

Ethnic Diversity and The Demand for Public Goods:  
Interpreting the Evidence from Low-income Communities in Delhi  
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Note: The original title of the paper—“Does Diversity Come in the Way of Struggles for Citizenship: The Case of India”—has been changed. However, the content of the paper is still about the role of civil society and struggles for social rights.

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A large number of writings have found that, with some exceptions, democracies outperform dictatorships on human development (Halperin, Siegle, and Weinstein, 2005; Lake and Baum, 2001; Navia and Zweifel, 2003; Zweifel and Navia, 2000). One such exception is India. Despite an impressive democratic record, India’s human development performance has been dismal (Planning Commission, 2002; UNDP, various years). This can be explained in large part by the state’s failure in providing basic public goods such as water, electricity, roads, education, health and others (Planning Commission, 2002; 3iNetwork, 2006, 2008). While low-income groups are the main losers, lack of sufficient water, poor sanitation, good public schools and health facilities, and other deficits hurt other income groups too. Some public goods can be acquired by private means but their provision is commonly considered an important state responsibility. Surveys show that a majority of Indians believe so (Chhibber, Shastri, and Sisson, 2004). However, the same state is implicated in India’s poor public goods provision. Common people do not consider the state to be a credible provider of public services (Mehta, 2003). Critics like Das (2006) note that in sectors where the state is “desperately needed—in providing basic education, health care, and drinking water—it has performed appallingly” (p. 9). India’s failures in this regard are all the more mystifying because economic growth has been steady since independence and impressive since the 1990s. Economic growth is often seen as a fix for many problems in the developing world, including human development (Bhagwati, 2004; Dollar and Kraay, 2002; Firebaugh and Beck, 1996; Pritchett and Summers, 1996; Friedman, 2005).<sup>1</sup> If economic growth is good for welfare, how can

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<sup>1</sup>More recent studies make the same arguments. For example, acknowledging that China’s economic growth needs to be complemented by reforms of the public service sectors, the *Human Development Report: China 2007/08* notes that the country’s “extraordinary human development achievements during the era of reform and opening up” are “to a considerable extent, an outcome of rapid economic growth” (UNDP, 2008: 1).

we explain the Indian paradox of “a booming private economy” with “despair over the lack of the simplest public goods” (Das, 2006: 9) and attendant poor human development?

An expansion in public goods provision typically occurs in one or more of the following ways: 1) Top-down interventions; 2) Bottom-up pressures; and 3) Some combination of 1 and 2 (Banerjee, Iyer, and Somanathan, 2007). Top-down interventions are not rare. Even some colonial regimes, both European and Asian, have been associated with an expansion of select public goods (Benavot and Riddle, 1988; McGuire, 1994, 2001). Authoritarian and semi-democratic regimes—infused primarily by an instrumental logic but also in some cases by socialist ideologies (the former Soviet Union and communist regimes in East Europe, China, and Cuba are good examples)—also expanded public goods provision. Authoritarian regimes in East Asia set an exemplary record in the provision of select public goods such as education (McGuire, 1994, 2001). In the American south, major expansion in water supply and sanitation occurred in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century during the heyday of the Jim Crow era (Troesken, 2004).

These examples notwithstanding, the current state of public goods provision in most developing countries suggests that top-down initiatives are not routine either. Citizen demands for public goods may be necessary to stimulate top-down responses by political leaders. This is more likely in democratic settings. In particular, through the act of voting and political mobilization, citizens can force the state’s hand. When political leaders face the prospect of losing power to competitors, they may become responsive to citizen demands. Different kinds of public action for a variety of goals become are also more likely in democracies (O’Donnell, 2001; Sen, 1999). However, political freedoms are “permissive advantages” whose effectiveness depends on how they are exercised and to what ends (Sen, 1999). The advantages of political freedoms apply only when those freedoms are or can be used in virtuous ways.

#### The Indian Puzzle

Indians are openly critical of their government’s non-performance and punish them at the polls. However, the incidence of claims-making for public goods is weak, sporadic, or even absent. There are two puzzles here. First, low-income groups, who are especially short-changed in terms of access to public goods, are known to use their political freedoms to vote out the rascals. The poor vote more than the rich and the middle classes and anti-incumbency voting is widely recognized as a fact in Indian politics (Yadav, 1999, 2000). Second, while the poor are known to mobilize for a variety of goals, *they do not make sustained efforts to demand public goods*. Overall, India records among the highest numbers of protests and demonstrations of all kinds (Rao, 1978; Omvedt, 1993; Singh, 2001; Shah, 2002) but they are most prominently identity-based (Katzenstein et al, 2001). On balance, India’s low-income groups use their political freedoms for the individual action of voting and collective action on a variety of goals (Varshney, 2000), other than claims-making for public goods. The

limited use of political freedoms is curious since, despite modest improvements in select areas, public goods provision remains poor and uneven. As Mehta (2003) asks:

Why is political mobilization on *these* [health and education] issues less effective? Can one just assume that this is simply a product of the *state's* failure or is there something about the structure and ideologies in civil society that impedes the formation of *effective demand* for health and education? (p. 137).

Similarly, for Keefer and Khemani (2004), the puzzle is why farmers prefer targeted transfers such as agricultural subsidies over public goods: “Why do farmers not organize themselves to demand better public services, including better power supply and agricultural extension services, rather than input subsidies that are inefficient and unsustainable?” (p. 937). The lack of an effective demand for public goods is bemoaned by others as well. In a study on public services, Chand (2006) sees citizens’ failure to organize around improving public services as detrimental to public goods provision.

Mehta (2003) hints that there may be something about in the structure and ideologies of civil society that impedes the formation of *effective demand* for public goods. His reference is partly to India’s caste system or more generally ethnic diversity. Indeed, a growing stream of academic writings has looked for answers to poor public goods provision in the ethnic make-up of countries (Alesina and LaFerrara 2005; Alesina, Baqir, Easterly, 1999; Easterly and Levine, 1997; Kimenyi, 2006; Miguel and Gugerty, 2005; Posner, 2005).<sup>2</sup> The evidence points to a negative relationship between ethnic diversity and public goods provision: the higher the level of ethnic diversity, the lower and more uneven are levels of public goods provision. One of the ways in which ethnic diversity hurts public goods provision is facilitating ethnic mobilization for particularistic goals which fractures the possibility of popular mobilization for universal goals. Summing up this view, Banerjee and Somanathan (2007) note that ethnic diversity often “inhibits communities from working collectively to extract public goods from a recalcitrant state” (p. 288). Members of different ethnic groups typically use their political freedoms to mobilize for “ethnic goods” in preference to public goods.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, India’s ethnic diversity is a liability.

