

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## The urban poor and everyday states in an Indian metropolis

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## Abstract

This article examines an incident of fire in a squatter settlement in Delhi to understand the interaction between the urban poor and the state. Following the incident, the Delhi government undertook different welfare measures for the affected residents. These included immediate relief in the form of temporary tents for the families, a proposal to build proper houses for them, and compensation checks as direct monetary support. The empirical materials presented in this article show how state interventions tend to suffer from deficiencies of knowledge, trust, and bureaucratic effectiveness. Thus, they do not commensurate with the apparent intentions behind them. Each of these welfare measures engendered an entanglement of the urban poor in the state that affects their relationship to the law, urban space, the local economy, and bureaucratic structures. Analyzing the unfolding of the everyday state on the ground, I suggest that a squatter settlement's dynamic and entangled relationships with the state make it a unique site for analysis of the state from an urban perspective. Critical interpretations of their interactions and the discourses they engender are key ethnographic resources for understanding the dynamics of inequality in contemporary cities.

## KEYWORDS

caste, India, informality, squatter settlement, state, welfare

## INTRODUCTION

It was 2AM on a winter's night when a massive fire broke out in Sunder Camp, a squatter settlement in Delhi. The residents were fast asleep in their *jhuggis* (shanties) when the commotion and cries overtook the whole settlement. Some of them woke up confused, unsure if it was a dream or reality. The narrow lanes and by-lanes were swarming with people trying to flee the settlement. While escaping, they were also alerting the others who were still asleep, shouting, "Fire! Fire!"

"I got scared and I just ran out. I kept worrying if my daughter and my granddaughter were able to escape," Shiv Eshwar would note in his retelling of the night. His daughter's family lived in a different lane. "I was relieved to finally sight them near the drain where people ran and gathered. Only then could I start thinking about how the fire was ravaging our settlement," he said, narrating the tragic sequence

of his fears. Sunder Camp had nearly a thousand *jhuggis*. The fire destroyed a quarter of them before it could be brought under control. Luckily, people would note with great relief, there was no loss of human life ("*jaan ka nuksaan nahi hua*").

Shiv Eshwar is a proud resident of Sunder Camp. He is originally from the state of Bihar and belongs to a Dalit community ("untouchables"). Marginalized social groups have looked towards the city as a place to reimagine and realize their material and symbolic aspirations. Shiv Eshwar's decision to migrate to Delhi was shaped by his search for a livelihood as much as by an honest desire for a dignified life. The fire shook these aspirations and reduced his pride, his house, and his belongings to ash ("*sab kuch mitti ho gaya*").

In the days following the fire, Sunder Camp became a site of intense activity. Several actors visited the settlement to provide relief and support, including officials from the Delhi government, police officers, political party workers and local leaders, journalists, local

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charitable-foundation members, residents of adjoining gated communities, among others. The community members, though acknowledging these forms of support, were aware of the inadequacies and the limited durations of these interventions.

The Delhi government, however, attained renewed importance for them. "It's all in the hands of the government," some said; or, "let us see what the government would do for us." The government (*sarkar*) became the main actor with whom the residents started fresh relations of claim-making and welfare.

The government responded swiftly to provide immediate relief. It was winter, and the fire created a massive rooflessness crisis in the settlement. To mitigate the crisis, the government decided to set up temporary tents to shelter the affected families. On a service road just outside the settlement, a line of white tents contrasted with the black and gray remnants of burnt down jhuggis (see Figure 1). The tents were good quality and indicated substantial expenditure of resources.

Contrary to the expectations of the government, the affected residents did not move into these tents. The tents remained vacant, and this welfare measure "went to waste." The vacant tent is an important urban artifact, useful for reflecting on how the state's welfare measures engender complex interactions with the modes of inhabiting the city's margins. The ethnographic task is to identify, document, and interpret these interactions for theorizing

contemporary cities. My aim in this article is to conduct an anthropology of the resonance and dissonance in the actual unfolding of welfare interventions in the city and to demonstrate how such work might offer an analytical advantage over the apparent coherence of City Master Plans.

The importance of an ethnography of concrete welfare interventions is to understand them both as expressions of entangled relationships between the state and the poor as well as their everyday remaking in cities. Das and Poole (2004) have offered directions for conducting such critical analysis. In theorizing the state and its margins, they offer two analytical suggestions. The first suggestion is to rethink the margins not as bounded or discrete entities, but as exceptions produced in the everyday functioning of the state. An analysis of a devolved configuration of power would thus show how the frontiers between the legal, illegal, and extralegal produce exceptions that limit the rights of the people. Secondly, the analysis would include a focus on the people's encounter with the state through documents that produce inclusions and exclusions, and how they entail ideas of identities. I use and extend these insights to analyze a squatter settlement as a dynamic urban margin produced through multiple and simultaneous relationships with the state. I examine residents' negotiation of the illegalities of dwelling and livelihoods as well as their experiences of documents and bureaucratic recognition.



**FIGURE 1** Government tents for the affected residents after the fire in the jhuggi settlement, Delhi, India 2019. Credit: The author.

To study the state in the city is to examine the intricacies of the modes through which it becomes accessible. Anand's (2017) ethnography of access to water in Mumbai shows how "leaks" in water systems and authority are imperative for water to become truly a public service. It is such leaks in state rationalities and formal planning that make urban services accessible to many, enabling them to sustain a dwelling in the city. Studying unlicensed hawkers in Mumbai, Anjaria (2016) shows how the state views them as more or less illegal and how the spectrum of illegality engenders the possibility of negotiating relationships to sustain a urban livelihood. In the case of Sunder Camp, I examine the question of access through an intertwined nature of dwelling and livelihood insecurities of the residents. A careful account of life at the margins reveals how people use and combine formal-informal, legal-illegal, regular-irregular modalities of politics and access to the state to sustain an urban belonging (Chatterjee, 2004; Heller & Evans, 2011). Their structural location requires emergent flexibilities in their interaction with the state. An engagement with the specificities of the urban poor's material and symbolic struggles (Bourdieu, 1991) shows if, when, and what modes of access to the state are activated and what kinds of political knowledge and labor they entail.

