The Politics of Civil Society: Neighbourhood Associationism in Chennai

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Scholarly work portrays Residents Welfare Associations as constituting an exclusively middle class “civil society” in urban polities structured overwhelmingly by class. In this view, RWAs belong to a new politics representing an emerging partnership between civil society, the reforming state and private capital, aimed at reclaiming urban governance from the messy dealings of electoral democracy. The urban poor, meanwhile, are perceived as organised predominantly through the sphere of politics. This paper, using survey and ethnographic data on neighbourhood associations in Chennai, argues that these accounts are over-schematised. There are considerable overlaps between civil and political society: the urban poor increasingly resort to civil associational forms to claim urban citizenship, and middle class associations are more deeply engaged with the sphere of formal politics than their own or scholarly accounts convey.

This paper reports on a study of neighbourhood associations in Bangalore and Chennai, carried out from June 2006 to November 2007 by Madras Institute of Development Studies, assisted by CASUMM, Bangalore. The project was supported by the Development Research Centre on the Future State, based at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex.

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The emerging prominence of neighbourhood-based civic activism, notably in the form of Residents Welfare Associations (RWAs), across major Indian cities has provoked reflections over whether they constitute the new face of urban civil society in India, and if so, what the implications might be. The new visibility of RWAs since the 1980s is partly a concomitant of reforms in urban services. RWAs function as key players in new service relationships that are defined by public relations and consumer satisfaction initiatives in public bureaucracies. This raises the inevitable question: how do these new relations work for the urban poor who access services in modes variously characterised as collective, politically mediated, or extra-legal?

Urban society is increasingly understood as structured by class, as in Harriss’ succinct formulation: “civil society is the arena for middle class activism and assertion, while the poor engage in politics” (2005: 32). In this formulation, middle class associations maintain a distance from the sphere of local politics. Harriss (2007) and others locate these collective actors within the ambit of the “new politics”, an emerging project of partnership between the reforming state, private capital and sections of civil society, aimed at reclaiming urban governance from the messy and dirty dealings of electoral democracy.

These schema have some purchase on the shifting dynamics of urban public activism in India. Metropolitan transformations have provoked unprecedented mobilisations of the urban middle classes, generating new energy and activism around agendas of protecting public space and improving services. The “new politics”, as Harriss points out, breaks with the old politics in several ways – rooted in small-scale voluntary associations rather than in the infrastructure of parties and electoral democracy, located in residential and recreational domains rather than in workplaces, and, we add, employing “civilised” modes of engagement such as memos, media coverage and courts rather than mass campaigns, rallies, or demonstrations.

Closer study reveals, however, that these accounts are overschematised. Some recent studies of collective action in Chennai (Coelho 2005) and Bangalore (Kamath and Vijayabhaskar, this issue) suggest that RWAs constitute an increasingly mixed bag, with enormous variation in composition, concerns, modes of engagement, and political relations. The somewhat caricatured equation of RWAs with middle classes in the scholarly literature is partly because little detailed empirical material exists on them. Most efforts at mapping “civil society” in Bangalore and Chennai have focused on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and broader social networks and
This study aimed to unpack the arena of urban collective action through a combination of survey and ethnography on RWAs and other neighbourhood groups and their federations, both middle and lower class, in eight localities of Chennai – four in the core city and four in peri-urban towns within the larger metropolitan area. In seeking to systematically capture the character of neighbourhood-based collective action, we cast a wide net, including, as far as possible, the universe of neighbourhood-based membership associations working on civic issues within these areas, excepting service bodies or NGOs. A total of 197 associations were covered using a semi-structured survey instrument, followed by ethnographic case studies in four of the sampled neighbourhoods.

For purposes of analysis, the sample was divided primarily along the axes of class and type of association. Of the 197 associations, 94 (48%) were of low-income residents, 98 (50%) were middle income, and five were mixed. The sample organises these areas, excepting service bodies or NGOs. A total of 197 associations were covered using a semi-structured survey instrument, followed by ethnographic case studies in four of the sampled neighbourhoods.

For purposes of analysis, the sample was divided primarily along the axes of class and type of association. Of the 197 associations, 94 (48%) were of low-income residents, 98 (50%) were middle income, and five were mixed. The sample organises itself around two major types of associations: RWAs (97 in number, or 49%) and self-help groups or SHGs (70, or 36%). Along with their respective federations (six RWAs and four SHGs) these two types of associations account for over 90% of the sample. Middle class neighbourhoods accounted for 82% of RWAs, while SHGs were almost exclusively found in low-income neighbourhoods (98%). In addition, the sample included youth groups, dalit associations, traders’ associations, religious groups, and local units of unions or political parties. These, however, were not numerically significant at the neighbourhood level, and/or rarely constituted a prominent voice in demanding improved services.

In contrast to numerous studies that posit RWAs as exclusively middle class, our study found several bodies named and registered as RWAs in slums and low income neighbourhoods in the city and its peripheries. Springing up in neglected margins or underserved pockets, these RWAs arm themselves with the tools of civil society – registration, elections, and letterheads – to claim official attention, and are often more active than the middle-class associations that have received so much attention. These associations struggle over road conditions, drainage and water, but the pivot of their formation and ongoing existence is land. This core thematic is common to – although it rarely unites – middle/upper class RWAs and low class ones. Neoliberal transformations of urban space, primarily its pervasive commodification as property or real estate, have sharpened the class-polarised politics of collective action over the single issue of land. While low-income RWAs focus on issues of tenure-security, titles, allotments and land acquisitions, middle class RWAs are concerned with land use, zoning, regularisation and the protection of real estate value.

