

Transcript Ep. 65: Book Review Roundtable: Migrants and Machine Politics

[00:00:00] **Intro:** This is the Urban Political, the podcast on urban theory, research, and activism.

[00:00:11] **Nitin Bathla:** Welcome, dear listeners. Today, we are here to discuss Adam Auerbach's new book: Migrant and Machine Politics, how India's urban poor seek representation, and responsiveness. Which Adam has written with Tariq Thachil. And I'm really glad that Adam is here with us to discuss his book. And we have two other really great respondents who will introduce themselves just in a second.

[00:00:41] **Adam Auerbach:** Hello everyone. I'm Adam Auerbach. I'm an associate professor at the School of International Service, at American University. And please just let me add that it's incredibly exciting and an honour to be here with you Nitin, Sofie, and Nico. Thank you so much for reading and engaging our book.

I'm very excited for the conversation.

[00:01:05] **Sofie Heintz:** Hi, everyone. I'm Sofie Heinz. I'm a political science PhD researcher at the University of Zurich. Where I'm both affiliated with the Political Science Department and Indian Studies Department at the Institute of Asian Oriental Studies. And in my dissertation project, I explore the changes in public service provision in Delhi under the current government of the Aam Aadmi party. And I'm really, really excited to engage in this conversation because Adam's entire work has been extremely informative, for my understanding of not only ground level dynamics of public service delivery in different contexts in India, but also on how political science research is really at its best when a multitude of methodologies are employed and complement each other to build and test theoretical arguments. So, I'm really excited.

[00:01:49] **Nicolás Palacios Crisóstomo:** Hello everyone. I'm also very excited to be a part here of this conversation. My name is Nicolás Palacios. I'm a PhD researcher at ETH Zurich at the Spatial Development and Urban Policy Group. My research is related to the role of digital platforms in the production of urban space, and how they rely on migrant labour in the Global North, to actually be able to provide the services. And then also the relations of exploitation and ambivalent relation between labour and the platform. So, I think that there's also a lot of very interesting parallels, even though the book is focused on India, I think that there's a lot that we can take away to understand representation and responsiveness in other contexts.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here.

[00:02:40] **Nitin Bathla:** Thanks, Adam. Thanks, Sofie. Thanks, Nico. Thanks for joining us. Thanks for taking your time to discuss this important book. So just to add, this book is a part of the Princeton Studies in Political Behaviour series. And it's available to buy online.

You can buy it in paperback and as an e-book on most platforms across the world or access it through your libraries. I really enjoyed the book, but just to contextualize it in the moment, we just had a very big political upheaval in India, a couple of days ago. And it was in this context that I enjoyed the book even more, which is a very shocking landslide victory of the centre-left Congress party over the quite divisive and religious majoritarian politics of the BJP in the Indian state of Karnataka in South India.

Which is one of the biggest states. And it's somehow seen by political commentators as a turning tide in this sort of right-wing majoritarian politics. And just to bring this current moment and project it into Adam's book, which I don't know if Adam foresaw that this moment would come or not.

But just to say that Adam's and of course Tariq's book focuses on two quarter settlements in two states, which are in central and western India, which are Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and two capital cities, which is Jaipur and Bhopal of these states respectively.

Adam and Tariq's book takes us in the everyday life of quarter settlements in these cities and tries to bring us close to political representation that migrants, coming into these quarter settlements, seek. Which I've found quite refreshing because it doesn't presuppose a gangster type environment and tries to unmask and unearth some of the deeper politics. I really enjoyed this metaphor of machine politics, which was somehow to me, as an urban studies person and not coming from political science, was unknown. But perhaps in political science, it's quite well known, this machine politics metaphor.

I really enjoyed it because it is talking about how, perhaps squatter politics or squatter settlements, which we, as urban studies scholars, see and discuss and write about so much, it actually works, and how people living in these squatter settlements build up political representation. It's a very interesting and exciting book that deals with this.

So perhaps, Adam, jumping right into my first question to you, is, if you could talk a little bit more about the metaphor of machine politics itself?

[00:05:37] **Adam Auerbach:** Absolutely. Nitin, thank you for that generous introduction to the book, and yes, the idea of the political party machine, is absolutely central to our theoretical framework, our empirical work.

Party machines are really defined with two respects. One is their shape, the way that they're organized, and the other is what they do. In terms of their shape, they're hierarchically organized. They connect, most often, low-income urban neighbourhoods. Up to the highest echelons of politics in the city, political elites in the city, through tiered networks of party workers.

In terms of what they do, they're most known for engaging in the exchange of access to basic public goods and services for political support. And the study of political party

machines goes back at least a century. Chicago school sociologists studying low-income migrants coming from Europe, settling in cities like New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago.

Living in ethnic enclave, trying to find work, trying to get electricity connections for their houses or water connections, access to hospital bed. And these political party machines, in the cities in North America, most famous of which would be the Democratic Party machine during the Gilded Age period in New York City, Tammany Hall Politics, where the Democratic Party machine had ward bosses.

Who lived, were embedded in these neighbourhoods, would take up the problems for migrants, and seek to solve them with the expectation that when election time comes, those low-income migrants will shuffle behind the ward boss, in support of the democratic party machine. Much of the roots of this sort of idea of the party machine goes back decades.

And as political scientists and other sociologists sought to understand party organization, processes of migration, urbanization, in the Global South, this idea of the party machine, again, in terms of both its structure and what it does, really echoed with what they were seeing. So, there's outstanding work on, for instance, the PRI in Mexico, the Peronist Party in Argentina.

The examples were always stretching across the Global South and the Global North. A lot of the work by Chubb on party machines in Sicily. Just to give you a sense this is a literature that's a century in the making. So, in terms of the two cities that we've studied in India, Jaipur, and Bhopal, and we certainly don't think this is unique to these two cities, but the Congress Party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the two parties that are primarily in competition in our two study states and in our two study cities, Jaipur and Bhopal, are organized in the very same way.