The squatter settlement has a discursive importance for conceptualizing the state. Scholars have highlighted the need for understanding the state both as a formal system and as ideas and imaginations (Fuller & Bénéï, 2001; Hansen & Stepputat, 2001). In developing a reconceptualization of the state, Sharma and Gupta (2006) critique the theorization that posits states as pre-constituted coherent institutions. They suggest that an anthropological approach would examine the states as "culturally embedded and discursively constructed ensembles" (27). Gupta (2012) foregrounds how the discourses of corruption are central for understanding how the state is imagined by the people. A focus on corruption is important; however, there are other imaginations of the state that take prominence based on the nature of margins' struggles. Everyday life in a squatter settlement produces diverse imaginations of the state. I examine how the interaction of the poor and the state engenders narratives where intelligence, trust, and the functional capacity of the state emerge as prominent discursive objects.

The interaction of Sunder Camp residents with the Delhi government after the fire incident offers a rich analytical opportunity to understand the constructions of the state in cities. In this article, I show how welfare interactions of the poor with the state index their structural and emergent relationships. These relationships include the urban poor's claims to space in the city amidst strict land regulations, their relationship to state spatial rationalities, their relationship to the urban informal economy, and their relationships through bureaucratic documents. In the ethnography that follows, I show how these different relationships are entangled and how their confluence make the squatter settlement a key vantage point for understanding state from the perspective of the urban margins.

In this article, I argue that a squatter settlement's dynamic and entangled relationships with the state make it a unique site to understand the state from an urban perspective. It is a site occupied by the

socio-economically marginalized groups whose very marginality is reproduced in and through the law, the state rationalization in cities, and bureaucracy. The urban poor are not passive. They engender critical discourses on the state, making it a pivotal site for their symbolic struggles in the city.

To develop this argument, I focus on three ethnographic cases of entanglements that emerged inductively from the three welfare measures by the Delhi government. I analyze the cases in three sections. In the first section, I return to analyze the tents as an immediate relief measure. I discuss how the statist knowledge becomes dissonant with the actual life of the urban poor, resulting in vacant tents. It shows the urban poor's spatial struggles in managing their nested insecurities. The tents thus engender discourses that construct the state as unintelligent. In the second section, I analyze the relation of trust between the residents and the state. I discuss a proposed welfare measure in which the Delhi government offered to rebuild the houses lost in the fire. I explain community members' outright rejection of this seemingly helpful proposal and how it renders the state as untrustworthy. This case highlights how well-intended state interventions can threaten livelihoods in the local informal economy. In the third section, I examine the actual monetary support that the residents finally received from the Delhi government in the form of compensation checks. Analyzing the prolonged delays caused by errors in recipients' names in the checks, I show how efforts towards bureaucratic efficiency become dissonant with the struggles of life in a squatter settlement. The prolonged delay leads to discourses that construct the state as erroneous. This case shows how bureaucratic encounters and entanglement in documents reproduce urban marginality through the act of welfare itself. Ethnographic engagement with these three cases reveals how the everyday struggles of the urban poor render the state's interventions as unintelligent, untrustworthy, and incompetent. Careful interpretations of these constructions are important to understand the relational reproduction of urban marginality. Before developing culturally embedded interpretations in these cases, I start with a short socio-cultural and historical account of Sunder Camp in the next section.

## SUNDER CAMP: A SQUATTER SETTLEMENT

Studying the complexities of socio-spatial inequality in Indian cities has been the core objective of my postdoctoral research. Delhi is my primary research site for this project. Delhi is made up of different types of planned and "unplanned" neighborhoods, and the majority of the city's population lives in the latter type (Sheikh & Banda, 2015). My fieldwork in the city has focused on documenting everyday life in squatter settlements, unauthorized colonies, and squatter resettlement colonies. I conducted field research between 2017 and 2019. There are more than 675 squatter settlements in Delhi. Sunder Camp is one of my primary field sites.<sup>1</sup> My key interlocutors include community members, elected settlement heads, local leaders, political party officials, local state officials, and gated community residents, among others. Most of my interactions

occurred inside the settlement at my interlocutors' homes, shops, temples, doctor's clinic, street corners, and other emergent spots in the daily life of the settlement.

Delhi is my home city, where I grew up with experiences rooted in both the unplanned and planned parts and processes in the city. I am a native Hindustani and Rajasthani speaker. My linguistic and cultural competencies helped me develop strong trusting relationships with key community members. My engagement with the fire incident and my focus on Sunder Camp as a main settlement for my postdoctoral project emerged inductively. I was familiar with Sunder Camp's location in the city, but the fire incident was the catalyst for my developing relationships with the residents. Listening to their experiences and oral history accounts, I decided to conduct a detailed study of the settlement following the fire incident. For the purpose of this paper, I present my material through the accounts and stories of two interlocutors, Irfan and Shiv Eshwar. Irfan is a local community leader and a very knowledgeable person in settlement history, sociality, and politics. My queries to other community members were often redirected to Irfan, "You should ask Irfan about this, he would give you the complete answer." My relationship with Shiv Eshwar developed through listening to his personal struggles of claiming state compensation after he lost his home to the fire. I listened to his stories multiple times as they developed over a period of a year. I met Irfan and Shiv Eshwar for the first time during the fire incident. In addition, since then, they have been a continuous source of knowledge and news about the neighborhood, the city, and the state.

The cause of the fire in Sunder Camp remained unclear. Some residents speculated short-circuiting to be the cause, while others suggested that it might have resulted from an unattended bonfire. However, some residents strongly dismissed these reasons and emphasized that such fires are rarely accidental. A social activist familiar with similar instances of fires in the city suggested that these events can be related to interest in the land of jhuggi settlements in the city.

