Subaltern urbanism in India beyond the mega-city slum: The civic politics of occupancy and development in two peripheral cities in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region
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CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH FOUNDATION AND DESIGN

This chapter sketches the critical realist philosophy of social science that underpins this research, drawing extensively from Andrew Sayer’s influential text, Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach. For those already familiar with critical realism (CR), I suggest you forward to section 2.2, which outlines my general research design.

2.1 Critical Realism

Critical realism was brought into social science as an ontological intervention to both methods privileging discourses and those privileging the empirical. It critiques postmodern discursive approaches for collapsing the epistemological with the ontological, and it critiqued positivism for collapsing the empirical with the ontological. Reasserting the ontological was to serve as a reminder that all knowledge is mediated through the concepts available to us—there is no unmediated access and all knowledge claims are partial, positional and fallible.

Critical realism argues that social reality is stratified and marked by emergence, rather than flat and construed by discourses or constituted by empirics. The CR social world contains three interlocked strata: real, actual, and empirical. The real refers to the internal structure of phenomena, namely their properties and what powers and vulnerabilities develop from these (Sayer, 2000: 10-11). The layer of the actual refers to the events or conditions that occur (whether one is aware of them or not such as legislation, asset bubbles, and election results) that manifest out of what happens when phenomena come together given the properties and related capacities of those phenomena. The empirical level refers to the observations and experiences of actors and their technological extensions. Social reality is not static given that it is full of phenomena capable of interacting in ways that produce events and conditions in the actual strata, with varying degrees of expanse, durability, and visibility in the empirical strata. While the level of the empirical is tied to the criterion of perceptibility (directly or via the accounts of another), the level of the real is tied to the causal criterion. Addressing the causal criterion requires answering the question: what likely exists in order for X to appear in this manner, what is helping to produce, manifest, or enable an event such as a household moving out of poverty? Answers to this question can contain readily empirical phenomena (more cash or a new job), events (increased FDI in the petty manufacturing sector) and non-empirical phenomena (shift in dominant ideology from neoliberalism to well-being, changes in gender norms enabling the wife to more easily work outside the home). Unlike positivism, causes are not based on regularity of occurrence or correlations, but are about first what a thing (person, object, law, relationship, or organisation) can do given its properties and related

8 Most notably by Andrew Sayer, Margaret Archer, Dave Elder-Vaas, and Kevin Cox
powers and vulnerabilities, and secondly about what events, conditions, or forms are actually manifesting in a particular place and time. The first is an ontological or conceptual question the second is an interpretive question focusing on what is it about this thing or set of things in a particular context and in a particular arrangement that tends to bring about a particular result or condition. Resultant properties, common in empiricist works, come from the aggregation of properties, for example tallying up a household’s assets. Emergent properties depend on the relationships between properties and between different things, for example the interplay between a household’s assets, their motivations, citizenship entitlements, and how other phenomena present are strengthening, weakening, or altering these. This thesis leverages a CR method for conceptualisation, and it is this aspect of CR that I now turn.

**Things, Properties, Powers and Susceptibilities**

Any ‘thing’ that can affect behaviour or influence something exists (Fleetwood, 2009) regardless if it is visible in the empirical strata. Things have properties. People have the properties of being warm-blooded, conscious, emotional, habitual, and of occupying various social roles. A landlord has the additional properties of holding private property and the ability to rent or lease it. Money has the properties of a being a unit of exchange, a holder of value and an accumulator of value. The properties that make up a thing can instantiate certain powers (what a thing does or could do, thus functioning in Sen’s (1999) framework); people can think, labour, lie and so on. Things also have susceptibilities or the ability to be influenced in certain ways by certain things in certain contexts. People are susceptible to shaming, desire, education, social conditioning and so on. Money’s powers are susceptible to inflation, deflation, and lack of trust in its backers (banks and states). Powers and susceptibilities arising out of properties can be actual or latent. People can be violent, but for many this capacity is normally dormant. What powers and susceptibilities are active or dormant is related both to some thing’s internal composition and to those of externally linked phenomena—other things present in a particular situation that support or motivate the actualisation and duration of powers, or conversely constrain or stifle powers from becoming active and effective.