This arena of struggle frequently necessitates political mediation: thus both middle and low class RWAs tend to cultivate and maintain political ties in their own, distinctive styles. Our findings not only challenge the orthodoxy about RWAs being an associational form peculiar to the middle classes, but also complicate the portrayal of RWAs as part of a new politics which rejects mainstream party politics.

A critical insight of this study is that the RWA as an associational form has come to be more than an empirical category, it is increasingly a normative term, a label adopted as a form of “speech act” to assert a certain kind of status. The RWA emerged as a vehicle for aspirations of urban citizenship, a status linked to property, in particular to increasingly restrictive forms of title over property. It offered a means for low-income communities to demand or consolidate rights over urban property and demand the concomitant amenities – in other words to assert urban “class”.

Not only are civil associational forms like the RWA increasingly co-opted by the urban poor in attempts to claim urban citizenship, they are also promoted by the state as instruments of what Joshi and Moore (2004) call “institutionalised co-production” – in this case to maintain and manage facilities for the state. Efforts to turn slum resettlement projects into proto-middle class localities have often been designed around the establishment of RWAs in slum tenements. Confounded in these attempts by a political stranglehold on slum organising, the state-NGO partnership now rests its hopes for institutionalised co-production of governance on women’s SHGs. This paper traces the state’s attempts, since around the 1970s, to “civilise” the urban poor into stable associations based on residential proximity, whether RWA or SHG. This process, accompanied by a deployment of schemes such as entrepreneurship training and micro-credit initiatives, ran concomitantly with a growing intolerance of unauthorised slums in the city. Consequent to these pressures among others, autonomous collective action by the urban poor to resist evictions and demand housing rights declined since the late 1980s. It was replaced by forms of civic associationism that work through negotiations and political patronage, but are increasingly presented on authorised, legal (or at least paralegal) bases (such as slum board allotments) in contrast to claims made predominantly on political grounds.

This paper, then, highlights overlaps and convergences between Chatterjee’s (2004) contrasting categories of “political society” and “civil society”. The crux of that distinction rests on the former’s status as violators of law accommodated in the city on contingent political calculations, while the latter consists of legitimate associations that can “demand the attention of governmental authorities as a matter of right because they repre(sent) citizens who obser(ve) the law” (Chatterjee 2004: 137). In our study, political society displayed marked similarities to civil society, partly because it had adopted similar associational forms and modes of engagement with the state, but more importantly because its claims were framed less as political demands than as rights activated by authorised and documented allotments of urban “property”. Meanwhile middle class associations also were caught in the “field of continuous negotiation” that, in Chatterjee’s (2004) account, marks the relations of political society with the state.

The paper discusses, in the following section, the classic civil society of middle class RWAs, revealing it as on the whole an exclusionary force. The next section turns to a consideration of collective action in low-income neighbourhoods, discussing SHGs.
and RWAs in turn and the last section concludes by revisiting the discussion of civil and political society.

1 Exclusivities in Middle Class Civil Society

While the RWA emerged in our study as a complex associational form with multiplying profiles and potentials, our data also support the common contention that middle class RWAs, which are still the majority, are exclusive in their composition, character and vision of the city. As the paper by Kamath and Vijayabhaskar (this issue) argues, the category of “middle class” comprises a heterogeneous landscape of positions and interests. Yet, a curiously consistent, indeed a constitutive feature of middle class collective action was a strong complex of exclusiveness. This emerged not only in the caste and gender composition of the leadership of the 84 middle-class RWAs in our study, but also in their narrow and self-interested agendas concerning urban space and governance.

For one, the longevity of these associations appeared to depend almost entirely on the voluntaristic (often charismatic) engagement of one or two leaders. Rotating leadership, dispersed power structures, large cadres or broad-based involvement by members were conspicuously absent. Middle-class RWAs were led, with surprising uniformity, by small and stable coteries of older men. In our survey, 11 of the 97 RWAs had a majority of office bearers over 60 years of age, while the rest had leaders mostly between 40 and 60 years. Almost all reported difficulties in getting young people to participate, stand for office or undertake responsibilities for associational activities.

Middle class RWAs in Chennai were surprisingly male-dominated. This contrasts with Nair’s findings in Bangalore (2006), that women were prominent in RWAs as their activities were seen as extensions of women’s housekeeping roles. Our study found that, alongside a predominance of male members (glossed as “heads of households”), there was an almost complete absence of women in executive committees (ECs) or leadership positions. Forty of the 84 middle-class RWAs in our sample had no women at all in their ECs, and only one EC had more than 50% female members.

There was a striking predominance of retired government officials (usually of middle grades) in these committees. This left its mark on the association’s style of functioning – the principle modes of action consisted of petitions or memos, supplemented by the judiciously targeted telephone call or personal visit, and sometimes followed with writ petitions. Middle-class RWAs were notably uncomfortable with, or sceptical of, more direct forms of action such as protests and demonstrations.

