MGR Nagar reported that when she, with all the requisite documents, appealed to Kumar, the ration shop official for a card for the very first time (Step 4), he asked her how he could believe that she was born and raised here, and had never had a ration card.

Kumar's suspicions alluded to the possibility of welfare fraud, people obtaining multiple ration cards at multiple locations, and accessing benefits at all these locations—something government officials have repeatedly expressed their frustrations with. In an interview, Kumar explained that while ration card records are computerized, there was no way for the government to verify if families had more than one ration card.

The possibility that ration cards can be used for capturing multiple resettlement homes is not lost on the Board. An ex-employee expressed relief that the process of eviction and resettlement which had been politicized and corrupted over time was somewhat redeemed through the intervention of the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank after the tsunami in 2004. It was then that in an attempt to keep up with international development practices, the collection of biometric information and the issuance of photo passes was introduced into the enumeration process of resettlement in 2012[42]. The process aims to ensure that each enumerated family, linked to the biometric information of the family head, receives only one resettlement housing unit, and is unable to exchange or sell that unit.

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[42] Interview with TNSCB official, January 2013.

Although the move was initially condemned by municipal councilors and political parties

(Staff Reporter 2012), biometric information collection has become an integral part of

resettlement procedures in the time since. According to a Slum Free City Plan put together

by the TNSCB in 2014 - 2015, the exercise is taken up to avoid "de-duplication of tenements

for the same families in the future", "for legal entity" and to curb illegal transfer of the

tenements (TNSCB and Darashaw, n.d., p. 57). De-duplication to thwart excessive capture

was the basis for the national biometric authentication system known as Aadhaar (Das

2015), which seeks to eliminate reliance on low tech identification systems like the ration

card that are too vulnerable to fraud and corruption.

A changing documentary landscape: the Aadhaar card

The Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) was launched to issue "Aadhaar" or

unique identification numbers to all residents of India, in order to eliminate duplicate and

fake identities and to easily verify and authenticate identities (UIDAI n.d.a) [43]. The

elimination of duplicate, or at least multiple identities is ensured by the collection of

biometric information of each resident, so the government can curb leakages and improve

efficiency by ensuring targeted delivery of welfare schemes to the "intended beneficiaries

only" (UIDAI n.d.b). (Aadhaar's particular concern with "leakages" is not without validity:

the public distribution system in India is notoriously corrupt, with up to 60% of subsidized

food going "missing" before it reaches the consumer (Peisakhin and Pinto 2010).) For

residents, Aadhaar is meant to be a one-stop proof of identity that can be verified online

anywhere in the country. It can be obtained by completing an enrolment form and

submitting supporting documents and biometric information at any of many enrolment

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[43] The word "Aadhaar" means base or foundation in Sanskrit.

centers opened across the country.

Although the UIDAI was first set up under the rule of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) headed by the Indian National Congress in 2009, the Aadhaar has also been an important means and manifestation of centralization of power through big data, in the regime of the National Democratic Alliance headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi since 2014 (see Regidi 2018, Khera 2018, for instance). Following the various corruption scams during the preceding United Progressive Alliance regime[44], Aadhaar has been channeled into Modi's rhetoric as part of the fight against corruption that has saved the exchequer crores of rupees (ANI 2016, for instance). The World Bank (2016) in its *World Development Report*, touted Aadhaar as a "transformational" technology that has helped the country save over US$11 billion a year and considered it worthy of replication in other countries.

Figure 14: Graphic rendering of an Aadhaar card, picture source IndiaMart.
Caption at the bottom of the card reads "Aadhaar: rights of the common man"

Aadhaar was not meant to be a mandatory document: it does not confer the right of, nor serve as a proof of citizenship. But the Central Government officially deemed it mandatory in early 2017 (Mukherjee 2017) with state governments, including Tamil Nadu, supporting

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[44] For a quick overview, refer to India Today (2013).

the move (Staff Reporter 2017)—in explicit, coercive violation of the highest court in the country. In multiple hearings in 2013, 2014 and 2015, the Supreme Court had emphasized that Aadhaar cannot be mandatory to access government services (John 2017). Yet, it is being deemed requisite by both government and private agencies for obtaining cooking gas subsidies and unemployment benefits, mobile phone connections, and bank accounts, and in some cases, to accessing medical care (Rao 2017) and pensions (PTI 2017a), with the Supreme Court hearing several petitions seeking relief. The failure to link Aadhaar to the ration card could lead to families not receiving food rations. There are documented cases of children being denied meals at school due to such lapses (Ali 2017), as well as starvation deaths in deprived regions of the country (Kumar 2017, Himanshu 2017). Thus, while Aadhaar doesn't confer citizenship in absolute terms, it does mark individuals as subjects of the welfare state and establishing their right to access welfare. The preservation of life has become contingent on the people's coercive participation in this biopolitical exercise of the government. By the time the UIDAI received legislative backing in 2016, a billion Aadhaar cards had been issued, making it the world's largest biometric program (Press Information Bureau 2016).

Kumar once complained to me about how residents often have ration cards in multiple locations, most commonly in their native village and in the city. "From now on, this isn't possible. Aadhaar is compulsory for the ration card, and if the system detects the fingerprints as already linked to a card, it will reject another linkage. This sort of centralized database does not exist for the ration card," he explained.

In judicial and democratic arenas, the central government is claiming to have achieved this very goal, of preventing duplication. Prime Minister Narendra Modi claimed in the

parliament in 2017 that nearly four crore (40 million) bogus ration cards had been weeded

out since the introduction of Aadhaar (a number that was later contested) (Bhatnagar

2017); the previous year, he had tweeted that sixteen million "bogus" cards had been

deleted, leading to the government saving about Rs. 10,000 crores (~$1.5 billion USD)[45].

Kumar revealed that no new ration cards have been issued since 2016, because the

transition to Smart Cards is now underway in Tamil Nadu. Based on information collected

for the Aadhaar, the Tamil Nadu government is issuing Smart Cards for the issue of rations

(PTI 2017b). Aadhaar had integrated with the ongoing computerization of the public

distribution system, in order to achieve oft-stated aims of preventing duplication and bogus

billing, so "the deserving" may get welfare (ibid.). A familiar, 'capturable' government

document with clear benefits was going to be phased out, and a new, more technologically

advanced one, the Smart Card, was going to take its place, riding on the back of Aadhaar.
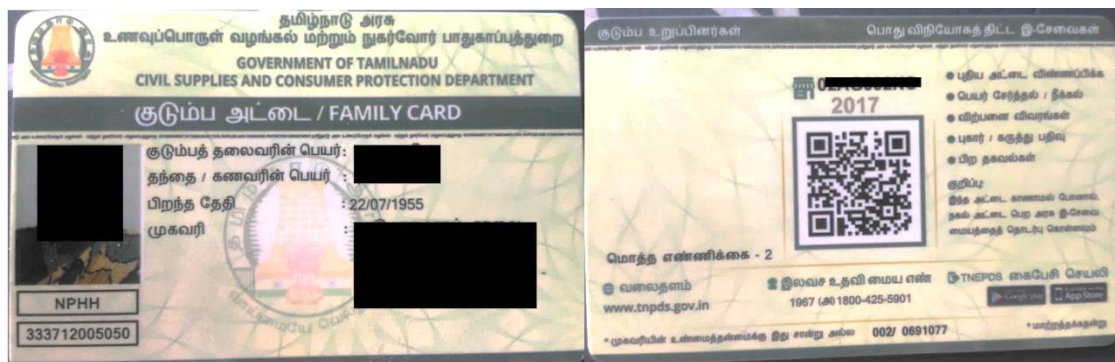
Figure 15: The new Smart Card in Tamil Nadu, courtesy Kumar

The significance of Aadhaar in the everyday life of the urban poor was unmistakably evident

at the time of my field work in MGR Nagar in 2016-2017. By that summer, only those with

Aadhaar cards could get rations. On the days that monthly rations were being handed out,

residents lined up at the window in front of where Kumar sat in the neighborhood ration

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[45] https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/729907020778876929?lang=en

shop, with empty plastic cans and cloth and plastic bags. Those with Aadhaar cards made easy laughing banter with Kumar, as they filled their bags with rice, lentils, spices and other essentials. Others had to step away from the line, as they tried to negotiate with Kumar to give them rations anyway, and he dismissed them impatiently, waving his little electronic machine at them, as he declared that he cannot do anything;"the system" wouldn't allow it. These residents walked back home with empty bags, complaining to everyone they met on the way, resigned to buying expensive food at market rates until they got Aadhaar. Pushpa, another resident, showed me several messages from her bank urging her to link her Aadhaar to her account as soon as possible, to ensure her bank account doesn't get shut down. Throughout the summer of 2018, she and I made several trips to the Civil Supplies office and the electronic governance centre to correct her date of birth on Aadhaar so she could be approved for a bank loan to finance the reconstruction of her house. It seemed like life without an Aadhaar was impossible; residents were quite stumped by the newness of the ID and its emerging implications in their lives. It seemed like Aadhaar had put a wrench into predictable everyday practices. However, for those adept at capturing a ration card, adapting to capture Aadhaar did not prove that difficult. I will attempt to explain how that is the case.

Figure 16: Aadhaar enrolment form

Aadhaar is implicated in already existing informal circuits of claims making due to its

linkage to older identity documents (as has been observed by Rao 2013). To enroll in

Aadhaar, one is required to produce proofs of address, identity, and date of birth. Eighteen

documents are accepted as proof of identity, and many of these are also accepted as proof of

address (see inside red box in Figure 16). Examples of accepted documents are the ration

card and voter ID, ironically the very documents Aadhaar emerged as a response to. My own

experience of getting Aadhaar in June 2017 is illustrative of the implementation issues,

specifically the flexibility in the documents accepted for the Aadhaar that render it

vulnerable to possible fraud. I applied for Aadhaar bearing my passport and a bank

passbook as supporting documentation, each containing a different residential address. But

despite the discrepancy in the two documents, one served as proof of identity and the other

as proof of address, and I received my Aadhaar containing my new address in two weeks[46].

Even though it is not possible to get multiple Aadhaars, the possibility of strategically using

the process to get an Aadhaar at a preferred location is a significant one, given the rising

prominence of Aadhaar in the everyday survival struggles of the poor.

The process of capturing Aadhaar, as it turns out — rather, as Malliga and Kamatchi had

already figured out — is remarkably similar to the process of getting a ration card, only a

step shorter. By following steps 1 through 3 in the procedure to get a ration card, it is fairly

straightforward to obtain documents necessary to enroll in Aadhaar (Figure 17, compare to

Figure 13). The residence certificate from the *tahsildar*, an ID from the post office, an

electricity bill... all of these suffice for getting Aadhaar, and so getting Aadhaar entailed

following the same step.

Also, unlike the ration card which can only be obtained after the physical verification of the

dwelling by the authorities (Step 4), there is no physical verification of the dwelling unit for

Aadhaar. That is, there is no need to prove that there is a material referent for the door

number on the documents submitted, or that the resident actually lives in that particular

location. In theory, the resident need not even take the trouble of erecting a shanty

structure or a door: she only needs to pick a unique door number. Once the door number

appears on documents that satisfy the requirements, which need only a door number, not

an actual physical structure, she can apply for and get an Aadhaar card.

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[46] Admittedly, one's class position, or simply, the ability to explain the discrepancy when questioned
could result in different encounters with the multiple enrolment officers employed, much like in the
experiences of the 'arbitrariness' of state bureaucracy described in Akhil Gupta's (2012) *Red Tape.*
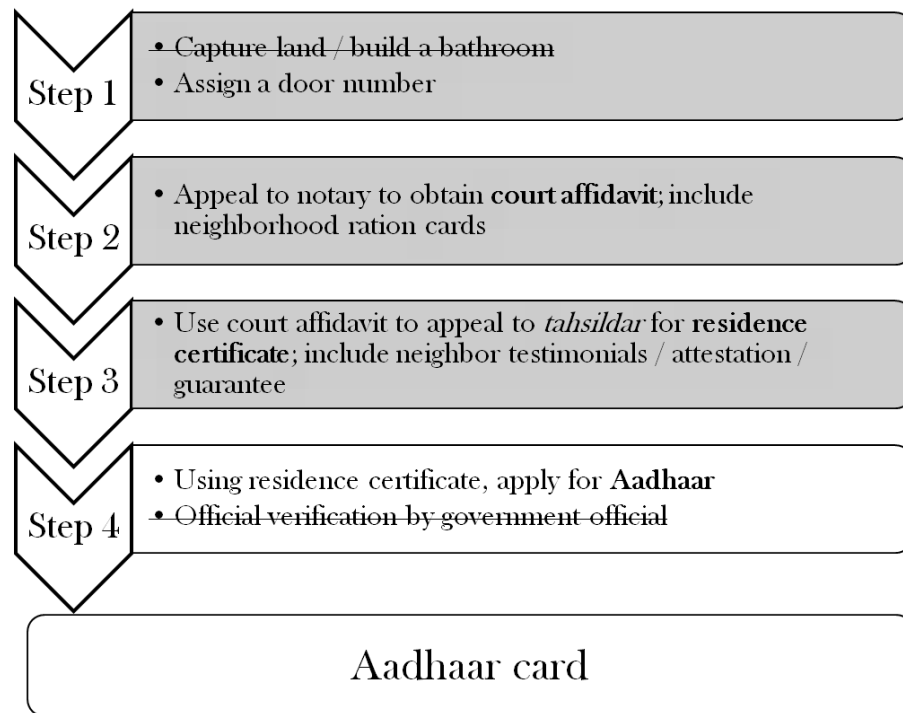
Figure 17: Representation of *metis* of capturing an Aadhaar card, in steps
Clear boxes indicate official bureaucratic procedure; shaded boxes indicate locally created / transformed practices

Aadhaar is thought to be a solution to the red tape, patronage politics, and corrupt procedures that have become an expected part of the lives of urban and rural poor (The Economist 2012). But indeed, as is demonstrated in MGR Nagar, the supporting documents required by the Aadhaar are obtained by the very informal, discretionary, sometimes "fraudulent" processes (*metis* of the urban poor, in other words) that the Aadhaar hopes to fight: conjuring a door number, appealing to the benevolence of single bureaucrats, possibly by bribing them, to obtain paper documents that Hull (2012) claims are more "participatory" and inclusive in their creation. Electronic forms of representation build not only on older discourse genres and concepts developed through the medium of paper (ibid., p. 256), but also rely on older discourse *forms* such as paper documents, in order to be created. The errors made in these supporting documents are also replicated in the Aadhaar: for instance, in a village in Northern India, all residents received cards with the same date of birth, making it difficult for them to receive welfare benefits in health and education

because it reflected incorrect ages (Azad 2017). The government's implementation of the

Aadhaar on a war footing by coercing residents to obtain one and link it to services within

deadlines perhaps makes the process prone to errors.

One may argue that there are justifiable, even necessary reasons why getting an Aadhaar

card is designed to be a straightforward process. That the poor do not have adequate

documentation and find it difficult to obtain and produce documentation every time they

need a service (The Economist 2012), is one of the reasons Aadhaar is touted as a one-stop,

portable authentication and verification service which can be used to access many services

(UIDAI n.d. a). The UIDAI allows for multiple routes to getting Aadhaar: for instance, the

head of the family could introduce family members by submitting some proof of

relationship (see Figure 16). Those with no documentation at all can also get an Aadhaar by

liaising with an "introducer" appointed by the registrar (UIDAI n.d. b). But since even these

processes involve negotiating with single bureaucrats and officials and depending on his

discretion and willingness to accord legitimacy, it begs asking whether these processes are

indeed impervious to fraud. The key takeaway is that the quantum of human mediation has

not disappeared in this form of electronic governance (as also observed by Chaudhuri

2019): it remains dependent on older forms of discourse and often informal practices

involving participation from both residents as well as state actors and contains immense

potential for new forms of mediation to emerge (Hull 2012).

Emerging opportunities

It is unclear yet, what the new mediations of Aadhaar might be. All government services and

welfare benefits require it; and indeed, that was the purpose of Aadhaar itself, to be a one-

stop proof of identity and address (unlike the ration card, which is issued by one state department for a certain purpose, but relied upon by other state departments as an ID). Residents recognize the centrality of Aadhaar in their lives and remain open to exploring and capturing the possibilities for the future (Simone 2017) hidden in it. As Kamatchi said,

> new ration cards are not issued anymore, neither are old cards renewed. If your old ration card has five people listed as family members, and if they all have Aadhaar cards, it seems like we will be issued Smart Cards. With the Smart Cards, we can now get rations. Then they have to give us resettlement houses using the Smart Cards, right?

The ration card, which guaranteed resettlement housing to the informal urban poor, is being phased out, and this has serious implications for the residents of MGR Nagar. Kamatchi's hope is that now, the new government documents on the block, the Smart Card via Aadhaar, will provide that guarantee, of future propertied citizenship. This is not a possibility that has crystallized yet: recent evictions as part of the Integrated Cooum River Eco-Restoration Project in late 2017 and early 2018 were implemented on the basis of family ration cards and biometric information only. Yet, the poor's hope for the future, as is evident here, is an "anticipation of contingencies" (Das 2012, p. 6). In a largely unpredictable, constantly shifting urban (and documentary) landscape, the poor rely on calculations and "a gambler's faith" that doing something today present certain opportunities for mobility and survival tomorrow (ibid.). Capturing Aadhaar then, is interpreted as a way to qualify for and "future-proofing" resettlement housing and future propertied citizenship, in case that is a future use of Aadhaar and the Smart Card that has not emerged yet. In a future description of capture practices, Malliga and Kamatchi will probably include steps to get these two documents as well, because who knows what they might be useful for. If *metis* is really the acquired intelligence and arsenal of practical skills required to navigate a constantly changing environment (Scott 1998, p. 313), the leaders of

MGR Nagar seem well equipped for the challenges involved.

This chapter is an attempt to bring attention to the active production of space by the urban poor, the making of what is often a taken-for-granted urban form, the "slum". The slum does not simply prevail widely (Davis 2006), but is consciously, constantly manufactured by its inhabitants to sustain urban life. The process of producing space is theorized by its producers as *capture*, not just of the spatial, but of the political *through* the spatial. Slum space is a political, social, ideological, and historical product of class struggle (Lefebvre 1976), materializing as a means to access livelihood and affordable housing in the face of a rapidly commodifying urban environment. If cities are the privileged sites of negotiating citizenship (Holston and Appadurai 2003), urban space is the battlefield of that struggle. Capture occurs through a set of learnt, practised, adaptive processes, or *metis*, through which urban land is rendered livable, legible, and legitimate in the eyes of the state. Capture in this instance does not involve the community's own 'deep democratic practices' of grassroots governmentality (Appadurai 2001, Roy 2009), but is the appropriation of existing biopolitical technologies for the survival of its inhabitants.