India has been described as “the most heterogeneous and complex society on earth” (Manor, 1996: 459) where at least four kinds of diversities are relevant: caste,

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<sup>2</sup>On ethnic diversity and public goods in India, see especially Banerjee and Somanathan (2001, 2007); Banerjee, Iyer, and Somanathan (2008); and Keefer and Khemani (2004).

<sup>3</sup>By “ethnic goods” we loosely refer to those goods that are sought by members of an ethnic group to satisfy their specific needs. These may include public goods when they mostly benefit members of that ethnic group and not others.

language, religion, and tribe (Stuligross and Varshney, 2002).<sup>4</sup> In this nation of a million mutinies, the struggle for caste-based or religious rights typically trumps over class-based struggles. According to Chand (2006), it is the absence of demand for public services which partly explains the greater focus on identity issues. Lower castes have utilized their political freedoms to challenge upper caste dominance (Hasan, 2000; Jaffrelot, 2003; Pai, 2002).<sup>5</sup> There is also substantial mobilization in parts of the country along religious lines (Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996; van de Veer, 1994). According to Mehta (2003), caste “emerged as a salient political category” in the absence of “other competing ideologies that allowed people to make sense of their social circumstances the way caste did (p. 76). Alternately, it is also argued that “with isolated exceptions, caste rather than class has been the primary mode of subaltern experience in India” (Varshney, 2000: 7). A similar argument applies to religion where social injustice is defined with reference to past Muslim rule and current Hindu domination. For these reasons, Varshney (2002) has argued that the politics of post-independent India has been organized around the three “master narratives”—defined as “the major organizing devices for mass politics, or the leading political idioms that mobilize the masses” (p. 46)—of secular nationalism, religious nationalism, and caste as a basis of social justice. Over time, the narrative of secular nationalism has weakened in the face of challenges from Hindu nationalism and caste-based mobilization.<sup>6</sup>

The Indian experience with the abundance of identity movements and the lack of collective action for public goods suggests that the ‘structure’ and ‘ideologies’ of civil society bear closer examination (Mehta, 2003). Accordingly, this paper raises two questions:

- 1) Why are low-income groups not using their political freedoms to mobilize and make demands for public goods?
- 2) Does India’s ethnic diversity impede claims-making by low-income groups?

The paper focuses on low-income groups in the city-state of Delhi to explain why they do not use their political freedoms to make effective demands for two public goods—water and sanitation—which are typically in short supply and of poor quality

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<sup>4</sup>*The People of India* project of the Anthropological Survey of India estimated that there are nearly 4,599 separate communities in India with as many as 325 languages and dialects in 12 distinct language families and 24 scripts (cited in Hasan, n.d.).

<sup>5</sup>To that extent, India’s democracy allows subaltern actors to challenge and limit the domination of upper castes and fulfill Shapiro’s (2003) ideal of the essence of democracy.

<sup>6</sup>A third challenge has come from some of India’s tribal communities (Stuligross and Varshney, 2002) and has gained in momentum since the 1990s.

(Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006).<sup>7</sup> Keefer and Khemani (2004) have addressed similar questions but with greater emphasis for rural settings. I opt for an urban focus with the expectation that urban residents are likely to be more educated and more aware of their rights as citizens. Literacy rates are significantly higher among urban residents than among peasants. Higher literacy rates, especially among women, are commonly associated with greater citizen activism and demands for better governance.<sup>8</sup> Approximately 82 per cent of Delhi's residents are literate. In 2001, 75 per cent of girls and women above seven years of age could write (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006: 22).

While the supply of some public goods has improved over time in Delhi, advances in water supply and sanitation have been limited. These deficits have a direct bearing on people's well-being, health, and capabilities. Private solutions involve substantial out-of-pocket expenses. Lack of sufficient water leaves people with little choice but to buy water. Inadequate living conditions cause ill-health and poor public health services means that many spend their own money on private health care. Surveys show that people express a desire for a broad range of public goods and identify three "main concerns" regarding their physical quality of life: inadequate access to safe drinking water, poor sanitation and ineffective garbage disposal, and insufficient power supply (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006). People may therefore be expected to demand these public services.

A cursory reading of Delhi's newspapers indicates that citizen protests for public goods, especially water, garbage, and electricity are routine during the summer months. Some protests are spontaneous and others led by NGOs, community organizations, and opposition parties. However, these protests do not endure beyond securing immediate relief. Despite facing deficits in water supply, sanitation, electricity and other public goods, there is an absence of *sustained claims-making* by civil society actors. Once public officials provide relief, citizen activism fades away. The cycle of citizen activism and retreat is repeated over and over. Why are citizens not mobilizing to make concerted demands for better provision of public goods?

This paper is organized as follows. In the first section, I propose that collective action for public goods is contingent on 1) the specific features of the public good in question and 2) the expectation that individuals have from the state and fellow citizens. The second section looks at academic writings that link ethnic diversity to

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<sup>7</sup>New Delhi is India's capital city and part of the city-state of Delhi with an urban population of 93 per cent (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006).

<sup>8</sup>For example, citizen activism for public goods such as health and education has been reported since at least the 1980s in states like Kerala and West Bengal which have higher literacy rates, especially among women (Jeffrey, 1988; Mencher, 1980; Nag, 1989).

the demand side of public goods provision. A large number of studies have noted low levels of trust and social capital in the relationship between members of different ethnic groups. The lack of community solidarity hinders ethnically diverse communities to organize and make claims for public goods. However, differences based on class and other cleavages also contribute to low levels of trust and social capital. In the third section, I describe the provision of water and sanitation in Delhi, including two adjacent low-income multi-ethnic communities—Dakshinpuri and Subhash Camp—where field research was carried out. In the fourth section, I use interviews with residents in the two communities to explain the lack of an effective demand for water and sanitation. In the concluding section, I summarize the findings.

### 1. The Argument

Citizens have three broad choices when they face deficits in public goods: organize to make claims on the state; find private solutions; or tolerate poor public goods provision. Collective action, whether for public goods or any other goal, as is well documented, is subject to a wide range of constraints. It should not be surprising that people opt for private solutions or tolerate deficits in public goods more routinely than making demands on the state. A recent study shows that while low-income groups and the poor vote more than the rich in India, their participation in social organizations and in protests and demonstrations is lower than the middle- and upper-income groups (SDSA Team, 2008: 264, 268). The study also shows that women's participation is significantly lower than men (ibid: 268). This suggests that the political participation of low-income groups is high when the costs of participation are low. The act of voting is not costly whereas membership in social organizations or participation in protests and demonstration involves considerable time which low-income groups, who are typically employed in the unorganized sector (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006), cannot afford. They are exposed to a different set of collective action problems derived from their socio-economic status and the nature of employment.

