

Paper Proposal

Paper Session /Stream

Challenges of Doing Comparisons: Theory and Evidence from the Global South

Paper Title: The Politics of Property: Fluid Boundaries of Space and Identity in Indian Cities

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the fluid politics of claiming property in both material (territory) and symbolic aspects (identity) - in Aizawl, a frontier town in the North East of India. Specifically, it explores the practices of constituting, challenging, and redrawing the boundaries, which in turn shaped the shifting perceptions about, and political spaces to, claim territory and identity. The town spaces are shaped by confluence of flows within and across national boundaries. Like other towns and cities in the north eastern frontier of the country, Aizawl is barely connected by land with the rest of India. The flows of commodities, bodies and finance within the national boundary are mediated through Guwahati, the capital city of the North Eastern Frontier State of Assam. However, the town is well connected across the national borders particularly with Myanmar and experiences a robust cross border trade. The town's politics is shaped by territories of ethnic communities along the Himalayan range and whose boundaries do not overlap the political boundaries of the Indian State. The town is home to communities from diverse ethnic, migratory and religious backgrounds. Besides, the Mizo community who consider themselves as natives, migrants and refugees from the neighbouring countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh and other regions of India congregate in the town. The paper elaborated on the politics of property through tracing the socio-spatial histories of different communities and the dynamics of everyday life in the town. Three findings from our ethnographic research are highlighted in this paper. First, we show how transnational flows of people, ideas, and finance settle in Aizawl and intersect with the politics of territory and identity. We illustrate how individual and collective identities are constituted flexibly in time and space. Second, we describe the manner by which the governmentality of land and territory contributed to the politics of place and identity. In this context, we look at three policies specific to the North East Frontier State namely, the Scheduled Area act, the look East policy and the New land use Policy aimed at integrating the town's economy with the South east Asian region. The paper is an effort to contribute to the empirical gap on the urbanization of non-metros in India and the North-Eastern frontier states and in contextualizing the politics of property.