The residents' savvy in adapting to new documentary landscapes emerges from and is embedded in the labor that has already gone into developing the *metis* of capture. In other words, Aadhaar, meant as a centralizing, technocratic governmental technology, has been appropriated and vernacularized by the poor in their existing local practices (such as erecting a door, conjuring door number, legitimizing discrete family units, and so forth). The shift in requirement from the ration card to Aadhaar was enabled precisely to curtail the poor's access to welfare surplus in an increasingly neoliberal political economy (Chaudhuri

and Konig 2018). Indeed, Aadhaar may have succeeded in constraining a citizen's ability to 'fraudulently' access more benefits than she is entitled to. But through an unexpected mediation of a state paper practice, the urban poor hope to channel Aadhaar to gain a future stake in the city. The capture of Aadhaar is perhaps also an unanticipated dimension of a 'speculative urbanism' in which the future value of land is being speculated on by private players and the state, and future citizenship hedged on by the urban poor in new state documentation. "They have to give us resettlement houses, right?"

CHAPTER 3

SELF-CONSTRUCTION OF THE COMMONS: MORAL CLAIMS TO CITY LAND

Namma vasadhi naama dhaane senjukkanum, if *we* need something, *we* should do it for

ourselves, should we not, Kamatchi asked me softly, while recounting a piece of the slum's

history.

A crucial mechanism of how "the politics of the governed" works, for Partha Chatterjee

(2004, p. 56-60), is for populations to form collective identities, or communities, with a

moral content. Policy strategies are undertaken for the well-being of particular "population

groups", say squatters on public land, or ration card holders entitled to a particular amount

of rations every month. Political society then, involves investing these groups with the

moral force of a community. In Chatterjee's own example of squatters in Calcutta, the

community he describes takes on the moral logics of shared kinship. MGR Nagar has a

similar, kin-based imagined community, where relationships are discussed on often-

biological terms. For instance, here is how Thangam explained it:

> Some ten families came here first, captured this land here in MGR Nagar. Malliga's father
> Mahendran brought them here. Then, the neighbourhood expanded. We are all related,
> don't you see? Malliga for instance: I am sort of her mother's older sister's daughter, like
> her older sister. Kamatchi, the one in the ADMK, she is Malliga's relative by marriage. In
> this way, we all married within, and now we are all related!

Kinship within the settlement is also illustrated in the residents' ability to tell a rather

consistent account of local history, and in constant invocations of *naama* (us), *namma*

makkal (our people, referring to residents of MGR Nagar), *namma ooru* (our settlement or

neighbourhood, referring to a piece of land that is defined by a name and clear boundaries).

Kinship then, is also defined by the collective occupation of a piece of land, one that is now

under threat (ibid.). It involves a collective violation of property law; residents use "the moral rhetoric of a community striving to build a decent social life under harsh conditions" (ibid., p. 60). It is in this spirit that residents also describe the history of the settlement as *collective* labor.

The previous chapter discussed the capture of land and legitimacy by each family in MGR Nagar as a way to qualify for resettlement housing in the event of eviction. This chapter will examine the collective ways in which capture is practised, specifically through the creation of common infrastructure. It suggests that squatting practices in MGR Nagar can be characterized as collective, feminist, and a form of commoning, sometimes even involving the ceding of slum space and spatial privileges in order to gain material improvements and legitimacy.

Social reproduction and community infrastructure

Since the time in the 70s when the first ten families came to the site now known as MGR Nagar, a lot has changed. The settlement now houses over a thousand families, and has regular water delivery and a public toilet complex nearby, as described in the previous chapter. The welfare function of the state helps maintain other aspects of the residents' lives. Most residents also have ration cards which entitles them to subsidized food and cooking fuel through the Public Distribution System.

However, there remain some limits and difficulties in accessing some of these welfare initiatives. Kamatchi recalled how residents had to get their monthly rations — rice, lentils, oil, kerosene, soap, among other necessities — until a few years ago. They had to enter a

highly securitized area, to their assigned ration shop and later, go even further, a ten-minute

autorickshaw ride away. It was inconvenient and required them to spend money on

transport. They were also only one of many slum communities that received rations from

the same facility, which meant that the shop was invariably always overcrowded,

understocked; things sometimes got violent.

The solution was for residents of MGR Nagar, beneficiaries of the welfare state who had

until then been asked to receive rations from inconvenient locations, to mobilize as a

community to create their own ration shop, in MGR Nagar itself. They approached the DMK,

who helped them put together a request to the Civil Supplies Corporation for residents to

open their own. Kumar, who has been the Public Distribution System official in charge of

distributing rations to MGR Nagar residents for thirty years now, recalls how the

Commissioner of the department was open to providing separate services:

> We encouraged people to build their own ration shop which we would then service, as
> long as there were about 1000 ration cards in the neighborhood, which there were. This
> is among the first ration shops in all of Tamil Nadu that the people themselves built and
> was a precursor to the ration shop facilities that the PDS rents in various areas, without
> having to buy the asset[47].

Hence, in 2007, residents identified a space in their settlement, right by the main road,

collected Rs. 100 (~$1.4) per household, a little more from local leaders and relatively well-

to-do families within the slum, and built their own ration shop. The DMK also pitched in

monetary aid to help the residents. Now, the PDS department serves them in their own area.

Women quickly walk up to the shop in the beginning of the month in their nighties, enquire

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[47] On being asked if the state cared about the slum possibly being illegal, Kumar said
    if the expressway comes, the shop will shut down, that's all. The department is not concerned with
evictions. As long as it is possible to continue this service here, we will. Besides, they have been
saying that the area will be removed for many years now, and we are still here.

about when supplies will come, and procure rations as and when convenient for them.

Kamatchi reasons, "if we need something, we should do it for ourselves, should we not?

While we waited for the government to actually build us a shop, we would've had to spend a

lot of money (going to the assigned shops meanwhile). We actually saved money building

our own ration shop."

In saying this, Kamatchi was summarizing a spatial practice that sustainably creates and

maintains a slum, that isn't just about putting a roof over your head in a literal, material

sense, but about addressing many needs, and creating a livable space for the community,

step by step, incrementally. In Cindi Katz' (2008) discussion of social reproduction, housing

is only one aspect, among others such as environmental infrastructure, healthcare,

education and social justice. Examining squatting in MGR Nagar through the lens of social

reproduction enables us to think beyond the erection of individual shanties for families, to

understand the expansion and continuing survival of MGR Nagar through the *collective*

production of slum space. This is in line with Gautam Bhan's (2017) call to undertake socio-

spatial readings of urban settlements (or *bastis*) which are attentive to the social practices,

meanings, norms, temporalities, emotions and affect associated with the settlement, not just

the built form of the individual houses alone[48].

According to Johanna Brenner and Barbara Laslett (1991, as quoted in Bhattacharya 2017),

social reproduction refers to

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[48] In policy and administrative documents, slums are routinely described simply in terms of quality of material infrastructure. Sample the adjectives used in the definition of a slum in the Tamil Nadu Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act, 1971, the primary legislation for interventions into slums: "dilapidation", "overcrowding", "faulty arrangement and design of buildings", "narrowness of streets", "lack of ventilation, light, sanitation facilities".

the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, and responsibilities and
relationships directly involved in maintaining life, on a daily basis and
intergenerationally. It involves various kinds of socially necessary work - mental,
physical, and emotional - aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as
biologically, defined means for maintaining and reproducing population. Among other
things social reproduction includes how food, clothing and shelter are made available for
immediate consumption, how the maintenance and socialization of children are
accomplished, how care of the elderly and infirm is provided, and how sexuality is
socially constructed.

Building their own ration shop was one of many ways by which MGR Nagar residents

negotiated with the state and political actors to secure the conditions of social reproduction

in the settlement. In his seminal 1976 treatise on self-help housing, John F.C. Turner

advocates for housing and locally specific services to be "autonomous", decentralized, built

and managed by people themselves. Turner's advocacy of self-help housing gained much

mileage in the World Bank's housing policies across the world, most notably in the Sites and

Services schemes. This is misunderstood largely as the point at which public housing lost

favor, ushering in an era of anarchism and neoliberalism in housing (see Davis 2006 in the

chapter titled "The Illusions of Self-Help", for instance.) However, the autonomy that Turner

emphasizes is not absolute: it is dependent on accessing essential resources, such as land,

from a "central authority" (pp. 13-17), centering the need for the state to provide the aid

with which residents could make decisions about their housing (Harris 2003). Turner's real

thrust was on residents' control and autonomy over their dwellings so their dwellings can

reflect the flexibility of use and priorities, "families making decisions", planning with, and

not for the poor (ibid.), of which construction of the built form played only a small part.

Turner's ideas ring prescient and particularly relevant today, considering that the main

mode of intervention that the urban poor receive in Chennai — peripheral resettlement — is

a top-down, opaque project that causes great losses to the urban poor in terms of

livelihoods, social care, and community networks. Indeed, this mode of public housing has

been a failure in the city, because it does not respond to the needs of urban residents: less than 50% of the original allottees of resettlement housing in Kannagi Nagar continue to live there (Lopez 2012). Squatter settlements like MGR Nagar instead, take a more holistic approach to living practices, and with the aid (or complicity) of the state, address many needs of urban residents. Analyzing squats (and Turner) through the lens of social reproduction helps us take more generous cognizance of everyday practices of the urban poor.

The ration shop stood on government land that the residents did not own, and thus, was an 'encroachment', an illegal construction in the eyes of the state. Yet, this is a type of squatting that was abetted by the state, given its obligation to preserve the lives of the urban poor in political society. The willingness to work with the state, by accessing funding, or allowing for the possibility for the state to take over a community infrastructure also demonstrates that self-construction of community infrastructure is **not** an act of letting the neoliberal state off the hook. It is instead a way to make demands on the welfare state, foreclosing possibilities of its retreat. As subjects of the biopolitical welfare state, possessors of the ration card, residents were able to mobilize as a community to bring the welfare state to their very doorstep, even if by partly taking on the responsibility of the state by building a community infrastructure. In doing this, they were able to oil the wheels of social reproduction in their own settlement.

The residents' demonstrated ability to help themselves, either through the mechanisms of political society or simply by helping themselves, begs asking the question: what are the limits to what can be accomplished through these methods? When we were raising money to build the childcare center, one of the residents asked rather belligerently, why we

couldn't come together to build household toilets, considering that all the residents were dependent on a nearby public toilet complex, and desperately needed better sanitation infrastructure. Toilets need underground drainage connections: for this, landowning state departments needed to issue a 'No Objection Certificate' to the municipal agency laying sewage connections. To allow the laying of concrete infrastructure on land you owned gave legitimacy to the people living on the land, and implied you had no problem with their occupation. Thus, most landowning departments on which informal settlements stood, were reluctant to do so. Even political will could take you only a certain distance: the MLA routinely expressed lofty ambition in his plans for the slum but did not think that household toilet facilities were possible even from his political position[49]. In other words, household toilets did not fall within a part of the political-bureaucratic machinery that was malleable to the pressures of political society, or the range of possibilities in self-construction.

What residents could do, then, was create other advantageous relationships with which other parts of their lives could become easier. They were able to negotiate with the Public Distribution System for their own ration shop. More recently they worked with *Pennurimai Iyakkam* to channel funds from the national government and raise their own childcare center.

Childcare in MGR Nagar, a feminist intervention

The provision of childcare, particularly focusing on education, health and nutritional needs of children below the age of six, has been a priority for the Indian state at least since the

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[49] A community development officer in the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board expressed a similar sentiment, remarking how residents of MGR Nagar have lived on that land for a long time, the Board was unable to build toilets for them, due to the complications in navigating land ownership and permissions. The officer seemed to suggest that resettlement of squatter settlements to tenements in the peripheries was preferable, given that it provided all basic services *in situ*.

1970s (Ministry of Women and Child Development website, n.d.). Through the Integrated

Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme, the state has been developing infrastructure to

address maternal and child mortality, malnutrition, pre-school education and immunization

needs of the population. Mobile health workers provide some of these services, but it is

significant that there are particular sites, visible infrastructure in which some of these goals

are met: these take the form of government-run childcare centers, or *anganwadis*, which

function from 8 am to 3:30 pm on weekdays, offering nutritious meals, and pre-school

education. In Tamil Nadu, the government aims to make available at least one such facility

for every 800 people, especially in neighborhoods with minorities residing in them and

slum areas (Integrated Child Development Services Tamil Nadu website, n.d.). However,

news reports and activist accounts have revealed that Chennai city does not have adequate

ICDS centers to meet the needs of its vulnerable population (Sampath 2018, for instance). It

is notable, however, that there are other routes available, created by the national state, in

order for non-governmental organizations and communities to create and run their own

childcare centers, through the Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme, which is discussed at

some length later in this article.

Through its intimate connections with women in urban poor settlements, the *Iyakkam*

recognized the need for childcare services while women went to work (in construction,

domestic work, or as street vendors), the poor nutritional status of children, and the low

literacy and high dropout rates in the settlement. In the early 1990s, the *Iyakkam* was

running a childcare center in a nearby settlement. Encouraged by Mahendran, the

distinguished Lakshmi Amma, who was then-*oor* president, and a twenty-something

Malliga, *ooru* secretary, checked it out, and fell in love with the cultural vibrance, the

entrepreneurial spirit and the nurturing aspects of the facility. Malliga quit her job as

domestic worker to start one in MGR Nagar, which was already hosting adult education night classes at the time. She rented for nominal rates, an unused structure where a little restaurant used to operate. About 80 children below the age of five attended, over three daily shifts, each managed by a teacher and a helper from among the women in the community. The teachers got training in teaching young children, drawing, puppet making, etc., as and when the *Iyakkam* found support. Eventually, the facility was actually built up, through *oor vasool* then too, with each family contributing Rs. 17 each (~25 cents today). Non-formal education classes were held there in the evenings, for school dropouts to be able to take examinations and resume formal schooling. These activities happened with light from Petromax lanterns, Malliga fondly recalls. The Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board had also floated tenders, soliciting non-formal education provision for urban poor children[50]. The *Iyakkam* won the bid, strengthened services, and sent at least 30 students in the area back to school. This setup was functioning vibrantly between 1994 and 1998. Funding dried out by 1998, and the *Iyakkam* struggled to keep the facility afloat. The semi-pucca structure began to suffer too, with the tarpaulin sheets leaking, and residents and the *Iyakkam* becoming unable to afford repairs. The facility became defunct in time, and the *Iyakkam* was determined to revive it.

At the time of the start of my field work in the summer of 2016, MGR Nagar residents and the *Iyakkam* had already started discussions on opening a childcare centre in the neighborhood. They had recruited an architect collaborator of the *Iyakkam*'s — who had earlier helped design tsunami-relief homes and undertaken analyses of resettlement houses

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[50] The TNSCB has a Community Development Wing, which was also instated by the World Bank in 1978. As a way of taking a "holistic approach to housing and rehabilitation", the wing is in charge of "transformation of the lives of the slum dwellers" (TNSCB website n.d.). Earlier, it worked in settlements in the central city. Today, it focuses largely on resettlement sites; its social workers conduct employment training programmes, help resettlees get new ration cards, and coordinate social infrastructure.

and disaster management capacities after the 2015 floods ▬ to design a plan for the center. It proposed a main room, a kitchen, and a front verandah in a 400-square-foot area in a part of the settlement where earlier, the older structure had stood. In August 2016 under a street light after sundown, a community meeting was held with residents of MGR Nagar, where the plan was presented, and their consent and ideas solicited: it was attended by the many slum leaders, members of the *Iyakkam*, the architect, and over 70 residents mostly women, who all unanimously expressed enthusiasm for the plan. Dhanalakshmi, who lived right across from the proposed site of the childcare center, suggested that the childcare facility could be a self-sustaining service of benefit to the community:

> All this while, I took it upon myself to ensure that this space wasn't misused, I wouldn't allow anyone to stand around here and smoke even. A childcare facility coming up here is a good thing, is it not, I was waiting for this to happen! We can hold little events here in the same space, ear piercing ceremonies, birthday parties... instead of renting a space elsewhere, we can host events here and pay a little donation for use of the space, which in turn can help our children, no?

This was not the first facility to be run by the *Iyakkam* in the city. At the time of the construction of the childcare centre in MGR Nagar, the *Iyakkam* was already running two fully functional childcare facilities in two other low-income settlements in Chennai. In fact, the movement commenced this service before government *anganwadis* could penetrate into many low-income areas of the city[51]. It collaborated with the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS), an organization set up by former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1972 to work towards the welfare of underprivileged women and children (Special Correspondent 2010). The WVS made available a nominal amount of funds every month from the Rajiv Gandhi

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[51] The Centre for Labour Education and Development (CLEAD), a trust allied with the *Iyakkam* and various labour unions has been working towards the protection of women workers and elimination of child labour since 1991. It operates child care centers and rehabilitation centers for child labourers and school dropouts, conducts skills training for women and young girls whose parents are released bonded labourers, and organizes regular medical camps for families of unorganized workers across Tamil Nadu.

National Creche Scheme to empower non-profit organizations like the *Iyakkam* to run

childcare centers: the *Iyakkam* accessed these funds and supplemented them with its own

modest funding and infrastructure to create and sustain these childcare centers. Much like

how the ration shop was built in MGR Nagar, each resident family was to chip in Rs. 100

(~$1.4) to help raise the structure.

I suggest that the construction of a childcare center in MGR Nagar is a feminist mechanism

of squatting that has not been adequately discussed in the literature thus far, especially in

accounts from the Global South. Women-only housing and squats during the women's

liberation movement in London of the 1960s and 70s was an instance when likeminded

women came together to take control of the material basis of their lives, and participate in

cheap, collective living (Wall 2017). Women learnt plumbing, electrical wiring and building

in order to sustain themselves, and came together to do gardening, conduct sports and

cultural events, and run women's centers, libraries and art centers. It was a way to claim the

right to the city by living alternatively, autonomously, helping create communities for young

lesbians, too, in the process (ibid.)[52]. In post-war Italy, the Autonomia Movement was

committed to squatting and occupation of public spaces (Vasudevan 2017). Class struggles

were waged particularly in the sphere of social reproduction: many self-managed women's

collectives focused on creating radical urban infrastructures, including day-care centers,

health clinics, and shelters, where feminist political subjectivities were sharpened. This was

a wider interpretation of the struggles for housing, one which was attentive to cultural and

political needs of urban squatters (ibid., Mudu 2004). These social centers later inspired

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[52] This mode of squatting remains necessary in present-day London with young single mothers
occupying apartments and council homes as recently as 2015, as a way to deal with housing market
insecurities.

similar initiatives elsewhere, including the Zapatista movement.