People's willingness to make collective demands for public goods is especially influenced by the following:

- 1) The specific attributes of the public goods in question: How important are the public goods in question? Can they be acquired privately?
- 2) The expectation that individuals have from the state and fellow citizens: Will the provision of public goods improve over time due to state action or claims-making by fellow citizens? Is the state likely to respond positively to claims-making by citizens?<sup>9</sup>

Public goods are likely to be ranked in order of importance based on whether they a) are necessary for survival; b) yield direct benefits; c) are useful in improving one's

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<sup>9</sup>These propositions are specific to urban residents and derive from academic writings and reports on India's economy, politics, and society. I also base these propositions on the findings from field research in Dakshinpuri and Subhash Camp.

quality of life; d) can be acquired privately.<sup>10</sup> Some public goods that are needed for survival—like water supply—also yield direct benefits as well as improve one’s quality of life. Others—like education—yield direct benefits but are not ‘survival goods.’ Some public goods can also be acquired privately. ‘Survival goods’ are likely to rank higher than others unless they can be acquired privately at affordable prices. We can expect residents to demand ‘survival goods’ before other public goods. This does not rule out the possibility that there may be a broad demand for a range of public goods at the same time but only that residents are likely to prefer better provision of some goods than others. The importance assigned to a public good is also likely to be shaped by the knowledge and understanding of public goods. For example, most Indians value education because they know it yields direct benefits. However, if people have inadequate information about the benefits from public goods, they are unlikely to consider it as important.<sup>11</sup>

The importance assigned to public goods is also determined by the nature of public discourse (Gupta, 2006). If trusted political leaders or activists identify certain public goods as important, common people are more likely to embrace the idea. If an emphasis on public goods such as sanitation and sewerage is absent from public discourse, the importance assigned to them is likely to be low. According to a study conducted by the SDSA team (2008), the neglect of poor people’s issues and challenges is due to the absence of an “ideological frame” where community-specific issues are left disconnected to class-based issues (SDSA Team, 2008: 128).

Some public goods can be acquired by private means. The primary consideration for low-income groups is the importance of the public good and the cost factor. When sufficient quantity of water is not available, they can buy water. If the quality of public schools is poor, they have the option to send their children to private schools. Of course, such expenses are a drain on incomes and acquiring a whole range of public goods through private means is impossible. Low-income groups acquire some public goods through private means and get by without others, depending on the importance and cost of the public good. Private options are also more likely when citizens do not expect the state to provide public goods (see below).

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<sup>10</sup>Public goods also compete with other basic needs such as employment. For many low-income groups, the concern with employment trumps the concern over public goods provision.

<sup>11</sup>Banerjee, Deaton, and Dufflo (2004) found self-reported health and well-being measures to be uncorrelated with the poor quality of health services in rural India. People’s perception of their health and the health care system was completely out of sync with reality. In such cases, people may not demand public goods because they wrongly believe that the current provision of public goods is satisfactory.

Finally, collective action for public goods is contingent on citizens' expectations from the state and fellow citizens. Over time, citizens have developed a set of expectations about their political leaders and their fellow citizens. They have heard political leaders make promises and not deliver on them. They have voted for leaders who claimed to champion the cause of the poor but instead accumulated personal wealth. For Keefer and Khemani (2004), there is a credibility problem with political leaders and citizens do not expect them to follow up on their promises. The findings of the SDSA Team (2008) hold no surprises: Indians do not trust political parties even though they vote for them in large numbers. Citizens also have a history of engagement with their neighbours, friends, and other members of their community. While they might all agree that public goods provision is lacking, that the state and public officials are to blame, their past success or failure in mobilizing their community to make demands for public goods is likely to influence their actions in the current period. If past efforts at community mobilization failed due to ethnic or other community differences, residents might expect current efforts to fail as well. Even if there has been past incidence of collective action, citizens might consider what they gained from their efforts in the past. If collective action in the past was not successful in bringing results, they are less likely to make the effort again. Public action will depend on such expectations regarding political leaders, fellow citizens, and probability of success.

## 2. Ethnic Diversity and the Provision of Public Goods

There is substantial research on how ethnic diversity affects impacts on both the demand and supply of public goods (Alesina and LaFerrara 2005; Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly, 1999; Easterly and Levine, 1997; Kimenyi, 2006; Miguel and Gugerty, 2005; Posner, 2005). This paper is concerned with social relations between members of different ethnic groups, and in assessing whether those relations hinder collective action for public goods (i.e. the demand side of public goods). However, it is appropriate to note that empirical studies confirm the supply side of the diversity-low public goods provision link. In essence, there is an "ethnicization" of public goods (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972) so that ethnic elites in power engage in preferential treatment towards fellow ethnics and discrimination against others. According to Easterly (2001), Punjabi domination, ethnic diversity, and gender relations make Pakistan "the poster-child for the hypothesis that a society polarized by class, gender, and ethnic group does poorly at providing public services." Brockerhoff and Hewett (2000) find that inequality in child mortality rates in African countries is due to the fact that dominant ethnic groups channel scarce state resources to areas where fellow ethnics are concentrated. In multiracial Brazil, discrimination in the provision of public goods to Afro-Brazilians is well documented (Telles, 2005). In India, Betancourt and Gleason (2000) find evidence of discrimination in the provision of medical services at the district level on the basis of caste and religion as a consequence of decisions taken by the state governments. A higher proportion of lower castes and Muslims in the rural areas of a district led to the lowering of public services (also see Roy et al, 2004; and Srinivasan and Mohanty, 2004).



On the demand side, ethnic diversity is said to inhibit communities from working collectively to extract public goods from the state (Banerjee and Somanathan (2007). This may be because members of different ethnic groups simply do not get along, perhaps because some of them have for long suffered discrimination at the hands of the dominant ethnic groups and continue to do so (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2002).<sup>12</sup> Members of different ethnic groups may also differ in their preferences for different public goods (Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly, 1999). It is also argued that coordination is easier achieved within members of the same ethnic group than between them. Diverse communities are said to face higher costs of coordinating the provision of public goods (Vigdor, 2004; Miguel and Gugerty, 2005).

There are two broad insights in prior research that seem to be especially relevant to explain the lack of demand for public goods:

1. Members of different ethnic groups are unable to agree on the importance of specific public goods (Easterly and Levine, 1997). This is because different ethnic groups have a preference for different set of public goods, depending on their location, their socio-economic status, history, cultural preferences or something else.<sup>13</sup>
2. Members of different ethnic groups have discriminatory preferences and only care about the welfare of fellow ethnics (Cutler, Elmendorf, and Zeckhauser, 1993). Furthermore, they even prefer a lower provision of public goods if an increase in the provision of those goods also benefits members of other ethnic groups (Alesina, Baqir, Easterly, 1999).