Caste and Religion

Many RWAs defined their role as creating a sense of community in the neighbourhood, promoting social cohesion, peace, and security. This orientation further strengthened their exclusionary character for reasons outlined below. Middle-class RWAs, particularly in the southern wards and suburbs of our sample (Besantnagar/Shastrinagar, Alandur and Perungudi) were dominated by brahmins and upper castes. The exact magnitude of this was hard to gauge (only six RWAs admitted that their leaders were mostly brahmins) as the question about the caste of members or office bearers, no matter how carefully phrased, met with reactions ranging from a quick “mixed!” along with a vehement denial of any caste-related imbalance, to anger at the question itself. This insistence on the casteless and secular nature of the association parallels the peculiar ideological structure of Indian secularism in which the cultural practices associated with the dominant religion are taken as the common cultural foundations of the nation and community, with other communities simply incorporated into this ethos. The president of one RWA described how the association raised money from all its members to construct a Ganapathy temple in the common compound. At the opening ceremony, a Muslim resident was asked to lay the first adikal or foundation stone and a Christian presented the anguvasthrham or shawl to the Hindu idol. In his view, this epitomised the community cohesion that was fostered in his neighbourhood.

Many middle-class RWAs were anchored in a performance of community through religious observance, specifically Hindu. Religion was a pillar of RWA activity and identity, both in middle and low class localities. Many had constructed small temples with funds from members and/or donations. The events typically organised by RWAs were not rallies or public meetings, but pujas and religious celebrations, which were second in frequency only to nationalist commemorations such as Independence Day and Republic Day. The latter accounted for the single most significant category of events organised by RWAs in the preceding three years. While these celebrations serve to keep the association alive between campaigns and struggles, they also tend to portray RWAs as bastions of a specific type of cultural-nationalist formation of citizens.

The brahminical character of RWAs was discernible not only in their composition but also in their visions and agendas. Their activism was driven by a pursuit of cleanliness and a sense of order based on a functional segregation of spaces, separating commercial and unauthorised activities from residential precincts. RWAs largely comprised owners rather than tenants. Many were descendants of housing cooperative societies formed by government employees, predominantly brahmin, in the 1960s and 1970s. The societies were eventually replaced by RWAs, which took over from them the tasks of improving services through representations to government agencies. Many were very active in early phases, procuring water and sewage connections in bulk, arranging for electric transformers, garbage management, security, maintenance, and recreational facilities. Once the areas were transformed into well-served, high-value residential localities, the associations’ concerns moved to issues such as fencing and enforcement of zoning and land-use norms.

RWAs tend to function as enclaves within their larger neighbourhoods, despite the fact that two-thirds of our sample (64%) belonged to federations. The majority displayed a weak tendency of horizontal collaboration, beyond the occasional protest, joint grievance meetings with officials, or sports event. For the most part, RWA agendas seemed oriented towards defining the boundaries of their territories and promoting or defending their space.
and amenities against different forms of encroachment by the larger urban public. They were rarely in favour of sharing facilities with neighbours outside their boundaries. Thus inasmuch as RWA s constitute a form of urban civil society, they appeared to constitute a fragmenting, rather than cohesive force.

A ‘Small Government’

Not content to protect and defend their own property, numerous RWA s have successfully gained control over neighbourhood parks and playgrounds through maintenance agreements with the city corporation which owns them and has traditionally been responsible for their maintenance. The associations mobilise funds to equip the parks, beautify them, and install gate security; some even charge an entry fee.

Most RWA s in Chennai still look to the state for basic services. But there was also a discernible thread towards self-provisioning, particularly among RWA s in enclosed and relatively homogenous planned developments. These associations aspired to become as self-sufficient as possible in maintenance and repairs, acquiring capacity to handle lighting, drainage problems and supplementary water supply through borewells. One association president proudly proclaimed: “we can almost run a small government here!” They regarded this as a more convenient option than chasing down and pleading with officials. These experiments in self-provision are, arguably, an easy route into demands by civil society for privatisation of the state’s service-provision role.

The more active and sustained RWA campaigns in operation at the time of our study were focused on issues such as the removal of a large garbage dump (in Kodungaiyur, north Chennai), a crematorium and a fish market (in Besantnagar, south Chennai), from the vicinity of residential localities and the removal of commercial establishments encroaching on pavements or streets. It was in fact largely in the context of such campaigns that RWA s remained active. Most RWA s in our sample were apathetic or inactive or existed only in name. However, where campaigns such as the above were underway, associations displayed remarkable energy, tenacity, and resources. Their leaders had built up surprisingly thorough analyses of the problems, including histories, geographies, and technical notes, maintained elaborate files in bureaucratic style, and kept themselves informed and up to date. In these cases, a fervent spirit of activism, a “fight-to-the-last” resolve was evident among the elderly men despite their bureaucratic methods. Their most potent weapons were writ petitions, their hope in the courts. They were articulate, indefatigable, and not prepared to compromise.

Some of these campaigns created the rare occasions for collaboration across class: middle class RWA s in Kodungaiyur, for instance, invited slum associations of RR Nagar and Ezhilnagar to join their mass demonstrations opposing the garbage dump. However, in general there is a pronounced discomfort among middle class RWA members about including lower class groups of the neighbourhood, especially slum-dwellers, in their struggles, even where stakes are common. In the upscale suburb of Besantnagar, a cross-section of residents’ groups got together to oppose the corporation’s beach beautification plans on environmental and conservationist grounds. When it was proposed that they join forces with the fishing villages or the hawkers along the beach who were facing eviction from their homes or livelihood spaces to make way for these beautification plans, the RWA s were extremely wary. On the whole, relations among middle and lower class associations in a neighbourhood are at best weak. Campaigns of middle class RWA s to “clean up” their neighbourhoods are often targeted against poorer residents.