In the Global South, there have been studies of gender *within* existing urban poor spaces. Richa Nagar (2000) applies a spatial aspect to women's grassroots activities to uncover how everyday gendered spaces can be transformed. Ayona Datta (2007) turns the lens on working-class feminism inside the space of an urban poor settlement to examine how built form and everyday spatial practices create sites of control, emancipation, collective consciousness, and transformation of the members of a women's organization. Ananya Roy's examination of Calcutta's squatter settlements (2003) contrasts the masculine nature of local politics with the increased burden on women to earn wages and take charge of domestic labor, what she calls the "feminization of livelihood". It isn't that women do not lead squatting initiatives: many parts of Africa have witnessed women-led land occupation as a response to land enclosures, and denial of land ownership rights for women (Federici 2019, 2011). These practices have spread from rural areas to urban areas too, emphasizing subsistence-oriented ways of living and using land, through farming initiatives (ibid.). The *Iyakkam* too, has been encouraging land occupation as a way to cope with the shortage of affordable housing stock in Chennai, and notably helped residents of MGR Nagar re-squat after their eviction in the early 1990s. In what is possibly India's most visible story on urban poor women building their own infrastructure, the Alliance has been conducting housing exhibitions and toilet festivals in Mumbai to mainstream the poor's ways of building (Appadurai 2001). The goal of the Alliance is to officially enter the housing market through the "politics of recognition" and visibility from below. In a departure, the *Iyakkam*'s initiatives to help build community infrastructure are matter-of-fact, not particularly "quiet encroachment" (Bayat 2000), just a part of regular squatting and reproductive processes

within urban poor neighbourhoods, and steadfastly local, if also portable.

In providing childcare services, the *Iyakkam* is making a direct intervention into social reproduction processes in slums. Geetha, founder and primary advisor, points out repeatedly that the goal of such a facility is not to provide a single service, not just childcare. Ideally, as in the other facilities run by the *Iyakkam*, the goal is to provide multiple services that can benefit the community as a whole. In Neelam Basha Dargah, a working-class Muslim neighbourhood in Chennai, the childcare center created a paradigm through which young children began to be sent to school in the 1990s (before which not many children received formal education). In addition, since it was a community that was mainly engaged in a cottage industry of rolling *beedi* (indigenous cigarettes that are thin and cheap), the *Iyakkam* also helped residents secure a production contract to secure livelihoods.

At this point, a short note about the national government scheme providing funding for these centers, the Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme, is necessary. The scheme explicitly recognizes the need for women to be employed "to keep the family afloat" (Childline India website, n.d.), as if recognizing the constraining conditions of wage labor. Secondly, since women now have to go to work, their need for help looking after their young children is recognized: it is this need that the state, in collaboration with the non-governmental sector, seeks to fulfill. It also identifies the care of children as the duty of the women; there is no mention of men anywhere[53].

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[53] The scheme is also significant in that a) it recognizes children as "future resources" (Integrated Child Development Services Tamil Nadu website, n.d.), and b) the stated goals of the ICDS services is not just to improve outcomes for mothers and children, but to bring about behavioural change: this

The *Iyakkam* does not explicitly challenge this idea. Perhaps due to its allyship with labor

unions and informal sector organizations, it sees the provision of childcare services as a way

to make it easier for women to access wage opportunities (unlike in the Italian social

centers, which are entirely volunteer-driven (Mudu 2004)), financial independence and

dignity. The facilities run by the *Iyakkam* employ women from the neighborhoods they are

located in, as teachers and helpers. This not only sustains community interest in the facility,

but also provides reliable salaried employment to women in the slum who may otherwise

have been home, in the private sphere, caring for their own children with little to no income

of their own, their labor invisibilized. The first helper we employed was a single mother

poorer than most others in MGR Nagar, looking for work to provide for her child. The

Iyakkam thus enables a practice of caring and income generating that reproduce capitalist

social relations, while also altering these relations, what feminist geographers Katharyne

Mitchell, Sallie Marston and Cindi Katz (2003) call life's work[54].

This intervention takes on an additional significance considering the broader context in

which it is located. In the event of evictions, livelihood options, for working class women in

particular, are vastly constrained in peripheral resettlement sites. In addition to great

difficulties in finding and retaining jobs, women have reported job insecurity in contractual

labour, poor working conditions, loss of social networks and flexibility in working hours,

and absence of childcare facilities (Coelho et al 2012) as issues. The loss of jobs and income

experienced in the process of being forcibly moved to the peripheries have proven tough to

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suggests both a neoliberal strategy to preserve social reproduction processes to ensure labour supply, and also a biopolitical mode of governmentality that is interested not only in preserving the health of the population, but also set up systems of self-governance so that government intervention will ultimately not be necessary.

[54] Mitchell, Marston and Katz (2003) refuse to uphold the analytic binaries between production and reproduction, highlighting how the domains of work and home increasingly blur in to each other in life's work, defined simply as "how we live".

recover from in the short to middle term (Unorganized Workers' Federation 2016).

Creating and preserving the livelihoods of women in the settlement *in situ* then, is an

alternative to (Federici 2019), and an act of defiance against potential, perhaps imminent

dispossession.

Creating a commons

Around the time at which the community meeting was held in August 2016, the *Iyakkam*

was awaiting funds from a non-governmental organization to build the facility in MGR

Nagar. However, a few months had passed, and there was no word from them, so in

December 2016, it was decided that an attempt would be made to start the service first with

the help of WVS, at Malliga's house, and the facility could be raised while we made

arrangements for funding the construction. The possibility of starting the service without a

dedicated facility speaks both to the multi-functionality of houses, and the "make+shift"

nature of housing (Simone 2017), where residents embrace flexibility and uncertainty to

adapt to resource constraints and survive.

To prepare for our meeting with WVS, Malliga and I first went door-to-door in MGR Nagar,

compiling a list of children from the ages of one to five. Malliga moves around the

settlement with the assuredness of a veteran, and we make quick progress due to her

familiarity with all households, her sarcastic wit sparing (and offending) no one. Many of

the twenty and thirty year olds in MGR Nagar still call her "teacher" from the time she used

to run the childcare center in the 1990s, and many of their children call her *ayah*, a

commonly used term for grandmother. We compiled a list of about 73 children in one part

of MGR Nagar over two afternoons. We also wrote two letters under the *Iyakkam* letterhead,

one from Malliga stepping forward to be teacher in the facility, and another from Pushpa, agreeing to be the helper, and submitted these along with their proofs of identity. WVS, however, turned us down, because they did not have the resources to provide for a new service, especially given that they were already struggling to keep the other centers afloat from the delayed disbursement of funds from the central government. The childcare center had to wait.

However, a few months later, in February 2017, WVS reached out to the *Iyakkam* to say that there was a possibility of funding that was going to a defunct childcare facility elsewhere in the city could be rerouted to MGR Nagar. We had to resubmit the necessary documents. Parvathy of the WVS explained again how the release of funds from both the central and the state governments, which contributed 60% and 40% of the running costs of the services offered by WVS, had been delayed for many months, "But with the *Iyakkam*'s help both with the practical running of the facility, and with supplementing monthly supplies, we can run childcare services confidently," she said. A senior official came to do some due diligence of MGR Nagar: she took a tour around the settlement, enquired about the number of houses, and details of the land ownership. She looked rather skeptically at the piece of land where the old childcare center stood, now with half a wall surviving, lots of old rubble, debris, broken bicycles, appliances and plastic waste piled up, and a clothesline hanging above, where we assured her a facility would be rebuilt when we had the funds. For the meanwhile, she ensured that Malliga's two-room house could house the service and has the amenities required for cooking for the children.

A few days later, Malliga, Pushpa and I picked up the first set of supplies (monthly groceries, a few vessels, attendance registers) and the official board for the childcare facility from the WVS office, and made a list of all the things we would need the *Iyakkam*'s help with - a stove, cooker, some educational charts for the children. Malliga and I had commenced *oor vasool* meanwhile, to begin raising funds for the childcare facility. All households were required to contribute: in some instances, Malliga had to coax, even scold residents into contributing, in other cases, she herself decided not to collect from certain households because they couldn't afford it and were the poorest of the poor in the neighborhood.

On the morning of February 17, 2017, the neighborhood youth helped clean the site of the childcare facility, (even removed a couple of non-poisonous snakes), level the floor with construction debris ("rubbish") from elsewhere in the settlement and erect old bamboo poles that would hold up, a yellow tarpaulin sheet to protect the ground from the sun. One of them helped us put up the board of the childcare facility, ironically held up on one end by string tied to the flag pole in the neighborhood, on which both DMK and AIADMK party flags (both red and black, with quite minor differences) were aloft. Young children started to stream in for the official commencement of the service, dressed up for the occasion. We brought out a household kerosene stove, and boiled milk for the auspicious occasion, and all the children gathered briefly under the tarp sheet, before they went to Malliga's for a brief, formal teaching session and games. Later that evening, we consulted with construction masons in MGR Nagar about the materials required to build the facility in accordance with our architect's plans.

Figure 18: Commencement of childcare services in MGR Nagar, February 2017. Pictures courtesy *Pennurimai Iyakkam*

In a bid to save costs and raise the most efficient building, the childcare facility was to share a wall with the government-built wall that fenced MGR Nagar from the rest of the government land it sat on. It was also going to build on the remnants of a wall of the older childcare center. Construction began on International Women's Day, March 8, 2017, with two construction workers from the *Iyakkam* and one from MGR Nagar leading the proceedings: on this day, we had a mere Rs. 7,200 (~$103) with which to buy construction materials with. This was much like how residents of MGR Nagar built their homes: incrementally, as and when they could afford the next stage of construction (Raman and Narayan 2013, Davis 2006, Neuwirth 2005, Turner 1976)[55]. Water was drawn using the

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[55] On one of the days during which we were strapped for cash to pay for materials and wages, Malliga wanted to pawn her gold earrings to fund construction for the next few days. This strategy was one that was evidently, regularly used when liquidity was required to continue construction of one's own home. I said that I would never allow it, and instead suggested perhaps putting a pin on construction for a few days until we could source the funds. Malliga vociferously protested, and said that if we lost the momentum, she would feel guilty, and construction would drag on and never be completed. This too, was an anxiety that stemmed from experiencing first hand, and witnessing, the vagaries and precarities associated with incremental building, in which rooms, even entire homes, would often start to be built, but could be finished and used only years later.

motor in Dhanalakshmi's house, closest to the site. Over the next month, we continued

collecting contributions from residents, *oor vasool*, and soliciting donations from donors of

the *Iyakkam*, and friends of those associated with the *Iyakkam*, to ensure that construction

continued. Some donated in cash, others in kind, buying us cement bags, bricks and sand for

the day's work, and roofing sheets. The more prosperous among the residents of MGR Nagar

contributed more than the requisite Rs. 100 per household (`$1.3). (We even put out a little

donation box that visitors to the settlement could contribute in.) Construction was

eventually completed by construction workers residing in MGR Nagar, and supervised each

day by interns of the architect, Malliga, Malathi or me. We were also able to access local

construction expertise when certain critical day-to-day decisions needed to be made.

Ultimately, the total construction of the facility - not including the costs of the materials

donated in kind - came to about Rs. 1,30,000 (~$1,857), only marginally more than the

average cost of construction of a home in MGR Nagar[56].

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[56] Often, sweat equity goes into dwelling construction too, much like the childcare facility. However, there are differences between the nature of the average dwelling in MGR Nagar and the childcare facility: the average dwelling is a small two-room house, about 150 square feet in size, while the childcare facility was 350 square feet large. Dwellings tend to have shelves built into them and more internal divisions to separate uses of the space (living room, kitchen, wet/bathing area, for instance), while the childcare facility is relatively simpler, with only one internal division and a slab of slate built into the wall serving as kitchen counter, and a short wall running the length of the structure on one side.

Figure 19: Construction of the childcare center, March-April 2017

For Peter Linebaugh (2008, p. 45, 2014), the process of commoning is one that is embedded in labor, praxis and exploration, is necessarily collective, and independent of the law and the state. It is through a social process, and labor that something is rendered a resource, or a commons. In the urban context, commoning is the everyday, often desperate attempts to survive in a context marked by high pressure on land and resources (Huron 2018, p. 62). Squatting itself, in being a form of subsistence living, has been theorized as a form of commoning (Zibechi 2012, Federici 2011, Neuwirth 2005): it is an instance where use value holds primacy over private property rights or logics (Neuwirth 2005). Drawing from Federici (2019) and Huron (2018), I take a feminist perspective to examining the commons by visibilizing the labor that goes into creating the commons, both in explicating processes of capture in squatting, and in creating community infrastructure.

Squatting, when it takes the form of erecting shacks in discrete spaces for each family, can become the basis on which families can make claims to individual gains in the form of resettlement housing (as discussed in the previous chapter). However, there is no route through which the childcare facility can be used to make an individualized claim. The facility

is not a commodity, it cannot be commoditized; rather, it is an asset for the community which stands on shaky legal ground where property law is concerned, consistent with Gidwani and Baviskar's 2011 characterization of the urban commons. It actively resists commodification, while also attempting to resist the commodification of the settlement through eviction, by demonstrating the use value of the land. It was built by community funding and community labor: the workers involved in the construction of the facility were either residents of MGR Nagar, or members of the *Iyakkam*. In the last stages when we could no longer afford to buy sand, the laborers were able to mine sand from deep under the ground right next to the facility. Hose pipes, spades, water barrels, step ladders, cement bags were all crowdsourced every day of the construction. When the structure was built, the neighbourhood youth painted it for free, other residents donated ceiling fans, chairs and tables for the opening day. Once construction was completed in April 2017, the rules of its functioning were set by the people co-creating it — MGR Nagar residents and members of the *Iyakkam* — who determined the working hours, the everyday food menu, the school curriculum, the salaries of the staff, and the uses of the space. In doing that, the commons was a critical site of care, collectivity, and sharing, producing a new set of social relations in the process of commoning itself.

As Kamatchi remarked, inadvertently echoing the rallying call of squatting itself (Wall 2017), "this facility is on government land, no one can own it, at the same time, it belongs to all of us." On the one hand, Kamatchi was claiming the commons as our own, yet, she was aware of the fact that it stood on government land. This points to a complex relationship between the commons and the state (discussed in some length later in this chapter), and the possible ways in which the commons can be used to make claims on the state.

Making moral claims on city land

When the childcare structure was mostly constructed (only the windows and door hadn't been installed), WVS suggested that we open the facility formally on April 8, 2017, on World Health Day, with a free medical camp for children. A day before the opening, while the neighbourhood youth painted the structure a peptic pink (Malliga's choice) we printed matching pink notices officially announcing the opening, with the largest individual contributors from within the settlement acknowledged on it. Malliga and I distributed it after dark, also shouting out our invitation door-to-door. We had a rousing, formal opening ceremony, with the ribbon to the facility cut by Navin, a toddler resident of MGR Nagar, over 60 children attending the medical camp, and many more residents attending the opening.
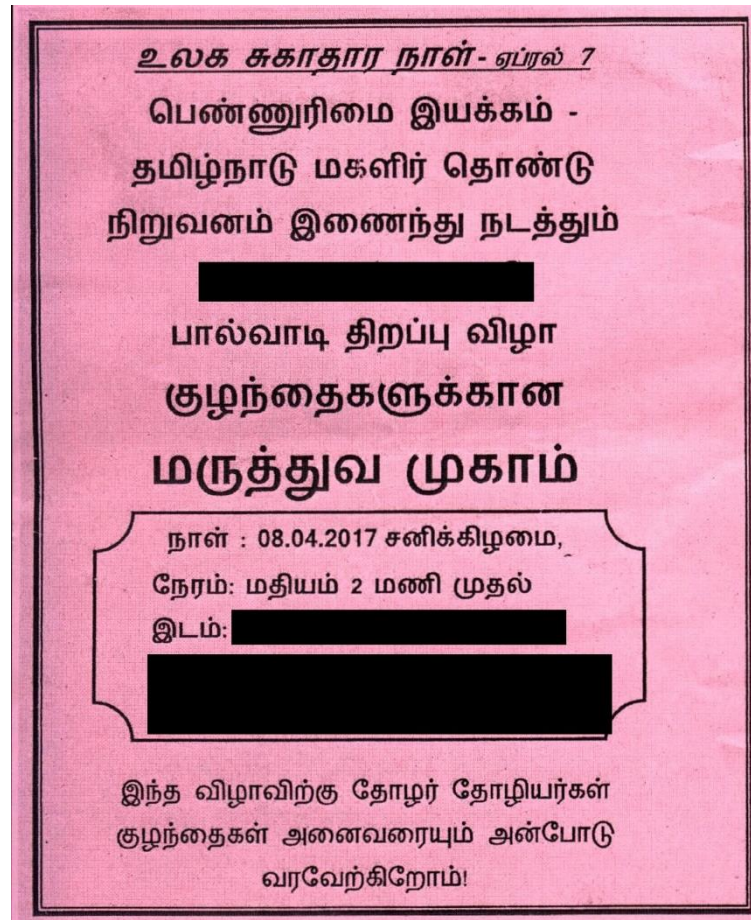
Figure 20: Flyer printed for the opening of the *balwadi*, Apr 2017

At the opening of the childcare center, Kamala, the Chennai district secretary of the *Iyakkam* made a comment on the significance of the childcare facility: "we have been pushing to rebuild this childcare center in MGR Nagar for so long now! Only this childcare center can save the settlement (from eviction). It's a good thing we have built it now, now we can face any threat!"

In saying this, Kamala was making explicit connections between the construction of the childcare center, and the possibility of the settlement being spared evictions. It was implied that actual structure of the childcare facility, its materiality, is a significant weapon of resistance against evictions. Some residents also made the connection: during *oor vasool*, one of them asked us, "why are you building this facility, are they going to evict us?" In another instance, Geetha, while discussing the construction of the center, said

> We know a painter, who painted the painted lovely animals, birds and the alphabet on the white walls of our Neelam Basha Dargah center. We should get him to paint the walls of the MGR Nagar center as well, it would be excellent. The demolishers will take one look at the beautiful walls of the center and leave without demolishing!