What is also crucial to demand for public goods is the degree of physical distance between members of different ethnic groups. When different ethnic groups occupy the same or proximate physical space, the demand for public goods is low or lacking (Alesina, Baqir, Easterly, 1999; Cutler, Elmendorf, and Zeckhauser, 1993; Easterly and Levine, 1997).<sup>14</sup> On the face of it, this should be surprising because despite their

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<sup>12</sup>This is certainly true of the three most populous democracies in the world: India, the U.S., and Brazil. While India's caste system sanctioned systematic discrimination against lower castes, the U.S. and Brazil practiced slavery. Discrimination against Afro-Americans and Afro-Brazilians continues as evident in the human development gap with white Americans and Brazilians.

<sup>13</sup>Some examples may be useful. If ethnic group X is relatively prosperous, its members are likely to have a different set of preferences than ethnic group Y if its members have a mixed socio-economic profile. If X is concentrated in rural areas, its preferences will be different from Y whose members are concentrated in urban areas. Past relations between X and Y, where Y has suffered systematic discrimination at the hands of X, may lead Y to give greater priority to ethnic or cultural demands over material goods.

<sup>14</sup>In contrast, when ethnic groups are concentrated in distinct physical spaces, they are more likely to come together to demand public goods which are in deficit because

differences, members of different ethnic groups experience similar deficits in public goods. Typically, they occupy the same or proximate physical space because they also belong to the same or similar income group. Class affinities among ethnically diverse peoples have the potential to offset ethnic and other differences. Furthermore, closer interaction between different ethnic groups has the potential to create new bases for understanding, tolerance, and solidarity. Why then do ethnically-diverse communities, who share class affinities and experience similar deficits in public goods, not engage in collective action for public goods?<sup>15</sup>

The relationship between members of different ethnic groups is said to be characterized by “social distance” which determines levels of trust and cooperation between individuals. Social distance may be a function of physical separation between different ethnic groups. The interactions between different ethnic groups are limited when they reside in separate spaces and this deepens the social distance between them. However, even when different ethnic groups share the same physical space, their relations may be strained due to a variety of factors such as competition for scarce resources or public goods, cultural or other differences, past relations, and other reasons.<sup>16</sup> Social distance is hardly conducive for trust and cooperation between members of different ethnic groups. According to Alba and Nee (2003):

When social distance is small, there is a feeling of common identity, closeness, and shared experiences. But when social distance is great, people perceive and treat the other as belonging to a different category (p. 32).

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the demand for ethnic goods may merge with public goods. Of course, this may not always be true. Even when members of the same ethnic group are concentrated in the same space, there are many reasons why they may not make claims for or expect public goods from their elected leaders. As Keefer and Khemani, (2004) argue, owing to the distortions of the political marketplace, citizens favor visible public goods or those especially targeted at them over public goods like education whose benefits kick in after some time.

<sup>15</sup>Unfortunately, with some exceptions (Heller, 1999; Miguel, 2004), the literature on ethnic diversity and public goods has not adequately addressed the question of why class affinities do not dilute the ill-effects of ethnic heterogeneity or what it will take for class to trump ethnicity. We are left to assume that ethnic identity is more basic and salient than class identity which studies on ethnicity have found to be questionable.

<sup>16</sup>Large diverse democracies such as India, the U.S., and Brazil are said to be characterized by social distance between members of different ethnic groups due to a history of slavery (Brazil and the U.S.) and the caste system (India). On social distance in the U.S., see Alba and Nee, 2003; on India, see Mehta, 2003; on Brazil, see Silva, 1987.

Not surprisingly perhaps, studies have found greater ethnic heterogeneity to be associated with lower social trust (Anderson and Paskeviciute, 2006; Delhey and Newton, 2005). This is, “in large part due to the fact that individuals trust those more similar to themselves” (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2002: 231).

The observations above lead us into social capital territory and to the path-breaking and widely critiqued work of Putnam (1995, 2000, 2002; Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, 1993) and others (Arneil, 2006; Edwards, Foley, and Diani, 2001; Hero, 2007; Krishna, 2002; Lin, 2001; McLean, Schultz, and Steger, 2002). Social capital is defined as those “features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995: 67). Communities with lower levels of social capital are considered less capable of organizing themselves effectively. In the language of social capital theorists, ethnic differences undermine levels of trust within a heterogeneous community rendering them incapable of mobilizing together for public goods (Khwaja, forthcoming; Miguel and Gugerty, 2005; Okten and Osili, 2004). While there may be high levels of trust between members of the same ethnic group, this only implies that they may successfully mobilize for ethnic goods or mainly for those public goods which only benefit members of their ethnic group.

To the extent that social capital matters for community action, it is important to emphasize that ethnic differences are not the only source of social distance and low levels of trust between individuals. Class differences have historically accounted for social distance and low levels of trust within communities. Szreter and Woolcock (2004) have noted the existence of “suspicions of all kinds between different social groups” in the “socially divided and class-segregated” towns and cities of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain (p. 458). While there was plenty of trust and social capital *within* specific classes, relations *between* social classes were characterized by social distance and low levels of trust. The prevalence of class conflicts since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and struggles for political and social rights by workers and peasants across the world may have been largely driven by material issues but also involved challenges to existing patterns of social relations. In contemporary United States, higher income inequality is one of the main factors that explain lower levels of interpersonal trust (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2002). O’Donnell (1999) has noted that in Latin American countries, “huge social distances entailed by deep inequality” promotes “manifold patterns of authoritarian relations in various encounters between the privileged and the others” (O’Donnell, 1999: 322-23). In Brazil, as Hochstetler (2000) argues, “social divides [between the middle-classes and the poor]...are not often bridged...except through more hierarchical relations” (p. 169). These studies alert us to the fact that social distance, low levels of trust and lack of unity or solidarity in a society are not based on ethnic differences alone.