How new are RWA s as units of urban civil society? This study found that neither their appearance nor their proliferation is recent. More than half the RWA s in our sample were founded over 20 years ago and 10 had been in existence for over 40 years. While most had grown in size, corresponding to population growth in the neighbourhood, 19 had stayed the same size, and two had actually diminished. This is not a marginal trend: the study found that RWA s cannot take growth for granted, most have to struggle to retain membership and even to stay alive. In fact, the impression of this study was that, despite the hype created by their recent visibility, RWA s are not robust forms of social organisation – there is evidence that large numbers had declined or died over the years, diminished in size or in levels of activity, or existed only in name. There were also, reportedly, several “letterhead” associations in existence, in which individual leaders used the respectability of a registered association as a cover for property-related violations or irregularities.

Yet the RWA phenomenon, in other words their voice and visibility on the landscape of urban governance, is recent. This is largely an artefact of media coverage. Since the 1990s all newspapers devote space to city and neighbourhood issues and rely heavily on RWA representatives as local spokespersons. Neighbourhood newspapers which have proliferated since the 1990s also amplify their voices. RWA s themselves reported an increasing use of media to gain attention and obtain official response: while only 28% had used media in initial stages, 66% claimed to use them now.

Politics, New and Old, in Civil Society: Relations between RWA s and mainstream politics were found to be much more complex than is generally reported. The overwhelming representation of RWA s in scholarly writing as well as in their own discourse is that they stay away from the domain of politics. The ideology of “keeping politics out” operated strongly in their self-presentation as civil society. This often meant avoiding internal conflicts and competition in the association, essentially by pre-empting elections, as well as staying out of the ambit of formal politics. While most associations failed to hold regular elections simply because candidates for office were not readily forthcoming, elections were also often forestalled by internally negotiated settlements.

Lama-Rewal (2007) and Zerah (2007) have recently complicated the narrative of RWA s maintaining a distance from the “dirty river” of mainstream politics (cf Harriss 2005) by spotlighting different forms of political engagement by neighbourhood associations in Delhi and Mumbai – from supporting greater powers to local elected councils, voter registration and enrolment campaigns, to fielding candidates for local council elections. In Chennai, all these forms of political engagement were found among RWA s. Over 75% of associations in our sample had been
approached by political candidates for support during elections. Eight RWAs and one RWA federation admitted supporting political candidates. Of these, five supported independent candidates, and three supported mainstream party candidates. Some associations and one federation in the upper-income neighbourhood of Besantnagar fielded candidates (usually independents) for local elections. More commonly, associations engaged themselves in electoral activism: 34 RWAs and four of the six RWA federations reported activities such as obtaining voter IDs for members, verifying electoral rolls, and encouraging members to vote.

Dirty or not, state-level politics emerged as highly salient for the functioning of RWAs, and having a ruling party MLA from their constituency was always a highly prized and carefully cultivated asset. Political party membership was not nearly as common in middle class associations as it was in low-income RWAs; individuals also tended to keep their party affiliations under wraps in routine RWA dealings. On mundane matters, middle class RWAs were much more likely to approach administrative officials – municipal engineers or department heads – than elected officials. However, the more long-running and vigorous RWA campaigns, addressing issues of land use or property values (e.g., those opposing dump yards in the vicinity or demanding better connectivity through roads or bridges) almost always addressed themselves to politicians, drawing on all the political resources of members, especially contacts with MLAs and ministers. Part of the failure of the long-standing RWA campaign against the garbage dump in Kodungaiyur is attributable to undercover political affiliations of key RWA leaders, which divided the struggle front and diluted its demands by allowing deals to be cut with the ruling party. Overt relationships of key RWA members with politicians also had local repercussions, e.g., the long-time president of a federation was removed from office due to his closeness to an MLA.

Middle class RWAs appeared to explicitly enable the shift in the paradigm of state-society relations toward consumerisation of citizens. Many informants claimed that their relations with local officials had improved mainly because “we now know our rights as consumers”. RWAs frequently presented themselves as lubricants in this new state-consumer relationship, helping members to understand the problems and constraints of the departments, facilitating mutual understanding and smoothing the service interface. RWAs insistently positioned themselves as a constructive civil society vis-à-vis the state. Asked to characterise their relations with government agencies, over 70% used terms like cordial, friendly, partners or “consensus”. These terms, however, appear to be a normative gloss on their actual dealings with the police, and of extending friendly gestures (such as festival greetings and invitations to events) to them whenever possible. One RWA representative declared, “We have our friends in every department!”. Only 11 RWAs (12%) used terms like “unfriendly”, “adversarial” or “watchdog”. The culture of cooperation rather than of challenge or confrontation seemed clearly established as a norm among middle class RWAs.

We now turn to forms of neighbourhood-based collective action in slum and low-income neighbourhoods.

2. Civic Associationism among the Urban Poor

Mobilisation around services and amenities in urban poor communities is generally regarded as less systematic and organisationally anchored, more sporadic and direct action-oriented, than in middle class neighbourhoods (see for e.g. Harriss 2005; Arabindoo 2005; Narayanan 2005). However, this study found a wide range and diversity of associations that had adopted civil associational forms, such as youth groups, dalit associations and/or several RWAs in almost all slums or low income neighbourhoods. Many of these were at least two decades old. Along with SHGs and local party wings, these associations addressed problems of roads, electricity, water and drainage, but more commonly, issues of land and housing rights. Taken together, these associations offer a landscape of collective action sharing many features of the civil society usually associated with middle class activism, but differing in the major respect of being more overtly and closely tied in with the sphere of party politics.

