

Adam Michael Auerbach and Tariq Thachil. *Migrants and Machine Politics: How India's Urban Poor Seek Representation and Responsiveness*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023. 275. Softcover, \$35.00.

In *Migrants and Machine Politics: How India's Urban Poor Seek Representation and Responsiveness*, Auerbach and Thachil explore how Indian urban slum populations leverage goods and services from government officials. Their research stretched over eight years and focused on two major cities, Bhopal and Jaipur. The research included fieldwork, forced-choice conjoint experiments, interviews, surveys, and the use of satellite imagery. Auerbach and Thachil test political theories that suggest the votes of slum dwellers can-be-bought by election-day gifts and challenge the belief that urban machine politics operate as a top down mechanism. They also question the assumption that Indian political engagement occurs within lines of caste, ethnicity and/or religion.

Auerbach and Thachil focus their research on 110 squatter settlements which include “over 300 sub-castes (jati), stretching across all strata of the Hindu social hierarchy and a wide range of Muslim zat” (p. 29). Ten million Indians move from rural areas to urban centers each year (p. 239) contributing to the development and growth of squatter settlements across India. Because of their tentative legal status and the rapidity of expansion, slums dweller struggle to obtain what they need from local governing authorities.

Among their findings is the way in which local slum leaders emerge. Those who prove themselves effective in assisting neighbors develop followings. Key to their efficacy may be their relatively high level of education (e.g., helpful when applying for ration cards) and connectivity outside of the slum to government bureaucracies and officials. These informal leadership roles are cherished for the opportunity they provide for upward mobility (e.g., within political party structures). Because of the fluidity of slum populations, leaders assist a diversity

of residents. The wider their support base, the more effective they are especially in turning out crowds to pressure government officials to act.

Political machine operatives, constantly looking to recruit talent and garner the votes of slum residents, interface with slum leaders petitioning for assistance. Slum leaders with “mouth publicity” (p. 130) can turn out crowds, and are of interest to political patrons. Patrons depend on slum leaders who can elevate events (e.g., a gathering to provide health services to residents) or when community improvements are dedicated (e.g., an ally way).

Because of limited resources, slum leaders and patrons must carefully choose which requests to pursue or grant. Both slum leaders and patrons favor requests that facilitate their claim-making (p. 178), i.e., elevate their role in meeting community needs (e.g., by tagging a water tank with their face and name). Auerbach and Thachil find, in contradistinction to expectations, that leaders and patrons rarely prioritize particularistic solicitations, i.e., petitions from those of their caste/ethnicity/religion. And they find there is agency among slum dwellers to the extent that they choose the leaders who interface with patrons in quest of goods and services for the community. It is at the point of slum leader/patron interface that bottom up movement exists within the political machine.

That what they have discerned through their meticulous execution of method and data analysis will stand the test of time has much to do with the shifting nature of facts on the ground in India. The dominance of Modi’s BJP party and its move to centralize government (p. 241) and act upon its Hindutva ideology (p. 245) challenges both mechanisms of local power and cross-religion/caste mobilization of groups and votes documented by this work.

This book is well-written and the scholarship is excellent. Auerbach and Thachil make good use of extant research while contributing new insights into the agency of slum-dwellers and

how the bottom, feeds machines politics. And while the authors consistently point to the agency of slum residents, they constantly remind us of those who are still excluded from the system as it currently operates. This book would be a good addition to classes that deal with the urban poor, machine politics, and South Asia. As a methodological treatise, it may be appropriate for graduate research classes. It belongs in the library of all Indian scholars. Kudos to the authors for producing such of fine piece of work.

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