1-7-2022

Book Review: Properties of Rent: Community, Capital and Politics in Globalising Delhi

Aniket Nandan

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.nls.ac.in/nlsj

Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.55496/SYHV1975
Available at: https://repository.nls.ac.in/nlsj/vol16/iss1/11

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in National Law School Journal by an authorized editor of Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact library@nls.ac.in.
BOOK REVIEW

Aniket Nandan*

Sushmita Pati, *Properties Of Rent: Community, Capital And Politics In Globalising Delhi* (Cambridge University Press, 2022)

Post-independence India's yearning for economic development through urbanisation led to far-reaching transformations in its social and political realms. The phenomenon of the urban village is one of many such outcomes of this. Sushmita Pati's meticulously researched monograph, *Properties of Rent*, captures the peculiarities of the urban village, characterised as stretches of land located deep within the city yet designated as rural. This is not a mere narration of agrarian transition, dispossession or violent expropriation of land by the state. Rather, the book posits a grounded exposition of an uneven process of land acquisition, exemption and capital accumulation, mediated by landowning communities. It successfully captures the fraught integration of the inhabitants of urban villages into urban land markets, and their accumulation of property through rentiership and speculative investments in land.

According to Pati, the urban village represents more than a social and spatial articulation of uneven capitalist development. She alerts readers to an underlying narrative of continuity and change. In the opening lines, Pati, akin to a storyteller, conveys one of her respondents' narrations quoting Nehru, 'Badhte hue bachhe aur badhte hue shahar ko main nahi rok sakta' (I cannot stop a growing child or an expanding city). This effectively captures the dilemmas of growth as well as insecurities and anxieties associated with it. However, according to Pati, the chronicling of the history of two urban villages in Delhi—Munirka and Shahpur Jat—cannot be reduced to a standard story of dispossession.

'Tenuous property titles and the strong community ties in these villages have proved to be particularly productive in the global economy.... [They] have come to find their place in and as the underbellies of the city: an inchoate, messy form which absorbs the contradictions of capital' (p. 3).
Properties of Rent locates the anxieties of the inhabitants as emerging from a compelling impulse to hold on to kinship relations as they navigate their changing economic realities. The forms of property accumulation that have evolved in urban villages are products of their strategies to manage these anxieties and the interface between global capital and local ties.

One of the key forms of accumulation that the book brings to light is ‘rent’, which is treated as distinct from capital. ‘[R]ent, unlike capital, is not produced by labour, rent is an expression of possession’ (p.10). Pati argues that, even as it ensures accumulation, rent functions as a node around which existing notions of prestige are reinforced, if not reconstituted. The fact that rent continually operates within the context of global urban capital produces generalised conditions of fear and anxiety. Urban villages showcase a peculiar tenacity, which can also be seen as a distinctive aspect of Indian modernity—the ability to allow the past to live in the present. The boundaries between urban and rural, traditional and modern, individual and communitarian ethics are similarly ambivalent in urban villages. Their inhabitants are thus constantly grappling with the emerging contradictions. Change is not always desirable as many of them benefit from the greyness of these boundaries. The book’s nuanced articulation of the spatial and temporal liminality that manifests in urban villages is among its key strengths.

I. **Changing Values: People and Land**

The first chapter introduces the reader to the two key players in land ownership in urban villages: the state and local residents (landowners). It captures the everydayness of bureaucratic regimes, valuation of property, and modalities of making spaces and citizens legible. As the state uses law to assert its presence and control over the inhabitants, it must also face everyday forms of resistance. These often take the form of claims of the community over land through ‘kabza’, or the informal occupation of land. The author points out that, if land acquisition is how the state partakes in primitive accumulation, kabza is the community’s response to it (p. 52).

Another key mechanism through which villagers respond to the changing value of land is ‘bhaichara’ (literally, brotherhood). Chapter 2 highlights the centrality of kinship networks among the Jat inhabitants of the two urban villages studied in this book. Pati observes how land acquisition by the state, compensation money, fragmentation of land and the declining fortunes of intermediate landowners pushed the Jat community to venture into new modes of capital accumulation. In pursuit of diverse strategies...
of accumulation, landowners become transporters, transporters become financiers, construction contractors become educationists, and local policemen or ex-army personnel become builders. Such decisions are made in several permutations and combinations at different moments, as families and individuals consider their options in the context of the changing urban political economy. This is vital to understand the transformation of the community in these urban villages, from agriculturalists to landowners for whom rent became a medium of capital accumulation sans labour.

II. Property in a Neoliberal Market
In the third chapter of the book, Pati explores the friction between legal and illegal in the wake of neoliberal expansion in India. Undoubtedly, the 1990s changed the physical and economic character of India as a nation, and urban villages in Delhi did not miss the train. With the meteoric rise in land values, urban villages came to stand for spaces in the city that defy almost all principles of architecture to follow just one: maximisation of space. The inflow of migrants to the city for education, jobs and menial labour fast became a new indomitable reality of cities in the 1990s. For many such people who wanted to avoid high rents, there was no better alternatives than urban villages. For landowners, renting became an immensely profitable means for accumulating capital. Renting out spaces to accommodate the influx of migrant and informal workshops, or fabricators, providing production back-up to the factories in the adjacent industrial estate created an affordable social and economic reproduction of resources in a city. Therefore, in this chapter Pati characterises the relationship between the migrant and the urban village as a symbiosis between two different biological organisms that is mutualistic and parasitic. She also draws our attention to the role of the state in managing both migrants and urban villages as both configure themselves as margins, which informs the practices of the neoliberal state. This is where Pati deftly unveils urban villages not merely as the 'underbelly' of a city but as spaces that inform us about the precarity of everyday life. The presence and absence of the state causes myriad complications for its citizens whose lives are calculable only as entities to be governed. This is reflected in the shifts in the state's governance strategies as well, as spaces and people who were hitherto marginalised and abject became sources of revenue generation and a political subject of interest for the state.