From Collapse to Co-production: However, a brief historical review of collective action among the urban poor in Chennai indicates profound shifts in its character since what is widely regarded as its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, when the city witnessed intense struggles by the urban poor around the three axes of land rights, housing and basic amenities. The central strategy in these struggles was to resist evictions, demand pattas (legal titles) and retain hold of squatted land in the city. The struggles brought together a cross-section of groups who were active in slum-based mobilisation at the time, including autonomous movements of slum-dwellers such as Pennurimai Iyakkam and Madras Slum People’s Organisation, NGOs such as Centre for Development Madras (CEDMA) and Madras Christian Council for Social Services (MCCSS), and advocacy groups like Human Rights Foundation and the National Campaign for Housing Rights. Despite differences in approach and minor hostilities and turf wars, groups banded together at the points of struggle. Battles were waged both on the streets and in courtrooms: public interest litigation cases (PILs) were filed in the Supreme Court, and massive rallies and demonstrations held in the city.

A widespread and relatively stable local base was provided for these struggles through sangams or action committees established in each slum by NGOs or movements. Youth sangams associated with different political parties were sometimes incorporated into the struggle platforms.

The collapse – as many commentators describe it – of this genre of struggle was due to several factors, among them the slum-dwellers’ acceptance, for the first time, of the relocation option in 1980, in a landmark case in the Madras High Court. Consequently, the first slum relocation site was established in the south-western suburb of Velachery. The government’s success in establishing relocation of slum-dwellers as an acceptable option is partly ascribable to strenuous outreach and persuasion efforts by the trained social workers of the Community Development (CD) Wing of the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB).
The CD wing was charged with ensuring community participation in slum improvement schemes, and, in the case of resettlement, winning community compliance. One (retired) CD official recalls the preparations for relocating slum-dwellers from Sterling Road to Velachery:

We used to go and interact with the people, identify group leaders, tell them about the relocation plans, the purpose, the long-term benefits. They started getting convinced. They realised there was no other option. But at night these other people (from the anti-evictions campaigns) would come and tell them they should not move. …When we returned the next day, we would find the people saying we won’t go. We were slowly moulding them, bringing in the right mindset, but these people would change their minds at night (interview with retired CD official, 14 November 2007).

Eventually, however, the persuasive tactics of the state combined with political rifts in the communities weakened the cohesion needed to stand up to eviction drives. Organised and large-scale opposition to evictions is now rarely evidenced, and movements like Unorganised Workers’ Federation and Pennurimai Iyakkam, which continue to fight evictions, remain in the minority.

A second factor seen as responsible for the decline of collective action among the urban poor is the growth of the credit movement through SHGs. The SHG movement, vigorously promoted by the government and international donor agencies since the late 1980s, bracketed NGOs working with the urban poor into new relationships with state agencies, defined by negotiation and bargaining. Key activists in these organisations were caught up with the bookkeeping activities associated with SHG management. This is further discussed below.

A third factor accounting for the weakening of urban poor assertion is the changing realities of city governance and development, with a hardening stance taken by state agencies toward squatting in the inner city, as well as gradual changes in the occupancy of slums, including gentrification of TNSCB tenements.

With the fading away of agitational modes of collective action and the gathering predominance of social work-oriented approaches, slum clearance officials and NGOs entered into partnerships to facilitate processes of slum relocation and rehabilitation. This institutionalised a notion of collective action built on stable relationships of the urban poor which would take responsibility for maintenance and management in the new settlements, participate in welfare programmes and work constructively with government schemes.

A well-known and, for a period of time, successful model of this was the New Residents’ Welfare Trust (NRWT), started in 1971 as a collaborative effort of TNSCB, the MCCSSS and a citizens’ group called the “77 Society”. Its aim was to form tenants’ associations, women’s groups and youth groups in slum clearance tenements to undertake maintenance of the area and prevent the tenements from becoming “concrete slums”. The associations, facilitated by trained social workers, channelised various health, education and welfare programmes of the government to residents. The initiative was successful for some years, and established associations in numerous TNSCB tenements across the city before it folded in the mid-1970s. A similar effort was launched again in 1990, when a government order converting rental tenements into hire-purchase housing demanded that welfare associations be formed for their future maintenance. Around 50 such associations were formed in 1990-93.9 This initiative also failed, largely due to political control over slum leadership. Following this, most of the TNSCB tenements, according to CD officials, fell into disrepair due to a lack of organised initiative from residents after the agency pulled out its site offices. One official remarked,

In the middle class areas you have associations taking over management and maintenance, but in slums, everything has to be done by the government. The present MD favours handing over maintenance to SHGs and local associations. But this will take time, a lot of capacity-building inputs are needed (interview with senior CD official, 15 November 2007).

By the late 1990s, the CD wing had begun increasingly to turn to women’s NGOs to take on the roles that the failed welfare associations in slum settlements had been expected to fulfil. All slum improvement programmes, from health to solid waste management, are now channelled through NGOs, with attempts to federate them into Community Development Societies.