### 3. Public Goods Provision in Delhi

Large parts of urban India, including the metropolitan cities—New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Chennai—are deprived of public amenities that are taken for granted in cities around the world (3iNetwork, 2006; on Delhi, see Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006). Cities have failed to upgrade their infrastructure to support their growing population. With migrants from poor Indian states heading to the metropolitan cities in large numbers (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006), public needs for housing, transport, health, education, water and electricity have all fallen behind supply. The most obvious deficits are in housing so that there has been a significant increase in the number and size of slums. Population density in slums is two to three times higher than in other residential settlements with poor provision of public goods. Section III of the Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act of 1956 defined slums as “unfit for human habitation” and parliamentary debates in 1973 recognized that the “slum problem” was not just about shelter but also a matter of health and hygiene (Ali, 1995). In these slums, open spaces are turned into garbage heaps, public washrooms without water to keep them usable, and lack of maintenance by municipal authorities leading to filth, stench and potential for disease (Verma, 2003). In large cities, the “absolute poor” live in “slums within slums” and compete for scarce public goods with those who are less poor (Ali, 1990, 1995).

Delhi is better off than most other cities and towns. It has the highest per capita income in the country, more than double the national average, and among the fastest rates of economic growth in the country. Income poverty has fallen sharply over the last two-three decades and is currently under 10 per cent. Delhi ranks among the top Indian states on most human development indicators. However, despite the growing prosperity of the city, many are left behind, and the lives of low-income groups, particularly slum dwellers, are under great strain due to poor provision of public goods (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006). Since India’s independence, Delhi’s planners and policymakers have paid scant attention to issues of housing, water supply, sewerage, and health services (Priya, 1993). Delhi has witnessed the fastest population growth among the metropolitan cities and the shortage of key public goods is striking. Housing is identified as a severe problem area. Approximately 38 per cent of households live in one-room units and the population living in slums is estimated to be 45 per cent (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006: 4). Only 75 per cent of households have access to tap water and the remaining households depend on the informal water market (ibid: 47). The poor provision of public goods has social and environmental consequences and reduces living conditions to dangerously low levels beyond repair (Ali, 1995).

Delhi’s slums are said to have the worst living conditions among all of India’s metropolitan cities (Ali, 1995). The problem begins with lack of access to sufficient

quantities of clean water, universally considered the cornerstone of good health.<sup>17</sup> The provision of adequate water supply was not a major concern in any of the resettlement programmes initiated by the government (Priya, 1993). Delhi faces an “unparalleled water crisis” (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006: 7) to an extent that water has become one of the dearest commodities (Zerah, 2000) with a flourishing industry of private water supply. Among the many problems are the unequal access of water and poor quality of water (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006). According to one estimate, a slum resident gets access to 30 litres of water a day whereas the more privileged use more than 300 litres a day (*Down to Earth*, February 28, 1999).

The state of sanitation and sewerage is also not encouraging. Approximately 71 per cent of Delhi’s population has access to toilet facilities within the house (Census of India, 2001) but 45 per cent of the population has no sewerage services (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006: 49). Even where sewerage services exist, they are of poor quality. Poor localities in Delhi India are dotted with open sewers, clogged and overrunning drains and indisposed garbage. Lack of proper garbage disposal ranks high among the main concerns for Delhi’s residents, especially for those living in low-income areas (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006: 69).

The poor provision of water, sanitation, sewerage and garbage removal has adverse consequences on the health and well-being of people. Living in crowded conditions makes people vulnerable to diseases such as tuberculosis. Poor water supply, sanitation and sewerage have high health costs. Water-borne diseases are common in Delhi. Outbreaks of cholera, dengue, measles, malaria, meningococcal meningitis, diarrhoea and gastroenteritis occur year after year during the summer and monsoon months. The overall incidence of some communicable diseases has dropped but they remain a threat to vulnerable populations in low-income areas (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006). Delhi’s public officials often play the blame game. In summer 2004, a rapid increase in water-borne diseases led the the Municipal Corporation of Delhi to accuse the Delhi Jal Board as responsible because of the poor quality of water it supplied (*Hindu*, June 17, 2004). Partly due to substandard living conditions of large numbers of residents as well as the unsatisfactory state of public health (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006), Delhi’s infant mortality rates are still more than double that of Kerala.

Surveys show that Delhi’s residents identify deficits in water and sanitation among their “main concerns” (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006: 59) and low-income groups in particular rate water supply, sanitation and garbage disposal facilities as poor (pp. 68-9). Why are they then seeking private solutions or tolerating these

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<sup>17</sup>According to Haldan Mahler, the former director general of the World Health Organization, “the number of water taps per 1000 persons is a better indicator of health than the number of hospital beds” (cited in Gadgil, 1998: 257).

deficits? Does the credibility problem (Keefer and Khemani, 2004) explain why citizens do not make claims for public goods, knowing that their efforts will come to nothing? Do community-level differences based on ethnicity or other cleavages contribute to low levels of and fracture solidarity so that demand for public goods does not emerge? Is there something in the ‘structure’ and ‘ideology’ of civil society that merits closer examination?

#### 4. The Urban Poor and the Demand for Public Goods

During 1991-2001, 2.2 million migrants moved into Delhi, with nearly 70 per cent of them from Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), Uttaranchal, and Bihar (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006: 41-2). Most of the migration is for employment opportunities in Delhi and a large number of migrants become absorbed in the unorganized sector which is characterized by unstable employment. According to a survey carried out by the Slum Department of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, more than 70 per cent of the slum population is from U.P. (42.2 per cent) and Bihar (29.2 per cent) (*Hindu*, September 21, 2002). The ethnic profile of Delhi’s is quite mixed as is true for the poor, especially in larger settlements (Ali, 1998). The poor belong to different castes, including the upper castes and Dalits (untouchables), and many are Muslims and Christians. The Dalit population in Delhi is estimated at 19 per cent with a very small number who count as rich (Kumar, 2004). A smaller number of migrants are from the non-Hindi speaking states of south India. Both Dakshinpuri and Subhash Camp were characterized by such ethnic diversity.

Dakshinpuri is one of the 47 resettlement colonies in Delhi.<sup>18</sup> The resettlement colonies are essentially “planned slums” since they are i) strategically located at the periphery of the city or in cheaper low-lying waste lands, often along drains and ditches; ii) the housing plot size is as low as 25 sq. yards; and iii) there is less-than-adequate provision for basic amenities (Priya, 1993). The other community—Subhash Camp—was classified as a JJC (Jhuggi-Jhopri Clusters)—or “slums within slums” as Ali (1990) labels them—and was adjacent to Dakshinpuri.<sup>19</sup> JJs are illegal squatter settlements that have come up mostly under political patronage. Living conditions in both kinds of slums is characterized by deficits in water supply, garbage disposal, electricity, roads, health, and schools. However, the resettlement colonies are better off since many households have been provided with legal tap water and electricity

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<sup>18</sup>Many of Delhi’s resettlement colonies came up during the period of Emergency Rule (1975-1977). The people who live in resettlement colonies range from those belonging to the lower middle-class to some of the poorest sections of society (*Frontline*, March 12, 2004; also see Priya, 1993).