**Relations**

The structure of some ‘thing,’ refers to its properties and the necessary internal relationships between them that make a thing what it is rather than something else. During the conceptualisation phases of research, CR recommends structural analysis to separate contingency from necessity. This highlights the order of CR’s interests (1) things (what are they; what can they do) and then (2) events and material conditions (what actually manifests, where, and how). This method of conceptualisation and analysis helps to better explain why things where not otherwise, as well as how they could be different. Conceptualisation through structural analysis requires separating substantive relations from formal relations and then necessary from contingent relations and then symmetrical from asymmetrical. Let’s take the example of clientelism and subject it to Sayer’s (1992) questions for uncovering structure: what
does the condition of clientelism in this context presuppose? Can it exist on its own? What cannot be removed without clientelism becoming something else? What is it about clientelism that contributes to inequality and uneven development? Clientelism presupposes clients, patrons and uneven exchange. We would expect to find a context of unsettled or negotiable citizenship rights, inequalities in resource access, and norms rationalising this activity. You cannot have clientelism without clients or patrons and the relation between them. Additionally, it seems that if there was nothing to be gained (resources) via this relationship that it would become extinct. Clientelism without uneven power-relations makes little sense; it is in the vested interests of patrons to maintain certain levels of inequality, particularly where access to basic needs is concerned. Relatedly, resources are not likely to be distributed in a needs based way, so it is not surprising that areas with high rates of clientelism are likely to be unevenly developed. Regarding formal vs. substantive relations, the substantive and necessary relationship is between clients and patrons. We could find that most patrons in a city are between 40 and 50 years old, this would be a formal relationship that has nothing to do with the components and organisation of clientelism. The relationship between resources and clientelism is asymmetrical for resources would continue to exist if clientelism ceases, but not the other way around. The relations between clientelism and the external context are contingent. Operating in circumstances of power imbalances and unsettled citizenship rights enable clientelism to continue contingently. This exercise shows that if we focus on occurrences of clientelism we may miss the differences between necessary and contingent relations, or we may confuse one of its components (patrons, clients, unequal exchange) for the whole.

**Processes**

Whether and how powers or susceptibilities are actualised and deployed is contingent, depending on the external relations with other objects’ powers and susceptibilities. Powers and susceptibilities exist in different states ranging from dormant to actualised with some reaching realisation with empirical dimensions. They can act counterfactually or transfactually (Fleetwood, 2009). The events or conditions that properties of a thing could instantiate may never be instantiated—powers and susceptibilities can remain unactualised and thus unrealised but still real. A conjuncture or configuration is acting counterfactually when something did not happen that could given the properties of the thing(s) conjoining or being configured. Transfactual refers to a situation when powers or susceptibilities have been actualised, but the expected consequences have (as-yet) not materialised. This points to possible sources of mediation, suppression, or resistance that may be unobservable at the empirical level. For example, consider instantiated caste norms (those that are acted in accordance with by others) that are not having an appreciable effect on everyone. This is a transfactual condition that does not mean that caste norms have no powers or do not exist because some do not exhibit their influence as expected. The closer the powers of a things internal and external realising conditions are to being met the more likely its capacities are likely to manifest. For example, at birth humans have the latent capacity to speak, but initially this power is dormant because the basic internal
physiological conditions have not been satisfied. Eventually the internal conditions are satisfied and this power is able to be actualised, but this is not enough. If the external necessary conditions are not satisfied (being regularly exposed to language and having loving caregivers) then the event of a toddler starting to speak language can be delayed and their future cognitive development impacted.