Two things are significant about this claim. First, in hoping that at the time of demolition, the demolishers can be convinced to stop eviction was a consideration that was even possible to make, a method to try, precisely because the very process of eviction and demolition was one governed by informality. As I have illustrated elsewhere (Narayan 2015), there is no due process of evictions and resettlement in Chennai, given that there is no overarching policy or government order to govern how evictions are to be implemented. The discretionary power of the bureaucrats in the eviction process is a significant factor in

determining how evictions occurred[57]. Secondly, in a dual purpose is attributed to the

childcare center: it would not only fulfill a critical need within the settlement to serve the

community, but also be channeled as a way to make a moral claim on the state to prevent it

from being evicted.

Figure 21: The childcare facility after construction was complete, May 2017. Photo by author.

According to Veena Das (2007), citizenship itself is a moral claim: urban residents and the

state are bound together through the notions of preserving life that lie outside the letter of

the law[58]. She also highlights the agency of objects (ibid.) such as the ration card, issued

usually to entire communities, in preserving the life of these communities. Bringing these

two ideas together helps us understand the role of the childcare center in urban poor

settlements like MGR Nagar. The center is very much also an instance of illegal squatting, on

land that is owned by the state. Yet, it is also a material demonstration of the vibrant life of a

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[57] In a comparative study of multiple evictions in the city (Narayan 2015), some evictees reported being denied resettlement housing altogether because they were at work, or out of town at the exact time of allotment, and in one instance, because TNSCB officers became "irritated" during allotment.
[58] Life, in this instance, is not in the same as Foucauldian or Agamben's notions of biological and bare life, but life as lived by a community, the unit on the basis of which citizenship is claimed and performed (Das 2007).

community, in the collective labor that has gone into it, and the function it performs for MGR Nagar as a whole. The affective import of catering to children, as embodied in the center and its walls with the animals and birds and other educational material, also cannot be underestimated. In erecting the center then, residents of MGR Nagar are making moral claims to continued life in their current location.

Another common example for there being room for affective appeals to state actors is local temples within settlements being spared at the time of demolition. This was the case in the part of MGR Nagar that was violently evicted in 2000 too: the local temple still stands, but the surrounding homes in that part of the settlement have been destroyed, its residents moved to Kannagi Nagar, Asia's largest resettlement colony in the city's peripheries. Bureaucrats tend to have some hesitation razing down places of worship: perhaps that explains the presence of little Hindu temples and shrines for Mother Mary (one right alongside our childcare center), which serve social needs of the community while they live there, and some possible leverage when they are threatened. However, inevitably, the settlement is demolished even when the temples are spared, because the temples carry a sort of religious import in themselves that in independent of who built it and used it. A childcare center is different though: it does not have a significance other than its service to the community that lives around it. If the community goes, the infrastructure has no use. The destiny of the community then, is unambiguously tied to this building. The logic is that if the childcare center is made impressive enough through the hope and labor invested in it, maybe the whole settlement will be spared. In other words, the childcare center is a demonstration of the current use value of the land, a direct challenge to the commodifying logics making the contemporary Indian city.

Challenges, access, and inclusion

While the commons are sites invested with hope and collective labor, romanticizing the

commons may obscure the struggles and contradictions along the road to creating and

managing them, and does not let us anticipate threats to their existence. Multiple scholars

have pointed to the need to study within communities to understand how power operates

in the management of the commons, the sometimes-exclusionary nature of communities

that can restrict access to the common resources (Huron 2018, Agrawal 2003, for instance).

Being at the forefront of creating community infrastructure is an opportunity to gain

popular support within the settlement, and credibility within the political party one belongs

to. The range of possible action then, becomes an arena for competitive patronage, with

local slum leaders belonging to various parties attempting to one up each other in their race

to provide services to the community in exchange for support in local elections, or more

broadly, to their parties. According to multiple accounts by *Iyakkam* members and local

residents, Kamatchi proposed the opening of a library in the same location where the

childcare facility in the 1990s stood, in a bid to compete with what Malliga and the *Iyakkam*

had accomplished. With the AIADMK in power at the time, she was also able to weigh in

with the backing of officials of the Chennai Corporation, and the police. There were attempts

at intimidation, but ultimately, attempts to open the library were unsuccessful. These

frictions created local disillusionment, and coupled with the financial problems the facility

was already facing, it had to be shut down. Malliga expressed some fear about possible

sabotage this time around too, but Kamatchi and most other residents only welcomed the

initiative to rebuild the facility in 2017. (In the intervening years, Malliga and Kamatchi's

relationship had also significantly improved.)

However, the re-capture of land for re-building the facility in 2017 was not without conflict. A resident questioned why the space was being used to construct a childcare facility instead of a toilet. It was justified by Malliga rather belligerently that the space had already housed a childcare facility, and so that was how it was going to be used. (Besides, what is the point building a toilet when we do not have sewage connections, she asked.) In another instance, an argument broke out between Malliga and Rani, whose house was right opposite the site of the childcare facility. Although the site itself was unused except to dump discards, the space right outside it, across from Rani's doorstep, was used as a parking space for motorbikes and scooters by some, including Rani's son. When construction began, large stones were placed around the site to cordon off passersby, and parking was not possible any more. Rani questioned Malliga's authority in taking over the space outside her house, which had caused her great inconvenience. Malliga in turn, asked her if she preferred a dump outside her house, instead of creating a facility that would benefit the whole *ooru*. She also weighed in with her authority, to point out that the land, especially this part of the settlement, was captured by her father Mahendran and other members of the DMK, and Rani did not have any right to question why parking outside the construction site was not allowed anymore. Rani was disgruntled, but the conflict fizzled out in time, and ultimately, Rani was among those who loaned chairs for the opening of the facility.

Although the commons is expected to serve all the members of a community, there are questions related to exclusion even where access to commons are concerned (Huron 2018). I had once held a separate group discussion with residents of the *pallam*. In this discussion, which I detailed in the Chapter 1, residents expressed anger at local leaders who, they claimed, routinely excluded them from any patronage benefits they distributed within the settlement. When Malliga and I went door to door, first to collect details of eligible children,

then to do *oor vasool*, I noticed the tension first hand. They barely acknowledged our presence, which seemed to anger Malliga. Only some of them gave us names of their children; most refused to contribute to the facility, claiming they could not afford it. Malliga in turn, reprimanded them, saying the facility would benefit all children, but that she as leader can only help those who cooperate with her. A few children from the *pallam* attended the medical camp, but only two children from that part of MGR Nagar regularly used the facility, despite repeated encouragement.

While the intent and impact of services provided by the *Iyakkam* is admirable, its actual record with sustaining childcare services across the city has been checkered. Childcare centers that were fully functional in two other settlements in the city for over five years, had to be shut down. Depending on the number of children that attended, the running costs of the facilities, including teacher and helper salaries, was at least Rs. 12,500 (~$179) a month. For three functioning centers, that amounted to at least Rs. 4,50,000 (~$6,428) a year. The WVS, if the central government disbursed funds on time every month, that is, contributed to about half of the costs (this is a generous estimate: during the time of my fieldwork, there were many months during which the WVS could only spare a fraction of their usual contributions). The *Iyakkam* in 2016, had only received a total of about Rs. 3,00,000 (~$4285) in individual donations for all its childcare and training activities; it no longer has sustained grant funding. The rest was made up for by pulling out of Geetha's, even Malliga's household budgets. The childcare services that remain functional continue to operate under severe and perennial financial precarity, which ultimately was a justification to cede control of the childcare facility in MGR Nagar, the story of which will be laid out in the next section.

Negotiating relationships, ceding control

The relationship of the childcare facility to the state is complex. The provision of the service

was enabled by channeling parts of the state machinery — in this case, as partial funding

from the central government — in order to address certain needs of the community. If

allowing squatting and providing in situ services to informal settlements despite the

illegality of their occupation of city land itself is a form of welfare in the postcolonial Indian

state (Ghertner 2014, Das 2011, Chatterjee 2004), then MGR Nagar, the childcare center and

the ration shop, are examples of the commons supported by the state. Yet, in its material

form, the childcare facility in being the manifestation of community labor and care

practices, also emerges as a means to make moral claims on the local state (landowning

departments, the city corporation evicting settlements) in the event of evictions. As a

commons privileging use value over property rights, it stands in defiance of, and challenges

the contemporary state and its citymaking logics centering the exchange value of land. At

the scale of the neighbourhood, the visible, material infrastructure of the childcare center,

that was built with no help from the local state or political parties, signalling the autonomy

of MGR residents, proved to be a source of resentment for important political actors outside

the settlement. This section of the chapter will pay attention to local politics, and its bearing

on the autonomy and legitimacy of MGR Nagar.

As a loyal cadre worker of the DMK and long-term member of the *Iyakkam*, Malliga seemed

often to feel a need to balance or reconcile these two positions she occupied, in the party

and the *Iyakkam*, by being as transparent as possible. As a move in that direction, and to

ensure that the *Iyakkam*'s efforts are not thwarted by a powerful political party, she wanted

to talk to the MLA about our plans to raise this childcare center before we built it. In a sense,

the *Iyakkam*'s practice of raising and running childcare centers in low income

neighbourhoods of the city, was being refracted through the local politics of MGR Nagar, and through local members who had political associations and loyalties. On Malliga's part, undertaking such an endeavour as a resident required the careful management of relationships with other actors in political society, so that future opportunities for claimsmaking are not foreclosed. On one occasion when the MLA visited the neighbourhood in December 2016, Malliga told him about her plans of reviving childcare services in the settlement by rebuilding the center that existed before. At the time, he expressed interest in starting an ICDS anganwadi, a government childcare service, and told us to wait until he is able to gather funds and approval. Malliga was optimistic about this prospect, especially considering that WVS had, at the time, turned us down. "It is a good thing if the government comes to us, like they did for the ration shop," she reasoned. However, the MLA had become busy and did not seem very forthcoming about pursuing this idea, and when finally, WVS came around in February 2017, we were all collectively enthusiastic about commencing services ourselves. At the time, it seemed like the *Iyakkam*'s primary imperative had won out over the political leader's wishes. Malliga did want to inform him about our plans to build the center though, and so we set out to meet him one evening:

Malliga: *Anna*, we had discussed running a shelter for children in our neighborhood...

MLA: Yeah, we do need an ICDS center. We will do it, I told you, let me look into what can be done.

Malliga: No *Anna*, we at the *Iyakkam* were thinking of building one... we have even drawn a plan with our architect, which we wanted to show you... (hands him a copy of the plan)

MLA: Hmm... if you have decided to do this yourselves, why do you ask me?

Malliga: *Anna*, it is not that we are doing this in defiance of you. It is a good thing if the ICDS

anganwadi came. But for now, we are only resuming a service we used to provide in this neighborhood years ago. We wanted to inform you about it though...

Childcare services, as well as construction of the facility commenced, and there were no further comments or questions from the party for a while. One afternoon, when construction was on in full swing (and when we were facing daily financial difficulties keeping up), the air in Malliga's house was tense. According to Malathi's account, the party zonal secretary had come that morning to ask her and Malliga to help with some party matters, and Malathi turned him down rudely.

> I asked him why he came here asking us for help when he isn't helping us build the childcare facility for the people. He may be a politician, but he should have some scruples, he should be fair. I won't budge, not for the Rs. 5, Rs. 10 they give me for party work. He could've helped at least to bolster his own respect in the community, if not for us. The party didn't help us because this neighbourhood is going to be evicted, then why do they come to this neighbourhood for help?

Malliga, who was in the kitchen, interjected angrily, to point out that the MLA had only warned that if we built our own facility, the Corporation of Chennai would demolish it. This was the first I had heard of this unequivocal threat from the MLA, warning us that our efforts would indeed be run to the ground if we tried to build our own childcare facility. Logically, this made little sense, considering that the childcare facility was only one of many kinds of squatting already going on in MGR Nagar — residential, commercial, community facilities — and there was no reason to bring the childcare facility down. Clearly, he was implying that the entire neighbourhood would be evicted, for defying him and building the facility ourselves.

Malliga was also worried about having directly scorned a locally important figure in the party. But she conceded why it was perhaps a good thing to have no political party contributions to the childcare facility. "It's a good thing that these party guys did not contribute to the facility. Tomorrow, they cannot ask to store party things, or hold party meetings here. They have no connection to the childcare facility, and we don't need them."

Malliga in this instance, was privileging her position with the *Iyakkam*, and the need to do things for the neighborhood, over her position and loyalty to the party. Significantly, she was also highlighting the importance of spatial control and autonomy over the facility, by ruling out any dependence on political party patronage.

In the time that the childcare facility was functional though, the MLA did not seem to be openly resentful. He did not hold back on any of his regular activities in the settlement: ahead of the 2017 monsoons, he laid a few drainage tanks to manage rainwater, and offered relief for the rains to residents in the form of dry food supplies and new bedsheets[59]. He had apparently also encouraged the *nalla velai*, good work, of the *Iyakkam*. As a goodwill gesture, he was invited to distribute presents to the children at the Children's Day celebrations at the facility in November 2018; medical camps organized by the party were hosted at the facility.

However, in February 2019, after being functional for 22 months, the childcare center we built in MGR Nagar was razed to the ground. Another government-run ICDS facility in his

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[59] Post fieldwork phase phone call update from Malliga, November 2017

constituency had become defunct, and the MLA was keen in having its resources shifted to

MGR Nagar. He wanted to fund and raise a more sophisticated childcare service in the exact

same location. His proposed structure was a two-storeyed one in which the bottom floor

would house a government ICDS *anganwadi*, and the top floor, a community hall at which

local social events could be held: in essence, it was a separation of the dual function of the

existing structure. Multiple discussions were held, both among residents of the settlement

and the members of the *Iyakkam*, and with the elected representative himself. The facility

had been often strapped for funds; it could really benefit from the regular funding from the

government in providing good services without interruptions. But a fair amount of labor

and resources had gone in to building the structure, and the facility was also providing

employment to local women. However, the MLA claimed that the existing structure was said

to be not sound enough, making it unsafe for children, considering it did not have a concrete

foundation, and used parts of a 25-year old wall. Despite negotiations that lasted many

weeks, ultimately, without a protest, the structure we built was allowed to be demolished.

When Malathi reported the demolition to me on a voice note in February 2019, she framed

it primarily as grief over losing control over settlement space:

> It was hard to take, Priti. How much we persevered to erect it, collecting funds, building
> it ourselves, what did we not do. That's what makes it painful... what I feel bad about is
> that all this while, the center was in our control, we had the keys. When someone else
> now rules over the space, it's hard. It's our *balwadi*, our space, you know? It's not like
> before now, is it?

The demolition was evidently a symbolic defeat of the residents, in how something they

built was taken down overnight. It took away their control over some space in the

settlement, and was a threat, to their autonomy and their ability to sustain life in the

settlement, signaling the precarity of their dwelling conditions. It was also the loss of an

asset, a financial loss for both the *Iyakkam* and the residents.

Yet, the loss of control over settlement territory was not the end of politics, but only an

intermediate stage. Malathi believed that it was because we raised a facility first that the

MLA was forced to respond. The demolition of our facility meant that now the state came to

the settlement in an explicit way: a Corporation of Chennai board would now hang in the

new building when it comes up, providing the entire neighbourhood, more legitimacy, and

hopefully, better protect it from eviction. The *Iyakkam* also admits that the city government

with its resources will be able to better provide for the children, feed them more nutritious

food. The center will be outfitted with a toilet with running water and sewage facilities.

MGR Nagar, at this point, has access to neither. But the center will get underground sewage

and water connections, possibly enabling the entire neighborhood to tap into the

connection. The MLA, by demolishing something that the people had built themselves, is

now pressured to keep his promises if he does not want to lose local support and votes in

the upcoming elections. Considering his investment in the new infrastructure, he might be

more motivated to weigh in against the demolition of MGR Nagar, if the situation were to

arise. Yet again, as in the case of the ration shop, the government was compelled to provide

for the settlement. To enable this, not protest, but ceding or giving up of this spatial

privilege was considered an advantageous move for MGR Nagar. The residents had traded

autonomy for the possibility of better services, and legitimacy and consolidation of their

occupation of city land.

In articulating his anxieties about urban populism, Manual Castells (1983) articulates the

actions of squatter settlements being constrained by their "dependency" on, and "heteronomy" vis-a-vis political systems (p. 209-212). Their lack of citizenship provides them the political system the ability to control them in accordance with the good will of the state and an urban development dictated by foreign capital. In order to avoid a possible threat to their occupancy, residents of MGR Nagar were forced to relinquish control over a community infrastructure they created and managed. Yet, as in Pickerill and Chatterton's (2006) definition, 'autonomy' itself is interstitial in nature, without an 'out there' to build autonomy from, necessitating a constant toggling between autonomous and non-autonomous tendencies. The giving up of the childcare facility is only one instance in a long trajectory of negotiation between residents, political actors, the state, and social movements, in which citizenship is a precarious claim that is constantly negotiated (Das 2011). On a temporal axis, it appears stronger at some moments, and weaker at others, sometimes built through unbuilding and ceding of autonomy, rather than building upon and seizing urban territory.

A feminist politics of space?

Squatting, especially in the face of police repression, is often described as militant (as in Alexander Vasudevan's 2017 history of Frankfurt), or at least always confrontational and spatially expansive. (Many squatting initiatives are also led by men and remain patriarchal in their political organization (Roy 2004, multiple chapters in Lopez and Cattaneo 2014, for instance.)) James Holston's 2008 description of auto-construction by the urban poor in Sao Paulo's peripheries, is conceptualized as "insurgent" and "irruptive" in how citizenship or the political is seized through the occupation of new space. In this instance, in MGR Nagar, ceding, surrendering or giving up urban land already occupied and spatial privileges already accrued is seen as a way to make new political and material gains, decidedly not

masculinist, possibly even feminist in its non-confrontational approach. Decisionmaking with respect to both the building and unbuilding of community infrastructure in the settlement have also been made by women.

In addition, if reproduction is to be defined as not just concerning our material needs, but also the reproduction of "collective memory and the cultural symbols that give meaning to our life and nourish our struggles" (Federici 2019, kindle location 312), the childcare center itself remains a cultural artefact of the community even after its demolition. The new ICDS anganwadi was for the community, it would still serve the people. As Malathi reassured me,

> We built the *balwadi* first. When our balwadi stood there, it forced the MLA to want to do something, that is why he wants to build one right here. If it is in our neighborhood, it is *our* childcare center. Our kids are going to benefit from it, and if a government childcare facility comes to our *ooru*, it is our pride, isn't it? Our neighborhood will only benefit from it.