<sup>19</sup>Sabir Ali, who has collected data on India’s slums for many years, identifies seven different categories of slums in Delhi: 1) legally-notified slum areas; 2) Jhuggi-Jhopri Clusters (JJs); 3) unauthorized colonies; 4) urban villages; 5) Harijan bastis (untouchable caste settlements); 6) pavement dwellers; and 7) resettlement colonies (Ali, 1995).

connections, roads (in varying degrees of disrepair), and drains (in poor condition). The residents of resettlement colonies enjoy greater security because of their legalized status whereas those living in JJsCs have to depend on political patronage. In many cases, JJsCs are located next to resettlement colonies and compete for scarce infra-structural facilities. Delhi's rapid population growth coupled with inadequate housing has contributed to a continuing increase in the number of JJsCs. In 1977, there were 20,000 people estimated to be living in JJsCs. Current estimates put the total number of JJsCs at 1087 with a total of 3 million people (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006: 4).

According to Dakshinpuri's residents, while public officials told them to expect water for 15-20 minutes each day, the usual supply was in fact no more than 10 minutes, usually very late at night and in a trickle. Families are forced to store water for days since it is either not readily available through the municipal water supply or needs to be brought village-like, after a long walk from some public tap shared by tens of people. Long waiting periods are common to procure a minimum quantity of water. Not only is water a scarce commodity, the water available from public or private sources is of poor quality. The water usually had high amounts of solid content which was allowed to settle down before using it. Many residents were not concerned about boiling the water.

Most residents do not have toilet facilities at home. The rising income of some residents of Delhi's slums has allowed them the luxury to construct private toilets. However, newer arrivals to the city, who tend to be poorer, suffer the most, since the lack of or poor maintenance of public toilets leads them to open defecation. This situation was quite visible in Dakshinpuri and even worse in Subhash Camp. The lack of adequate sanitation creates unhygienic conditions leading to susceptibility to various diseases. The poor have to cope both with the absence of basic services such as sanitation as well as from the health effects of these deficits

### The Importance of Public Goods

Low-income areas typically have lower literacy rates and Dakshinpuri fares among the worst of Delhi's resettlement colonies (Ali, 1998). Communities with lower literacy levels are more likely to lack a proper understanding of how their living conditions impact on their physical and economic well-being. However, most residents of Delhi, especially those living in low-income settlements, express high levels of dissatisfaction with public goods provision (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006). This suggests that low-income groups take the poor provision of public goods seriously. However, with the exception of 'survival goods' like water, it is not obvious why residents consider public goods as important other than that they improve the quality of life. Several residents of Dakshinpuri and Subhash Camp noted that, other than employment opportunities, one of the reasons for their migration to Delhi was to be able to provide education to their children. Thus, they fully understood the direct benefits of

public goods like education. Some residents expressed significant concern about poor sanitation and open drains because they considered them to be a health hazard that sometimes prevented them from work and cost them medical expenses. Overall, water supply and sanitation were considered important public goods and women gave them greater importance than men (see below). Despite lower literacy levels in low-income areas, residents were approximately aware of the physical and economic benefits from better provision of water and sanitation. The absence of claims-making for public goods like water and sanitation was certainly not due to ignorance on the part of Dakshinpuri's residents about the direct benefits from their provision.

### Survival First

Low-income groups and the poor are primarily employed in the unorganized sector of the economy which makes up for more than 80 per cent of employment (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006). Their main worry is losing jobs that they hold. Residents of Dakshinpuri and Subhash Camp expressed deep concerns about employment and inflation, particularly food prices. As Manoj explained:

We are worried about jobs. Sometimes I am unemployed like now....I am worried about employment. Other issues can be solved once we are employed. If I am unemployed my family suffers. My wife has to work outside the home.<sup>20</sup>

The picture that emerged from meetings with residents was that people prioritized their needs so that employment comes first, even to the exclusion of other needs.<sup>21</sup> Residents felt that if they had a steady basic income, they could address other needs. For most, everyday issues—travelling to and back from work, earning enough money to provide for their family or to send money to family members in their home village—left them with little time or inclination to worry about their living conditions. Many interviews were conducted with women who stayed behind at home. Living conditions had a more immediate and direct bearing on their everyday lives. While several of them expressed concern, frustration, and even anger, they defined their primary responsibility as taking care of the family and putting food on the table. They believed that it was their responsibility to get sufficient water, wash clothes, keep the living quarters as clean as possible, and take care of the children. They agreed that men's employment was a greater priority in order to meet the basic needs of the family. Beyond that, both men and women, expressed dissatisfaction with poor public goods provision but accepted it as a compromise and found little time or inclination to do more than what was necessary to survive.

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<sup>20</sup>All interviews in Dakshinpuri and Subhash Camp were conducted between July and December 2000.

<sup>21</sup>This is consistent with polls conducted before the last general elections in 2004 and the 2009 elections in which respondents identified employment and inflation as their two main concerns (*India Today*, 2004, 2009).



### Nothing is Going to Change

Democracies demand greater responsiveness from political leaders. Elected leaders may be voted out of office if they are not responsive to the basic needs of citizens. However, one of the truisms of Indian politics is the lack of responsiveness on the part of elected and non-elected officials. There is widespread perception among people that political leaders and parties are insensitive to their needs. Such perceptions have been formed over years of engagement with the state. As Mehta (2003) notes, “there is little in the citizens’ experience of the Indian state that leads them to believe that the state will be a credible provider of social services” (p. 138). The state’s response to citizen demands is at best to provide temporary or partial relief before things return to the normal dismal state. If political leaders lack credibility (Keefer and Khemani, 2004), claims-making for public goods can at best secure empty promises or partial relief before things return to normal.

Dakshinpuri’s residents recounted several stories of corruption and indifference on the part of government officials. As Urmila said: “When we complain about water, garbage, public toilets, electricity or anything else to government officials, they do nothing.” Residents had few expectations from the state and little optimism that things would change. They pointed out that politicians made promises before every election but never followed up with good deeds. Occasional ad hoc improvements did come about but they were meaningless because things usually became the same again or even worse soon after. Overall, the state and public officials were held in low esteem and incapable of changing the lives of the poor.

There was however, an uneasy contradiction regarding the role of the state. While residents had low expectations from the state, it was considered responsible for providing public goods. (also see Shah, 1997). This contradiction may explain why personal responsibility was abdicated. Ravi, a out-of-town college student sharing cheap accommodation with other students in Dakshinpuri, felt that:

The people are to blame....They throw out personal garbage at any time of the day, expecting that it will be picked up, and to keep their homes clean. But there is no regard for the public space.

