

# Repertoires of Political Contestation: Strategies of the Urban Poor and Cultural Idioms of Resistance in Delhi

Sanjeev Routray

Urban Studies Postdoctoral Fellow,  
School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs, Northeastern University,  
310 Renaissance Park,  
Boston, MA 02115

By looking at resistance against various exclusionary processes of urbanization and urban policies in three distinct neighbourhoods inhabited by diverse low-income residents, I examine the strategies and cultural idioms of resistance in Delhi. The poor are divided along the lines of caste, religion, gender, and settlement as well as the possession of several different documents required to prove eligibility for various government service. However, I will show that broader alliances are manufactured especially when there are limited avenues for redressing the circumstances of outright exclusion. I attempt an understanding of unity and solidarity as well as antagonism among various social groups that inform the urban poor's political strategies and cultural expressions.

Through an examination of particular historical conjunctures, I consider the politics of peaceful demonstrations and militant struggles with a focus on three forms of peaceful resistance: *dharnas* (peaceful gatherings), rallies, and felicitation ceremonies. While the displays of numerical strength in these demonstrations remain central, I also argue that the protest events, especially felicitation ceremonies, contribute to the reinvention of community solidarity during resistance movements. In contrast, forms of militant protest include *gherao* (encirclement), *rasta roko* (road blockades), and *julus* (marches or parades). I show how although militant protests are intelligently calibrated and mostly symbolic in nature, they may also entail direct verbal or physical attacks on the targets. These ethnically and religiously diverse resistance tactics temporarily shift the balance of power between the poor and the non-poor. Finally, my paper examines how the activities of the poor and activists intersect in the low-income neighbourhoods. Despite the social distance between the activists and the poor, the work of activists is seen to contribute to *marg darshan* (path-showing or guidance) and *chetna badhana* (consciousness raising). I argue that *marg darshan* and *chetna badhana* may or may not be seen as acts of condescension; rather, they are solicited as part of the general *rann-niti* (game plan or tactics), which can be understood as an open-ended dialogical act, which requires the appraisal of every possible route for collective action based on experiential knowledge. One of my key findings consists in demonstrating that, while the poor celebrate the contributions of the middle-class activists, they also evaluate the differential merits of advocacy and service-providing work, and identify associated problems including undue credit-taking and ineffective strategies on the part of the activists.

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