You have booth level committees that stretch down into the individual gullies of *kachi bastis*, the Hindi word for squatter settlements. And these organizations in the neighbourhoods are then linked to political elites in Jaipur and Bhopal through the ward committee, through block committee, through the city committee, district committee.

So, there's essentially a small army of party workers. *Karyakarta* would be the Hindi word. Who connects these low-income settlements in India's Cities to these upper strata politics in the city. And they too are engaging in very sort of similar activities as what was documented by scholars looking at the Democratic Party machine in New York City.

People in squatter settlements. These are areas of India's cities where property rights are either totally absent or weak. Where residents, you know, there's the constant fear that the bulldozers will come and knock down their homes.

They emerge on greenfield sites where there's very little access to basic infrastructure and services. Especially when the, of course, the community first emerges. So, there's significant

need and political parties seek to exchange access to these very basic goods and services, and protection from eviction, for political support.

Of course, during elections, and this always comes up in the newspapers, parties engaging in activities that are referred to by political scientists as vote buying. So, you'll get parties handing out things like *desi daru* country liquor, small amounts of cash, bags of food, again, for low-income residents of these communities to try to bring them over to that side of the party.

Tariq and I, in doing the research for this book, which unfolded over the course of almost a decade. Several years of ethnographic fieldwork between the two of us, surveys among residents, community leaders, and politicians in the city. We were really trying to understand, as India continues its urbanization story, India already has half a billion people living in its cities.

Almost half of India's whole population will live in cities just in the next couple decades. So, much of the migration from the countryside, people moving to cities, oftentimes residing in squatter settlements. How are they being incorporated into the politics of the city? We really look to how the networks are constructed within these party machines.

How they're connecting, or not connecting, low-income voters to the states to get access to these goods and services and to improve their security. And this very theme, of course, immediately brought up the idea of the party machine. It serves as both, that metaphor, but also our theoretical framework and the empirical focus of the project.

[00:10:47] **Sofie Heintz:** Thank you so much. I think that's so interesting. And I think you already gave some very interesting crumbs and outlooks on what the book is all about. I want to jump on the point of party machine and link it to the discussion that you have towards the end of the book on centralization and the risk of centralization, what it means for public service delivery.

So currently there's a lot of discussion on how the BJP is putting a lot of effort into centralizing public service delivery, ever since they got into power on the national level in 2014. And currently in Delhi, for example, you see so many posters celebrating how the rule in the centre of the BJP and also in India's biggest state, Uttar Pradesh UP, how this double engine [unintelligible] is working together to deliver development efficiently to the people.

So, you argue in your conclusion that centralization of service delivery might actually undermine the successful claim making processes that you show in your book because it lowers competition on a local level. And then there's less opportunities for brokers who find themselves in opposition on the local level.

So, who don't belong to the ruling party on a local level to do this governance level leapfrogging and reach out to a party leader that might be at a higher level, higher governance level, but of their own party, co partisan. So, this undermines these bottom-up channels. But at the same time, I think there is a point, people do talk about how efficiency

and public service delivery can be increased when you have officials on different governance levels actually working together and cooperating and merging.

So, what do you think, which model works better in the sense that, do you see a difference in the quality of public service delivery? For example, when a counsellor in MLA, or maybe other levels, are co-partisans, is it more easy to get budget? Is there a difference in the speed these requests are resolved across constituency, or do we actually see that competition really is the driving force behind keeping people on their toes to actually deliver to their constituencies?

[00:12:37] **Adam Auerbach:** Absolutely. Sofie thank you. That's an absolutely fascinating question. And what we sought to do in the book, they're spending 200 pages on trying to understand how these networks are constructed. After people move to these squatter settlements, how do they choose their informal leaders in their communities.

Generating this cast of characters that we refer to, in the literature, as brokers. How do brokers select the residents in the communities that they help? How do politicians in the city go about selecting local leaders within the communities, these brokers, to bring into their party network? Throughout the book we're engaging in sort of the study of these grassroots politics in the city.

But then we get to the end of the book and what we're seeking to do is, what is the relevance of studying this grassroots politics in a polity, and in a time when so much political power is being funnelled upward, and is being concentrated, really, within the prime minister's office and this new welfareism in India, intimately tied into the Modi brand.

How would these dynamics change what we observed over the course of the decade. And most of that data was collected before the 2019 election. We're trying to put our findings into conversation with these larger forms and trajectories in India's politics.

And exactly as you said, we try to anticipate, at the end of the book and the conclusion. As power gets sucked upwards, what is this going to do to local politics? And you put your finger on one expectation that we might have for this. In chapter five of the book, we get into this idea of credit claiming.

That politicians in cities, much like politicians elsewhere, outside of cities and outside of India, they like to take credit for the developmental goods that they deliver within communities. At least Nitin and Sofie, I know, I'm sure you've seen in India's cities that these are landscapes that are often littered with credit claiming paraphernalia and signs, it's very common in our field work to go into community and there'd be an iron sign cemented into the ground saying ward counsellor, these elected officials, I'm the one that gave you this paved road. I am the one that gave you these streetlights, or the sewer. You'll see water

tanks that are tagged with graffiti of the names of politicians on it. So much of the oxygen, for this effort around credit claiming, gets sucked out of the room when suddenly credit for it is brought upwards, the image of Modi and the central politicians and the central government branded on it.

It takes away those opportunities for credit claiming. And I think we would expect that if things continue to go in that direction, it would change, to some degree, the dynamics of credit claiming with implications for how distributed politics unfolds in India's cities. As you also mentioned, we surveyed as part of our book 629 slum leaders, leaders of these squatter settlement communities, the vast majority of whom, work for a political party, either the Congress party or the BJP. The BJP hegemony, at the centre.