Since the *sarkar* (government) was responsible for public goods provision, residents abdicated their responsibility for the piles of garbage and clogged drains. They reasoned that it was not their responsibility to keep the drains clean or to pay others to remove the garbage. Some public goods were selectively relegated as wholly the responsibility of the state and for others, private solutions were sought when necessary.

### Public Goods, Private Options

Since the water supply in Delhi is insufficient and of poor quality, an entire parallel industry of bottled water and private water tankers has mushroomed, signalling the widespread exit of citizens from seeking public solutions towards individualistic

market-based solutions. Even in low-income settlements, families procure water from private tankers for their needs. Others got their water from longer distances, often waiting in long lines. The ability to acquire public goods by private means, subject to costs involved—such as money, time, or physical hardship—would appear to create disincentives for claims-making. However, witnessing the hardships and costs involved, it is hard to comprehend why private options for water would be preferred over public action or tolerance.

Even for sewerage or garbage collection, private options were preferred or living conditions tolerated. If there was no regular garbage collection, residents of the community would sometimes pool money and pay to have it removed. In some cases, the residents of JJs are known to have collected money to have a working drainage system (*Statesman*, May 20, 2000). In other areas, as in Dakshinpuri and Subhash Camp, garbage was simply allowed to rot, signalling tolerance. It seemed that residents opted for private solutions to some public problems and letting other problems persist.

While deficits in water supply and sanitation contributed to ill-health and disease, medical attention was easily available when needed. While residents were not able to exercise control over their living conditions, they were in a position to seek curative health care. They did not express much satisfaction with the quality of public health services available in their neighborhood but they utilized it when they could. When necessary, they were able to seek medical attention from private providers. Therefore, the availability of private options diluted the need to make collective demands on the state for public goods.

Overall, it was curious that residents sought private solutions for water or other public goods. Private options involved spending on public goods which residents believed was the state's responsibility. The only credible answer to private options or tolerance for living conditions is that residents did not believe things could change from their efforts at demanding public goods.

#### Things Could be Worse and They Are Better

As noted earlier, a large majority of migrants to Delhi are from U.P. and Bihar. Despite their adverse living conditions in slums, they are better off in Delhi—in terms of public goods provision and human development—than in the place of their origin (Bhat and Zavier, 1999; Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006). One of the reasons why slum dwellers put up with their living conditions is because they believe that they are better off than in their place of origin. Cities offer hope where there is none in their village. Cities offer the possibility of overcoming the burden of caste

prejudices.<sup>22</sup> For residents of Dakshinpuri and Subhash Camp, there was no better alternative to the city despite its disadvantages. There were opportunities for employment, there was access to education for their children, and there was a better provision of public goods or they could at least be procured privately. They knew from their own visits to their place of origin, and from their friends and relatives that little had changed back home. Despite the obvious kinds of problems in the city, friends and relatives from the villages often envied their good fortune. The big gap between the quality of life in the city and the villages brought a sense of relief that things could be worse but that they were actually better. As Prakash, a father of three, explained:

When I feel sad, sometimes I think the village is better. That is what I dream. Because here it is like the village with all the water and electricity problems. But not for employment and education. We come here for economic opportunities. We are here for our children.

Indeed, for most residents of Dakshinpuri and Subhash Camp, concern for their children's education was cited as one of the important reasons why they preferred the city to their place of origin.

#### Intra-Community Differences

Three main kinds of differences were visible in Dakshinpuri: 1) Intra-class; 2) Ethnicity; and 3) Gender. The residents of Dakshinpuri were segmented along ethnic lines. There were also income and status differences between families. There were residents who had found good employment but continued to live in Dakshinpuri either because it saved them money or because better housing was too expensive. Gender relations among residents were typical of traditional societies. Men worked for wages and women took care of household work. Women had to bear the main burden of poor public goods provision but their problems were secondary to those of men who earned for the family's basic needs. The heterogeneity within low-income along all these dimensions—intra-class differences, ethnicity, gender—might explain the absence of solidarity and the inability to engage in collective action for public goods.

Intra-class differences within residents of Dakshinpuri and between the residents of Dakshinpuri and Subhash Camp were quite pronounced. An unlikely class division existed between those who had 'made it' and those who were 'left behind' even though both shared the same or similar deficits in public goods. There were some blocks and lanes in Dakshinpuri that were better maintained, cleaner, and more eye-

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<sup>22</sup>It may not be a coincidence that while caste movements and caste-based parties flourish in the states that the migrants come from, Delhi has not become a locale for caste-based mobilization. In the 2004 general elections, class was a more relevant indicator of voting preferences than caste with the rich favoring the BJP and the poor supporting the Congress (Kumar, 1999, 2004).

pleasing than other blocks which were in a state of disrepair. Some houses were solidly-constructed whereas others were of poorer quality. Income differences were also apparent in terms of clothes worn by different residents, ownership of consumer goods like television and stereo, and the means of cooking. Those who had 'made it' did not want to associate much with those 'left behind' and the latter were ...with the pretensions of those who had 'made it.' As Anjali put it:

One reason why people don't have unity is a lot of people think they are better than the other. When they start earning better than the others they think they are too good for you, for this place. They can't wait to get away.

The 'have nots' believed that the 'rich' considered it beneath them to be involved in the community. In conversations with the 'rich', it seemed that they had psychologically, while not physically, transcended their previous station in life and considered their further stay temporary or a hardship that had to be endured for a larger good in the future. As Maya told me:

We would like to move away from here. But it is difficult. A lot of places it is too expensive to rent. But I don't know if I want to bring up my children in this kind of locality....My mentality is different from people here.

Dakshinpuri exhibited heterogeneity within a social class with pronounced differences between the 'not so poor' and the 'poor' even though it was not uncommon for the same residents to make references to a 'common fate' because of their lower class status.

Ethnic differences were relevant at two levels. The first pertained to differences among residents of Dakshinpuri themselves. The second involved caste differences between Dakshinpuri's residents and the lowest castes who provided cleaning and other services. However, a narrative that emphasizes ethnic differences as singularly important impediments to collective action would be an exaggeration. There were stories of 'good neighbours' as well as others where neighbours were described as casteist and prejudiced. There were instances when neighbours from other castes or linguistic groups had come through when a child was taken ill, and others when the same neighbours had let them down. Neighbours shared water, took the responsibility to care for the elderly or the children, and helped each other in various ways, irrespective of religious and caste affiliations. Stories of indifference and subdued hostility were intermingled with cordiality and cooperation.