Yet, slum-based mobilisation continues to face intractable challenges for two major reasons: one, political party control in slums. Old thalaivars or hereditary leaders that carried over from village systems into slums with relatively homogeneous populations are increasingly replaced by younger leaders closely connected to political parties. These leaders represent themselves as “social workers” and embody a multiplicity of crucial roles – real estate brokers, patrons of temple festivals, protectors, police liaisons, and intermediaries in accessing pensions, compensations or other government benefits. In areas where they enjoy a hold, these individuals function as proxies for local collective action. Attempts to organise slum-dwellers outside the ambit of party politics have thus in recent years been largely unsuccessful. According to activists, local women leaders in slums, trained and supported over the years by social movements and NGOs, are increasingly lured away by political parties.

A second challenge is the pervasive monetisation of the urban poor. Money has increasingly become crucial to slum mobilisation – any attempt to bring people to meetings has to be accompanied with cash payments and a meal. This culture of buying participation is now common practice both among political parties and NGOs, through the SHG scheme.

The space left by the collapse of struggle-oriented collective action among the urban poor was filled over time by a range of collectivities of varying types. Two of the most common, SHGs and RWAs, which assumed forms closely modelled on those of civil society, are described below.

Self-help Groups: A Civil Society in the Making? SHGs, numerically the predominant type of membership-based neighbourhood association in slums and low-income areas, are in many ways a foil to middle class RWAs. Besides being relatively new (almost all in our sample were founded after 2000), they also differ radically from RWAs in the demographics of their membership and leadership. Against the upper caste male domination of RWAs, SHGs are, almost by definition, comprised of and
led by women. Twenty-three per cent of the SHGs in our sample had a leadership dominated by scheduled caste, backward class, most backward class, or fisher community people, the rest claimed to be mixed. SHG leaders are also relatively young: 13 of the 70 SHGs were led by women under 35 years, while the remaining had mixed-age office bearers and none over 60.

SHGs also had very different objectives from RWAs: the majority cited savings, loans, livelihood opportunities and entrepreneurship training as their primary motivations, and more general awareness and empowerment as the second. At the time of our study, most were still preoccupied with micro-credit and entrepreneurship activities. Nevertheless, many conceived of their role as working to solve local problems through organised means, and some had taken up issues of civic amenities with local officials and politicians. More importantly, SHGs, with their infrastructure of registration, bank account, executive officers, and regular minuted meetings, appear to constitute another emerging civil associational form, albeit initiated or brokered from above.

SHGs are among the most ubiquitous social phenomena of the last two decades in Tamil Nadu and Chennai. Since the beginning of the Mahalir Thittam (Women’s Scheme) in the late 1980s/early 1990s, they have multiplied in every low-income neighbourhood in the city, with sometimes up to 50 groups in a single slum. Terms like “capacity building”, “leadership training” and “awareness programmes”, which inevitably accompany any discussion of SHGs, symbolise efforts to represent (and/or transform) what began as a micro-credit idea, as (or into) a programme for women’s empowerment. The idea has caught the imagination of middle class actors in a big way: government departments, NGOs, even industrial corporations engaged in programmes to assist the urban poor increasingly structure their interventions around SHGs. Many NGOs have begun to focus a major part of their energies and staff resources toward initiating and supporting SHGs. Aasha Nivas, a Catholic social service agency in Chennai, has initiated 2,500 SHGs across the city since it adopted the programme 10 years ago. It receives targets from the Women’s Development Corporation (WDC) specifying 200-250 new SHGs to be formed annually.

While this proliferation of grass roots women’s associations suggests, on the surface, a scenario of vigorous collective action among the urban poor, SHGs are perceived by several critics as weakening or diluting the potential for assertion and mass mobilisation among the urban poor. For one, their stipulated small membership fragments and divides rather than unifies the poor. Under the Mahalir Thittam scheme, the maximum size of an SHG is 20 members from a single street or locality and the minimum is 12. The competitive scramble by agencies, from NGOs to political parties, to create and sponsor new SHGs, keeps their real size even lower. The SHGs in our sample had an average size of 12 or 13.

Second, the government-sponsored SHG scheme brings NGOs into close partnership with various government agencies. As some NGO workers reported, saturation of a neighbourhood with SHGs was a common problem, leading NGOs to depend on the WDC’s assistance to identify new (relatively unsaturated) areas. NGOs also receive from the WDC a grant of Rs 300 for each SHG initiated, and monitoring costs of Rs 30 per month per group. In addition, other government agencies such as the TNSCB channel trainings, stipends and other benefits to SHGs through NGOs. These schemes place NGOs in a clientelistic relation with state agencies, resulting in many opting to assist rather than resist the government’s efforts at slum eviction. Finally, the significant level of political patronage found among SHGs, especially at the level of their federations, subjects them to the same challenges as other slum-based associations.

Resident Welfare Associations in Low Income Neighbourhoods: Our study identified, aside from youth groups, dalit associations, and others, 13 associations in low income neighbourhoods that classified themselves as RWAs, many dating back to the late 1960s or 1970s. RWAs in low-income neighbourhoods are of two types. One comprises associations formed in connection with Slum Clearance Board (SCB) housing schemes, as indicated in their nomenclature, e.g., Thiruvalluvar Nagar Slum Clearance Board Residents Association. The second, found mostly in peri-urban areas such as Manali, are descendants or offshoots of traditional village panchayats.