Tenancy insecurity indeed emerged as a core issue in the oral history accounts of Sunder Camp. The residents do not possess formal land titles, and the settlement's land officially belongs to the Delhi Development Authority (DDA).<sup>2</sup> The settlement's beginnings date back to the mid-1980s when a few jhuggis were built through modes of quiet and tolerated encroachment (Bayat, 2015; Rao, 2013). The early residents included migrants from Rajasthan and Haryana. In the mid-1990s, Sunder Camp saw a large increase in jhuggis, primarily belonging to migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh. The next expansion of Sunder Camp occurred with the arrival of migrants from Bihar. There are also a few households where the residents have migrated from Jharkhand and West Bengal. The number of jhuggis now stands at around 1000. The residents of Sunder Camp belong predominantly to marginalized caste groups, with the majority being Dalits. There are also about a dozen Muslim families in the settlement.

Sunder Camp leaders maintain strategic relationships with political party leaders to ensure practical land occupancy as well as support for basic services and informal livelihoods. The residents

emphasize that they used to be strong supporters of the Congress Party. In the early 2010s, the DDA conducted an "encroachment removal" demolition of the settlement. The political loyalties changed after the demolition. The jhuggi residents petitioned the Delhi High Court against their eviction from the land; the case is still ongoing. The residents' original reliance upon political leaders to counter land insecurities shifted towards reliance upon the case in the High Court.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Sunder Camp residents were able to rebuild their jhuggis after the demolition, the spectacular legal stigmatization that demolitions produce forms a key aspect of their urban experience. The urban development process in Delhi shows how the land of jhuggi settlements is entangled in world-class city making (Baviskar, 2003) and how eviction (Bhan, 2016) is an important mode of unjust urban development. The production of settlements and people as "illegal" is key in this regard (Datta, 2016). Refracted through these experiences and suspecting arson as a possible mode of evicting them, the cause of the fire itself became a discursive site for the residents to critique their perpetual legal vulnerability.

The cultural construction of Sunder Camp is important for understanding localized occupying practices. Spread over an area of around five acres, the settlement is bounded by the large open Najafgarh drain on its south side. On the east and north sides, it is bounded by a cremation site and the lane leading to it. In addition, on its west side, it has a subdrain that empties into the Najafgarh drain. The subdrain was open earlier but it was covered later, also leading to the construction of a service road. To regulate the visibility of Sunder Camp to the outside public, a six feet boundary wall was also raised on its west side. Thus, the settlement occupies an interstitial space enclosed within the Najafgarh drain, a smaller city drain, and a cremation site. The symbolism of death, cremation, drains, sanitation, and dirt render the space a site of physical and ritual pollution. The residents emphasize the importance of the stigmatizing nature of the drain and cremation site for creating an occupying possibility for them.<sup>4</sup>

The expansion of the settlement is related to informal plastic-recycling work in the city. Recovering recyclable materials from the city's solid waste was a key livelihood for the starting period of Sunder Camp. With the increase in solid waste generation in the city, the number of migrant laborers engaged in such recycling work increased over the years. Sunder Camp expanded along the bigger drain to accommodate the migrant workers' jhuggis and to create additional waste-sorting spaces. Recovering valuables from the city's solid waste is a stigmatized work associated with marginalized caste groups. The stigmatized nature of the waste work thus becomes interwoven with the stigmatized geography of the space. Sunder Camp becomes a squatter settlement through the intricate intertwining of material and symbolic dimensions of the drain, the cremation site, and the solid waste in the city.

The fire incident led to an intensification of the symbolic processes that shape Sunder Camp's legal and cultural stigmatizations. The residents of Sunder Camp resist these processes through different means and with different efficacies. The jhuggi residents



foreground their labor in the functioning of the city as a mode for claiming a dignified belonging in it. The key mode through which they deflect the indignities is by making stronger claims on the state. Community members' strong claim-making on the Delhi government after the fire becomes understandable within this context. The intensities of claim-making on the state also generated intensities of the dissonances that emerged with the government's welfare interventions. My ethnographic interest is to offer a close examination of these interactions and how urban marginality to the state is reproduced.

## VACANT TENTS AND AN UNINTELLIGENT STATE

Why did the affected residents not take shelter in the government tents, and how do we interpret such welfare measures to understand the limits of state knowledge and intentions?

The Delhi government's response needs to be understood partly in relation to electoral politics and its temporality. The 2019 General Elections in the country were due within months, and electoral fervor was already picking up speed. The fire in a jhuggi settlement and its management would be judged publicly and politically as a statement of the Delhi government's policies, sensibilities, and practices regarding the poor. The Chief Minister (CM) and the area's Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA)—also from the ruling party in Delhi—visited Sunder Camp once the fire was brought under control. To assess the damages, the CM, accompanied by local officials and some community members, made a short round of the settlement. Afterward, the CM promised welfare assurances and made relief announcements at the site itself. One of these announcements was about providing government tents for the affected residents. The officials then set up tents that became an instant sign of the government's support for the urban poor.

Around 20 tents were arranged on the service road just outside the boundary wall on the west side of the settlement. Each tent provided an area of roughly one hundred square feet. For a settlement whose visibility is ordinarily minimized by officials, the tents were quite noticeable to the outside public and traffic. These tents temporarily extended the settlement outside its hard boundary. The residents were impressed with the quality of the tents: They were waterproof, structurally sound, and firmly secured. Inside each tent, mats were laid down on the ground. Mattresses were lined on top of the mats. Sufficient blankets were provided for each tent. Evaluating the response of the government, the residents would note that "the government has spent a lot of money." The government in this case did not invoke the reasoning of lack of resources for denying welfare to the poor. The residents, aware of the relationship to upcoming elections, noted, "it's election time."