And Rajasthan will, of course, be engaged in elections this coming year. With many expectations that the BJP will come to power in the state. If you're a congress party worker, and it's difficult for you to switch to the BJP, or you don't want to switch to the BJP, that might be more difficult to access politicians, and therefore access basic public goods and services for your community.

And one interesting thing that we noticed, and again, this might be somewhat unique to Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, due to party systems and electoral competition, although I don't think it is, but it was very rare in the communities that we studied. So, we surveyed 110 squatter settlements, spent a considerable amount of time doing ethnographic case studies in our survey research.

But across these communities, it would be extremely rare for your ward councillor, your MLA, the municipal governments, the mayor, state government, and the centre to all be perfectly aligned. That would be incredibly rare.

A much more common scenario would be, our ward councillor is from the Congress party. The majority in the *Nagar Nigam*, the municipal government, is BJP. The mayor is Congress because there's direct elections for mayor. Our MLA is BJP, our MP is Congress, the state government is Congress, you see where I'm going. So, it was not a common situation, looking at this through the eyes of a resident or a community leader, where they're looking upward towards the states and only seeing one party in power.

There's usually some outlet for you to go to, of someone that has their hands in the gears of the state. for you to bring your petitions and your claims for basic public services for your community. Indian elections are, of course, very hard to predict, extremely competitive, and we certainly expect that to continue, in Rajasthan, in Madhya Pradesh. We really want to keep our eyes, of course, on these larger changes in national politics because they do trickle down with implications to the local level.

And one last thing, one other thing that we try to take on in the conclusion is Hindu majoritarianism. We document in several chapters of our book that the political networks that form in squatter settlements are incredibly multi ethnically diverse. Incredibly ethnically diverse.

With Hindu residents going to Muslim slum leaders, Muslim residents going to Hindu slum leaders, people of different castes, *jāti*, going to leaders of castes that are not their own. People from Rajasthan going to informal leaders, who have migrated from Chhattisgarh or West Bengal. This is not necessarily because of a cosmopolitanism in the city.

Because of the compulsions of wanting to go to somebody that can get things done for your community. And people being willing to overlook ethnicity to turn to somebody that can help them. But with this constant drumbeat, Hindu majoritarianism, that might put great strains, in particular, into religious networks, of problem solving in these communities. It might be just become increasingly untenable to hold up these sorts of connections. But thank you so much for that question, Sofie.

[00:18:18] **Nicolás Palacios Crisóstomo:** I was very captivated by the simplicity, but also the explanatory power that the frame of the arenas of selection gives to the book.

Like the relation between patrons, brokers, and poor migrant voters in the context of Jaipur and Bhopal. But by the conclusion comes up the question of beyond the slums. Then, also very quickly, we start looking at cross national research, single country studies. And I feel that then there's also a shift of the scale.

So we go from the city, again, to talk about national level. And of course, that's the research that's been done, like general political science, always concerned with the state. For me, the work done in the book was extremely interesting, but because it brings back again the question of the urban at the political level of the urban.

So, I wanted to ask you, how do you see the value of reshifting these questions that usually are taken at the national level to the level of the urban and start seeing a lot of these situations as a city at the city level? So, what's your take on this?

[00:19:15] **Adam Auerbach:** I really appreciate that question. And one of the many reasons why I like to hang out with nonpolitical scientists often is.

I mean, I think a lot of the best work on urban governance, politics, development is happening in geography, anthropology, urban planning, I think, at least within comparative politics, and this is very much seen through the lens of American political science, the self-identified sort of, being an urbanist within political science is still very nascent, and with several of my colleagues, we're trying our best to generate a community of scholars who see themselves, at least in part, as urbanists. Because as you're suggesting, cities are unique political spaces.

The built space is unique. It structures social and political life in particular ways. Ideas of migratory churn, people coming and going, the diversity that emerges within cities, and how that intersects with things like racism, discrimination, segregation, to generate particular sort of geographies of where people are in the city and how they interact with politicians and politics in the city.

I certainly personally think, and I know the three of you would agree that thinking through the lens of the city and how the contours, both physically and their economies, how they shape all these important outcomes that we care about at the local level. It's really essential. Political science is of course a very diverse field, with people doing research at multiple levels of analysis, different units of analysis. There's been an interesting sort of subnational turn. A colleague of mine here at American University, Agustina Giraudy along with Eduardo Moncada and Richard Snyder, have a great book on the subnational research design, that sort of going more local facilitates comparison, that you can hold constant national politics and delve more deeply into the local. Tariq and I, in our book, we're not even necessarily seeking to make comparisons between Jaipur and Bhopal, that was always sort of implicitly going on in the background because these, of course, are two different cities. I think the texture of the local, going all the way down into the neighbourhood fascinates us.

These neighbourhoods that we study, these squatter settlements are their own fascinating, unique social and political spaces. The average one emerged around 1980. The average one, again, in our two cities is about 40 years old. Migrants, coming into these greenfield sites, setting up an individual little *jhuggī*, a shanty would be the translation, in this little plot of land.

And the diversity of these communities, people coming from different areas, belonging to different religions, belonging to different caste groups, that's time A, when these communities emerge, we're going in 40 years later, and it's just absolutely fascinating to try to reconstruct the micro histories of these individual neighbourhoods.

They have their own histories. They have their own types of engagement with the states. Patterns of collective action that emerged among residents. And of course, all of this being shaped by a lack of property rights, the threat of eviction, a lack of access to basic public goods and services, engagement with political actors and parties that seek to take advantage of that vulnerability and that precarity, informality in the city to seek political support.

So, looking down at the grassroots, studying it intensely, trying to historicize these processes, which is absolutely crucial. And I think, one of the things that initially brought Tariq and I together was a shared general interest for the grassroots.

And really wanting to grapple with these communities, that are so rich in their histories.