Of the associations in the first category, some reflect in part the legacy of the state’s efforts to establish associations in SCB tenements, as described above. One extraordinarily successful instance is the Rani Anna Nagar Residents Welfare Association, formed in 1982 by allottees of TNSCB tenement housing in KK Nagar and active for over 25 years. The majority of residents are lower grade public sector employees, vendors, small traders or low end service sector workers, mostly belonging to the backward classes and scheduled castes. Office-bearers are almost all of the backward classes, and, like most of the members, belong to various political parties. However, the association remains politically neutral in order to maintain the unity of the colony. Remarkably, women were active in the association, although they were not represented in the EC. The association’s efforts to improve basic amenities in the tenements were largely successful, particularly in regard to water – the colony rarely faces water shortages, and is among the few low-income neighbourhoods in Chennai where water distribution is not in the hands of local political bosses, but rotates among all the families in the association. For a TNSCB tenement colony, the complex is unusually clean and free of encroachments.

In contrast to the tenement-based associations, other low-income RWAs formed in connection with SCB schemes were more spontaneous creatures of local circumstances. For instance, several RWAs function in the network of narrow, crowded streets in the slum settlements of Ezhilnagar, MGR Nagar and Chandrasekharnagar in Tondiarpet, north Chennai, where the TNSCB in the early 1990s allotted house sites to thousands of families that had been squatting for decades on the area’s vast open lands. The associations or sangams were established by local units of traditional village panchayats.
established through representations to local officials and politicians. More recently, the sangams involve themselves in channelling local welfare schemes, managing the distribution of flood relief by the municipality, holding medical or eye camps, and assisting in marriages and funerals.

However, their main efforts centre on issues of land and property rights. Many had waged struggles to reclaim lands originally allotted for public toilets, crèches or schools but subsequently sold in underhand deals. According to association leaders, the major ongoing raison d’être of the associations was to obtain pattas for all members. One leader claimed that the associations would no longer need to exist after that:

Earlier we were all uneducated and there was so much rowdyism, so we needed sangams. Now we have educated people. Once we get pattas, people will pay taxes and will be too busy for associational activities.

Most leaders of these associations are members of one of the dominant political parties of the state, the AIADMK or the DMK, as their visiting cards proudly proclaim. Individual sangam leaders sometimes campaigned for their parties in city or state elections, and some claimed that parties strongly influenced sangam elections. Yet all respondents insisted that the associations were “politically neutral”, and that office-bearers all worked together. Relations with the local councillor depended on the political equation between him and association leaders.

The second type of low-income RWAs, found predominantly in the suburban municipality of Manali, had its roots in the centuries-old ooru panchayats or local councils that covered a hamlet or part of a village, such as the sc colony. These panchayats began to reconstitute themselves as modern legal entities since about the 1960s, largely in response to large-scale development projects involving heavy industrialisation, land acquisition and threats to local livelihoods. Two major imperatives propelled the panchayats’ makeover as RWAs. One was the need for a legal form that could represent the village in court, and two, the need for an institutional form that had legitimacy with the state, local companies and residents themselves, the latter in response to demands for democratisation of traditional panchayat structures. The institutional form of the RWA offered an expanded leadership structure by mandating three office-bearers and a five-member executive committee. Vestiges of the panchayat structure, however, remained in the new executive committees, whose members were selected from the five lineage strands, called thallakattu, which comprised all families in the village.

The central issue driving the Manali sangams remains land. For many, their origins lay in early assertions of collective claims on land. The Thiruthillaipura village was formed by agricultural workers, manual labourers and petty traders settling on the lands of a local zamindar and on poromboke (government/common) land. In the 1960s, it constituted a Grama Munnetra Sangam (Village Advancement Association) to acquire land titles and improve living conditions. The Manali Village Service Association had its origins in a football club established in 1943. After independence, it took up the demand for abolition of zamindari, laying claim to the zamindar’s lands and distributing them among its members, all of whom belonged to the sc.

More recently, the sangams struggle against land acquisitions by major industries which began in the late 1980s. In addition, they fight pollution and flooding, both also ascribed to the industrial development in the area. Their modes of action include court cases, demonstrations, and representations to a range of official bodies. Struggles over land rights and industrial pollution have brought substantial collaboration between and among local consumer groups, trader associations, sangams, and political parties.

Like slum-based RWAs in the city, most members of these sangams belonged to dominant political parties, yet all the associations insisted they were politically neutral. There was a clear difference between the putative apolitical character of middle class RWAs and the political neutrality of lower class RWAs. The latter referred more to an accommodation of multiple party affiliations rather than a distance from party politics. In Ezhilnagar, candidates for RWA office posts ran as a team, with a mixed representation of parties. A careful balance was necessarily maintained between the strong political affiliations of individual office-holders and the association’s normative as well as pragmatic stand of political “neutrality”.

There were some marked similarities among middle and lower class RWAs. Both were largely male bastions. Another point of commonality was their religious moorings, more marked among lower class RWAs. The sangams’ activities centred on the temple, and their single major event was the annual kovil thiruvizha or temple festival, which functioned as a ritual for legitimating its authority as well as a platform for mobilising people. Substantial funds contributed by residents, local politicians, traders, and in Manali even companies, were spent on temple reconstruction and improvement. Some sangams in Tondiarpet demanded a cut from every land transaction in their territory.