In the end, the tents were used by children for their games and entertainment. In a few tents, government officials installed booths for people to reapply for the documents they had lost in the fire. At times, these tents also became public spaces for daily chatter by

male community members. The new usages of the tents emerged but did not reflect their primary intended function as imagined by the government. The tent remained both an object of admiration and amusement for the residents, but it also became an object around which people evaluated the understanding of the government and posed their practical critique.

Confused by the vacant tents and wondering how much of it was an election gimmick, I inquired about it to Irfan, a community leader and my key interlocutor in Sunder Camp. "Why didn't the families move into the tents?" I asked. Irfan was in fact exasperated by the sight of these tents and replied by lambasting the government: "This was a complete waste of money! Look how expensive these tents are. I don't understand why the government would waste so much money on them." In answering my query, Irfan showed gentle anger. I also sensed that the answer to this question was obvious and that my lack of understanding also contributed to the anger a bit. We had some tea in his rickshaw garage; he then generously explained why the tents would continue to remain vacant.

The immediate challenge that emerged after the fire was a spatial crisis and boundary-demarcation issue between jhuggis. The fire had razed the previous structures and disturbed the old boundaries. Many jhuggis were completely gutted to the point that they lacked even a basic delineation of their limits. These boundaries had been the result of intricate socio-spatial relations, and they exemplified the local history of the place. The consequent socio-moral relations were important for sustaining boundary relations and their negotiated ambiguities.

Therefore, an urgent step for the affected community members was to hold on to their respective pieces of land and to start the process of re-establishing their limits. Occupying their sites was required to maintain possession (*kabza*) of their individual land plots. In the context of these challenges, the affected families and individuals would not be inclined to move to the government tents. This sense of spatial insecurity arose from the genuine difficulties of remarking boundaries with precision, but also the fear of intentional encroachment by a scheming neighbor or some dominant outsider.

A key concern for residents was to stop the boundary crisis from leading to a disproportionate community crisis. Often, in the absence of accessing formal legal routes for their social and interpersonal issues, many people in the informal settlement rely on strong community relations to resolve their issues and disputes. These local juridical practices lead to the strengthening of the community relations themselves. These community relations, though not without intricate internal tensions, are key for everyday dynamics. The notions of justice and moral expectations that constitute community relations are based on the lived experiences of the people and their struggles in the city. This contextualized morality is valued deeply by the residents.

Understood in the context of these local existential, spatial, and moral priorities, it was indeed not difficult to understand why the tents remained empty. The logic of life inside the settlement required that the affected families maintain their ground. This individual spatial insecurity of the affected families was different from

the fear of eviction that the residents experience collectively. These are nested land insecurities, and although there was no immediate threat of eviction at that moment, the residents did feel that if these neighborly tensions became a community crisis it would end up stigmatizing the settlement as an urban nuisance. Such stigmatizations are used to legitimize evictions of the poor.

Therefore, it is very important for the poor to understand their precise insecurities and their interconnections: the consequent “illegalities” of their tenure marginality; their social stigmatization transforming them into an urban nuisance; their neighborly and community relations and their possible tensions, among other vulnerabilities. To assess the scale and relative significance, and to manage the transformation of one insecurity into another leading to micro and major implications, are all part of the required labor that the urban poor have to do to sustain their life in the city. As one of my other interlocutors remarking on these nested insecurities would often emphasize: “you have to know a lot to be able to live in Delhi!”

In short, the tent represents both an instance of resonance and dissonance. The residents' appeal for urgent welfare and the government's intention to spend funds on an intervention were in fact commensurate; however, the tent as a form of welfare expressed a dissonance. The official knowledge of the city as a basis for planning this welfare action expressed a disjuncture with the logic of life inside the urban margins.

From the government's perspective, it seemed like the jhuggi residents did not want to benefit from this relief. The officials at the site blamed the residents for not making appropriate use of their support. “See, the government wants to help people, but it is the people themselves who do not use the support. So, what more can the government do?” From the context of life at the margins, it was easy to understand why the residents' practices were not commensurate with the government's generous plan. Instead, residents raised their own small tarpaulin tents on their respective sites and started their efforts to rebuild their jhuggis (see Figure 2). After a week or two, the government tents were removed.

There are different ways to interpret the emptiness of the tents. The residents did not use the government tents for the intended purpose, and they remained vacant. There were key practical factors that needed consideration for planning the tents as a useful welfare measure. For instance, reflection was needed regarding occupancy per tent; how different communities and families would be accommodated in the tents; gender considerations; planning for bathing space; among other questions. Though very important, there were limited discussions of these matters among the officials. I could not receive any suitable response from the officials on the site. Even among the community members, I did not observe demands on these matters. For them, it seemed, the tents were never meant to work, and thus, these practical considerations were not even discussed. Thus to develop the interpretation of emptiness, the



**FIGURE 2** Residents waiting at the sites of their jhuggis in the settlement, Delhi, India 2019. Credit: The author.

absence of these considerations implies a certain internal bareness of the practical reason in the planned welfare intervention.

The installation of the tents on the service road outside the boundary wall of Sunder Camp was important in another regard. In occupying a public land for creating dwelling possibility through these tents, the state was performing an act similar to the squatting practice of the residents for which they suffer the stigma of "illegality." The temporary tents had, in a way, the potential to become a precedent for the space-crunched settlement to start using this public land for more durable settlement purposes. It would have helped to soften the hard boundary of the settlement. This did not happen, as the hard boundary returned after the removal of the tents. The tents' potentiality of creating an occupying possibility did not materialize. The tents were empty of this potentiality too.