[00:22:41] **Sofie Heintz:** Thank you so much. I would like to actually continue on that conversation, on the specific context of the urban and would like to point out how I think, it's really a great contribution of this book that you focus on a type of politics, community interaction that has so far been understudied in Indian context, informal urban settlements.

And not only for the sake of shedding light on life realities that are already so prevalent are going to become even more prevalent in the coming decades as you outline, but because these are recent settlements of migrants who find themselves in this new societal makeup as these settlements emerge. And give you the opportunity to study how grassroots political power structures are formed in the absence of these century long hierarchical power structures that you often find in villages and that a lot of this patronage literature is also focused on so far.

So, one thing that you find, in the first arena of competition that you look at, when you ask the question, what kind of brokers do people want? What kind of qualities do people look for in a broker? And you find that people generally favour these brokers who are educated and capable.

Capable, that means they have some sort of upward connectivity. They have some link to higher levels of authority or governance that help them place their claims and get them resolved. And you also mentioned that this is to some extent substitutable with co ethnicity. More realistically, actually, people choose a capable leader rather than a co ethnic because in these very ethnically diverse settlements, as you point out, that's just the more prevalent choice.

And still, even if all of these settlers are recent transplants in these settlements, let's say, or they all start from a clean slate. I was wondering about the different kinds of forms of capital that accumulate over time. So, things like land ownership or family businesses, or different forms of employment that allow you to accumulate capital in different forms than wage labour, in which many of these people involve.

Aside from the connectivity part, isn't it that these kinds of people who have more free time also have a particular type of social command over people, are more likely to actually engage in these brokering activities or this social work just because their permission in society allows them to do that.

And building on that, I was wondering whether you, because you also did a lot of archival work, which I find so fascinating. And you document that in the book. As these settlements progress and these power structures become more entrenched, do you see that maybe gradually there's like a kind of, let's say, quote unquote "village type dynastic dynamic" emerge, that might be based on these kinds of different forms of capital?

[00:25:17] **Adam Auerbach:** Sofie, thank you for all these questions that really so nicely centre on chapter two of our book, which exactly as you said, seeks to understand, after the dust of squatting settles, the need for collective action and leadership is really intense. People in the community, who can rally others, write petitions, go visit the offices of bureaucrats and politicians to ask for things for the community.

Just as you said, we seek to ask this question in chapter two. What role do residents play, first of all? Do they actually have agency over the selection of these local informal leaders?

Because much of the literature on local political brokers, and these sorts of informal local leaders would suggest that residents don't really have that much of a role to play, and that they are selected from the top down by parties, and if residents want to turn to their *basti नेता*, slum leader, they can turn to him or her.

If they can't or don't want to, there's not really anybody else to go to. But what we show in the chapter is that residents have significant agency, and this then brings up questions of what kind of leaders do they want? And do those leaders actually emerge? Just as you said, a major driver of this selection decision is the education of those aspiring to be a slum leader.

That it's such an important marker of capability and claim making. That you're able to understand eligibility criteria and read it. You're able to write petitions. You're able to go to the government office, demand some sort of responsiveness from elites to the problems of individual residents and the community as a whole.

You bring up several really interesting points about the ideas of different types of time use, precarity, capital, within these processes of selection, community leaders. Which is an ongoing process. How these patterns of informal leadership within any given community really don't calcify.

Tracing back over several decades within our case study communities. You see the rise and fall of different types of leaders, sometimes that fall is because, as we outline in the book, giving one example, one of the slum leaders that we spent time with, or a former one I should say, started to engage in *gundaagardee*, forceful behaviour, going around, being coercive.

Residents wouldn't have it. So, they showed up at his doorstep one day with rocks. Women took off their *cappal*, their sandals, and sort of beat the politician with their sandals, or the slum leader with their sandals. And he lost power. There's informal elections in these communities, and there's the everyday decisions that residents make about who do I want to support, who do I want to go to and seek help from.

To finally get to your question specifically. The role of one's occupation is essential in this process. Residents in these communities have a wide range of different types of occupations. Many of them, as you note, are *mazdūr*. They leave early in the morning. They're working on construction sites, auto rickshaw drivers, street hawkers selling every imaginable type of wear or food or drink. And as we find, both in terms of our qualitative evidence and our quantitative evidence from our survey, these people are less likely to become slum leaders due to a lack of connectivity to the city bureaucracy or to politicians, but also due to the fact that the incredible precarity of their work in the informal sector doesn't really leave a lot of time to engage in community leadership.

There were certainly slum leaders who were *mazdūr*, who were construction laborers, but they had to balance and juggle that with their community leadership activity. For the most successful slum leaders, the money that you get from solving the problems of residents and

the money you get from political parties during elections can oftentimes dwarf the money that you get through your regular job.

Moving into slum leadership, if you have the qualities to do that, can sometimes be a job in and of itself. But we did find, both qualitative and quantitative evidence that residents who have very modest but still public sector job, specifically in the municipality, are preferred by residents.

So, to give you some examples of these, a *safāī karmacārī*, a very modest job, but one where you're going to the municipality every day. You're interacting with the low, the vernacular sort of bureaucrats of the city. So, you're better able to turn to them, to ask for someone to come and clean up the gutter.

Or for someone to come in and fix that broken streetlight. Another common job would be a *caprāsī*. Doing simple paperwork within the municipality. Or a municipal security guard. So, we have these sorts of quotes in the book and a couple of vignettes of informal leaders who have these sorts of jobs.

Where residents would turn to them and say: "You're going to that very same place every day. You're seeing these people. Take our problems with you and that can help us solve them.". One of the communities that I spent several months in, as an ethnographic case study, one of the leaders was a chauffeur.

A public sector chauffeur for local politicians. And not surprisingly, residents said, you're with these people every day, please be sort of the vehicle for our petition. And gender is of course interacting with all of it. 88 percent of the 629 slum leaders that we surveyed were men.

