

Making a case for urbanism in Bihar: Moral and material striving among Muslims and Dalits in Patna city

Abstract

The eastern Indian state of Bihar is predominantly studied for its land and agrarian relations, migration and caste in politics. The state, one of the predominant sources of migration, is seen as a source of labour but rarely as a site of urban life. As per the metrics of urbanization, such as administrative and infrastructural, many of its settlements do not fulfil the criteria of urban. Patna, the capital city of Bihar, for long has been marked by administrative apathy and thus fails on the many markers of what an ideal urban life constitutes. Many scholars argue that the urban question in the case of Bihar has been sidelined due to the prominence of questions of caste and democratization. In this thesis, I proceed by critically engaging with scholarships that emphasize metrics of urbanization and markers of modernity and draw from bigger metropolitan cities or Western contexts to examine what constitutes urban in the context of Patna and Bihar. Lately, there has been an attempt by the state government and section of the elite to reimagine and redefine the region through infrastructural projects, avenues of consumerist spaces and projects of aesthetics such as paintings and photographs. However, in this thesis, I endeavour to look into and lay for the readers what exactly urbanity beyond the state-initiated and elite-led attempt at remaking and refashioning the region looks like. For this, I draw from my ethnography in the neighbourhoods between Bankipur and Patna City (Patna City here refers to old Patna at the eastern end of city of Patna). This stretch does not conform to the usual metrics of urbanization – infrastructure and global consumerist spaces, and neither has a legacy in terms of a strong urban past. The groups I focus on are Muslims and Dalits. These two groups I see internally differentiated on the basis of caste, class and occupation. In the case of Muslims, dimensions of sectarian practices and sensibilities of caste and class add additional layers of vulnerability and privilege, which inform the urban experience. I argue that the moral and material striving of Muslims and Dalits to make and secure a place for themselves in Patna city enriches our understanding of urbanity. Here, urban is understood not simply in terms of infrastructure and legacy but also through the everyday struggle of families and communities to navigate desires and deprivations of their lives. In this thesis, I attempt to explicate the urban life that Dalits and

Muslims strive to secure for themselves from their unique positionalities. Urban life here constitutes physical space, opportunities, and a notion of belongingness cultivated from the different sensibilities and positionalities of caste, religion and class. Drawing from Dalit and Muslim experiences, I argue that in contesting ways, people attempt to enrich existing sensibilities of caste and sect, which informs the particular making of a neighbourhood. Thus, the urban I see as a space of contesting articulation of moral and material interests marked by intensity of exchange and difference.