The surrender of the commons also did not imply the loss of a commons. Now that the childcare center we built was demolished, the *Iyakkam* just moved the service to a different location, to a nearby settlement. It entailed renting an existing structure in that settlement (with a recent tranche of donations to the trust), and simply shifting the bare infrastructure from MGR Nagar to run the center in the new location — a stove, gas cylinder, vessels to cook and store food in, a blackboard, and a few educational charts. Geetha explained the prerogatives of the *Iyakkam* quite simply when she said "the government has the resources to provide much more nutritious food to the children, feed them eggs every day. We can move elsewhere; there are so many needy children in the city."

Thus, the commons in this case, is really a *portable* apparatus that can serve the needs of a

population in any location in the city. The portability is a feature of both the minimal

material infrastructure with which the service can be provided, and the ethos of commoning

as a social practice. In its potential to enable a politics of place (in its ability to strengthen,

defend and transform the local), commoning technologies of the *Iyakkam* are also an

illustration of what Cindi Katz (2001a, 2001b) calls a countertopography, that challenges

capitalist spatialities across different places. Katz' idea of 'topography' recognizes the

vulnerabilities and losses to processes of social reproduction across multiple sites, and

identifies potential for transformation and solidarity in material social practices across

these locations. Intervening in childcare provision across multiple precarious urban poor

settlements across Chennai allows the *Iyakkam* itself to mobilize negotiations with the local

state from multiple sites. Thus, the politics of giving up is necessary in order to manage

relationships that sustain and preserve urban life, but also enables imagining possibilities of

commons and commoning as durable, portable technologies that strengthen a politics of

place while not remaining geographically bound themselves.

As of May 2019, the new ICDS *anganwadi* is being built in MGR Nagar. The *Iyakkam* is in

discussions with the MLA on hiring local women to staff the facility, in order to preserve the

community's participation, and providing local women the opportunity to access

government jobs. Geetha believes that better care is provided to children if their caregivers

were familiar, from the same community, especially considering that Dalit children continue

to be discriminated against in government facilities (Thorat and Sadana 2009, Aiyar 2011).

The negotiation continues.

CHAPTER 4

ACCESS THROUGH THE PARASTATAL:

CONSUMER CITIZENSHIP AND EVERYDAY CORRUPTION

MGR Nagar had built its childcare center by early April 2017. The walls had been painted a peptic pink, and streamers and balloons had been put up for its opening, which was to be marked by a free medical camp for children of the area. Tables and chairs had been borrowed from various homes in MGR Nagar and set up for the visiting doctors. It was the beginning of summer in an always-hot-and-humid Chennai, and, despite the large windows running the length of the structure, it was very stuffy inside the facility. So, in addition to crowdsourcing furniture for the opening, we also scouted for and borrowed two standing fans and multiple extension boxes so the fans could be connected to power sockets in the homes closest to the facility. The opening went resoundingly well: about 60 children attended the medical camp with their parents. The community was curious and excited about the new facility and congratulated us effusively. But the task ahead was clear: if the childcare facility was to be used through the summer, it needed electricity, and soon.

Getting access to electricity is not hard in Chennai. According to the 2011 Census of India, 99% of households in the city have access to electricity.[60] In Tamil Nadu, with the state government regularly distributing consumer electronic goods like television sets and laptop computers to its poor populations, it would be pretty ironic if residents did not have access to electricity (observed earlier by Jeyaranjan and Vijayabaskar 2011). Both the leading political parties in the state, the DMK and the AIADMK own television channel networks through which a fair degree of propaganda (or at least, biased news) is broadcast. Both

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[60]http://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/dchb/3302_PART_B_DCHB_CHENNAI.pdf

parties have an interest in all families having access to a television (hence the distribution of TV sets as patronage (see Ranganathan 2006, for instance)), and hence, to electricity itself[61]. It is fairly common for electricity to be tapped or drawn from the nearest street light, house or shop, without being penalized by state functionaries. This can be witnessed in MGR Nagar as well, for instance, in the little electric lamp at the Mother Mary shrine that is powered by a line directly drawn from the local electricity distribution box. It is illustrative of what Ravi Sundaram (2009, as quoted in Coleman 2017, p.33) calls 'pirate modernity', in which the technological conditions of modern urban life are made nearly universal through practices of recirculation and creative bricolage, bridging "the gap between the fictive universality of state guarantees of citizenship and their always insufficient realization in material grids and networks of power" (ibid.). One of the most vivid sights I have witnessed in Chennai is one of a settlement located literally on water, in the low tide area of the Adyar River. It was completely shrouded in darkness from being located right under the Saidapet bridge between its structural columns, but for the flickers from television sets in the huts.

Despite the ease with which electricity can be stolen, many poor families choose to get formal electricity connections. They follow a bureaucratic procedure to apply for one, often involving a lot of running around, invest significant labor and resources (as I attempt to describe later in this chapter), have their electricity consumption metered in order to pay electricity bills every two months — all this, when they could, hypothetically, get electricity for free or at cheaper rates. Why do they make this choice to pay for an urban service? How

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[61] Although households in some rural parts of the state have received free television sets, but do not have access to electricity (Selvam 2018, for instance). Electricity penetration in urban areas is better.

is this choice even available to them? What are the implications of getting a formal

connection?

This chapter will first lay out a thesis on how we might understand why residents of MGR

Nagar opt to get formal electricity connections. Next, I will detail how and why accessing

electricity was perhaps easier than accessing other services in MGR Nagar, suggesting that

electric consumer citizenship in MGR Nagar can complicate existing scholarship on

neoliberal urban governmentality and the contentious role of the parastatal agency. In the

final two sections, I will lay out an ethnography of applying for and ultimately getting an

electricity connection, which in turn, contributes to scholarship on the Indian bureaucracy

and corruption in urban terrains of negotiation.

The implications of consumer citizenship

How can we understand why the urban poor choose to pay for urban services they can get

for free? Malini Ranganathan (2014) differentiates between two perspectives: the

instrumentalist view often proffered by aid organizations and development agencies that

espouses the "willingness to pay" for better services, and the Foucauldian perspective that

draws attention to the "self-responsibilization" enforced by neoliberal governmentality, in

services previously subsidized by the state (as in Lemke 2001, for instance). In her

examination of water reforms in Bangalore, Ranganathan rejects both these views, arguing

instead that payment for water provides a means to bargain for symbolic recognition,

tenure security, and material benefits from the state. This is much like Veena Das (2011) in

her examination of how *jhuggi* dwellers in New Delhi use electricity bills to demonstrate

how long they have lived in that location, and make moral claims on that basis to gain

prolonged security of tenure.

What was happening in MGR Nagar, and many urban poor settlements in Chennai, was

similar. Getting electricity connections and ration cards was necessary to live and survive in

MGR Nagar. That getting a *formal* electricity connection was considered necessary for

residents, when (at least theoretically) electricity could be pirated, says something about

the function of formal connections. Every resident meticulously maintains a file or plastic

packet filled with documents from the state — the ration card, slips handed out during

enumeration as part of some government exercise or another, bills paid to the Tamil Nadu

Electricity Board (TNEB) over many years. These paper trails serve as evidence of being

seen by the state in some way (ibid.) and are critical for residents of an informal settlement.

Informality has critical implications for Chennai's poor residents. As explained in the

introductory chapter, settlements that are formally recognized and declared under the

Tamil Nadu Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act 1971 are eligible for formal

government intervention and improvement. They have been evaluated for property tax,

have a degree of tenure security, and become eligible for urban renewal schemes that aim to

improve housing and basic services of the urban poor. However, the last time the state

undertook the process of declaration was in 1985. In the meanwhile, hundreds of urban

poor settlements have languished in a state of informality (Transparent Chennai 2012).

Informal settlements like MGR Nagar do not appear in the books of the state and are

intentionally neglected so that the state is not obligated to provide care (Anand 2017, kindle

location 1898) and is freed from accountability (Hull 2012). In such an instance, being seen

by the state, in whichever way possible, becomes important. What Veena Das elsewhere (2004) calls the "signature of the state," the presence of the state in the life of a community, is preserved through documents, to be channeled as a claim for legitimacy and tenure security[62]. Thus, applying and obtaining formal electricity connections must be seen not as a compulsion to pay for services, but an *opportunity to be legible*.

Once in two months, a junior official of the TNEB goes from household to household in MGR Nagar, taking meter readings so the household can be charged for its consumption of electricity. This is not unlike what happens in middle class and rich neighborhoods. In these moments, as consumers of electricity who pay electricity charges for their metered connections, urban poor residents are most like, or proximate to, propertied citizens of Chennai. In preserving their bills for possible future use as a bargaining tool to fight evictions, residents will invoke this proximity and their ability to be tax- and bill-paying citizens of the city, much like peripheral dwellers in Holston's Sao Paulo (2008).

Residents of informal settlements regularly express the need for *patta* (land title) in order to secure their lives and livelihoods in the city. Documents such as electricity bills help demonstrate why they deserve to become propertied by proving their ability to be rule-abiding, taxed and billed. During a city-wide demonstration against evictions organized by the *Iyakkam* in April 2017, Pushpa expressed this demand:

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[62] Das draws continuities into the present from Emma Tarlo's (2003) account of how urban poor families in New Delhi used certificates of (forced) sterilization undertaken during the Emergency to make claims on housing, as a way to understand how the state governs the populations at the margins.

> We need to be able to live where we do, without any fear. For that, we need a *patta*. If you give us a *patta*, we will pay taxes, no problem. Even now, we regularly pay electricity bills, we have preserved all bills carefully. Similarly, if you give us a *patta*, we will do our duty without fail.

Many residents of informal settlements regularly phrase their appeals in a similar way. What is striking in this instance was Pushpa likening the *patta* to an electricity connection. She is pointing to her correct, rule-abiding behaviour upon being given an electricity connection, that she pays her bills on time as a proper consumer citizen. Similarly, if given a *patta*, I will not fail to do my bit as a propertied citizen, she emphasizes. She frames the *patta* and an electricity connection, both, as opportunities to be, or become legal.

A whole body of literature exists on the politics of infrastructure and technology ("techno-politics") and its ability to divide and exclude populations (Kooy and Bakker 2010, McFarlane 2008, Graham and Marvin 2001, for instance). This very ability also enables infrastructure to *include*: in Leo Coleman's (2017) history of electrification of India for instance, the wide distribution of electric power in the new postcolonial nation was emphasized to herald political community, integration and unity. The metaphor of grid as used by Dominic Boyer (2015, p. 533), particularly apt for electricity, serves well to understand the function of infrastructure: an apparatus looking to expand, solicit dependency on its powers, which then grow in response. If biopolitics is the governing of life through the administration of goods and resources (Collier 2011, as quoted by Anand 2017, kindle location 396), the use of material infrastructure like electricity is statecraft, a way to penetrate or expand into, to govern populations. In turn, it is often of strategic advantage to allow the state into squatter settlements, on account of the specific subjectivities it produces or potentially can produce. Although the residents of MGR Nagar

are indeed formal citizens (and indeed it is their ability to vote that allows them to negotiate favorable outcomes for themselves), their access to civil, political and socioeconomic rights remain unequal. The fact that urban poor residents are recognized by a state agency through the provision of legitimate electricity infrastructure and services, is a matter of substantive citizenship (Anand 2017, kindle location 334-346), and inclusion.

The website of the Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited (TANGEDCO), the company under the TNEB that is in charge of new connections, lists many forms using which one could apply for new applications. There is one through which the legal owner of a building could authorize an electricity connection for her tenant. However, even if the legal owner does not provide consent for a new electricity connection, or if you live in a "hut" with no legal relationship with the owner of the land you occupy, you can still get an electricity connection. In other words, the TNEB provides you electricity service irrespective of legal tenure status. The individual electricity connection then, can be seen as an opportunity offered by the TNEB as a form of belonging and substantive citizenship, in a landscape where other opportunities to become legal (through declaration, say), have been foreclosed.

Is the TNEB unique in this respect? Do all government agencies offer a similar kind of inclusion? To examine the specific implications of being able to access a formal electricity connection, I look at how other services in MGR Nagar are accessed, say water. From ethnographic fieldwork in MGR Nagar, it was clear that there were critical differences in how residents accessed electricity, as opposed to water.

Being an electric citizen, rethinking the parastatal

Veena Das (2011) distinguishes between services like water which can be considered 'public goods' because they have health externalities, and others like electricity, which are, thus, not public goods in the same way. Perhaps the suggestion is that the moral obligation of the state to ensure public health through the provision of water is not the same with respect to electricity. Yet, accessing electricity at one's doorstep was perhaps easier than accessing water in MGR Nagar.

At first glance, water and electricity have many common features, apart from being essential for survival. They are both fluid, mobile amenities that were administered through infrastructure like pipes / wires, storage tanks / transformers, meters and other paraphernalia. In Tamil Nadu, they were both provided by parastatal state agencies (discussed in more detail below): if you wanted to receive formal connections from either, you needed to plug into a grid or network created by these agencies to serve various parts of the city and pay for these services. But there are also many ways to access water and electricity, other than through formal connections: theft or piracy from existing connections is one obvious route. Yet, while different state agencies and services relate to each other, they do not arrive to residents in the same way (Anand 2017, kindle location 352). Water and electricity come to MGR Nagar residents in markedly different ways.

Water is delivered once every day, through water tankers that fill up the settlement's two large black tanks. Women and the young men, if they are around, line up to get water as soon as the tanker arrives, because the understanding is that water is available first come, first serve. Residents pay Re. 1 per pot of water they draw: this is a way to pay Chennai

Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board (CMWSSB, hereafter referred to as

"Chennai Metrowater") for the supply of water, tip the tanker driver for his service, and pay

nominal amounts to residents who are in charge of cleaning the water tanks and

coordinating the service.

Chennai MetroWater has a procedure through which 'economically weaker sections" — an

administrative term for the urban poor — can get a piped water connection. The applicant

is required to produce proof of property tax payments (Padmanabhan 2012): usually

property tax is paid only by residents of declared slums. Unrecognized settlements like MGR

Nagar have not been evaluated by the Revenue Department, do not pay property taxes, and

therefore, do not qualify for piped water connections. Hence, they rely on water delivered to

communal water tanks in their settlement. For this, they pay nominal charges of Rs. 39

(~$0.56) per 1000 litres of water (Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board

website, n.d.)

During an interview with me, the MLA had listed as his top priorities in MGR Nagar the

provision of *kazhivarai sushtham* (sanitation, specifically clean toilets), *minsaaram*

(electricity, specifically for street lights), and *kudineer* (drinking water). But there are

certain constraints he had to operate within:

> We are in discussion with the concerned landowning department about them giving over
> the land, but they are not budging, stating that they might need the land for use in the
> future. For these reasons we do not have a No Objection Certificate (NOC). This is all is
> possible: we can maintain existing facilities in good repair, and where possible, improve
> some essential services that people need.

The MLA was referring to the fact that piped drinking water and sewerage connections need

clearance from landowning departments, which he, even from his powerful position, has not been able to secure for MGR Nagar yet. Thus, for basic needs such as water and sanitation, MGR Nagar residents have had no choice but to rely on communal facilities: in the form of public toilets and water tanks to which water is delivered regularly. Some relatively well-to-do families are able to supplement communal supply with handpumps to draw groundwater with. The MLA has also provided some handpumps for community use. However, groundwater is most often used for other purposes such as washing clothes, vessels, and bathing, not as drinking water.

Water scarcity is not a laughing matter in Chennai. The city, due to its dependence on erratic monsoons and government neglect of water bodies, routinely faces water shortage: most recently, in the summer of 2019, it spectacularly "ran out" of water, its reservoirs sucked dry (BBC News 2019, for instance). One day during the construction of the childcare center, we could not access a hosepipe with which to route groundwater from a handpump to prepare the flooring of the structure. We decided to buy from the day's MetroWater supply. Chitra, the construction helper stood in line, when one of the residents, standing behind her to fill her pots, asked why we were using drinking water to build the structure. Drinking water was valued dearly by residents and had to be shared, necessitating a system of neighbourhood accountability for water use.[63] It was also generally in scarce supply, especially at the time, in the early summer. (Chitra ended up drawing water from a

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[63] There are multiple ways to access drinking water even in MGR Nagar. Some are able to purchase drinking water from private providers in plastic cans: this is a widely prevalent practice among middle class and rich households in Chennai for at least the last twenty years, stemming from a period of intense water shortage and fears of contamination. Water can also be purchased at a premium from private providers who deliver water in many locations in the city in the face of scarcity. However, these were options that were available only for the more affluent residents of MGR Nagar; the vast majority of them depend on regular supply from the state agency.

handpump at a different location in the settlement by a potful at a time, and bringing it to the site, instead.)

However, access to electricity did not pose the same hurdles. While the state faces power deficits and residents are subject to scheduled and unscheduled power cuts (the former referred to as "load shedding") (Vijayakumar and Srikanth 2018, for instance), residents were not forced to conserve electricity. Many residents are able to secure household access to electricity, the vast majority through formal electricity connections provided by the concerned parastatal agency, the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB), despite the illegality of their residence status. Most households used electricity at their own discretion, with autonomy, even liberally, it seemed like. Televisions and fans were on the entire day, except when there was a power cut: "load shedding" were very common in the summer. Residents put up extra decorative lights for festive occasions. A huge speaker often belted popular Tamil film numbers from some household or other, because it was a family celebration of some kind, or simply because it was Sunday. Borrowing electricity and electrical appliances for the opening ceremony of the childcare facility from the homes closest to the facility was a matter-of-fact affair. For the days that we used Dhanalakshmi's electrical motor to draw groundwater for construction, we simply paid a small, token compensation fee of a few hundred rupees. During Cyclone Vardah in December 2016, MGR Nagar's electric lines were severely damaged like in many parts of the city, and the settlement did not have power for four days. Muthu collected a small amount from every household to tip linesmen who fixed the infrastructure, and then it was business as usual.

What caused these differences in accessing these two urban amenities in MGR Nagar? What does it mean when piped water connections need permissions from landowning departments, but electricity connections do not? I suggest that examining the parastatals that provide and govern these amenities may give us an understanding of the differences. The unevenness in access, and the differences in governance of these two amenities, points to unexpected pathways to staking claim to urban citizenship. In other words, to answer Nikhil Anand's (2017, kindle location 396) question on whether being a hydraulic citizen is the same as being an electric citizen, whether all urban technologies produce the same kind of subjects, the answer is no, as evinced in the lives of MGR Nagar residents. I want to examine why, and what the implications of this fragmented citizenship are.