Understanding a process—understood in CR as the relation between transfactually and counterfactually acting powers—susceptibilities and their consequences requires (1) thorough conceptualisations of things’ properties and the relations between them which allow for its powers and susceptibilities to exist, and (2) identifying what external enabling conditions seem necessary to bring about a particular event or condition, while keeping in mind that events and effects ride also on the tendencies of other things they are in contact with in their environment—things that can obstruct, overrule, amend, or strengthen tendencies:

There is therefore a double contingency involved in the movement from causal powers to susceptibilities to effects. Causation is unlikely to be linear. We should expect agents NOT to be masters of their own plans. Voluntaristic accounts of social construction are implausible: what is constructed is always likely to diverge from what was intended, so it is unsurprising that agents are not masters of their own plans. [...] A key notion of critical realism is that systems are open—arrangements are likely to unravel, unless steps are taken [i.e., institutions and other borders or mediations put in place] to keep them from doing so. And much of the activity of agents (individual or organisational), is taken up with struggling to keep things which are favourable to them at least roughly intact in the face of internal and external change (Sayer, 2004: 265).

2.2 Critical Realist Conceptualisation

Critical realist social science is concerned with conceptualisation and causation. It is a relational method as its focus is not on unidirectional impacts of substantive or discrete variables. For example, I try not to treat mediators or mediation as a fixed role, practice, or institution (i.e. as an independent variable) to see how it impacts outcomes in access to basic services. Mediators, mediation, and the mediated do not travel across space (social and material) unaffected. Their powers and susceptibilities can take different forms and develop different magnitudes. Mediation could be a derivative of the separation between political society and civil society as described by Chatterjee. It could be transformative, if it is altering social-spatial relations, or it could be found to be constitutive if it is playing a role in the production of new types of spaces, practices, or citizenship. These different roles are possible because of what Sayer (ibid.) refers to as ‘double-contingency’. Properties of mediation in political society are one part of a contingent field or configuration that shape practices, processes, events, and conditions in different urban formations. This means that differential citizenship, forms of occupancy, and locality development in KD and MB are over determined by many interlinking and parallel causes and contingencies. The goal of this thesis is to explore the causes and contingencies of urban formations
related to political society actors and institutions. To this end the process of
describing objects of inquiry in terms of properties, potential capacities and actual
capacities is used throughout. Analytically this type of explication is used to explore
under what circumstances does a potential capacity become active, and under what
knot of circumstances (conditions, relations, practices) does it seem to produce some
effect. For example, when does mediation seem to result in strengthening an urban
formations occupancy security, and when does it seem to undermine it?

I refer to the different areas researched in these two cities as urban formations rather
than as settlements. Most areas in most cities these days are anything but settled in
terms of their civic, political and spatial status being fixed. Many processes, some
more visible than others, reach these formations and play a role in their constitution
or development such as, but not limited to: capital accumulation via urbanisation,
industrialisation or deindustrialisation, state regulations, budgets, and projects,
consumption patterns, different modalities of spatial production (unauthorised,
encroachment, self-help, sub-divisions, gentrification), migration, changing
demographics and labour markets. The ‘urban-ness’ of these former towns is
relatively recent and their municipalities are still in their adolescence. The urban
formations studied are in a relatively early phase of development. Except for one, they
are not the result of some formal, inaugural event like the municipal charter, ratified
development plan, or government scheme. They are a mix of various informal and
quasi-formal processes and actors. While they are not settled, they do have sufficient
coherence and duration to be seen as existing social-spatial phenomena--just not ones
with internal structures and capacities that have been well documented in the
literature. As you will see as you progress through the next chapters, my nascent
understanding evolved bit by bit—the formation of my understanding of these
formations was forming bit throughout. During my literature review and pilot studies, I
categorised the selected electoral wards as being relatively deprived, average or
relatively privileged in terms of socio-demographics and the status of locality
development. This changed to slums, gaothans, median and middle-class areas, and
then to the slum, gaothan, and standard typology of formations discussed in Chapter
8. My level of appreciation for the role political society plays in these formations also
developed between the articles written in 2010 and those written in 2013 and 2014.