Low income RWAs, like their middle class counterparts, claimed to maintain cordial relations with local state officials, although their relations with “the government” as a broader entity – the acquirer of land, the payer of compensation, the planner of one-sided development – was largely defined by conflict. While sangams made efforts to befriend each changing face of the local state, the implacability of the larger state stayed constant. A sangam president declared,

The collectors are often transferred and we have to go each time with garlands and gifts to meet them and place requests. At least 20 collectors have changed in the past 15 years but the official attitude has not changed.

The tactics of slum-based sangams have shifted markedly over the years, according to their own accounts. Most had abandoned agitational modes of demand-making in favour of persuasion and negotiation. Tenement-based associations claimed that street demonstrations had, in earlier times, brought ministers to their doorstep. Similarly, many of the Manali sangams, influenced by union strategies, had once resorted largely to street demonstrations to address their issues. However, with increasing recognition of their associational status from service providers as well as companies, they believed that these methods were no longer necessary. Almost all had come
to the conclusion that confrontational strategies rarely brought results, and that negotiations were the best way to get their demands met.

3 Polis Unbounded: Para-Legal and Proto-Civil
This study laid out the different dimensions of exclusiveness in Rwas – both upper/middle and lower class – arising from their gender composition, their predication on property-holding in some form, their caste and other elite leanings in the case of middle class Rwas and their localised and self-serving visions of urban space. Struggles for democratisation and broader representation in Rwas were rare, with the leadership of middle class Rwas tending toward calcification and that of lower class Rwas defined by links to political parties.

It is worth briefly commenting here on how state agencies perceive neighbourhood associations. This study found that the growing scholarly emphasis on Rwas as new voices in urban governance overestimates their significance, at least for Chennai. Chennai has had no major state-promoted schemes, like Delhi’s Bhagidari and Mumbai’s Area Local Management, which invite middle class associations to partner with the state in urban governance, apart from some minor initiatives in traffic or garbage management. There was also a pronounced ambivalence discernible among state officials, both administrative and political, toward Rwas of both classes. Higher officials tend to view Rwas as elite groups driven by a limited and exclusive vision, hardly viable partners in addressing the complex issues of urban development, even at the neighbourhood level. Junior officials at local corporation offices seemed to take a dubious view of Rwas in low-income areas, seeing them as vehicles for furthering individual agendas or under the strong influence of parties. From the official perspective, then, Rwas did not figure prominently as representatives of the public at large, although they sometimes served as convenient shortcuts in processes of mandatory public consultation.

Chatterjee’s (2004) schematic categories of civil and political society, however, admirably capture the terms through which the associations we studied framed their own positions as collective actors and as citizens. The re-emergence of an activist middle class into the urban public sphere has occurred through its narrative of constituting a civil, public-spirited collective voice, “clean” of electoral politics. Poorer residents, similarly, finding that agitational strategies have lost their traction in the emerging climate of metropolitan development, increasingly present themselves through legal-institutional forms in which the political colours are neutralised. This study, however, shows how these accounts of civil legality and non-partisanship often mask the complex and messy terrains in which both poor and middle class associations have to struggle. They serve more as self-representations through which associations frame their positions vis-à-vis the reforming state than as accurate depictions.

More crucially, these categories problematise the question of legality as the grounds for claim-making. Chatterjee’s (2004)
distinction between civil and political society is premised fundamentally on the difference in legal status between the two domains. However, when it comes to land and property in Indian cities, simple assumptions about legality in property-holding are often problematic. Surprisingly large proportions of "propriety" classes in Chennai, especially those in peripheral municipalities, hold titles that can best be described as para-legal. Legal status is also often a dynamic attribute. Processes of "rationalisation", which take different forms, constitute an important mode of de facto urban planning – or non-planning – wherein unapproved constructions receive post facto approval on payment of fees (for propriety classes), or squatted land gets allotted, with varying forms of paperwork, to the squatters. Rights for regularisation of illegalities by middle and upper classes in Indian cities have been post facto approval on payment of fees (for propriety classes), or squatted land gets allotted, with varying forms of paperwork, to the squatters. Rights for regularisation of illegalities by middle and upper classes in Indian cities have been demonstrated greater in volume and value than all the encroachments of the urban poor.

Even legally held property is rendered tenuous by the state's increasing use of its powers of eminent domain to acquire land for "development". Thus, just as the associational forms of the urban poor.

NOTES
1 Earlier work by the first author suggests that re-
2 We define collective action here as involving mass-based or membership-based mobilisations, thus excluding NGOs which typically represent a corporate rather than a collective structure: con-
3 Within the city, the areas sampled roughly corre-
4 The relatively small proportion of lower class RWAs in our sample merits some explanation. First, it partly reflects the reality that in poor neighbourhoods, RWAs represent only one among various types of collectivities, whereas in middle class neighbourhods they form the single most common associational form. Second, our ethnographic work in and around the surveyed locali-
5 This appears to be a peculiarity of our sample: at least some of the sampled localities had large fed-
6 The phenomenon reported here differs slightly from that discussed by Arabindoo (2005) which
7 I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of R Geetha, Ossei Fernandes, C J Paul and Shannu-
8 The TNSCB's CD Wing is an offshoot of the CD Unit established in 1978 in the Madras Metropoli-
10 The Mahalir Thittam is a partnership between the Women's Development Corporation of the Tamil Nadu Government and NGOs. See K Kalpana (2008) for an account of the controversies over its inception date, as both the major political parties – AIADMK and DMK – claimed credit for its launch during their regimes.

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