Although the tents, as forms of welfare by the government, failed to benefit the residents of Sunder Camp, the act was able to constitute itself as welfare. The whole process attained a ritualized conduct. The CM visited the site of the fire, assessed the damages and welfare needs, and announced immediate relief in the form of tents. The officials arranged the tents. Thus, when the officials at the site say that the tent is welfare, the tent is constituted as welfare. This is the symbolic power of the state (Bourdieu, 1994). This process receives further validation when the amount spent on the tents was classified as welfare expenses and entered the bureaucratic documents (Mathur, 2016). The success of this act also required that the intended beneficiaries would be constituted as not interested in the government welfare. Therefore, it was important that the officials emphasized that Sunder Camp residents themselves were not utilizing the welfare support. In this welfare ritual, the government produces its own coherence by constituting the residents as self-damaging recipients. Such rituals thus manifest how state coherence is realized on the ground.

In jhuggi discourses, however, the tents led to alternative meanings. Sunder Camp residents took the intelligence of the government as an object for knowledge evaluation. For instance, in a mode similar to Irfan's, residents would express the government's lack of intelligence thus: "It does not understand us;" "it does not want to understand us;" "it cannot understand us;" "it does not consult us." Expressed through an evaluation of ability, intention, effort, and procedure, these discourses constitute the government as lacking the required intelligence.

In short, the operationalization of the tent as a form of welfare expressed the tension between the state's understanding of the city and the urban poor's lived reality as knowledge. The limitation of the statist knowledge was productive for its symbolic processes. On one hand, the state stereotyped jhuggi dwellers to realize its own coherence; on the other, the jhuggi discourses constructed the state as unintelligent.

## A PARK AND A DHOKEBAAZ STATE

The knowledge tension expressed by the tents was symptomatic of a deeper issue, that of the distrust between the government and

the residents. The strength of this tension became apparent when community members outrightly rejected another welfare proposal by the government.

When the CM, the MLA, and officials visited the settlement to ensure appropriate rehabilitation, a suggestion was made that the government could construct "proper" (*pucca*) houses for the affected residents. The suggestion to apply its technical expertise to building proper houses with better building materials might have indicated the government's willingness to provide meaningful welfare. However, this proposal did not resonate with the community leaders and residents, and was subsequently rejected. It therefore never made it beyond informal consideration and did not receive any further formal commentary.

Although the proposal had only an ephemeral presence in rehabilitation talks, it had a long life in jhuggi talks, where it rekindled discussions on the perils of letting the government inside the settlement. These discussions were marked by concerns and local jokes. One such joke that emerged among residents was the statement: "The government would even carve out a park for us here." Humor is an important community practice for negotiating power relations and for positing moral and political critiques (Waghmore, 2015). Understanding the contrast between actual life in the settlement and how the residents imagined what the government plan would do reveals why a park—a desirable social infrastructure—became an object of community ridicule.

The proposal of government-built houses led to animated community discussions. Irfan would pose the rhetorical question: "What would be the sizes of these houses and who would decide that?" The purpose of this question was to emphasize intricate variations as a central element of the jhuggi's form. The size of self-constructed jhuggis varies considerably; likewise, the number of people residing in them varies. For instance, a family jhuggi could have two to four members, or there could be six male migrants sharing a single jhuggi. Merging, division, and extensions of jhuggis would be carried out based on need. These variations are shaped by factors including the availability of space, livelihood choices, the local socio-political configuration, migration histories and temporalities, kinship and community relations, among other factors. The complex interactions of these factors shape the emergent micro-built forms of the settlement. The diverse vulnerabilities of the jhuggi residents are intricately intertwined with the local built environment of the settlement. For instance, a rickshaw driver in the settlement lost his rented e-rickshaw to theft once. He thus had to give away part of his jhuggi to the e-rickshaw's owner as compensation (resulting in two smaller jhuggis). The jhuggi, he told me, represented a treasured memory of his late mother, and he hoped that he would be able to reclaim his full jhuggi after repaying his debt with cash.

Community members were even more concerned about the impact of the government-housing proposal on the settlement's precarious "informal" economy (Anjaria, 2016). Jhuggis are places of residence but they are simultaneously spaces of diverse livelihoods. Sunder Camp's jhuggis' support works include several forms of recycling (plastic, clothes, hair), leather dyeing, e-rickshaw and

auto-rickshaw driving, battery recharging, rickshaw garages, small retail stores, stone masonry, among others. The intricacies of these economic practices in the settlement defy simplified residential and commercial planning categories. The spatial and temporal flexibilities in the uses of the space are key to sustaining the local economy. Also, many migrant residents view their jhuggis in the city as places of work and their native homes in the village (where they spend only a few months a year) as their real places of residence. Many of my interlocutors would foreground that they are in Delhi to work (*"yahan to hum kaam ke liye hain"*). A core aspiration, emphasized by many of my interlocutors, is to build a proper house in their native places from their Delhi-based earnings. Similarly, to celebrate their annual festivals, they ideally like to go to the places they live in their "home districts." Material and ritual sustenance of the home in the place of origin is a strong aspiration among the migrant workers in the city negotiating their dislocations (cf. Bowers, 2021). Thus, they often do not express the same certitudes about the places of work and places of residence as official planning categories.

The intricate spatio-economic formations of Sunder Camp sustain city life for the urban margins. Therefore, the government's proposal raised concerns that it would enshrine the residential function as the dominant norm for the settlement.

Irfan summarized the issue like this:

There was a suggestion that the government could rebuild *pucca* houses for the affected families. But we will not agree to it. We do not trust the government. Once you let it inside the settlement, we would lose all control. We would not have any say on the size or the structure of the houses. The government would come up with its own sizes, types, and rules. It would make such small houses that it would have land left for making a park for us here.

Community control over local built forms and functions is central to socio-economic sustenance in Sunder Camp. The community members did not trust the government to understand and respect their variations and emergence as modes of survival in the city. In such a context of general distrust—where welfare activity is simultaneously a control activity—the suggestion that the government could be trusted to build houses for affected families was greeted with justified suspicion, dismissal, and humor.