The governance of urban amenities in Chennai is largely led by parastatal agencies. A "parastatal" — also variously known as a "statutory corporation", or "state-owned enterprise" — is a company whose majority shares are owned by the government. They are usually set up by a legislation that clearly defines the rules and regulations for its functioning. In Chennai, for instance, parastatals such as the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board, the Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board, and the Tamil Nadu Electricity Boardt are in charge of important civic functions, such as housing for the urban poor, provision of drinking water and drains, and provision of electricity respectively. They are autonomous from, but often work with, the Greater Chennai Corporation, the municipal body that is chaired by a mayor and ward councillors elected by citizens. A critical feature of the parastatal is that very often, no elected official is part of the management (Benjamin and Bhuvaneswari 2006), largely consisting of technocrats and bureaucrats.

Several scholars have suggested that parastatals are both instruments and manifestations of neoliberal urban development in India. In Michael Goldman's (2011) analysis, parastatals are often created with investment capital as parallel agencies uncorrupted by local politics and freed from the inertia of local bureaucracy. Their accountability is only to top state officials and the international financial institution that funds them, with very little local oversight. Very often, they have very little or no elected representation at the local level (Benjamin 2000), making them impervious to vote bank logics that give poor residents some ability to influence processes and outcomes in their favor. The funding and functioning of parastatals are notoriously opaque to the public, and with their increasing local power, are greatly impacting democratic processes. Drawing comparisons to what James Ferguson (1990) calls the "anti-politics machine," Benjamin (2008) has highlighted the role of parastatal planning authorities in depoliticizing and technocratizing urban development. In Coelho et al's (2011) pointed examination of participatory mechanisms in urban governance, parastatals are a critical component of urban reforms that bring government activities under market logics. Urban reforms tend to emphasize the urgent need for urban transformation over meaningful, responsive public participation, resulting in less-than-ideal outcomes for the urban poor, and elite and middle class capture of urban space and resources through "corporate citizenship".

This critical scholarship, especially focused on urban planning agencies, has uncovered many mechanisms by which anti-poor citymaking has been enabled in the contemporary Indian city. However, diversifying and focusing on the histories of particular parastatals may offer a more complex understanding of their impact on democratic processes and citizenship. I attempt a preliminary analysis.

In Karen Coelho's (2010) account of water reforms in Chennai, water provision as an urban amenity seems to have been neoliberalized in a manner consistent with the many accounts of parastatals in India. In the 1970s, municipal drinking water was removed from the jurisdiction of the city corporation, following an intervention by foreign consultants and United Nations bodies. To meet the growing needs of the population and the infrastructure of the city with financial autonomy, the Madras Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board[64] ("MetroWater") was set up. This set the stage for receiving World Bank funds in the future, which had been pushing for institutional reform, depoliticization, corporatization, and privatization in MetroWater[65]. Institutional strengthening increasingly started to take the form of commercializing water services. What was once a commons has been increasingly commodified. Undertaking reforms also entailed removing the free water made available through public fountains for the poor from the range of consumer services provided by the Board, a key step in its depoliticization. Due to bureaucratic conditions - such as the need to get an NOC from the landowning department - and the pressure on urban land more broadly, the urban poor are greatly constrained in their ability to get private water connections[66], and are thus forced to pay for daily water needs met through common water infrastructure such as water tanks.

The distribution of electricity, on the other hand, has historically taken on a moral character, invested with the expectation of fostering integration and political community,

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[64] When the name of Madras was changed from Chennai, the name of the Board changed accordingly, to Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board. Through this chapter, this body will be referred to as "MetroWater".

[65] This trajectory is remarkably similar to the history of international intervention into the provision of housing in Chennai, leading to the creation of other key parastatals in the state, the Tamil Nadu Housing Board and the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board.

[66] This is a different practice in Chennai, as compared to Mumbai as described by Nikhil Anand (2017), where a different set of criteria determine whether piped water connections are possible.

and making connections and communication possible (Coleman 2017, pp. xvii). Electricity in Tamil Nadu is supplied by the TNEB which was set up in 1957 through the Electricity Supply Act 1948. The central government legislation reflects a concern about centralized energy generation and distribution impeding the efficient penetration of electricity in semi-urban and rural areas of the country and envisaged the setting up of autonomous corporations or boards in each state as a way to efficiently administer electricity to all parts of the nation. Electricity was seen as a key instrument to integrate diverse parts of what was now a single nation after independence from colonial rule (Kale 2004). The legislation also signals an openness to private sector participation in power generation, supply and distribution as early as 1948[67]. However, given the central role of the state in developing all domestic industry at the time, the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board was fully controlled by the state (ibid.), and continues to be[68].

The emergence of powerful agricultural interests in the 1960s and 70s resulted in pressure on electricity boards to provide agricultural subsidies to farmers, another feature of the boards that has stood the test of time. The offer of electricity subsidy became an election issue, a way to gain legitimacy in Tamil Nadu too, for the AIADMK in the 1970s (Dubash and Rajan 2001). Corruption in the form of political interference in personnel decisions and contract awarding also adversely affected the financial health of these bodies (Kale 2004). By the early 1990s, nationalized industry was also losing favor, and thus, state electricity boards were compelled to open themselves up to private investment. The Indian state of

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[67] http://www.cercind.gov.in/ElectSupplyAct1948.pdf

[68] Kale (2004) describes the electricity landscape pre-1948 as composed of hundreds of urban-based private supply and distribution companies. The Constituent Assembly remained divided on whether the sector should be fully nationalized, resulting in a compromise between government and private operators. Some state governments including Tamil Nadu fully nationalized, while others like Maharashtra, allowed private operators to continue, resulting in the state-by-state differences in electricity privatization we see even today.

Orissa was chosen by the World Bank as the first board that would undergo full privatization reform. In 1992, TNEB invited its first private sector partner to set up a power generation project in Chennai (Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited website, 2017a).

Yet, electricity provision in Tamil Nadu never received international intervention nor undergo full privatization, unlike Orissa (where privatization was deemed a Bank failure) and New Delhi. In compliance with national legislation to "unbundle" its services, increase competition and ease up private participation, TNEB was restructured as a holding company, with two subsidiary companies, each in charge of transmission and distribution (Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited website, 2017b). Both these companies continue to be fully owned by the state. A regulatory commission was set up in order to reform tariffs and protect the board from subsidy burdens: this involved imposing tariffs on farmers and hut dwellers who had been enjoying free power until that point (BusinessLine Bureau 2003) - it was in the early 2000s that residents of MGR Nagar started to apply for and receive individual electricity connections. Leo Coleman (2017, p. 165-166) claims that prior to privatization, Delhi's electricity distribution was based on political privilege, effectively reaching only those with influence in the bureaucracy. The new governmental emphasis on efficiency has inserted the electricity distribution company as a mediator between the state and the citizen, changing the terms of participation (ibid.), with the effect of plebianizing access to electricity. The offer of formal electricity connections to applicants irrespective of their legal status is enabled by these very ideals of efficiency and reform, achieving very similar effects in Chennai.

Yet, interestingly, the progress in metering the connections of these constituencies has been slow due to "stiff opposition" (Ramakrishnan 2010); subsidies have also been regularly provided by the government on these tariff charges, illustrating the push and pull between state-owned companies and the state itself, on how services can be offered[69]. This large-scale political pressure on the board has caused it to suffer huge losses for decades now (Madhavan 2012, Poornalingam 2011). Electricity distribution remains highly susceptible to political capture, intransigent to price changes, and a significant way to win the votes of, or appease particular constituencies in Tamil Nadu and other parts of the country (Coleman 2017, Jeyaranjan and Vijayabaskar 2011, Dubash 2005, Godbole 2004), despite having no elected representative in its official organizational structure at any level. The offer of free power has however, been an election issue, a way to win votes, and intense power shortage and frequent power cuts, an indicator of poor electricity management, distribution and procurement, a dealbreaker in elections. When I asked Malliga why she thinks she has an electricity connection, but not a piped water connection, she pointed to how political party meetings use so many ceremonial lights in and around the venue all night. "What would people say? Would they not say that politicians consume so much electricity while not giving us any? It is due to the fear of that criticism that we get current (electricity)."

To return to the comparison I started with, both water and electricity require connecting infrastructure. MetroWater seems to need the permission of the landowning departments for this purpose, and landowners have been reluctant to legitimize the illegal occupation of their land by the urban poor by explicitly granting permission. Allowing electricity connections seems not to demand this bureaucratic procedure: instead, it puts the burden

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[69] As seen in a number of tariff orders of the Tamil Nadu Electricity Regulatory Commission: listed at http://tnerc.gov.in/

of liability on the individual consumer while granting them the service (as described later in this chapter). This indicates that different state agencies interact with each other and urban residents differently, illustrating the unevenness of bureaucratic terrain and claims making. Some state agencies, parastatals though they may be, may offer opportunities, even forms of citizenship, that others don't, for various reasons, and they deserve closer scrutiny (than this chapter provides at this point). Provisionally, it seems that given the historical trajectories of electricity provision in Tamil Nadu, the role of the state remains central. Electricity is an amenity greatly malleable to national interests, legitimacy and vote-bank recruitment projects[70].

In the next section, I describe what it takes to get an electricity connection in MGR Nagar. The process of getting an electricity connection for the childcare center proved to be the same as getting one for a house in MGR Nagar, and for this reason, understanding how the childcare center was connected to the grid is a way of understanding how MGR Nagar households also find their way into the grid.

Navigating the bureaucracy

In order to apply for an electricity connection for the childcare facility, Malliga and I had a letter drafted. The letter was typed up at the *Iyakkam* office — where all manners of petitions are written up to government authorities on behalf of its members — and printed under the organization's letterhead. Once it was neatly sealed in a white envelope, Malliga

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[70] Water provision is still not fully autonomous from political interference either: hiring decisions and tariffs remain greatly constrained (Coelho 2006). This analysis is in relative terms to the provision of electricity.

slipped it into her worn brown bag, so we could go to the local TNEB substation office.

I met Malliga at MGR Nagar the next afternoon after lunch. She was waiting for me in a neat white sari with prints of large pink flowers, her hair oiled and pulled back, face freshly powdered. MGR Nagar houses many autorickshaw drivers, one of whom she beckoned and off we went. The TNEB office, which would look like any other nondescript government building if it weren't painted a rather violent green (coincidentally, the colour from the ruling party AIADMK's twin leaves symbol?), was only a five-minute autorickshaw ride away. The office bore that quintessentially lethargic vibe characteristic of government offices post-lunch, with officers lounging outside the building chatting and drinking tea. We asked a couple of them where we must go to apply for a new connection and were directed to an Assistant Engineer (AE) on the second floor of the building. But he wasn't in; he had been called away to a meeting, and so we were asked to come by some other time.

We tried again later that week. A fan was whirring slowly overhead in the empty office of the AE who was again, not at his desk. Malliga and I sat on the beige plastic chairs near the desks piled high with files, and chatted about this and that, until the Commercial Inspector (CI) walked in. We told him what we had come for and handed him the letter. He stared at it for a couple of minutes, and finally looked up to say that there really wasn't a procedure by which an organization could apply for an electricity connection[71]. Following a brief discussion of what could be done, it was decided that we could apply using a resident

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[71] In the *Iyakkam*'s experience, depending on the location of the communal facility, electricity board officials have asked for letters from either the Corporation of Chennai or the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board authorizing the connection. This seems to be a discretionary bureaucratic procedure for facilities on government land, in slum settlements. In other instances, the *Iyakkam* has used / drawn from existing electricity connections in the neighbourhood.

family's ration card that was not connected to an electricity line. Yet again, the ration card became a ticket which expanded the scope of citizenship in the city and enabled access to more services and welfare schemes of the state.

Meanwhile, Malliga had heard in the neighborhood that a couple of people who had applied for electricity connections recently had been turned down, presumably because MGR Nagar was going to be evicted soon anyway[72]. One of the residents I had spoken to before, Bama, had mentioned that she had gone to the TNEB office to enquire about her faulty electricity connection when she was sent away because the *ooru* was going to be evicted soon anyway. "If the MLA were to put in a word with the TNEB office, we will get a connection," she declared. The day we went in, the MLA was not in, but one of his deputies, Prabakar[73], and three other party men, were available. Malliga told Prabakar (*Anna*, she called him, meaning older brother, but also a common term of respect for an older male) about her concern, and he immediately and casually reassured her that getting a connection for the *balwadi* wouldn't be a problem—that the DMK office would also put in a word. It did not seem the party had anything to do with us ultimately getting an electricity connection: the TNEB was a parastatal that had no elected representative in its official organizational structure, certainly none at the local level. All elected representatives could do was "put in a word." But Malliga now felt more secure about our chances of getting one. This seemed to be a regular practice for her: whenever she felt insecure about, or faced trouble accessing a particular service at a government office, her instincts compelled her to seek help or

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[72] There had been rumblings about possible evictions, due to the Port-Maduravoyal Elevated Expressway project, that was to run through where MGR Nagar now stood. This project had been stalled for about eight years before being put back on the table in 2017.
[73] Name changed.

reassurance from the party where she held a position.

Also meanwhile, Malliga had enlisted her brother-in-law, a very genial, middle-aged man who was an electrician by profession, to help us wire up the childcare facility. *Periappa* (Uncle, I called him, because that is what Malliga's daughter called him) came one morning, and over multiple cups of tea and lots of laughter, told us the story of how he met Malliga's sister (which took an hour), and quickly made a list of all the appliances and hardware we would need in his little red pocket notebook (in about five minutes). That very afternoon, we took an autorickshaw together to a basement wholesale shop in Rattan Bazaar, where *Periappa* rattled off his list. An hour later, we came back in two autorickshaws, bearing our fans and lights and switch boards. *Periappa* came by again the next day with a helper, and wired up the place, all for free, just as he had done for Malliga and her children's homes in the past. Social networks were important in MGR Nagar — they served the all-important function of decreasing the cost of the labor necessary to make a residence livable. (The network can also be relied on to provide technical expertise when electricity or other services needed to be pirated). All the work had been done to ready ourselves for inclusion in the grid. All we needed was "last mile connectivity," and that could only be done by linesmen of the TNEB.

This time, armed with a handwritten letter on plain white paper (without the *Iyakkam* letterhead), we went to the CI again. This letter stated honestly what had transpired, that we had asked for an electricity connection for the childcare facility but were instead asked to apply for an individual electricity house connection, and so here we were. Malliga had rented out another shack within MGR Nagar, the door number of which, 83, appears on her

daughter's voter ID card. This house did not have its own formal electricity connection: it drew a line from Malliga's own electricity connection, and Malliga charged her tenant a flat Rs. 150 (~$2.08) for electricity. Since this house was not on the books of the TNEB, Malliga suggested that we get a connection for the facility with this door number. In other words, the electricity connection was officially, on paper, for door number 83 of MGR Nagar, located in a different part of the settlement, but was instead going to be wired to the facility. We made photocopies of our letter, her daughter's voter ID and Aadhaar card, all of which we were submitting to the TNEB.

The CI, not surprisingly, asked us to come back later because the AE wasn't in. We protested a little, so he deigned to give us an application form that was to be signed by Malliga's daughter before we met the AE. Just as we walked out, we ran into other officials of the TNEB just outside the building, who had seen us there before, and asked what we were doing. "Why do you go upstairs, it is futile; the AE is here, downstairs, eating lunch," one of them said. Perhaps he overheard us, because the AE emerged then finally, a mild-mannered, neat man, fingers caked in *kozhambu* from the lunch box he was eating out of. He heard us out and telephoned the CI immediately to instruct him to draw out the 'papers' today. Malliga and I, in turn, did as we were instructed: we went to the premises of the nearby Madras High Court to buy stamped paper worth Rs. 80 (~$1.11), from vendors sitting in the shade of a giant banyan tree in the middle of the premises.

Our encounter with the AE and CI was consistent with narratives of the "good bureaucrat" (*nallavanga*) and the "bad bureaucrat" (*andha aalu romba mosam*) that is common both among MGR Nagar residents, as well as members of the *Iyakkam*. Strategies that involved

negotiating with bureaucrats were built around deciding whom within a department to speak to, who was likely to be most sympathetic and helpful. The urban poor clearly *saw* the state (Corbridge et al 2005) as fragmented, not just in terms of the often-different policies of one government department compared to another, but also within the same department. Reading into the concerned bureaucrat's attitude, and judging the intention and morality of the bureaucrat concerned, based on one's own experience, or the experience of one's neighbors or friends in other settlements, was very much part of figuring out how to make a case with the state (and by going to the CI first, we failed in this instance to make this calculation). This was a question of identifying the most pliable parts of a bureaucracy — that often yielded arbitrary, diverse outcomes to the many that relied on it for survival (Gupta 2006) — to ensure favourable outcomes for oneself.

After buying stamped paper, we trudged back in the afternoon sun to the TNEB office. The CI was visibly unhappy to see us again, because it was nearly 4 pm, the end of his workday. But because he had instructions from his superior, he ploughed on, complaining under his breath the whole time. He opened a template of the 'papers' on his dusty desktop computer and peered closely at the voter ID to enter the individual details required for this connection. He then printed it on the stamped paper we had bought and asked us to have it signed by Malliga's daughter and two witnesses, along with the application form he had handed us earlier.
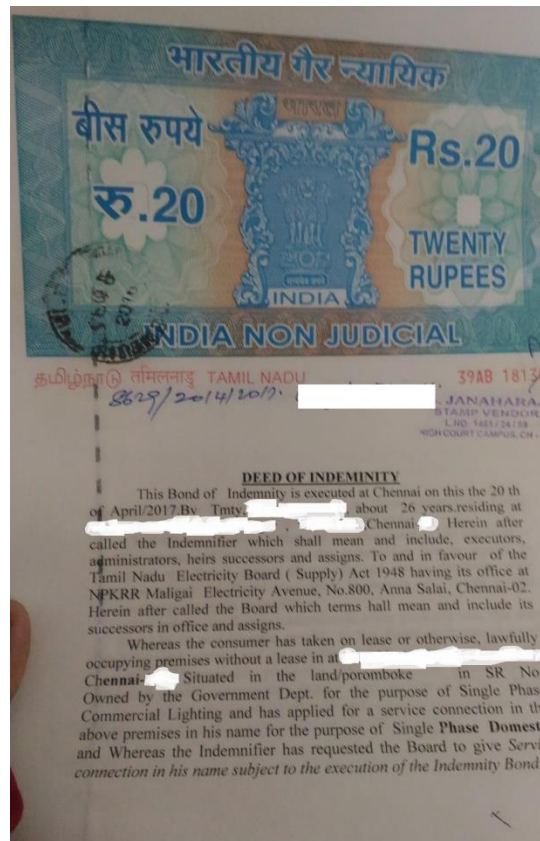
Figure 22: Page 1 of the indemnity bond we received

The 'papers' we received was in fact, a deed of indemnity. The indemnity bond performs

two critical functions. First, it seemed like the TNEB is aware of the possible uses to which

the electricity connection and associated bills could be put. It established that the applicant

of the connection — the "indemnifier" — is likely to be evicted at any time, and this

undertaking does not confer permanent or full right to the land they occupied. The

indemnifier was also to agree not to undertake any legal actions against the TNEB with the

understanding that this electricity connection indicates or confers ownership of the land

occupied. This does not mean that the deed cannot be used to claim legitimacy or a more

propertied form of citizenship from the state: the potential of the document remains the

same. It only lets the TNEB off the legal hook as an agency that can be mistaken as offering a

quasi-ownership of the land through the connection and associated documentation.