So, this is a male dominated vocation. That said, one of the many reasons why we love and see the great value in doing both ethnography and surveys and qualitative case studies and archival work, is that in several of our case study communities, there were women who were doing *netāgirī*, they were doing local leadership, but because they are women, they were not bestowed that title of *netā* in the community.

The contours of problem solving and collective action among women is a fascinating and, I think, understudied topic that needs even more research. But women, of course, because of the gendered distribution of tasks at home, gender discrimination by state actors and politicians, all of this combines with things like time use and occupation to marginalize certain groups in the formation of leadership.

So, I think you're absolutely spot on with that question.

[00:31:05] **Nicolás Palacios Crisóstomo:** In 10 years, a lot of things changed. In the last decades, we have seen a very strong eruption at a global level, like global south and global north, digital technologies and changes in the economy which have affected from China to Paraguay.

In this context, a lot of migrant workers have engaged with the digital economy, selling their labour through digital platforms, let's say, which is my area of research. Delivery work, for example. Which in many cases act as arrival infrastructures. So, there's very low entry barriers for migrants to get into this job.

And for these migrants, there's a constant need to make do in everyday life. Like we all do. But with a lot of other hurdles. And to balance the ambivalence of this new type of labour, they have to always be available in a sense to serve the convenience economy. Nowadays, in my own work, I've seen that there's a lot of struggles from formal institutions such as unions, and political parties to connect with these workers.

Have you seen, in this time, a change or a relation between new forms of production and how they affect, to a certain degree, the way that people engage with politics and with brokers? And has it had, to a certain degree, in your perception, effects in the way that these relations are organized? Let's say from social media to platform labour, in that sense.

[00:32:26] **Adam Auerbach:** Such a fascinating question Nico, thank you so much. I think the biggest change with people's relation to work, that I've noticed over the last, say, decade and a half of engagement in the field was not necessarily brought about by the introduction of new types of jobs.

It was certainly the pandemic. One thing that Tariq and I examined, and we have a paper in world development, on this issue was, the politics of service delivery during the pandemic, where we turned to the slum leaders that we had surveyed earlier during India's lockdown, which was one of the most harsh and strict ones across the world, where there's incredible amounts of precarity and suffering. People in informal settlements, in particular circular migrants who were unable to return back to their villages.

I think that was certainly a very intense moment. But these larger ideas of, that I'm sure is not unique to the populations that we're studying in India that connect to other parts of the globe, among migrants that face such precarity, this constant sort of uncertainty that is faced in access to employments that would be regular.

These are of course defining features of working in the informal economy. Very little regulatory oversights. If you get sick or you get hurt and you can't show up at the worksite that day, you don't get paid that day. And if you're not already below the poverty line, you're sort of teetering above it.

One of my colleagues down at Duke University, Anirudh Krishna, has a great book called "One Illness Away", where he compares everywhere from North Carolina in the United States to India to elsewhere, showing that incredibly delicate nature of life, even teetering just above the poverty line.

As I just mentioned, some of the most precarious populations are these circular migrants. Tariq and I study a particular subsection of migrants in India. Those that are a little bit more rooted in the city. Even if they're renting within the squatter settlements.

They're there semi permanently. They're working in the city. Most have moved with their family, although there is a renting population of male migrants. In the background though, the numbers on this vary, but there's at least, by the estimates that I've seen, 120 million circular migrants in India who are in villages for part of the year, cultivating fields. And when they're not cultivating the fields, they're moving to cities, sometimes nearby, sometimes very far away, to engage in labour in the city, and send money back to their families. Gareth Nellis and Nikhar Gaikwad, two other political scientists, based here in the United States, have been doing some really outstanding work on the incredible marginalization faced by circular migrants. Where they're much more footloose. They don't have access to even many informal types of services in the city. Politicians are oftentimes more disinterested in them because they're not necessarily voting in the city. And so, they don't form those vote banks.

Politicians in India cities will use that English term, vote bank. To refer to people living in squatter settlements. Circular migrants who are shifting back and forth between the city and the countryside throughout the year, are especially vulnerable populations. And on the uncertainty that you're talking about, stemming from, not only employment, but access to services, has all other types of manifestations, that I'm sure are not unique to India. To continue to point to work by colleagues of mine. Tanu Kumar, Alison Post, they did really interesting work on access to water. In a couple Indian cities there's immense amounts of intermittency in access to water.

Is the water going to come through the tap in our community at 8 a.m.? Is it going to come at 2 p.m.? Maybe it won't come at all today. And then going back to the gendered nature of work. You'll very oftentimes see these images of groups of women having to sit by the water tank or sit by the water tap with children, waiting for the water, because if you're not there at that moment, and you don't fill up your bucket, you're not going to have water that day.

It's almost difficult to even conceive of the incredible stress that place is on those individuals, their households. It disallows them from doing all other types of things that they could be doing otherwise. These different facets of precarity, stemming from informality and employment and housing are just vast and they're an incredible burden on individuals and migrants, in particular in cities.

I would assume, India is of course the context that I study most closely, but certainly reading work by other people, and even just following the news, that these same conditions increasingly are facing large proportions of the world's population.

It's something that we need to continue to understand and seek to mitigate.

[00:36:53] **Nitin Bathla:** I just wanted to jump in there on the issue of migrants. This is something that you, it's an imaginary that you tease out in your book, Adam. Not just in the ethnographic portraits, which are so beautifully written at the beginning of every chapter.

But perhaps also in how you discuss the urban demographic shift, that people will keep coming from the countryside moving to urban India. And these are questions that I've been looking at and I was looking at it in my PhD research, but I also keep continuing looking at, in conversation rather with also the subaltern urbanization group in Delhi at the CPR. And I was wondering, isn't, perhaps, this imaginary rooted a little bit back in time? Perhaps, that urban reality itself is changing, that perhaps, the demographic shift, that we are imagining of urban India would happen rather as an in situ to urbanization in the countryside or elsewhere in places beyond the city.