Often when the community members discuss their diverse interactions with the state and its different officials, they invoke the term *dhokhadena* (to betray or cheat). For instance, when the promised welfare resource did not reach its beneficiary, a resident noted, *"sarkar dhokebaaz hain"* (state characterized through betrayal). This does not suggest that community members do not trust different institutions or officials of the state, but it emphasizes that matters of trust and distrust in the state are complex and contextual (Kolling & Koster, 2019). Considering the legal marginality of their settlement and livelihoods, it becomes very important for residents to develop a grounded understanding of when to trust different state actors

and their practices and when to deploy distrust as a defense in their urban struggles. For Sunder Camp residents, answering the puzzle of trust-distrust formed a critical part of their "learning the city."

Sunder Camp's previous encounters with the government become important in shaping their trust-distrust in government promises and plans. The local history of demolition and eviction in particular shaped their core distrust. The demolition incident in the early 2010s became increasingly important in their discussions of the government's proposal. In one discussion, Irfan narrated the incident and why Sunder Camp members should be distrustful of the state.

"The DDA had planned to demolish our jhuggis," Irfan began his account. "It colluded with different government authorities and planned the demolition so carefully that we were caught totally unawares." This surprise act was key to the DDA's strategy. As Irfan explained in more detail, "The DDA had even requested an additional police force at the local station." Meanwhile, at Sunder Camp, life continued as normal: "For us it was a usual day in the settlement; we didn't know what was happening." Then, later that day, there was an initial hint of the impending event: "The police force had gathered at the station and, just as they were leaving for Sunder Camp, only then did someone inform us about the planned action." This information may have come from community leaders' contacts among lower-level officials. "I didn't believe it initially, but then the DDA official arrived and very hurriedly served us the eviction notice." This was when they fully realized the severity of the matter. Irfan noted how time was critical in negotiating this threat. "If the DDA had given us a little more time or any slight indication of demolition, believe me, we would have been able to gather support. We would not have let a single jhuggi be demolished." The DDA planned the demolition with such precision that the community members could not contact their elected political leaders in time or approach the Delhi High Court for a possible intervention to halt the demolition. At the end, Irfan noted, "they cheated us, and we have no trust in the state now."

The mode of demolition that the DDA planned for the settlement was deemed highly unfair and inhumane by community members. These local histories of encounters with different state actors are recounted in discussions within the community and go on to shape notions of trust-distrust in the state.

The community did not trust the state to listen to them or respect their intricate life in Sunder Camp, and this distrust led them to reject the government's proposal from the start. Otherwise, as the joke goes, the government would have put them in downsized houses and used the leftover land to build a park for them in the settlement. The idea of building a park in a settlement where people do not even have sufficient space to live and work was a big source of amusement, thus leading to the local joke: "the government would even carve out a park for us here!"

In short, an effective welfare measure requires trust between the state and the people. The rejection of the proposal to build proper houses expressed a tension in the relation of trust between the Delhi government and Sunder Camp residents. The state inherits and suffers a trust deficit. The lack of trust in the state's proposal



again takes on a symbolic relevance when the residents' discourses construct the state as untrustworthy, a "dhokebaaz sarkar."

## WELFARE CHECKS AND AN ERRONEOUS STATE

The Delhi government's immediate relief in the form of tents as temporary shelter for the affected families did not correspond to the immediate struggles of the residents. Similarly, the suggestion of government-built houses did not appeal to residents, as it could not overcome the historical and contemporary distrust of state actions and intentions. The actual rehabilitation then took a monetary form. Concluding his damage-assessment trip to Sunder Camp, the CM made the official announcement (*ghoshana*) that community members who had lost their jhuggis to the fire would each be compensated twenty-five thousand rupees (\$330) by the government.<sup>5</sup> This amount was issued to the residents as checks.

The question of cash transfers as a policy instrument for anti-poverty programs in India has been debated keenly in development discourses. A direct connection between the state and the poor through the use of cash transfers has been proposed as the new mode for realizing the required efficiency and effectiveness of these antipoverty policies. The role of new technology in shaping bureaucratic efficiency is significant, but it is important to examine how the directions and outcomes of these technologies depend on social factors (Graeber, 2016). In the case of Sunder Camp, the cash-transfer method showed initial signs of efficiency, but it also showed how the method, when woven into the actual material and symbolic contexts of the recipients, creates complex delays.

Shiv Eshwar was one beneficiary who received the compensation, but only after a long struggle. Many checks had spelling errors in the names, producing a new issue for the intended recipients. I documented Shiv Eshwar's intricate struggle, which is illustrative of how the plans of efficiency tend to become dissonant with the complexity of the life of the urban poor.

After the announcement by the CM, local officials conducted a survey to make a list of eligible beneficiaries. For the affected residents, it was important that they stayed at their respective sites, lest they missed the surveyors. "I planted myself at the site of my jhuggi," Shiv Eshwar noted, describing his start of the day of the survey. After a long wait, the surveyor finally reached Shiv Eshwar's site. "They asked for my name and then asked me to stand in front of my jhuggi." The surveyors needed to take a photograph of the recipients with the ruins of their jhuggis. "They clicked my picture and left."

Although there were some residents who reported that their names were not included on the list, Shiv Eshwar's name was thereby ensuring his eligibility for compensation funding. A few days later he received a check of twenty-five thousand rupees in his name. This measure by the government was marked by reasonable efficiency. The affected residents received their compensation checks within a week of the incident. However, this efficiency created its own challenges.

Shiv Eshwar did not have a bank account in Delhi, and therefore, he deposited his check into his daughter's account. The check was returned, and the bank informed him that the check was in his name, and that he needed to deposit it into his own account.