This begs the question: how did I know a type of urban formation when I entered
one? Following Latham and Sassen (2005: 10-11) there needs to be a sufficiently
coherent configuration of organisation (rules, roles, vested interests, opportunity
costs), of interaction (power-relations and coordination), of space (built environment)
and shared meaning (people see this space as a place). Much work has established
the connection between settlement type and quality of housing and basic services, and
settlement type and how claims are made and to whom they are made (Harriss, 2007;

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9 For the sake of brevity, from this point forward ‘capacities’ refers to both powers and susceptibilities.
10 This was done in part by utilizing deprivation maps produced by Karin Pleffer (see Baud et al., 2008 for details of
this process).
Baud and de Wit, 2008; Chatterjee, 2004). The importance of local leaders, landlords, municipal councillors (MCs) and political parties in drawing, co-opting, or blocking resources and interventions from entering their turf has been fairly well established (Hansen and Stepput, 2001; van Dijk, 2006; de Wit, 2010; Berenschot, 2009; Witsoe, 2011). Thus this analysis began with selecting locations diverse in terms of locality development, socio-demographics of residents, and the presumed legal status of residents. The official political and administrative boundary of each locality was the electoral ward boundary (formal jurisdiction of the elected MC)—another factor establishing coherence. Both those inside and outside these locations connect these places with shared patterns of behaviour, and they are sources of identification from within and without. Initial field visits observed indications of institutions and practices that cohere around those living within these wards. They exhibited sufficient organisational, spatial, material, practical, and imagined coherence to be considered social-spatial formations. Figure 2, at the end of this chapter, includes maps of the cities and the locations of the 11 cases.

2.3 Research Design

I spent a total of 13 months engaged in fieldwork over a two and half year period between January 2009 and June 2011. Seven months were focused on Kalyan-Dombivli, four months on Mira-Bhayandar, and two months were spent interviewing people in Mumbai, Thane, and Delhi from various state and parastatal agencies.

Exploring and Gaining Access within Subaltern Cities

Besides a few master student projects, no academic work in English was found on these two cities. In this way, they are already subaltern because they represent gaps in our archival, codified, and peer-reviewed knowledge on Indian cities (pace Spivak, 1998). This situation required an initial phase of exploration using a flexible and opportunistic qualitative research approach. First there was a trust-building phase with informal discussions and exploratory site visits with actors usually associated with political society, such as MCs, political party offices and workers, lower level bureaucrats, and municipal engineers and staff. Before this process began, my research assistant introduced me to the chief municipal commissioner, the mayor and the heads of opposition parties. During these initial exchanges we would explain my research in terms of wanting to understand how the municipality manages issues of increasing demand, limited resources and state policies that often do not match up well with circumstances on the ground. Basically, how do their cities work in practice to provide basic infrastructure and services to a growing and diverse population was the topic. I normally answered more questions than I asked in this initial phase, and a few times meetings ended with me having my picture taken for local newspapers. Luckily everyone gave their verbal permission and the municipal commissioners of both cities signed a letter saying that they were aware of our research, and that their subordinates should help us to complete our study. These letters proved helpful in making respondents and interlocutors feel at ease given that I was the first foreign
researcher they had met; thus there were concerns about why I was coming to them and uncertainty regarding how this interaction should play-out. Whenever possible during these first discussions we tried to manage a tour of their area of operation in the city. This proved instrumental for picking up on less formalised aspects of occupancy and locality development. In this manner we were also able to see who came up to actors, how and for what. What these actors tended to point out in these tours, and to whom or what they placed responsibility became analytically useful as the research progressed. These site tours were a catalyst for discussions on the practices and power-relations in different formations. These tours also gave residents and local notables a chance to see us with municipal actors and politicians, and to hear about my research. Often people would ask to talk to us later over tea or lunch on our own. These unplanned and largely unstructured exchanges proved valuable for getting a feel for the different areas of the city. When tours were not applicable or possible, we tried to stay by the respondent as long as possible. We did not mind at all when visits or phone calls demanded their time and attention. Many times we were not asked to leave; this gave us opportunities to observe practices and interactions in real time. Key informants emerged in this phase and came in two types: people very knowledgeable or active in local politics that we sought ought, and key informants who sought us out. Those who sought us out were either curious about us, interested in venting their frustrations, or gatekeepers. Access of any kind needs to be utilised and we met regularly with key informants to discuss what general findings were emerging to note their reactions and advice—keeping in mind possible biases. There were three assistant municipal commissioners, six MCs, three party workers, one MLA, two local builders, two heads of self-help groups, one slum-lord, two real estate brokers, and one goonda\textsuperscript{11} who became key informants. This variety also helped to offset biases. Being a novelty in the city and endeavouing to be as social as possible, we often accepted invitations for lunch or dinner and to participate in cultural activities, which allowed us to capture some of everyday life via participant observation.