Secondly, the deed stipulates that the TNEB is due to be compensated for "all proceedings claims demands, costs damages which the Board may incur by reason of a fresh service connection" (sic), as well as "any sum that may be found to be and become payable to the Board with regard to all liabilities and claims and personally as well as by means of both movable and immovable properties" (sic). The nature of the exact "claims", "costs", "damages" and "liabilities" are not specified in the deed.

The list of forms available on the TANGEDCO website clarifies that an indemnity deed is only required for occupiers who were applying for an electricity connection without the permission of the "owner" of their homes, and applicants, who were occupying *poromboke* land[74]. In contrast, propertied citizens, who either owned the houses they lived in or legally rented them, had to fill out an application form which served as an agreement between the engineer at TANGEDCO and the consumer[75]. Indemnity bonds were drawn on stamped paper, meaning they can be admitted as evidence in court (The Legal Capsule 2018). This protects the TNEB in case the electricity connection is used by the consumer to claim some kind of property rights and enables the TNEB to levy charges for vaguely stated "damages" and "liabilities" in the process of laying the connection. The differences between these two types of documentation indicated that although all those with metered connections were recognized as 'consumers' who deserved a formal connection — indeed, Malathi was referred to as one in the indemnity deed — there were differences between different types of consumers. Tariffs are different for different categories of users too: "hut" and "agricultural" connections seem to receive electricity with different tariffs, and an upper

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[74]*Poromboke* is an administrative term to describe land generally set aside for communal purposes. But the word often serves as a catchall term to describe land owned by the government as in this case, or connote lands and people as "wasteful" (Chandni 2017, for instance).
[75] https://www.tangedco.gov.in/linkpdf/321LTservice.pdf

limit on how much electricity they can consume, as opposed to regular (propertied)

"domestic" users[76].

In the following section, I will describe how being an unpropertied consumer necessitated

the use of bribes to ultimately get an electricity connection.

Getting an electricity connection

After the bond and the application form were filled out and signed, we handed them over to

the CI, who told us that linesmen will come sometime soon to install the connection. Malliga

had taken his number, after which she kept in touch with him primarily on the phone to

follow up on the connection. He had told her over the first phone call she made that we

would have to buy the electric cables ourselves, 12 metres of which were required to draw

the connection to the facility from the box when the linesmen came. *Periappa* was not

available, so Malliga and I spent a frustrating afternoon in the same basement store in

Rattan Bazaar trying to call the CI to ask what thickness the cables ought to be (25 square

millimetres, 2-core, apparently), before we were finally able to bring the cables back to MGR

Nagar, slung over Malliga's shoulder as she rode pillion on my scooter. Incidentally, the CI

had also asked that we pay Rs. 8,000 ($111) as the laying charges. I told Malliga it needed to

be negotiated down, but the CI did not budge. On our next visit, I asked the CI what the

breakdown of the costs were, and why the prices were so high. "It will cost that much, with

four linesmen installing the connection, the cost of a new meter, installation charges, this is

pretty standard," he offered[77]. I explained to him that we were able to afford the electricity

connection only because through donations, that we had to produce bills to *Pennurimai*

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[76] Note: this is a simplistic description of the apparent differences. The tariff system available on the TANGEDCO website is more complex.
[77] Tariff details, and new connection charges are available on the TANGEDCO website, but it does not seem to be reflecting the full charges that are to be officially levied for installation.

Iyakkam for all the money we were spending, and so he should give us a receipt. He nodded quickly and turned back to his computer. A few days later, Malliga dropped in to the TNEB office before she was due to be at the DMK office and handed the CI the money. He, in turn, handed her a bill that he had ready: a small blue piece of paper with a few illegible line items, whose total only added up to Rs. 4000 (~$55.5).

It was May 8, 2017, a whole month since the opening of the *balwadi*. The kids were either being fanned with magazines and handfans or taught and fed in Malliga's house, because we still did not have electricity. (The electricity connection alone was now taking longer than the entire construction of the *balwadi* had — one month.) Malliga had been constantly calling the CI, even met the AE once in the TNEB office. They both reassured her that work would happen soon, that the meter had been bought. But apparently the CI had also explicitly admitted to being unnerved by my questions about installation costs and my insistence on receipts. Malliga thought that the extra money we paid would ensure that we get a connection, revealing a fear that we will not. "Let the work happen, then we will ask the AE about the bills. What if they don't give us the connection after taking the money?"

Having to go to government offices multiple times, being asked of different documents each time, and delaying for no apparent reasons, is a common experience among people, especially among the urban poor. (I have some first-hand experience from accompanying Pushpa many times to have Aadhaar and ration card details corrected, and for her to appeal to get her pensions for working as a conservancy worker for a time.) These are practices that are intended to force residents to offer bribes in order to have the process expedited, and to be offered services (Peisakhin and Pinto 2010). Bribes are high when uncertainties

prevail (Wade 1982). In this instance - as when Malliga was worried about whether we would get an electricity connection at all, given the eviction threat - the uncertainties arise from the fact that by virtue of not being propertied, we could still be denied a connection. The indemnity bond, in its allusion to various vague liabilities, costs and claims, perhaps enabled the extraction of unqualified charges from these types of consumers, in a way that documentation for propertied consumers did not enable, at least explicitly.

Two days later, the connection had been laid. Malliga and I then set out, yet again, to the TNEB office, this time to meet the AE about the unbilled charges. He emerged just as we entered the premises, and I immediately told him about the problem.

AE: How much have you paid?

PN: 8000.

AE (stunned): Why did you give him the money without checking with me first? You ask me why the connection hasn't been laid yet, why didn't you come to me when you were asked for money? We do not take money in MGR Nagar, I only allow them to take money to be taken in some areas. Now I have to give you Rs. 4000, take it as my donation. What else can we do?

Malliga (protesting): *Ayyo* sir.

PN: I will tell you honestly, Sir. Malliga and I have been dealing with this issue by turn. By force of habit, Malliga handed over the money without the bill reflecting the full amount. This is routine practice in her neighbourhood. When we asked the CI for the bill, he told us to speak to you, and also suggested that we write laying charges of Rs. 4000 on a piece of paper and have it signed by the linesmen when they came. This is why we have come to you.

We actually bought the cables ourselves, too.

The AE was stumped, and told us he would reach out to us after he sorted out the issue internally. On our way back in the autorickshaw, Malliga quietly admitted to me that she had bought the linesmen tea and tipped them Rs. 100 (~$1.38) each. Later that day, they had asked her for more money, this time for 'cool drinks', and she told them already that she had given their superiors much more than she was billed for. Apparently, the linesmen also clarified that the AE doesn't take cuts from consumer charges, only the CI does. Although the AE told us that he did not allow his subordinates to collect bribes from poor settlements (implying that he was complicit when bribes were solicited in more prosperous neighborhoods), there was no way for us to know for sure if he took cuts from our payment. Corrupt practices are generally prevalent across state organizations and electoral politics, with those at higher levels tending to squeeze their subordinates. It is only because lower-level officials tend to interact and work with large numbers of people that corruption at the lowest levels is most visible and most maligned, and because of the inherent class bias in discourses about corruption (Gupta 1995). Neither did we hear from the AE again, nor did we follow up. I was livid about the entire episode. All Malliga said though, thoughtfully, was, "they could've taken a little less, Rs. 1000 or 2000 extra... Rs. 4000 is a bit much. I tried to negotiate it down with the CI, because it was for children, but..."

She didn't seem too concerned with the fact that a bribe was solicited, it was the excess, the greed that bothered her. This is consistent with scholarship on corruption as it is located in everyday life, as a routine, banal practice (Gupta 1995, Anjaria 2011). Such a focus allows us to locate bribing practices as part of struggles for substantive citizenship (Anjaria 2011),

consistent with logics of negotiation and gift giving (da Sardan 1999), even friendship and helping (Anand 2017) without descending into discussions about the moral aspects of corruption (Leys 1965). If anything, this scholarship complicates the question of morality, instead of treating "corruption" of state practices, say, as a change from good to bad (ibid.) For Bayat (1997), encroachment of urban space is justified on moral grounds, as necessary usurpation to fulfill basic needs, and occasional bribing is only one means to enable this encroachment. For someone on the fringes of legality and outside the logics of property ownership like Malliga, paying a bribe reduces insecurity associated with whether she would get a connection, even though she is formally, institutionally eligible in spite of her property status. What she lacks for in legal status, she hopes to paper over, and negotiate through bribes.

The fact that Malliga and I reacted so differently to having to pay large bribes also has to do with our respective class positions. For Malliga, it may be routine, but my view on the matter was aligned with the quintessential Indian middle class' self-righteous outrage to corruption in government, as has been witnessed in many Tamil movies, and mass movements and political mobilizations in the recent past. Such a view of corruption stems from consumption practices that center professional values and class entitlement, disillusionment with "dirty" Indian politics, and deferment of blame on political classes (Khandekar and Reddy 2015, Jeffrey 2002). This is possible only through the active denial of the middle classes' daily involvement in corrupt practices in everyday life (Joseph 2011), and their underrecognized reliance on informal favours and claims making, as has been observed by critics of political society (Coelho and Venkat 2009 for instance; also see Swain 2012, Roy 2009). For all my outrage, it is also entirely possible that we paid as much as we

did because of my presence, and apparent ability to afford the bribe.

However, these differing views to bribing and corrupt practices do not exist only across class divides. Residents themselves seemed to have contradictory views on corruption, accepting bribing as a routine, necessary matter-of-fact in some moments, and taking a moral stance against it in other instances.

Interpreting corruption

One afternoon, Malliga and I were walking through MGR Nagar to the ration shop, while she complained about her electricity connection. "My old electricity meter wasn't working well, so I had a new meter installed, but now my bills are very high..." Coincidentally, Shanmugam, the Junior Engineer of the TNEB, walked past us, as he was taking the bimonthly meter readings door-to-door.

Malliga: What is this, why are you are fleecing me for changing the meter?
Shanmugam (smiling): Did you install a new meter? I told you to wait for me to do it. Now you fight me?
Malliga (smiling, shaking her head): Yeah right. As if my bills are going to come down if you were to look at it...

Noticing their familiar banter, I asked Malliga if they were friends. *Friend dhan...* (pause) *panam edhirpaarkura friend.* He is a friend... just a friend who expects money. That he looked out for her interests was clear when we ran into him once more, at the TNEB office. He ruefully asked her again why she had installed a new meter for her house in haste,

because the new meter added arrear costs, and he could've done something about it. Malliga

told him to come check out her new meter anyway, and also requested him to draw a

temporary (unmetered, illegal) line from the local "EB box" for the childcare facility, until

we got our formal connection. He agreed readily. He also advised us to take the AE's phone

number and follow up about our application periodically, so it was processed quickly. This

is an illustration of the blurred lines between lower level bureaucrats and urban poor

residents, where a kind of friendship is possible, even created through a negotiation, within

the range of actions that is to be found within a local moral economy (Anjaria 2011) or

informal practices based on shared ties with bureaucrats (Benjamin 2004).

Bribing is a routine practice, used to keep livelihoods and services intact in MGR Nagar. It

was treated matter-of-factly sometimes, yet at other times, it was frowned upon. In the

beginning, MGR Nagar was a place where moonshine was brewed and sold. Over the last

two decades or so, marijuana is being sold. A few years ago, then- Joint Commissioner of

Police P. Sylendra Babu attempted to rid the area of the problem, by conducting door-to-

door raids, and regularly following up, also officially declaring the area a drug-free zone. He

had also helped rehabilitate the livelihoods of those who had depended on drug

procurement and sales. The settlement was indeed drug-free for about five years, until sales

resumed. Young men sauntering through MGR Nagar to score marijuana is a very common

sight. But despite repeated complaints from Malliga, Kamatchi, and other upstanding

members of the MGR Nagar community and the fact that MGR Nagar is located near highly

securitized areas, marijuana sales is thriving. Little packets sell like hot cakes out of a plastic

bag, as Rs. 50 (~$ 0.7) and Rs. 100 (~$ 1.4) are swiftly exchanged with these young men.

This is because, the community leaders emphasize, the marijuana dealers line the pockets of

the policemen, in return for allowing them to continue to ply their trade. For a few days at a

time, there would be quiet in the neighborhood, no young men to be seen inside MGR Nagar: this usually meant that there was a change of guard at the local police station. Anyone who looked like an outsider would be pulled up by the multiple patrolling policemen outside the settlement, even prevented from entering. But after a week or so, activity in the neighborhood would resume, like nothing had happened. Every once in a while, one would notice a police constable with his cap off, eyes peeled to the ground, slowly walking through the main street inside MGR Nagar in the afternoon sun to see someone. Corruption in the form of bribing the police and government officials can be thought of as keeping the wheels turning in MGR Nagar, a way of preserving parts of the local economy that lie outside the law (Anjaria 2011). Yet, the fact that the police are being corrupted by the police is a matter of great displeasure to many residents. "The police must do good for the people; how can they ruin our lives by taking bribes? There are so many young people here who have been influenced to take drugs, many who could be, with this thriving here," Dhanalakshmi ranted, shaking her head in disapproval. Malliga and Kamatchi have registered complaints with the police and submitted petitions to the Corporation and Social Welfare departments multiple times, but have failed in rooting out the problem. Of the many times we have discussed the issue, Malliga once said in anguish,

> I know the peddlers well, but that doesn't make what they do, right. This police station in this area is known as a "punishment posting[78]," but in reality, policemen make a lot of money after coming here. It's like a thief robbed a house, and then was invited to live safely in that very house.

Similarly, Malliga has mentioned multiple times that Kumar, the Public Distribution System official at the ration shop, pilfers kerosene that must rightly be distributed to the people. "How is it that kerosene ("kishnail") is never available, does it run out as soon as the shop is

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[78] Colloquial way of describing an undesirable location that policemen are sent to as a matter of punishment.

stocked? He (Kumar) is stealing from the shop, selling our supplies in the market. Don't trust him," she said. She was also considering complaining to the MLA for a while.

In these instances, residents seemed to be resentful of the corruption of police and government officials serving them. The fact that ganja was being sold was of immense moral concern, corrupt police officials enabling this to happen, was not acceptable. The fact that Kumar was taking what had to rightfully reach them, was also not[79]. Taking what Craig Jeffrey (2002) calls "moral political action" against corruption was necessary in these cases, whereas bribing officials in order to secure an electricity connection was a "practical political practice," necessary for securing basic services, life in the settlement[80]. These differing views towards corrupt practices reveals a disjuncture in perspective, one that is par for the course in terrains of negotiation marked by informality, precarity and moral claims. James C. Scott (1969, p. 323-324) uses the vocabulary of 'inducements' to speak of the ways in which corruption could be considered a transaction, in which there is an exchange of favors. Positive inducements could be material, in the form of bribes, or may simply involve bonds of friendship or kinship. The inducements that a government offers could be interpreted as 'welfare' and 'patronage' when they take the form of housing, pensions, even consumer goods, or as 'corruption' when they involve the distribution of *biryani*, beer, or cash for votes. What can be understood as "corruption" then, is part of a large repertoire of inducements, transactions, and negotiations that characterize political

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[79] Anand (2017, kindle location 3152) observes that corruption, of politicians and bureaucrats, is likely to be overlooked by the urban poor if there is an understanding that "ordinary people" are helped in the process. In this case, Kumar is seen to be "stealing" from what should be reaching the people. This perhaps explains the disdain for his pilfering.

[80] On the widely discussed corrupt practices of the high rungs of the DMK, Malliga does not have any comment. She dispassionately observed how everyone takes bribes (*kaasu vaangaraanga*).

life in Chennai, with its interpretation spanning and slipping between multiple registers.

Transactions with the bureaucracy

The process of accessing electricity in MGR Nagar seemed quite different compared to how the settlement has received, and continues to receive other services. I have already highlighted the central role played by political parties and key politicians in how the settlement received a public toilet complex, its own ration shop, even a government-run *anganwadi* over the past few decades. In the story of electricity though, the involvement of political actors is unclear. The TNEB as a whole seems to be malleable to political pressures, but this happens to be at the decisionmaking, upper levels of the bureaucracy which has been supplying subsidized power to particular constituencies. The TNEB, in its attempts to be a financially viable parastatal, has made reformative moves in the direction of alleviating subsidy burdens created by political pressures. Through the process of imposing tariffs on "hutment" dwellers, the TNEB has plebianized formal access to electricity. Electricity, which until that point, had been unevenly, unreliably available for free for the urban poor, could now be formally obtained. MGR Nagar did not have electricity at all — residents got by with petromax lanterns — until it was possible to get their own individual connections in the early 2000s. An essential urban service was accessed by the urban poor as a way to gain substantive citizenship (Anand 2017), when the TNEB leaned towards its corporate logics instead of offering it informally and or free. In a range of urban amenities that have been acquired incrementally, electricity is the only one that does not seem dependent on tenuous, informal arrangements with political actors; it seems to be outside the realm of political society. Formal electricity connections have given residents, the opportunity to

channel their "proper" consumer citizenship as eligibility for future propertied citizenship.

Political pressures seem to have been effective in keeping overall tariffs low and stable. However, it remains unclear as to whether "vote bank politics" and local political actors actually have any pull on whether a single individual like Malliga, or even a group of residents can get electricity. Malliga talked to the MLA's deputies once, but at no point in the process did we have any explicit support from them in getting the connection or having bribe amounts reduced or waived. The absence of elected representatives in the TNEB, especially at the lower level, is significant for this reason. It does not mean that if the MLA "did put in a word", it would not amount to some pressure on the bureaucrats, or that elected representatives did not work with the TNEB, in the provision of street lights, say. But because of the institutional guarantee provided to us for the service already, the role of local politics to get electricity has been made dispensable. There was no need for a "porous bureaucracy" (Benjamin 2004, Benjamin and Bhuvaneswari 2001) to emerge.