III. Caste, Kinship and Politics in an Urban Village
Understanding the associational life in an urban village is pivotal to Pati's analysis of accumulation strategies. Chapter 4 looks at the interweaving
mechanism of economic interest and caste networks that controls rental markets in urban villages. This ‘vernacular market of renting out property’ is forged through old institutional networks. Pati deftly analyses how, in the face of neoliberal individualism, landlords in the urban villages also became increasingly protective of their cultural identities and spaces that symbolised this identity and communitarian pride.

The simultaneous existence of spatial precarity and burgeoning confidence and pride from capital accumulation (by leveraging opportunities provided by the market) make these urban villages sites for discrimination but also openness, as they accommodate those who find the city unwelcoming. In pointing out this conundrum, Pati analyses how communal social control through panchayats and kunbas defines the structure of rent in urban villages, and how majboori, or compulsion, defines their social life.

Pati also highlights the importance of caste and politics as ‘pivotal to one’s understanding of the social life of rent’ (p.200). These have complex implications for property ownership, renting as a strategy, the accumulation of capital as well as how power manifests itself in urban villages. Caste and class status shape not only prospects of land ownership but also regulate the workings of the panchayat, Kunba and other social spaces. Other have noted that the modern political democracy and the neoliberal turn in the post-1990s brought some, albeit limited, opportunities to marginalised castes in urban villages.

IV. ADVANCING THE UNDERSTANDING OF RENT AS ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL
Pati's use of an ethnographic lens to study archival data, legal documents culminates in a long-term perspective on the emergence and evolution of urban villages. While the ethics and the legality of these modes of capital accumulation are anything but straightforward, the study certainly presents a compelling case for the need to evaluate the necessity of spaces that can be as accommodative in a resource-strained capitalist society. The variety of sources that the book relies on advance a substantive understanding of the dynamism of land and its value in an urban village. Pati offers readers two different yet co-constitutive stories: one of the landlords and the other of the people who seek rent in these spaces. The landlord narrative is a response to the changing status and value of their land, the need to maintain primordial affinities, and the need to manage the accumulation of capital without interrupting a communitarian ethos. For the tenants—mostly comprising marginalised social groups and low-income workers—the narrative is one of
co-existence and conflict. They are viewed as prospects for money-making, but also as 'outsiders', and habitually subjected to derogatory remarks.

While the book effectively chronicles the shifting spatiality and durability of kinship in urban villages, it does not adequately explore the interconnectedness between migration and rental markets. This could have substantiated the critique of a neoliberal state that deploys extraordinarily malleable technologies of governance as well as exclusion. It would also have illuminated the impact of migration on real incomes and wealth generation. Moreover, the author could have explored the non-labour channels by which migrants have been influencing the socio-economic and political fabric of urban villages.

The book addresses the precarity of Delhi's urban villages which, while representing informality, have also been a part of a rural-urban circular migration trajectory. The narrative appears to undervalues the migrants' straddling of rural and urban spaces in light of the agrarian transformation of the last few decades. Migrants, attracted to urban villages because of low rents, also bring their own culture, traditions, customs and attitudes. While the book does articulate the consequences of these differences and othering, it does not devote enough attention to the demand effect of rental pricing on migrants as well as landlords owing to competitiveness of rental markets and the unplanned character of urban villages.

In the context of urban planning, another pertinent question arises that finds limited consideration: can urban villages be planned? Pati's analysis of the interactions between formality and informality in the development of urban villages from the perspective of spatial planning and governance need further deliberation. One obvious impediment here is the erasure of indigenous spatial patterns, which make it more difficult to conduct long-term investigations concerning interactions between formal and informal planning practices.

V. Conclusion

Properties of Rent offers vital perspectives on the pathologies of urban planning, politics of the state and neoliberal precariousness. The book also poses a salient question to legal scholars: to what extent do government regulations matter for the development of a well-functioning rental market when it comes to informal arrangements in urban villages? Can there be mechanisms of rent control in spaces that defy the definition of formality and legal consistency? Pati's articulation of spaces and people does not offer
neat geographical or social arrangements; rather, it pushes readers to see
the entangled, multiple and locally articulated meanings and experiences of
spatial-temporal changes, state monopoly, kinship relations and modes of
capital accumulation.

This book is relevant not only to scholars of urban studies and the political
economy, but—especially given the methods deployed and its flawless
narration—to any reader seeking to understand human interaction with
capital, traditional institutions and modern state. A formidable academic
endeavour, Properties of Rent questions the unregulated fetish for growth
and capital accumulation by the state as well as non-state actors. Moreover,
it highlights the existence of multiple modernities, where caste, kinship,
and renting property as means of capital accumulation sans labour, take
exception to the forms of modernity imposed by the neoliberal state.