Caste-based sensibilities mattered in terms of how residents responded to their living conditions. The attitude of residents towards waste and general cleanliness derived from their caste status. Their attitude was to get waste out of their living quarters first, and thereafter, it was the duty of the lowest, untouchable castes—commonly employed in the most degrading profession of sweepers and cleaners—to get rid of it.

There was no individual or collective responsibility towards maintaining cleanliness outside the house; it was considered the duty of the *bhangis* (scavengers – who themselves did not live in the part of Dakshinpuri where research was carried out) to remove the garbage. Many residents belonged to other lower castes but *bhangis* were treated as outcastes by both the upper and lower castes. There was considerable resentment that *bhangis* were paid by the government but did not do their jobs properly or that they demanded money to do what they were already paid to do.

On their part, *bhangis* complained that residents treated them badly. One of their other complaints was that soon after they cleaned up, residents would immediately dump garbage and expected them to get rid of it immediately. Kailash, a sweeper, blamed Dakshinpuri's residents:

People think it is our job to be constantly cleaning the drains. They don't make our job easier. We can't clean the drains the whole day, we will do it once a day and it is the people's responsibility to not throw anything once we are done cleaning. But they are prejudiced against us. Because we are *bhangis*, they give us no respect and believe it is our job to clean their garbage.

While ethnic and other differences mattered, neighbours belonging to different castes or religion were able to overcome those differences on many issues. The sharing of deprivations perhaps made it necessary for residents to cooperate on more than one occasion to overcome their common problems. As Manorma explained:

People are unified in sharing each other's personal troubles (*dukh sukh mein sab saath hain*).... But try to act collectively for public goods, to storm government offices, or run a signature campaign against the government for better services and everyone has their work. For women it is the kitchen, children, husband. For men, it is work, or looking for work.

The gendered division of labour added to the existing heterogeneity in Dakshinpuri. Men and women perceived deficits in public goods in different ways. The persistence of poor public goods provision had a greater impact on women than men. With men away at work, it was left to women, many of whom did not work outside home, or worked part time (most commonly as domestic help) to pick up the slack. The task of maintaining the living quarters, cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children, was a their work. Women had to find ways to overcome the range of problems emerging from deficits in public goods in carrying out their 'duties'. Therefore, one might expect women to be more responsive to the poor provision of public goods than men. However, women seemed resigned to finding solutions on their own. Both men and women prioritized employment and economic needs to the extent that they downplayed the lack of public goods and, depending on the public good in question, saw private solutions as the only way out.

The powerfully gendered private space of the family and notions of a woman's work implied that the domestic world and its associated problems were for women to manage since it was their natural work. This structure of familial power relations appears to be a hindrance to claims-making. As Manju explained:

It is difficult for us women to take part in political activities. We have to look after our homes. There are so many household duties, and some of us also have part-time work....We are so busy putting food on the table there is no time. Women here are involved with their own families. They don't want to do anything political. Our men work hard, come back tired. They have no time for our complaints. All this...it is our job and we have to suffer. And we suffer, but what can we do, we have to. The state is useless. Then, they [the men] don't like us to go out and do something, to get involved too much with all this, with politics.

Since women are more directly affected by everyday forms of deprivation, their political involvement would seem to be the key to generating claims on the state. However, women were disadvantaged in at least two ways. First, because of their subordinate status to men, their everyday problems were considered less important. Women themselves gave greater primacy to the problems faced by men and to some extent downplayed their own. Second, a large majority of women accepted their place as natural in the order of things. The lack of a discourse of gender equality and work place experiences, both of which could potentially serve to give women greater autonomy, and thereby make them agents for seeking change on issues that affected them directly, meant that women depended largely on men to define priorities.

An obvious impact of the diversity within Dakshinpuri was on social relations between its residents. Many interviewees expressed concern over the lack of trust and unity (*ekta*) in their community. Some pointed out to individualistic behaviour on the part of residents. As Rajan put it:

We are not united that is why there is no collective action. We don't trust each other or the government. There is just a general atmosphere of distrust and individualistic behaviour.

Similarly, Kusum noted that:

We have no unity. People are scared of taking action against the government. There is lack of trust. People tend to be individualistic.

Ramesh even speculated about why there was a lack of unity:

It is not that people are illiterate here. Most are educated...at least most of us have done basic schooling. I don't know why people are just not able to come together. It is just selfishness or lack of trust, or fear. Then people who get better jobs or start doing well become too proud to associate with the rest. There are many people like that here.

Women blamed other women for the lack of unity. According to Sushma:

We women have no unity. We are involved with our individual households. Women have become very individualistic, involved only in their own families. They are reluctant to take part in political activities, and our husbands also don't like it.

The heterogeneity of the population living in Dakshinpuri conditioned the perceptions and responses to experienced deficits. Everyday interactions between residents belonging to different castes or religion displayed varying degrees of trust—from low to middling—but there were sufficient instances of cooperation. While the lack of unity towards collective goals was conveyed by almost every resident, they were united by their shared grievances. Much more than the fragmented nature of experienced and perceived deficits among residents belonging to different castes, religions, gender and class, what also surfaced was widespread doubt about the usefulness of engaging in collective action. Residents extolled the virtues of political participation and democracy but were unsure about the benefits of making demands on the state. Political participation and democracy was defined overwhelmingly in terms of the act of voting. They expressed resignation to the indifference of others in the community. They noted that their past experiences indicated that broader and long-term change would not take place even if they tried. The residents of Dakshinpuri were caught in a “cognitive trap” where they recognized their situation as unjust but did not believe it could be changed through their actions (Gupta, 2006). Paradoxical as it may seem, residents expressed faith in political participation and democracy but at the same time were convinced that they could not be the agents of change.

#### Summing Up

Surveys show that a majority of Indians understand democracy in terms of “justice/welfare” in preference to “popular rule,” “election” or “freedom.” Indians also believe that “basic necessities for all” is a far more “essential element” of democracy than “equal rights” or “opportunity to change the government” (SDSA Team, 2008: 242, 244). However, for a large majority of Indians, justice and welfare understood in terms of basic necessities remains elusive (UNDP, various years). Since citizens have political rights, the question posed in this paper was: Why are people not using their political rights to demand public goods? Better access to public goods would ameliorate the living conditions of low-income groups and the poor.

Three broad conclusions emerge. First, the absence of claims-making for public goods appears to be due to the lack of political credibility. Based on their past experiences, citizens do not trust their political leaders and public officials to deliver public goods. Demand for public goods is therefore weak or absent. Second, differences within society, based on class, ethnicity, and gender, weaken the ability of civil society to press for and demand public goods. Third, citizens have learned to, or

adapted, deal with deficits in public goods. Typically, they seek to acquire public goods privately or tolerate deficits in public goods.

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