Shiv Eshwar did not have a bank account in Delhi but he had one in his home district in Bihar. This was when his translocal migrant position became important (Gidwani & Ramamurthy, 2018). In 2015, he had opened a savings account through the Government of India's financial inclusion program (*Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana*). Therefore, he decided to deposit the check in that account in Bihar. He commenced a train journey of 1000 kilometers to his home district where part of his family lived, very carefully carrying the check with him along the way. Upon his arrival, Shiv Eshwar tried to deposit the check in his account there, but his bank informed him that this was not possible. The bank suggested that he deposit it in Delhi, where the check was issued. Though he did not know why he was not able to deposit the check in his account there, he surmised that his account had become dormant due to inactivity over the years. Left with no other choice, he returned to Delhi with a plan to open a bank account in the city.

To open an account in Delhi, Shiv Eshwar needed to update the address on his biometric ID card (*Aadhaar* card) from a Bihar to a Delhi address. Updating the address, in turn, required a letter from his MLA validating his residence in Sunder Camp, which he obtained only after multiple trips. Once secured, and with the help of this supporting document, he was able to update the address on his ID card in due time. With this proof of address, he visited a nearby bank to open a new account, but the bank refused. Shiv Eshwar did not understand why he was refused, so he visited another bank nearby. Finally, he was able to open an account with that bank. In total, 2 months had passed after the fire before he obtained a bank account in his name in Delhi.

That still was not the end of Shiv Eshwar's struggle. He deposited the check in his new account, but the check did not clear and was returned to him again. It was at that time that his bank informed him that there were spelling errors in his name on the check. His full name was "Shiv Eshwar Ram," but the name on the check appeared as "Shiv Ishwar." The check did not include his last name, and his middle name had been misspelled. This was an error by the government officials.

Shiv Eshwar's struggle took yet another bureaucratic turn. He brought his problem to the Sub-Divisional Magistrate's (SDM) office and inquired with the *patwari* (the official who had conducted the survey and issued the checks to the beneficiaries). The *patwari* checked the error in Shiv Eshwar's name and kept the check. He also noted down Shiv Eshwar's new bank account information and informed him that the funds would be transferred to his account through a direct deposit. He suggested that Shiv Eshwar keep checking his account for the compensation money.

Shiv Eshwar waited a few weeks. Those weeks soon became months, and still he had not received any funds in his account. He then decided to visit and inquire with the SDM's office. The officials there informed him that his case was under review and that once the

SDM had approved it, he would receive his funds. He was advised to wait more. He followed the advice for a considerable period, still without any success, until he started visiting both the SDM's office and his MLA's office. Shiv Eshwar stated that he made nearly 20 visits to different offices. His understanding was that one just needs to keep trying.

Eventually, it seemed that these efforts were picking up steam: He started to receive more support from the MLA's office, which had recently recruited a volunteer from the MLA's political party to resolve the issues of delays in compensation funding for the community members. By this time, the Delhi state elections were approaching.

Eventually, Shiv Eshwar received a text message that his account has been credited twenty-five thousand rupees. All things considered; he received the compensation funds a full 10 months after the fire and just 6 weeks before the state elections. For Shiv Eshwar, this was a happy moment. In the meantime, he had rebuilt his jhuggi (this time with brick and cement) by using some money he had been saving for the marriage of his second daughter and with some informal loans. The actual cost of rebuilding the jhuggi was nearly two lakh rupees (\$2700). I asked him how he would utilize the meager funds (\$330) he had received as compensation. He replied, "My jhuggi needs some color, so I will use this money to finally paint my jhuggi."

The cash transfer as a mode of welfare delivery indicates sense and coherence in its abstracted formulations. However, when these modes descend into the everyday life of the beneficiaries, they generate dissonance. Shiv Eshwar's case shows that, to overcome such dissonance, one must wage a long, intricate struggle of intertwined encounters with different state actors, banking institutions, and political actors. The waiting time for receiving state welfare is an inconsistent result of the convergences of these actors. It was Shiv Eshwar's labor that produced the required commensuration.

Shiv Eshwar's struggle and waiting were punctuated by moments of anger, hope, despair, submission, and indignity. The state practices domination over the urban poor by making them wait, and this play of time makes them patients of the state (Auyero, 2011). The politics of patience is also recognized as a key aspect of "deep democracy," where urban survival depends on collective work and organization (Appadurai, 2001; Procupez, 2015). The temporality of waiting is a key dimension of realizing alternative agency against exclusionary urban development (Harms, 2013). The critical question here is how one experiences the waiting time and what meanings emerge in the process. Such emergent signification is important for understanding the life of the urban poor.

During his long struggle and waiting, Shiv Eshwar's anger would often be expressed through the threat of legal action: "*Main SDM pe case kar dunga*" (I will file a court case against the SDM). I heard this threat multiple times in my conversations with him in Sunder Camp when he was waiting for his compensation money. Wondering how this legal action threat made sense of his waiting, I once asked him if he had filed a case in the past. He answered, "Yes, in Bihar we have done it before!" After a few more questions, I gathered that he was referring to a case of caste violence in Bihar. The case was

brought by the Dalit community and alleged that "upper-caste" people had murdered several Dalits. To understand the specifics of the case, I asked him about his association with the Dalit family involved in the case. Shiv Eshwar could only provide ambiguous details. His ambiguous answer, however, was followed by an emphasis on how the Dalits were murdered and how the community fought the court case. The state of Bihar has a history of frequent instances of caste violence against Dalits, including some major massacres in the country. Shiv Eshwar's invocation of a caste-violence court case suggests that he was employing community history to make sense of his urban struggles.

To understand the emergent politics of the urban poor, it is important to situate it in local histories (Das & Walton, 2015). What is also important is to examine the link between the local history and the translocal history of interaction with the state. Shiv Eshwar invoked a translocal history to make sense of the indignity entailed in bureaucratic waiting. This deployment of translocal history also suggests that he drew a relation of similarity between caste domination in Bihar and state domination in Delhi. There emerged a symbolic entanglement between caste injustices and state injustices. Through this threat to file a court case against the officials, he attributed a caste character to the state. Translocal community history therefore emerged as a kind of symbolic good to counter the humiliation entailed in encounters with the state.