I would like you to talk about that, perhaps?

[00:38:03] **Adam Auerbach:** Thank you, Nitin, and this provides an opportunity, if you don't mind, to point to some new work that I'm doing with colleagues. Yes, absolutely. India's urbanization story is unfolding in all types of different respects. And much of that story is not in your Delhis and your Mumbais and your Bangalores.

And it's not even in your Jaipurs and your Bhopals and your Indores. Six out of every ten people living in urban India live in a city or a town under 500,000 people. So, Tariq, another co-author and friend of ours, of course, Shikhar Singh, who just finished his PhD at Yale University, definitely keep an eye out for his work. He's doing fabulous work on the political economy of development in India.

The three of us are starting a new research agenda on India's small town, which, again, where most people living in India's cities are living in these smaller towns. And we've been focusing on Rajasthan in particular, and trying to understand ideas of social change, local state capacity, migration, the nature of electoral politics in these small cities, and whether it be higher instances of rates of independence running, to fewer bureaucrats per capita, dramatic underspending by local government, and the nature of constituency sizes.

In these little towns in Rajasthan, the average ward size is about a thousand people. That's like 200 households. These are very intimate political spaces that differ dramatically from, say, like in Jaipur, where the average municipal ward is an order of magnitude bigger. The brokerage, political brokerage, by people like the slum leaders that we study, even in this current book that we're discussing, there's less of a need for them in small towns, because you can more directly access these locally elected politicians.

So, I think there needs to be much work, much more work on, and of course, there's endless questions to be asking in the big metros. And those will continue to be important. Not only, certainly in terms of academic work, but in terms of them being very much the economic engines of the country.

But these much smaller, Mandi town and other small cities, towns spread throughout India. There's over 7, 000 of them, housing millions and millions and millions of people, 60 percent of India's urban population. I think there's a great need to study these smaller towns.

In addition to that, I think another space that deserves much more work, and particularly in my field in political science, just by virtue of the fact that oftentimes we ask different questions as different disciplines, is the peri-urban periphery. There's been some exciting work over the last few decades by geographers and anthropologists pointing to the outskirts, the edges of cities, where the politics of land looms so large.

Massive amounts of money shifting between hands in these land transactions, the emergence of, what would be referred to in Jaipur and I'm sure elsewhere as the *bhū māfiyā*, the land mafia. Which connects the small army of land brokers to political parties, private developers, it's this enormous web of actors who are making all these little decisions that are fundamentally changing the built space and the politics of the urban periphery.

So, with another colleague and co-author and friend, Tanu Kumar, we've been studying the outskirts of the edges of Jaipur where the face of informality is increasingly not the squatter settlement. It is the unauthorized calling. It's these planned, privately planned neighbourhoods that are unauthorized.

They're not actually given permission to exist and be built on that land by the city authorities. The lands are oftentimes rural land. They're governed as rural agricultural spaces and they haven't been transformed into urban spaces. But people are still setting up these urban neighbourhoods and private developers are making windfalls of money, all types of different forms and faces of corruption that happen as people buy plots of land, and endless, countless legal disputes, citing work that's unfolding and needs to be done on these spaces that Partha Mukhopadhyay and his colleagues refer to as subaltern urbanization.

Small towns, the edges of cities, Sushmita Pati has this great new book on urban villages in Delhi. It's just thrilling to see the diversification of scholarship that's taking place to understand these breakneck changes in cities and towns of all types and sizes.

[00:42:13] **Nicolás Palacios Crisóstomo:** Thank you very much. As I said earlier, it was very pleasant to go through the book because there's a lot of referencing to clientelism, to populism in different parts of the world. Really good parallels. And it was very illuminating to see this focus on competition, coming from Latin America and we do look a lot at the United States political science. I think there's a structure. So, there's always, I think, it's been very present and in the Latin American context, as the research, for example, of Juan Pablo Luna has looked into the fragmented modern society and state criminal relations, let's say within the peripheries, within the centres of the city.

So, there's a lot of pockets as well of peripheral urbanization, even within the city. So, it's segregation, Latin America, it's known for its high spatial segregation. And in this context, we see a lot of actors that contest the state, work on the provision of services and material gains

are not necessarily linking the population, or let's say the poor migrants or the poor overall with the state. So, there are brokers that actually are providing directly the service. And I thought that was just very interesting to see, what do you think about this? How do you see there are some parallels and why there's not a focus on competition in other contexts.

I think that it was just a really brilliant approach of seeing it through this perspective and not just through the criminal relations. But what can you tell me about these other actors that, I guess, are also existent in the context of India?

[00:43:49] **Adam Auerbach:** Nico, thank you. So many great points embedded in those questions.

The study of urban politics, the study of informality, the study of clientelism. Latin America has been sort of the epicentre of that. Going back decades to the 60s and 70s. Janice Perlman, Robert Gay, Javier Auyero, in Argentina. The list goes on of these just outstanding studies asking and picking up on many of these same themes of urban informal settlements, places like *favelas* or *barrios* and low-income people in the city seeking to carve out a better life for themselves and having to deal with all types of different political actors and state actors in that process.

It's been really fun and so illuminating for me, over the course of the past decade and a half, to really, not trying to flatter myself, but I try my best to read as deeply as possible into this literature that's so vibrant in the Latin American context.

And much of what Tariq and I are doing in this book is, I think at least implicitly throughout the book and explicitly in several places, is to put our findings in a conversation with work, for instance, on clientelism in Latin America, which oftentimes renders it a much more rigid and contingent relationship than I think what we see in India.

Certainly, in no position to comment on empirical realities of what's happening in any Latin American city beyond what I've read. But you oftentimes get this sense, say from work by like Susan Stokes, that low-income voters, places like Buenos Aires or Rio or Mexico City, sometimes they're depicted as cowering, but at the very least have to rigidly line up behind their local broker, behind the political party.