Across his various rich accounts of local democracy, Solomon Benjamin seems to identify two separate realms in which state-society porosity can be described. The first is one of "informality, bribes, and personal fiefdoms" (2004, p. 183), where lower-level bureaucrats sometimes face pressure from low level elected officials, local groups bribe to get things done or speed them up, and the shared social and cultural ties between low level bureaucrats and urban poor residents. On the other hand, is the second realm, what he theorizes as "porous bureaucracy", where all the above-listed characteristics of informality, bribes and personal ties may exist, but are witnessed in systemic organization that is built by local politics and economics around regulation of land (ibid., p. 184). These are local level administrative procedures that run parallel to higher level planning objectives, that when

coupled with "vote bank politics", become sophisticated strategies with well-established conventions over time. Low level bureaucrats may operate through loopholes in higher level planned activities, such as giving services to undeclared settlements. Our experience with electricity, getting a connection, having to pay bribes, and maintaining close relationships with bureaucrats for speeding up the process or getting small favors, seems to be in the realm of the first, especially given that there has been no need to go against higher level decisions made by the parastatal (which have in fact accorded formal access).

Dealing with bureaucrats to ensure a connection required a different set of calculations that were not political. Identifying the most malleable parts of the bureaucracy — the "good bureaucrat - bad bureaucrat" routine — was necessary to reduce the effort and perceived uncertainty in getting a connection. As demonstrated in our experience, had we made the right calculation and consistently, we may have saved money paid in bribes. However, the CI, at a lower level than the AE, was more consistently accessible to us and was our primary point of contact (although both of them are not very high in the overall bureaucratic hierarchy). Possibly aided by the vague terms of the indemnity bond issued to us, he finds himself in a part of the bureaucracy that is conducive for rent-seeking. (Benjamin and Bhuvaneswari (2001) would classify this as "petty bribing" to ensure services, and locate it in a different circuit of corruption, compared to the extensive kickbacks received by those at the highest, decisionmaking levels in urban renewal projects.) An openness to bribing to secure essential services seems to be necessary on the part of the resident, despite moral misgivings about bribing practices in other instances. Securing the service seems to occupy higher moral ground than the offer of bribes itself: Malliga and I both tried negotiating down the charges by centering the affective purposes of the connection, that it was for children, with funds being raised through donations. But ultimately, we ended up paying the

bribe. For Malliga, it was an instance of everyday corruption, if a little steep.

Her acceptance perhaps came from her understanding of urban life as inevitably transactional and negotiational. The terrains in which urban poor residents find themselves is uneven: they have to deploy deeply different strategies to access various parts of the state in order to secure their survival. With political actors, they find themselves exchanging their votes for various services. Bureaucrats in parastatals who are somewhat protected from political pressures at the lower level, have other expectations.

CONCLUSION

The set of practices observed and analyzed in this project unveils a fragmented state that urban poor residents relate to in multiple ways. Getting a degree of tenure security, at least initially, and basic services at the location of the squat requires active cultivation of political presence and legitimacy at the settlement. Accessing the welfare state involves having to develop a *metis* of capture, of land and documentary backing, so the bureaucracy can be navigated as a citizen of the liberal state who is eligible for certain welfare benefits. The governmentality categories they are identified by are used strategically by residents to ensure the social reproduction of the slum, possibly even to secure resettlement housing, if evictions are to occur. Active encroachment of slum space, not just in the form of individual shanties, but also through the construction of community infrastructure is part of this repertoire of practices; the infrastructure in channeled as a means to make moral claims on the land through commoning. MGR Nagar residents found themselves in a position of having to cede their commons and slum space. However, residents did not respond to this loss with outright resistance. Instead, they hoped that this surrender of spatial practices, would result in increased government presence and better services in the settlement. Finally, as a neoliberal subject, residents are able to avoid the arena of unstable political arrangements, and ensure reliable, formal electricity services as legitimate consumers of the TNEB. Based on the vastly different political and transactional spaces created by a fragmented state, residents deploy different sets of knowledge, tactics, and subjectivities on these uneven terrains.

Urban citizenship is thus dialectically determined by the state and its subjects, a "dual process of self-making and being-made" (Ong 1996, p. 738). In Chatterjee's conception of

political society, residents act as communities based on the governmentality categories that group them. However, here we see them as political clients created by traditional loyalty, kinship and affective ties, collective encroachers backed by a rights organization (whose collective encroachment is then upturned by further political entrenchment), and neoliberal consumers who seem to be navigating the parastatal bureaucracy individually. Citizenship across these terrains is also uneven, and at some moments appearing stronger, and in others, appearing weaker, always having to be managed and maintained.

A few common features can be identified: all these practices blur the lines between the legal and the illegal, formal and informal practices, in an effort to preserve life in and of the community, and serve as a way of claiming citizenship. This is particularly visible in the *metis* of capturing documentary legitimacy, which involves a set of learned, cunning practices that transform bureaucratic processes at the level of the local, rendering the bureaucratic state porous (Benjamin and Bhuvaneswari 2001).

The themes of visibility and invisibility also run through the project. Since the 1990s, there has been a consistent effort to invisibilize the poor in the public sphere; this is in order to tout the unqualified success of liberalization (Fernandes 2004), and continue the project of global city-making which doesn't envision a place for the urban poor. In the case of MGR Nagar, this is evident in the construction of the wall between the settlement and the road, a physical barrier that hides the settlement, and the anti-loitering pavement alongside. Other means include a consistent and deliberate 'unmapping' of the urban poor (Roy 2003) through the perpetuation of the informality of settlements. This helps the state avoid its obligations to provide services to informal settlements (Anand 2017) and reserve the

means to evict them to aid land accumulation when necessary. The TNSCB has not undertaken an official recognition of informal settlements in the city for 35 years precisely for these reasons, so evictions without due legal process can be enacted.

Urban residents have to make themselves selectively visible and invisible, as there are latent threats to survival in both. In the case of the wall, it is perhaps advantageous for the informal settlement to be hidden, so they can escape the sanitization of the central city that might displace them. (In the early days, residents also actively invisibilized themselves by regularly dismantling their shanties to avoid punitive action.) Slum enumerations are often undertaken surreptitiously, even under false pretensions. These are rightly recognized by residents as portending evictions, and actively resisted in many settlements across the city. Being off the books is advantageous in certain ways.

However, being invisible might hamper access to benefits that residents are entitled to as formal citizens. Being seen is necessary for accessing several benefits from the welfare state, and possibly even resettlement housing in the event of evictions. For this, residents need to be savvy at navigating a changing documentary landscape that now relies on advanced biometric technology to curb fraud and duplication. Accessing as much documentary legitimacy as possible may help secure urban land, and even demonstrate a capacity for future propertied citizenship, as in the case of electricity bills. The potential in these documents to claim propertied citizenship may not have fully crystallized yet, but residents collect and preserve them anyway, in "anticipation of contingencies" (Das 2012). Squatting itself is not a particularly inconspicuous activity or "quiet encroachment" (Bayat 2000): it entails erecting structures that, especially given how much in the thick of political

activity the settlement can be, cannot escape the eyes of powerful political actors on whom

the settlement depends for survival. Sometimes, one may go "too far", building settlement

territory autonomously in a way that threatens the standing of the powerful political actors

(as residents believe happened with the childcare center). This perceived threat is not

surprising: the construction of visible, material infrastructure is a domination strategy often

used by the state to demonstrate its efficiency and commitment to development, as in

evident in Modi's *Swacchh Bharat* initiative that builds toilets to eliminate open defecation

in the country (as observed by Mallawarchi 2019)[81]. Of course, there is a threat of

repressive action if the poor become too visible, and autonomously so; there are prices to

pay for visibility.

All practices examined here reveal the negotiable, transactional nature of urban life for the

informal settlement dweller. Votes are traded for patronage benefits and legitimacy, which

in turn consolidates loyalty and support for political parties and leaders. Spatial privileges

are sometimes ceded to powerful actors, in the hope that it delivers more security; overt

resistance is avoided in order to preserve the status quo of relationships and continued

occupancy of urban land. Residents willingly offer to be seen by the biopolitical state, in

exchange for being able to appropriate their visibility to strategic ends in the welfare state.

Where political transactions may be unnecessary because of their formal entitlement to an

urban amenity, residents often have to enter into monetary transactions with low level

bureaucrats to ensure that the service is indeed delivered. (However, one could also argue

that this is not a position that the informal poor alone are in: bribes are regularly paid by

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[81] Padmanabhan (2015) notes that the building of visible infrastructure such as toilets on a war footing has not been proportionately accompanied by the laying of more invisible infrastructure such as sewers and treatment plants, necessary for the sanitation network to function efficiently.

the middle class to smoothen out bureaucratic processes, even subvert them, especially in matters of land (Sivakumar 2018, Karthikeyan 2017, for instance). The political elite's rampant capture of kickbacks has already been outlined. Corruption is a feature of the state at all levels. In this case, residents perceive the need to pay bribes as an illegal occupant of public land, a subject position she finds herself often seen in, as evident in how *other* urban services, apart from electricity, are delivered.)

A larger perspective: the case of Tamil Nadu

In public discourse, and due to the political elite's involvement in some spectacular scams, Tamil Nadu holds a reputation of the third most corrupt states in the country (ibid., BusinessLine Bureau 2016). Investors are said to be repelled by the high levels of corruption in politics and bureaucracy to work through before investing in or opening operations within the state (India Today 2017), even causing a "downward slide" in the developmental index of the state (BusinessLine Bureau 2016).

However, contrary to popular discourse, Tamil Nadu is thriving economically, recording a growth rate of 8.09% in 2017-18, compared to the (original) national average of 6.7% (Ramakrishnan 2018). Harriss and Wyatt (2016) find that economic success has come not because of an imagined collusion between the political elite and business interests, but *because* politicians have focused on competitive patronage to "benignly" neglect business group interests, enabling the latter to operate with a degree of autonomy.

From a comparative study between three Indian states, Rina Agarwala (2013) concludes that Tamil Nadu's competitive patronage model offers the most conducive conditions for

informal workers to access the welfare state, even over erstwhile- Communist stronghold West Bengal. This is partly attributed to its history of progressive social movements and relatively "pro-poor" political parties attempting to work for the people, and partly to informal workers pursuing the struggle for citizenship and basic rights over the opposition of capital. Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen (2013) find that Tamil Nadu is among the top three states in the country in the Human Development Index, only behind Kerala and Himachal Pradesh, with among the highest per capita incomes, and lowest poverty rates in all Indian states, while being among the largest in population (72 million in 2011). They attribute this to a slew of reasons, including "bold social programs" like the Midday Meal Scheme and extensive social infrastructure such as schools, health centers, roads, public transport, water supply, vibrant democratic politics, and sustained social reform movements.

Indeed, the legacy of the Dravidian Movement has set Tamil Nadu apart from the rest of the country. The federal spirit of its secessionist roots has ensured the consolidation of the regional Dravidian parties as a bulwark against the right-wing, conservative Hindutva wave sweeping over other parts of the country. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, the BJP could not win a single seat, or even a significant number of votes in the state, with support going to the DMK-led coalition in all its constituencies. The Tamil electorate has been attuned to the anti-poor moves of the Modi regime, as witnessed in many of its economic strategies in the last few years, particularly demonetization and the levying of Goods and Services Tax (GST) Bill which have adversely affected informal workers and small business owners. Its insensitivity to the plight of the state's farmers, lack of respect for cultural and linguistic traditions such as *jallikattu*, and support for various socially and environmentally destructive projects like the Koodankulam nuclear plants, the hydrocarbon project in the Cauvery delta, and the Sterlite plant have sparked large scale mass movements in the state

(Sivapriyan 2019, Muralidharan 2019). It wouldn't be inaccurate to attribute this anti-

hegemonic spirit to the Dravidian Movement[82]. It is also notable that large-scale industrial

and economic projects are consistently challenged in the state.

This isn't to say that the poor are thriving in the state, or other hegemonies do not exist. To

return to the central problem of this research, hundreds and thousands of urban poor

families have been evicted due to developmental projects. Political protection for illegal

occupation of land is no longer guaranteed. Urban poor residents do not have the space to

participate in decisionmaking where larger logics of citymaking and "development" are

concerned. However, the power of the vote is strong: despite the populism, Chennai is not a

"dependent city, a city without citizens" (Castells 1983). The poor are able to channel the

power of the vote in terrains of negotiation created at the level of the local, through which

they are able to secure the means of survival and urban citizenship, while preparing for an

as-yet unclear future. The terrains are uneven and unstable, both within the settlement, and

across settlements in the city. Given the specificity of local conditions, there is no

predictable formula with which to say why some settlements have survived the urban

development juggernaut in the central city, and others haven't. The terrains, in my view,

present opportunities, and perhaps hope, especially when the aspirations of the poor, and

what they really want, are not either/or. Elsewhere, I highlight how informal modes of

claimsmaking do give the poor relatively favorable outcomes even in top-down urban

renewal projects (Narayan 2018). To acknowledge these tactics of the poor also as forms of

democratic participation, can enrich our understanding of actually-existing democracy in

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[82] Many of these occurred during 2016-2017 my year in the field, not to forget Jayalalithaa's death
and the consequent power struggles in the AIADMK. It was a very exciting year on the field that gave
me an opportunity to witness a political churning in the state that played out in the public sphere.

the contemporary Indian city.

Women, labor, and the Right to the City

Although this is a project that was always about women and entailed working closely with them, I did not always have the tools of feminist theory to understand what I observed in MGR Nagar. Chapter 3 benefitted greatly from the engagement and comments from my amazing feminist colleagues at the Institute for Research on Women seminar in 2018-19. If I were to start this research project again, I would attempt a feminist approach to examining terrains of negotiation.

To start with, feminist theory, specifically social reproduction theory, is concerned with survival as at once social, emotional, physical and material (Hopkins 2017, for instance). In the lives of the residents of MGR Nagar, their social relationships — the intimate connections with political parties and the *Iyakkam*, in addition, of course, to their sense of the collective in speaking of *namma ooru, namma makkal* — have enabled their very survival. The mutually beneficial relationship with political leaders ("vote bank politics", if you will) earlier helped protect their occupation of public land. Although they cannot predictably rely on that sort of protection anymore, given the demand on public land in a neoliberalizing urban, political relationships create a terrain on which continued negotiation is possible, sometimes through the ceding of spatial privileges and settlement territory. These relationships also provide other rewards — legitimacy, livelihoods, pride, respect, consumer goods and other material benefits.

The *Iyakkam* is a presence in the settlement that has endured over many decades, sustaining a continuing struggle to preserve control over the means of subsistence, the land, which in turn enables access to the benefits of the central city, including livelihoods, schools, hospitals, and other utilities. Through its allied labor unions, the movement advocates for more stable livelihood conditions as well. This is the space of 'non-corporate capital' as Chatterjee (2008) puts it, where livelihood needs are central, and prioritized over the logics of profit and further accumulation (as in corporate capital), or the "other economy" in Mies and Bennhold-Thomsen (2000, p. 5), where life and everything necessary for life is put at the center of economic and social activity. The *Iyakkam* enables this subsistence in multiple ways: through the creation of commons that provides a moral basis for claimsmaking, providing the women a larger city-wide community that rallies to demand tenure security, and supporting the squat and preservation of life within the city even in the event of evictions. The commons — be it the childcare center, or the informal settlement on urban land itself, more broadly — enable economic survival and social agency, particularly in the face of a dispossessing urban capitalism. The claim to land and urban space then, through social and political organization, is crucial for survival itself, and survival as not just physical preservation, but at once social, material and emotional survival (Federici 2019, kindle location 3849). These everyday ways of living keep "life going" (Mies and Bennhold Thomsen 1999, p.3). These social relationships also help claim a Lefebvrian right to the city, that emphasizes use value (city as oeuvre) over exchange value, the right to partake in the centrality of the urban in terms of networks of communication, information and exchange, the refusal to be removed from urban reality through a discriminatory organization, the right to social life and the symbolic function of space (Lefebvre 1996, p. 194-196).

Another ripe area for scholarly exploration is women in the political sphere. In a study of squatters in West Bengal, Ananya Roy (2004) observes that access to land depends on the negotiation of domestic life. Local politics, and the negotiation of *de jure* and *de facto* rights to the land is the realm of the (unemployed) man, while livelihoods are "feminized", with women also having to sustain the domestic sphere. In Roy's study, it is in the commute to work that women are able to challenge gender and class hierarchies; going to work becomes the political act. What we see in MGR Nagar is vastly different. Women are robust participants in the political in multiple ways: they are active in electoral party politics, often bearing official party posts (even if they might feel constrained in their prospects for upward mobility due the masculinist nature of party politics) (Carole Spary (2007, 2014) has undertaken studies on female leadership in electoral politics in India.) They are key local leaders who are key collaborators with which local residents make claims to essential government services. They are part of city-wide networks such as the *Iyakkam*, in which they participate in confrontational politics, strategizing in struggles against urban dispossession and partaking in an optimistic, radical view of the future where the urban poor belong in the central city.

The *Iyakkam*'s concerns with tenure security are deeply entwined with its interest in protecting labor and working conditions for the working class. The demand to remain in the central city is essentially connected to the right to work, and to access work easily. In order to do this easily, without precarity, land title and basic services, which secure the women's conditions of work both in the sphere of the public and the private, emerge as a central concern. In MGR Nagar, as I demonstrate in Chapter 3, the *balwadi* is the locus of many radical goals that were all concerned with both land and labor. It is at once (a) an essential service that cares for children so that women can go to work, an intervention into social

reproduction. (b) a source of livelihood for women in the settlement, who can visibilize labor they otherwise provide within the walls of their home, (c) a material artefact of the community through which moral claims can be made to be spared eviction, which in turn, would preserve the livelihoods of the working class residents.

For the *Iyakkam*, active squatting is the first step in urban citizenship, the basis with which claims, both legal and illegal / informal, can be made for urban citizenship. Residents in MGR Nagar have benefitted from this vision of the *Iyakkam*. Yet, on the other hand, the *Iyakkam* also facilitates a feminist politics of space in which the space sometimes needs to be unbuilt, surrendered, as a bargaining chip for better conditions of living. Allowing our *balwadi* to be demolished so a government facility can take its place, is a gamble to possibly secure drainage connections, better childcare, more legitimacy for the settlement, maybe government jobs for some of its women.

Connections are also made between labor and the urban itself. "The people who make the city through their labor, should be able to live in it" is the consistently-repeated motto of *Iyakkam* members. There is a lot to explore there.

Figure 23: Demonstration demanding land rights for the urban poor, organized by *Pennurimai*

Iyakkam, December 2012. Picture courtesy Transparent Chennai.

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