While documenting Shiv Eshwar's struggle and waiting, I also wondered if his welfare pursuits made economic sense. His numerous trips and journeys over those 10 months required significant expenditure. Was it even worth pursuing those compensation funds? I asked him this once. He responded, "*ye sirf paizon ki baat nahi hain; ye to hamara haq hain.*" (It is not about money; it is about our rights). He went on to say that even if the pursuit cost more than the expected compensation, he would persist. The act of claiming one's rights and materializing them through one's own evaluation and sense-making informed the dignified belonging to which Shiv Eshwar aspired in the city. Yet Shiv Eshwar's struggle was just one of the many cases of spelling errors in the checks.

In short, basic bureaucratic functionality is necessary for the effective delivery of a desirable welfare measure. The prolonged delays in the delivery demonstrate the deep dissonance between planned bureaucratic efficiency and its actual unfolding on the ground. The production of arbitrariness in the outcomes of welfare actions is a known feature of bureaucratic practices. What is required here is to relativize this arbitrariness with reference to the structural position of the communities needing welfare interventions as well as how arbitrariness is given meaning by the community members.

The errors in the checks thus attain discursive importance, as they become a substantial element of community critiques in Sunder Camp. Some residents would assess the officials as educated, yet nevertheless too incompetent even to write a name correctly. Others would argue that these errors were deliberately committed to delay the funds. Several others emphasized that bureaucratic rules were applied more strictly to the poor. The errors in the checks led to diverse interpretations. At the analytical level, these local

discourses lead to constructing the state as an "erroneous state" replete with errors.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have focused on an incident of a fire in a squatter settlement in Delhi to understand the interaction between the urban poor and the state. I have analyzed three ethnographic examples of welfare measures by the Delhi government. These examples demonstrate how the state and the urban poor are entangled in relationships marked by tensions. On one hand, the squatter settlement houses marginalized groups facing interconnected insecurities that necessitate their interaction with the state. On the other hand, the squatter settlement becomes a dynamic site through its multiple relationships with the state. It includes relationships with reference to the illegalities of dwelling and livelihoods, with reference to the state rationalization of the space, and with reference to document-mediated bureaucratic encounters. Institutional knowledge base, trust in institutions, and basic bureaucratic functionality are key necessities for a planned welfare intervention to be beneficial. The empirical materials presented in this article show how state interventions suffer from knowledge, trust, and bureaucratic deficiencies and are thus unable to commensurate with the desired intentions.

Analyzing the unfolding of the welfare on the ground, in this article I argue that the squatter settlement is a dynamic space shaped by nested relationships between the state and the urban poor. The management of dissonance and resonance in these relationships renders the squatter settlement a key vantage point for conceptualizing the state from the perspective of the urban margins. Developing careful social-cultural interpretations of the interactions and the discourses they engender are key ethnographic resources for understanding the reproduction of inequality in contemporary cities and the urban poor's complex struggles against it.

Conceptualizing the production of the urban margins as a relational effect of interactions with the state has broader implications. Das (2011) has directed attention to the labor that the urban poor devote to learning and engaging with legal spaces, objects, and processes to actualize forms of citizenship in the city. A focus on how the urban poor produce commensuration amidst tension-filled relationships with the state reveals the essential material and symbolic labor they must perform in order to actualize the modes of welfare that might benefit them, as well as in negotiating the interventions that would produce further exclusions.

An empirically rich analysis of the urban poor and the state foregrounds the intricacies of the politics of the poor. Negotiating the illegalities of their dwelling and livelihoods, the poor must learn and practice flexibility and fluidity in the way they engage with the state in their dependence and resistance. The structural and emergent factors add certain practical indeterminacies to their modes of claiming and accessing the state to sustain their lives in the city. Documenting the specificities of their material and symbolic struggles is imperative for understanding how the state becomes a site of aspiration as

well as a site for waging their struggles. Therefore, a careful analysis of their negotiation of tensions reveals how the urban poor combine both formal and informal resources to carve an urban belonging; and how these efforts shape their contingent participation in the political field (Chatterjee, 2004; Heller & Evans, 2011).

Documenting and interpreting the discourses engendered by the welfare interventions have implications for diversifying the imaginations of the state. The discourse on corruption has often been foregrounded to understand how the state is discursively constructed (Gupta, 2012). An ethnography of the urban poor's experience shows how the state becomes distrustful, unintelligent, and erroneous. It is therefore important to recognize the emergence of knowledge, trust, and competence as key discursive objects in engagement with the state. The diverse constructions of the state are again a reflection of the complex material and symbolic struggles of the squatter settlement as a dynamic margin in the city.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>To maintain the anonymity of the research participants, I use pseudonyms for the settlement as well as my interlocutors in the city.

<sup>2</sup>DDA is the statutory body responsible for the overall development, land use, and planning in Delhi.

<sup>3</sup>The case has created a paradoxical situation in the settlement. On one hand, the community members rely on the case in the Delhi High Court that restricts the development authority's eviction action against the settlement. Yet, on the other hand, the residents do not want the Court to deliver a final judgment on the case, as they fear that it might end up excluding a large number of them from resettlement claims.

<sup>4</sup>Jhuggi settlements and their marginality are realized through the dominant discourses of nuisance, where aesthetics and caste values shape their displacement to urban peripheries (Ghertner, 2015; Guru, 2000), which produce socio-spatial distancing in the city. Some of my interlocutors also foreground how historically living next to a drain was important as they practiced their ritually polluting occupations like leather dyeing or human hair recycling.

<sup>5</sup>The current minimum wage rate in Delhi is \$7.5/day.

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