There's very, very little wiggle room. If you're given something, you better show up at the ballot box and vote that same way. From what I understand and from what I gather, one scholar's work that I'm really excited about, that I've been in touch with recently, Rodrigo Zarazaga, who's based in Buenos area, saying, I'm seeing a lot of the same stuff in Buenos series.

These communities oftentimes have multiple informal leaders, they have multiple brokers. And those brokers have to compete with one another for the affections and support of residents in the community. So that competition among them, in theory, should be opening

up a little bit more space among residents and deciding, am I going to go to that person or that person or that person?

Increasing political competition across parties should be opening up more agency on the part of voters. One interesting, and to get to another point of yours, cities differ in, are there available civil society organizations working in these communities?

In Jaipur and Bhopal, the two cities that we study, the presence of NGOs is very, very weak and fleeting. They really were not present actors in the communities that we studied. At most you might get a couple NGOs that are affiliated with the BJP, part of what's called the Sangh Parivar, the family of organizations of the Hindu right, things like Seva Bharati, an NGO that does important things like cataract surgery or setting up medical camps.

There're things that might happen a couple times a year, but not a deep presence. Labor organization is essentially non-existent in these cities. There was significant Communist Party activity in both of these cities in the 60s and 70s that was building sort of class consciousness within the informal settlements in the two cities.

But really by the mid-1980s, that started to really weather and then break apart. So, this is a highly fragmented politic across informal settlements. Gang activities look much different from, at least in the Indian context, the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, and there's been several sort of follow ups, different types of Netflix series and movies. When they're depicting slum settlements, it's these gunslinging slum lords, where if you cross them, you're risking your life, and illicit things being exchanged.

Honestly, what is now three years of field work in these communities. Never once did I see something that even approached that level, and that oftentimes the subject of study in those movies is Mumbai, which is different, right? Mumbai, Dharavi, this slum settlement in Mumbai that has a million people, obviously a very interesting and important place, but it is a statistical outlier.

Most people living in slum settlements in India do not live in Mumbai, they don't live in slums that have a million people, they live in this enormous constellation of small and medium sized cities where these sorts of gang activities, at that level of organization, and the presence of guns, really just doesn't exist.

Certainly, there were gangs of local boys that would get in fights. People were making bootleg liquor. There was other sort of illicit things going on, that the police are present and are seen as a very predatory force. A colleague of mine that I went to grad school with, Nick Barnes, who's at St. Andrews in Scotland, who studies gang governance in Rio de Janeiro, within the favela. Reading his scholarship and learning from the experiences of his fieldwork. It's a fundamentally different place from what I was studying, where the presence of organized crime is less present, but that of course is a scope condition.

The findings that we have in our book might ring a little bit less true in spaces where there's really organized crime, high levels of violence. Things might look quite different in terms of the formation of leadership and the relationship between citizens and the state.

[00:48:53] **Nitin Bathla:** Adam I was wondering, just to amplify the question of Nico's, I did really like your attention to everyday life of these places and to peel off rather projection that's made on these settlements sometimes of the sort of gun violence and all the crime happening and you embed us into the everydayness of these settlements. And I was wondering how does that sit in to the overarching method of your research and the book itself, which where 80 percent of the book is rather a discussion of quantitative data rather, of surveys and of other kinds of quantitative data.

And, again, to just tie it to Nico's question, did you, for instance, also think about collecting data from social media? This sort of big data, digital media, social media kind of data.

[00:49:50] **Adam Auerbach:** Thanks, Nitin. Going all the way back to say 2013, 2014, when Tariq and I first got in touch with one another.

I think one of the reasons why we like to work with one another so much, and we do our field work together, we're out there with the survey teams every single day together. I think one of the things that brought us together initially and I think sustained the research was this appreciation for multi method research.

And not just for the sake of doing multi method research, but because we think that it oftentimes generates compelling products, right? We both really like doing ethnography. These are understudied, misunderstood spaces where spending every day marinating in local context, talking to residents, seeing spontaneous patterns of collective action, seeing how people deal with the various challenges that face these communities, is indispensable. To understanding process, to understanding the formation of informal authority, how people get things, how networks form. I'd like to think that that's really the heart of the book and the heart of our work. It's the qualitative data.

But we also like to compare. When you start spending time in these communities and you go from one to the next, you quickly notice there's differences. This community is way more diverse than this one, in terms of religion or caste or region of origin. This one's near the core of the city, this one's far away.

This one was built in 1980. This one's only six years old. Differ across communities got us thinking and I think compelled us to want to do survey research across a much larger set of settlements. As I mentioned earlier, we surveyed residents across 110 different settlements. And I think that gave us the ability, and something that would have been much more difficult to do qualitatively, to give us a sense of, and the distribution of different types of variables

and outcomes, allowing us to seek to explain it. We do survey experiments where we're trying to disentangle the causality of things, they're difficult to do with observational data, the surveys are cross sectional, right?

They're a snapshot in time, but we wanted to do historical research too. So doing oral histories, interviews with residents. One of the most exciting and unanticipated sources of data for us was, what I refer to as informal archival material. You could almost assume that the informal leaders in the community obsessively keep documentation going back decades.

Petitions that they've written to politicians and officials, the responses of those politicians and officials, public community meeting notes. Political ephemera going back decades. And they would oftentimes sit us down and say, you're asking about when this water well was installed, here are these 15 papers of our struggle to get that. That in addition to the oral histories, it allowed us to triangulate and recreate the micro histories of these communities. I don't think that we would have felt comfortable hanging our hat on, any one of these sort of methods and sources of data.

We really think that putting them in a conversation with one another. The deficiencies of one, being made up for the strengths of the other, allowed us to render what we hope is a more complete picture of the politics of these spaces.