\textbf{Case Studies and Institutional Ethnography}

Given the lack of prior academic work in these cities, the necessity to account for as many contextual factors as possible, the prevalence of informality, and because statistical analysis was not a priority, case-studies were carried out in 11 electoral wards. Institutional ethnography focuses on the actualities of people’s experiences and practices related to specific issues and problems (see Smith, 2005). Actors are seen as practitioners who know how to do things related to their everyday lives. What people do and how they experience what happens is the first step. Next, one looks for what people are doing, and how they experience the effects of practices and social relations stemming from multiple sites. The goal is to have a better idea, for example,

\textsuperscript{11} Local strongman, mafia type.
of how the actions and regular experiences of a MC are connected to other actors and contexts, many of which the councillor is likely unaware:

Our everyday worlds are not self-contained, although we do have intimate knowledge of them. They are coordinated with unknown others who are acting elsewhere and at other times. This is the problematic of institutional ethnography (Smith, 2002: 18).

The focus of my interaction and observation within electoral wards was on what people did when dealing with issues regarding locality development and occupancy. By prompting people to recount what they did, in particular where, with who and why, the social organisation and power structures of these activities began to take shape. As my understanding of this organisation evolved, the questions I asked and what I focused on observationally shifted accordingly. Data was collected via observation, interviews, semi-structured informal discussions, and focus group discussions. From this data composite standpoints were abstracted in terms of how these processes are experienced and engaged by different actors, such as: resident standpoint, administrative standpoint, landlord standpoint, builder standpoint. Lastly, important physical sites where coordination related to specific issues tend to cluster were discerned. For these cases, the MC's office was one such site.

Weekly visits were made to the electoral wards. We spent the most time with MCs, party workers, residents who befriended us and other key informants. Whenever possible we devised reasons for walking around the ward. We always stopped by the MC's local office first before going about our business out of respect, and because these are hubs of coordination. Often these courtesy calls stretched out for 2 hours giving us regular opportunities for observation and for impromptu discussions with a variety of actors. Initially every MC in our sample and their top party-worker were given the same interview. Subsequent discussions developed organically. The goal was to understand processes and to discern key actors and conditions, rather than asking similar actors the same questions.

Once it seemed that the spatial-political organisation of occupancy and locality development within these formations had been grasped. I prepared talking points to go over with pertinent external officials and actors. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with officials at the Mumbai Metropolitan Regional Development Authority, the Directorate of Municipal Affairs, the Ministry of Urban Poverty and Housing, two lawyers and two plaintiffs in Public Interest Litigations (PILs) related to unauthorised construction in these cities, three officials of housing society federations/associations, two real estate developers, and the first chief municipal commissioner of Mira-Bhayander. We also collected three years of local newspaper archives from municipal public relations officers, and I searched several online archives of English language newspapers looking for articles referencing key themes of this study.
The last phase of research included a household survey administered to 550 households, 50 from each ward in our sample. The surveys were inputted into SPSS and analysed using cross tabs to compare responses within and between formations.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

During lunch and at the end of the day Nutan and I compared notes and interpretations of the days’ events. I would first write these in my field journal, and then type them up more formally in the evening. Process diagrams were used and revised throughout based on different standpoints. Almost every weekend I combined and refined my daily field notes to send them to my supervisors for feedback. All my primary and secondary data were inputted into NiVivo for more systematic coding and analysis. PDF files can be uploaded and coded in this program; this allowed me to incorporate scholarly literature and keep an on-going dialogue with relevant debates and established conceptualisations. Original, secondary and bibliographical data sources were colour coded differently.