[00:52:52] **Sofie Heintz:** Thank you so much, Adam. For my next question, I would like to relate to Nico's last point, on the different kinds of competition again. And talk about an arena of competition that you outline in the fourth chapter, basically, where it's about which kinds of brokers get selected by higher ups in the hierarchy of these parties.

To me it was a very interesting chapter and I think it talks a lot about the opportunities of upward mobility for brokers, that they enjoy. And basically, that the reality is there, that brokers can move up if they're very capable in the party hierarchy. And that they're rewarded for the capability also, by these higher ups, by these patrons, when they exhibit certain traits and located in certain types of settlement.

And you also point out that it's clear that these parties would be doubly motivated to integrate good brokers, firstly for the services that they provide for the party, and then also to keep them doing this good work for the other parties who are in opposition or in competition with them, obviously.

But you also say that these posts are rare, and that parties have little incentive to create over bloated, local level organizational structures. At some point the only way for a promotion is upward. Regarding this, I was wondering about the trade-off that is involved for these low patrons that select good brokers and promote these good brokers as well.

In a sense that there's a very real threat coming from these very effective brokers, who are next in line for the low patron's position in the party. I was wondering what you think about that and whether you maybe also found different mechanisms of who actually then decides

which brokers are integrated into the party positions and maybe also which positions they're allocated.

[00:54:29] **Adam Auerbach:** Yes, Sofie, thank you for so nicely framing chapter four of our book. In any corner of the city, in any constituency, whether it be a ward or an assembly constituency, there are hundreds and hundreds of these local brokers who want to be absorbed within parties and be given a position in the party as a vehicle for sort of socio-political upward mobility.

It gives them greater name recognition, more access to goodies that the parties distribute, and for many brokers, a hope of, maybe someday, getting a ticket to fight in a municipal election. The amount of money that it takes to fight in a state election, just simply out of reach for 99.999% of people residing in informal settlements. But it was the case in some of our settlements that they were, because they were so popular, had demonstrated loyalty to a party that they were allocated a ticket to fight in a municipal election. So, there's this constant clamouring for party positions that are by design made scarce.

So, there's only so many positions to dole out. And so, what we seek to ask and study in chapter four is, looking at this through the eyes of the patron in the city, these higher-level politicians, who have a lot of sway over how these positions are doled out.

How are they deciding amongst this small army of brokers, who to give these coveted positions to? Pointed exactly to this trade off, of wanting to pick somebody that is loyal. We typically think of the BJP, the Congress, these are political parties. But when you get down into the city, and I'm sure elsewhere in India, and elsewhere outside of India, these are faction ridden organizations, right?

It's factions all the way down. Even within the political party. So, there's certainly concerns, as you point out, among politicians, if I bring this person into the party, and give them this kind of platform and these resources, are they going to continue to be loyal to me? Are they going to work to advance my own political interests? Are they going to undermine it? Are they going to switch to somebody else when the winds favour that other person? Could they even try to leapfrog over me? So those are certainly concerns.

On the flip side, one of the main reasons to absorb these local leaders, these brokers from slum settlements is that you hope that they will work hard within their community, because they're popular there, to mobilize voters behind you. So, there's this potential sort of trade off, or tension between loyalty and efficacy in mobilization, in the selection of these local

brokers. And we find interesting evidence that points towards both of these, right? Patrons do prefer people of their own *jāti*, for example their own subcaste, which is seen, very largely in the literature as a heuristic tool that facilitates cooperation, transactions between people, this idea of co-ethnicity.

That if we're of the same ethnic group, we're embedded in the same sort of kinship structures. We have similar understandings and patterns of collective action and ideas of reciprocity. So we do pick up on some evidence of that, but connecting with some of our earlier findings in the book, the education, as this marker of capability continues to loom large, in understandings of broker selection by patrons because they are so intimately aware of the importance of capability and popularity in the neighbourhood that, we want to pick people that, of course are going to be loyal, but people that are going to maintain the support of residents within their communities.

And they know through their daily interactions with these individuals. Because these very brokers are the ones coming to them, to ask for things for the broker's community, that their efficacy in doing so ripples back into the community, maintains their sort of informal authority, thus allowing them to lean on these brokers during elections for political support.

It's a really interesting sort of trade off. I think certainly future work, not only in our cities, but elsewhere. Going back to your work, the Aam Aadmi Party might operate in a really interestingly different way, in the ways that they engage the grassroots, the way that they engage informal leaders, brokers in their party.

And of course, in any given community, parties are vying with one another over these same individuals too. And as you move across different states and cities in India, party systems and what parties are in competition, degrees of competitiveness, shift around.

So, I think it's an interesting open question, especially in the Aam Aadmi party, to look into these sorts of patterns of network formation between the grassroots and the larger currents of politics in the city.



[00:58:49] **Nitin Bathla:** Thank you, Adam. Thank you, Nico. Thank you, Sofie.

This was such a wonderful conversation and I hope more people write such books from the bottom up, which are combining multi methods and focusing on quotidian practices. Thanks a lot for generously giving your time and attention to this much deserved book and I hope our listeners Consider engaging with this book more.

Thank you.

[00:59:16] **Adam Auerbach:** I know I can speak for Tariq as well. Thank you so much for having me. It was so wonderful talking to the three of you. It was a real honour and thank you so much.

[00:59:25] **Nicolás Palacios Crisóstomo:** From my side, it was a great conversation, as I said. I also learned a lot, which was wonderful. Also, as Nitin mentioned, the question of methods, it's really inspiring to see in use on that way and combining, especially, ethnographic work with quantitative data. So, thank you very much.

[00:59:45] **Sofie Heintz:** Also, many thanks from my side again. I don't want to repeat myself too much, but I'm a big fan. I continue to be a big fan and I hope to read many more books by you in the future.

[00:59:57] **Outro:** Thanks to you for listening.

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