The database was approached both deductively and inductively via coding, abstraction, and dimensionalisation. Data was coded by attaching a label to sections of text in terms of what phenomena it is thought to belong, represent or be an instance of. Most of my codes were related to actors/roles, practices, rationale or motivations, and the direct and indirect links between these to discern how occupancy and locality development are organised. This process is the beginning of generating meaning and locating patterns in data. It also allows one to separate out extraneous details and to retool your data collection accordingly. Abstraction is where you combine codes in terms of shared properties. For example, I combined: fixer, broker, gatekeeper, middleman, party-worker, and tout under ‘mediators’ and these practices under ‘mediating’. Going forward, I looked for incidents where these came up to see differences and similarities. This process offered directionality in terms of focusing on how mediation and mediators changed or not in the formations being studied. This comparative process brought out the dimensionality of ‘mediators’ and ‘mediating’ in terms of their properties and capacities. It was this process that brought out the typology of slum, gaathan and standard formations as an important contextual factor shaping who mediates with whom, how, and for what. Coding, abstraction, comparison and dimensionalisation are iterative processes. The data record needs to be re-read every time a new abstraction or dimensionality emerges, which can of course cause previous codes to be deleted, recoded, or to be added or removed from abstractions. For example, a year after my fieldwork ended, I realised that mediating needed to be separated into mediating and intermediating.

Moving from analytical work to interpretation requires integration, were I worked to flesh out if and how my conceptualisations (abstractions) were co-productive of the uneven development between the different types of urban formations. This was done my looking for which actors, roles, practices, relationships and situations tend to
conjoin or form governing networks or configurations (however loosely) within these formations, and between these formations and the municipality.

**Ethical Considerations**

Some of what was observed and shared is technically illegal, and for some ethically problematic. This type of information was shared willingly, without any direct solicitation. However, when key informants began to see Nutan and myself as people who understood ‘how things really work,’ this prompted even greater sharing and elaboration. A few slum and gaonhan residences, who became worried that they had spoken too freely, asked specifically that I their names not be mentioned. This was, of course, complied with.

Everyone knew that I was doing research for my PhD, and that I was not working for the government or for the press. I made it regularly clear that I was not a route for funding or for pressuring government actors and agencies. To give back, three workshops were organised, one targeting MCs, one targeting leaders of women’s self-help groups, and one targeting kids. They were on how one could use tools available for free on the internet to collect and analyses information on your localities and included an overview of municipal governance. A report based on my thesis will be sent to respondents and others who expressed interest.

**Limitations**

More than the methods chosen to collect data and the instruments we use to process data, the researcher/writer—what they look for and how, their predispositions for certain theories and arguments, and the composition of their sociological and geographical imagination—is the centre of gravity. By the end of data collection and analysis, there are many colours available on our palette and the canvas has certain parameters, so to speak, but how we put it all together is still significantly a creative process. This creative process is rooted in scholarly literature, ethnographic and survey data, and systematic analysis with the purpose of providing insights into actual situations, but remains, nonetheless, a product of my observations, inclinations, choices, and interpretations. So the main limitations of this study must therefore lie with me.

I do not speak Marathi or Hindi and almost always worked with my research assistant Nutan Shivtare. Even when English was not an issue, I worked with Nutan to give people a choice and because four eyes are better than two. Nutan has a MSW and a background in slum advocacy. She also worked with me during my fieldwork in Mumbai for my master’s thesis, and we have remained friends since. In the mornings we discussed our schedule and strategy for the day to make sure we understood the ‘why’ behind the questions being asked and the people we were tracking down, and to share our thoughts and concerns. This allowed us to be on the same page and reduced what can get lost in translation in the field.
Validity issues with government data, particularly where slums and unauthorised development are concerned, are another limitation. Lack of computerisation, non-compliance with protocols, and issues of politicisation figure in here, such as practices of paying people to fill in forms rather than paying people to carry out surveys (to save money and/or shape results) and the reliance of administrators on the local knowledge of politicians and other local leaders. Ideas of risk and reward figure in to how government agencies define and collect data on slums, inequality, and unauthorised development. This was offset by triangulation with other data sources when available.
Figure 2: Mira-Bhayandar and Kalyan-Dombivli Maps, Boundaries and Cases
(Source: Author used Scribblemaps.com)